# Chapter 16: Building Trust and Connections

As they walked through the city, Acri mused on how easily Samuel had convinced Lady Alastryn to let Sarah accompany them, and the easy chatter Sarah was keeping up with Samuel that seemed so natural to her personality. Like so many other things, both felt foreign to him and yet strangely desirable.

“Where are we going?” Sarah asked.

Samuel shrugged. “You said you wanted to explore. And Acri just needs to meet people.”

Sarah turned to Acri. “Oh, are we meeting friends of yours?”

“Uh…” *Friends?*

“Ah, here’s someone I want you to meet, Acri.” Samuel gestured to an older female elf. She was several feet ahead of them on the street and was struggling to carry several packages. He nudged Acri. “Go offer to help her carry the packages.”

Acri stared at Samuel, eyes narrowing. This time, he couldn’t help asking, “What? Why? What’s the point?”

“Think of it as an opportunity to form a simple healthy connection to someone. You’ll never get on the right path if you remain isolated.”

Sarah chimed in. “Samuel is right! Mom always said helping people is a good way to make friends. But I can help her if you don’t want to.”

Acri stared as she ran up to the elf.

“Excuse me. Do you need any help carrying those?”

Samuel chuckled. “Now quite what I planned, but I suppose it will work. Come.” He gestured for Acri to follow him as he approached Sarah and the female elf.

Sarah now held one small package. “Oh good, you’re here now, so you can help and make friends too!” She shoved her package at Acri, who barely managed to keep from dropping it in his surprise.

“Here, let me take another one now,” she said.

“Thank you dear. You’re very sweet.” The elf smiled at her. “But, really, let me just put these down on the ground here. No point holding onto them while we talk.”

“And you must be Acri. Samuel mentioned he’d be helping you.” She smiled warmly at him as she placed her packages on the ground at her feet. “How are you liking our city so far?”

Something about her -- was it just the genuine warmth in her voice and smile? -- put Acri unexpectedly at ease. He felt his muscles relax and a sense of calm and peace washed over him.

“It…it’s quite nice actually. It’s very…different from anything else I’ve experienced. Everyone has been far kinder than I ever would have expected.” *And somehow, that kindness doesn’t seem like weakness.*

“That’s wonderful to hear.” She reached out her hand and lightly brushed his arm. That feeling of serenity increased and he felt a gentle warmth radiating from her touch, past his walls, deep inside him, to parts of his heart he hid even from himself. And yet it didn’t feel like an invasion, but like the return of something he hadn’t known was missing. For the first time he could remember, his fear completely melted away, replaced by a sense of peace and courage. The courage to allow himself to really *feel* his long-buried desires that had been trying to push through his walls ever since Juniper’s death had shaken him all those months ago. The desire to really be able to trust someone, for a relationship based on more than fear and power games, even a desire for love and affection. And…sorrow, grief even, at Juniper’s loss.

As Calliope’s touch receded, the peace and courage lessened, but didn’t fade completely. And those *feelings*-- did he *really* long so *deeply* for trust and love? And sorrow over death? It seemed unfathomable -- and yet, he still felt them, and they felt…right. Like they’d always been there, just hidden in shadow.

“Wh…what? What…*was* that? Why do I feel so…different?”

Samuel spoke. “Acri, Sarah, meet my mother, Calliope. She is gifted with the ability to read and reveal a person’s heart.”

Acri’s eyes widened. “What does that mean exactly? What did you just do to me? I…I don’t understand what I’m feeling. I…I…” His breath caught and he struggled to keep from shouting. “None of this makes any sense.”

Calliope looked at him with such kindness in her eyes it nearly broke him. “I merely gave you the strength to see what you’ve been hiding from yourself.”

“My mother’s gift can be…overwhelming at times, especially if you’ve never experienced it before. But sometimes it’s exactly what’s needed to help us see what we’ve been hiding from.” Samuel’s voice was gentle.

“But…magic isn’t about emotions. It’s about power and control.”

Calliope shook her head, but her eyes remained warm, no hint of reproach in her voice. “It can be *used* to expert power and control over others, certainly. But magic comes from the soul. In its purest form, it’s about connecting with and aiding others. My magic allows me to connect with another’s heart, to unveil the truth behind all the walls, as well as to give occasional boosts of emotional strength to allow a person to unveil truths for themselves. What you felt just now is what you already felt, deep down, what I gave you the strength to allow yourself to feel.”

Magic was about…connecting with others? Helping them? The idea was contrary to everything he’d been taught. But…how else could he explain what he’d just experienced? What he’d witnessed last night? And…would it really be so bad if it were true?

As the effects of Calliope’s magic continued to fade, he could feel his defenses reasserting themselves, his instincts screaming at him to banish such thoughts back to the darkest corners of his mind. *Yes, it* would *be that bad,* they shouted at him. Desperate to regain that feeling of peace, for his fear to fade away again, he reached out and touched Calliope’s arm, but felt no different.

“Please. Take away the fear again. Let me feel those other things instead.”

She smiled kindly at him. “Alright. I can’t give you another boost of strength right now -- it takes too much of my magic to do several in a row. But I can help you see past your walls and lift the layers of your fear, if you consent.”

It should’ve been unthinkable for Acri to let someone past his walls. But that feeling of peace, the absense of fear…

He hesitated briefly, then nodded his agreement.

“I also have to warn you that you’ll eventually have to learn to let go of the fear on your own, to let your deeper desires through, and not become overly reliant on my magic to do it for you. It’s only a catalyst, not a replacement for self-reflection and true inner change.”

Again Acri nodded, though he didn’t quite understand.

“Come over here.” She pointed a few feet away to a grove of trees.

Acri glanced back at Samuel, who nodded. “As long as you remain in my line of sight, it’s fine.”

Once more, warmth spread through Acri, cutting through his fear, filling him with serenity and letting his deeper desires shine through. It felt a bit different this time, but equally pleasant. He found himself welcoming her magic, inviting it to penetrate each one of his walls, to the very deepest parts of his heart, wanting desperately for that feeling of peace to go deeper, but it went no further than the first time.

“I appreciate your trust, but you aren’t ready for me to go that deep. We’d do more harm than good to stir up your most deeply buried emotions so soon.”

“Um…OK?”

She chuckled. “Now, if I’m going to hold my magic in you for a few minutes, we must make use of the time, otherwise you’ll only start to grow dependent on it. So why don’t you tell me what thought made your fear return so suddenly?”

*Tell her what thought prompted my fear?* He froze, but with her magic flowing through him, the idea didn’t feel as terrifying as he would’ve expected.

“Steady,” Calliope said. “It’s alright to fear opening up. This is new to you. But you’ve already expressed enough trust to invite my magic deep into your heart. Is expressing the reason for your fear so much worse?”

*She’s right. It’s so unlike me, but I* did *invite her power past my walls. It was an act of desperation, but I did it, put myself entirely at her mercy. Yet she’s done nothing to me besides what I asked for. The enchanters also haven’t done anything to me against my will, even though I put myself at their mercy. Is expressing a single thought really a bigger risk than that?*

*Plus…I don’t want her to release her magic. The peace it brings…it’s like a drug. I can see why she says I could become dependent on it.*

Voice trembling, but focusing on the feeling of peace and his blossoming desire to trust, he said, “I…was thinking that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if you were right about…about magic being about connection.”

Calliope’s eyes filled with compassion. “It’s entirely understandable that such a change in perspective would be frightening, especially since I imagine you grew up in an environment where you were never allowed to question what you were told. It will take time to adjust to a new reality. But know that you’re *safe* here. And as much as your fear might try to bury them from you, your desires for trust and love and connection are not misplaced or futile. You’re on the path now to have those desires met.”

Unbidden, tears came to his eyes. “I…don’t know if I can believe that. I *do* want those things now, I can see that. But how could someone like me ever gain them? I’m not from this world where such things are possible.”

“You’ve already started. You’ve formed a connection with me, haven’t you? You’re talking with me, being honest about your thoughts and feelings, and listening to what I have to say. My magic is helping with that, making it easier for your deeper emotions to overshadow your fears, but you’re still the one making the choice to be open.”

“I…I don’t know. I don’t think I could do it without your magic.”

“Not yet perhaps, but eventually.” She smiled. “If I know my son and his stubbornness, he won’t give up on getting you there, and I’ll help as well. But I think that’s enough for today. You’ve made tremendous progress in a very short time, and I don’t want to undo that by pushing too hard too soon.”

He nodded and swallowed, unsure how to respond to such reassurances. “OK. Now what?”

“Now, I’m going to slowly pull my magic back. If you can, try to let your defenses stay down for a few minutes afterwards. But if you can’t yet, that’s alright.”

Gradually, the warmth receded from inside him and his walls of fear and apprehension did return, but a bit less potent than before, his desire for trust and connection a bit less buried.

When they returned to Samuel and Sarah, Sarah’s excited voice prompted the ghost of a smile on Acri’s face. “Can you use your magic on me now? I wanna see what’s in my heart too!”

Calliope smiled at her. “I don’t need magic to see into your heart, my dear -- it’s as open as they come, and full of kindness and curiosity.”

“Oh…OK. I just thought it would be fun to see more magic.”

“Oh don’t worry,” Calliope said. “You’ll see plenty more magic if you stay here for any length of time. Ever since our magic has recovered from the curse, many of us haven’t been able to resist using it at every reasonable opportunity. Six years is a long time to go without it.”

Sarah frowned. “There was a curse on the elves?”

A flicker of darkness crossed Samuel’s face. “A story for another day. Come, there are other people to meet and things to see today.” He looked at Calliope. “Thank you for your assistance, Mother. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Of course, of course. It was nice meeting both of you, Sarah, Acri. I look forward to our next meeting.”

As Samuel led them away, Acri felt yet another surprising mix of emotions. Calliope’s mention of the curse had stirred his emotions nearly as strongly as her magic had. To know that the kind and compassionate elf who’d made him feel such peace, and even the more taciturn elf whose motivations he still didn’t understand but who was also undeniably kind…that they’d suffered for six years under a curse *his people* had cast…his stomach tightened and his fists clenched at the thought. *Huh. Something really* is *changing in me. Am I starting to actually…*care *about other people?*