

Chapter 1

Angelica crouched low, pushing the hilt of her sword down to keep it from brushing against the ground. She was being followed, *again*. She caught sight of her two pursuers through the tangle of undergrowth behind which she had ducked. One moved his hands, making a series of basic patterns that allowed them to communicate silently.

"Did you see her?"

"No, but she can't be far."

Then the first man flicked up his middle finger. Angelica smiled and, still crouched low, moved downhill, toward the lake. When she had gotten a good distance from the two men, she picked up a stone from the forest floor and tossed it into a patch of undergrowth. The men turned immediately and moved toward it. Step, step, step-
"YARGHHH!"

Both men disappeared from view with undignified screams. Angelica laughed and stood up, moving slowly forward until she stood on the edge of the mud pit. Both men sat, six feet down, in mud that covered their laps in their prone positions. That was until they spied Angelica, and both jumped to their feet. "You bitch, how dare you-"

"Captain, you can't speak to the princess like that." Rilen tried to cut him off.

"Like hell I can't," Captain Howard spat. "That little bitch doesn't deserve to be called a princess."

"Princess, we were just following our orders from your father to protect you."

"And I've told him time and time again that I don't need protection." Angelica shrugged. "No one around here even knows how to use a weapon outside the guards and nobles."

Howard just muttered something under his breath, looking around the pit for a way out. The walls were slick, and every attempt he made to gather a handhold was quickly thwarted. There were dozens of such pits on the hills surrounding the lake and not even Angelica knew where they all were. Most people remained on the marked paths to make it to the lake safely.

"I'll send someone out after you once I get back to the castle." Angelica smiled.

Rilen just sighed, but Howard turned, his face livid. "Don't you dare leave us down here you damn bitch! Come back here! How dare you..."

Angelica was already making her way back up the hill toward the castle, leaving the two guards and their complaints behind with a chuckle. A little mud would not kill them.

The castle itself sat at the top of the large hill, on land that had been manually flattened with dirt, hauled up by hand. Down the hill in front of it, a city had grown up on a stretch of flat (or as flat as it could get) land. Farther down were numerous villages and farms spread out on the more vast stretches of land in the foothills.

Angelica made her way to the back door of the castle, pulling it open to move into the kitchen. No one gave her more than a glance as she grabbed an apple from a barrel and headed through the steam and delicious smells. The chef was outdoing himself again, she thought as she saw a half-cooked turkey being basted in its own juices before being slipped back into the oven.

The young woman mounted the stairs, and came out into the halls of the castle. She took a bite of the apple and headed toward her room.

"You ducked the guards again," a voice said behind her.

Angelica turned, continuing to walk backward when she saw the tall guard with rich brown hair. He stepped after her.

"Well at least you don't sound surprised anymore." Angelica took another bite of the apple. She chewed and swallowed. "Oh right, and you might want to send someone to get Rilen out of that mud pit down toward the lake, and Howard too if you must."

Jasper shook his head slightly. "You certainly earn your nickname, 'Renegade Princess'."

"Thank you." She turned to begin walking forward again, falling in next to the level-headed guard. "How did the uprising turn out? You didn't have to hurt anyone did you?"

"No, luckily the Choir was able to calm everyone down, but it's not looking good. People have been getting more and more restless."

"Yeah, well Father can't exactly stay on the throne forever. I mean it's been over twenty years." Angelica grinned. "I'm getting tired of all this princess stuff."

"You've been a princess all your life."

"Well that doesn't mean I can't get tired of it."

They were approaching Angelica's room now, but she spied a figure next to her door. Jasper must have seen her too, because he fell back to the other side of the hall.

"Father's looking for you," Angelica's sister said as she approached.

"Eh, no surprise."

"You were supposed to come home hours ago. Did you forget that Elder Gareth and his son are coming tonight?"

"Actually I did. No wonder the chef was outdoing himself. Thanks for reminding me, Nell."

Penelope smiled. "Because now you can get out of here before they arrive?"

Angelica grinned. "You know me so well."

Penelope was almost a polar opposite of Angelica. She was small and petite, even though she was several years older, and she was wearing a pleasantly exquisite blue dress as opposed to Angelica's mud stained tunic and leggings.

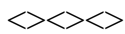
"Angelica, why do you insist on testing father so?"

"Because no one else is going to." Angelica turned and hurried back the way she had come.

"Princess Angelica, your father would not want you to go out again," Jasper said quickly.

The princess turned, moving her fingers swiftly over silent words she knew Jasper would understand. "*My sister wanted to talk to you in private. You shouldn't miss this opportunity.*"

She saw the resulting blush across his cheeks as he glanced at Penelope. Angelica laughed before taking off down the hall during the guard's moment of distraction.



Angelica hopped down off the back of the hay wagon on which she had hitched a ride. The driver continued forward, unaware of his passenger's departure, or that she had ever been there at all. The gates to the city were wide open though there were guards standing outside in order to keep out the obviously unsavory. She was mud covered, but that was not all that uncommon for the farmers who lived in the area.

One of the guards reminded her about the penalty for drawing her weapon in the city limits, but let her pass with no more trouble. Only the palace guards knew what she looked like. In the city she was just another patron.

The city was in fully swing, the streets were packed such that there was hardly any room to move among the shops and carts set up along the main way. The cart she had ridden to town on was trying to eke enough space to move up the street, but most people ignored the farmer's calls and the pair of horses tossing their heads at the activity. Angelica moved much more easily through the crowd toward the Temple of Lucinia, which was situated proudly at the end of the main street, where the road split off to each side at the fountain.

The doors to the temple were wide open as always and she went up the stairs, made of a beautiful white marble that was polished daily to a lustrous shine. Columns rose up on either side of her, holding up the intricately carved awning. As she passed through the rich wooden doors, she pulled off her cap in respect. Teal hair fell down her back in soft waves.

"Blessed day to you, sister," one of the priests greeted her.

"Blessed day," she responded with a smile.

The palace had its own temple, but there everyone knew that she was the princess and eyes were always on her. Here she was able to worship in peace without it being some sort of spectacle.

There was a short hallway, lined with tapestries and paintings of the Goddess Lucinia. While it was not known exactly what she looked like, she was generally portrayed as a tall, graceful woman with hair like spun gold, falling in deep curls down to the floor. Eyes the color of the clear blue sky twinkled on a face of soft curves. Most of

the time she was shown in a white robe that hung in rippled waves, with a simple purple sash and a golden cord tied around her waist. She was always barefoot as she never walked on the ground, but floated several inches above it at all times. The priests and bishops of the temple wore a similar outfit, only without the purple sash, and they all wore sandals on their feet.

At the end of the hallway was the main foyer of the temple, a large round room surrounded by statues of Lucinia, Goddess of the Heaven, lighted by burning white candles. There were many people already here, kneeling in front of the statues.

Off to the side, in a depression that went back several feet was a jet black statue of a man, Terranok, God of the Earth. His features were strong, severe, and sharp, and no candles lit the area around him, leaving him in perpetual shadow cast by the candles of Lucinia. At his feet were baskets of food and other offerings.

Angelica walked up to the pure white statue of the Lady of Light and knelt down. She proceeded to pray blessings for the day and for Ryall. As a princess, her prayers were more likely to be heard, so she always tried to bring everything she could to Lucinia's attention.

She lost track of time in her reverie and when she looked up again, there were many more people than she was used to seeing at this time of day, and most of them were standing with babies or leading young children. Angelica stood up smoothly, making the sign of the heaven before turning toward the door.

All at once she felt a heaviness settle on her, like a winter blanket. A figure stood in the doorway, light from outside creating a halo around his body, while the flicker of candles illuminated his handsome features and the pointed ears that proclaimed him to be an angel, even if the white and gold trimmed uniform had not. His hair was jade green and fell halfway down his back over a white traveling cloak.

"Welcome, your Mercy." The priests flocked around him, giving praise to Lucinia in his name.

The women around Angelica were now chattering nervously. Angelica knew it would be rude to leave after the arrival of a member of the Choir, so she stepped back in order to remain out of the way.

The high priest arrived from his meditations and spoke to the angel in quiet tones, before nodding and bowing out of the way. The Archangel glided over to the women, his feet barely seeming to touch the ground as the pressure grew reassuringly stronger. He pulled an item off his belt and held it up to the first child he came to.

The child shrank back slightly, but other than that, nothing else happened. The angel waited for a few moments before moving to the next child. Angelica realized quickly that he must be looking for the Heir. The item was no doubt magical to in some way detect him or her. The princess made the sign of the heaven as he passed over her, breathing becoming difficult for a few moments until he moved on.

The Archangel went through the rest of the children, spending the same amount of time on each. Nothing out of the ordinary seemed to happen. After their child had been checked, the women started chatting again, "Still no Heir."

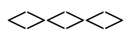
"Angels don't make mistakes."

"Could something be wrong? It's been so long."

"There is a purpose for everything in Lucinia's time," Angelica spoke.

Some of the women glanced at her, but they looked unsure. They gathered up their children and made their way out of the temple.

Angelica cast one last prayer to support the people of the country before leaving the temple herself.



The sun was growing lower to the horizon as Angelica moved off the southerly advancing road. She had rented a horse with some spare change. He was an older black gelding that Angelica had dubbed Tricky due to the nearly unending number of tricks that he tried in order to turn them back toward the city and his waiting stall. Just ahead the

road had been cut through a particularly annoying bunch of hills to avoid having to detour miles out of the way. He managed to plod up the hill at a speed that Angelica was sure to be slower than her walking herself. At the top she tied his reins to a tree that had stood against the weather. Tricky began munching at the grass within his reach immediately.

The hill ended just a few feet beyond, dropping at a steep grade down about twenty feet to the road below. She looked southward along the road that went straight for another mile before disappearing into the forest. There was no one in sight. Angelica crossed her legs and plopped down in the grass. She snapped off a stalk of grass and stuck the end in her mouth, chewing it as she looked back toward the castle. It was easily visible in the distance; its walls shone bright and solid in the late day sun. Behind her, she heard Tricky snort and whinny sharply. Angelica glanced back over her shoulder. "Hey, no complaining. They can't be that much longer if they want to arrive before dark."

In fact, it was not more than a few more minutes before Angelica caught sight of the procession coming out of the forest. She shifted her position, making sure she would be out of sight of even the most watchful eye as they drew closer. It was easy to spot Elder Gareth, his bald head glinting spectacularly in the sun, made even more prominent by the dark purple tunic he wore. Next to him, and slightly behind, rode a younger man, his head fully covered in blue hair, with a matching blue tunic. The Renegade Princess easily labeled him as the elder's son.

"I'm sure my sister will love him," she commented absently. "His dark hair will compliment her blonde beautifully."

Surrounding the two noblemen were their guards, a few dozen at least, proclaimed loudly by the white and blue tunics they wore with the seal of House Hethal sitting on their chests. The Hethal Province was over a day's ride from the King's Province. She could not imagine riding so long in those uncomfortable ceremonial outfits instead of riding gear.

As they drew up alongside her hiding place, she tried to catch a better look at the Elder's son's face, but the height of the hill, and angle of the sun made it very difficult. She imagined it matched his perfectly styled hair and impeccable posture.

They were passing by now, still intent on their destination. She had not been noticed. Angelica pushed herself back from the edge, looking up as she did. On the hill opposite her, she saw a large black creature, also watching the travelers.

A wolf?

The creature glanced up, looking straight at Angelica for the briefest of moments.

No! A demon!

"Danger above!" she cried out.

The demon had already launched itself down the steep hill, running fast enough to keep up with the gravity pulling him toward the ground. That momentum carried him into the horse and rider who had been unlucky enough to be in his path. The horse screamed as it crumpled under the demon's weight, its rider flung away.

"What the...?"

"It's a demon!"

"Protect the Elder!"

"*Crue.*" Angelica swore, jumping to her feet, her legs cramped slightly and she stumbled forward, almost tumbling down the hill head over heels. Beneath her, she could see what was quickly becoming a massacre. The guards were doing what they could, but the creature was fast, and they did not appear to be doing any real damage. The beast demon had blood splattering out from beneath its claws.

Lucinia protect me. Angelica gritted her teeth as she pulled out her sword and vaulted over the side of the hill. She had slid, half jumped down the slope, coming down exactly right to slice the surprised demon's side. There was another screeching growl as the demon whirled toward her. She ducked under its horns to see razor sharp claws lashing out at her. Only well-trained reflexes saved her from more than a shallow cut to her shoulder. The guards were attacking in the moment of distraction, but once their swords found their marks, they quickly pulled his attention.

"What's this? Angels falling from the sky?"

Angelica turned to see the man in the blue tunic standing a short distance away; a sword held in one hand, blood splattered across his fine suit. A smile graced his handsome face.

"No time to stare," she said more to herself than anything else, and darted back toward the demon. Elder Gareth's horse was rearing, striking at the demon, whose attention had turned to the panicking animal. The Elder looked like he was barely holding on.

Angelica sliced at the demon's back legs, catching it with a glancing blow. If she could cripple it somehow, then they could pick it off more easily. But the demon kept leaping away from its attackers, coming in from another angle with supernatural speed. Angelica was fleetingly glad that it was only a beast demon as she swung her sword with all her might to knock its horns away.

"All consuming flame from the depths of the earth."

Angelica panicked at the sound of a spell being cast and jumped back almost randomly. A ball of fire exploded underneath the demon, sending it straight toward her with a howl of pain. Her mind was a mass of panic, but her training took over, and her sword came up, meeting the demon's chest head-on as she stepped to the side. The demon carried her sword into the canyon wall, driving it firmly into the beast's chest.

"It's dead," one of the surviving guards announced a moment later.

Elder Gareth had dismounted from his horse, which was being steadied by two other guards. Their tunics ruined with blood. There were only about a dozen of them left.

"You..." The Elder pointed at Angelica. "Who are you?"

"I'd hazard a guess, and say the Renegade Princess," came a voice from behind her.

Angelica brushed her hair back out of her face as she turned around. Elder Gareth's son was standing behind her, his sword still gripped in his right hand. Blood stained his clothes and face, but it did not hide his handsome face. Angelica could do nothing but stare for a few moments. She had not allowed herself the time for a proper look before.

"Yes, that is I." She allowed her trained manners to kick in. A pair of beautiful blue eyes complimented his hair perfectly. She felt almost as if she were looking at a deep mountain lake. "And I must thank your mage, whoever he is," she added.

"That was I. Let me introduce myself. I am Young Elder Kenneth of House Hethal." He bowed; appropriate to her station. She was glad to see his eyes did not leave her as he did so.

"Angelica Millian, second Princess of Ryall," she said as she walked back to retrieve her sword. The demon was quite dead, she was happy to note, though her sword was now completely drenched in blood. She wrinkled her nose at the nearly overpowering smell. "If you'll excuse me, I need to tend to my horse. I left him up on the cliff."

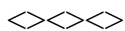
"Are you sure you're uninjured?" Kenneth asked.

"Nothing serious," she responded fingering the shallow cuts on her left shoulder briefly.

"Well I'll accompany you. There could be another demon around," Kenneth said. "We will be back shortly, Father."

Elder Gareth nodded. "The rest of you, gather the dead."

Angelica nodded to the elder, and turned to pass by Kenneth. "You can come if you can keep up," she said with a smirk, and after finding a place that was not a sheer wall, began to climb.



Surprisingly enough, the noble did not complain about the strenuous climb, though he was not exactly able to keep up with her swift ascent. Tricky was standing where she had left him, though the ground under his hooves was ripped up. The demon's appearance and the smell of blood was obviously making him nervous.

Whenever she tried to approach him, he would throw up his head and try and pull away. When Angelica tried to reach toward him to reassure him, she noticed that her

hand was shaking. She rubbed her hands together quickly, trying to steady them. By that time Kenneth had made his appearance.

"Is he okay?" he asked, he was breathing heavily.

"He's fine, but scared because I have blood everywhere."

"I'm a bit cleaner, let me try." Kenneth was able to approach the gelding after a few tries and untie him from the tree. "There. Oh, are you okay?"

"Of course I am. I said these cuts are nothing serious."

Kenneth stepped toward her. "I wasn't talking about the cut. You're shaking."

Angelica felt a stab of annoyance that he had noticed. "Right, because a woman can't handle battle or the sight of blood right?" she said sarcastically. "It's adrenaline. I'm making a detour to the river so I can clean up."

She started down the hill without waiting for a reply. The river was only a little ways off, flowing down from the mountains, through the hills before getting lost in the forest.

"You do earn your nickname. Sliding down the cliff like that, fighting a demon. You're not very much like a princess at all." Kenneth was following her, with Tricky in tow.

"I thought you nobles were better trained at compliments. I haven't heard anything about my outfit." She cast over her shoulder. The young noble did not seem annoyed by her response, but she thought she heard him chuckle.

She turned to look at him. "You know my sister is a proper princess, right? Beautiful, polite, elegant?"

"I am well aware." He flashed a charming smile and she felt her face grow warm.

The river was closer than Angelica remembered and she was thankful for it. She waded right into the cold water, up to her waist. The current swirled around her, taking blood with it. She plunged her sword in, washing off the blood before tossing it onto the grass. Kenneth led Tricky to the river upstream from Angelica, allowing the horse to take a long sip.

Angelica pulled off her tunic and dunked it in the water, scrubbing it together with her hands. Luckily the blood had not had enough time to dry since the battle, and it was coming out somewhat. Her chest bindings were going to have to be replaced, however. She did not envy the guards in their white uniforms, that would more clearly show the events of the day.

The princess was shivering now. The water must be colder than she had first thought, but she could not leave until she washed out her hair. She had lost her cap somewhere in the mad scramble, leaving her waist length teal hair free to be dirtied in the fight. She spent the most time scrubbing and rinsing it, as she refused to allow her hair to be stained by demon blood.

Kenneth had already cleaned his face and hands of blood when she was done, but he'd had much less on him to start. He walked over to offer his hand to her as she sloshed out of the river. Angelica accepted the gesture as she stepped up onto the bank.

She allowed herself to look up into his beautiful blue eyes. His hair wafted gently in the breeze. *He's so handsome...*

"You look beautiful," he said.

"Wha...what?"

He grinned. "Proving that nobles are indeed better trained in complements. You're blushing."

She tried to pull her hand out of his. "I am not." His grip was firmer than she expected.

"You act as if you don't receive complements often." He leaned closer to her.

"My sister is more worthy of receiving them."

"Don't you?" he asked softly, brushing her hair back behind her ear.

Angelica's eyes widened as she realized he was going to kiss her. No one had ever tried before and the realization of it paralyzed her.

"Master Kenneth, are you there?" a voice called from the forest, shattering the atmosphere. Angelica wrested her arm free and stepped back.

"Yes, we're here," Kenneth called, though his eyes were still on Angelica. "My father must have wondered what was taking us so long."

Angelica smirked, taking Tricky's reins from him. "Obviously."

It took most of the trip back to the castle for her heart to stop racing.



Angelica's father was actually waiting just inside the outer gates when they finally arrived back at the castle. She could see Penelope waiting with him, still in the same dress as earlier, but she had added a matching ribbon in her hair. She smiled when the group came into view, but her smile faded when she saw the state of the guard's clothes.

There was chaos for several moments as the King called for the medics to come and tend to the wounded, and Elder Gareth explained what had happened. Angelica saw her father look at her in obvious disapproval when it was mentioned how she slid down the hill into the midst of the battle.

"I am glad you and your son were able to arrive safely, your Justice. I trust my daughter was not too much of an inconvenience?" the king said quickly.

"On the contrary, Your Majesty, she was most helpful in the dispatching of the demon," Kenneth inserted.

The Elder cast a disapproving look at her. Angelica decided it was about time for her to make her exit. She avoided looking at her father, and started leading Tricky toward the stable.

"Elder Hethal, Young Elder Kenneth, this is my eldest daughter, Princess Penelope." She heard her father making formal introductions.

"It is an honor," Elder Hethal said.

Angelica quickly turned the corner into the stables. Tricky pulled back against the sudden pressure on his reins and shook his head. The princess patted him on the neck with a sigh. She stopped one of the stableboys and gave him direction to take the horse back to his owner.

The Elder's servants were bringing in his horses now, putting them into the visitor stalls, and talking loudly as they did.

"Did you see her come sliding down the cliff like that? No wonder they call her the Renegade Princess," one of them said.

"I was a little too busy trying to not get eaten," another replied.

No thank you for saving their lives.

Rilean came up the aisle. "Well now I know where you went."

"Oh good, they got you out of the pit. I hope your uniform is soaking before the stain sets."

"Could you please stop dumping me in traps?"

"I could, but I won't. You're getting too good at predicting where I go."

"That's my job, princess."

"One day you'll thank me for training you so well." She patted his shoulder as they walked out of the stable. "How about some sword training later to thank me?"

"You fought a demon; I doubt I can teach you any more."

"At least spar with me." She batted her eyes. "You and Jasper are the only ones who do anymore."

"Because of what the captain would do if he found out. As is, I get reprimanded because you wear a sword."

"I do appreciate what you do for me."

He smiled. "You've said, but how about those traps?"

"You can guard me on the way back to my room. I have to get ready for the party tonight." She offered.

"I'd be honored to."

"So do you think I should wear the green or the blue dress tonight?"

"I really don't think I should be..."

Angelica raised her eyebrow at him.

He sighed in defeat. "The green."

Chapter 2

Angelica looked over her shoulder at her hair in her mirror. She had requested her maids' services for the first time in many months to braid her hair in a fancy fashion that looked like it had taken hours. And in fact, it practically had, even with both Janna and Beth working on it. She also allowed them to apply some hints of makeup to her face.

An elegant forest green dress hung on the door of her wardrobe. Once her hair was done, she had Janna and Beth help her into the dress. As they tightened and tied, Angelica's thoughts drifted back to her father's visit two hours ago.

"I am expecting your presence at the dinner tonight," he had said.

"Of course, Father," Angelica replied with a charming smile.

She knew the look in his eye as he nodded his approval and left her room. He thought he had her figured out. He assumed that she always did the opposite of what he wanted her to do, but were that always the case, it would make her just as predictable as Penelope. Her father had assumed that by telling her that he wanted her to be there, that she would disappear into the stables or the forest for the remainder of the night, unseen to his distinguished guests. But Angelica wanted to see Kenneth again.

The dining hall fell silent as Angelica floated in. There had been no announcement for her entrance, but every eye was on her. She smiled at her father, crown sitting proudly on his head with one of his fancier black tunics, as she approached the table, curtsying as was customary. Then the princess nodded to her mother, who was looking both beautiful and murderous with a glare that Angelica found herself unable to meet.

She turned her eyes to a more pleasant place, and Kenneth caught her eyes as she moved around the table, to the seat that was always left vacant for her next to her sister. Penelope smiled as Angelica sat down. She was served her meal almost immediately. The servants were very good at their jobs.

She ignored the eyes staring at her, all except for Kenneth's. Every time she looked at him, she was greeted with a smile. Angelica was used to attention, and to the stares she

received, but it was the first time she could remember having such attention from a man. The princess figured she should enjoy his presence as much as possible.

The ball after dinner was pleasant enough. Angelica stood out of the way, but in a place where she could still see the activity on the floor. She accepted a drink from one of the servants, and had just sipped it when her mother floated up. Her blonde hair was piled tall on her head, and a low cut purple dress spilled out over her body, just barely brushing the floor. It had probably taken her hours to be laced tight enough for it to fit.

"I suppose even the lowest mutt can be dressed up for occasion." Her voice was low, but carried all of the venom Angelica had come to expect from the queen whenever her daughter was "acting out".

"Your visage would prove otherwise," Angelica responded smoothly.

Her mother colored, though it was barely noticeable under the makeup caked on her face. With a sound of annoyance, she turned and glided away.

"Quite a splendid evening." An older man had moved up beside her.

"Good evening, Jeffery," the princess said with a smile, curtsying.

The king's adviser bowed in response. "Princess Angelica."

"It is indeed, and my sister seems to be enjoying herself."

"As she should be. They make such a fine pair and it will do well to bring Houses Millian and Hethal together."

Penelope and Kenneth were the main attraction of the night. Angelica had to admit her sister looked stunning, a purely happy look on her face.

"Is that your professional opinion?"

"As much of one as I can give with such an odd situation," Jeffery replied. "People have been making decisions with the assumption that your father will actually remain on the throne indefinitely. Long enough that your sister could actually inherit the throne."

"Everyone expected another Heir to be born by now, but I suppose Lucinia works in mysterious ways."

The song picked up tempo, and Angelica saw that her sister was looking quite tired. She had danced quite a few dances already.

"If you would excuse me." Angelica handed her drink to Jeffery, who nodded. She crossed the floor, weaving in and out of the other dancers, to where Penelope and Kenneth were dancing. "May I cut in?" Penelope studied her sister for a moment, and then nodded. Angelica took Kenneth's hand, and continued with the dance. She floated across the dance floor, matching her movements perfectly in time with the music.

"You are an excellent dancer," Kenneth commented after a moment.

"You could use some work," Angelica replied, looking up into his gorgeous blue eyes.

That earned a chuckle from the Elder's son. "I suppose I shouldn't have forgotten who it was I was talking to underneath all of that finery; though I have to admit you look as comfortable in that dress as you did in your tunic earlier today."

"They're only clothes." Angelica spun, her dress flaring out beautifully, in time with the song's ending crescendo. She was in her element here, a situation in which she had been raised to excel.

Kenneth clapped along with the other guests until the band struck up the next song. The young man then offered his hand to her and Angelica took it with a smile and they began to dance again.

"So what are your plans for tomorrow?"

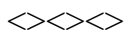
"Doing what I normally do, not that you care. You will be spending the day with my sister, preparing for your wedding."

"The wedding has not yet been decided upon."

"You know well enough that this is all just fluff." Angelica smirked.

"I suppose." Kenneth smiled.

Angelica launched into the next song with just as much fervor as the first. Kenneth did his best to keep up with her quick steps, and she watched him with mild amusement. After the next song had ended, she excused herself. She gave her sister a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving the ballroom and heading back to her room.



As soon as she arrived back in her own quarters, Angelica flicked on her radio. A quintet was playing a famous piece by Mayer entitled 'Moonlight Secrets'. She called in Janna to help her out of the dress, and then dismissed her for the night.

Angelica turned the dial, honing in on another station, and a man's voice came through the radio almost immediately. "Earlier today the esteemed Elder Gareth Hethal arrived at Skywall Castle with his son, Young Elder Kenneth. Their trip was not without incident, and it is reported that their escort party was attacked by a beast demon. It managed to kill several of the Elder's guards before Princess Angelica, the famed Renegade Princess, arrived in the fray. Luckily the Elder and his son are both unhurt, and the country continues to wait on bated breath for the announcement of our beloved Princess Penelope's engagement to Young Elder Kenneth. This announcement is expected any day now."

Angelica caught herself smiling at the thought of the handsome young man. He had not been the best dancer she had ever seen, but he had tried his hardest to impress her.

"Reports of the humanoid demon, Naresrom the Terrible, are becoming more frequent in the Province of Millian."

Angelica paused, putting her full attention on the radio.

"The Choir has been called in to investigate. They assure us that they are doing everything in their power to quell this uprising as soon as possible. It is known that Naresrom uses highly destructive fire magic, so if there are any odd outbreaks of fire, or if anyone happens to see Naresrom, or any other humanoid demon, we would like to remind you to run as far and fast as possible before reporting the incident."

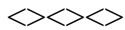
The princess nodded at that. Ever since she had been young, every tutor and guard had been adamant that if she ever met a humanoid demon, she do just as the announcer had said. It was something that all children were taught as young as possible. Humanoid demons, though rare, were extremely powerful. Even the Choir treated them with caution.

Nothing else nearly as interesting as the humanoid demon rampage was mentioned, and as Angelica picked up her hairbrush, she switched back to the music station. Music

floated around her as she lovingly brushed out every knot and tangle from her hairstyle, until it lay down her back in soft waves, shimmering teal in the candlelight.

Angelica turned off the radio and knelt next to her bed for her nightly prayers. She made the sign of the Heaven. "Thank you for the beautiful and happy day, Great Goddess Lucinia. Your blessings were appreciated and I pray you continue to honor me as such." And then she made the sign of the Earth. "Thank you for your blessings of the earth today, Great God Terranok. It was thanks to you that I was able to evade my watchers without having to harm them in any way. And thank you for your child who allowed me to meet Kenneth."

The princess climbed to her feet, blowing out the candles before climbing into bed. She could still picture Kenneth's beautiful blue eyes in her mind and his handsome face as she danced with him. It had been a pleasant day to say the least.



The next day, Angelica did not awake until early afternoon. She switched on the radio as she climbed out of bed. She felt extremely refreshed as she pulled open the heavy curtains. Light spilled into the room from a cloudless blue sky. Angelica danced a few steps to the upbeat tune coming from the radio, twirling happily before kneeling beside the window.

"Thank you for this sun filled day, Lady of Light. May your blessings be many for those deserving. Lord of Dark, if it be your will, allow the people of my father's kingdom to remain safe today."

Angelica picked out a nice tunic from her wardrobe and changed into it. She grabbed breakfast from the kitchen before heading out to the garden. Penelope was sitting on a bench in the middle of the rose garden, reading a book, which was propped open in her lap. A few feet back, Jasper stood at attention.

"Good morning, Nell."

The blond princess looked up from her book. "Angie. Good morning. You haven't seen Kenneth have you?"

"I would think I'd be the one asking you that," Angelica replied. "Isn't he supposed to be spending time with you?"

"No one has seen him all morning."

"Odd. I haven't seen him; I just woke up."

Penelope reached over to stroke one of the just opening rose buds. "I wish...I could be as carefree as you."

"It's not hard." Angelica smelled a fully open rose. "You just care too much about what other people think. It's just a matter of doing what you feel like doing."

"If you had seen the way father was looking at you during dinner last night...and when you were dancing..."

"I wouldn't have cared." Angelica leaned forward and touched her forehead to her sister's. "Don't worry Nell. Soon you'll be married and it won't matter what they all think."

Penelope smiled softly. "I hope you're right."

Angelica mirrored the smile. "If anyone tries to take your happiness away from you, I'll take care of them."

"I love you, Angie."

Angelica kissed her sister on the cheek. "I love you too, Nell. Don't worry; things will work out just fine."

"I hope you're right."

"Of course I am." Angelica stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get away before anyone else realizes I'm awake." She cast a glance at Jasper, who was still unmoving in the background and then headed out of the garden.

Only minutes later the princess walked slowly down the familiar path toward the lake. At one point during the castle's construction, the earth under a portion of wall had fallen away due to a shoddy foundation. The whole wall had then slid and tumbled all the

way down the slope until it splashed into the lake. The wall still lay in the shallows, sticking up at an odd angle that was perfect for sunning in the late morning.

Angelica had just reached the slab when she noticed that a figure was already there, laying back and looking up at the sky. As she approached, she realized it was Kenneth, though she did not see any guards nearby.

She moved closer as quietly as she could. He seemed to be asleep, his blue hair wafting in the breeze coming across the lake. Angelica found herself unable to do anything but watch him for several minutes.

What is he doing down here? Penelope doesn't even know where he is. She moved to the shore of the lake and scooped up some water in her hands, carrying it back over to where he lay. *Could he be waiting for me...?* She parted her hands.

Kenneth sat up sputtering, wiping lake water from his eyes. "Who dares to...?" He stopped when he saw her standing over him. "Ah, Princess. It's good to see you."

"You as well, Master Kenneth." She curtsied. "What are you doing out here on your own? It is most dangerous for one such as yourself to be..."

Kenneth put his finger to her lips, cutting off the flow of words. "Don't talk like that. It feels wrong somehow."

Angelica smirked. "Penelope is looking for you."

"And I've been looking for you. You are good at making yourself scarce."

"It is one of my most well guarded secrets. It's called sleeping in late."

Kenneth chuckled lightly. Angelica found the sound to be most pleasant. *But out looking for me when he should be spending time with my sister...* Angelica moved away from the fallen wall, and looked out over the lake.

"Do you want to fight?"

"Fight?" Kenneth's voice was laced with confusion.

"Well spar. I have to order the guards when I want to, and it's not very good practice when they are scared to try and land a real blow." Angelica turned around, laying her hand on her sword's hilt.

"I'm afraid I would be scared to try and land a real blow as well."

"Oh come on, would you say that if I were a man?"

"Yes, after seeing the way you handled that demon I am doubtful of my own skills."

The teal haired princess burst out laughing.

"I am glad that amuses you."

Angelica pulled her sword free. "Now I really want to fight you. Anyone who had time to evaluate my skills while protecting his own hide and casting a spell should be worth fighting."

"Alright then, I accept." Kenneth unsheathed his sword.

The princess judged his stance immediately. It was solid, aggressive and she found herself smiling as she lunged forward. He met her attack gracefully, pushing it off to the side. Angelica countered the move immediately and her sword sliced through the fabric on his right sleeve.

"Aw, and I expected to draw blood," Angelica said playfully.

"Either way, I can't forgive you for ruining my favorite tunic." Kenneth closed the gap between them, and Angelica only had time to stumble to the side. He was fighting her seriously. Her excitement soared. No one had ever treated her so much like a person before. All the attention she had ever received before was negative, someone disproving of her actions. But she liked the attention he was giving her. Like she was the only one he could see at times, like she was the only one that mattered...

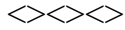
Kenneth's sword bit into her arm, and she cried out in surprise. "You're slowing down," he commented.

He is spending time with me when he should be with Penelope. Angelica dodged the next blow, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Penelope had looked worried when she asked where Kenneth was, and had she looked relieved when Angelica admitted to not knowing. Could she possibly think that Kenneth might like Angelica better? Was that even possible?

I like him don't I? Angelica stopped moving. Really like him.

His sword hummed forward and stopped just beside her throat. "Looks like I win." He smiled.

"You are marrying my sister," Angelica said flatly, ignoring the look of surprise on the man's face. And she turned and disappeared into the forest.



Angelica made her way to Penelope's room slowly. She had wandered in the forest for the last part of the day, only turning back to the castle as the last rays of light faded from the sky. Jasper stood just outside the door, and smiled as the princess approached. She avoided his gaze, and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice said from inside.

Angelica pushed the door open, and entered the room. Penelope sat in front of her mirror, one of her maids brushing her hair.

"Oh, Angelica. What a pleasant surprise."

"I was wondering if I could talk to you," Angelica said carefully.

"Of course. Marissa, if you don't mind?"

"Yes, Miss." The servant set down the brush and moved from the room, shutting the door after her.

Angelica moved over to the bed and sat down.

"Is something a matter? Oh your arm!"

Angelica glanced over at the shallow cut from her spar that morning, in the same place as where the demon's claws had hit her the day before.

"It's nothing. Did you see Kenneth today?"

Penelope was still paying attention to her wound though she answered. "Yes, he came just after midday and apologized for being so scarce. He is really very nice."

"Listen Nell, I'm sorry. It was my fault that he was scarce this morning."

Her sister looked back at her face. "You said you didn't know where he was."

"I didn't, but when I got down to the lake...he was apparently there waiting for me."

"He was...waiting for you?"

"Yeah. I admit that I liked his attention. I mean it was the first time anyone's actually been interested in me. I don't even know how things got that far, and so I told him that he was marrying you, and so he should spend time with you."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry Nell. It was just the first time anyone showed interest in me, and I lost my head. I know silly thing for me to-"

"Please leave."

"Nell?"

"I request that you leave now."

"What do you mean?" Angelica stood up.

"You came here to tell me that my future husband is interested in you, and would rather spend time with you, but you felt sorry for me, so you tossed him my way when you were done with him?"

"No...that's not what I-"

"And last night you could not help but draw his attention to you. Taking him and dancing the night away while I was left on the sidelines."

"Nell, that is not what I was trying to do, I just wanted to-"

"Jasper!"

The door opened immediately and Jasper appeared in the doorway.

"Please escort Angelica from my room."

"Nell..."

"Now."

Jasper's hand closed over Angelica's arm and he guided her toward the door. The upset princess went without any resistance. Jasper shut the door after them.

"She didn't understand...how could..." Angelica looked up at Jasper. His eyes were full of questions. The pain of wanting someone you could never have. Jasper knew this pain, and she had teased him. "I'm sorry." She managed, but tears began to spill down her cheeks, so she pulled away from him and hurried to her own room.

The Renegade Princess flung herself down onto her bed, curling up around a pillow. After saying those encouraging things to Penelope just this morning, she was the one who ended up hurting her.

Kenneth was the first man to ever show interest in her. Was it some sort of punishment that he was already betrothed to her sister? Why had he showed such interest in her when he was engaged to Penelope?

She rolled over. *Maybe it'd just be better if I weren't around...*

Wind howled through the window in a sudden burst, waking Angelica from the slumber she had not remembered falling into. She groaned in tired annoyance and rolled over, trying to slip back into unconsciousness. The window shutters clacked against wall, stirring her further from sleep.

She mumbled to herself as she climbed from the warm bed, her feet finding the slippers beside her bed. The wind was biting cold against her skin as she groped for the shutters, which were still dancing around wildly.

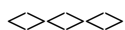
An arm slipped around her neck from behind, and another attempted to pin her arms. Her responses were still dulled by the blanket of sleep and she found herself thrown back onto the bed before she could respond.

Now Angelica was beginning to wake up, and her training took over as she landed a strong blow into the figure's stomach. She refused to cry out. She did not need any help. The last thing she needed were the guards rubbing in the fact that she had needed to be saved. There was a grunt in response to her attack, and then whispered words drifted into Angelica's ears. Suddenly a pair of dark wings flared out from the figure's back.

Oh by the powers...it's a demon...

Fear clutched Angelica as realized she was in over her head, and she opened her mouth to scream. But nothing came out. A wave of peacefulness washed over her, and her eyes began to feel heavy.

No, I can't go to sleep now. I can't...



Angelica woke with a severe headache. She kept her eyes closed for several minutes as she remember what had happened before she blacked out. The silhouette of the demon played across her memories and she was suddenly terrified to open her eyes and find herself in a dungeon.

But it did not feel like a cold stone floor beneath her. She reached out her hands and felt cloth. Angelica opened her eyes to see a light yellow canopy floating over her head. She was in a bed with light yellow sheets, but it was not her bed, or her sheets, and it was most certainly not her room.

The princess sat up. There was a window just to her right, the curtains open to allow light to stream in. Elsewhere in the room was furniture, though all had sheets covering them. There were also two doors on different walls. Angelica sat on the edge of the bed, slipping her feet into her slippers and, shaking slightly, made her way to the door directly across from the bed.

It opened with an easy twist of the doorknob. Outside was a hallway which was empty as she peeked out. A vase sat on a small table across from her room, which held a bouquet of fresh flowers. She listened for any sounds that would betray other people down the hall.

It had been a demon that had attacked her the night before and demons were known to kidnap people. *But where did it bring me, and why put me in an unlocked room with no guards?*

"I didn't pray last night!" She cried with sudden realization. Angelica dropped to her knees immediately, making the sign of the Heaven. "I beg your forgiveness for my forgetfulness, Goddess Lucinia. I put the worry of earthly issues above my praises to you."

She made the sign of the Earth, closing her eyes tightly. A demon had been sent after her, a child of the Earth. Terranok was obviously displeased. "Please forgive me, Father of the Earth. My praises to you are many and my heart does not falter in this. If you need me to prove myself, please send me a sign." She remained silent for several

minutes, praying that something, anything, would happen. If she were home she could have gone to the priests to have them help her prayer reach the Gods.

Angelica opened her eyes and then screamed when she noticed a figure standing just a few feet away. She scrambled back into the room and slammed the door shut, her heart beating in her chest. Was it the demon? She had not gotten a good enough look.

There was a knock on the door. "I did not mean to scare you."

"Who...are you?"

"My name is Dusty, Miss Angelica."

"How do you know my name?"

"Would you mind opening the door. I would prefer not to converse through it."

"Are you a demon?"

"No."

Angelica wondered for a moment if she should even believe him. If he was a demon he had no reason to tell the truth. But then if he was a demon, a little flimsy door was hardly going to keep him out. She pulled the door open. Standing in the hallway just outside was a young man. He appeared to be approximately her age with dark brown hair, oddly pale eyes, and a collection of freckles across his cheeks.

He smiled. "Hello, my name is Dusty," he repeated, bowing.

"I'm Angelica." She said warily, even though he had seemed to already know her name. "Where are we?"

"The doorway to your room," he replied immediately.

She blinked. "No, I mean where is this house? How far from home am I?"

"We are currently in the Arcona Mountain Range, but you will have to ask Master Dylan if you wish to know more."

"Who?"

"You."

"No, who is Dylan?"

"He is my master."

Angelica studied the young man for a moment. He appeared and acted like a servant and one limited in what he was allowed to say. If she was going to get any answers about where she was and why, this 'Master Dylan' was going to be the one she needed to ask.

"Take me to see Dylan."

Dusty offered his arm. Angelica looked at him skeptically, but he waited patiently until she put her hand on his arm. He then escorted her down the hall.

All of the doors they passed were closed, betraying no clue as to what was on the other side. More bedrooms? Torture chambers? Washrooms? Dusty matched his pace to hers.

They descended a staircase and Angelica heard music floating toward her. It was a beautiful tune, played by a single violin. The song was coming from the room into which they went. A fire crackled in the fireplace as the only source of light and it silhouetted a figure with a violin in his hands. The music moved around her, light and happy. Then the figure stopped playing and reached forward to mark something on the stand in front of him.

"Are you the one who had me brought here?" Angelica demanded.

The figure finished writing and set down the lead before turning to her. She could not see his face against the glow of the fire. "You're not injured, are you Princess?"

It was only then that she realized her shoulder did not ache. She looked over to see no wound through the cut tunic. It had healed? "I'm not worth any ransom."

"And what makes you think I care about ransom?" he lifted his hand and a ball of fire lit itself, hovering over his palm.

Angelica's eyes went wide as the flame moved itself through the air to a lamp, which caught the fire and spread light into the room. The figure was pale skinned with dark hair and appeared to be human except for a pair of horns poking out from behind his ears.

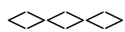
The blood seemed to freeze in Angelica's veins. *Lucinia protect me.* She stumbled backward, reaching for the sword that was not on her belt.

The humanoid demon chuckled. A humanoid demon. Almost fully humanoid. The most powerful of demons. Even the Choir treated them with care. Angelica felt bile rise in her throat. She turned and ran out of the open doors behind her.

Torn between the urge to drop to her knees and beg the Gods' forgiveness and the desire to get as far away as possible, she raced down the hallway into what seemed like a foyer. She flung open the front door and lit out across the yard.

Freezing wind whipped around her. Her tunic was thin and did not protect well from the weather in the mountains. The princess walked across snow spotted grass, which quickly reminded her that she was only wearing slippers. She ignored the cold and continued running, keeping herself from looking back as she was terrified of what she might see chasing her. She instead focused on the mountains rising up all around her. There would be a town. If she could just reach a temple.

As she ran down the sloping yard, the Renegade Princess wondered for a moment why it had been so simple for her to escape. *If that humanoid demon went through all the trouble of kidnapping me, you'd think he would at least lock...* Angelica's vision blurred. She paused, shaking her head at the sudden wave of tiredness, but found that to be a mistake as the world spun and she fell into darkness.



Angelica's eyes opened to the same yellow canopy and the same pounding headache, but this time the humanoid demon sat on a chair next to the bed, watching her. She clutched the blankets to her, fear racing through her system again.

"Did you really think it would be that easy to leave, Princess?" he asked with a mocking smile.

"Did you really think I would just resign myself to this fate, Demon?" she retorted before she realized what she was saying.

The demon chuckled. "You, Princess, are my prisoner, and I have done what I needed to keep you as such."

Was he mad? She couldn't tell. Angelica wondered for a brief moment if it was possible to die from fear alone.

"This room is yours to do with as you like, but as you've seen, you are not restricted to it. You can go anywhere you can get to, though most rooms haven't been opened in many years and are a bit dusty."

She found herself studying him through her fear. After everything she had heard about humanoid demons, she was slightly disappointed. He looked so much like a human. If not for the horns she never would have known otherwise. His clothing was worn, but well made. His hair was dark blue but she was too afraid to see what color his eyes were.

He stood up in a smooth motion that still sent her heart racing into her throat. "If you need anything, Dusty will tend to it. Now if you will excuse me."

He left through the door that had been slightly ajar this whole time. Was he mocking her with freedom? That had to be it, to have an invisible spell be her cage. It would have been much better if there were bars across the windows and a heavy lock on the door. The demon closed the door after him. She stared at it for a few moments before standing swiftly and locking the door from the inside. The situation did not seem real.

But she was alive. Alive and unhurt which was more than she had ever expected to be after meeting with a humanoid demon. It was still possible for someone to come and rescue her. Surely her Father would fly into a rage on finding her kidnapped, and her mother would beg the Choir to help. She was not their first child and she could be a little rebellious but she was still their child.

She would be fine. They would not leave her here long. All she had to do was stay safe in this room and she would be rescued. Angelica went to the window and looked through the glass over what appeared to be a garden, out to the mountains beyond. She would probably even be able to see them, marching up in full regalia on proud horses. The Choir's uniforms bright in the sun.

And as far as rooms went, this was not necessarily all that bad. It was at least as large as her room at home. And most importantly, she was not in a damp dungeon with her hands chained up to the wall.

Angelica bent down, making the sign of the Heaven. "Thank you, Lady of Light, for your protection during these difficult times. If it is your will, please give me the strength to persevere." She hesitated slightly as her hand traced the familiar sign of the Earth. It seemed rather rude to say, "Thank you for not letting your child kill me." So she settled for, "Thank you for your protections as well." By the light outside the window it was drifting into late afternoon.

The cloths covered the furniture like unmoving ghosts. She reached over and pulled the nearest cloth with a flourish. It turned out to be a big mistake as dust exploded into the air, throwing her into fits of coughing. She stumbled back to the window and pushed it open, coughing for several more minutes until the dust had settled. Unfortunately much of it settled back onto the dresser she had uncovered.

The dresser itself was a beautiful piece, made of the same dark wood as the bed. It was detailed with carvings of spinning feathers. She ran her fingers over the carving along the side. She folded up the sheet and more carefully this time, removed the sheet from another piece of furniture.

This one was a couch, trimmed in the same dark wood and carvings. The body of the couch was a soft to the touch white cloth. Under the rest of the sheets were a large set of drawers, several small tables, a bookshelf and a wardrobe. There were no accessories on the furniture and an examination showed nothing left inside them either.

Angelica gathered the sheets she had removed and piled them in the corner. The room looked much more comfortable with all the sheets gone and the furniture uncovered. Though there was still enough dust in the room to make her nose itch, it was an improvement.

That done she went over to the other door in the room. She opened it to see a washroom. There was a basin high enough to wash her hands and face. On the other side of the room, below a high window, was a tub. Next to that appeared to be a chamber pot. It was not much unlike what she had at home. Both the basin and tub had an odd piece of curved pipe above them with a circular handle on them.

There was a knock on the door and Angelica jumped at the sound, spinning around.

"Who...is it?" she called out.

"I brought your dinner." Dusty's voice floated to her.

"Leave it out there."

There was a pause. "As you wish, Miss Angelia."

The princess waited several minutes, listening at the door, until she was sure the boy was gone. Even if he was a human, he might be magicked into being loyal to the humanoid demon, and thus spy for him. She opened the door a crack and looked out. There was no one in the hall, but a covered tray had been set on the table across the hall.

After another check she retrieved the meal and retreated back to the room. After locking the door she set the tray on the table and uncovered it. It was a large bowl of soup, loaded with meat and vegetables. A piece of bread and cheese sat next to it, and there was a cup of wine.

She decided there was no reason for them to poison her, so she sat down and ate. It had been almost a whole day since she'd eaten and it was delicious. Yes, she decided, it would be perfectly nice in this little room until she was rescued.