# Chapter 23: Sarah’s Intervention

Acri looked at the ground and shifted his weight nervously as he walked next to Samuel through the palace halls. The enchanters had apparently returned the previous evening, and Samuel was taking him to speak to them and the elf king. Samuel hadn’t said what they wanted to speak to him about, but…what if they intended to seal his magic again? It wasn’t as if he’d done some big heroic action to make up for all the harm he’d caused, not even the harm he’d caused to the enchanters personally. By rights, his seal shouldn’t have broken in the first place. And yet, could he really bring himself to submit to such a seal a second time?

These past weeks had been…unlike anything he’d experienced before. He’d been so preoccupied with his newfound relationships and the challenge Calliope presented him with -- moving past his fear and bitterness and allowing his other emotions in -- that he’d hardly noticed the seal on his magic. But now that it was *gone*…it was like his chest had been compressed and now he could finally breathe deeply again. Could he stand to go back?

Acri’s thoughts were interrupted by Samuel’s groan. “What are they doing here? They’re supposed to be with Lady Alastryn.”

Acri looked up to see Sarah, Beth, and Thomas walking side-by-side in the opposite direction down the hallway. They froze and Sarah looked at Samuel sheepishly. Then she glanced between her friends, who nodded, and, as one, they turned and started running away.

“Stop.” Samuel didn’t even raise his voice, but the single word held a note of command that wasn’t to be trifled with. The children stopped and Samuel approached them, gesturing for Acri to follow.

“Sarah,” Samuel knelt down and, looking her in the eyes, said gently but firmly, “we’ve already had the conversation about you sneaking off to wander the palace alone. You know better.”

After a brief lecture on why they shouldn’t be wandering off by themselves, Samuel informed the children they were taking them back to Lady Alastryn. The children groaned, but didn’t argue.

As they started walking again, the children now beside them, Sarah looked at Acri. “Where were you going?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “The enchanters wanted to talk to me.”

“Oh they’re back now? That’s nice.” She wrinkled her nose. “I hope they don’t spend the whole time talking to you holding hands though. Is that why you look nervous?”

A chuckle escaped Acri. “No. I don’t mind if they hold hands.”

She furrowed her brow. “Then how come you’re nervous?”

Acri shrugged. What was he supposed to say? He didn’t think she even knew about his seal in the first place. Not to mention his underlying guilt for how he’d tried to kill Enchantress Angelique or how, for over five years, he’d mocked Enchanter Evariste as his mother drained the enchanter of his magic. Or how he’d helped imprison the enchanter in the first place. Acri had felt no such guilt the last time he’d spoken to the enchanters. But after all these weeks with Samuel and Calliope and Sarah…

He shook his head. No, he couldn’t tell Sarah any of that.

Sarah pulled on Acri’s arm and stopped walking, forcing him to stop as well if he didn’t want to pull her along. “Acri. Are you OK? You look really scared.”

Acri glanced around to see the others had stopped as well. Samuel was looking at him with concern, while Beth and Thomas looked uncomfortable and uncertain.

Everyone was silent, apparently awaiting his response. How the heck was he supposed to navigate this situation? He had his magic back, but this didn’t seem like a situation magic could solve. Finally, he shrugged. “I’ll be fine. Let’s just keep walking.”

Sarah looked unconvinced. “I’m coming with you to see the enchanters,” she stated matter-of-factly. “You’re scared and you need a friend.”

Acri’s tension eased slightly, though he wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t as if Sarah could *do* anything to fix his problems. Besides, surely Samuel wasn’t going to let her intrude on a meeting with the king and the enchanters. He looked at Samuel, expecting him to say as much. Instead, Samuel looked *pleased* at the idea.

“Very well then. Sarah, you may accompany us to the meeting, after we bring your friends back to Lady Alastryn.”

A strange mix of shock and relief settled inside Acri. *I suppose I should have expected that. Samuel* has *always* *encouraged Sarah in anything that means she’s around me. I still don’t get* why*, but he’s clearly invested in my wellbeing. And somehow, he knew her friendship was exactly what I needed.*

Beth and Thomas, who had been surprisingly quiet this whole time, now spoke up, objecting that they weren’t going to be separated from Sarah again. An argument began and Sarah looked conflicted, glancing between Acri and her other friends. Seeing her expression, Acri felt a pang in his chest. “Sarah, it’s OK -- go with your friends. I’ll be fine.” Sarah turned back to him, but he must not have looked fine at all, because her expression only grew more conflicted.

Lost, Acri glanced at Samuel, who intervened, reassuring Thomas and Beth that Sarah would be back with them later that day.

When they looked ready to continue arguing, Sarah raised her arms in exasperation. “Guys! I’ll be *fine*! Stop worrying about me! Come on, and let’s get moving.”

About fifteen minutes later, Acri’s stomach lurched when he found himself seated at a round table between Samuel and Sarah, across from the enchanters and the elf king.

“Before we begin,” the king said, gesturing to Sarah, “what brings you here? The mission to find your friends was clearly a success. Surely you want to be with them.”

Enchantress Angelique interjected, “You arrived *with* them, Emerys. How do *you* not know why she’s here?”

For reasons unclear to Acri, the elf king had actually been at Lady Alastryn’s residence when they’d arrived. The king had smirked at Lady Alastryn, said, “I told you so,” then declared he was returning with them to the meeting.

The king shrugged. “I saw no reason to object if Samuel thought her presence appropriate, nor any point in getting the same explanation twice.” He turned back to Sarah, and raised a questioning eyebrow.

Sarah visibly straightened, as if trying to appear older than she was. “I do want to see my friends. But Acri is my friend too and he needs me more right now.”

Enchantress Angelique’s expression turned thoughtful and Acri thought he saw a flicker of something gentle in her eyes when she glanced at him. It was nothing compared to the way he’d seen her look at Enchanter Evariste or even the looks he assumed were friendly exasperation directed at the elf king. But it was also different from how she’d previously looked at him with hostility and wariness.

“That’s very kind of you,” the enchantress said, looking back at Sarah. “But why do you say Acri needs you right now?”

“Because he keeps saying he’s fine, but I can tell he’s scared.”

Acri shifted in his seat. When had he gotten so easy to read? He used to be a master of hiding everything behind a mask of indifference. Where had that mask gone?

“I’m just…scared of messing this up!” he blurted, looking at the floor.

Sarah tugged on his arm and he looked at her. “Acri, just say what you want. You want to be friends with them!”

Acri stared at her. Friends? With the enchanters? That was impossible. They had shown him mercy, but it wasn’t as if they actually *liked* him. And yet…by all rights, Sarah shouldn’t like him either. But, here she stood, stubbornly *insisting* on being his friend. Was it possible that the enchanters could also be so forgiving? They *had* shown him mercy he’d never expected, afterall. But if he wanted their forgiveness, he knew he had to ask. Could he really do it though? Show them the same vulnerability he’d shown Sarah, not knowing how they'd respond?

Sarah tugged at him again. “Come on Acri! Just say it! I know you can do it!”

Acri looked at Sarah, seeing nothing but confidence in her eyes. She didn’t doubt him for a second, and, in that moment, he couldn’t bear to let her down. Steeling himself, he looked across at the enchanters’ indecipherable expressions, quickly blurting out, “Enchantress Angelique, Enchanter Evariste, I’m sorry for what I did to both of you. It was utterly inexcusable and I just wish there was more I could do to make up for it.”

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*Well…*that *was not how I expected this meeting to start*, Angel thought. How in the world had Acri befriended Sarah after he’d kidnapped her and held her hostage? But then, judging by her initiative, perhaps it was *she* who’d befriended him. The one time Angel and Evariste had met her, she’d seemed incredibly confident, stubborn, resilient, and a little fearless. Angel supposed, if anyone was going to pull Acri into friendship, it would be someone like Sarah, who simply wouldn’t take no for an answer.

And the way Acri had been looking at Sarah -- it wasn’t a predatory look or the look of indifference he’d tried so hard to maintain in their last meeting. Instead, it was a look, first of genuine shock, then pure vulnerability, then utter determination. This Acri was a far cry from the one they’d met with before leaving to deal with the conclave. If she hadn’t believed he’d changed before, she did now. His behavior and the range of emotions he now let show on his face made that clear.

Angel met Evariste’s eyes. *What do you make of Acri’s apology?*

Evariste opened his mouth, then shut it. *Ha! Now I’m the one who needs to get used to the new depth of our bond -- not that I’d ever regret it. As for Acri, he* seems *genuine. His behavior is certainly markedly different than the last time we saw him.*

Angel squeezed their joined hands under the table. *I agree. And a part of me can’t help but feel sorry for him, given how we know his mother treated him. But can we really forgive him so easily?*

“Well,” Sarah said, “aren’t you going to say you forgive him?” She glared at them with her hands on her hips, and Angel didn’t know whether to be impressed or amused by her outburst. It was Evariste who responded, however. “Sarah, you’re a good friend and Acri is lucky to have you. But this is something we need to discuss alone.” He looked at Emerys.

Sarah, however, was having none of it. “So you’re not gonna forgive him? But…if you don’t forgive him you’re hurting him *and* you. Mom always said that if we don’t forgive people who hurt us, we’re just hurting ourselves more.” She stared at both of them with wide round puppy eyes.

Angel stood momentarily frozen. How could a mere expression on a child’s face make her feel so compelled to acquiesce? It was as if Sarah’s eyes held the force of a spell.

Before either she or Evariste could come up with a coherent response, Emerys chuckled. “Sarah, I think you broke them.”

That snapped Angel out of it and she rolled her eyes. “Emerys, don’t be ridiculous.”

She glanced back at Evariste, started to open her mouth, then closed it again. *Ha! You’re right, this will take some getting used to! Anyway, arguing with her about this is silly. The whole reason we wanted to talk to Acri in the first place is because we need his help. Him apologizing is actually a better start than we could’ve expected.*

Evariste sent the impression of a sigh through the bond. *What he’s done -- how he tried to kill you -- I don’t know if I can ever entirely forgive him for that.*

*Even knowing all he’s been through? You told me yourself how Lillian abused him right in front of you. What he's done and been a part of is despicable. But the way he’s been interacting with Sarah…Samuel said it was by protecting her that he broke his seal. The Acri you described taunting you,* -- at this Angel clenched her fists; even in pointing out how he’d clearly changed, she still had to tamp down her anger at the thought of even the small role Acri had played in Evariste’s torment -- *the one who tried to kill me and who showed up weeks ago with a hostage, would never have shown concern over the wellbeing of a magicless child. He isn’t the same person Lillian molded him into. He* can’t *be, or the seal wouldn’t have broken. And let’s not forget that Lillian and the mirror are the* real *enemies.*

Evariste sighed aloud this time. *I suppose you’re right -- he didn’t just apologize, his whole demeanor is different. And we don’t have time to waste. We need to get to and destroy that accursed mirror and we’ve already agreed he’s our best chance to get someone through the wards safely. Rejecting what seems to be a sincere apology on his part won’t help convince him to cooperate.*

“Are you two alright?” Emerys asked. “You’ve been staring at each other for a while now.”

Angel flushed. Not only would they need to get used to this silent communication, clearly they’d have to work on using it more subtly. And, she supposed, they’d have to tell Emerys and Severin about it, as it would likely be an additional strategic advantage.

*Of course, Emerys will start going on about “the power of love” again.* She had the instinct to roll her eyes, but she wasn’t actually all that bothered by the idea this time. After all, why *should* she be embarrassed by her love for Evariste? She’d finally realized what her friends had long since understood -- romantic love *wasn’t* necessarily a distraction from dealing with more important things, like breaking curses or stopping attacks. Instead, it could be an additional source of strength to keep on fighting. And if their magic had found a way to harness their love to give them extra powers -- even if she still had no idea *how* that was possible -- all the better. *And besides, I can always retaliate by mocking him with his title. He really should’ve known better than to show me such an easy way to annoy him.*

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Acri waited silently, muscles tense, as the enchanters just stared at each other strangely. When Sarah finally spoke up, unprompted, demanding they forgive him, he didn’t know whether to hug her in gratitude (Wait, where had that thought come from? When had he ever hugged *anyone*?) or shake his head at her naivety, so he did neither.

Finally, after the king called the enchanters out on their strange staring, they faced Acri again, expressions unreadable.

“We can see you’ve begun to change, so we accept your apology.” Enchantress Angelique spoke stiffly, though, again, Acri thought he saw the briefest flicker of something softer in her eyes.

Acri’s muscles relaxed. It wasn’t the warm and encouraging forgiveness Sarah had so readily offered, but still, they’d accepted his apology, which was more than he deserved.

“And,” Enchanter Evariste added, “there *is* something more you can do to make up for your actions. But that’s a matter we need to discuss privately.” He glanced at Sarah, then at the king, who nodded to Samuel.

“Alright, Sarah, it’s time to go now,” Samuel said.

Sarah glanced at Samuel then looked intently at Acri, her gaze boring into him. “Are you really OK, now? You don’t look as scared as before.”

A smile broke across Acri’s lips at her concern. *Is this what it would have been like if I’d gotten to know my siblings?* The thought startled him. His mother had “gotten rid of” all her children prior to him because she hadn’t deemed their magical abilities sufficiently useful. That had always been a warning to him to never fail to use his magic as she ordered. He’d never thought of what they might actually have been like as *people,* had they been allowed to live. But even if they hadn’t all been killed, they’d be older than him, not younger.

He shook himself. Now wasn’t the time to think about this.

“I’m fine,” he told Sarah. “And I’m sure Beth and Thomas are missing you. Let Samuel bring you back to them.”

She didn’t quite look convinced. Abruptly, she stood from her seat, went to Acri and hugged him. It was an awkward hug, given he was still seated, yet his heart swelled with affection and he hugged her back.

“OK, now I can leave,” Sarah said, pulling away. “*Now* you’re really OK. Hugs always help make things better.”

Acri chuckled and grinned at her. Hearing a chuckle from the other side of the table, he turned and saw Enchanter Evariste chuckling too. Enchantress Angelique was smiling at the child, while the king looked amused.

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*She’s so innocent, so cheerful, so self-assured*, Angel mused, watching Samuel lead Sarah out. *So like I was at her age…before the Chosen-corrupted-conclave got to me. Before all the lies and manipulation. Before they had me convinced I was a monster.*

Angel clenched her fists at the mere notion of what had been done to her being done to Sarah, or to any other child. And yet, if the Chosen, if *Lillian* especially, had her way, they’d continue to do far worse. She *had* done far worse already, and to her own children nonetheless. But no longer. They’d reached a turning point, where it was time to end this, for the sake of all the children who’d otherwise end up suffering far worse than she had.

She glanced at Acri. *Hopefully, his newfound friendship with Sarah and remorse over his past will be enough to convince him to do this.*