# Chapter 1: A Fake Love Note

“Emerys!” Angel shouted, stomping through the halls of the Elven palace. “If you don’t quit hiding and come out right now, then, so help me, I’m going to kill you!”

“Angel? What’s the problem?”

Startled, she whirled around to face Evariste.

“*Emerys* is the problem! I can’t *believe* him. We came to him for help breaking your seal, and he thinks *now* is the time for pranks?”

“Wait. What exactly did he do?”

“*This*!” She shoved a paper at him. “Did he *seriously* think I would fall for this? It’s obvious that *he’s* the one who wrote it, not you.”

Evariste glanced down at the paper.

*How* dare *he! I told Emerys about the condition on the seal so he could help me find a way to break it* without *using the built-in condition. Instead he forges a love note to Angel from me?!*

Evariste clenched his jaw. “I’ll take care of this.”

Angel frowned. “I’m the one he pranked. I don’t need you to handle it for me.”

“Oh I know you can handle Emerys. But, I think I know why he did this and it’s not what you’re probably thinking.”

“You know why he pulled this stupid prank, *now*, of all times? Why?”

Evariste hesitated and shifted his weight. “There are some things I haven’t told you yet, about myself and about the seal,” he hedged. “I promise I’ll tell you eventually, but for now, can you please just let me handle this situation with Emerys?”

She frowned. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s fine. But now really isn’t the right time to talk about it. Can you please trust me on that?”

She paused. “Alright. But you’d better make sure Emerys knows not to pull something like this again. We don’t have time for distractions right now.”

“Oh don’t worry, he’s going to be *very* sorry.”

As Evariste walked away, Angel’s thoughts drifted back to the fake love note. Loathe as she was to admit it, it had rattled her. She *had* fallen for it, if only for a brief moment, before she recognized Emerys’ handwriting. Those words, which she had momentarily thought were Evariste’s -- that declaration that he was *in love* with her -- they’d brought out feelings she didn’t want to think about, things she hadn’t felt since the almost-kiss.

She had once questioned if perhaps his time trapped in the mirror had affected his mind and that *that* was why he’d almost kissed her. But now he’d been out of the mirror for months and it was clear his captivity hadn’t affected his sanity. So then *why* would he have tried to kiss her? And…why was she *disappointed* that the declaration of love hadn’t truly been from him?

*Get ahold of yourself, Angel!,* she scolded. *You said it yourself -- there’s no time for distractions right now. We’re in the middle of a war with the chosen and the most important thing right now is finding a way to break Evariste’s seal. Now is* not *the time to wonder about these feelings. If Evariste is going to go deal with Emerys’ strange behavior, I should go find Alastryn and see what she knows about magical seals.*

And yet, as she walked off to find Alastryn, relieved to have a specific task to focus on, a part of her was still stuck on that almost-kiss. Now that Emerys’ stupid prank had brought those confusing feelings back to the surface, try as she might, she could no longer seem to just ignore the obvious conclusion -- *Is it actually possible…did Evariste try to kiss me because…he has romantic feelings for me? No, that…that can’t be it. It just…*can’t*.*

# Chapter 2: Confrontation

Evariste stood outside the palace entrance, waiting to confront Emerys. He’d given up trying to find him once it was clear he’d left the palace for the day, no doubt to avoid his and Angel’s wrath.

*What was Emerys* thinking?

When Evariste had told Emerys about the condition on his seal and asked him to help find an alternative, Emerys *had* been stubbornly insistent that they didn’t have *time* to find a way around the condition, and that Evariste needed to tell Angel the truth. But Evariste had thought he’d convinced him to at least *try* to find another way to break the seal first.

*I know Emerys meant well, but he crossed a line here.*

Evariste sighed. On the other hand, even if his methods were…questionable, to put it mildly, maybe Emerys was right. He’d clearly gotten to know Angel better recently, especially in helping her to *finally* accept her magic. Plus, the situation *had* drastically changed in the past six years. Angel was no longer paralyzed by fear and self-hatred, and no longer reliant on him to lead the way or provide for her. She was *fierce* and independent, and fully capable of standing on her own, though he was immensely grateful she *wanted* to stand with him. They were equals now -- the corrupt council’s refusal to formally recognize her as a full enchantress didn’t change the reality.

He felt a glimmer of hope stir in his heart, tempering the fear of rejection. Maybe… this new, stronger, *fiercer* Angel would at least be willing to hear him out and not immediately put distance between them. But…was “maybe” good enough? What if she hated him when she learned kissing her was his darkest desire? Worse, what if she thought he saw *her* as dark? No, he couldn’t risk it.

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As Emerys approached the palace, Quinn beside him, his shoulders tensed when he saw Evariste, arms crossed, glaring daggers at him. *Ugh, looks like my plan was a bust. Surely he wouldn’t be* that *angry with me if he and Angel actually had a heart-to-heart. He’d be too relieved that Angel didn’t reject him.*

Emerys had really thought the love note idea would work. Afterall, how much longer could those two really keep dancing around their feelings anyway? It had been obvious from the moment they’d arrived in Sideralis that Angel was now just as head over heels for Evariste as he was for her. Now, if the two of them would just *get their heads out of the sand*, breaking Evariste’s seal would be *simple*.

Once they’d reached the entrance, Quinn glanced between the two of them. “Looks like you two need to talk. But you should probably do that somewhere more private than the palace steps.”

“Yes, that would probably be wise.” Evariste’s voice was tight and he was still glaring daggers at Emerys.

Emerys gulped. “Uh, sure. Let’s go into one of the receiving rooms.”

He glanced at his wife, as if looking for rescue and Quinn held up her arms in defense. “Don’t look at me! I don’t know what you did to make Evariste so furious with you, but whatever it is, you’re going to have to handle it.” With that, she walked away.

As they entered the room, the tension was palpable in the air. Evariste’s fists were clenched and his eyes narrowed as he spoke.

“What were you thinking Emerys?! You wrote a fake love letter to Angel in my name, confessing my feelings for her! Do you realize how big of a betrayal that is?!”

Emerys flinched internally. “I’m sorry. I truly thought leaving the note would get you and Angel to have a heart-to-heart. I thought you’d tell her the truth and then, when she didn’t reject you, you could stop living in fear of her reaction. And, you know, you could get your magic back, which is *kinda* important right now. I certainly didn’t intend my actions as any sort of betrayal. But it’s clear now that I seriously misjudged the situation. I’m sorry."

Evariste sighed, unclenching his fists. “I know you meant well, Emerys. But I was very clear with you last night that I’m not ready to tell her. I *told* you how scared I am of ruining my relationship with her. But you just ignored that and tried to force the issue. You really crossed a line here.”

“You’re right, I should have respected your decision. I know how important Angel is to you and I never meant to make you feel your relationship with her was in danger. I’ll do whatever I can to make this right. If you want to find another way to break the seal, I’ll do my best to help find an alternative.”

Evariste’s expression softened. “Alright, I forgive you. But,” he added, an edge to his words, “I need you to *promise* me you won’t try something like that again. If Angel is to know how I feel about her, it’s *my* decision when to tell her. If that means my magic stays sealed, so be it. Obviously I’d rather find a way to break the seal, but I’m not willing to risk losing her to do it."

Emerys nodded, relieved he was getting out of this so easily. “Of course. I promise I won’t try to force the issue again.”

Evariste nodded, looking mollified and Emerys pondered what the best way to move forward was. It grieved him to see Evariste so *afraid* of Angel knowing the truth.

Hesitantly, he spoke. “Like I said, I won’t try to force the issue again, but…*why* are you so sure that telling Angel the truth will make her push you away? She spent *six years* scouring the continent in her efforts to find you, and it’s not as if you two have been subtle in showing affection since you arrived.”

A dark look crossed Evariste’s face. “How could she *not*? Kissing her is my *darkest desire*, Emerys. I was her *teacher* when I fell for her. Plus it’s not as if she’s made a secret of how she feels about people falling in love in the midst of war.”

Emerys was taken aback at Evariste’s tone and expression. He’d never seen his friend so *ashamed* before. *I should’ve realized how much his years of captivity have affected him. No wonder he was so much angrier with me than I ever would have expected.*

“Don’t you think that maybe you’re being a little too hard on yourself?”

Evariste just frowned.

“Think about it. The chosen placed a curse on you that can only be broken by your darkest desire. They probably thought that would be killing someone or something equally horrible. But instead, your *darkest desire* is just to kiss the woman you’ve been in love with for years.”

Evariste’s expression lightened slightly, giving Emerys hope that perhaps he could get through to him after all.

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At Emerys’ words, Evariste felt that flicker of hope from earlier blaze to life and Angel’s lingering magic flared up as well, as if to encourage him. Am *I being too hard on myself?* Angel’s magic flared even more strongly, feeding that dangerous hope.

“Maybe you’re right. I’ve been so focused on my fear that she’d push me away if she knew kissing her was my darkest desire, that I didn’t stop to think that it’s not an evil desire.”

“Yes, exactly! Didn’t you say the specific condition is giving her a kiss *of true love*? That’s not even truly dark.”

Evariste’s eyes widened and realization hit him. For all this time, he’d tormented himself over his desire to kiss Angel, all because of *Lillian’s* claim about his “darkest desire”. And yet, her claim plainly contradicted what the magic of the curse itself had said the condition was. Afterall, true love, inherently pure, could never be dark! And it made far more sense that a kiss of true love would break the curse than performing his darkest desire anyway -- *most* sealing spells with built-in conditions were designed for use on criminals, as a way to ensure they could only regain their magic if they had truly reformed. A kiss of true love or performing some selfless act were common conditions for such spells. Undoubtedly, someone like Lillian would have preferred to use a spell that actually *did* have “perform your darkest desire” as its condition, but she would have had limited options to seal someone with as much magic as him.

As the realization washed over him, it was as if a veil was lifted from his eyes. That flicker of hope grew to a flame, the piece of Angel’s magic flaring up with it, shielding him from the fear and hopelessness he’d been plagued by.

“You’re right, Emerys. In fact, I think the whole “darkest desire” part was just a lie intended to torment me. It’s *exactly* the sort of thing the chosen would do and I can’t believe I fell for it all this time."

A relieved look crossed Emerys’ face. Tentatively, he asked, “So, now that you realize your desire to kiss Angel isn’t something dark at all, will you tell her? Or do you still want to see if we can find another way?”

“I’d still prefer to find another way. I don’t want to burden her with my feelings, especially not with everything else going on right now. And I still worry how it will affect our friendship.” He sighed. “But maybe you’re right and it’s best not to waste time looking for an alternative. I just need some time to think.”

“Of course. Take the time you need to think and process and, in the meantime, I’ll start researching possible ways to break magical seals.”

# Chapter 3: Angel in Denial

As Angel sat at the table across from Alastryn, trying to focus on their conversation, her mind wouldn’t stop wandering back to that almost-kiss and her own disappointment about the love note being fake. *Ugh. Why can’t I focus on what’s important?*

“Angel? Is there something else on your mind? You seem unusually distracted.”

Angel felt her cheeks heat. *Ugh. Clearly, I’m not going to be able to focus on breaking the seal until I do* something *to resolve all these confusing feelings. I need to just go ask Evariste about this directly or I’m never going to have any peace. I’m sure he’ll have a perfectly reasonable explanation for why he tried to kiss me, and then I can stop wondering about it and focus on breaking his seal.* Nevermind that a part of her didn’t *want* him to have a reasonable explanation, but wanted the obvious explanation to be the right one.

“Umm, actually, there’s something I need to go ask Evariste about. It keeps distracting me and I’m not going to be able to focus properly until we discuss it.”

Alastryn frowned. “I thought you said he and Emerys were having a private discussion.”

“Yeah, but they’re probably done by now. Anyway, I just really need to get this over with.”

Alastryn raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And what *exactly* is it you need to ‘get over with’?”

Angel could feel her cheeks growing even hotter at Alastryn’s knowing look. “Uh…nothing. I just…”

“Angel, come on, spit it out. What’s bothering you?”

Angel shut her eyes. This was so embarrassing. But she needed to talk about this with *someone* if she wanted to be able to focus on anything else, and perhaps it would be less embarrassing to tell Alastryn than to ask Evariste about it.

“Well…you remember what I said before about how Evariste and I somehow managed to have shared dreams while he was still captured?”

“Of course. I could hardly forget about something so inexplicable.”

“Uh…well…during one of those dreams, he…well it almost seemed like he was trying to kiss me before I backed away.”

Alastryn smirked. “Oh, so you finally know he’s in love with you? You two have certainly been dancing around the issue for long enough.”

Angel froze. The words range with a note of truth it was hard to deny. Emerys’ love note prank, the almost-kiss, Evariste keeping secrets…was Alastryn right?…did it mean…?

“In love with me? What? No, that…that’s impossible.”

Alastryn had both eyebrows raised now. “Angel, you just said he tried to kiss you. I don’t know how much clearer it could get.”

“There’s…there’s just no way he could be in love with me. There has to be a reasonable explanation for his behavior. I just need to ask him about it so I can stop wondering!”

“Oh? And, *what*, pray tell, might this ‘reasonable explanation’ be?”

Angel was silent. What *was* she expecting Evariste would say? That he was so addled by the pain he wasn’t in his right mind? No, she’d already dismissed the idea of his sanity being affected -- even at the time, he’d clearly been suffering, but not *addled*.

“I…I don’t know! That’s why I need to go ask him about it.”

Not giving Alastryn a chance to respond, Angel abruptly turned and left the room. Clearly Alastryn wasn’t going to be any help in dealing with this…confusion.She’d just have to go talk to Evariste about it after all.

Surprisingly, Alastryn didn’t even call after her as she left. [[1]](#footnote-1)

# Chapter 4: Confessions

As Evariste walked through the palace after the discussion with Emerys, he felt lighter than he had in a long time. The realization that his feelings for Angel *weren’t* dark had lifted a weight from his shoulders. But what did he do now? The obvious conclusion was to just go tell her everything, but he wasn’t sure he was ready for that. Before he could spend too long thinking about it though, he saw Angel walking towards him.

“There you are! I’ve been trying to find you. Can we talk?”

“Of course. What did you want to talk about?”

She bit her lower lip and shifted her weight. “I know you didn’t want to talk about this before and I’ve been avoiding bringing it up too. But after that prank Emerys pulled, I can’t seem to stop thinking about it, so I just need to know -- why did you try to kiss me when we had that shared dream?”

Evariste froze. He certainly hadn’t expected Angel to be the one to initiate such a conversation. But the fact that *she* had brought it up, rather than him, gave him more hope that she wouldn’t react negatively if he told her the truth. Still, he was hesitant to just outright say that he was in love with her.

“Why do you think I did it?”

She blushed. “I don’t know! That’s why I’m asking you. You’re the one who tried to kiss me, so you need to tell me why!”

He sighed. She wasn’t going to make this easy. He supposed he’d just have to say it.

“There were two reasons. But the primary one is because I’m in love with you Angel. I have been for years.”

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Angel stood stock still, a mix of disbelief, apprehension, and elation flooding her mind.

Could it really be true? Could he *really* be in love with her? After spending years fiercely guarding her heart against such foolish hopes, could she dare to believe it? Her traitorous heart *wanted* to believe it, felt a thrill at the idea. But…what if it was all a misunderstanding? Could someone as wonderful as him *really* be in love with *her*?

Her mind flashed back to Alastryn’s words, “He tried to kiss you. I don’t know how much clearer it could get.” No doubt Alastryn would say it was even *clearer* now. Still, she couldn’t quite bring herself to believe it.

Hope and fear warring within her, she stammered, “You’re…really in love with me? But…*why*? You’re…you’re *you* and I’m *me*.”

A look of relief crossed Evariste’s face and words seemed to spill out of him in a rush. “Why? Because you’re brave, kind, selfless, and so incredibly clever. Because you can more than match me in magical skill. Because you took all the years of abuse and bullying the conclave subjected you to and you never let it destroy you, never let it make you stop *caring*.” He paused, flashing a grin at her and her heart skipped a beat. “I love you *because* you’re you.”

The look in Evariste’s eyes was so genuine and heartfelt that, alongside his words, it washed away her doubts and soothed her insecurities.

“Evariste…I…” Angel’s voice held a note of awe as she gazed into his eyes.

*He really* is *in love with me.* The thought echoed in her mind, both alarming and exhilarating. *But what does that mean for us? Do I feel the same way? I know I love him but… could I really be* in love *with him?*

She’d told herself before that she didn’t knowwhat kind of love she had for him, but…had that just been an excuse? Hadn’t she known exactly what Stil was talking about when he’d described his feelings for Gemma, even if she’d refused to acknowledge it at the time?

Overwhelmed by the implications of her own questions, she seized upon the first distraction that flitted through her mind. “Wait, didn’t you say there were *two* reasons you tried to kiss me? What was the other reason?”

Evariste hesitated, his expression wary. “It’s sort of complicated, but it has to do with my seal.”

Angel frowned. “Your seal? What does trying to kiss me have to do with the seal on…wait…are you saying the seal can be broken by an act of romantic love, like all the curses I modified?”

He nodded, a cautious hope flickering in his eyes. “I think so, yes.”

She groaned, feeling a mix of annoyance and relief, with an undercurrent of something deeper she wasn’t ready to confront. “I don’t know whether to be annoyed that there’s *another* curse requiring romantic love to break it or relieved that at least now we know how to break your seal.”

Angel regretted the words almost the instant they left her mouth, her heart sinking as the flicker of hope in his eyes disappeared and his shoulders tensed.

*No, that’s not what I wanted. Why did I say that?*

She wanted him to smile at her again, to see his eyes full of warmth. And…she hardly dared to even think it but…perhaps she even wanted more than that. Maybe…did she also want their almost-kiss to become an actual kiss?

*I berated myself for dreaming of such a thing, sure such feelings were one sided and inappropriate. But now…*

She stammered, “Not that I’d be annoyed with *you*… I mean, if you… kissed me. It’s just frustrating, all these curses.” The vulnerability of such an admission made her want to flee, but, at the same time, she desperately wanted to bridge the rift her words had created between them.

Hesitantly, she held out her hand. His shoulders visibly relaxed and he smiled as he accepted her hand, twining their fingers together. She smiled back, her own tension easing, and she found herself starting to lean forward before catching herself and straightening. *What am I doing?*

Evariste’s smile widened, and there was a flicker of humor in his eyes. “So…if you wouldn’t be *annoyed* if I kissed you, does that mean…you might actually *want* me to?”

Angel felt a blush crawl up her face and she stared down at their clasped hands. “I…I don’t know,” she stammered, though her traitorous heart knew it was a lie. Now that he’d actually voiced the question aloud, she *did* know. If someone had asked her that morning if she’d wanted Evariste to kiss her, she’d have laughed at the absurdity. But now, after hearing his declaration of love, after her heart had soared and fallen with his expressions, she could no longer deny the truth -- she was in love with him too and she *did* want to kiss him.

His expression lit up. “So you’re saying there’s a chance you could feel the same way?” His voice held a note of wonder.

“Uhh…” How did she say this? This was all so unexpected and overwhelming! She wanted him to keep smiling at her, wanted to see the light in his eyes, but she couldn’t seem to speak her feelings aloud.

“Maybe?”

His smile didn’t waver. “‘Maybe’ isn’t no. If your answer isn’t ‘no’ then I’ve got a chance.”

Unexpectedly, he pulled her towards him in a gentle embrace. They’d been in this position many times before, but this time felt different, more intimate somehow.

“Evariste, what are you doing?”

“I’m sorry.” He pulled back, sobering. “I shouldn’t pressure you. This must be overwhelming, and I’ll wait however long it takes for you to figure out your feelings.”

Strangely, with just those simple words, her hesitation melted away, replaced with certainty and resolve. His willingness to wait made her realize she didn’t *want* to wait. The idea of admitting her feelings out loud still felt terrifying, but really, what *was* there to fear? He wouldn’t reject her, nor would he ever take advantage of her vulnerability. She *could* do this. No, she *wanted* to do this.

Pressing her lips together, she forced herself to take a step towards him, feeling her nerves ease slightly as she laced their fingers together once again. *I don’t think I’ll ever stop being comforted by his touch.*

His responding smile strengthened her resolve, though her voice still wavered. “You don’t need to wait. I…I do feel the same way about you. I’m…in love with you too. I just… couldn’t get myself to say the words aloud before.”

Evariste’s face lit up once again, his smile bright, but his eyes held a hint of caution. “Angel, are you sure? I know this was all rather sudden and I don’t want you to feel rushed or pressured.”

She forced herself to meet his eyes, which were full of cautious hope. She wasn’t used to being this open with anyone, but…this was *Evariste*. “Yes, I’m sure. Deep down I’ve known for a while I think -- and I’m done hiding from it. And anyway, we really *do* need to break the seal on your magic. If a kiss is all it takes…then, well…” She blushed.

“*You’re* far more important to me than my magic, Angel. If I kiss you it will be because I love you and I know you *want* me to, not just to free my magic.”

Her heart melted at his words. Taking another daring step towards him, she released his hand and, even more daringly, put her arms around him.

“Evariste.”

“Yes, Angel?”

*I can’t believe I’m about to say this but…*

“I told you I love you, so just kiss me already.”

# Chapter 5: More than they Bargained for

Evariste was on top of the world. For Angel to not have pushed him away, to still want to continue their friendship, even after knowing his feelings, was already a tremendous relief. But he’d hardly dared to even *hope* she might actually return his feelings. But he could see her sincerity in her eyes -- she really loved him back!

“Evariste,” she said, “just kiss me already.”

At her words, the piece of her magic inside him flared more intensely than he’d ever felt before. At this further encouragement, he finally let go of his caution and fear -- he kissed her. She returned the kiss immediately and, somehow, his joy grew even greater, knowing she wanted this as much as he did.

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Mere moments after his lips met hers and when she’d hardly even had a chance to return his kiss, Angel felt a sudden rush of magic around Evariste and her magic flared up in response, as if excited to meet his. The shock of the sudden influx of magic caused them both to pull apart.

“The seal?! Is it really broken?”

“Yes! And I can’t tell you how good it feels to *finally* be able to just *feel* my own magic again, rather than constantly being blocked by that blasted seal. But even that pales in comparison to knowing you love me back, Angel! I meant what I said, that you’re far more important to me than my magic.”

She smiled at him. “I feel the same way, Evariste. I can’t tell you how important you are to me, how much I missed you all those years you were gone. How much I missed your kindness, your generosity, your laugh. Heck, I even missed your ridiculous insistence on calling Stil our child!”

He laughed. “So we’re still arguing about that, after all this time? Can’t you just accept that I’m right?”

She snorted. “About that? Never. It will always be ridiculous.”

He pulled her close again and she melted into him, the two of them standing in comfortable silence.

“It is strange though,” he mused.

“What is?”

“Your magic, the piece of it that stayed with me. I would’ve thought it would have returned to you now that I can access my own magic again. But I can still feel it. It’s still there, at the wellspring of my magic.”

Angel furrowed her brow. “That is strange, but I’m not sure it’s any stranger than it staying with you in the first place.”

“True. It’s almost like how the Snow Queen managed to disconnect her magic from herself and have it act independently.”

“But I didn’t purposely disconnect a piece of my magic from me. I just sent a tracking spell. I mean, I’m glad it did stay with you, since it was able to give you some protection and comfort, but I even didn’t know it had happened until you told me.”

“Hmm…then perhaps it’s not entirely disconnected from you after all. Why don’t you see if you can still sense it and control it?”

She paused and focused on her awareness of her magic. Now that she was specifically looking for it, she *could* feel a piece of it inside the swirl of Evariste’s magic. She pulled on it gently, not wanting to risk causing any harm to Evariste. It followed her command, but almost… reluctantly? It was as if it wantedto stay with Evariste, wanted to *protect* him.

At this realization, something inside her unwound. She had already come a long way in accepting that her core magic could be used for good -- she’d certainly not have been able to rescue Evariste from that damned mirror without it. But a part of her had still feared it, still held back from fully accepting it. But how could she fail to accept a force that sought to protect the one person who meant more to her than anyone else?

Voice trembling, she said, “It…it wants to stay with you. To protect you.”

“Angel? Are you alright? You don’t need to leave it with me for my sake. If it scares you to not have it in your control, take it back.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just…it’s like it just hit me suddenly that my core magic really *is* a magic of protection, that it really *does* seek to protect, not to harm.”

Evariste smiled. “I’m happy for you, that you’re coming to see your magic --”, he cut off as their magics suddenly flared up. Looking down, they saw that their magics were mixing and intertwining -- not just the small piece of Angel’s magic that had stayed with Evariste, but *all* the magic swirling around them.

“What is *happening*?!” Angel immediately stood upright. “This…this should be impossible! A piece of my magic staying with you was already impossibly strange. But this -- this is -- I don’t even know *what* this is!”

“Hmm,” Evariste mused, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed. “It certainly is unprecedented. But perhaps not quite as unexpected as you might think.”

“What do you mean? This goes against the very foundations of magical theory!”

“Perhaps it’s less about the magic than it is about *us*.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Evariste!” Angel growled. “Stay on topic! We need to figure out what the heck is going on here! This is exactly the sort of reason I’ve always thought romance was inappropriate in all these crazy situations!” She deliberately took a step away from him.

Now he was raising both eyebrows at her and grinning. “I seem to recall *you* being the one to initiate that conversation. And the one who insisted I kiss you.”

She flushed bright red. “I didn’t know what you were going to say when I brought it up.”

“Didn’t you?”

*Take a deep breath Angel. Turning Evariste into a frog isn’t going to get us any closer to solving this.*

“Ugh, Evariste, we’re getting completely sidetracked here! We really do need to figure out what the heck is going on.”

Before he could respond, their intertwined magic turned incredibly bright and began flaring up around Evariste, giving off a sense of protectiveness towards him.

*What the heck?!!!!??*

“Well, this is unexpected,” Evariste said.

Angel spluttered. “Unexpected?! This is *beyond* unexpected! This is utterly *absurd*! It should be *impossible*. It makes *no sense*! How can you be so calm about it?!!”

Another voice chimed in. “What’s going on here? We could see that flare of magic half-way across the palace.”

Startled, Angel whirled to face Emerys. “When did you get here?!”

He smirked. “In time to see this…whatever this is.” He gestured to the magic surrounding both their feet and shielding Evariste. “I take it you two finally had your talk and broke Evariste’s seal?”

“Yes,” Evariste said. “Although it seems we got more than we bargained for in doing so.”

Angel had *enough* with this whole situation. It was all too confusing and ridiculous and Evariste was being way too calm about it. And now Emerys suddenly butting in and acting equally calm…it was just too much. She couldn’t help it -- she burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all. Soon, Evariste was laughing with her.

# Chapter 6: An Unexpected Weapon

“So let me get this straight,” Emerys said. “You two finally confessed your feelings, broke Evariste’s seal, and then somehow managed to *accidentally* **combine** your magics?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Evariste responded.

Angel rubbed her temples. “It should be impossible.”

They sat in one of the palace’s many receiving rooms, where Emerys had ushered them once they’d stopped laughing. The situation had finally started to sink in and no longer felt *quite* so surreal to Angel. Now she just felt exhausted.

*Can’t I ever catch a break? I finally got Evariste back, and we finally broke his seal. And I even managed to accept my own feelings. But now* this *happens? Why is it always* me *who has to deal with these crazy situations?*

As if sensing her tension, Evariste, sitting beside her, offered his hand. She took it gratefully, a feeling of warmth spreading through her. *That’s right, I’m not alone anymore. We’re in this together.*

“And yet, it’s happening,” Emerys stated.

Angel scowled at him. “Clearly. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be impossible.”

Emerys held up his hands. “I’m not trying to bait you. I realize this developement is unprecedented. I just meant, since it is happening, we should try to figure out what it means.”

Angel sighed. “Yes, of course. But right now I’m too exhausted to even think straight. This is all too much.”

Evariste squeezed her hand. “I’m rather exhausted myself. We should both get some rest. Tomorrow, I think we should contact Clovicus.”

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The following day, Evariste and Angel sat in her room, looking at the image of Clovicus on Angel’s mirror.

“Clovicus,” Evariste said, “we need your help.”

“What mess have you two gotten yourselves into this time?”

They explained the situation and Clovicus’s jaw dropped. Then he barked out a laugh.

“*Of course* you two would be the ones to *accidentally* do something with your magic that should be impossible.”

Angel snorted. “Trust us to stumble into the impossible.”

“Have you really never heard of anything like this, Clovicus?” Evariste asked.

He shook his head. “The only remotely similar thing I know of is the Elven marriage bond.”

Angel frowned. “But we’re neither elves, nor married.”

Emerys, who had insisted on being present for the conversation, cut in. “Actually, Clovicus is right about the similarity. Clearly the circumstances are different, but the way your magics appear to have combined…it’s almost exactly like the marriage bond.”

Angel glared at him. “This isn’t the time for jokes.”

“I’m being entirely serious. It didn’t occur to me last night, since, like you said, neither of you are elves or married. But now that Clovicus brought it up, the similarity is uncanny.”

“But how is that even possible?”

He shrugged. “No idea. I’m just making an observation.”

“Regardless of how it happened, we need to understand it,” Evariste said. “Clovicus, any insights?”

Clovicus sighed. “I’m as baffled as you. Maybe I should see this in person.”

Evariste nodded. “I’ll make a portal.”

He instinctively pulled on his magic, but instead of the portal he intended, a decorative sword came flying off the wall and hovered in front of him. He stared at it, then at Angel, seeing his shock reflected in her eyes.

“Did…did you just use my magic?”

Clovicus laughed. “Well, this will be a surprise for the chosen.”

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Angel glanced between the hovering sword and Evariste, realization hitting her. She was still utterly bewildered by this strange situation, but that didn’t matter right now. She tried pulling on her magic, paying careful attention to the strands. She felt both her own familiar strands of magic, as well as Evariste’s, and yet they felt like two parts of a whole. She could feel the connection to the sword still hovering in front of Evariste, as well as the connection to her own wellspring of magic, and, impossibly, to his wellspring too.

Hand trembling, she touched the hovering sword. “This...this is both of us. Our magics are truly bound together.”

She met Evariste’s eyes. “They won’t see this coming.”

# Chapter 7: A Deepening Bond and Resulting Pranks

Several days later, Angel, Evariste, and Emerys stood in the palace courtyard, Emerys attempting to help them figure out how to use their newly intertwined magic. And yet, despite his insistence that their magics had merged so similarly to the Elven marriage bond, none of his advice so far seemed to actually help.

“This isn’t working! How are we supposed to send magic back and forth between each other when our magics have *already* somehow merged together?” Angel growled.

“OK, OK.” Emerys held up his hands in defense. “Maybe this connection between you two isn’t as similar to the marriage bond as I thought.”

Evariste spoke up. “Perhaps we should just try using each other’s power. Afterall, it was your magic, Angel, that somehow responded when I tried to create a portal for Clovicus.”

Angel’s breath hitched at the thought. It was already so strange that their magics had bound themselves together somehow, as if they were two parts of a whole. To be connected to him in such a strange and oddly intimate way, and *so soon* after they’d only just confessed their feelings was…unsettling. To agree to have him purposely use her magic and use his in turn…that was a level of trust and intimacy she’d never even contemplated. And yet, the possibility of having such an unexpected weapon against the chosen was too valuable to refuse.

She sighed. “I guess. It just feels… intrusive…to try to use your magic. Like I’m venturing somewhere I don’t belong. And, well, I’m not exactly used to letting my own walls down either.”

Evariste walked over to her and took her hands, her breaths evening out at the familiar contact. He lowered his voice, presumably so Emerys wouldn’t hear.

“You already have my heart Angel, and I trust you with my life. So trust me -- you won’t be venturing somewhere you don’t belong by using my magic. I’m happy to share it, to share that part of myself with you. But still, we don’t have to do this if it makes you uncomfortable.”

She stared into his eyes, which sparkled with undeniable trust and affection. How had she ever been so blind as to not see that he loved her? She felt a warmth spread through her and, slowly, the walls around her heart started to crumble, bit by bit. She was surprised to realize she *wanted* this connection with him -- even if it *was* sort of terrifying.

“Umm…well…”

At the sound of a throat clearing, Angel turned to see Emerys smirking at them.

“I’m glad you two love-birds have finally stopped dancing around your feelings, but is now *really* the time for this?”

Angel flushed and scowled at him. She looked back at Evariste, who was completely ignoring Emerys, his eyes only for her. He smiled softly.

“It’s your decision,” he whispered.

That did it -- her doubts remained, but they seemed smaller somehow, dwarfed by the trust they shared and how gently he was treating her heart. This was *Evariste* -- for him, she could let her walls down. It wouldn’t be easy, but she would do it.

Gathering her resolve, she spoke at a normal volume. “OK. I think you’re right, Evariste. We should try using each other’s power and see what happens.”

Emerys looked relieved. “Good. Angel, why don’t you try building a portal, maybe just to inside the palace. And Evariste, here,” he pulled a dagger out of its scabbard from his belt, “see if you can control this.”

Taking a deep breath, Angel nodded, standing erect.She squeezed Evariste’s hand, and felt him squeeze back. *He’s* here*. He’s not going anywhere. As invasive as this might feel, we’ll do it together.*

“OK, let’s try it,” she said.

Pulling on strands of their bound magic, she tried to visualize a portal appearing in front of her, but she started at the feeling of Evariste tugging on their magic as well. It was an unsettling feeling, like unlocking a door so deep inside her she’d never known it was there, letting free tightly coiled strands of her magic.

Her heart raced and, for a moment, she wanted to shout for Evariste to stop, desperate to regain control of that part of her magic she’d apparently been hiding away. But then warmth radiated from the magic that was now flowing between them and it was as if the flowing magic was anchoring them together, whispering a promise that, wherever they were, this newfound connection would always let them find each other, that they would never again be forcibly separated.

Her muscles were still tense at the jarring loss of control. Her instincts screamed at her to pull back, to somehow separate her magic from his. And yet, the unexpected warmth and deepened connection made her pause. And then, strangely, she could sense the magic itself trying to reassure her, urging her to let go of her fear, to trust herself, her magic, and Evariste. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

*No pulling back,* she told herself, trying to focus on the reassuring warmth. *You know you* want *this connection with him, no matter how much it scares you to let go of control. Don’t focus on your fear, focus on the connection.*

The thought grounded her and as she focused on the flow of magic that was acting as a tether between them, she could feel the warmth spread through her. She relaxed her muscles and her heart rate slowed. As the warmth permeated her whole body, she felt her anxiety drain away.

“Angel, are you alright? I could feel you start to pull on our magic, but then you just…stopped.”

Startled, she looked up to see Emerys’ dagger hovering in front of Evariste. When she looked at him, he searched her face, as if trying to read her thoughts. She smiled. “Yes, I’m fine; that was just a bit…intense. But wow…you really can wield my power.”

Concern crossed his face. Lowering his voice, he asked, “And, are you OK with that? I didn’t expect doing this would…connect us like that.”

She hesitated, then spoke in a lowered voice as well. “It’s definitely going to take some getting used to. This…connection. But…yeah. It’s actually sort of comforting.”

He visibly relaxed, then smiled at her. Unconsciously, she leaned towards him. She *wanted* this closeness with him more than she’d ever have thought she’d want anything, even if she couldn’t bring herself to say that out loud in so many words.

Evariste’s smile widened, and he leaned forward in turn, no hesitation, kissing her for the second time.

After a moment, their kiss was interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing.

“Do I need to get you two a room or are we going to focus on training? I can’t believe *I’m* the one having to remind you two that there are more important things than romance at the moment.”

Angel and Evariste both glared at him.

“Oh for heaven’s sake Emerys!” Angel exclaimed. “*You’re* the one who pushed us into admitting our feelings, what with your love letter prank. You know perfectly well that if it hadn’t been for that stupid prank, I’d never have asked Evariste about the…well never mind the details! The point is, you started this, so you don’t get to complain about the results.”

Evariste’s glare changed to an amused grin, and he turned back to her. “You’re adorable when you’re angry, you know that?”

Angel blushed. “Uh…what?”

Ignoring her question, Evariste laughed, then sighed. “But I suppose Emerys is right. We should try to focus. Why don’t you try again to make a portal?”

“No, wait. What exactly do you mean by my being ‘adorable’ when angry?”

He smirked. “Perhaps that was the wrong word. What I meant was that seeing you put Emerys in his place was incredibly *attractive*.”

She felt her cheeks heat again and rolled her eyes, trying to look annoyed, but ended up grinning. Despite all the craziness that had happened recently and the looming war with the chosen, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this *happy.* Without even realizing it, she started leaning towards him yet again, and he leaned in as well, about to kiss her once more, when Emerys interrupted for the third time.

“Seriously! Look, I’m happy you two are finally together, really I am. Goodness knows you certainly deserve some happiness after everything you’ve both been through. But is now *really* a good time for kissing? We need to be ready for…well you know.”

They sobered and glanced at each other.

Evariste sighed. “Emerys is right. Angel, why don’t you try again to make a portal to inside the palace?”

“Alright, fine.”

She shut her eyes again and focused. She sensed the connection between Evariste and the still hovering dagger and felt a slight urge to break it off, to try to keep her magic to herself, but resisted. The slight emotional discomfort was worth it to have this connection with him.

She pulled on strands of their bound magic and was about to visualize a portal to just inside the palace entrance when an idea hit her. She grinned, then visualized the portal and opened her eyes. Sure enough, in front of her stood a portal that looked just like any of Evariste’s. Her breath caught and a wave of satisfaction washed over her. *But is this* really *OK that I’m using his power?*

She turned to face him, seeing a wide grin on his face, and her apprehension melted away.

“OK, great! We’re making progress here,” Emerys encouraged. “Now, let’s try something else. Angel, where in the palace did you make the portal to?”

Her smile turned mischievous. “Why, to your and Quinn’s bedroom, of course.”

Shock briefly crossed Emerys face, followed by amusement. “I suppose I should have expected something like that. But you do realize Quinn will kill all of us if it stays there?”

Angel shrugged, trying very hard not to laugh. “You did interrupt a rather important moment. You had to know there’d be consequences for that.”

Evariste chuckled. “She’s right. You did bring this on yourself Emerys.”

“Fine, fine, I brought it on myself. But unless you want Quinn to kill all of us, would one of you kindly close it now, before she finds out?”

Angel couldn’t hold back her laughter any longer. “Oh please!” she choked out. “Quinn wouldn’t care half as much as you do. If anything, she’d be laughing with me.”

After a minute of Emerys glaring at her, her laughter finally subsided, though a smirk remained on her face. “Fine, fine. The look on your face was payback enough anyway.”

She focused again on their shared pool of magic and the portal disappeared.

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Emerys let out a sigh of relief when the portal closed.

“Thank you. Now, let’s move on. Now that you can both use each other’s powers, let’s see if you can combine them. How about --”

“Nope, I’m picking the exercise this time,” Angel cut in, still smirking.

Emerys glanced at her warily, while Evariste raised a questioning eyebrow, clearly amused.

“Oh? What did you have in mind?” Evariste prompted.

She turned and whispered something to him that Emerys couldn’t make out, but the mischievous looks on their faces didn’t bode well for him.

Emerys shifted his weight. “What, *precisely,* are you two scheming?”

Angel’s eyes danced with humor. “You’ll see.”

Evariste was visibly struggling to hold back a laugh. “Ready, Angel?”

“Yep.”

Evariste dropped the hovering dagger and a portal appeared in front of Angel.

Suddenly, a cloud of pointy sticks and various other pointy forest debris came flying up from behind them and through the portal, which then snapped shut.

“Alright, where did you two send that giant mess?” Emerys demanded.

They burst into laughter. “Your bedroom,” Angel finally choked out.

He groaned. “Really? My bedroom? *Again*? Are you *trying* to get Quinn to bring down her wrath on all of us?”

“Oh please,” she retorted. “Quit using Quinn as a threat. You’re the Elf King! You can afford a cleaning service.”

He tried to glare at them, but couldn’t resist grinning, barely holding back a laugh of his own. “Remind me, *why* did I ever push you two to admit your feelings? I’m pretty sure I’ve created an unstoppable foe by helping you two get together.”

Evariste chuckled. “No idea. But you *have* just doubled your chances of getting pranked.”

“Yep,” Angel added, looking far too pleased with herself. “He’s basically given us a license to team up against him. Tell me Emerys, how does it feel to be the architect of your own doom?”

Emerys couldn’t hold in his laughter any longer. They had all needed these few moments of levity, but Angel and Evariste especially. If a mess in his bedroom was the cost for giving his traumatized friends some joy in the moments before the coming storm, it was a small price to pay.

“Alright, alright, I surrender, *for now*,” he said, still chuckling. “I think we’ve done enough training for today anyway. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to do something about the giant mess *you two* created before my wife sees it.”

“Good luck with that,” Angel quipped. “And remember, as far as Quinn is concerned, we had nothing to do with it.”

Evariste laughed. “Yep, it was all because of your expert training skills, Emerys.”

“Yeah, yeah. You two had just better remember that I have *decades* of pranking experience on you both, so you’d best not get cocky.”

Grinning at their laughter behind him, he walked off to deal with the mess they’d made.

# Chapter 8: The Power of Love?

“That was amazing! This will give us a *huge* advantage.” Angel grinned and Evariste smiled back at her.

The two of them again stood in the palace courtyard with Emerys. They’d been working tirelessly for the past several weeks to perfect the use of their combined magic and Emerys had even been a surprisingly good coach. They’d just managed to create a portal lined with strands of Angel’s magic that should prevent any dark mage from entering without being destroyed.

Angel was thrilled. They had *finally* made some real progress in their training and she was eager to contact Severin about this newest development, as it would surely be of great strategic value.

Emerys, however, looked thoughtful.

“This will definitely be very useful. But I wonder if your magic couldn’t do even more if you gave it a boost of some kind.”

Angel furrowed her brow. “A boost? What do you mean? We’re *already* the two most powerful enchanters alive, *and* we’re somehow *sharing our magic*.”

“Well, your magic *has* always had this *purity* to it -- it can literally destroy dark magic. And, while you weren’t able to destroy the mirror before, you did get Evariste out by harnessing your love for him.” Emerys smirked, his eyes dancing with humor when she blushed. “So, I wonder if, perhaps the magical connection you two have, combined with your love, would be enough to actually *destroy* that accursed thing.”

*Is he* serious *right now? Is he really suggesting that* the power of love *is how we defeat the mirror?* The idea was absurd. And yet, with her luck, he’d somehow end up being right. *First love curses, then merged magic, now* this*? Why is my life so full of absurdity?*

“Emerys, stop being ridiculous! We don’t have time for pranks right now.”

“Oh really?! That’s convenient, considering the mess you made in my room a few weeks ago. You had time for pranks *then* apparently.”

Before Angel could retort, Evariste cut in. “Actually, Emerys might be onto something here.”

Angel narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Angel, stop and think about it for a second.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “This magical connection is clearly related to our emotional connection, and we already know love is a powerful force against dark magic.”

“So, you’re suggesting we use ‘the power of love’ to destroy the mirror? It’s not another curse I can just modify. Love might be powerful, but it’s not a cure-all for every problem.”

Evariste shrugged. “Isn’t it at least worth a try? What have we got to lose?”

Angel glanced between Evariste and Emerys, frowning. “You two are both ridiculous. You do realize that, right?”

They laughed.

She sighed. Loath as she was to admit it, Evariste was right. Destroying the mirror was too important to just refuse to even attempt a possible method of doing so. It *was* worth a try, even if the idea made her want to cringe.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I suppose you’re right and it doesn’t hurt to at least try and see what happens. *But*,” she pointed at Emerys, glaring, “if this turns out to be a waste of time, I’m blaming *you*.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Suddenly, a guard came running up to Emerys. “Your majesty! A Chosen mage has appeared at the border and he has a human child hostage in an enchantment of extraordinary power -- none of our spells could break it. He’s demanding to speak with Lady Enchantress Angelique immediately or he says he’ll kill the hostage.”

# Chapter 9: Hostage Situation

Shock and fury hit Emerys in full force at the guard’s announcement. After everything they’d put the elves through already, how *dare* the chosen show up like this and make demands! And had they really taken a *child* hostage? He took a breath, trying to calm himself. He needed to handle this situation rationally and he couldn’t do that if anger was clouding his judgment.

“Did you recognize the mage or the hostage?”

“No, your majesty. I’d never seen either of them before.”

“What exactly is the situation -- what’s this spell he’s using on the hostage? And are you certain there really *is* a hostage, instead of a ruse by two Chosen mages?”

The guard shifted uncomfortably. “I suppose I can’t be certain, Your Majesty. But the girl seemed terribly frightened and awfully young. I don’t think she could be older than ten. He has her inside of some kind of strange barrier that none of our spells seem able to break. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Did he say what he wants or why he’s here, other than to speak to Angelique?”

The guard shook his head. “No, he refused to say anything besides that he’s a member of the Chosen and that if we didn’t bring the lady enchantress to talk to him, he’d kill the girl.”

Emerys clenched his fists at the sheer callousness and audacity of such a threat and tried to think. It did seem unlikely such a young child could be culpable. But still, he had to approach the situation with utmost caution, lest his people end up trapped in another curse or something equally horrible.

He turned to face Angel and Evariste. Their faces were pale and eyes wide, mirrors of his own shock and horror. “This is obviously a trap, but I’m honestly not sure the best way to deal with it. You both have more experience with the chosen than I do and he’s asking for Angel specifically. What are your thoughts?”

Angel spoke. “This has to be a reaction to us flushing out all their spies from the conclave. This sort of move seems far more reckless and desperate than their usual schemes.”

Evariste nodded. “I agree. This doesn’t feel like one of Lillian’s usual plans. Sending a single mage with a hostage to contend with *all* the elves *and* Angel, especially when they no longer have me as a power source? Either they’ve gotten *really* desperate or there’s something about the situation we’re not seeing.”

Emerys frowned and turned back to the guard. “Tell the captain that I’ve ordered extra patrols around the border and they need to be alert for hostile mages. And alert me immediately if anything changes.”

“Yes, your majesty.” He bowed and left.

Emerys turned back to Angel and Evariste. “I’m increasing border patrols in case there are other chosen hiding nearby, but that’s a defensive move. We need to decide on how to handle the mage we know is there. He’s demanding to speak to you Angel, so it’s your call.”

“I don’t think we really have a choice. We can’t just abandon an innocent child. And if none of your guards can break whatever spell he’s using to hold her prisoner, our combined magic is probably the one way we have a chance of freeing her.”

Evariste took her hand. “We’ll face this together.”

Emerys nodded. “Alright. Let’s go.”

# Chapter 10: New Arrivals

*What am I* doing*?* Acri thought. Taking a random girl hostage, just to get the attention of that self-righteous enchantress, so he could *surrender* to her and beg for help? It was absurd.

But what other choice did he have? His mother had utterly lost her mind and he refused to die attempting her idiotic plan that anyone with half a brain could see was suicide. He’d tried reasoning with her, to no avail, and he knew better than to actually refuse her orders -- she’d kill him without a second thought. That had left him with only one option that gave him an actual chance of survival. And so here he was, outside Sideralis, just *waiting* for the enchantress to come speak with him.

Although…if he was being honest with himself, this decision had been coming on for a while now; Lillian’s suicidal plan was simply the last straw, the thing that forced him to acknowledge he had no future with the Chosen.

For as long as he could remember, Acri had disliked most people, or, at best, felt neutral towards them. He generally preferred to keep to himself and he certainly didn’t have friends. And yet, there had been one person, a powerful weather mage named Juniper, whom he’d actually rather liked having around, her antics one of the precious few sources of amusement in his life. At least, until she’d failed one too many times to successfully complete a task from his mother. He’d been in the room, summoned by Lillian to discuss some unrelated matter, when a senior officer had reported the return of Juniper’s group, who had apparently failed to capture the mage they’d been sent after.

Immediately, his mother had ordered Juniper be brought before her and railed at her for failing yet another mission. Lillian had then pulled on her magic and begun torturing the girl. At first, Acri felt nothing, numb to his mother’s cruelty, so long as he needn’t fear it being directed at him. But as the seconds, then minutes ticked by, Juniper first screaming, then begging with a trembling voice for the pain to stop, he’d realized Lillian didn’t mean only to punish the mage, but to kill her. It shouldn’t have bothered him -- it wasn’t as if this would be the first time he’d watched his mother kill someone. But when he’d caught the look of terror in Juniper’s eyes, it *did* bother him. And if it wasn’t mere annoyance or irritation at losing a source of amusement, but something *deeper*, something he couldn’t identify. It was as if there was a dam somewhere inside him and that look on Juniper’s face, that realization that she was going to die, had made a tiny crack in it.

For months Acri had tried to bury the memory, to pretend Juniper’s death hadn’t affected him. But every so often, when boredom struck, he would have the desire to summon Juniper and witness her inevitable antics. Then he would remember.

A few times, he’d started to ponder his reaction, wondering what exactly he’d felt when he realized Juniper was going to die. Each time, however, such thoughts had stirred up unfamiliar and overwhelming emotions that he didn’t know what to do with. Instinctively, he squashed them down and pushed his musings away. But every time he remembered, every time the overwhelming emotions started bleeding through, it became harder to suppress them, to slip on his mask of indifference, to act as if nothing had changed.

Sooner or later, he’d have had to run anyway, once he was no longer able to slip on his mask at all. For if Lillian saw on his face the sheer contempt and resentment he held for her, saw that, internally, he wasn’t the perfectly loyal son she demanded he be…he shuddered at the thought. She might not kill him, but she’d make him wish for death until she was again convinced the façade of loyalty he’d put on for decades was genuine.

Seeking a distraction from the discomfiting thoughts, he glanced down at the girl he’d trapped inside the magical barrier. He might as well talk to her -- it would be better than just *waiting* in silence with only his thoughts to occupy him.

“What’s your name?”

The girl shrank back, eyes wide. Voice trembling, she answered, “S…Sarah.”

Acri’s breath caught at seeing a lesser version of the sheer terror in Juniper’s eyes and voice that day. The resulting bubble of undefinable emotions was even more overwhelming than he’d experienced before. A knot formed in his stomach, his shoulders tensed, and, unconsciously, he pulled on his magic, forming a blade. But no, he couldn’t just kill the girl or the border guards would be on him in an instant. And besides, it seemed likely that killing her would only exacerbate these overwhelming emotions. Unable to bear the look of terror in her eyes and the memory and emotion it triggered, he turned away, attempting to settle back into his comfortable mask of indifference.

A few minutes passed when, to his surprise, the girl -- Sarah, he supposed he should call her -- spoke. "W…why did you take me? I…I never did anything to you."

He scoffed. *As if her actions made a difference to my decision -- she’s simply a means to an end, nothing more.* And why should that surprise her? Shouldn’t she have understood life’s simple, brutal rule -- power dictates, the weak comply, and peers negotiate? That was the dance of life as he knew it, a dance where every step was a calculation.

And yet, ever since they’d started fighting that enchantress, he’d had flickers of doubt.

For over six years, she’d been a thorn in their side, traversing the continent and unselfishly helping all the victims of their curses to break them. Loath as he was to admit it, this baffling behavior intrigued him. *Why* was she willing to go to so much trouble to help people so much weaker than herself when she didn’t even get anything for her trouble? Such a thing seemed foolish beyond description. And yet, *she* was the one who was so powerful and who had so many allies that trying to attack her was suicide.

*Why couldn’t she have been there to break my mother’s hold on Juniper?*

The thought startled him. What was he *thinking,* wishing the enchantress had been there, *in their stronghold*, just to save the life of a single mage he’d found amusing? She surely would have taken them *all* down.

Acri sighed. What did it even *matter* anymore? He’d already fallen so far as to come asking to join his enemies just so he had a *chance* to survive. *Talk about hitting rock bottom*.

And yet, at least if he *did* die today, it would be because of a choice *he* made, not an order from his tyrannical mother. With that realization came an odd sense of freedom he’d never felt before.

*Never again. I’m done being her puppet. Done watching her destroy everything and everyone. I’d rather die than go back to that.*

“Why *did* I take you? Why *am* I doing this at all?” He hardly realized he’d spoken aloud. “Because you were a convenient way to get the enchantress’ attention I suppose. And she’s my only chance to escape my mother’s tyranny and insanity.”

“So…you don’t want to hurt me then?” Sarah responded immediately, even though his answer had come several minutes after her initial question. Her voice no longer trembled and the fear in her eyes had dimmed.

He laughed, not a laugh of joy or humor, but of bitterness and irony. “When has what *I* wanted ever mattered? It’s always been about what my tyrant of a mother wants. She’s always been the one with the power.”

Although her eyes had gone wide, Sarah spoke with a surprising strength. “Your mom…doesn’t let you choose? My mom used to say that everyone should get to choose. She always let me choose a treat when we went to the market.” There was a hint of wistfulness in her voice, odd for someone so young.

Acri snorted. *Everyone* choosing what they wanted, instead of just the most powerful? That wasn’t the world he lived in.

And yet, Sarah’s voice and expression were open and genuine as she spoke, an expression he couldn’t recall ever seeing before. In spite of himself, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was actually possible that maybechoice *didn’t* have to be a privilege reserved for only the most powerful.

And…the enchantress *did* seem to see the world differently, even if he didn’t understand why. If he could just convince her to let him join her side, then…maybe there was a chance, however small, that his life could be different going forward. The thought sparked a flicker of hope, which he quickly squashed -- he’d learned long ago that hoping for something better only led to disappointment.

Finally, no longer able to bear the oppressive silence, he spoke. “My mother always told me that she had more power, so I would do as she wanted, because that’s how things are.”

The girl -- Sarah, he reminded himself -- frowned.

“Your mom sounds mean, just like my dad. He would always tell Mom and me we had to do what he said and he’d hit Mom if we weren’t fast enough.”

A surprising fierceness appeared in her eyes. “But we ran away from him and Mom said he couldn’t hurt us anymore. Did you run away from your mom too? Is that why you want to see this enchantress?”

He hesitated, unsure how to respond. No one in his life ever just…*talked* the way this girl was talking to him. He was used to conversations that were either carefully calculated exchanges of information between equals or demands for information from someone more powerful. It was never one person just…*sharing*. Yet, that was what this child had just done, and it made him feel…*understood* in a way he didn’t remember ever experiencing before.

That ray of hope he’d tried to squash flickered back to life and other unfamiliar emotions stirred in his heart, but these felt less overwhelming and more bittersweet. He had to fight to keep his voice from trembling. “I--yes, I did run away. It was the only way I had a chance of surviving.”

Sarah’s eyes widened and she gaped at him. “Your mom wanted to *kill* you?”

He shrugged, managing to school his expression back into his usual mask of indifference. “She kills anyone who refuses her orders. And her latest plan would almost certainly have gotten me killed even if I obeyed her. So now I’m here.”

Sarah’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry you have such a bad mom.”

He frowned in utter bemusement. “Why would you apologize for her? You have nothing to do with her behavior. And besides, she’s not so unusual. It’s just how life is -- she’s more powerful than me so she’s in control of me.”

Sarah was still teary-eyed, but now she frowned, looking equally confused. “Mom always used to say sorry if something bad happened to someone. She said it meant she wished the bad thing hadn’t happened. And I wish your mom wasn’t so mean to you and that she didn’t teach you such wrong stuff.”

No one had ever spoken to Acri like this before, like they *cared* about his suffering and wanted to wish it away. Like they cared about *him* as something more than a means to an end. The experience was strangely pleasant, stirring something buried deep inside him, lowering his defenses. How was it that this naïve child was reaching a part of him he’d hardly even known was there?

"I…I don’t understand how you can be so kind. Why would you care about my pain?"

“Because I put myself in your shoes, like Mom taught me. I would hate it if Mom had been so mean to me. So I wish your mom wasn’t so mean to you.”

Her words were so simple, so naïve. He wanted to scoff, to say it was foolish to care what other people suffered through. And yet, the sincerity and innocence in her eyes cut through him, as if punching a hole through all his defenses and that flicker of hope that things could be different flared up more strongly than before.

But before he could respond aloud, Acri sensed the enchantress’ magic and instantly tensed. This was it. The moment that would decide his fate.

# Chapter 11: Defector?

Angel, Evariste, and Emerys approached the mage standing at the edge of the forest. Sure enough, there was a young girl beside him, evidently trapped inside a magical barrier. With a start, Angel realized she recognized the mage.

“That’s him. The one who ambushed me and tried to kill me.”

Evariste clenched his fists, his expression hard. “I recognize him too. That’s Acri, Lillian’s son.”

Emerys looked between them, his eyes widening. “Lillian’s son? The same Lillian who’s been behind everything?”

Evariste nodded. “The very same.”

Once they reached the border, Acri spoke, his words shocking them into silence.

“I want to switch sides.”

Of all the things Angel might have expected him to say, this wasn’t one of them. She wasn’t sure whether to laugh at the sheer *absurdity* of his claim, or to simply demand he say why he was *really* here.

Her eyes fell on the girl he held hostage and her fists and jaw clenched in fury, the moment of absurdity and uncertainty forgotten in a heartbeat.

“I’m going to give you *one* chance to let the girl go before we *make* you let her go.”

To her shock, Acri simply nodded, pulled something out of his pocket, and the barrier disappeared. The girl stayed put however, looking scared and uncertain. Angel glanced between Evariste and Emerys, unsure how to proceed. She’d expected a fight, to have to subdue or even kill Acri to rescue the child. Instead, he’d removed the barrier after she made a single threat, and yet the girl stayed in place. The whole situation felt…off. They had to be missing something.

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Seeing Angel’s hesitation, Emerys took the lead, walking over to the girl and kneeling so he was at her level.

“It’s OK, you’re safe now. We won’t let him hurt you. What’s your name?"

“I’m Sarah. I…actually don’t think he wanted to hurt me though. His mom was really mean to him and he said he just needed to get the enchantress’ attention.”

Emerys’ frowned. "You’ve met his mother?"

She shook her head. “No. But he said she doesn’t let him choose anything and she kills anyone who doesn’t do what she says. She sounds really mean, even worse than my dad.”

His frown deepened. “Does your father hurt you?”

“Not me. He used to hurt Mom, but we left him.”

He nodded. He’d get the details of the girl’s situation later, but first he needed to get her to safety.

“OK, why don’t you come with me, Sarah? We’ll take you to safety and you can tell us where your mom is so we can get you back to her.” He held out a hand.

Sarah looked at him warily. “I’m not supposed to go with strangers.”

He paused. He’d never spent much time with children and didn’t know the right words to reassure her.

Evariste stepped in. “Hi, Sarah. I’m Evariste, this is Emerys, and this is Angel.” He gestured to his companions.

“You’re smart to not want to go with strangers. But I promise, we’re only here to help you.”

She hesitated, glancing between the three of them before returning her gaze to Emerys. “Will you take me home?” Her voice cracked. “I miss my friends.”

Compassion for the traumatized child filled Emerys. “Yes, Sarah. I’ll do everything I can to get you safely home. But first, let’s get you away from the man who took you.”

Sarah glanced back at Acri, her expression oddly sad, before accepting Emerys’ outstretched hand. “OK. I’ll go with you.”

Relieved, Emerys stood. “Good. Let’s get you to the city.”

He called to one of the many border guards who were watching the situation unfold.

“This is Sarah. Would you please bring her to Alastryn, and explain the situation to her?”

"Of course, Your Majesty."

“Aren’t…aren’t you coming with me?” Sarah’s eyes were wide.

Emerys hesitated. He’d planned to stay and confront Acri. But this poor child was squeezing his hand and looking at him with desperation, clearly not wanting to be left alone with yet another unfamiliar person. Angel and Evariste could certainly handle one mage without his help, especially with all the guards there to provide aid if needed. Heck, Angel could probably handle him on her own now that she was no longer handicapped by fear of her own magic.

“Yes. I’ll come with you.”

He knew he’d made the right call when he saw Sarah’s shoulders slump in relief.

# Chapter 12: A Desperate Offer

As the elf led Sarah away, Acri let out a breath, feeling oddly relieved that any remaining opportunity to use her as leverage had been removed, and yet also sad to lose her presence. She really had stirred something inside him and he wanted to understand what it was. But that would have to wait.

The two enchanters turned their attention back to him.

“Alright, why are you *really* here?!” Enchantress Angelique was glaring daggers at him. “I don’t believe for one second that you actually decided to defect.”

He shrugged. “Whether you believe it or not, it’s the truth. My mother has lost her mind with her latest plan. Attempting it would be suicide, but refusing an order is a death sentence. My only chance at survival was to defect.”

The other enchanter, Evariste, scoffed. “So what you *actually* want is protection from your insane mother.”

“You could say that. But I have information, valuable information about her plans.”

He paused.

“And, I know where she’s hiding the mirror.”

*That* seemed to get their attention, as they visibly stilled, but their eyes remained narrowed, lips pressed into firm lines.

The enchantress scoffed. “And you really expect us to believe this isn’t just a ruse to get us to trust you? You could easily give us false information and we wouldn’t know until we verified it.” Her voice was icy.

Acri thought. He wasn’t surprised they didn’t trust him -- he wouldn’t have trusted him either if their positions were reversed. But how could he convince them it was worth it to take him in? Should he offer to be their prisoner? But, no, if they’d wanted to do that, they’d have done it the moment Sarah was safely away. *They must think my goal is to get inside the forest and cast some other curse on the elves or something.*

He needed to *prove* he really wasn’t planning anything nefarious. But how? An idea hit him, a crazy and desperate idea that he’d never have expected to even *consider*. It would have been utterly *unthinkable* if his situation wasn’t so dire.

“Well!?” Enchantress Angelique demanded. She was tensed and looked ready to attack if he made one wrong move.

“Do you really have nothing else to say?!” Enchanter Evariste’s voice was hard.

“Seal my magic.” Acri stared at Enchantress Angelique, his words laced with fear and desperate hope in equal measure.

Both enchanters froze, the weight of his words seeming to shock them into silence.

They exchanged a look, then stared straight at him. The enchantress crossed her arms. “You would *truly* submit to such a thing?” Her disbelief was palpable.

He clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking and he felt dread coil in the pit of his stomach at the mere thought of losing his magic. But he took a breath, determination filling him. He wasn’t ready to die -- he *would* do this if it would ensure his survival and keep him out from under his mother’s thumb.

“If that’s what it takes to prove I’m being sincere. It’s better than being dead, which is my certain fate if you don’t help me.”

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*This just keeps getting crazier and crazier*, Angel thought.

She turned to face Evariste and cast a sound bubble around them. Now that Acri no longer had a hostage, the border guards would be on him in an instant if he tried anything, so they could afford to take their eyes off him and discuss his offer.

“Do you think this is a ruse?”

“I was certain it was until he suggested sealing his magic. But I have a hard time imagining *any* of the mages I saw while I was captured agreeing to such a thing for the sake of their mission. They all had far too much pride to make such a sacrifice, Acri included.”

"So you think he’s telling the truth then?"

“I don’t know. This *could* be some elaborate scheme of Lillian’s. If he were claiming to have had a genuine change of heart so suddenly, I’d think that was still the most likely explanation. But a drive for self-preservation is a lot more believable. Given Lillian’s ruthlessness and willingness to sacrifice her own people, it’s not implausible that he truly fears for his life."

"So do you think it’s worth the risk of taking him on after sealing his magic then?"

He hesitated. “I can’t say I *like* the idea, but if he *is* telling the truth, the information he’s offering is invaluable. And sealing his magic would remove a lot of the risk. If he actually allows us to do it without a fight, that would be a strong indication that he’s being sincere.”

She sighed. “This whole situation is just…a *lot*. But I think you’re right. The chance at the information is too valuable to pass up. But we’ll still need to keep him under guard to make sure he’s not trying to sneak off to relay information to anyone or have someone remove the seal.”

Seeming to sense her tension, he took her hand and she relaxed as their fingers intertwined, at the reminder that he was *there*.

“You make a good point. Although we can minimize the risk of someone else removing it if we use a rehabilitation seal, since then it will be tied to his own actions and intentions.”

She let out a breath. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. And it also gives us an additional test of his sincerity. If he ever actually breaks it, we’ll know he’s truly started to have a change of heart.”

He squeezed her hand. “Exactly. But you’re right that we should also keep him under surveillance as a precaution. I’m sure Emerys can see to that while we remain here. And it might be best to leave him here once we depart, though we’ll have to discuss that with Emerys of course."

Angel grimaced. “Emerys may not be too happy with us if we let a chosen mage into his city, even if he *is* sealed.”

“Emerys is reasonable and he trusts us. He’ll understand once we explain. The real danger will be if Acri attempts to communicate with anyone outside the city to pass information to them. But that risk can be minimized by keeping him under watch.”

She nodded. “Alright, let’s do this.”

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Acri waited in tense silence while the two enchanters discussed his fate. He could hardly believe he was *hoping* they’d agree to his offer to *have his magic sealed*. He really had hit rock bottom.

A small part of him wondered if it would really be so bad though. It wasn’t as if he’d ever been allowed to use his magic for anything *he* decided on. It was always “kill this person, maim this one, steal this item,” and so on. Even when he wasn’t in immediate danger of death, it was *exhausting*. And, if nothing else, at least he’d be *alive* and no longer his mother’s puppet. And…maybe, just maybe, he could find that part of himself Sarah’s words had unexpectedly stirred up.

Finally, the sound bubble burst and the two enchanters turned to face him. Enchanter Evariste spoke first. “We’ve decided to accept your offer. We will place a rehabilitation seal on you. It will break only if you perform a truly selfless act, as judged by the magic itself.”

Acri tensed at the declaration, then frowned in surprise. *Wait…“We”?* Had Enchanter Evariste broken his own seal?Acri noted how the enchanters were holding hands. Had they figured it out then, that his mother had lied about the condition on Evariste’s seal?

Lillian had *not* been pleased when those tasked with the research had been unable to find a spell for the type of “motivating”, enchanter-level seal she’d actually wanted. Vindictive as Acri knew her to be and aware of the rumors of Enchanter Evariste’s poorly hidden infatuation with his then-apprentice, he hadn’t been surprised when Lillian had told the enchanter the condition on his seal was performing his “deepest and darkest desire.” Apparently, she’d guessed correctly that the enchanter was deeply ashamed of his infatuation, as he’d never once tried to dispute the claim, though the spell itself must have told him he had to kiss whoever it determined his “true love” was. “True love” being utter nonsense, Acri was unsurprised it would have simply chosen the person the enchanter had been infatuated with at the time. He *had* been a bit surprised when Lillian had ordered several others to participate in the ongoing ruse, as it didn’t seem a particularly efficient use of time, but he hadn’t minded playing along.

Enchantress Angelique spoke next, pulling Acri back to the unpleasant reality of the present. “Additionally, you’ll be under constant surveillance to ensure you don’t attempt to sneak off and pass along information to anyone. We’ll have to discuss the specifics of your surveillance and confinement with the elf king, since this is his territory, so we can’t tell you the details now. Will you submit willingly to these terms?”

Their voices and faces were firm. There was no negotiating these conditions -- not that he’d have expected to. And yet, they didn’t seem to be taking pleasure at his plight either. Strange. He’d hoped they’d help him in exchange for information, but he’d also been entirely prepared to be treated with contempt and cruelty. That was certainly how Enchanter Evariste had been treated as a prisoner.

As the reality of the situation set in, Acri let out a breath of relief and some of his tension faded, while, at the same time, he felt a knot tighten in the pit of his stomach. They weren’t going to kill him or turn him away for his mother to kill. But they *would* seal his magic. The thought was terrifying, but it wasn’t as if he could complain when it had been his idea in the first place.

He swallowed hard. “Yes. I’ll submit to your terms.” The words felt like both a prison sentence and the key to a new life.

As the spell was cast on him, Acri felt his magical core constrict almost painfully and then he felt a barrier forming around it, walling it off. He wanted to fight the spell, to fight the process that felt as if it were walling off a part of *himself,* but he resisted the urge. He wasn’t sure he even *could* have fought the process once it had already started, but even attempting to fight back, after explicitly agreeing to submit, would surely not have resulted in positive reactions from the two enchanters.

“It’s done,” Enchanter Evariste said. “Your magic is sealed and it will remain sealed, unless you have enough of a change of heart to do something truly selfless.”

At this announcement, Acri felt a strange mixture of emotions. He tried to pull on his magic but just ran up against the unnatural wall. Being completely cut off like this…it felt *wrong*, like a piece of him was missing. For the first time, he felt a pang of sympathy for what Enchanter Evariste must have suffered through with his own seal. He started at the feeling. Since when did he *care* what others suffered through? Was…was *that* what he’d felt at seeing Juniper’s terror?

At the same time, he felt strangely… *relieved*. They had locked away the only part of him his mother had ever cared about. Without his magic, he *couldn’t* be her puppet anymore, because he wouldn’t be able to do any of the things she always ordered him to. With that knowledge came a freedom he’d never felt before.

# Chapter 13: Acri’s Revelations

“Wait,” Emerys said. “You’re really telling me that he suggested you *seal his magic* as a way to prove his sincerity? And then he actually just meekly submitted while you did so?”

Emerys, Angel, and Evariste sat in a private meeting room in the palace. Acri was being held by two elven guards outside the room. He’d been thoroughly searched and all weapons and artifacts on his person confiscated.

“We were just as surprised as you,” Angel said.

“But it did seem a genuine show of sincerity,” Evariste added. “We definitely shouldn’t blindly trust him, but I’m inclined to think he’s telling the truth about fleeing for his life.”

Emerys frowned. “And he said he’s willing to give information on Lillian’s plans and even where the mirror is hidden?”

Angel nodded. “Yes, but we were going to wait and contact Severin before we tell him to talk. Severin needs to know what’s going on and it’s better if he gets the information directly from the source.”

Emerys rubbed his temples. This situation was…unexpected, to say the least. He thought he perhaps had some idea of just how shocking it must have been for Angel and Evariste when their magics had suddenly merged. But shock wasn’t going to help him handle this. He needed to get a grip and focus.

“I agree that bringing Severin into the loop ASAP makes sense. Perhaps you should contact him now. Acri may have time-sensitive information that we can’t afford to wait on.”

Angel nodded and pulled out her mirror to make the call.

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Acri stood in awkward silence, flanked by two elven guards who watched him impassively, waiting nervously while the enchanters and the elf king discussed his surrender.

After what felt like hours, the door opened to reveal the same elf who’d led Sarah away. *Wait.* He’s *the king?*

“Acri. Come inside.”

Hesitantly he walked forward and the guards moved to follow, but the elf motioned for them to stay outside. *I supposed I’m not much of a threat without access to magic or weapons. And certainly not to two powerful enchanters and a king who’s probably just as strong as any of his warriors.*

The elf, presumably the king, gestured for him to take a seat across from the two enchanters.

The enchantress was holding a mirror which showed a face Acri recognized as Prince Severin of Loire.

“That’s him?” the prince asked.

“Yes,” Enchantress Angelique confirmed, then turned to face Acri.

“Alright. We’ve discussed your situation and it’s time for you to keep your promise of information. Prince Severin will be participating in the interrogation as he deems necessary. Start talking.”

Acri gulped, his heart racing. Was he *really* going to do this? Betray everything he’d ever known? But then, he didn’t really have much of a choice, did he? While they hadn’t explicitly threatened him, he was all too aware of how vulnerable of a position he was in and he was certain it wouldn’t end well for him if he tried to go back on his word now. And besides, he’d already made up his mind that he was done being his mother’s puppet and he didn’t owe her anything, so why should it matter if he betrayed her secrets?

Working hard to keep his voice firm and his face expressionless, he asked, “What do you want to know?”

Enchanter Evariste looked him directly in the eyes. “Why don’t you start by telling us what suicidal plan your mother has that made you defect in the first place?”

Acri gave a grim smile. *That* plan he would *happily* tell them about, because he was utterly *infuriated* by his mother’s stubborn refusal to see how *idiotic* it was and her insistence that *he* lead the charge. It would be all too satisfying to play a role in thwarting *that* insane plan of hers.

“I don’t know what madness is going through her mind that she even came up with this insanity, but she’s determined to kidnap Princess Elise of Arcainia. She’s convinced that Elise’s ability to suppress magic will let her trick the Snow Queen’s magic into letting dark mages into Verglas.”

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The room went silent at Acri’s revelation as looks of shock crossed everyone’s faces. Then Angel broke the silence with a snort.

“She seriously thinks she can use Elise to trick the *Snow Queen’s* magic that’s protected Verglas from dark mages for *centuries*? That’s utterly absurd. Does she not have any idea how powerful the Snow Queen was? Elise is strong, but she’s no match for the Snow Queen’s magic.”

Acri nodded. “*Exactly!* And I tried to tell her that, that trying to get into Verglas is suicide, but she’s obsessed with the idea and won’t listen to reason. She’s gotten increasingly desperate ever since all the spies were flushed out of the conclave. First she wanted to attack you again directly, but I managed to convince her that would be suicide. But then she got the even *more* insane idea about Princess Elise and Verglas and no one could reason with her about it. I don’t know what she’s thinking. She’s always been a tyrant but her plans have never been this insanely reckless before."

Angel frowned. “That…sounds all too similar to how the mirror affected Queen Faina.”

She turned to Evariste. “You said the mirror spoke of using the Chosen and then disposing of them, right?”

He nodded. “Yes. You’re thinking this is its attempt to dispose of them?”

“It seems plausible, given Acri’s description and how Snow described her stepmother’s behavior after she received the mirror.”

She turned back to Acri. “Has your mother been talking to the mirror or using it frequently?”

He nodded. “Yes, actually. She’s been talking to it a lot, though she’d never let me get close enough to hear what they were saying.”

Angel and Evariste exchanged glances, then looked at Emerys and Severin in turn.

Severin spoke. “Regardless of whether the mirror is the one pushing Lillian towards this scheme, it’s imperative that we warn the Arcainian royal family immediately. Acri, when was the kidnapping supposed to take place?’

“In a week. She thinks I’m currently gathering a team and making plans. She’ll expect me to check in with her in three days, assuming she’s not too distracted by the mirror to notice my absence immediately.”

“And what do you expect she’ll do when she realizes you’ve defected? Will she send someone else to attempt the kidnapping?”

“Probably. Though her behavior has been so erratic lately that I can’t say for sure.”

Severin frowned. “Very well. I’ll contact Arcainia immediately. Please update me as soon as possible with any new information.”

“Of course,” Angel said, putting away the mirror after Severin’s image faded.

Emerys leaned forward. “So we’re thinking the mirror is the one actually behind this plan? But why? What does it gain?”

Evariste’s expression grew dark. “The only thing it seeks is chaos and destruction. It saw the Chosen as a means of achieving that. Presumably, it’s decided it no longer needs them and, or at least that it doesn’t need Lillian anymore, so it’s manipulating her into causing her own downfall. It’s only her own arrogance that makes her think she can control it.”

“Then it’s vital we get the mirror away from her as soon as possible,” Emerys said. “We can’t allow it to use her for whatever destructive plan it has. Acri, you know its location?”

Acri looked hesitant as all eyes turned to him. “I know where she normally keeps it, but it won’t be easy to get to,” he hedged.

Angel exchanged a glance with Evariste, thinking of their newfound ability to share magic. It might well be much easier than Acri expected.

“It doesn’t have to be easy to get to,” she said, a hint of ice in her voice. “Just tell us where it is. And know that if you deceive us, sealed magic will be the least of your worries.”

Acri visibly tensed. “She’s most recently been keeping it in a heavily warded room at the center of our stronghold. I can draw a map, but the biggest problem will be getting past the wards. She has them set to kill anyone besides herself or a handful of others if they attempt to enter the room, as well as to notify her immediately if anyone attempts to tamper with them.”

Angel actually smiled. “Oh that won’t be a problem. We can handle Lillian in a fight --”

Acri shook his head. “You don’t understand. These aren’t normal wards. Even if you manage to kill her, I’m not sure you could actually break through them.”

Evariste frowned. “What do you mean that they aren’t normal wards?”

“The spellwork is…weird. It’s almost rudimentary in a way, but I couldn’t begin to make sense of it. I don’t know who she had cast them, but I doubt if she even understands the spellwork herself.”

Angel’s brow furrowed. “That sounds all too similar to the spelled apple that nearly killed Snow White. The spellwork also felt strangely rudimentary and yet I couldn’t make enough sense of it to even attempt to pull it apart.”

She looked at Evariste. “What do you think? Could we brute force our way through? I didn’t dare try with Snow because it would almost certainly have killed her. But the wards shouldn’t be connected to someone like that.”

Evariste paused, seeming to think. “Possibly. But relying on brute force is risky if we don’t understand the spellwork. It could backfire on us badly.”

Emerys spoke up. “Perhaps there’s another option, though I don’t know if I ought to suggest it, as it may well be a trap.”

He looked at Acri, eyes wary. “Are you one of the ones keyed into the wards?”

Looking taken aback, Acri nodded. “Yes. But…you can’t mean to have *me* go through the wards, surely. Returning to the stronghold would be a death sentence for me.”

“No, that’s definitely *not* happening.” Angel’s voice was firm and she glared at Emerys. “That’s *far* too risky when we don’t know if we can actually trust him.”

Evariste intervened before she and Emerys could start arguing. “Perhaps we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Acri still needs to tell us where the stronghold actually *is* before we plan how to get the mirror out.”

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Acri felt trepidation in the pit of his stomach as all eyes turned to him once again. He knew he’d already crossed the point of no return -- he’d come to the enemy, surrendered, let them seal his magic, and given them valuable information. And yet, giving the actual location of the stronghold itself…that somehow felt like crossing yet another invisible line. Or perhaps it was that it highlighted just how irrevocable his defection truly was, how completely he was severing ties with the only life he’d ever known. While he didn’t truly want to return to that life where he was nothing more than a puppet, he still felt inexplicably grieved at the loss.

“Giving up the stronghold…I…it’s…” His voice cracked.

Enchanter Evariste leaned forward and Acri braced himself for an attack. But the enchanter didn’t raise his hand or cast a spell. When he spoke, his voice was firm, but it also seemed to have just a hint of something softer. Compassion?

“You’ve come this far, Acri. This is the next step. We need this information.”

Taking a breath, Acri pushed past the confusing emotions and nodded.

“The stronghold is in the mountain region between Mulberg and Arcainia. It’s incredibly well hidden using both magical means and physical camouflage. You’ll never find it unless you know exactly where to look, but I can draw a map.”

The elf king got up and walked over to a desk, pulling out paper and pencil and putting them on the table in front of Acri. “Draw it then.”

Hesitantly, Acri picked up the pencil.

Enchantress Angelique cut in. “A map is a good start, but you’ll also need to give us all the details about the stronghold itself in addition to what you’ve said about the wards around the mirror room. We need to know its layout, how to get inside, and the exact warding spells used anywhere in, on, or near the building.”

Acri swallowed hard. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

With a sense of finality, the pencil heavy in his hand, he started drawing, marking exactly where the stronghold was located in the mountains. He then drew a map of the inside, marking the room where the mirror was kept, labeling which locations had wards, where guards were stationed, and so on.

He wasn’t sure why he was so thorough. His first instinct was to say it was out of fear of retribution if he omitted anything important, but that didn’t feel entirely true. Loath as he was to admit it, a part of him actually *wanted* to help get that mirror away from his mother, not for her sake, and not just to avoid punishment, but because he felt a brief glimmer of hope that maybe, just *maybe*, he could built a different kind of life if he could earn the trust of these people he’d long considered enemies. Already they’d treated him better than his mother often had -- they had yet to raise a hand or spell against him in violence, even when he’d hesitated to do what they wanted.

Finally, he put down the pencil and looked up. He was surprised to find Enchanter Evariste watching him intently, his eyes still showing suspicion but also a hint of that same something that had been in his voice.

Acri cleared his throat and slid the paper towards him. “Here. That’s everything I know about the stronghold.”

Enchanter Evariste picked up the paper and looked at it closely. “This is thorough. If you’re telling the truth, this should be enough information to get us inside, though we’ll still need to figure out a plan to deal with the wards.”

“It’s accurate now, but once my mother realizes I’ve defected she’ll certainly change the security details. I’m not sure if she’ll be able to change the wards around the mirror room, but she’ll definitely change everything else.”

“And you expect we have three days until she realizes?”

Acri shrugged. “Most likely. She’s been so obsessed with the mirror lately it’s possible she might be too distracted to notice right away. I wouldn’t count on it though.”

The elf king spoke. “If we’re that short on time, we need to solidify the plan to actually *destroy* the mirror once we get it. We can’t just lock it up somewhere; it’s too big a risk someone will steal it again.”

The enchantress groaned. “Let me guess. You’re back to your ‘amplify our magic with the power of love’ idea from before?”

Acri’s brows knitted together. “Wait what? You want to use *love* to amplify magic? That’s absurd.”

The enchantress turned to face him, her eyes narrowed, before her lips twitched upwards slightly. “*Exactly!* I’m so *tired* of love being the answer to every curse, every problem we face.”

Enchanter Evariste took her hand, and Acri saw her expression soften, lines of frustration fading.

*That’s…different. Physical contact brings her…comfort? Calm? Strange.*

Enchanter Evariste spoke. “I understand your frustration Angel. But didn’t you say before that it couldn’t hurt to try?”

The enchantress sighed. “Fine.” She glanced briefly at Acri and then back at Enchanter Evariste. “But we need to discuss this in private.”

“Wait…you’re all *seriously* considering this?” Acri could hardly keep a scoff out of his voice.

The enchantress turned back to face him, her lips twitching in the ghost of a smile. “As ridiculous as it sounds, we actually have reason to think it might work. But that’s all we’re going to say until we’re sure we can trust you not to betray us.”

Utterly confused, Acri nodded. He wasn’t expecting they’d tell him their secrets. *But…*love*…as a way to amplify magic? What could possibly make them think that would work?* Love was weakness. And yet, if there was one thing he knew, it was that the enchantress *wasn’t* weak. The whole reason he’d sought her out was because he knew she was stronger than his mother and was perhaps the only person who stood a chance against her. There had to be a *reason* she was willing to even consider such an absurd idea as *love* making her more powerful, especially since she clearly thought it as absurd as he did. Though what that reason could be, he hadn’t the faintest idea.

# Chapter 14: How to Accidentally Amplify Magic

This day had been a marathon for Angel -- first the breakthrough with their training, then Emerys’ idea about using love to amplify their power, then Acri showing up and revealing all that information. She looked at Evariste and saw her exhaustion mirrored on his face. *Won’t we ever get a rest?* Emerys was right about the tight timeline though -- they needed to figure this out ASAP.

As they walked through the palace halls on their way to the training room, she instinctively reached for Evariste’s hand, her tension easing as she felt his hand grasp hers. *Just having him here, being with him, makes this all so much more bearable.* She sensed the gentle pulse of magic between them and the weight on her shoulders lessened.

*Had this connection formed with anyone other than him…* She stopped the unsettling thought in its tracks. It *had* formed with him, and because of that, she *wanted* this bond.

She laughed, marveling at her openness to the desire -- a stark contrast to the fears and insecurities that, mere months ago, would have drowned it out.

“What’s so funny?”

She swung their joined hands. “It’s just…I never would have thought I could even *handle* having such a deep magical connection with anyone. But with *you*…it’s not just something I can live with, but something I’m starting to cherish.”

He smiled softly, his eyes brightening. “Truly? Even though it was thrust upon us so unexpectedly?” His voice was full of wonder.

“Yeah. I never would have expected to want something like this, but I do. With anyone else, it’d be such an invasion of all my boundaries. But with *you*…well, in that first training session, I *chose* to let down my walls and let the magic flow between us, to *trust* you and myself. It really scared me at first, but it was worth it, because it’s *you*.”

His smile widened, eyes dancing. “I can only imagine how hard that had to be for you, to let go like that. To know that you trust me enough to have made that choice, and that you *want* this bond between us…I can’t even describe the joy that gives me.”

She smiled back at him and her heart swelled. “I spent so many years building walls around myself, holding so tightly to my magic, living in fear. You were the one who first saw through all that and set me down the path to find myself again. So…” She hesitated, her voice lowering and her cheeks slightly red. “There’s no reason to hide myself from you. I trust you Evariste, more than I trust anyone else.”

As they reached the training room, they paused and he squeezed her hand, his gaze intense as he turned to face her. “And I trust you, Angel. With my life, with my magic, with my heart.”

At this declaration, their magic suddenly flared up all around them, but this time it felt different, *stronger*. It was as if it was pleased by their declarations of trust and had somehow strengthened itself in response. Angel had the distinct impression that it could have cut straight through the mirror.

She thought she really ought to be freaking out -- it made *no sense* for magic to behave like this. But her heartbeat was steady, her breathing even. Peace and strength radiated from the magic surrounding and flowing between them.

She could feel the connection to Evariste more strongly than ever, and memories flooded her mind -- holding his hand, joking with him, late nights discussing magical theory, her begrudging amusement at his insistence Stil was their child, even his stubborn insistence that her core magic wasn’t evil…so many moments of joy, caring, and connection, all the reasons she’d fallen in love with him.

Evariste’s face was alight with wonder. “Do you feel that? The strength of the bond?”

“Yeah...it’s stronger than I ever would have thought possible. If love and trust can really amplify magic to such an extent…” She grinned. “Well I might *almost* owe Emerys an apology. Almost.”

He chuckled. “‘Almost’ being the key word?”

She smirked. “He’ll be smug enough just knowing he was right. I don’t need to give him an even bigger head.”

Returning her focus to the magic swirling around them, she sobered. “But this,” she gestured to the magic swirling around them, “the sheer *strength* of this bond, is truly astounding.”

Determination filled her and she gazed into Evariste’s eyes, a silent understanding passing between them. “That mirror has *no idea* what we’re going to hit it with.”

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Acri walked down the halls, flanked by the same two guards as before. His mind was swirling with all that had happened that day. He had no idea what the future held for him.

Unbidden, his mind flashed back to the memory of Sarah’s earnestness when she’d shown him empathy…the feeling that she saw straight through his defenses, that she saw *him* as something *more* than just a tool.

And then there was the way the enchanters and the elf king interacted with each other -- there was no hostility between them, no power plays, no negotiations or careful exchanges of information, no *fear.* He figured he should simply classify it as weakness and move on. And yet…wasn’t it the same way Sarah had talked to him when she’d made him feel *seen* for perhaps the first time? And even the guards who flanked him hadn’t tried to intimidate him -- though he had no doubt they’d act immediately if he tried to escape their watch. It was as if he’d entered a new world with a different set of rules from the ones he knew, and that reality was equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

As they rounded a corner, he was startled out of his musings by a sudden ripple of intense magical energy. Looking around, he saw his guards had frozen in place, slack-jawed. Just up ahead, at a hallway intersection, stood Enchanter Evariste and Enchantress Angelique, surrounded by a cloud of swirling magic. Acri’s own jaw dropped as he starred. It almost looked like…two separate magics had swirled together somehow, strands of blue and silver intertwined. But that was impossible -- magic simply didn’t behave like that.

“That mirror has *no idea* what we’re going to hit it with.”

The enchantress’ words pulled him from his shock. They were really going to destroy the mirror? With this…what even *was* this?

His jaw dropped even further and his mind raced when the elf king, previously out of sight in the adjoining hallway, came into view as he reached the corner, approaching the enchanters.

“I knew it! All your talk about it being ridiculous, but here it is, the power of love at its finest!”

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Angel nearly jumped at the exclamation, dropping Evariste’s hand and whirling to face Emerys. “What are you doing here?!”

He smirked. “You two are the ones who put on yet *another* dramatic display *in the hallway.* But I guess you were too impatient to use ‘the power of love’ to wait until reaching the training room.”

She flushed. “You’re being ridiculous!”

“Ridiculous? The evidence is right here!” He gestured to their swirling magic, which was radiating intense power.

She clenched her teeth in irritation. “Yes, we amplified our power. But it *wasn’t* because of some silly ‘power of love’ thing.”

Emerys raised his eyebrows, smirk widening. “Oh? Then what *was* it?”

Angel narrowed her eyes. “That’s none of your business.”

His smirk widened even further. “Yeah, that just means I’mright.”

She let out a huff. *Why does he have to be such a pain about this? He’ll never let me hear the end of it if I let him have the last word about it now. He’ll be bringing up “the power of love” every chance he gets. To think I was* almost *going to apologize to him!*

“It was about trust, OK!? Are you happy now?! Our magic amplified when we deepened our trust. We weren’t even trying to amplify it yet. *That’s* why we’re still in the hallway!”

“Huh. Your magic really does like flaring up in my hallways.”

Evariste chuckled, then took Angel’s hand again, twining their fingers together. “What’s important is that now we should be strong enough to destroy that accursed mirror.”

Emerys visibly sobered and Angel’s irritation eased as she squeezed Evariste’s hand. *How is it that just his touch is always enough to make me relax?*

Another voice spoke, stammering. “W…what is going on? How is…how can any of this be possible?”

They all turned to see Acri and the two guards currently assigned to him, standing at the adjoining hallway, all three gaping at them.

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Emerys cursed internally. What were they doing here?

One of the guards had apparently gotten over his shock enough to speak. “Y…You’re majesty. I apologize. We didn’t realize this hallway would be…uh…occupied.”

Emerys groaned. *Of course they didn’t.* How could they have when he hadn’t told them to avoid it or given them any reason to think they should? It wouldn’t have mattered if Angel and Evariste hadn’t *accidentally* flared their magic *in the hallway* for the second time, but what was done was done.

“I suppose that’s my fault. I should’ve told you to avoid this route today. Continue on to his quarters as discussed, and mention this to no one until I say otherwise.”

Both guards assented and bowed before leading away a wide-eyed Acri.

# Chapter 15: A Guide to the Path of Light

Blearily rubbing his eyes, Acri sat up in bed the following morning. He’d been given what he guessed was a room intended for a servant, as it was small and plain but far more comfortable than any accommodations he’d expected. Despite the comfortable room, he’d hardly slept the previous night, his mind still whirring with thoughts of all that had happened the previous day.

He still had no idea what to make of the impossibly interwoven magics he’d accidentally witnessed. And the strangest part was the enchantress’ irritated exclamation about *trust* having amplified theirmagic. He’d felt the sheer *power* of the strange magic -- *something* had to have amplified it. But…*trust* making something *more powerful*? That was utterly absurd. Trusting required vulnerability and vulnerability was weakness. Getting *close* enough to someone to trust them was weakness. And yet, the enchantress wasn’t weak -- that much he knew, because he’d seen her fight, and heard of how she’d destroyed all the mirror’s constructs and forced it to let go of Enchanter Evariste. And he’d seen her magic *destroy* his own spell. No one weak could do anything like that.

He shook his head, trying to clear the confusion from his mind. Perhaps this was all some elaborate trick intended to confuse him and ensure he wasn’t a threat? Yes, that had to be it. Nothing else made sense. Nevermind that there were much simpler ways of ensuring he wasn’t a threat, which had already been taken. Nevermind that a small, long-buried part of him longed for the obvious, most straightforward explanation to be the right one.

The door to his room opened, admitting a guard he hadn’t seen before. He stood at attention, gazing at Acri unflinchingly. “Acri. You may call me Samuel. I shall be your escort around the city during the day.”

Acri blinked. “Wait what? The king said I would be confined to my room unless they need to speak to me.”

Samuel’s gaze didn’t falter. “Yes, well I spoke to his majesty and requested to escort you around the city. He agreed to let me assume responsibility for you.”

Acri did a double-take. He’d never even seen this elf before (not that he’d seen many elves before yesterday). Why in the world would he volunteer for such a task? And why had the king agreed? Was this another trick of some kind? If it was, he couldn’t fathom the purpose.

Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “Why would you do that? How does it benefit you?”

“You’ve taken a step off a dark path. But you’ll need guidance to step onto the right one.”

Acri furrowed his brow. Guidance actually didn’t sound so bad. Maybe he could start to understand the rules of this new world he’d entered. But…

“Why would you care what path I walk in life?”

Samuel shrugged. “My reasons are my own. Perhaps I’ll tell you eventually. For now, just think of this as a second chance to walk the path of light. Too many people waste their second chances or refuse to take them at all. But if I can help it, you won’t be one of them. Now get dressed. The city awaits.”

Utterly confused by the guard’s motivations, but seeing no reason to argue in favor of his own confinement, Acri shrugged and complied.

As they were approaching the palace entrance, a child came running down the hall, ramming straight into Acri.

“Oh, sorry -- oh!” She quickly jumped back upon seeing his face.

Acri was taken aback to see Sarah staring up at him with wide eyes.

Samuel spoke. “You must be Sarah. I’m Samuel and this is Acri. But weren’t you supposed to be staying with Lady Alastryn for now? Why are you running through the halls by yourself?”

She glanced at Samuel then stared at the floor. “Uh…I might have snuck away from her.”

“I see. And why is that?”

She glanced up sheepishly. “I just wanted to explore by myself a little. I’m not used to staying with a grown-up all the time. It’s always just me and my friends.”

Not sure why he cared, Acri found himself asking, “What about your mother? You kept talking about her yesterday.”

Her expression turned wistful. “Oh. She died last year.”

To his surprise, a hint of sadness flared in his heart -- yet another emotion he hadn’t felt in a very long time. Or, at least, he didn’t *think* he had. He’d always so quickly suppressed the overwhelming bubble of emotions that surfaced whenever he’d tried to ponder his reaction to Juniper’s death that he wasn’t even sure *what* they all were. He shook his head, not wanting to think about Juniper.

But, *why* had he been feeling so many long-forgotten and yet identifiable emotions -- sadness, sympathy, hope -- ever since arriving here? His emotions were normally dominated by fear and desperation to avoid his mother’s wrath.But then, he supposed that, for the first time in his life, he was out of his mother’s reach. And these people, who had been his enemies, hadn’t treated him with the cruelty he’d expected.

*Even under constant guard and with my magic sealed…I don’t recall ever feeling this…free.*

He’d *never* been free to just *feel* and not have to hide everything under a mask*.* But here, knowing he was truly out of Lillian’s reach within the elven city and interacting with people in such different ways than he was used to…it was as if several more little cracks in his defenses had started appearing alongside the gradually widening one that had been created by Juniper’s death.

Samuel’s voice, gentle, pulled Acri from his momentary distraction.

“I’m so sorry to hear that Sarah. You must really miss her.”

“Oh, thanks. Yeah, I miss her a lot,” Sarah sniffled.

Acri felt a nudge and Samuel whispered in his ear, “Express your condolences for her loss.”

Acri stared at him, bewildered -- he was used to following orders, but not ones of this nature. Samuel stared straight back at him, his gaze steely.

Acri stammered out words that felt foreign on his lips. “I’m…I’m sorry about your mother.” And, to his own surprise, he actually meant it.

*What’s happening* *to me?*

“Thanks.” Sarah gave him a watery smile. “Did you get away from your mean mom? Did the enchantress help you?”

“Yes,” he found himself saying. “The enchantress was…kinder to me than I expected.” *They all were really. I still don’t understand why I’m not locked in a cell somewhere.*

“That’s good. I met her and Enchanter Evariste last night and they seemed nice.”

Acri nodded, still unsure how to navigate this conversation. “Yes, they’re… different than I expected.”

“Yeah, they kept holding hands the whole time I saw them.” Her nose wrinkled. “It was weird. I asked them why and they said it’s because they love and trust each other.” She wrinkled her nose again. “It still seemed weird though.”

*Love and trust.* The words triggered his memory of the scene from the previous night -- what were undeniably intertwined strands of two different magics, swirling around the two enchanters and radiating truly *immense*  power. And the enchantress’ words -- that their magic had unexpectedly amplified when they’d deepened their trust. It still didn’t make any sense -- yet, could he really keep denying what he’d personally witnessed? Besides, it wasn’t as if much of *anything* in his life had made much sense ever since --

Samuel’s words interrupted his thoughts at just the right moment. “Well Sarah, it was wonderful to meet you, but I think we really ought to get you back to Lady Alastryn now. She must be worried.”

Her face fell. “Do I *have* to? I want to explore.”

Samuel smiled at her. “Exploring is fine, but not by yourself. You could get lost or get into trouble. And it’s not right to worry Lady Alastryn.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up. “Then, can you take me exploring?”

Samuel paused, his eyes brightening for just a moment before his expression turned neutral.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea. I’m taking Acri to see the city anyway. We’ll have to find Lady Alastryn first, but if she consents, I see no reason you can’t accompany us.”

“Really? That sounds like fun!”

*What in the world? First Samuel shows up out of nowhere volunteering to help me, “step onto the path of light”. Now he’s involving the girl I kidnapped. What’s he really after?*

# Chapter 16: Building Trust and Connections

As they walked through the city, Acri mused on how easily Samuel had convinced Lady Alastryn to let Sarah accompany them, and the easy chatter Sarah was keeping up with Samuel that seemed so natural to her personality. Like so many other things, both felt foreign to him and yet strangely desirable.

“Where are we going?” Sarah asked.

Samuel shrugged. “You said you wanted to explore. And Acri just needs to meet people.”

Sarah turned to Acri. “Oh, are we meeting friends of yours?”

“Uh…” *Friends?*

“Ah, here’s someone I want you to meet, Acri.” Samuel gestured to an older female elf. She was several feet ahead of them on the street and was struggling to carry several packages. He nudged Acri. “Go offer to help her carry the packages.”

Acri stared at Samuel, eyes narrowing. This time, he couldn’t help asking, “What? Why? What’s the point?”

“Think of it as an opportunity to form a simple healthy connection to someone. You’ll never get on the right path if you remain isolated.”

Sarah chimed in. “Samuel is right! Mom always said helping people is a good way to make friends. But I can help her if you don’t want to.”

Acri stared as she ran up to the elf.

“Excuse me. Do you need any help carrying those?”

Samuel chuckled. “Now quite what I planned, but I suppose it will work. Come.” He gestured for Acri to follow him as he approached Sarah and the female elf.

Sarah now held one small package. “Oh good, you’re here now, so you can help and make friends too!” She shoved her package at Acri, who barely managed to keep from dropping it in his surprise.

“Here, let me take another one now,” she said.

“Thank you dear. You’re very sweet.” The elf smiled at her. “But, really, let me just put these down on the ground here. No point holding onto them while we talk.”

“And you must be Acri. Samuel mentioned he’d be helping you.” She smiled warmly at him as she placed her packages on the ground at her feet. “How are you liking our city so far?”

Something about her -- was it just the genuine warmth in her voice and smile? -- put Acri unexpectedly at ease. He felt his muscles relax and a sense of calm and peace washed over him.

“It…it’s quite nice actually. It’s very…different from anything else I’ve experienced. Everyone has been far kinder than I ever would have expected.” *And somehow, that kindness doesn’t seem like weakness.*

“That’s wonderful to hear.” She reached out her hand and lightly brushed his arm. That feeling of serenity increased and he felt a gentle warmth radiating from her touch, past his walls, deep inside him, to parts of his heart he hid even from himself. And yet it didn’t feel like an invasion, but like the return of something he hadn’t known was missing. For the first time he could remember, his fear completely melted away, replaced by a sense of peace and courage. The courage to allow himself to really *feel* his long-buried desires that had been trying to push through his walls ever since Juniper’s death had shaken him all those months ago. The desire to really be able to trust someone, for a relationship based on more than fear and power games, even a desire for love and affection. And…sorrow, grief even, at Juniper’s loss.

As Calliope’s touch receded, the peace and courage lessened, but didn’t fade completely. And those *feelings*-- did he *really* long so *deeply* for trust and love? And sorrow over death? It seemed unfathomable -- and yet, he still felt them, and they felt…right. Like they’d always been there, just hidden in shadow.

“Wh…what? What…*was* that? Why do I feel so…different?”

Samuel spoke. “Acri, Sarah, meet my mother, Calliope. She is gifted with the ability to read and reveal a person’s heart.”

Acri’s eyes widened. “What does that mean exactly? What did you just do to me? I…I don’t understand what I’m feeling. I…I…” His breath caught and he struggled to keep from shouting. “None of this makes any sense.”

Calliope looked at him with such kindness in her eyes it nearly broke him. “I merely gave you the strength to see what you’ve been hiding from yourself.”

“My mother’s gift can be…overwhelming at times, especially if you’ve never experienced it before. But sometimes it’s exactly what’s needed to help us see what we’ve been hiding from.” Samuel’s voice was gentle.

“But…magic isn’t about emotions. It’s about power and control.”

Calliope shook her head, but her eyes remained warm, no hint of reproach in her voice. “It can be *used* to expert power and control over others, certainly. But magic comes from the soul. In its purest form, it’s about connecting with and aiding others. My magic allows me to connect with another’s heart, to unveil the truth behind all the walls, as well as to give occasional boosts of emotional strength to allow a person to unveil truths for themselves. What you felt just now is what you already felt, deep down, what I gave you the strength to allow yourself to feel.”

Magic was about…connecting with others? Helping them? The idea was contrary to everything he’d been taught. But…how else could he explain what he’d just experienced? What he’d witnessed last night? And…would it really be so bad if it were true?

As the effects of Calliope’s magic continued to fade, he could feel his defenses reasserting themselves, his instincts screaming at him to banish such thoughts back to the darkest corners of his mind. *Yes, it* would *be that bad,* they shouted at him. Desperate to regain that feeling of peace, for his fear to fade away again, he reached out and touched Calliope’s arm, but felt no different.

“Please. Take away the fear again. Let me feel those other things instead.”

She smiled kindly at him. “Alright. I can’t give you another boost of strength right now -- it takes too much of my magic to do several in a row. But I can help you see past your walls and lift the layers of your fear, if you consent.”

It should’ve been unthinkable for Acri to let someone past his walls. But that feeling of peace, the absense of fear…

He hesitated briefly, then nodded his agreement.

“I also have to warn you that you’ll eventually have to learn to let go of the fear on your own, to let your deeper desires through, and not become overly reliant on my magic to do it for you. It’s only a catalyst, not a replacement for self-reflection and true inner change.”

Again Acri nodded, though he didn’t quite understand.

“Come over here.” She pointed a few feet away to a grove of trees.

Acri glanced back at Samuel, who nodded. “As long as you remain in my line of sight, it’s fine.”

Once more, warmth spread through Acri, cutting through his fear, filling him with serenity and letting his deeper desires shine through. It felt a bit different this time, but equally pleasant. He found himself welcoming her magic, inviting it to penetrate each one of his walls, to the very deepest parts of his heart, wanting desperately for that feeling of peace to go deeper, but it went no further than the first time.

“I appreciate your trust, but you aren’t ready for me to go that deep. We’d do more harm than good to stir up your most deeply buried emotions so soon.”

“Um…OK?”

She chuckled. “Now, if I’m going to hold my magic in you for a few minutes, we must make use of the time, otherwise you’ll only start to grow dependent on it. So why don’t you tell me what thought made your fear return so suddenly?”

*Tell her what thought prompted my fear?* He froze, but with her magic flowing through him, the idea didn’t feel as terrifying as he would’ve expected.

“Steady,” Calliope said. “It’s alright to fear opening up. This is new to you. But you’ve already expressed enough trust to invite my magic deep into your heart. Is expressing the reason for your fear so much worse?”

*She’s right. It’s so unlike me, but I* did *invite her power past my walls. It was an act of desperation, but I did it, put myself entirely at her mercy. Yet she’s done nothing to me besides what I asked for. The enchanters also haven’t done anything to me against my will, even though I put myself at their mercy. Is expressing a single thought really a bigger risk than that?*

*Plus…I don’t want her to release her magic. The peace it brings…it’s like a drug. I can see why she says I could become dependent on it.*

Voice trembling, but focusing on the feeling of peace and his blossoming desire to trust, he said, “I…was thinking that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if you were right about…about magic being about connection.”

Calliope’s eyes filled with compassion. “It’s entirely understandable that such a change in perspective would be frightening, especially since I imagine you grew up in an environment where you were never allowed to question what you were told. It will take time to adjust to a new reality. But know that you’re *safe* here. And as much as your fear might try to bury them from you, your desires for trust and love and connection are not misplaced or futile. You’re on the path now to have those desires met.”

Unbidden, tears came to his eyes. “I…don’t know if I can believe that. I *do* want those things now, I can see that. But how could someone like me ever gain them? I’m not from this world where such things are possible.”

“You’ve already started. You’ve formed a connection with me, haven’t you? You’re talking with me, being honest about your thoughts and feelings, and listening to what I have to say. My magic is helping with that, making it easier for your deeper emotions to overshadow your fears, but you’re still the one making the choice to be open.”

“I…I don’t know. I don’t think I could do it without your magic.”

“Not yet perhaps, but eventually.” She smiled. “If I know my son and his stubbornness, he won’t give up on getting you there, and I’ll help as well. But I think that’s enough for today. You’ve made tremendous progress in a very short time, and I don’t want to undo that by pushing too hard too soon.”

He nodded and swallowed, unsure how to respond to such reassurances. “OK. Now what?”

“Now, I’m going to slowly pull my magic back. If you can, try to let your defenses stay down for a few minutes afterwards. But if you can’t yet, that’s alright.”

Gradually, the warmth receded from inside him and his walls of fear and apprehension did return, but a bit less potent than before, his desire for trust and connection a bit less buried.

When they returned to Samuel and Sarah, Sarah’s excited voice prompted the ghost of a smile on Acri’s face. “Can you use your magic on me now? I wanna see what’s in my heart too!”

Calliope smiled at her. “I don’t need magic to see into your heart, my dear -- it’s as open as they come, and full of kindness and curiosity.”

“Oh…OK. I just thought it would be fun to see more magic.”

“Oh don’t worry,” Calliope said. “You’ll see plenty more magic if you stay here for any length of time. Ever since our magic has recovered from the curse, many of us haven’t been able to resist using it at every reasonable opportunity. Six years is a long time to go without it.”

Sarah frowned. “There was a curse on the elves?”

A flicker of darkness crossed Samuel’s face. “A story for another day. Come, there are other people to meet and things to see today.” He looked at Calliope. “Thank you for your assistance, Mother. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Of course, of course. It was nice meeting both of you, Sarah, Acri. I look forward to our next meeting.”

As Samuel led them away, Acri felt yet another surprising mix of emotions. Calliope’s mention of the curse had stirred his emotions nearly as strongly as her magic had. To know that the kind and compassionate elf who’d made him feel such peace, and even the more taciturn elf whose motivations he still didn’t understand but who was also undeniably kind…that they’d suffered for six years under a curse *his people* had cast…his stomach tightened and his fists clenched at the thought. *Huh. Something really* is *changing in me. Am I starting to actually…*care *about other people?*

# Chapter 17: Grim News

That same day, Angel sat side-by-side with Evariste at the meeting room table as she pulled out her mirror to contact Severin so they could give him the requested update. .

Severin’s face was grim when his image appeared on the mirror’s surface. “Enchanter Evariste, Enchantress Angelique, I’m relieved you called. Unfortunately, there's a grave situation that requires your assistance.”

Angel frowned. “What is it?”

“The Chosen have started launching coordinated attacks all over the continent, sending whole teams of dark mages to attack towns and villages full of civilians. The death count is rising and the Conclave is failing to respond. I’ve been in contact with Enchanter Clovicus and it seems they’re in disarray, with everyone arguing about who’s in charge and how to respond to all the attacks. He’s been trying to organize a response, but apparently they won’t stop arguing with each other long enough to listen to him.”

Angel sighed. *Of course the Conclave falls back into chaos right when we desperately need their help. They seriously can’t even get their act together long enough to go protect innocents?!*

“I suppose you want us to go to Verglas and knock some sense into them?”

Severin hesitated. “I wouldn’t ask if the situation weren’t so dire. I know we’ve relied on you too much already.”

“This is a dire situation indeed.” Evariste’s expression was steely. “When did this start?”

“Only a few hours ago. I’ve been coordinating with the other royal families, trying to organize a response of our own, but so far we’ve had little choice but to each send our armies to attempt to fight off the mages in our own borders, and there’s only so much they can do without magical aid.”

“What about the magic knights of Sole?” Angel asked. “Please tell me King Giuseppe isn’t *again* refusing to let them help the rest of the continent?”

“Sole seems to be faring better than the rest of us thanks to their knights, but there aren’t enough of them to defend against the attacks there and help the rest of us. We *need* the conclave to send teams of mages out immediately or the death count will just keep rising.”

Angel clenched her jaw. *How dare those mages misuse their powers like that?!* Those *hypocrites* who had spent years making her think *her* magic was evil, who had kidnapped and tortured Evariste, and who were now attacking more innocent people.

She startled when Evariste took her hand, then relaxed slightly, feeling their fingers twined together and the magic pulsing between them. *How does he always know when I need him to do that?* She squeezed his hand in unspoken thanks.

“The problem,” Evariste said, “is that we also need to retrieve that accursed mirror and destroy it, which will be no easy task. That’s what we were calling you about -- Acri gave us the information about their stronghold and where the mirror is kept, but he expects the information is only good for a couple more days before Lillian likely realizes he’s defected.”

Severin paused. “I understand the necessity of destroying the mirror. But these attacks are crippling our forces. If we don’t receive magical aid soon, there may not be much left for the mirror to destroy.”

Angel’s blood went cold at the look on Severin’s face. She’d never seen the usually stoic commander show such *fear* before. Instinctively, she squeezed Evariste’s hand and scooted her chair closer to his.

“The situation is truly that dire?”

Severin nodded grimly. “I’m afraid so.”

She exchanged a look with Evariste, who nodded. “Alright, we’ll go.”

# Chapter 18: Confronting the Conclave

Angel walked through the portal, Evariste at her side, to find various groups of mages all shouting at each other in the courtyard outside the Conclave. *Is there not a big enough meeting hall to hold everyone? I suppose our numbers* have *vastly increased since the days of the Snow Queen.*

Within seconds, a flustered looking Clovicus appeared from the crowd. “Finally! Maybe you two can talk sense into these idiots! They’ve been arguing like this for hours!”

Angel glanced around at all the shouting mages. She had to raise her voice to be heard. “What are they even arguing *about*?”

Clovicus huffed. “At this point? I have no idea. It *started* with arguments about who’s in charge and who to send where, but I gave up even trying to follow it when it became obvious they weren’t going to listen to a word I have to say.”

*This whole situation is ridiculous. They’re acting like bratty children. Maybe I need something equally ridiculous to snap them out of this nonsense.*

An idea hit her and she grinned. *Oh, this is gonna be* fun*!*

She pulled on her magic and imagined the illusion. Her grin widened as hundreds of chickens suddenly appeared and started fluttering through the crowd of mages, clucking loudly. The shouting gradually subsided as the mages all glanced around at the chickens in obvious confusion.

Angel couldn’t resist a snort of laughter.

“Well,” Clovicus said, “that’s certainly *one* way to get them to shut up.”

Evariste seemed momentarily shocked into silence, then he laughed and grinned broadly. “Angel, that was *genius!*”

She grinned back at him and took his hand. “Shall we go knock some sense into these mages?”

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Evariste couldn’t shake off his pride to stand beside Angel. She was utterly *brilliant* and a force to be reckoned with. A surge of anticipation went through him at the thought of her reading the riot act to all these foolish mages.

Together, they walked forward, voices murmuring “Enchantress Angelique” and the crowd moving out of their way as if magnetized by her presence. He struggled not to laugh at the strange juxtaposition -- Angel’s determined stride and the awe of the crowd alongside the chaos of the fluttering chickens.

He turned his head to face her. Her jaw was set and her expression fierce, but he saw the uncertainty in her eyes. He squeezed her hand. “You’ve got this.” He poured every ounce of his faith in her into his words. “You’ve earned their respect and they *will* listen to you.”

For an instant, their gazes met, then she stepped closer to his side, their shoulders brushing, even as they continued walking forward. “I hope you’re right, because lives are at stake here.”

As they reached the front of the crowd, hands still clasped together, Evariste was filled with admiration. Many of these mages had spent years convincing Angel to fear and hate her own magic, but here she stood, fearlessly facing them down.

“Quiet!” Angel’s voice cut through the murmuring and the chickens disappeared. “I don’t know what you’ve all been wasting time arguing about, and frankly, I don’t care! Lives are at stake here and yet you waste time shouting at each other?! With every moment you waste, you’re giving the Chosen exactly what they want!”

The murmuring began again and the crowd’s discomfort was palpable as they began shifting and looking at the ground. “Here, here!” shouted a voice Evariste recognized as Enchantress Lovelana. “Enchantress Angelique is right!” shouted another voice. A smattering of similar shouts rang out.

Then someone exclaimed, “But we don’t know who’s in charge or where any of us are supposed to go!”

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Angel gritted her teeth, ready to shout once again, but Evariste met her gaze, a question in his eyes. She nodded, relaxing her jaw.

His voice and expression were calm but firm, leaving no room for argument. “We’re facing a crisis the likes of which hasn’t been seen since the time of the Snow Queen. Enchanter Clovicus has been trying to organize a response, and he’s been unsuccessful only because you all have been worrying about hierarchy instead of saving lives.”

The crowd’s murmuring grew louder, then Enchanter Tristisim pushed to the front, his voice rising above the murmurs. “We must uphold tradition! Even *more so* during this crisis. We can’t just put unqualified people in charge!”

Angel clenched her fists. *Has Tristisim* seriously *not learned his lesson yet?! We already put him in his place before, but apparently it didn’t stick.*

“*Unqualified*? Enchanter Clovicus has done more for this continent than *you* ever have!” Her voice was icy and held a note of warning Tristisim would be foolish to ignore. “The council is over and done with and *you* have no place being in charge. So sit down, *shut up*, and stop getting in the way!”

The crowd went completely silent, their shock palpable.

“Precisely,” Evariste added amid the silence. “Tradition is no excuse for inaction and obstruction. We’ve already seen the results of that. If you can’t see the foolishness in continuing the very attitude that got us into this mess, then get out of the way of those who can.”

Tristisim’s expression was a mix of fury and shame, but Angel turned away from him to look at Evariste. She felt the soothing pulse of magic flowing between them and the steady strength he radiated. He squeezed her hand and her fury turned to steely determination.

Turning back to the crowd, her voice seemed to cut through their shock.

“Now! The rest of you *will* listen to Enchanter Clovicus!” She raised her hand to cut off any objections. “I don’t *care* if you think he’s unqualified. We don’t have *time* to argue about that. We need to *stop the armies of black mages* who are *killing innocents* at this *very moment*!”

“And,” Evariste added, “if you insist on arguing over hierarchy or worrying about foolish traditions anyway, that means you’re just letting the Chosen win.”

The silence was heavy as the seconds ticked by. Then, Enchantress Lovelana’s voice rang out once again. “Angelique and Evariste are exactly right!” A group of war mages pushed their way to the front of the crowd and announced, “We stand with Enchantress Angelique!”. The rest of the crowd began murmuring again, but no one shouted any more objections.

Angel turned to Clovicus, who stood behind them. “There, we knocked some sense into them. Now you can get them organized and sent off, because I haven’t the faintest clue how to do that.”

Clovicus nodded, concern still etched on his face. “Thank you. I just hope they *stay* sensible long enough to be effective.” He walked towards the crowd and started ordering them to break into groups, and, without prompting, the war mages immediately took charge of enforcing the command.

Angel turned back to Evariste. “Shall we go? We need to figure out how we’re going to get past those wards and get to the mirror.”

“First I expect Clovicus will need me to make portals to as near the attack sites as my limit will allow. But then, yes, I think we should return and finalize our plan. Destroying the mirror is paramount.”

Clovicus whirled around. “Absolutely not! You two can’t just leave. If you do, they’ll fall back into disarray. They’re only listening to me now because most of them greatly respect Angelique.”

Angel frowned. “The war mages already seem to have taken charge of getting everyone in order and grouped. I don’t see what else you need me for. And besides, we have a limited window in which to get the mirror.”

He sighed. “You haven’t seen the utter chaos it’s been here for months. Things seemed to be settling down at first, but with most of the council members and so many other high ranking members having been Chosen, there’s a huge power vacuum. Combine that with the grief and anger at all the betrayals and it’s a recipe for chaos. We desperately need someone they all can look to and rally around.”

She reeled. “And…you think that’s *me*? Yelling at them for wasting precious time is one thing. But I’m no leader. Most of them still don’t even *like* me.”

“You underestimate yourself. It was mainly the Chosen moles who were always against you and they stirred up the others. But now that everyone has *seen* how you drove all the moles out and realized how they were manipulated, a great many of them have changed their tune.”

Angel shook her head, conflicted. It was obvious that the remnants of the conclave weren’t *against* her the way the Chosen infested one had been. And sure, the war mages might even actually respect her. But everyone else? And besides, they *needed* to destroy that accursed mirror as soon as possible.

“I don’t think so. And anyway…” she trailed off as Evariste gave her a meaningful look she couldn’t quite interpret.

“Angel, I think we should discuss this privately.”

Clovicus immediately nodded, stepping away, and Angel frowned in confusion and watched as Evariste cast a sound bubble around them.

“What do we suddenly need to discuss privately right now?”

He hesitated briefly, then spoke. “I think Clovicus may be right. Perhaps we *should* stay.”

Her frown deepened. “Why? We’re the only ones who can destroy the mirror.”

“Because he’s likely correct that they need someone to rally behind if they're to hold off these attacks.”

“And…you think that’s me?”

He paused, then nodded. “I do. You’ve shown them it’s possible to succeed against all the odds. And they saw how the Chosen all fled rather than fight you.”

Angel wrestled with the weight of Evariste’s words. She thought of the way the crowd had automatically moved aside for them, and the way Sinaed had accepted her comfort all those months ago after finding out her husband was Chosen. Of the respect and deference the war mages had shown her, and how quickly the crowd had submitted to their demands. She thought of how Evariste had always seen the good in her, even when she was convinced she was unlovable. Was he now seeing the way others saw her more clearly than she was?

She bit her lower lip. “I just…I don’t know if I even *can* play that role.”

He squeezed her hand. “You won’t have to do it alone. We’ll do it together.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. Why had it been easier to agree to come here and shout at the Conclave than to be the reason they stayed united? But Evariste was right -- she wouldn’t be acting alone. She squeezed his hand back, grateful that he was by her side, and nodded. “Alright. *Together*.”

# Chapter 19: A Veil Lifted

Several weeks went by for Acri in relative calm and he started feeling a sense of real belonging. He was so relieved to be free of his mother’s tyranny and cruelty that the seal on his magic and restrictions on his freedom hardly chaffed. Not that he was even *that* restricted, really, not compared to what he’d expected -- every day Samuel showed up and took him around the city and every week he met with Calliope. Slowly, he was starting to feel less afraid to hope, less afraid of wanting something *more* out of life.

And then there was Sarah. She often tagged along with them and Acri marveled at how cheerful she always was, keeping up a constant flow of chatter and charming everyone they met. Her constant cheerfulness worked at dissipating Acri’s fear and anxiety and, to his own surprise, he couldn’t help but be grateful for that. But today, as the three of them walked through the city, Sarah was unusually subdued, hardly speaking.

“Sarah…are you OK? You’re very quiet today.” Acri’s voice was laced with unexpected concern.

She looked up at him, her eyes full of deep, unspoken sorrow. “I miss my friends. King Emerys said he would help me find them and that they could come live here too.” Her voice faltered slightly. “B…but he’s been so busy, he hasn’t had any time.”

Acri looked at her, at the deep sorrow in her eyes, and a twinge of sadness and regret pulled at his heart. *I did this to her*, he realized. *I treated her as nothing more than a means to end. I didn’t even consider, or care, how my actions affected her.*

At the time, it had felt perfectly natural and normal to act as he had, considering only his own interests. But in so doing, he had hurt this innocent child, this person who had seen *him* as something more than a tool, who had seen his pain and actually *cared* enough to express sorrow, even though he hadn’t cared about hers. Or, he hadn’t cared then. But now, for the first time he could remember, he felt a strange sense of responsibility and a desire to heal the pain he’d caused. His regret too, deepened and tugged at his heartstrings, prompting him to admit his wrongdoing.

Instinctively, he tried to banish the guilt. Surely it *was* only natural for him to use those weaker than himself, just as he’d always been used by his mother. What should it matter if he’d caused Sarah pain? It wasn’t as if anyone had ever cared when they’d caused *him* pain.

Memories of the past several weeks flashed through his mind, and his stride faltered at the onslaught. Sarah’s gaze that seemed to pierce all his defenses, making him feel *seen* and *understood*. Samuel’s subdued kindness. The feeling of Calliope’s magic flowing through him, cutting through his layers of fear and bringing to the surface his deeper desires, always seeking his invitation before slipping through each layer of his defenses. *They…they* do *care. Even after all I’ve done.*

The weight of the realization silenced his attempts to rationalize his actions. He squeezed his fists in an effort to keep his hands from shaking, as guilt pushed its way past his walls. Words spilled out of him, almost of their own accord. “I’m…I’m sorry, Sarah. I never should have taken you away from them.”

Sarah’s mouth was an “O” of surprise. “You really mean that? Even though your mom was going to kill you?”

Acri hesitated, caught off guard by his own admission. *Did* he actually mean it? The memory of her fearful eyes that day came to mind and he winced. “Yes…I’m sorry I hurt you and scared you.” He shifted his weight and took a breath, trying to keep his voice steady. “I…I never should have used you like that. I couldn’t see that then but I do now.”

She looked at him intently, gaze piercing,

and he waited with bated breath, struggling not to look away.

After what felt like an eternity, Sarah’s face softened and she spoke. “It…it’s OK.” She paused, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Well…actually, it wasn’t OK…but I forgive you. You were scared too.”

The weight on Acri’s shoulders lifted and something in his heart loosened. His worth had always been determined by his ability and willingness to do as his mother ordered. If he failed to meet her expectations, he was punished. Harshly. To simply be *forgiven* of an offense was a strange and wonderful experience. And yet…

“I *was* scared. Really scared. I’ve always been scared…until I came here. But… I still shouldn’t have done what I did.”

Sarah shrugged. “That’s why I forgive you. I wouldn’t need to if you hadn’t done anything wrong.” She paused, again looking thoughtful, before her expression became one of utter certainty. “And you’re different now anyway. You wouldn’t do that again.”

Acri frowned slightly and shook his head. “How can you possibly know that?”

“I just do. I feel it in my heart.” She placed a hand on her chest.

Before Acri could process this, Samuel, who had been quietly listening, spoke. “She’s right, Acri. You *have* changed. The person I met several weeks ago would never have decided on his own to apologize. You’re growing.”

Acri turned, seeing warmth and kindness on Samuel’s face, and something in him relaxed. “Thank you.”

Samuel nodded. “Of course. I’m merely stating what I’ve observed.”

He turned to Sarah. “And I’ll speak to the king and inquire about when we might be able to go find your friends.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up. “Really? You’re the best Samuel!”

Seeing her go so quickly from sorrow to joy at Samuel’s promise, it struck Acri just how *powerful* such acts of kindness could be. The memory of the enchanters’ swirling, merged magics flashed vividly in his mind, the sheer *strength* of the radiating power beyond anything he’d ever felt. The enchantress’ claim that it was by deepening their trust that they had amplified their power had seemed utterly inexplicable, ludicrous even. Now, seeing the tangible results of kindness, *feeling* the results of forgiveness, it was as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes. If the simple words, “I forgive you” and just the expression of kindness on Samuel’s face could have such a profound effect on him, was it any wonder that a deep, enduring trust between two incredibly powerful enchanters could also amplify their magic?

# 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.

# 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.

# Chapter 22: Broken Seal and Unbreakable Bond

Angel and Evariste had just returned from the conclave and Emerys sat across from them at a round table in a meeting room. They were attempting to finalize the mission plan to steal the evil mirror, when a knock sounded at the door.

Samuel’s voice came through the door. “Your Majesty, we’ve returned from the mission and I have important news!”

Emerys got up to let him in. “For heaven’s sake Samuel, we’re friends! Are you ever going to stop your ridiculous insistence on formalities? Just call me ‘Emerys’ for once!”

Samuel shrugged, eyes twinkling with humor. “It wouldn’t be proper, Your Majesty.”

“I’m the king and I say it’s perfectly proper!”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

“Ugh, you’re utterly impossible!”

Angel smirked. “What’s the matter, *Your Majesty*?”

Emerys turned to her with a glare, then an idea hit him and he grinned deviously. “Hey Angel, remember how I was *right* about ‘the power of love’ amplifying your magic?”

She scowled. “It was about *trust*. And that has nothing to do with anything.”

Emerys shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but couldn’t resist smirking. “Hey, if you’re going to participate in Samuel’s nonsense, I’m going to retaliate.”

Evariste laughed. “Careful Emerys. You’ve just shown Angel the best way to retaliate against *you*!”

Angel looked at Evariste and grinned, then gave Emerys another smirk. “Exactly…*Your Majesty*.”

Emerys shook his head, unable to hold in his laughter. “You two are just as impossible as Samuel!”

“As entertaining as this is to observe,” Samuel interjected, “I do have rather important news.”

They all sobered and turned to face him.

Emerys sighed. “Alright, what is it Samuel? Clearly nothing went seriously wrong, or you’d have said so already.”

“No, nothing went wrong. In fact, it went better than I ever could have hoped. Acri broke his seal protecting Sarah.”

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Angel froze in place at Samuel’s announcement. This was Acri, the same Acri who’d tried to murder her and who’d stood by as Evariste had been tortured. Her fists clenched at the memories, but sheer bewilderment quickly overcame her anger. Begrudgingly working with them out of self-interest was one thing, but for him to have had a true change of heart this quickly…that was something else altogether.

She turned to Evariste and saw her shock and confusion reflected on his face.

Emerys, however, looked thoughtful. “Perhaps this solves the problem of how to get past the mirror wards when you break into their stronghold.” He glanced between Angel and Evariste. “The spell you used can’t be tricked, correct? He had to have *truly* acted out of selflessness to break it?”

“Yes,” Evariste said. “This particular spell is all but impossible to get around.”

Angel nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I don’t see a way he could have tricked it…but it seems almost as unlikely that he’s genuinely changed this quickly. And why was he even *on* a mission in the first place?”

Emerys sighed and explained.

Angel’s mind raced at the revelations. Acri had *truly* held no malice in his heart, but rather, fear and desperation? That was… unexpected, yet it made a certain amount of sense given what they knew of Lillian. Unbidden, compassion and empathy welled within Angel. Living in fear was something she knew all too well -- how many years had she spent terrified of her own magic, driven to suppress it and never use it in its most natural form? Acri’s fear had been of physical pain and death, but fear was fear. And she shuddered to think what his childhood must have been like, with someone like Lillian as his mother. *The chosen spent* years *lying to me, manipulating me, convincing me my magic was evil*. *But Acri…he spent his* entire life *with such people.*

Angel rubbed her temples, trying to massage away a burgeoning headache. As if reading her mind, Evariste placed a hand on the back of her head and the soothing feel of healing magic instantly banished the rising pain.

She gave Evariste a look of gratitude and clasped his other hand, the feeling of their fingers laced together and the flow of their interwoven magics grounding her.

Able to think more clearly now, something dawned on Angel -- the delicious irony of just how badly Lillian had failed. By relying on fear to control Acri, she’d ended up driving him straight into the arms of those poised to defeat her. And now, in less than two months away from her toxic influence, he’d started to truly reform -- the broken seal proved it. And that meant they now had an actual chance of getting to that accursed mirror *without* trying to force their way through wards that might well blow up on them.

Unexpectedly, a snort of laughter escaped Angel’s lips, resulting in looks of bewilderment from Evariste and Emerys.

“What’s so funny?” Emerys asked. “*Please* tell me you’re not about to start Samuel’s ‘Your Majesty’ nonsense again.”

*Well I wasn’t* going *to but now that he brought it up…*

“Why no, *Your Majesty,* that’s *not* why I was laughing.”

Emerys groaned. “I suppose I asked for that.”

Evariste laughed. “You definitely did.” He turned to Angel. “So what *were* you laughing about?”

“Oh, just that it will be particularly ironic if Lillian’s own son is the reason we’re able to steal the mirror from her.”

“Wait,” Emerys said, smirking, “Are you admitting I was *right*?”

“That we should bring Acri on the mission to steal the mirror and have him go through the wards?” Angel rolled her eyes. “Yes, fine you were *right,* assuming we can’t come up with a better idea. And that we can even convince him to do it. Are you happy now?” She paused. “Though I still don’t like how risky it is to hinge the plan on him. Even assuming he agrees and doesn’t betray us, he admitted himself that he was only guessing that Lillian couldn’t adjust the wards.”

Emerys’ smirk disappeared as the conversation turned serious again.

Evariste spoke. “I’m not fond of the idea either, but I don’t see a better option. Risking the blow back from brute forcing our way through seems even more dangerous.”

“Sounds like it’s decided then,” Samuel added unexpectedly. He looked at Emerys. “Shall I fetch Acri so you can request his assistance?”

Emerys glanced between Evariste and Angel with a questioning look. They agreed and Samuel left to fetch Acri.

A couple minutes later there was another knock at the door. It was a different guard this time, one Angel wasn’t familiar with.

“Your Majesty, Lady Alastryn requests your immediate presence, as it seems the children have gone missing.”

Emerys groaned and shook his head. “They’re probably just exploring the palace. Of course Alastryn would make a big deal out of it, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

The guard shifted uncomfortably. “She was very adamant that you come, Your Majesty.”

Emerys sighed. “Fine. She’ll make me regret it later if I don’t come now.”

He turned to Angel and Evariste. “If I’m not back before Samuel arrives with Acri, don’t wait for me.”

Angel snorted. “Why would we? We’re more than capable of handling Acri.”

Emerys rolled his eyes at her then turned to the guard. “Alright, let’s get this over with.”

After Emerys left, Angel and Evariste sat in silence for a moment. This was a rare moment of peace where they could just be together. Angel gently squeezed their clasped hands and felt him squeeze back. No words were needed, as they simply took comfort in each other’s presence.

Allowing herself a much needed moment of relaxation, Angel shut her eyes and focused on their bond, smiling as she felt magic pulse between them, connecting them and making them stronger. *To think, I was scared of letting Evariste so deeply into my heart, scared to let my magic be free to fully merge with his and create this beautiful bond we share, scared of my magic itself. Now, I wouldn’t want things any other way.*

“I love you Evariste.” Unlike the first time she’d said it, she didn’t have to work up her courage to force the words out -- they flowed naturally with no hesitation. “And thank you for supporting me through all of this.”

Evariste squeezed her hand. “Open your eyes.”

She did, only to see he’d pushed the table to the side and pulled his chair directly in front of hers. He was looking straight at her, his eyes saying he’d move the world if she asked. “Angel, I love you more than anything in the world. I’ve never been happier than when you first said you loved me back. I will *always* support you, *always* stay by your side, until the day you tell me not to.”

Angel stared back at him in awe, warmth filling her from her head to her toes, and the magic flowing between them seemed to rejoice with her. “Evariste. Being separated from you for so long was the worst experience of my life. The only thing that kept me going so long was that I refused to believe you were dead and that I was *determined* to find you. I was able to force that damned mirror to let you go because all the pain it threw at me was *nothing* compared to how much I missed you, how desperately I wanted you back. Now that we’re reunited and we’ve stopped hiding our feelings, I’m *never* letting us be separated again, not physically and not emotionally.” She joined their free hands, twining their fingers together and squeezed both their clasped hands. “I *love* you and you mean far too much to me to *ever* send you away. As long as you want to be at my side, I want you there and I want to be at yours.”

Now he was the one looking at her in awe. “Angel…being separated from you, unable to help you -- that was the worst part of my imprisonment. It was loving you, wanting so badly to get out so I could help you, that kept me from giving up. I almost *did* give up near the end, but I knew I had to hold on for your sake.” At this, Angel squeezed their clasped hands again, needing to reassure herself that he was truly here with her. “So if you really mean it that you never want to let me go, I’m never letting *you* go either.”

Tears welled in both their eyes, and Angel wanted to learn forward and kiss him. She would have, if not for the feeling of their magic tugging at her, clearly wanting to deepen their bond, but needing her to fully let down her mental and emotional defenses.

“Do you feel that?” Evariste asked. “The magic pulling at us?”

She nodded. “I think it wants to deepen our bond.” She grinned. “I’m game if you are.”

Evariste gave her that heart melting smile she loved. “Of course. I told you, I’m never leaving you.”

With that, Angel let down all her walls, marveling at how easily she *could* let them down, no doubt, fear, or hesitation getting in the way of opening her mind and heart fully to their magic. Somehow, she could sense that Evariste had done the same. Their magic spread out to fully envelope their minds, the bond now bridging them together, then doing the same with their hearts, building a bridge between them.

The old Angel would have been utterly horrified by the very notion of what she was doing -- trusting her own magic implicitly and opening herself to such closeness with another person -- it would have been completely unthinkable. Even when she’d let go and allowed their magics to fully merge together, choosing to trust Evariste with her magic and accept his reciprocal trust, she’d still not have been ready for *this*. But *now*…now she welcomed the deepened connection, relaxing at the feel of their familiar magic in her mind and heart, at the feeling of the bond between them strengthening, drawing them yet closer together.

She leaned into the feel of the magic and smiled at Evariste, who smiled back. She felt him experimentally prodding at his end of the bond. *You’re truly OK with this?* She started at his voice in her head, then laughed.

Prodding at the bond herself, she responded, *I dropped all my defenses and let it happen, didn’t I? And* *I could sense you doing the same.* She smirked. *Are* you *having second thoughts?*

He chuckled. *Not a single one. The only thing that would make me regret it would be if* you *weren’t happy with it.*

*Well I’m* quite *happy with it. Why wouldn’t I be? It’s our magic affirming the commitment we’ve already made to each other, afterall.*

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Evariste gazed at Angel with pure admiration. She’d already been through so much -- all the lies and abuse heaped upon her by the conclave; the pressure *he’d* put on her to use her core magic before she was ready; 6 years running around the continent single-handedly fighting curse after curse, all the while searching for him.Who else, after enduring *so much* pain*,* would ever choose such trust and vulnerability?

He shook his head and gave a joyous laugh. “*You* are truly amazing, Angel. I love you beyond what mere words can express.”

She grinned. “Then let’s not use words.” Abruptly, she stood, pulling him up with her. Then, she leaned forward and kissed him.

# 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.*

# 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.”

# 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.”

# Chapter 26:

1. Because Alastryn is sitting there smirking, knowing exactly what Evariste is going to say when Angel asks him about the almost-kiss. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)