# Chapter 19: A Veil Lifted

Several weeks went by for Acri in relative calm and he started feeling a sense of real belonging. He was so relieved to be free of his mother’s tyranny and cruelty that the seal on his magic and restrictions on his freedom hardly chaffed. Not that he was even *that* restricted, really, not compared to what he’d expected -- every day Samuel showed up and took him around the city and every week he met with Calliope. Slowly, he was starting to feel less afraid to hope, less afraid of wanting something *more* out of life.

And then there was Sarah. She often tagged along with them and Acri marveled at how cheerful she always was, keeping up a constant flow of chatter and charming everyone they met. Her constant cheerfulness worked at dissipating Acri’s fear and anxiety and, to his own surprise, he couldn’t help but be grateful for that. But today, as the three of them walked through the city, Sarah was unusually subdued, hardly speaking.

“Sarah…are you OK? You’re very quiet today.” Acri’s voice was laced with unexpected concern.

She looked up at him, her eyes full of deep, unspoken sorrow. “I miss my friends. King Emerys said he would help me find them and that they could come live here too.” Her voice faltered slightly. “B…but he’s been so busy, he hasn’t had any time.”

Acri looked at her, at the deep sorrow in her eyes, and a twinge of sadness and regret pulled at his heart. *I did this to her*, he realized. *I treated her as nothing more than a means to end. I didn’t even consider, or care, how my actions affected her.*

At the time, it had felt perfectly natural and normal to act as he had, considering only his own interests. But in so doing, he had hurt this innocent child, this person who had seen *him* as something more than a tool, who had seen his pain and actually *cared* enough to express sorrow, even though he hadn’t cared about hers. Or, he hadn’t cared then. But now, for the first time he could remember, he felt a strange sense of responsibility and a desire to heal the pain he’d caused. His regret too, deepened and tugged at his heartstrings, prompting him to admit his wrongdoing.

Instinctively, he tried to banish the guilt. Surely it *was* only natural for him to use those weaker than himself, just as he’d always been used by his mother. What should it matter if he’d caused Sarah pain? It wasn’t as if anyone had ever cared when they’d caused *him* pain.

Memories of the past several weeks flashed through his mind, and his stride faltered at the onslaught. Sarah’s gaze that seemed to pierce all his defenses, making him feel *seen* and *understood*. Samuel’s subdued kindness. The feeling of Calliope’s magic flowing through him, cutting through his layers of fear and bringing to the surface his deeper desires, always seeking his invitation before slipping through each layer of his defenses. *They…they* do *care. Even after all I’ve done.*

The weight of the realization silenced his attempts to rationalize his actions. He squeezed his fists in an effort to keep his hands from shaking, as guilt pushed its way past his walls. Words spilled out of him, almost of their own accord. “I’m…I’m sorry, Sarah. I never should have taken you away from them.”

Sarah’s mouth was an “O” of surprise. “You really mean that? Even though your mom was going to kill you?”

Acri hesitated, caught off guard by his own admission. *Did* he actually mean it? The memory of her fearful eyes that day came to mind and he winced. “Yes…I’m sorry I hurt you and scared you.” He shifted his weight and took a breath, trying to keep his voice steady. “I…I never should have used you like that. I couldn’t see that then but I do now.”

She looked at him intently, gaze piercing,

and he waited with bated breath, struggling not to look away.

After what felt like an eternity, Sarah’s face softened and she spoke. “It…it’s OK.” She paused, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Well…actually, it wasn’t OK…but I forgive you. You were scared too.”

The weight on Acri’s shoulders lifted and something in his heart loosened. His worth had always been determined by his ability and willingness to do as his mother ordered. If he failed to meet her expectations, he was punished. Harshly. To simply be *forgiven* of an offense was a strange and wonderful experience. And yet…

“I *was* scared. Really scared. I’ve always been scared…until I came here. But… I still shouldn’t have done what I did.”

Sarah shrugged. “That’s why I forgive you. I wouldn’t need to if you hadn’t done anything wrong.” She paused, again looking thoughtful, before her expression became one of utter certainty. “And you’re different now anyway. You wouldn’t do that again.”

Acri frowned slightly and shook his head. “How can you possibly know that?”

“I just do. I feel it in my heart.” She placed a hand on her chest.

Before Acri could process this, Samuel, who had been quietly listening, spoke. “She’s right, Acri. You *have* changed. The person I met several weeks ago would never have decided on his own to apologize. You’re growing.”

Acri turned, seeing warmth and kindness on Samuel’s face, and something in him relaxed. “Thank you.”

Samuel nodded. “Of course. I’m merely stating what I’ve observed.”

He turned to Sarah. “And I’ll speak to the king and inquire about when we might be able to go find your friends.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up. “Really? You’re the best Samuel!”

Seeing her go so quickly from sorrow to joy at Samuel’s promise, it struck Acri just how *powerful* such acts of kindness could be. The memory of the enchanters’ swirling, merged magics flashed vividly in his mind, the sheer *strength* of the radiating power beyond anything he’d ever felt. The enchantress’ claim that it was by deepening their trust that they had amplified their power had seemed utterly inexplicable, ludicrous even. Now, seeing the tangible results of kindness, *feeling* the results of forgiveness, it was as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes. If the simple words, “I forgive you” and just the expression of kindness on Samuel’s face could have such a profound effect on him, was it any wonder that a deep, enduring trust between two incredibly powerful enchanters could also amplify their magic?