# Chapter 12: A Desperate Offer

As the elf led Sarah away, Acri let out a breath, feeling oddly relieved that any remaining opportunity to use her as leverage had been removed, and yet also sad to lose her presence. She really had stirred something inside him and he wanted to understand what it was. But that would have to wait.

The two enchanters turned their attention back to him.

“Alright, why are you *really* here?!” Enchantress Angelique was glaring daggers at him. “I don’t believe for one second that you actually decided to defect.”

He shrugged. “Whether you believe it or not, it’s the truth. My mother has lost her mind with her latest plan. Attempting it would be suicide, but refusing an order is a death sentence. My only chance at survival was to defect.”

The other enchanter, Evariste, scoffed. “So what you *actually* want is protection from your insane mother.”

“You could say that. But I have information, valuable information about her plans.”

He paused.

“And, I know where she’s hiding the mirror.”

*That* seemed to get their attention, as they visibly stilled, but their eyes remained narrowed, lips pressed into firm lines.

The enchantress scoffed. “And you really expect us to believe this isn’t just a ruse to get us to trust you? You could easily give us false information and we wouldn’t know until we verified it.” Her voice was icy.

Acri thought. He wasn’t surprised they didn’t trust him -- he wouldn’t have trusted him either if their positions were reversed. But how could he convince them it was worth it to take him in? Should he offer to be their prisoner? But, no, if they’d wanted to do that, they’d have done it the moment Sarah was safely away. *They must think my goal is to get inside the forest and cast some other curse on the elves or something.*

He needed to *prove* he really wasn’t planning anything nefarious. But how? An idea hit him, a crazy and desperate idea that he’d never have expected to even *consider*. It would have been utterly *unthinkable* if his situation wasn’t so dire.

“Well!?” Enchantress Angelique demanded. She was tensed and looked ready to attack if he made one wrong move.

“Do you really have nothing else to say?!” Enchanter Evariste’s voice was hard.

“Seal my magic.” Acri stared at Enchantress Angelique, his words laced with fear and desperate hope in equal measure.

Both enchanters froze, the weight of his words seeming to shock them into silence.

They exchanged a look, then stared straight at him. The enchantress crossed her arms. “You would *truly* submit to such a thing?” Her disbelief was palpable.

He clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking and he felt dread coil in the pit of his stomach at the mere thought of losing his magic. But he took a breath, determination filling him. He wasn’t ready to die -- he *would* do this if it would ensure his survival and keep him out from under his mother’s thumb.

“If that’s what it takes to prove I’m being sincere. It’s better than being dead, which is my certain fate if you don’t help me.”

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*This just keeps getting crazier and crazier*, Angel thought.

She turned to face Evariste and cast a sound bubble around them. Now that Acri no longer had a hostage, the border guards would be on him in an instant if he tried anything, so they could afford to take their eyes off him and discuss his offer.

“Do you think this is a ruse?”

“I was certain it was until he suggested sealing his magic. But I have a hard time imagining *any* of the mages I saw while I was captured agreeing to such a thing for the sake of their mission. They all had far too much pride to make such a sacrifice, Acri included.”

"So you think he’s telling the truth then?"

“I don’t know. This *could* be some elaborate scheme of Lillian’s. If he were claiming to have had a genuine change of heart so suddenly, I’d think that was still the most likely explanation. But a drive for self-preservation is a lot more believable. Given Lillian’s ruthlessness and willingness to sacrifice her own people, it’s not implausible that he truly fears for his life."

"So do you think it’s worth the risk of taking him on after sealing his magic then?"

He hesitated. “I can’t say I *like* the idea, but if he *is* telling the truth, the information he’s offering is invaluable. And sealing his magic would remove a lot of the risk. If he actually allows us to do it without a fight, that would be a strong indication that he’s being sincere.”

She sighed. “This whole situation is just…a *lot*. But I think you’re right. The chance at the information is too valuable to pass up. But we’ll still need to keep him under guard to make sure he’s not trying to sneak off to relay information to anyone or have someone remove the seal.”

Seeming to sense her tension, he took her hand and she relaxed as their fingers intertwined, at the reminder that he was *there*.

“You make a good point. Although we can minimize the risk of someone else removing it if we use a rehabilitation seal, since then it will be tied to his own actions and intentions.”

She let out a breath. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. And it also gives us an additional test of his sincerity. If he ever actually breaks it, we’ll know he’s truly started to have a change of heart.”

He squeezed her hand. “Exactly. But you’re right that we should also keep him under surveillance as a precaution. I’m sure Emerys can see to that while we remain here. And it might be best to leave him here once we depart, though we’ll have to discuss that with Emerys of course."

Angel grimaced. “Emerys may not be too happy with us if we let a chosen mage into his city, even if he *is* sealed.”

“Emerys is reasonable and he trusts us. He’ll understand once we explain. The real danger will be if Acri attempts to communicate with anyone outside the city to pass information to them. But that risk can be minimized by keeping him under watch.”

She nodded. “Alright, let’s do this.”

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Acri waited in tense silence while the two enchanters discussed his fate. He could hardly believe he was *hoping* they’d agree to his offer to *have his magic sealed*. He really had hit rock bottom.

A small part of him wondered if it would really be so bad though. It wasn’t as if he’d ever been allowed to use his magic for anything *he* decided on. It was always “kill this person, maim this one, steal this item,” and so on. Even when he wasn’t in immediate danger of death, it was *exhausting*. And, if nothing else, at least he’d be *alive* and no longer his mother’s puppet. And…maybe, just maybe, he could find that part of himself Sarah’s words had unexpectedly stirred up.

Finally, the sound bubble burst and the two enchanters turned to face him. Enchanter Evariste spoke first. “We’ve decided to accept your offer. We will place a rehabilitation seal on you. It will break only if you perform a truly selfless act, as judged by the magic itself.”

Acri tensed at the declaration, then frowned in surprise. *Wait…“We”?* Had Enchanter Evariste broken his own seal?Acri noted how the enchanters were holding hands. Had they figured it out then, that his mother had lied about the condition on Evariste’s seal?

Lillian had *not* been pleased when those tasked with the research had been unable to find a spell for the type of “motivating”, enchanter-level seal she’d actually wanted. Vindictive as Acri knew her to be and aware of the rumors of Enchanter Evariste’s poorly hidden infatuation with his then-apprentice, he hadn’t been surprised when Lillian had told the enchanter the condition on his seal was performing his “deepest and darkest desire.” Apparently, she’d guessed correctly that the enchanter was deeply ashamed of his infatuation, as he’d never once tried to dispute the claim, though the spell itself must have told him he had to kiss whoever it determined his “true love” was. “True love” being utter nonsense, Acri was unsurprised it would have simply chosen the person the enchanter had been infatuated with at the time. He *had* been a bit surprised when Lillian had ordered several others to participate in the ongoing ruse, as it didn’t seem a particularly efficient use of time, but he hadn’t minded playing along.

Enchantress Angelique spoke next, pulling Acri back to the unpleasant reality of the present. “Additionally, you’ll be under constant surveillance to ensure you don’t attempt to sneak off and pass along information to anyone. We’ll have to discuss the specifics of your surveillance and confinement with the elf king, since this is his territory, so we can’t tell you the details now. Will you submit willingly to these terms?”

Their voices and faces were firm. There was no negotiating these conditions -- not that he’d have expected to. And yet, they didn’t seem to be taking pleasure at his plight either. Strange. He’d hoped they’d help him in exchange for information, but he’d also been entirely prepared to be treated with contempt and cruelty. That was certainly how Enchanter Evariste had been treated as a prisoner.

As the reality of the situation set in, Acri let out a breath of relief and some of his tension faded, while, at the same time, he felt a knot tighten in the pit of his stomach. They weren’t going to kill him or turn him away for his mother to kill. But they *would* seal his magic. The thought was terrifying, but it wasn’t as if he could complain when it had been his idea in the first place.

He swallowed hard. “Yes. I’ll submit to your terms.” The words felt like both a prison sentence and the key to a new life.

As the spell was cast on him, Acri felt his magical core constrict almost painfully and then he felt a barrier forming around it, walling it off. He wanted to fight the spell, to fight the process that felt as if it were walling off a part of *himself,* but he resisted the urge. He wasn’t sure he even *could* have fought the process once it had already started, but even attempting to fight back, after explicitly agreeing to submit, would surely not have resulted in positive reactions from the two enchanters.

“It’s done,” Enchanter Evariste said. “Your magic is sealed and it will remain sealed, unless you have enough of a change of heart to do something truly selfless.”

At this announcement, Acri felt a strange mixture of emotions. He tried to pull on his magic but just ran up against the unnatural wall. Being completely cut off like this…it felt *wrong*, like a piece of him was missing. For the first time, he felt a pang of sympathy for what Enchanter Evariste must have suffered through with his own seal. He started at the feeling. Since when did he *care* what others suffered through? Was…was *that* what he’d felt at seeing Juniper’s terror?

At the same time, he felt strangely… *relieved*. They had locked away the only part of him his mother had ever cared about. Without his magic, he *couldn’t* be her puppet anymore, because he wouldn’t be able to do any of the things she always ordered him to. With that knowledge came a freedom he’d never felt before.