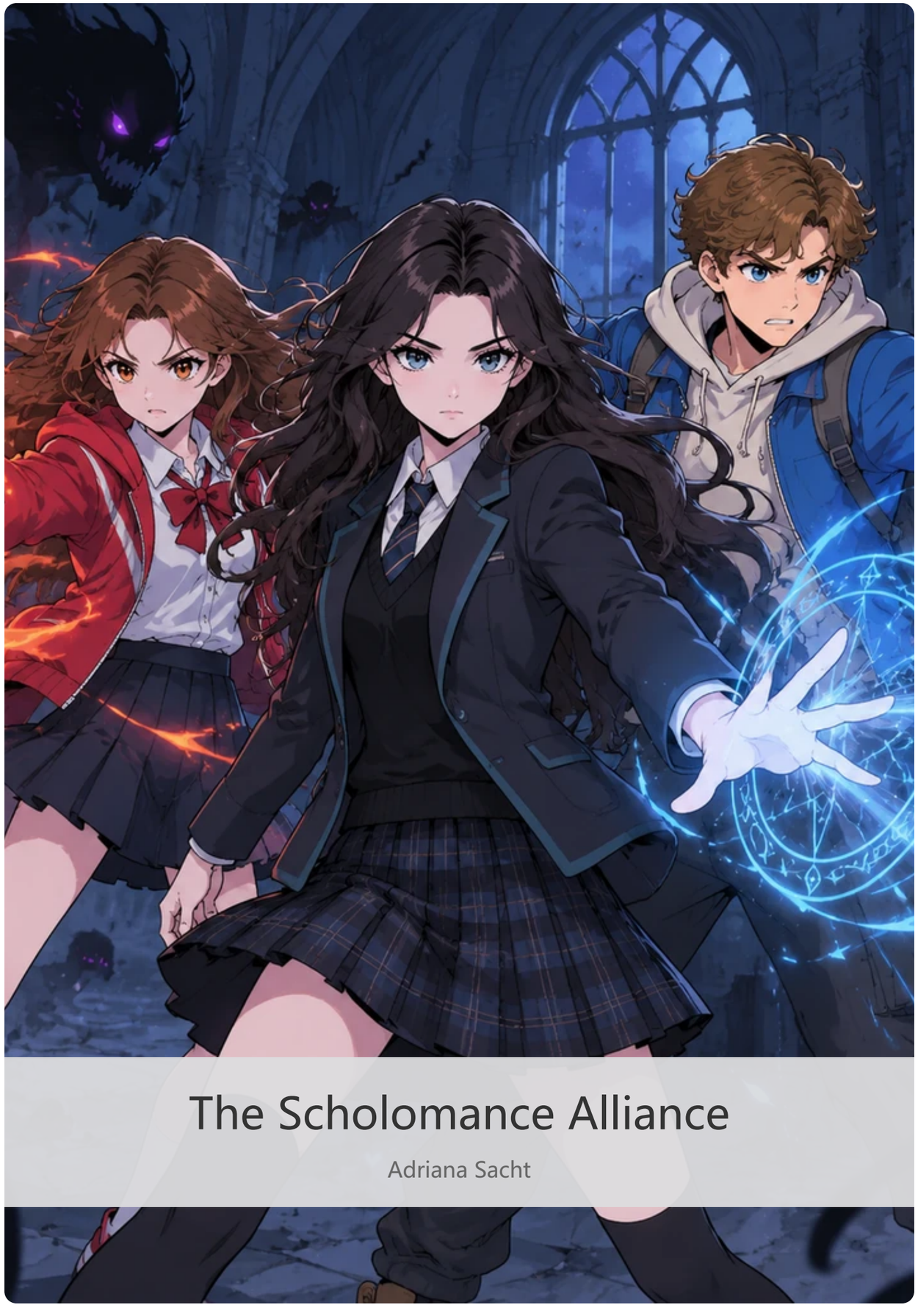


The Scholomance Alliance

Adriana Sacht



The Scholomance is a place designed to kill you in inventive ways, but surviving it is slightly easier when you have actual friends. Elara is one of the few people I can tolerate, a stunningly pale girl from Massachusetts with warm brown hair and eyes that constantly crackle with raw elemental energy. Her mastery over fire, wind, and earth makes her a formidable ally, though she is rarely seen without her inseparable shadow. That shadow is Newt, a boy straight out of the London Enclave who carries himself with quiet confidence rather than snobbish entitlement.



Newt's affinity is defensive shield spells, which fits his aggressively protective nature like a glove. He literally wraps Elara in invisible, shimmering barriers whenever maleficaria so much as twitch in the shadows of the hallway. Dating in this hellish boarding school is essentially a high-stakes alliance where couples share resources, mana, and survival strategies. Rumor has it that either Elara or Newt packed up their meager belongings and completely moved into the other's room, defying school norms just to be closer. They share everything, from mana reserves to lethal gossip about which senior is planning to feed us to a maw-mouth.



Our rooms are scattered across the shifting masonry of the school like rotting teeth in a skull, and my own door has just been completely obliterated by a particularly aggressive souleater. Standing in the ash of my ruined entryway, I realize I need to brave the cafeteria and track down someone brave or foolish enough to accompany me on a supply run. I immediately think of Elara and Newt, knowing their combined elemental and defensive prowess would keep any lingering monsters at bay. As I march down the hallway toward their shared quarters, I mentally rehearse how to ask them without sounding desperate.



The corridors are thick with the usual ambient dread and the stench of burnt sulfur, but I spot the familiar figures of Elara and Newt standing near the glowing iron sconces. Elara is laughing softly at something Newt whispered, her brown eyes catching the dim, flickering torchlight in a way that almost makes you forget we are trapped in a giant meat-grinder. Newt has one hand resting casually on the small of her back while his other hand subtly twitches, already casting a preemptive translucent ward around them both. They look like an ordinary couple taking a stroll, except the ground beneath their boots is actively trying to digest stray students.



As I approach them, I notice the subtle shimmer of a heavy-duty shield spell deflecting a stray, aggressive spark from a passing elemental trap in the wall. Newt's eyes lock onto me instantly, narrowing with habitual suspicion before he recognizes my scowl. Elara breaks into a warm, welcoming smile, her pale face lighting up as she steps slightly out of Newt's immediate defensive orbit. I open my mouth to explain my housing crisis and ask if they fancy a trip to the supply shops before the next monster spawn wave.



Before a single syllable can escape my lips, a familiar, irritatingly cheerful voice cuts through the ambient noise of the corridor. Orion Lake materializes out of nowhere like a golden retriever that wandered into a slaughterhouse, flashing his impossibly heroic grin. He immediately assumes I am standing here plotting my daily survival and announces loudly that he is coming with me to the shops. I feel a sharp twitch in my left eyelid as my carefully laid plans to hang out with normal, non-homicidal-hero people go up in smoke. Orion is a walking maleficaria magnet, and the last thing I need is a hundred ravenous maw-mouths tracking his stupid hero aura.



Elara raises an amused eyebrow, her fingers dancing with a tiny, harmless wisp of blue flame that she uses to inspect Orion's chaotic presence. Newt doesn't look amused at all, his shield spell instantly flaring up a defensive notch as he regards Orion like a particularly toxic hazard. I glare daggers at Orion, wishing I had enough dark mana to blast him through the nearest wall into the void. Orion completely ignores our collective hostility, cheerfully insisting that my door being destroyed is basically an emergency requiring his elite monster-slaying services.



Elara senses my bubbling homicidal rage and gently places a hand on Newt's arm to keep him from hexing Orion on the spot. She offers me a sympathetic, knowing look that says she completely understands why I look like I want to throttle the golden boy. Newt lowers his shield just enough to stop humming with combat readiness, though his eyes remain locked on Orion's broad shoulders with deep distrust. Even without asking them to tag along, I feel a sudden surge of gratitude for having friends who won't let me get eaten by a library-monster alone.



Since Orion has stubbornly appointed himself my bodyguard for the shopping trip, Elara and Newt decide to tag along anyway to make sure we don't accidentally walk into a nest of ghouls. We set off down the shifting stairwells as a mismatched quartet of doom, with Orion leading the charge and talking way too loudly. Elara walks close to Newt, her elemental magic humming softly in resonance with the ambient mana of the school walls. I trail slightly behind them, clutching my ruined door latch like a weapon and cursing the day I was born.



Navigating the Scholomance is a nightmare, but walking alongside people who actually care whether you live or die makes the crushing darkness a little more bearable. Orion continues to brag about his kill count while Newt mutters dry, sarcastic under-the-breath commentary that makes Elara giggle quietly. I might be surrounded by deadly traps and a school full of bloodthirsty peers, but for right now, we have an alliance that just might survive this place. And if Orion gets in the way, well, Elara's fire and Newt's shield will make disposing of the evidence remarkably easy.