# 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.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

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.