# Chapter 18: Confronting the Conclave

Angel walked through the portal, Evariste at her side, to find various groups of mages all shouting at each other in the courtyard outside the Conclave. *Is there not a big enough meeting hall to hold everyone? I suppose our numbers* have *vastly increased since the days of the Snow Queen.*

Within seconds, a flustered looking Clovicus appeared from the crowd. “Finally! Maybe you two can talk sense into these idiots! They’ve been arguing like this for hours!”

Angel glanced around at all the shouting mages. She had to raise her voice to be heard. “What are they even arguing *about*?”

Clovicus huffed. “At this point? I have no idea. It *started* with arguments about who’s in charge and who to send where, but I gave up even trying to follow it when it became obvious they weren’t going to listen to a word I have to say.”

*This whole situation is ridiculous. They’re acting like bratty children. Maybe I need something equally ridiculous to snap them out of this nonsense.*

An idea hit her and she grinned. *Oh, this is gonna be* fun*!*

She pulled on her magic and imagined the illusion. Her grin widened as hundreds of chickens suddenly appeared and started fluttering through the crowd of mages, clucking loudly. The shouting gradually subsided as the mages all glanced around at the chickens in obvious confusion.

Angel couldn’t resist a snort of laughter.

“Well,” Clovicus said, “that’s certainly *one* way to get them to shut up.”

Evariste seemed momentarily shocked into silence, then he laughed and grinned broadly. “Angel, that was *genius!*”

She grinned back at him and took his hand. “Shall we go knock some sense into these mages?”

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Evariste couldn’t shake off his pride to stand beside Angel. She was utterly *brilliant* and a force to be reckoned with. A surge of anticipation went through him at the thought of her reading the riot act to all these foolish mages.

Together, they walked forward, voices murmuring “Enchantress Angelique” and the crowd moving out of their way as if magnetized by her presence. He struggled not to laugh at the strange juxtaposition -- Angel’s determined stride and the awe of the crowd alongside the chaos of the fluttering chickens.

He turned his head to face her. Her jaw was set and her expression fierce, but he saw the uncertainty in her eyes. He squeezed her hand. “You’ve got this.” He poured every ounce of his faith in her into his words. “You’ve earned their respect and they *will* listen to you.”

For an instant, their gazes met, then she stepped closer to his side, their shoulders brushing, even as they continued walking forward. “I hope you’re right, because lives are at stake here.”

As they reached the front of the crowd, hands still clasped together, Evariste was filled with admiration. Many of these mages had spent years convincing Angel to fear and hate her own magic, but here she stood, fearlessly facing them down.

“Quiet!” Angel’s voice cut through the murmuring and the chickens disappeared. “I don’t know what you’ve all been wasting time arguing about, and frankly, I don’t care! Lives are at stake here and yet you waste time shouting at each other?! With every moment you waste, you’re giving the Chosen exactly what they want!”

The murmuring began again and the crowd’s discomfort was palpable as they began shifting and looking at the ground. “Here, here!” shouted a voice Evariste recognized as Enchantress Lovelana. “Enchantress Angelique is right!” shouted another voice. A smattering of similar shouts rang out.

Then someone exclaimed, “But we don’t know who’s in charge or where any of us are supposed to go!”

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Angel gritted her teeth, ready to shout once again, but Evariste met her gaze, a question in his eyes. She nodded, relaxing her jaw.

His voice and expression were calm but firm, leaving no room for argument. “We’re facing a crisis the likes of which hasn’t been seen since the time of the Snow Queen. Enchanter Clovicus has been trying to organize a response, and he’s been unsuccessful only because you all have been worrying about hierarchy instead of saving lives.”

The crowd’s murmuring grew louder, then Enchanter Tristisim pushed to the front, his voice rising above the murmurs. “We must uphold tradition! Even *more so* during this crisis. We can’t just put unqualified people in charge!”

Angel clenched her fists. *Has Tristisim* seriously *not learned his lesson yet?! We already put him in his place before, but apparently it didn’t stick.*

“*Unqualified*? Enchanter Clovicus has done more for this continent than *you* ever have!” Her voice was icy and held a note of warning Tristisim would be foolish to ignore. “The council is over and done with and *you* have no place being in charge. So sit down, *shut up*, and stop getting in the way!”

The crowd went completely silent, their shock palpable.

“Precisely,” Evariste added amid the silence. “Tradition is no excuse for inaction and obstruction. We’ve already seen the results of that. If you can’t see the foolishness in continuing the very attitude that got us into this mess, then get out of the way of those who can.”

Tristisim’s expression was a mix of fury and shame, but Angel turned away from him to look at Evariste. She felt the soothing pulse of magic flowing between them and the steady strength he radiated. He squeezed her hand and her fury turned to steely determination.

Turning back to the crowd, her voice seemed to cut through their shock.

“Now! The rest of you *will* listen to Enchanter Clovicus!” She raised her hand to cut off any objections. “I don’t *care* if you think he’s unqualified. We don’t have *time* to argue about that. We need to *stop the armies of black mages* who are *killing innocents* at this *very moment*!”

“And,” Evariste added, “if you insist on arguing over hierarchy or worrying about foolish traditions anyway, that means you’re just letting the Chosen win.”

The silence was heavy as the seconds ticked by. Then, Enchantress Lovelana’s voice rang out once again. “Angelique and Evariste are exactly right!” A group of war mages pushed their way to the front of the crowd and announced, “We stand with Enchantress Angelique!”. The rest of the crowd began murmuring again, but no one shouted any more objections.

Angel turned to Clovicus, who stood behind them. “There, we knocked some sense into them. Now you can get them organized and sent off, because I haven’t the faintest clue how to do that.”

Clovicus nodded, concern still etched on his face. “Thank you. I just hope they *stay* sensible long enough to be effective.” He walked towards the crowd and started ordering them to break into groups, and, without prompting, the war mages immediately took charge of enforcing the command.

Angel turned back to Evariste. “Shall we go? We need to figure out how we’re going to get past those wards and get to the mirror.”

“First I expect Clovicus will need me to make portals to as near the attack sites as my limit will allow. But then, yes, I think we should return and finalize our plan. Destroying the mirror is paramount.”

Clovicus whirled around. “Absolutely not! You two can’t just leave. If you do, they’ll fall back into disarray. They’re only listening to me now because most of them greatly respect Angelique.”

Angel frowned. “The war mages already seem to have taken charge of getting everyone in order and grouped. I don’t see what else you need me for. And besides, we have a limited window in which to get the mirror.”

He sighed. “You haven’t seen the utter chaos it’s been here for months. Things seemed to be settling down at first, but with most of the council members and so many other high ranking members having been Chosen, there’s a huge power vacuum. Combine that with the grief and anger at all the betrayals and it’s a recipe for chaos. We desperately need someone they all can look to and rally around.”

She reeled. “And…you think that’s *me*? Yelling at them for wasting precious time is one thing. But I’m no leader. Most of them still don’t even *like* me.”

“You underestimate yourself. It was mainly the Chosen moles who were always against you and they stirred up the others. But now that everyone has *seen* how you drove all the moles out and realized how they were manipulated, a great many of them have changed their tune.”

Angel shook her head, conflicted. It was obvious that the remnants of the conclave weren’t *against* her the way the Chosen infested one had been. And sure, the war mages might even actually respect her. But everyone else? And besides, they *needed* to destroy that accursed mirror as soon as possible.

“I don’t think so. And anyway…” she trailed off as Evariste gave her a meaningful look she couldn’t quite interpret.

“Angel, I think we should discuss this privately.”

Clovicus immediately nodded, stepping away, and Angel frowned in confusion and watched as Evariste cast a sound bubble around them.

“What do we suddenly need to discuss privately right now?”

He hesitated briefly, then spoke. “I think Clovicus may be right. Perhaps we *should* stay.”

Her frown deepened. “Why? We’re the only ones who can destroy the mirror.”

“Because he’s likely correct that they need someone to rally behind if they're to hold off these attacks.”

“And…you think that’s me?”

He paused, then nodded. “I do. You’ve shown them it’s possible to succeed against all the odds. And they saw how the Chosen all fled rather than fight you.”

Angel wrestled with the weight of Evariste’s words. She thought of the way the crowd had automatically moved aside for them, and the way Sinaed had accepted her comfort all those months ago after finding out her husband was Chosen. Of the respect and deference the war mages had shown her, and how quickly the crowd had submitted to their demands. She thought of how Evariste had always seen the good in her, even when she was convinced she was unlovable. Was he now seeing the way others saw her more clearly than she was?

She bit her lower lip. “I just…I don’t know if I even *can* play that role.”

He squeezed her hand. “You won’t have to do it alone. We’ll do it together.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. Why had it been easier to agree to come here and shout at the Conclave than to be the reason they stayed united? But Evariste was right -- she wouldn’t be acting alone. She squeezed his hand back, grateful that he was by her side, and nodded. “Alright. *Together*.”