

## Lani & The Prince

# Prague



“This is sooooo boring,” Lani groaned, dragging her feet across Charles Bridge. The mild autumn air did

little to lift her spirits as she trudged along with her school group.

“Now, this is St. Wenceslaus,” the tour guide began, stopping dramatically in front of a towering statue. “One of the most well-known figures in Czech history,” he announced, his voice dripping with enthusiasm.

“Oh, thrilling,” the girl muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes so hard she almost saw last week. “Shhh!” said a woman stepping towards the girl, her teacher Mrs Brošková whipped around and fixed a glare on Lani like a heat-seeking missile. The young girl stared back, unbothered and entirely unimpressed.

Beside her, a small blonde figure whispered urgently, “Lani, you should listen! You know we have a test on this when we get back to school.” “Katerina,” Mrs Brošková snapped, swiveling her attention to the blonde girl. “Did you have something to add?”

“N-no, Mrs Brošková,” Katerina stammered, her face turning a shade of crimson usually reserved for tomatoes and sunburns, as she quickly ducked behind her taller friend.

“Then keep quiet,” the woman barked before gesturing for the guide to resume his monologue. “I don’t see why we need to learn any of this,” Lani whispered as the group shuffled onward. “It’s not like I’m going to meet St. Wenceslaus at the shops.”

“Well, I think it’s interesting,” her friend replied, practically skipping as she took in the sights of the historic bridge.

“Of course, you do, Katchy” Lani said, rolling her eyes again, possibly aiming for a new personal record.

Katchy and Lani had been best friends since the age of six, though you’d think they were from different planets. Lani, tall for her age, with long red hair and piercing blue eyes, was outspoken, athletic, and allergic to homework. Katerina, or Katchy to her friends, was a head shorter, with bright blonde hair and green eyes that sparkled at the mere mention of books. Shy and rule-abiding, the blonde girl in glasses never got into trouble, unless, of course, she was caught in her friend’s gravitational pull of mischief.

The two attended St. Stephen’s, a language school in Prague. Among all their subjects, the one thing they both truly loved, though for wildly different reasons, was English. For Katchy, it was a doorway to the world of stories and knowledge. For Lani, it was just easier than her mother tongue, Czech.

As the guide droned on about medieval statues, Lani leaned over to her best friend. “You know, if I fail this test, maybe I’ll get held back and won’t have to suffer through these field trips anymore.”

“You’d miss me,” Katchy said out the corner of her mouth.

“True,” the red-haired girl admitted with a dramatic sigh. “But maybe I could convince them to let you skip with me.”

Today's field trip focused on Lani's least favorite subject: History. Even though the tour guide was speaking English, her favorite subject, it wasn't enough to make all this talk about old statues and dead kings her "cup of tea."

As the group reached the end of Charles Bridge, stopping under a grand stone arch, the guide clapped his hands to get the children's attention. "Can anyone tell me another famous Wenceslaus?" he asked, grinning like he'd just cracked the Enigma Code.

"I know, I know!" Katchy squealed, her hand shooting into the air like a firework. "Charles IV!" she declared triumphantly, barely letting the guide turn her way.

"What?" Lani asked, blinking at her friend.

"Charles IV. He was a prince and an emperor," the blonde girl said with the patient tone of someone explaining gravity to a toddler.

"Yeah, but his name was Charles, not Wenceslaus," her friend shot back.

"It wasn't always," Katchy said, her face lighting up with a know-it-all grin.

"That's right!" the guide chimed in, clearly delighted by the girl's enthusiasm.

"Wait, hold on," Lani said, throwing up her hands.

"Now I'm confused *and* bored. How can one guy have two names? Was he running from the police?"

"No, but that's a very good question," the guide said, nodding solemnly. "Charles IV was born

Wenceslaus but changed his name while living in France.”

“I thought he lived here in Prague?” Lani pressed. “He did,” the guide explained patiently. “But he also lived in many places. He had quite an extraordinary life. At just three years old, he was imprisoned by his father in Loket Castle and later in Křivoklát Castle. Then, at seven, he was sent to France to study.”

“Oh wow,” Lani replied sarcastically. “Riveting stuff. Somebody call Hollywood!”

“*Lani!*” Mrs Brošková hissed, spinning on her heels like an angry ballerina. “That is no way to speak to an adult! Apologize immediately!”

Mrs Brošková was the bane of young Lani’s existence, a fact the girl would happily share with anyone who’d listen. Tall and reedy, with hair tired in a bun like a net of cobwebs, Mrs Brošková had jagged yellow teeth and a mouth that puckered into a perfect imitation of a dog’s backside whenever she got annoyed, which was often. To Lani it seemed the woman had made it her life’s mission to torment her, though the feeling was entirely mutual.

“*Sorry,*” the girl mumbled, her tone as apologetic as a rock.

“You *will* be,” Mrs Brošková declared, her lips curling into their signature look. “*Tomorrow,* you will write 800 words about Charles IV.”

“What?” Lani yelled. “Why?”



“Because I said so, that’s why!” the teacher snapped. The woman suddenly narrowed her eyes at Katchy as she added, “And your little friend will *not* be helping you this time. Understood, Katerina?”

“Yes, Mrs Brosková,” Katchy squeaked, shrinking behind Lani like a shadow.

“When we get back to school I suggest you go straight to the Library!”

“But, *Miss*, I have floorball practice and then fencing training today!” Lani moaned.

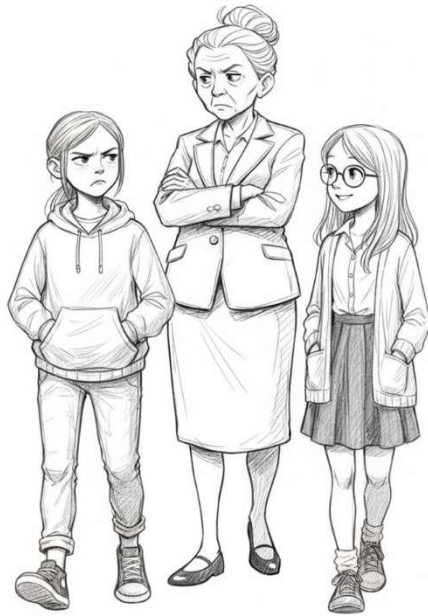
“Well, you will just have to miss them both, won’t you?” answered the girl’s teacher. “*Won’t* you?” she asked again, staring down at her defiant student. “Yes, Miss” Lani mumbled looking at her feet. “And if I hear one more sound from you it will be two thousand words!” declared the woman as they all started walking towards the tram stop to take them back to school.

*I hate History.* Lani thought to herself as she walked in silence with the rest of her class.

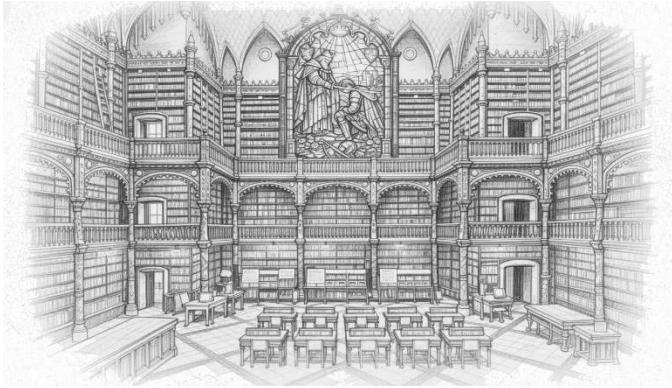
*I hate Czech History.... and French History. In fact all history sucks.* She continued thinking to herself.

“And I hate *Libraries* even more” she mumbled as she hopped on the number 12 tram that would take them all back to school.

But unknown to Lani, this was just the start of what would be a very interesting afternoon.....



# Library



St. Stephen's library was practically a labyrinth. It wasn't just old, it was ancient, creaky, and downright intimidating, like the kind of place where ghosts of long-dead headmasters might still be scolding students for not returning their books. The towering shelves stretched so high they seemed to touch the heavens, groaning under the weight of their dusty contents. If some ancient king had a forgotten wing, it might look like this. And smack in the middle of this overwhelming maze sat Lani, glaring at a book as if it had personally offended her. Across from her, Mr. Hall, the librarian, peered over his round spectacles like a disapproving owl, clutching a massive leather-bound tome. He cleared his throat dramatically. "In 1316, the royal couple christened their firstborn Wenceslas. King John..."

"This is torture!" Lani yelled, flopping dramatically onto the table.

"History is *not torture*, young lady," Mr. Hall retorted, bristling as if he'd been personally attacked. "It's vital. A tapestry of human..."

"It's boring!" the girl groaned. "And this library doesn't even have computers! What kind of place *is* this?"

"A sacred temple of learning!" the librarian declared, clutching his book like it was his firstborn.

"Computers have no soul!"

"...What?" Lani blinked.

"For one, computers have no soul." the man repeated as he put down his heavy book and started to clean his round spectacles.

"What??" the confused girl asked again.

"And they don't smell." The man continued. "Smell is the most powerful trigger to the memory there is. A certain flower, or a whiff of smoke can bring up experiences long forgotten. Books smell musty and rich. The knowledge gained from a computer has no texture, no context. It's there and then it's gone. If it's to last, then the getting of knowledge should be earned and...."

"Smelly??" Lani asked skeptically. "I think you spend way too much time in here Mr Hall"

"Mr Hall is right Lani" came a voice from behind a pile of books at the end of the table.

"Well, Katchy, I might agree that books smell, but a soul? I think you both need to get out more," the defiant girl declared.



"One day you will find a book that talks to you, young lady, and then you will know exactly what I mean." the Librarian stated as he picked up his tome again.

"Now where were we? Ah yes King John....." the man continued.

"Lani Eliska Cloud!"

Mrs Brosková , loomed in the doorway, arms crossed and an expression that could turn milk sour.

“Why,” she hissed, “are you not writing your essay?”

“I was just..”



“Katerina!” Mrs Brosková snapped at the blonde head trying to hide behind a stack of books.

“Yes, Miss?”

Katchy squeaked.

“Out! Now!”

“Yes Miss!”

the girl said

again, as she scrambled to her feet, grabbed a book, and bolted.

“*Mr. Hall?*” Mrs Brosková said turning and fixing the librarian with a glare.

“Y...Yes, Mrs Brosková?” he stammered, retreating toward his office. “I was just leaving for lunch!”

With the library now empty the woman turned her attention back to Lani. “*You*. Homework. No distractions.”

With that, the woman swept out, slamming the heavy doors behind her.

The red-haired girl folded her arms and stared at the book in front of her, the words swimming on the page.

“Do this, Lani. Do that, Lani. Blah, blah, blah,” the girl muttered to herself, trying to focus on the text in front of her.

“How am I supposed to learn anything when it’s sooo boring?”

After what felt like hours, though it had only been a few minutes, she groaned and threw her pen down in defeat.

Her head grew heavy, her thoughts drifting from the dull page until, eventually, she slumped over the table and fell into a restless sleep.



But then...

Scratch.

“Lani.”

Her eyes snapped open. The library, so warm and familiar moments before, now felt wrong. Heavier.

Darker. As though the walls themselves were pressing in.

A whisper slipped through the silence.

“Find the book. Find the sword.”

Lani sat up, her pulse quickening. “Katchy?” she called, her voice trembling slightly.

No answer.

The sound came again, soft and dry, like paper crumbling to dust. It wasn't coming from the main room, but from somewhere deeper within the shelves.

Her instincts told her to stay put. Her curiosity told her otherwise.

Against her better judgement, she stood. Her chair scraped loudly against the floor, and she flinched.

The noise echoed through the empty space, far louder than it should have been.

“Hello?” she called, stepping towards the towering bookshelves.

No reply.

As she entered the maze of book shelves, the air grew colder. Her footsteps, once muffled on the worn carpet, now seemed to amplify, bouncing back at her from unseen corners.

The whispers grew louder, indistinct and unsettling, as if the tomes themselves were murmuring secrets she wasn't meant to hear. The rows of shelves stretched endlessly, their heights so dizzying she couldn't see the tops.



She turned a corner. The whispers started again, over and over.

“Find the book. Find the sword”

She turned another corner.

Then another.

And another.

Each turn seemed to lead her further from the main room. The library felt alive, shifting and twisting around her.

“This is fine,” Lani whispered, her voice barely above a breath. “Totally fine.”

A book fell.

The sharp sound shattered the oppressive quiet, making her yelp. She turned quickly, scanning the shadows. The book lay open on the ground, its pages fluttering as though moved by invisible hands.

She took a shaky step back, but her foot caught the edge of a carpet. She stumbled, nearly falling, and grabbed a shelf for support. Her fingers brushed something cold and metallic, a decorative bookend shaped like a snarling two tailed lion. It wasn't there a moment ago.

“What is going on?” she asked herself, in a shaky voice.

The whispers she had heard moments before suddenly grew louder. Her feet moved almost on their own, compelled by some unseen force.

She passed through sections she didn't even know existed. Biology shelves loomed with faded covers of grotesque creatures and plants that seemed to

writhe on the page. The Math section felt hostile, its massive tomes filled with symbols that looked like spells instead of equations.

The whispers gradually turned into faint words, just out of reach, as if the library itself was trying to tell her something. The lights flickered, dimming with every step.

She turned down a corridor and found herself face-to-face with a towering shelf covered in cobwebs. It shouldn't have been there, she knew. The books here were ancient, their spines cracked and titles unreadable.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the aisle, carrying the scent of something old and musty, like the breath of the building itself. It pushed her forward.

"Nope, nope, nope," she muttered, her legs were trembling, but somehow kept walking.

The corridors narrowed, the shelves closed in, until she had to sidestep to squeeze through. The walls seemed to pulse, breathing in rhythm with her own panicked heart.

Then she saw it.

A faint glow spilled from an opening ahead, flickering like candlelight. Lani stumbled into the room, her breath catching.

It was a small, square room, and suffocatingly quiet. The shelves here were different, more like an old study than a library. Each book was bound in materials that didn't look entirely... natural. Some shimmered, others seemed to move subtly, like they were breathing.



And in the center of the room, on a pedestal that seemed to rise from the floor itself, lay *the book*. Without any doubt Lani knew it was this that was calling to her.

It was enormous, its cover bound in a brown and gold leather that glinted faintly in the flickering light. A round silver symbol in its center glowed softly, depicting two figures: one kneeling before the other.

The whispers stopped, replaced now with silence that was somehow worse, thick and pressing. Lani stepped forward, her hands trembling. She didn't want to touch the book, but her body moved as if it wasn't her own.

Her fingers brushed the cover.

The symbol flared to life. A blinding light filled the room, and the air buzzed with energy.

A voice echoed in her head, deep, commanding, and speaking a language she couldn't understand.

Then, louder, clearer:

**“They will understand much and be understood by many.”**

The room exploded with light. Lani screamed, shielding her eyes as the voice boomed in her ears.

“Find the sword!”

And then..

*Darkness.*