# Chapter 13: Acri’s Revelations

“Wait,” Emerys said. “You’re really telling me that he suggested you *seal his magic* as a way to prove his sincerity? And then he actually just meekly submitted while you did so?”

Emerys, Angel, and Evariste sat in a private meeting room in the palace. Acri was being held by two elven guards outside the room. He’d been thoroughly searched and all weapons and artifacts on his person confiscated.

“We were just as surprised as you,” Angel said.

“But it did seem a genuine show of sincerity,” Evariste added. “We definitely shouldn’t blindly trust him, but I’m inclined to think he’s telling the truth about fleeing for his life.”

Emerys frowned. “And he said he’s willing to give information on Lillian’s plans and even where the mirror is hidden?”

Angel nodded. “Yes, but we were going to wait and contact Severin before we tell him to talk. Severin needs to know what’s going on and it’s better if he gets the information directly from the source.”

Emerys rubbed his temples. This situation was…unexpected, to say the least. He thought he perhaps had some idea of just how shocking it must have been for Angel and Evariste when their magics had suddenly merged. But shock wasn’t going to help him handle this. He needed to get a grip and focus.

“I agree that bringing Severin into the loop ASAP makes sense. Perhaps you should contact him now. Acri may have time-sensitive information that we can’t afford to wait on.”

Angel nodded and pulled out her mirror to make the call.

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Acri stood in awkward silence, flanked by two elven guards who watched him impassively, waiting nervously while the enchanters and the elf king discussed his surrender.

After what felt like hours, the door opened to reveal the same elf who’d led Sarah away. *Wait.* He’s *the king?*

“Acri. Come inside.”

Hesitantly he walked forward and the guards moved to follow, but the elf motioned for them to stay outside. *I supposed I’m not much of a threat without access to magic or weapons. And certainly not to two powerful enchanters and a king who’s probably just as strong as any of his warriors.*

The elf, presumably the king, gestured for him to take a seat across from the two enchanters.

The enchantress was holding a mirror which showed a face Acri recognized as Prince Severin of Loire.

“That’s him?” the prince asked.

“Yes,” Enchantress Angelique confirmed, then turned to face Acri.

“Alright. We’ve discussed your situation and it’s time for you to keep your promise of information. Prince Severin will be participating in the interrogation as he deems necessary. Start talking.”

Acri gulped, his heart racing. Was he *really* going to do this? Betray everything he’d ever known? But then, he didn’t really have much of a choice, did he? While they hadn’t explicitly threatened him, he was all too aware of how vulnerable of a position he was in and he was certain it wouldn’t end well for him if he tried to go back on his word now. And besides, he’d already made up his mind that he was done being his mother’s puppet and he didn’t owe her anything, so why should it matter if he betrayed her secrets?

Working hard to keep his voice firm and his face expressionless, he asked, “What do you want to know?”

Enchanter Evariste looked him directly in the eyes. “Why don’t you start by telling us what suicidal plan your mother has that made you defect in the first place?”

Acri gave a grim smile. *That* plan he would *happily* tell them about, because he was utterly *infuriated* by his mother’s stubborn refusal to see how *idiotic* it was and her insistence that *he* lead the charge. It would be all too satisfying to play a role in thwarting *that* insane plan of hers.

“I don’t know what madness is going through her mind that she even came up with this insanity, but she’s determined to kidnap Princess Elise of Arcainia. She’s convinced that Elise’s ability to suppress magic will let her trick the Snow Queen’s magic into letting dark mages into Verglas.”

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The room went silent at Acri’s revelation as looks of shock crossed everyone’s faces. Then Angel broke the silence with a snort.

“She seriously thinks she can use Elise to trick the *Snow Queen’s* magic that’s protected Verglas from dark mages for *centuries*? That’s utterly absurd. Does she not have any idea how powerful the Snow Queen was? Elise is strong, but she’s no match for the Snow Queen’s magic.”

Acri nodded. “*Exactly!* And I tried to tell her that, that trying to get into Verglas is suicide, but she’s obsessed with the idea and won’t listen to reason. She’s gotten increasingly desperate ever since all the spies were flushed out of the conclave. First she wanted to attack you again directly, but I managed to convince her that would be suicide. But then she got the even *more* insane idea about Princess Elise and Verglas and no one could reason with her about it. I don’t know what she’s thinking. She’s always been a tyrant but her plans have never been this insanely reckless before."

Angel frowned. “That…sounds all too similar to how the mirror affected Queen Faina.”

She turned to Evariste. “You said the mirror spoke of using the Chosen and then disposing of them, right?”

He nodded. “Yes. You’re thinking this is its attempt to dispose of them?”

“It seems plausible, given Acri’s description and how Snow described her stepmother’s behavior after she received the mirror.”

She turned back to Acri. “Has your mother been talking to the mirror or using it frequently?”

He nodded. “Yes, actually. She’s been talking to it a lot, though she’d never let me get close enough to hear what they were saying.”

Angel and Evariste exchanged glances, then looked at Emerys and Severin in turn.

Severin spoke. “Regardless of whether the mirror is the one pushing Lillian towards this scheme, it’s imperative that we warn the Arcainian royal family immediately. Acri, when was the kidnapping supposed to take place?’

“In a week. She thinks I’m currently gathering a team and making plans. She’ll expect me to check in with her in three days, assuming she’s not too distracted by the mirror to notice my absence immediately.”

“And what do you expect she’ll do when she realizes you’ve defected? Will she send someone else to attempt the kidnapping?”

“Probably. Though her behavior has been so erratic lately that I can’t say for sure.”

Severin frowned. “Very well. I’ll contact Arcainia immediately. Please update me as soon as possible with any new information.”

“Of course,” Angel said, putting away the mirror after Severin’s image faded.

Emerys leaned forward. “So we’re thinking the mirror is the one actually behind this plan? But why? What does it gain?”

Evariste’s expression grew dark. “The only thing it seeks is chaos and destruction. It saw the Chosen as a means of achieving that. Presumably, it’s decided it no longer needs them and, or at least that it doesn’t need Lillian anymore, so it’s manipulating her into causing her own downfall. It’s only her own arrogance that makes her think she can control it.”

“Then it’s vital we get the mirror away from her as soon as possible,” Emerys said. “We can’t allow it to use her for whatever destructive plan it has. Acri, you know its location?”

Acri looked hesitant as all eyes turned to him. “I know where she normally keeps it, but it won’t be easy to get to,” he hedged.

Angel exchanged a glance with Evariste, thinking of their newfound ability to share magic. It might well be much easier than Acri expected.

“It doesn’t have to be easy to get to,” she said, a hint of ice in her voice. “Just tell us where it is. And know that if you deceive us, sealed magic will be the least of your worries.”

Acri visibly tensed. “She’s most recently been keeping it in a heavily warded room at the center of our stronghold. I can draw a map, but the biggest problem will be getting past the wards. She has them set to kill anyone besides herself or a handful of others if they attempt to enter the room, as well as to notify her immediately if anyone attempts to tamper with them.”

Angel actually smiled. “Oh that won’t be a problem. We can handle Lillian in a fight --”

Acri shook his head. “You don’t understand. These aren’t normal wards. Even if you manage to kill her, I’m not sure you could actually break through them.”

Evariste frowned. “What do you mean that they aren’t normal wards?”

“The spellwork is…weird. It’s almost rudimentary in a way, but I couldn’t begin to make sense of it. I don’t know who she had cast them, but I doubt if she even understands the spellwork herself.”

Angel’s brow furrowed. “That sounds all too similar to the spelled apple that nearly killed Snow White. The spellwork also felt strangely rudimentary and yet I couldn’t make enough sense of it to even attempt to pull it apart.”

She looked at Evariste. “What do you think? Could we brute force our way through? I didn’t dare try with Snow because it would almost certainly have killed her. But the wards shouldn’t be connected to someone like that.”

Evariste paused, seeming to think. “Possibly. But relying on brute force is risky if we don’t understand the spellwork. It could backfire on us badly.”

Emerys spoke up. “Perhaps there’s another option, though I don’t know if I ought to suggest it, as it may well be a trap.”

He looked at Acri, eyes wary. “Are you one of the ones keyed into the wards?”

Looking taken aback, Acri nodded. “Yes. But…you can’t mean to have *me* go through the wards, surely. Returning to the stronghold would be a death sentence for me.”

“No, that’s definitely *not* happening.” Angel’s voice was firm and she glared at Emerys. “That’s *far* too risky when we don’t know if we can actually trust him.”

Evariste intervened before she and Emerys could start arguing. “Perhaps we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Acri still needs to tell us where the stronghold actually *is* before we plan how to get the mirror out.”

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Acri felt trepidation in the pit of his stomach as all eyes turned to him once again. He knew he’d already crossed the point of no return -- he’d come to the enemy, surrendered, let them seal his magic, and given them valuable information. And yet, giving the actual location of the stronghold itself…that somehow felt like crossing yet another invisible line. Or perhaps it was that it highlighted just how irrevocable his defection truly was, how completely he was severing ties with the only life he’d ever known. While he didn’t truly want to return to that life where he was nothing more than a puppet, he still felt inexplicably grieved at the loss.

“Giving up the stronghold…I…it’s…” His voice cracked.

Enchanter Evariste leaned forward and Acri braced himself for an attack. But the enchanter didn’t raise his hand or cast a spell. When he spoke, his voice was firm, but it also seemed to have just a hint of something softer. Compassion?

“You’ve come this far, Acri. This is the next step. We need this information.”

Taking a breath, Acri pushed past the confusing emotions and nodded.

“The stronghold is in the mountain region between Mulberg and Arcainia. It’s incredibly well hidden using both magical means and physical camouflage. You’ll never find it unless you know exactly where to look, but I can draw a map.”

The elf king got up and walked over to a desk, pulling out paper and pencil and putting them on the table in front of Acri. “Draw it then.”

Hesitantly, Acri picked up the pencil.

Enchantress Angelique cut in. “A map is a good start, but you’ll also need to give us all the details about the stronghold itself in addition to what you’ve said about the wards around the mirror room. We need to know its layout, how to get inside, and the exact warding spells used anywhere in, on, or near the building.”

Acri swallowed hard. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

With a sense of finality, the pencil heavy in his hand, he started drawing, marking exactly where the stronghold was located in the mountains. He then drew a map of the inside, marking the room where the mirror was kept, labeling which locations had wards, where guards were stationed, and so on.

He wasn’t sure why he was so thorough. His first instinct was to say it was out of fear of retribution if he omitted anything important, but that didn’t feel entirely true. Loath as he was to admit it, a part of him actually *wanted* to help get that mirror away from his mother, not for her sake, and not just to avoid punishment, but because he felt a brief glimmer of hope that maybe, just *maybe*, he could built a different kind of life if he could earn the trust of these people he’d long considered enemies. Already they’d treated him better than his mother often had -- they had yet to raise a hand or spell against him in violence, even when he’d hesitated to do what they wanted.

Finally, he put down the pencil and looked up. He was surprised to find Enchanter Evariste watching him intently, his eyes still showing suspicion but also a hint of that same something that had been in his voice.

Acri cleared his throat and slid the paper towards him. “Here. That’s everything I know about the stronghold.”

Enchanter Evariste picked up the paper and looked at it closely. “This is thorough. If you’re telling the truth, this should be enough information to get us inside, though we’ll still need to figure out a plan to deal with the wards.”

“It’s accurate now, but once my mother realizes I’ve defected she’ll certainly change the security details. I’m not sure if she’ll be able to change the wards around the mirror room, but she’ll definitely change everything else.”

“And you expect we have three days until she realizes?”

Acri shrugged. “Most likely. She’s been so obsessed with the mirror lately it’s possible she might be too distracted to notice right away. I wouldn’t count on it though.”

The elf king spoke. “If we’re that short on time, we need to solidify the plan to actually *destroy* the mirror once we get it. We can’t just lock it up somewhere; it’s too big a risk someone will steal it again.”

The enchantress groaned. “Let me guess. You’re back to your ‘amplify our magic with the power of love’ idea from before?”

Acri’s brows knitted together. “Wait what? You want to use *love* to amplify magic? That’s absurd.”

The enchantress turned to face him, her eyes narrowed, before her lips twitched upwards slightly. “*Exactly!* I’m so *tired* of love being the answer to every curse, every problem we face.”

Enchanter Evariste took her hand, and Acri saw her expression soften, lines of frustration fading.

*That’s…different. Physical contact brings her…comfort? Calm? Strange.*

Enchanter Evariste spoke. “I understand your frustration Angel. But didn’t you say before that it couldn’t hurt to try?”

The enchantress sighed. “Fine.” She glanced briefly at Acri and then back at Enchanter Evariste. “But we need to discuss this in private.”

“Wait…you’re all *seriously* considering this?” Acri could hardly keep a scoff out of his voice.

The enchantress turned back to face him, her lips twitching in the ghost of a smile. “As ridiculous as it sounds, we actually have reason to think it might work. But that’s all we’re going to say until we’re sure we can trust you not to betray us.”

Utterly confused, Acri nodded. He wasn’t expecting they’d tell him their secrets. *But…*love*…as a way to amplify magic? What could possibly make them think that would work?* Love was weakness. And yet, if there was one thing he knew, it was that the enchantress *wasn’t* weak. The whole reason he’d sought her out was because he knew she was stronger than his mother and was perhaps the only person who stood a chance against her. There had to be a *reason* she was willing to even consider such an absurd idea as *love* making her more powerful, especially since she clearly thought it as absurd as he did. Though what that reason could be, he hadn’t the faintest idea.