# Chapter 15: A Guide to the Path of Light

Blearily rubbing his eyes, Acri sat up in bed the following morning. He’d been given what he guessed was a room intended for a servant, as it was small and plain but far more comfortable than any accommodations he’d expected. Despite the comfortable room, he’d hardly slept the previous night, his mind still whirring with thoughts of all that had happened the previous day.

He still had no idea what to make of the impossibly interwoven magics he’d accidentally witnessed. And the strangest part was the enchantress’ irritated exclamation about *trust* having amplified theirmagic. He’d felt the sheer *power* of the strange magic -- *something* had to have amplified it. But…*trust* making something *more powerful*? That was utterly absurd. Trusting required vulnerability and vulnerability was weakness. Getting *close* enough to someone to trust them was weakness. And yet, the enchantress wasn’t weak -- that much he knew, because he’d seen her fight, and heard of how she’d destroyed all the mirror’s constructs and forced it to let go of Enchanter Evariste. And he’d seen her magic *destroy* his own spell. No one weak could do anything like that.

He shook his head, trying to clear the confusion from his mind. Perhaps this was all some elaborate trick intended to confuse him and ensure he wasn’t a threat? Yes, that had to be it. Nothing else made sense. Nevermind that there were much simpler ways of ensuring he wasn’t a threat, which had already been taken. Nevermind that a small, long-buried part of him longed for the obvious, most straightforward explanation to be the right one.

The door to his room opened, admitting a guard he hadn’t seen before. He stood at attention, gazing at Acri unflinchingly. “Acri. You may call me Samuel. I shall be your escort around the city during the day.”

Acri blinked. “Wait what? The king said I would be confined to my room unless they need to speak to me.”

Samuel’s gaze didn’t falter. “Yes, well I spoke to his majesty and requested to escort you around the city. He agreed to let me assume responsibility for you.”

Acri did a double-take. He’d never even seen this elf before (not that he’d seen many elves before yesterday). Why in the world would he volunteer for such a task? And why had the king agreed? Was this another trick of some kind? If it was, he couldn’t fathom the purpose.

Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “Why would you do that? How does it benefit you?”

“You’ve taken a step off a dark path. But you’ll need guidance to step onto the right one.”

Acri furrowed his brow. Guidance actually didn’t sound so bad. Maybe he could start to understand the rules of this new world he’d entered. But…

“Why would you care what path I walk in life?”

Samuel shrugged. “My reasons are my own. Perhaps I’ll tell you eventually. For now, just think of this as a second chance to walk the path of light. Too many people waste their second chances or refuse to take them at all. But if I can help it, you won’t be one of them. Now get dressed. The city awaits.”

Utterly confused by the guard’s motivations, but seeing no reason to argue in favor of his own confinement, Acri shrugged and complied.

As they were approaching the palace entrance, a child came running down the hall, ramming straight into Acri.

“Oh, sorry -- oh!” She quickly jumped back upon seeing his face.

Acri was taken aback to see Sarah staring up at him with wide eyes.

Samuel spoke. “You must be Sarah. I’m Samuel and this is Acri. But weren’t you supposed to be staying with Lady Alastryn for now? Why are you running through the halls by yourself?”

She glanced at Samuel then stared at the floor. “Uh…I might have snuck away from her.”

“I see. And why is that?”

She glanced up sheepishly. “I just wanted to explore by myself a little. I’m not used to staying with a grown-up all the time. It’s always just me and my friends.”

Not sure why he cared, Acri found himself asking, “What about your mother? You kept talking about her yesterday.”

Her expression turned wistful. “Oh. She died last year.”

To his surprise, a hint of sadness flared in his heart -- yet another emotion he hadn’t felt in a very long time. Or, at least, he didn’t *think* he had. He’d always so quickly suppressed the overwhelming bubble of emotions that surfaced whenever he’d tried to ponder his reaction to Juniper’s death that he wasn’t even sure *what* they all were. He shook his head, not wanting to think about Juniper.

But, *why* had he been feeling so many long-forgotten and yet identifiable emotions -- sadness, sympathy, hope -- ever since arriving here? His emotions were normally dominated by fear and desperation to avoid his mother’s wrath.But then, he supposed that, for the first time in his life, he was out of his mother’s reach. And these people, who had been his enemies, hadn’t treated him with the cruelty he’d expected.

*Even under constant guard and with my magic sealed…I don’t recall ever feeling this…free.*

He’d *never* been free to just *feel* and not have to hide everything under a mask*.* But here, knowing he was truly out of Lillian’s reach within the elven city and interacting with people in such different ways than he was used to…it was as if several more little cracks in his defenses had started appearing alongside the gradually widening one that had been created by Juniper’s death.

Samuel’s voice, gentle, pulled Acri from his momentary distraction.

“I’m so sorry to hear that Sarah. You must really miss her.”

“Oh, thanks. Yeah, I miss her a lot,” Sarah sniffled.

Acri felt a nudge and Samuel whispered in his ear, “Express your condolences for her loss.”

Acri stared at him, bewildered -- he was used to following orders, but not ones of this nature. Samuel stared straight back at him, his gaze steely.

Acri stammered out words that felt foreign on his lips. “I’m…I’m sorry about your mother.” And, to his own surprise, he actually meant it.

*What’s happening* *to me?*

“Thanks.” Sarah gave him a watery smile. “Did you get away from your mean mom? Did the enchantress help you?”

“Yes,” he found himself saying. “The enchantress was…kinder to me than I expected.” *They all were really. I still don’t understand why I’m not locked in a cell somewhere.*

“That’s good. I met her and Enchanter Evariste last night and they seemed nice.”

Acri nodded, still unsure how to navigate this conversation. “Yes, they’re… different than I expected.”

“Yeah, they kept holding hands the whole time I saw them.” Her nose wrinkled. “It was weird. I asked them why and they said it’s because they love and trust each other.” She wrinkled her nose again. “It still seemed weird though.”

*Love and trust.* The words triggered his memory of the scene from the previous night -- what were undeniably intertwined strands of two different magics, swirling around the two enchanters and radiating truly *immense*  power. And the enchantress’ words -- that their magic had unexpectedly amplified when they’d deepened their trust. It still didn’t make any sense -- yet, could he really keep denying what he’d personally witnessed? Besides, it wasn’t as if much of *anything* in his life had made much sense ever since --

Samuel’s words interrupted his thoughts at just the right moment. “Well Sarah, it was wonderful to meet you, but I think we really ought to get you back to Lady Alastryn now. She must be worried.”

Her face fell. “Do I *have* to? I want to explore.”

Samuel smiled at her. “Exploring is fine, but not by yourself. You could get lost or get into trouble. And it’s not right to worry Lady Alastryn.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up. “Then, can you take me exploring?”

Samuel paused, his eyes brightening for just a moment before his expression turned neutral.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea. I’m taking Acri to see the city anyway. We’ll have to find Lady Alastryn first, but if she consents, I see no reason you can’t accompany us.”

“Really? That sounds like fun!”

*What in the world? First Samuel shows up out of nowhere volunteering to help me, “step onto the path of light”. Now he’s involving the girl I kidnapped. What’s he really after?*