# Chapter 25: Reading and Connecting

“Why did Samuel have to insist only *one* of us should talk to Acri?” Angel muttered under her breath, as Alastryn let her inside her rooms the following afternoon. *Though he’s probably right*, she admitted begrudgingly. They *were* more intimidating as a pair. And the goal *was* to get Acri more comfortable with them, in preparation for the mission.

Angel gaped for a moment at the scene behind Alastryn -- Acri sat on the couch in the living room, reading aloud from a story book to the three children sitting around him. She glanced at Alastryn. “How did *that* happen?”

Alastryn shrugged as she gestured for Angel to enter. “The children were *very* insistent he read to them.”

“Enchantress Angelique!” Sarah exclaimed, running to her and grabbing her hand. “Come sit and listen to the story with us!”

Angel raised her eyebrows in amusement, but allowed herself to be pulled over to the couch and sat.

Acri looked at her in surprise and visibly tensed, pausing his reading.

Immediately, the children objected. “Keep reading!” “We need to hear what happens next!”

“Come on Acri, keep reading,” Sarah said, drawing his attention. “Don’t worry, Enchantress Angelique is a friend.” She paused. “And anyway, books make everything better!”

Acri looked back at Angel nervously, apprehension in his eyes. She smiled. “It’s fine, Acri, finish the story for the children. I didn’t come to interrupt that.”

Hesitantly, Acri nodded and began reading aloud again.

Angel sent an impression of surprised amusement down the bond to Evariste. *I still don’t know why I let you convince me that* I *have a better chance of reaching him than you do, but it looks like this will at least be…interesting.*

*Oh?*

*Acri is* reading a story *to the children. I mean, it’s rather sweet actually, but…certainly not what I expected.*

*Well,* Evariste projected, that *is most certainly not something I would have ever pictured him doing.*

*Yeah, me neither. But anyway, how do I even approach this situation? He’s clearly comfortable with the children, but he tensed when Sarah pulled me over to sit with them. I’m not going to get him fully comfortable with me in one night.*

*Honestly? I don’t know,* Evariste replied, and Angel got the impression of a sigh. *What I* do *know, and why I said you’d be better at this than me, is that you have a natural way with people.*

She almost snorted aloud. I *have a “way with people”? Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the charming one, the one who knows how to talk to people and persuade them. That’s never been* my *strong suit.*

*Angel.* His tone was a strange mix of firmness and pleading. *Don’t forget that* you *held the Conclave together for over a month. You got through to them when they wouldn’t listen to anyone else.*

She mentally shook her head. *That wasn’t* me, *that was* us*. We did it together. There’s no way I could have done that by myself.*

Now it was Evariste mentally shaking his head. *I was there to support you, like I* always *will be, but I think you’re underestimating yourself. I’m not saying it would have been easy, but if you’d had to, I’m entirely confident you could have held them together without me.*

*That seems rather optimistic. Half the time, I was ready to scare them all into silence with wolf illusions when they kept descending back into pointless bickering.* You *kept me grounded.*

*Ha! I wouldn’t have objected if you* had *done that.* His tone sobered. *But you ground me at least as much as I do for you.*

She smiled inwardly, sending the impression down the bond. *We make a good team, don’t we? It’s trying to do this without you that’s going to be so hard, when I’ve gotten so used to leaning on your strength.*

*So* keep *leaning on me as long as you need to. It’s not like we’re really separated, seeing how we’re having this conversation right now.* He paused. *But Angel*, *you’ve* got *this. Follow your instincts and you’ll be fine.*

*We’ll see.* Her words were laced with self-doubt, but then she felt his complete faith in her ability radiate down the bond and she straightened, self-confidence bolstered. *Thank you Evariste. I’m not sure I* agree *with your level of confidence, but I’ll take it.*

*Of course Angel. I’ll always believe in you.*

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Acri closed the book as he finally reached the end, feeling oddly wistful. The story had been simple and innocent, yet he’d gotten oddly engrossed in the tale, even after Enchantress Angelique’s unexpected appearance.

“Let’s read it again!” Beth declared, and Acri marveled at how quickly the girl had warmed up to him after her initial reaction. *Sarah can certainly be persuasive.*

Curious at her silence, Acri looked to where Sarah was sitting next to him and realized she’d fallen asleep against his side. He smiled softly down at her sleeping form in awe. *She really does trust me.*

“Actually,” Lady Alastryn said from the doorway, “I have some cookies I thought you two might enjoy. Sarah can have some too when she wakes up.”

Instantly, Beth’s and Thomas’ attention shifted and they grinned at each other before racing off to the kitchen with the graceful elf.

“Things were awfully simple in that story, huh? No war, no hard decisions, no worrying who to trust.”

“Huh?” Acri glanced at Enchantress Angelique in confusion.

“Sometimes, I wish my life could be that simple and peaceful. I wonder if I’ll ever get a rest from all the fighting and strategizing.” The enchantress spoke wistfully, oddly like how Acri felt at closing the book.

“I…think I can understand that. My life…before…was nothing *but* fights and power games and punishments. I think a part of me always wished for something different, something less *exhausting*, at least…but it seemed impossible and too dangerous to even consider.”

The enchantress nodded in understanding. “Oh yes. Constant conflict, constant power games, *are* exhausting. I was nearly at my limit and ready to give up entirely when Evariste first intervened on my behalf.”

Acri stared at her. “*You*…nearly ready to give up? But you’re impossibly powerful. You could easily defeat practically anyone who dared attack you.”

Angelique snorted. “That’s true enough *now*, though even I’m not invincible, nor is my magic without a price. But you surely know as well as I how disabling and exhausting constant power games and fear can be. And that was my life, for many years.”

“Fear? But what could scare someone as powerful as you?”

Actually, now that he thought about it, he never had gotten a proper explanation for how it was that a team of mages was able to kidnap Evariste in the first place, given Angelique’s power.

“The power itself. I spent years, decades, convinced my core magic was evil, that it made me unlovable and unworthy, and that made me utterly terrified to use it.”

Acri was dumbfounded. *He* had once thought her a monster when he’d seen her magic completely *destroy* the spells he’d thrown at her. But, to think *she’d* been terrified of her own magic, of *herself*, especially when it was now obvious to him how noble and righteous she truly was…it seemed like a strange echo of his own experience, his fear that he was still the monster his mother had molded him into, unworthy of forgiveness, despite receiving so many assurances to the contrary.

In that moment, the balance between fear and trust inside him shifted. Angelique had shared something deeply personal with him, something that made him feel less *alone*. This one instance of unexpectedly genuine *connection* with her wasn’t enough to entirely break down the wall his doubts and fears created between them, but it had created a significant fissure.

“Thank you, Enchantress Angelique. I…don’t quite understand why you shared that with me…but it helped. Knowing I’m not the only one who’s lived with such constant fear and conflict and exhaustion…and such shame.”

Angelique smiled at him. “I’m glad I could help.”