# Chapter 24: Turning Point

For a brief moment after Samuel led Sarah out, the atmosphere in the room felt light, a smile on Acri’s face from the lingering warmth of Sarah’s hug. Then, he noticed the enchanters sharing yet another strange look. When they looked back at him, the spark of determination in Enchantress Angelique’s eyes and the more guarded but equally determined look on Enchanter Evariste’s face sent a wave of apprehension through him.

*This is it. The moment of truth. Are they going to say they want to seal my magic again?*

The enchantress’ eyes, set with determination, bored into Acri, but the words that left her mouth were the last thing he expected to hear. “Acri. It’s clear that you’ve changed and that you genuinely care about Sarah. Now, we need you to help us protect her and other innocents like her.”

Acri straightened, his full attention on the enchanters now. “Sarah is in danger?! From who? Tell me who’s threatening her and I won’t let them anywhere near her!”

His response was automatic and so vehement that he surprised even himself with the conviction in his voice. But he’d meant every word -- no one was going to touch a hair on Sarah’s head if he had anything to say about it.

The enchanters exchanged another of their strange looks -- they stared so intently at each other it was almost as if they were trying to read each other's minds -- then Enchanter Evariste spoke. “It’s not *only* Sarah, but the entire continent that’s in danger -- not just from your mother but from that infernal mirror. It *must* be destroyed before it can accumulate any more power.”

Acri stared at them in bewilderment. Of course he knew the mirror was dangerous and heaven knew his mother was terrifying; she’d even had plans to take over the entire continent after all. But those plans had fallen to shambles once all her moles in the conclave had run in terror rather than face the very enchantress who sat across from him now. Of course, his mother was still a problem, but surely not a threat to the entire continent anymore, not so long as Enchantress Angelique lived.

The mirror…that was its own problem. But what did they expect *him* to do about it? He’d given them all the information they’d asked for and anything else he knew would be outdated at this point.

Mind racing, Acri finally noticed not only the enchanters but also the elf king staring at him, clearly expecting some kind of response.

“I don’t understand. What do you expect *me* to do? My mother is already terrified of you.” He looked at Enchantress Angelique. “And I have no idea how to destroy the mirror, if it’s even possible.”

The elf king chuckled, breaking the tension. “Oh *you* don’t need to worry about destroying that cursed thing. *The power of love* will take care of that,” he said, glancing at Enchantress Angelique with a smirk. The enchantress smirked back at him. “For once in his life, *His Majesty* is correct.”

Enchanter Evariste looked at her with surprised amusement and they shared another of their strange looks.

Acri furrowed his brow. *These three have such a weird dynamic.*

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*What, no scowl, or objection that it’s not about love? You’ve upped your game against Emerys.*

Angel grinned at Evariste. *I decided I have no reason to be embarrassed that our love* and *trust is what amplified our magic. But we’re getting sidetracked. Clearly, we need to spell things out for Acri explicitly.*

Angel felt, rather than heard, Evariste’s agreement through their bond. *Hmm. We’ll have to experiment with this later. The magic* did *seem to connect both our minds* and *hearts.*

She turned back to Acri, sobering. “*We’ll* destroy the mirror. We just need you to go through the wards and *get* it.”

A look of incredulity and -- was that relief? -- briefly crossed Acri’s face, then he went white.

“You…you want me to go back to the stronghold? If…if my mother sees me…”

Abruptly, Angel felt an intense wave of empathy radiating through their bond, combining with her own compassion. Though the emotion flowing from Evariste felt almost…begrudging? She squeezed his hand and sensed his tension ease, just as hers always did when he made the same gesture. *It’s alright to feel for him, Evariste. What we’re asking clearly terrifies him.*

*I know,* he projected*. But at the same time…I don’t think I can ever forget that he tried to kill you.*

Angel suppressed a shudder at the memories. *And I’ll never forget the role he played in your imprisonment. But Sarah was right -- we’re hurting ourselves as much as him if we continue to hold on to resentment.*

Evariste nodded at her, his acceptance of her words ringing silently through the bond, though she could still sense his inner conflict.

Emerys gave them a knowing look and Angel inwardly groaned. Of course *he had to figure out something is different with us. And I’m sure he’ll be asking us about it later. Ugh, we need to be more subtle or* everyone *is going to figure out something is up.*

“Acri.” Evariste’s voice was soft, as if speaking to a small, scared child. “Your mother will never harm you again. We’ll *ensure* it.”

“Yes,” Angel added, her own resolve matching Evariste’s. “If you join us on this mission, we *will* protect you. You’ve seen what my magic could do alone. Now,” she held up her and Evariste’s joined hands, “we’d be virtually unstoppable if we truly unleashed our full power. Your mother won’t touch a hair on your head.”

Acri stared at them, dumbstruck. “Is…is this an order?”

Angel immediately shook her head. This entire mission would hinge on the three of them trusting each other and Acri needed to understand that.

“No,” Evariste confirmed. “As much as we could use your help here, we won’t force you.” His voice gentled again. “Acri, this *isn’t* like with your mother. We aren’t going to threaten you or punish you if you refuse to risk your life.”

Angel nodded. “This truly *is* your choice. But you know the stakes here as well as we do, so choose wisely.”

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Acri’s mind was a confusing jumble of emotions focused on a single thought as he stumbled through the city – he needed Calliope’s help. He’d told the enchanters and elf king he needed time to think before he could make a decision. He’d been half shocked when they’d allowed him to wander off on his own, but hadn’t stopped to question it, simply wanting to reach Calliope as quickly as possible.

His face must have said it all when he arrived at her house, because she ushered him inside without a word and gestured for him to sit in his usual place.

“Now, what’s got you so upset?”

Acri took a shaky breath. “Can you calm me first, please?”

Calliope nodded, laying her hand on his. Her cool, peaceful magic penetrated the outermost layers of his fear. Acri sighed, welcoming the feeling of partial relief and the whole story spilled out of him in a rush.

“I’m just…I’m so overwhelmed. I feel like I can’t even think this through. I…I know I *should* go. For Sarah’s sake. For *all* of our sakes. To make amends. But the prospect of facing my mother again…trusting they’ll truly protect me from her…”

Calliope’s eyes were wells of compassion and her magic gently nudged at him, seeking permission to pass his outer defenses. This had become their usual routine – they talked, and gradually she sent her magic deeper, seeking his consent at each additional barrier. As always, he immediately relaxed, inviting the magic forward, a deepened sense of peace further quieting his fear as the magic gently slipped through his outer walls.

“I’m so sorry you have to face this decision Acri,” Calliope said. “Your mother hurt you deeply and your fear is entirely understandable. But you’re also right to consider what’s at stake here.”

“So what do I *do*?” he pleaded.

“You know I can’t make that decision for you. But shall we see what’s truly on your heart?”

Acri started to nod, eager for the calming feel of her magic to permeate him further, and the insights it would provide.

“Although,” she added, “if you’re willing, I can probe deeper into your heart than I’ve done before, past your next layer of defenses. It may give you additional insight to help with your decision.”

Acri gulped, excitement and trepidation now warring within him. Calliope’s magic was just so soothing, radiating such peace, that, for weeks, he’d longed for her to go deeper, to stretch that peace all the way to the deepest parts of him. But she’d always warned that going too deep too fast would only hurt him.

“I’m…ready for that now?”

“You’ve reached a point where going a layer deeper than we have before is no longer likely to cause more harm than healing. But whether you’re *ready* is up to you. Diving deeper, nearer the root of your emotions means letting me through to more vulnerable parts of your heart than we’ve yet explored. It must be entirely your decision whether or not to allow that.”

Acri nodded, trusting Calliope implicitly and surrendering easily to the desire he’d had for weeks. “Yes, I want that. Please. Send your magic as deep as you safely can.”

“You’re certain?”

“Yes. I trust you. If you’d wanted to hurt me, you’ve had plenty of chances. But you’ve only ever helped me heal.”

She nodded. “Very well.”

Acri shut his eyes and felt his tension gradually ease as her magic slowly spread through him, letting his newly developed protective instincts for Sarah and his desire to make amends shine through the fear of his mother. A general feeling of peace settled over him as, at each additional barrier, he relaxed further and invited the magic to continue.

Then it reached the first line of defenses Calliope had previously refused to pass, and paused, waiting for his invitation. To his own surprise, he hesitated. *Did* he really want to go that deep? To be that vulnerable? What if, behind those walls, were actually the darkest parts of him?

“Acri, have you changed your mind? Should I stop here? If you have, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Calliope’s voice was gentle and soothing.

Acri took a breath and focused on the peace radiating from Calliope’s magic. He trusted her and she’d said doing this wouldn’t cause him more harm than healing, not if it was his choice.

“No. Continue, please.”

The magic surged forward then paused again. Acri opened his eyes and looked at Calliope in confusion.

“This wall is different than I’d realized,” she explained. “I can’t just slip through, like with the others – your guard is too tight. I’d have to force my way through, and that *would* hurt you. So, either we can stop here, or you can lower the wall yourself.”

Briefly, Acri tensed. Should he back out? But no, he was *safe* here. If he wasn’t ready to handle whatever was there, Calliope wouldn’t have offered to send her magic there at all.

He focused on where the magic had paused, and, bit by bit, he consciously let his guard all the way down. Finally, he felt the magic continue onward, radiating peace and comfort.

What Calliope’s magic revealed wasn’t some hidden dark corner of his heart, but desires that went deeper than he’d realized, deeper than he’d have been ready to accept if they’d done this sooner. With his guard fully lowered in the safety of Calliope’s home, her magic shining a light throughout his heart, he felt how *deeply* his desire to protect Sarah truly went. And not only Sarah but others too, Samuel, Calliope, all the people he’d met who’d treated him with kindness. He felt just *how badly* he wanted to prove to himself that he’d truly changed, how strongly he felt compelled to make amends for who he’d been. Just how badly he wanted to trust that, in spite of what he’d done to them both, Enchantress Angelique and Enchanter Evariste really *would* protect him if he went on this mission with them. That they really *meant* it when they’d accepted his apology.

“You *have* changed Acri,” Calliope said. “When I first looked at your heart, there was no malice there, but you were also lacking love, affection, and remorse. Now, your heart is bursting with all three. When presented with the first genuine opportunity to foster healthy relationships, you ran with it, overcoming your fear of revealing your true self. You’ve become kind and caring and I see your desire to protect. And you’ve developed a willingness to trust and show your true self.”

Calliope’s words washed over Acri as if by a magic of their own, healing hidden wounds inside him. *I…I really* have *changed, haven’t I? She of all people would know.* He thought back on his memories of the past weeks, particularly of all his time spent with Sarah, and saw the truth of Calliope’s words.

“Thank you, Calliope. That…that means a lot.”

She smiled warmly at him. “As for trusting the enchanters to protect you, I think the only way you’ll resolve that is by discussing it with them directly.”

Acri’s stomach clenched at the thought. “But how can I possibly discuss that with them, when I don’t *deserve* any of their protection? I…I tried to kill Enchantress Angelique. Twice. And I’m the one who pushed Enchanter Evariste into the mirror my mother held him captive in. And I mocked him over his seal.” He glanced down in shame. “And now I know exactly how terrible it is to be cut off from a part of yourself like that. To think I made it even worse for him with my bullying…”

“Acri, look at me.”

Hesitantly he looked back up at Calliope, seeing no condemnation in her expression, only compassion. “Yes, you did those things. And yes, those *actions* were greviously wrong. But *you* aren’t your actions; you’re a person, a person who’s made mistakes just like all the rest of us. It’s true, many of your mistakes were particularly egregious, but that doesn’t mean you’re defined by them or that they’re unforgivable.”

Acri gulped. “*You* believe that. But do *they*?”

“I’m certain they do. I haven’t met Enchanter Evariste or Enchantress Angelique personally, but they were well-known continent-wide for guiding stubborn troublemakers unto the right moral path long before the kidnapping and curse. And you know as well as I do of Enchantress Angelique’s reputation for selflessly protecting others. She doesn’t stop to ask how deserving someone is before aiding them.”

Clinging desperately to the peace radiating from Calliope’s magic, Acri added, “They…they did show me mercy I’m completely undeserving of. So did your king. I could be in a prison cell right now. But they gave me a chance to change instead.”

Calliope nodded. “Precisely. So go talk to them and work out whether you can bring yourself to trust them enough to go on this mission.”

Acri sucked in a breath, still clinging to the fragile peace radiating from the magic. Calliope was right -- at this point, the only thing truly holding him back from agreeing to help steal the mirror was his fear that, if his mother *did* show up, the enchanters would stand back and leave him to face her alone.

“It’s just…I wouldn’t know how to even begin to broach the topic with them.”

Calliope looked thoughtful. “Given that this needs to be decided as quickly as possible, I think the best solution is if I explain the situation to Samuel and he talks to them on your behalf. We can go from there, depending on their response. Do you agree?”

Acri nodded in relief. “Yes. As long as he’s willing.”

“Oh he’ll be willing. You’re practically like a son to him and he’s determined to…well nevermind, that’s his story to share. Now. I’m afraid I need to release my magic from you, then we’ll go find Samuel.”

Acri hardly noticed as Calliope’s magic slowly receded and left him, he was so focused on the words, “you’re practically like a son to him”. He was definitely asking Samuel about that, and sooner rather than later. He sighed. They needed to handle the mirror situation first though. The longer it remained with his mother, the more danger they were all in.

Acri wasn’t quite sure what he’d expected Samuel’s mediation attempt to result in -- perhaps for him to be summoned to speak with the enchanters again, hopefully with Samuel present at least. What he definitely didn’t expect was for Samuel to return and ask if Acri trusted *him* to protect him from his mother.

“Yes,” Acri answered immediately. “You’ve spent nearly every day since I arrived giving me freedom from confinement and guiding me down the path I didn’t know I needed to be on. I know you won’t abandon me if I’m in trouble.”

“Good,” Samuel said. “So if I accompany you on the mission, will you agree to go?”

Acri was momentarily silent as he absorbed the information. Samuel’s offer changed things completely. “You promise you’ll be there if she shows up and you won’t let her hurt me again?”

“My magic isn’t as strong as the enchanters’ so I can’t provide the same guarantee of safety as they have. But do I promise I will protect you to the best of my ability if it should become necessary.”

Acri hesitated, a new conflict brewing within him. The idea of a “guarantee of safety” from the enchanters struck a chord. He *had* come here in the first place precisely because of Enchantress Angelique’s level of power and fierce stance against his mother. And it *was* her and Enchanter Evariste who had allowed him into the elven city and convinced the king to give him refuge. And every time he’d expected cruelty or condensation from them, they’d surprised him.

Having Samuel with him, knowing he would stand between him and his mother, would be a great reassurance. And yet…he really did *want* to believe that Enchantress Angelique and Enchanter Evariste were the heroes and protectors they appeared to be. That people existed who would protect even someone like him, little as he deserved it.

“Alright, I’ll trust your promise Samuel. I’ll help retrieve the mirror.”

“Excellent,” Samuel said. His eyes beamed with pride, and Acri felt a lump in his throat.

“But…well I *want* to be able to just trust their guarantee of protection,” Acri added. “Do…do *you* trust them to protect me? Do you believe they’ll truly step in if she’s there and attacks me? I know they’re more than *capable*…but would they actually *care* if she kills me, so long as they’ve got the mirror?”

Samuel looked at him intently, eyes sparking, which Acri had finally realized meant he was pleased.

*So this wasn’t just about convincing me to join the mission then? He* wanted *me to ask about trusting them? That does fit his constant talk about how I need to build more healthy trust-based relationships.*

“Yes, I’m certain they would care. I believe my mother already discussed their reputations with you. And of course there’s the fact that Emerys – don’t ever tell him I called him that, by the way, or it’ll ruin our game – would never be such close friends with people who would simply abandon an ally like that.”

Acri looked down. “Even an ally who deserves it? An ally who tried to kill one of them and helped imprison the other?”

Samuel gently pushed Acri’s chin up, making him meet his gaze, his eyes somehow boring into him with nothing but compassion. “Acri, listen to me.” His voice brooked no room for argument. “I know trust is difficult for you and that’s entirely understandable given your background. But it sounds like the real problem here is that you haven’t forgiven yourself.”

Acri swallowed against the lump in his throat, feeling the urge to glance down, but he couldn’t seem to look away from Samuel’s eyes of compassion.

“So let me make it perfectly clear,” Samuel continued, “– you do *not* deserve to be abandoned to your abuser. *No one* deserves that, *no matter* their past or current actions. If I’d had the ability, I’d have gotten in between you and your mother even when you were at your worst.”

Samuel’s words hit Acri with the force of a hurricane, penetrating all his defenses just as effectively as Calliope’s magic ever had. A knot deep inside him, deeper than he’d known existed, loosened and began to unravel. His eyes teared up and his muscles relaxed a fraction. “Real…really? Even when I was just her puppet, killing people at her whim, if you were there, you’d have intervened? Truly?”

Samuel put a hand on Acri’s shoulder. “Yes, truly. Because you were still a *person* worthy of being treated with respect. You *are* a person worthy of being treated with respect. And besides that, it’s obvious you regret your past sins, that you’ve had a genuine change of heart. So *forgive yourself* and let yourself believe that *others*, the enchanters included, can forgive you too. They’ve already accepted your apology and acknowledged your change of heart, after all.”

Acri took a shaky breath. “Thank you Samuel. I’ll…I’ll try. I *want* to let go of this fear and guilt; I *want* to trust that the enchanters really mean what they say. I’m just not sure I even know *how*.”

“You trusted Sarah, when she said she forgave you, yes? It even seemed like you’d forgiven yourself,” Samuel stated. “Is that right?”

“Yes…I think so.”

“So why is it different this time?”

Acri furrowed his brow. “I guess…she didn’t ask me to do anything right after. And I *know* Sarah. She’s so incredibly *genuine*. I can’t even imagine her lying about something like that.”

“Fair enough. The situation with the enchanters is certainly more complicated. But consider that they aren’t asking you to do something to benefit them personally, but to prevent drastic harm to everyone. This is something you’re willing to help with anyway, now that you have additional assurance you won’t have to confront your mother alone, yes?”

“Yes…?” Acri said .

“So why lie about forgiving you when they could simply have offered for me to accompany you in the first place? In this case it was my idea, but I would certainly have agreed if they’d asked.”

*Because everyone lies, all the time. And they always just stand back and let* her *do whatever she wants to me.* The thought startled Acri. That was the voice of the old him, the one who trusted no one, expected no kindness or mercy from anyone and gave none in return. *No! I* know *not everyone is like that -- I’ve experienced it firsthand. And I* know *that Enchantress Angelique, at least, is a protector.* Everyone *knows it. So why* is *it so hard to trust her word?*

“You have a point,” Acri admitted, “but I still can’t seem to bring myself to trust them to protect me. At least, not when we might have to directly confront my mother.”

“And that’s OK. You have a lot of trauma to heal from and that doesn’t happen overnight.” Samuel’s eyes were again filled with compassion. “You have the benefit of working with my mother and you’ve been so receptive to the process that you’ve improved even faster than most others she helps. But even so, it’s entirely understandable that you need additional reassurance in such a situation. I’ll be there and I will NOT simply stand by and allow her to harm you in any way.”

Impulsively, Acri reached forward and hugged Samuel. His own father would have scorned such an attempt, but Samuel returned the embrace and slapped his back good-naturedly.

“The important thing, Acri, is that you’ve reached a turning point in your journey that directly intersects the turning point in the war and you made the right choice. Not only would the mission be far more dangerous without your probable access to the wards, but you’re making an incredibly courageous decision. I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were my own son.”