

## Allies Forever

AVA

In Edinburgh, it didn't usually snow at Christmas – or at least rarely. It had been years since the city's residents and visitors had seen any snow, and this December didn't seem to be any different. Nonetheless it was bitterly cold.

I shivered, rubbing my hands against each other and watching my breath dissolve into a white cloud that vanished in the crowd. All these people had come to the Christmas market at Princes Street Gardens to look at the many stalls with their red roofs and their pretty decorations, to buy Christmas presents and drink mulled wine, hot cider or hot chocolate while in the background, the lights of Edinburgh Castle stood out against the descending darkness.

I hadn't really felt like going to the Christmas market, though it was certainly impressive. The crowds, though? Not so much. I lived on the Isle of Skye where I usually saw a lot more sheep than people, and I liked it that way. But I had allowed Lance, Reid and Sloan to talk me into this meeting – and the prospect of a round of ice skating at the specially made rink on St Andrew Square had done its part as well.

So far, however, all I was doing was standing around in the cold by myself, as if I had become part of the decoration. In truth, there was nothing even remotely festive about me, what with my reddish-brown hair, black beanie, boots, leggings and skirt. My fingers were numb by now and the cold was creeping into my clothes. I should've gotten something hot to drink earlier while I was waiting for the others. A brief glance at my mobile phone revealed that I still had a few minutes, so maybe I could ...

I stood up on tiptoes only to drop straight back down onto my heels again with a sigh. The queue at the closest stall was unbelievably long.

While I was still busy agonising, inwardly cursing myself for having arrived at the agreed meeting point too early, I suddenly thought I felt a vibration in the ground. Just very faint, almost imperceptible, yet there.

A tingle ran down my spine and goose bumps formed on my arms that had nothing to do with the cold.

I slowly turned, letting my gaze wander. But I couldn't spot anything conspicuous amongst the people wrapped in thick jackets, beanies and scarves. Somewhere close by, a choir was singing Christmas carols, and further back I spotted Santa entertaining a group of kids. A cold wind carried the smell of roasted almonds and mulled wine through the lanes between the stalls and the colourful lights of the Ferris wheel and the swing carousel flickered across people's faces, blinding me for a moment.

I frowned. The vibration had stopped but I was sure I had felt something. And I knew what that meant, too.

Without paying any further attention to the stall selling hot beverages, I weaved past the people visiting the Christmas market. My heart hammered, my fingers tingling with excitement.

While I ran past the old sandstone buildings, the music and the voices behind me grew fainter and fainter. I passed the National Library of Scotland and left Greyfriars Kirkyard behind me. When I turned after yet another intersection and reached Meadows Park, nothing but silence greeted me – and an almost familiar rumbling in the ground.

"I knew it," I murmured, drawing the dagger of the MacLeods, the weapon everyone in my element clan had learnt to control the dangerous water magic with. Myself included. "Come on. Show yourself!"

My steps faded as I left the footpath and stepped onto the grass. At this time of year, with everyone spending their evenings at the Christmas market, a restaurant or the pub, it was spookily empty here. The perfect place for an elementary creature.

A slow smile spread across my face. I was a storm daughter. Protecting innocent people and destroying these creatures was my job. This was my life.

Suddenly, the ground beneath me shook again. It appeared to be moving slowly, seemed to be coming towards me in waves. I dived to the side, rolling across the grass and jumping back up. Whirling around, I found myself staring into the face of a nightmarish creature.

by Bianca Iosivoni

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Like all elementars, this one, too, used to be a member of an element clan who had lost control over his or her powers. What used to be a human being with power over the element of earth was now nothing but a creature whose limbs appeared to consist of thick branches and vines. The creature was covered with moss and small leaves all over, and a misshapen construct of twigs sat on its shoulders instead of a head. Only a glow was visible in the two deep dark hollows where the creature's eyes should have been.

Before I could do or say anything, the creature attacked me. Vines whipped towards me and I was forced to evade at lightning speed. An outgrowth whisked startlingly close past my ear. But when the same vine sprang back again, I swung the dagger in my hand and severed it.

The elemental bellowed loudly enough to make my ears ring. At least the hustle and bustle everywhere in town meant that nobody would hear us. Nevertheless, it was better to finish this quickly. Easier said than done, because the creature was awfully strong. And fast. One second, it was standing in front of me, the next moment it merged with grass and earth only to turn up again right behind me.

I whirled around, using my dagger to fend off the next attack, but the impact made me stumble backwards. Oh well, at least I wasn't cold anymore.

The stone in the handle of my dagger pulsed bright blue, reminding me that I had control over the water magic inside me. Unfortunately I couldn't really use it here. Just because I was a member of the Water Clan didn't mean I was able to influence every form of water. My speciality was the sea – and ice. But any use of ice magic was fraught with danger. For myself and for my environment. And the ocean was too far away to influence from here.

As if the elemental had read my thoughts, it sprang at me again. I waited until it was close by but failed to land a blow and had to evade again.

At that moment, something silver raced through the air, cutting off multiple vines at once, before the weapon returned to its owner like a boomerang.

Lance was standing only a few metres away at the edge of the lawn, the Chakram, the sacred weapon of the Energy Clan, casually in his hand. His brown hair was wind tousled and a determined expression lay in his dark eyes.

I straightened, breathing heavily, while the elemental howled with pain and fell back a step.

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"Where were you?" I asked with a teasing undertone.

Lance just snorted, stepping towards me. "Would you like me to go away and leave you guys alone?"

I grinned, directing my attention back to the creature. "Definitely not."

Even if we belonged to different clans, he to the Campbells, the Energy Clan, and I to the MacLeods, fighting elementars side by side with me was still his favourite thing to do. Moreover, there was nobody out there I would trust with my life more than Lance.

He threw the circular Chakram at our opponent again who had recovered from the previous attack in the meantime and was ready to leap at us again.

I used the distraction to sneak up on the creature and surprise it with a direct attack. Bit by bit, I forced it back while it roared with anger. Sweat poured down my forehead. All I needed was a suitable moment in which it neglected its cover so I could hit it right in the heart. But just as I was reaching back, the creature melted into the ground again, knocking me off my feet.

"No!"

Lance was at my side in a flash, holding out a hand to help me up. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. But we need to finish it before it starts attacking someone."

His eyebrows lifted. "You mean someone other than us?"

Abruptly, a flame pillar popped up just a few metres away and Reid Kelvin stepped out of it. Despite the cold temperatures, he was wearing his usual red Chucks, colour-matched to his red-blond hair.

"Where were you guys this whole time?" he exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. "I was at the meeting point on time and you guys were nowhere to be seen."

"And where were *you* this whole time?" I retorted. "Did you beam to the wrong place or something?"

"Hey, I had to find you first –" Reid broke off when he noticed the elementary creature rising from the ground at the other end of the lawn. "I should've known that you two would be right in the middle of a fight again. Are you going to be done soon?" he asked, pointing at the

creature that was now running straight towards us. Each individual movement was so fast, so intense, that the ground shook beneath our feet.

"We could use some help," Lance admitted.

I shot him an angry look. "Traitor."

I could have flattened this elementary creature by myself if I had been able to use my powers.

Okay, maybe with a little help. But ask Reid, of all people? We'd never hear the end of it.

"Well, if that's the case." A broad grin spread across Reid's face. He cracked his knuckles and used his fire magic to ignite a flame in his palm. "Let me show you how it's done."

I rolled my eyes. "Where did you leave Sloan, anyway?"

"What? Sloan?" Reid stumbled forwards and the flame in his hand went out. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh come on, as if you guys weren't together before this meeting," I murmured, getting ready to evade the elementar's attack.

That Reid managed to put on an innocent face even in the heat of battle was pretty impressive.

"No idea what you're talking about, MacLeod."

I only shook my head but left him to release his fire attack, which kept the elementar in check long enough for me to approach unnoticed. When I was standing directly in front of it, I raised my arm and rammed my dagger into its heart with all my strength.

The creature stiffened immediately, crumbling into its individual pieces in front of our eyes, branches and vines, leaves and moss, which in turn quickly dissolved into dust.

I took a deep breath. Done. Finally.

"Good teamwork," Lance declared, re-attaching the Chakram underneath his coat.

I was about to answer when the smell of smoke penetrated my nose. I threw a questioning glance at Reid but he just shook his head.

A second later, numerous little flames shot up on the grass, as if someone were lighting candles one by one. Unfortunately, though, there was nothing festive about this scene, for the many little flames united to form a creature made from pure fire.

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"You've got to be kidding me...", Reid growled, retreating because he was powerless against his own element. "Do something!" he demanded of me, waving towards the elementar. "Use your water magic!"

"Very funny," I said drily. "Unless we want to sink half of Edinburgh into the sea, forget it!" But what else was could I do? Lance and Reid were unable to help me against this creature. It was too powerful. Even though it had turned up on the other side of the lawn, I could virtually feel the burning heat it radiated once it had fully materialised.

I swallowed hard, throwing my dagger to the ground where it remained stuck in the grass, blade first. It usually gave me better control but that was the last thing I needed right now. Ice magic couldn't be controlled.

I suddenly felt a gentle touch on my arm. I turned my head and looked straight into Lance's face. In one step, he was right there, laying his hands on my cheeks and looking me deep in the eyes. "I'll get you back."

My heart, already beating way too fast from the fight, skipped a beat and then continued to hammer even harder.

I nodded slowly, unable to answer. If I lost control of the ice magic, he would get me back. He would stop me from becoming one of those creatures. It was a promise – and I trusted him.

I took a few deep breaths and then faced the fire creature and with it every awful memory of my life, until rage and powerlessness pulsed deep inside me, suffocating any other emotion. Yet it was a cold fury, not a raging, hot anger that spread inside me. A cold fury that I needed to activate the ice magic deep inside me.

My breath condensed in the winter air. The grass at my feet began to crackle and freeze. Ice glittered on my hands, spreading along my arms until I felt like even the blood in my veins was made of ice water.

The fire elementar eyed me suspiciously. I took a step towards it – and it fell back, as if it could feel the tremendous power inside me.

Every thought in my head dissolved. There was only one goal now: destroying the elementar.

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I raised my arms. Pure ice flowed from my hands and straight towards the creature, which simultaneously sent an attack in my direction. A hiss filled the air and steam rose as fire and ice met.

I took another step forward but the elementar evaded the attack. A breath later, a flame jet shot straight towards me.

"Ava!" Lance's cry reached my ear but I didn't react. Didn't move. I stood right where I was, letting the fire come towards me. Shortly before it reached me, it smashed into a wall of ice that formed in front of me with incredible speed.

Using the distraction, I started to sprint, moving around the fire creature and shooting one ice attack after another towards it. Again and again, until more and more flames went out and the shapeless form took on almost human features. I reached back one last time, using all of my magic. Ice splinters penetrated the elementar and ripped it into pieces until only the smell of something burnt and the sparkle of tiny little frost flowers remained in the air.

I sank to my knees, gasping. My pulse raced. My blood rang in my ears. Steps thundered across the lawn, and then Lance and Reid were at my side.

"Everything okay?" Lance put a cautious hand on my shoulder while Reid held out the dagger of the MacLeods.

It took all my willpower to force down the cold fury inside me and regain control over my body, my thoughts and my feelings. I nodded slowly, grabbing the dagger. The cool metal and the bright blue stone that seemed to soak up all my ice magic helped me find back to myself.

"You did it." Lance pulled me towards him and I allowed myself to relax against him in relief. His familiar smell and warmth surrounded me and did their part to make me wholly myself again.

Even Reid seemed impressed, and he and his big mouth were usually pretty hard to shut up.

"Not bad."

I gave him a weak smile. "Thanks."

I got up with Lance's help. We took one last look around before setting off on our way back together. After all, even though we fought supernatural elementary creatures and controlled

an element each, we were also still completely normal human beings who had agreed to visit the Christmas market together. Whatever *normal* meant for us.

"There you are, finally!" Sloan greeted us at our meeting point at Princes Street Gardens, studying all of us from top to bottom. It was probably all too obvious that we had been in a fight.

"We had to take care of something," Reid mumbled.

Sloan snorted, blowing a blond strand of hair away from her face. "I thought you might. While you were busy being superheroes, I took care of the things that actually matter," she announced, pushing a steaming mug into everyone's hand.

I exchanged a surprised look with Lance and smiled. "Thanks."

She shrugged but I hadn't missed her little smile.

We toasted each other and the four of us strolled past the stalls with food and drink, candles and Christmas decorations, wooden figurines and any number of colourful souvenirs until things were quieter around us.

"Look!" Reid exclaimed, rapt.

I tilted my head back, following his gaze. White flakes were falling from the sky, dancing through the air.

"Is that you?" Lance asked, reaching for my hand.

A snowflake landed on the tip of my nose and melted on my skin. I shook my head.

"So it's actually snowing," Sloan declared happily, stretching out her hands as if trying to catch every single snowflake.

I smiled.

It didn't usually snow in Edinburgh – but it looked like today was a special day. And not just because of the white flakes sailing down from the sky, but first and foremost because of the people with whom I stood there.

As different as we all were and as complicated as the relationships between our clans were, the most important thing was that the four of us were here. Not as storm daughters and sons. Not as clan members. Just as ourselves. As friends.