# Chapter 20: Light from Darkness

The following evening, Emerys had only just sat down at his desk after returning from King Dirth’s palace, when there was a knock at his office door. He sighed. He’d spent all day meeting with King Dirth about the human-elf defensive against the dark mage attacks. The last several weeks had been a whirlwind of constant strategizing with the Farset King and the mages the Conclave had finally sent thanks to Angel and Evariste’s efforts. What was he needed for *now*?

“Who is it?”

“Samuel, Your Majesty.”

Emerys got up and opened the door, allowing him in. “Samuel! We’ve known each other since we were children! How many times do I have to tell you to drop the title and just use my name?!”

Samuel shrugged, a hint of humor in his eyes. “I don’t know, Your Majesty.”

Emerys groaned. “You’re *impossible*!”

Samuel’s lips twitched. “I apologize, Your Majesty.”

Emerys rolled his eyes, but couldn’t resist a chuckle at Samuel’s usual antics. “What did you need?”

Samuel instantly sobered. “Young Sarah has been quite sorrowful since yesterday, grieving her separation from her friends. I promised her I would inquire as to when we might go find them.”

Emerys frowned. He’d promised Sarah he’d try to track down her friends and offer them a place here after she’d explained they were all homeless orphans. But that was before the attacks had started and King Dirth had requested their help. With nearly all the warriors who weren’t guarding the borders or the palace assisting the Farset army, there weren’t enough guards available for such an expedition. And he certainly wasn’t going to send unguarded civilians outside the safety of the city, not so long as these attacks continued.

“You *know* there are too few guards available for a trip outside the city right now. Why would you get her hopes up?”

Samuel had a look in his eyes that Emerys knew all too well. *What is he up to?*

“I'm aware of the situation. However, *I* would like to lead the trip, if you agree.”

Emerys narrowed his eyes. *If he’s going with this where I think he is…he’s a virtuous idiot.* “What about your determination to be responsible for Acri?”

“I believe Acri should come.” Samuel didn’t even blink.

Emerys’ eyes narrowed further. *OK, it’s official -- he’s a virtuous idiot.* “Explain,” he ordered.

Samuel stood resolute, voice unwavering. “Acri has changed. He’s not the same person he was when he arrived. He’s made genuine connections and started showing true remorse. My mother has seen his heart and says there’s no malice in him. Apparently, his actions, inexcusable as they are, were done out of fear for his own safety and a callousness born of years of abuse. She’s been working with him to overcome that fear and callousness and he’s been remarkably open to the process.”

Emerys rubbed his chin. If both Samuel *and* Calliope were speaking for Acri, he couldn’t ignore that. Calliope’s magic couldn’t be fooled, so if she said Acri held no malice, he believed her. And even if that weren’t the case, with his magic sealed, Acri posed no threat Samuel wasn’t more than capable of handling -- Samuel was one of his best warriors and would have made general decades ago if he hadn’t repeatedly turned down the promotion. If *Samuel* led the group, two other guards should be sufficient protection while they were on the roads. Still, it was a risk to send Sarah out at all while these attacks continued, especially to a village that might itself be attacked. So long as she remained in the city, she was safe.

“Even if you’re right about Acri, this would still put Sarah in serious danger. If the village is attacked while you’re there and the army doesn’t arrive in time, you and the two or so other guards we can spare may not be enough to protect her.”

Samuel nodded gravely. “It is a real risk. But so is simply waiting for things to calm down. If her friends are killed in an attack and we haven’t even attempted to rescue them, the emotional pain she suffers could be devastating. She’s already lost her mother and she has no family here.”

Emerys massaged his temples. Samuel had a point, but that only made this more difficult. Could he live with himself if Sarah ended up dead because he allowed this trip? But could he live with himself if her friends were killed after he’d promised her help finding them? Conflict waged within him, until finally he spoke.

“Let me speak with her first. She’s so young and I hate for her to have to make such a decision herself, but as she has no parents, I can’t in good conscience let her go on such a trip without explaining the risks.”

“Understood. Shall I go get her now?”

Emerys sighed. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Samuel nodded. “Very well. I’ll be back.”

About 15 minutes later, Sarah sat across from Emerys, eyes shining with excitement. “Hi, Your Majesty! Samuel said you wanted to talk to me about finding my friends! Are we going to go soon?!”

Emerys glared at Samuel, who stood behind Sarah. “You have *her* using my title now?”

Samuel shrugged, a glint in his eyes. “It’s only proper.”

Emerys sighed. “Sarah, please just call me Emerys, like I said before. And yes, I need to talk to you about finding your friends. I’m sorry you’ve had to wait so long when I said I’d help you as soon as I could.”

Sarah nodded. “It…it’s OK. I know you’ve been busy.”

“I have been busy, but it’s more than that.” He rubbed his temples, stalling. How was he supposed to explain, to a *child*, that the entire continent was experiencing attack after attack by dark mages? There wasn’t even a guarantee that her friends were still *alive*. It seemed Lillian still had much of the magic she’d stolen from Evariste, because mages just kept appearing at random towns and villages, often causing considerable harm before the defenders even got word of the location.

“Are you OK…um…Emerys?” Sarah asked. “You seem upset.”

He tried to fix his expression into a mask of calm. “Yes, I’m fine. Now…Samuel has offered to take you to find your friends, but I need you to understand that it will be dangerous to leave the city.”

She frowned. “Why? Will someone else try to take me away?”

“No, it’s not that. You see…for the past several weeks, since right before Enchanter Evariste and Enchantress Angelique left, some very bad people have been attacking innocents in towns and villages. We’re doing our best to stop them, but sometimes no one is able to get there in time.”

Sarah’s eyes went wide and Emerys wanted to stop, not wanting to burden her with such knowledge. But if he was going to even consider letting Samuel take her on this mission, he *had* to be sure she understood the risks and still wanted to go anyway. He probably should’ve called Alastryn from the start and asked her to explain to Sarah-- his cousin had certainly spent more time with the girl and could probably have explained more gently. But interrupting the explanation now would likely be worse than fumbling his way through it. So he continued on, laying out the relevant facts the way he would for one of his warriors.

“So, I need you to understand that, if you leave the city and go to your village, there’s a chance you could be attacked or even killed. Samuel will protect you to the best of his ability, but I can’t send enough guards to be sure you’ll be safe, because they’re helping protect other places right now. But if you stay in the city, you’ll be safe, because no one can get in unless we let them.”

Sarah’s eyes were as wide as saucers and, for a moment, the room was silent. “So…are my friends…are they OK?” Her voice trembled.

Emerys sighed, wishing he had better news or at least some way to reassure her. “I don’t know. We haven’t had word of your village being attacked, so they’re most likely fine. But we can’t be certain.”

“Then, we need to go get them now, before they get hurt! Please, can we go right now? Please?”

“Sarah. Do you understand that going to get them will be dangerous, that *you* could be hurt or killed?”

Sarah’s face briefly took on a look of sheer stubbornness and determination, before fear flickered across her features. “I…I think I understand. But they’re my friends. I miss them so much. And I can’t leave them to get hurt. Please, we need to find them!” Her voice took a pleading note.

Emerys let out a breath. For someone so young, she was certainly determined and brave. He still didn’t feel right about letting her take such a risk, even with Samuel there. But he’d given her the choice and it was clear she’d be devastated if she was made to stay here while her friends remained in danger.

“Alright. You can’t go tonight, because Samuel will need time to prepare. Perhaps tomorrow. But I also need to ask you, how do you feel about Acri?”

Sarah brightened. “Oh I like him! Can he come with us?”

Emerys gaped at her, then raised his eyebrows. “You…*want* the man who *kidnapped* you to come with you on a dangerous trip?”

Sarah sobered. “He didn’t really want to hurt me. He was just so scared of his horrible mom.” She brightened again. “And he’s different now. We’re friends. So can he come with us? Please?”

Emerys stared at her, uncomprehending, then glanced at Samuel, who didn’t look the least bit surprised or concerned. The situation felt surreal. It was a testament to how deeply Emerys trusted Samuel and Calliope that he didn’t call the whole thing off then and there.

Finally, he spoke. “Very well. If Acri is willing, he may go. Samuel, take Sarah back to Alastryn, then return to my office and we’ll plan the mission.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” Sarah exclaimed, earning a brief smile from Emerys.

Samuel nodded at Emerys. “Very well. Let’s go, Sarah.”

Emerys watched them leave, mind still reeling from Sarah’s request, at how she apparently saw Acri not as her kidnapper, but as a man who had acted in fear for his life and was now a changed man.

Emerys clenched his fists and gritted his teeth as, for the first time, he really considered how it was Acri’s own *mother*, someone who *should*  have loved him unconditionally, who he’d been fleeing for his life from. *What kind of a person is even* capable *of abusing their own* child *like that?* Being completely out of her reach and away from the toxic environment she no doubt fostered, perhaps it wasn’t such a mystery that Acri had changed so quickly.

Yet, even considering the mitigating circumstances, Emerys couldn’t help but be amazed at how Sarah had so quickly forgiven and befriended her former kidnapper. Her attitude was the polar opposite of everything the Chosen stood for, embodying the essence of the brighter future they were fighting for.

In that moment, Emerys felt a renewed sense of hope. If, out of all the darkness the Chosen had tried to spread had emerged such kindness and forgiveness, it spoke volumes about what the end result of this war was likely to be.