# 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.