# Chapter 21: Reunions and Redemption

The following day, Acri mused over his unexpected situation, as he walked along the forest path next to Sarah, Samuel in front of them and two other guards, Silas and Lyra, behind. He’d been utterly shocked and confused when Samuel had suggested he was to come on this trip, in order to make amends with Sarah by helping reunite her with her friends. And yet he hadn’t been able to shake the sense that Samuel was right, that he *should* do this for Sarah, even if it felt incredibly strange. When she’d first shown him compassion, even as he’d been holding her hostage, she’d sparked something inside him, setting off a chain reaction he still didn’t fully understand. He was no longer the man who wore a mask of indifference outside, while being internally tormented by fear, bitterness, and desperation. He didn’t know who exactly he *was* now, but he did know he’d started feeling the peace and freedom and connection he’d always yearned for, yet been too afraid to acknowledge. And when Sarah had forgiven him, without condition, it had strengthened his fragile hope that this life of peace and freedom from tyranny could be *real*, that it wasn’t just some cruel joke.

Acri glanced over at Sarah and felt an unexpected rush of affection for her, the child who’d seen straight through his defenses and responded with unexpected understanding, who’d treated him with such unfamiliar kindness, and who was somehow almost always cheerful.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

Acri hesitated, then blurted, “Thank you, Sarah. For being so kind to me from the very beginning.”

“Oh. Mom always told me to try to be nice to everyone. And you’re my friend, so it’s easy to be nice to you!”

Acri shook his head, a genuine smile on his face. She might not see it, but her kindness was no small thing to him. “Well, thank you all the same. It --” he cut off at the sound of a growl and turned, freezing at the sight of a huge bear coming towards them.

Acri broke into a cold sweat and his heart pounded in his chest, a single thought running through his mind: *I can’t let it hurt Sarah!* Before he could act, however, Samuel raised his hands, surrounding the bear in a blue translucent shield, then said something in a language Acri didn’t understand, but which apparently made the creature calm down.

Acri stared, awestruck, watching the bear simply turn and amble away as the shield dissipated. Calliope had told him magic was meant to protect, but he’d never imagined something like this -- not only had Samuel protected them from the bear, he’d also avoided harming the bear itself in the process.

“Is…is it gone now?” Sarah’s voice startled Acri out of his thoughts. He glanced down and realized she was clinging to his arm. Seeing her wide eyes and trembling lip and feeling her small hands gripping his forearm, a wave of protectiveness surged through him, followed by an urge to reassure her. The feelings were strange, yet not unwelcome.

“I think so.” He looked at Samuel, who nodded.

Samuel’s voice was steady and calm. “Don’t worry, the bear won’t bother us again. And if anything else tries to attack, we’ll protect you.”

Acri exhaled slowly. “Samuel, that was... incredible.”

Samuel offered a small smile. “It’s just a part of what we do, Acri. Protecting others, respecting life -- that's what our magic is truly for.”

“That’s so amazing!” Sarah exclaimed. Letting go of Acri’s arm, she looked up at him. “Isn’t it amazing, Acri?”

Acri felt his lips part in a smile, her cheerfulness infecting him. “It *is* amazing,” he agreed. “I never thought…magic was always a weapon…” He shook his head, marveling at the contrast between Samuel’s protective use of magic and his own past experiences with it -- as a means of exerting power over others.

A few uneventful hours later, the group had arrived at the village and Sarah was excitedly talking to her friends, a boy and a girl who appeared to be around the same age as her. Samuel and Acri stayed back while Silas and Lyra stayed with the children. Finally, Sarah came running up to Acri, Silas chasing after her, the other two children following behind more warily with Lyra.

“Acri! Samuel! This is Beth and Thomas! They’re my best friends!” Sarah’s voice was pitched with excitement.

When Beth and Thomas reached them, their eyes lit with recognition as they saw Acri’s face. Fear flickered across Thomas’ face, but Beth clenched her fists. “You!” she shouted, pointing at Acri. “You, you, you…buckethead! You’re the one who took Sarah away! You're a giant buckethead and I want you to GO. AWAY. RIGHT. NOW!”

The old Acri would have lashed out in anger at the girl for daring to speak to him in such a way. But instead of anger, shame washed over him. Sarah might have forgiven him, but clearly that hadn’t fixed everything. Should he apologize to her friends too? His stomach clenched at the thought. Apologizing to Sarah had been one thing, but even that had been a struggle. But to show such vulnerability to these strangers…

“Beth!” Sarah shouted, stamping her foot. “Acri isn’t like that anymore! He’s my friend now!”

Acri felt both shock and affection for Sarah well in his heart. She was…*defending* him? The man who’d kidnapped her, in front of her friends, to one of those friends?

Beth gaped at Sarah. “But he…he…he took you away! He can’t be your friend! That’s crazy!”

“Beth, you don’t --” Sarah’s response was cut-off by a sudden cry of alarm.

“Help! Please, someone help!”

Startled, Acri turned to see three men frantically running towards their group, each one carrying a woman who appeared to have severe burns.

As the men reached their group, one of them approached Samuel. “Please! You’re an elf, right? Can you heal them?”

Before Samuel could respond, however, another voice interrupted. “Well, well, well. It seems my daughter has finally returned to me.”

“D…Dad? W…what are you doing here?”

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Conflict waged within Samuel as he glanced between the women who were clearly in need of immediate healing, and the man -- apparently Sarah’s father -- who, judging by the look on her face, was terrifying her with his mere presence. Sarah’s safety was *his* responsibility. And yet, she didn’t seem to be in *immediate* danger, while these women likely were. He wasn’t a trained healer, nor were Silas or Lyra, but all elves had enough innate healing magic that they should at least be able to stabilize the women enough to save them from imminent death. Also…judging from Acri’s clenched fists as he glared at the man, it might prove unnecessary for Samuel to intervene at all.

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Acri whirled to face the man who was approaching a wide-eyed Sarah. Vaguely, he noticed Samuel usher Silas and Lyra towards the group of men carrying the injured women, but his focus was on the horror and fear in Sarah’s expression and a single thought ran through his mind: *I can’t let him hurt her.*

The man gave Sarah a crooked smile. “Why, I came looking for you of course! Your mother was a fool to think she could take you away from me. And you were a very bad girl to go with her. Now come along. You’re going to make up for all the time you abandoned me.”

Protectiveness and anger surged in Acri when the man tried to grab her. Heedless of the fact that he had no experience in non-magical combat, Acri jumped in front of Sarah and shoved the man away. “She’s not going *anywhere* with you. I *won’t* let you hurt her.”

Unexpectedly, something inside Acri cracked and a trickle of familiar warmth began flowing through him. Magic. *His* magic. Abruptly, another crack formed and then another, the flow of magic growing stronger. After what felt like an eternity but couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, the tight constricting feeling around his magical core was completely gone. Hesitantly, he tried pulling on his magic. It responded willingly, no unnatural wall blocking him off.

*Did…did the seal on my magic* really *just break?* *But…*why*? I wasn’t even* trying *to be selfless. All I did was stand up to this bully.*

“And who are *you* to tell me what to do?! Get out of my way!” Sarah’s father sneered.

Acri’s fists clenched and he glared at the man. Briefly, he felt a lightness in his chest as he pulled on his newly freed magic, before forming a blade and brandishing it at the man as he stepped into his personal space.

“Shut up!” Acri shouted, his eyes shooting daggers. “You’re going to get away from Sarah *now* and *stay away* or I’ll make you wish you had!” Acri waved the blade and the man flinched and stepped back, eyes wide as he raised his hands in surrender. “OK, OK, there’s no need for that. I’ll go.” Sarah’s father took several more steps back before turning and running away.

“You…you made him leave,” Sarah sniffled, coming out from behind Acri and staring at him. “He never just leaves me alone. But you made him."

She turned to Beth and Thomas, who were both gaping at Acri. “See? He really *is* my friend.”

Surprisingly, it was Thomas, not Beth, who asked, “Are you *really* her friend?”

Acri took a moment before replying, trying not to wither from the gazes of all three children. *Was* he Sarah’s friend? He couldn’t deny that she’d become important to him or that he’d even come to enjoy spending time with her. If that wasn’t friendship, he supposed it was the closest he was likely to get. “I’d…like to think so.”

“So then why did you take her away?!” Beth glared at him, but her voice was a bit softer than previously.

Acri froze. If only Calliope were here to help him process this situation. “I…I…was scared,” he forced out.

“His mom wanted to *kill* him,” Sarah added.

Both children gaped at Acri. “She did? Your mom?!” Beth demanded.

Sarah kept talking, saving him from having to come up with another reply. “His mom taught him lots of bad stuff too and made him really scared. But now he’s away from her and he’s different. He’s my friend.”

Acri couldn’t resist smiling at her words. He never could have guessed, when he’d made the desperate decision to defect from his mother’s cause, that he’d end up here.

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“Thank you Sir, thank you so much!” The man knelt on the ground, holding his unconscious wife’s hand as he looked at Samuel.

Samuel nodded. “Of course. It is my duty to provide aid when I’m able. I’m only sorry I don’t have the training to heal her completely. Unfortunately, we must return to our charges now.”

“Oh, yes of course,” the man said. “I wouldn’t want to hold you up. But thank you again, thank you so much. I don’t think she or her friends would have survived if not for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” Samuel nodded again, but his mind was elsewhere. He’d seen how Acri had confronted Sarah’s father and the sudden use of his magic. Acri had broken his seal. *He must have been acting solely out of concern for Sarah’s wellbeing for that to have done it.*

“Silas, Lyra, we must return to our charges now that we’ve done what healing we could.”

Samuel wore an uncharacteristically large grin as they approached Acri and the children. This trip had gone far better than he ever could have hoped for.