



BEYOND
— THE —
AFTER

PRINCESS LILLIAN

C.M. Healy

Copyright © 2010

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Names: Healy, C. M.

Title:

Beyond the after. Princess Lillian / C.M. Healy.

Other Titles: Princess Lillian

Description: [Dallas, Texas] : Mercury West
Publishing, LLC, [2015] | Interest age level:
010-020. | Summary: Princess Lillian is the
beautiful daughter of Snow White and Prince
Charming. She has led a fairly uneventful life
until a faction of rogue Drodic citizens threaten
the lives of the people of the Valanti Kingdom,
including its royal family--especially Lillian.
As Lillian tries to discover who is targeting her,
she must rely on the help of old friends and new,
thus intertwining the lives of three famous
queens and their eldest daughters in a way they
couldn't have possibly imagined.

Identifiers: ISBN 9781948577007 (paperback) | ISBN
9781948577014 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Princesses--Juvenile fiction. |
Battles--Juvenile fiction. | Friendship--Juvenile
fiction. | Queens--Juvenile fiction. | Imaginary
places--Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Princesses--
Fiction. | Battles--Fiction. | Friendship--
Fiction. | Kings, queens, rulers, etc.--Fiction.
| Imaginary places--Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy
fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H4315 Bel 2015 | DDC
[Fic]--dc23

Second Edition © 2020

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

By C.M. Healy

Copyright 2010 C.M. Healy

ISBN 978-1948577014

Mercury West Publishing, LLC; License Notes

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and copyright owner. Book is available for ebook purchase at any ebook retailer.

*For my beautiful wife, my princess, and my
happily ever after.*

Contents

Acknowledgments
xi

Azshura Map
xii

Preface – 1

Prologue – 3

CHAPTERS

One
Party Crashers – 11

Two
Resurgence - 17

Three
Ghost in the Woods – 22

Four
A Friend? – 28

Five
A Date – 34

Six
Girlfriends – 40

Seven
A Sleepless Night – 46

Eight
Lessons – 51

Nine
Figures in the Forest – 57

Ten
Motherly Advice – 64

Eleven
A Trip to Town – 70

Twelve
Target Practice – 77

Thirteen
Closer – 86

Fourteen
Closer Still – 92

Fifteen
Anticipation – 100

Sixteen
Misdirection – 106

Seventeen
Kidnapped – 114

Eighteen
Midnight Rendezvous – 124

Nineteen
Grounded – 135

Twenty
Vendetta – 141

Twenty-one
A Friendly Informant – 146

Twenty-two
Secrets Discovered – 152

Twenty-three
Past Life – 160

Twenty-four
The Talk – 169

Twenty-five
An Old Rival – 179

Twenty-six
Dinner Party - 186

Twenty-seven
The Escape – 194

Twenty-eight
Into the Lion's Den – 204

Twenty-nine
My Hero? – 212

Thirty
Growing Up – 220

Thirty-one
A New Suitor – 229

Thirty-two
Two's Company; Four's a Crowd – 237

Thirty-three
A Couple's Quarrel – 246

Thirty-four
A Long Farewell – 255

Thirty-five
A Traitor in the Midst – 264

Thirty-six
The Game – 275

Thirty-seven
Preparations – 284

Thirty-eight
Betrayal – 292

Thirty-nine
End Game – 303

Family Tree & Characters
318

Note from C.M. Healy
319

Other Books by C.M. Healy
320

About C.M. Healy
321

Acknowledgements

The journey of writing my first novel has been long and arduous. One that I couldn't possibly have done alone, and would be amiss if I did not thank a few people who helped me along the way.

Foremost, my parents and teachers throughout my life, who encouraged my creativity and challenged me to be great. Dave Yackuboskey, my archery expert, who made sure my terms and description of the sport were correct. My "lunch lady" helpers, who gave me invaluable insight into the young teenage mind, and what really happens at sleepovers. A special thanks to Paul Boyd and A.M.H. who, actually took the time to read the whole thing and give me constructive feedback. My proofreaders Brooke Fugitt and Tiffany Chan who I could not pay enough for their expertise in making this book look and sound professional.

And of course my partner in crime, my wife Sondra, who was encouraging me every step of the way, staying up multiple late nights, and being my sounding board throughout this endeavor. You truly are my light and I can't wait for our next adventure together. I love you. I know we'll live happily ever after.

Azshura







BEYOND
— THE —
AFTER

PRINCESS LILLIAN

Preface

The battle between good and evil is a tale that's as old as the universe itself. Both have always existed, coexisted if you will, but they are not always equal. In truth, equality between the two is rarely the case. Evil does have its moments, but good has always seemed to have an upper hand. Is it the edge of sacrifice versus selfishness? Loyalty opposed to treachery? Love over hate? Whatever the mysterious power, more often than not, good wins, and peace is established for a period of time. It might be a year. It might be a hundred years. However, when one evil is vanquished, another will arise, attempting to shroud the land in darkness again, for that is the natural order of things. It is a delicate shift of momentum between these two, much like the swinging of a pendulum. One can never be sure what situations will spawn sinfulness or what hardships will harbor heroics. And one can never be sure what the outcome will be. But one thing is for sure, it is during this fluctuation of powers, in which the greatest stories ever told take place.

Prologue

And they lived happily ever after. The End.

The End?

Such a strange beginning for a tale. Nevertheless, the ideal one for ours because it reminds us of where things left off. Because The End is never really the end. What The End means is that the current story being told has come to a relative finish. All the important events have been told, all the characters' problems have been resolved, and life continues on for these heroes and heroines as they live out their daily lives without much interruption. But as we all know, life rarely continues without interruption. Important events occur that must be told. The End really represents quite the opposite. The End indicates the beginning of a new tale. So, really, The End should be The End..., especially in this story, because for three very famous tales, there was more. There was the beginning of a new tale that followed the "happily ever after," the tale beyond the after, and that is exactly where this story begins.

Prologue I: History

Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora (better known as Sleeping Beauty) all married their princes and became queens of their kingdoms. This is well known. But what is less well known is that their tales happened at the same time. During that time, evil ruled two of the five magic kingdoms on the continent of Azshura and was attempting to take over the remaining three.

The southeastern portion of Azshura at that time was made up of two kingdoms in the process of becoming one. The first kingdom was ruled by King Stefan and Queen Leah, who arranged the marriage of their newly born daughter, Aurora, to King Hubert's son, Prince Phillip, to unite the two kingdoms. The rest of the story you know: evil sorceress, curse of eternal slumber, prince kills sorceress, and they lived happily ever after, reigning over the newly formed kingdom of Caldera.

Just to the west was the kingdom of Tapera, where Cinderella resided. Here, evil was in the works through her wicked stepmother. Fortunately, good had a strong hold in this kingdom by way of the

king and, of course, the fairy godmother. That story I'm sure you know as well. The infamous glass slipper and Cinderella's marriage to King Louis Charming.

The next is the kingdom of Valanti, home to Snow White. Here, the evil witch queen (and stepmother to Snow White) ruled. The queen did not meddle too much in her people's affairs because the kingdom was rich in diamond mines, and as long as those diamonds supplied her with her every desire, life was at least livable. There was once, however, a dry spell when the queen turned citizens into pigs every day until a fortunate group of dwarves discovered a vast mine of infinite wealth. It was this discovery that actually made the queen happy enough to marry Snow White's father. Unfortunately, she killed her husband shortly after, only to use Snow White's tears for a potion of eternal youth (a practice she utilized regularly by inflicting different methods of cruelty upon Snow White). Ironically, the queen's vanity was her ultimate downfall, for it was prophesied that someday there would be one who would surpass the queen's beauty and be her demise. Snow White was such a plain child in youth that the queen dismissed her entirely until it was, of course, too late, and Snow White had blossomed into a beautiful young lady. Fairest in the land, if you recall. So, the queen had Snow White killed, or so she thought.

I'm sure you remember the rest of the tale, but it is important to focus on a small part. The part in which the hunter was supposed to kill Snow White but did not.

Everyone has a sense of good and evil. And everyone has a choice of which one to follow. But just because someone decides to follow one over the other does not mean that the other is completely lost. In other words, champions of good are quite capable, in a moment of despair or weakness, of making an evil choice. Just the same, there are villains of malicious intent, who can, in one instant, choose the path of righteousness and change the history of what could have been.

So it was with the Hunter. He was a man who, for most of his life, had chosen evil. He was the queen's right-hand man and the executioner of Snow White's father. But on that day in the forest, with his axe high above his head ready to end Snow White's life, he paused. No one can say for sure why he hesitated. Some believe it could have been Snow White's beauty. Others believe it was because

she reminded him of his own daughter he had lost long ago. Either of these is quite possible, but the simple truth is on that day, the hunter chose good. No magic. No potion. Just a simple man, making a simple choice to do what was right, forever altering the events that followed.

Naturally, he was tortured without mercy by the queen for his insubordination. Yet the deed had been done, and the queen was eventually destroyed. An interesting part of this story you may not know, however, is that the prince who gave Snow White the famous kiss, Prince Harry Charming, is actually King Louis's younger brother. He was on a secret mission to kill the queen when he was love struck by Snow White's beauty.

The last of the once five magical kingdoms was Drod. Drod was ruled by Zoldaine, the evil king and sorcerer, older brother to both the late wicked queen of Valanti and the late sorceress of Caldera. Here, the land had not seen the rays of the sun for almost two hundred years. Evil had a strong hold on the land and its people. Despite what prince or knight attempted to defeat this evil, it would not relinquish its controlling grip. It is this kingdom you have not heard of because no one wants to tell or listen to a tale where evil triumphed and the handsome hero perished under its talons. Zoldaine ruled his kingdom with a twisted iron fist. He tormented his people in any way you could think of. Starvation, poverty, drought, flood. All to entertain his sick and demented mind. Why didn't the people just leave, you ask? Because Zoldaine had a wall built around the entire kingdom and enchanted it by a very ancient dark magic, killing instantly whomever should touch it. This enchantment made entering the kingdom very difficult as well. Difficult but not impossible.

Prologue II: A Change of Heart

It was shortly after the kisses and slipper that each newlywed king and queen did what any king and queen would do—start a family. Cinderella was first with her son Marcus, followed closely by Aurora with her son Jaccob, and then Snow White with Lillian. A few years later, Aurora gave birth to Avery, and Cinderella bore Olivia. Several years after that, Snow White had Andrew, and

Aurora had Layla, who was a much-needed blessing, as you'll see later.

It was a few months after Andrew was born when Zoldaine made his first and only attack on the three kingdoms. He was hell-bent on controlling the entire continent of Azshura, and the passing of his sisters motivated his poisoned heart even more. Revenge is a potent toxin, capable of not only amplifying a nefarious presence but also corrupting some of the most gallant heroes. Nothing good ever comes from revenge. Nothing.

So, with his twisted desire to rule Azshura and revenge set deep in his soul, Zoldaine led the first offensive attack against the Valanti Kingdom. Now, Zoldaine was no fool. There was a reason he had held his kingdom for the last hundred years. He knew the only thing more powerful than magic was information. Six months prior to the birth of Andrew, Zoldaine had sent out an informant to gather as much information on the three kingdoms as he could. Weapons, soldiers, magical beings, supplies, and most importantly, the royal families. The informant had been hideously deformed by Zoldaine but was still loyal to his master, if only for a desired lack of future torment. Zoldaine had even promised amnesty for him and his family. Zoldaine provided safe passage from Drod, and the informant began his assignment. In his deformed state, he was expecting those gawking stares and whispers just out of ears' reach. What he was not expecting was the lack of ridicule and the generosity of the people. The three kingdoms under the rule of good reacted in a way the informant was not used to. Even though he had no coin for food or residence, the kind citizens of all kingdoms offered him a warm meal and a soft bed. Now, the kingdoms were not without their problems or criminals—as I said before, good and evil coexist, it's only a matter of choice. But when one is almost always surrounded by goodness, it is hard not to follow suit.

So it was with the informant.

Maybe it was the smile from that pretty girl in the village. Maybe it was when that stranger had helped him up after he had fallen in the mud. Maybe it was the family that had shared their last piece of bread with a deformed stranger. For whatever reason, when the informant got back to Drod, he made a choice. He chose the path of good. He chose to mislead his master. The informant knew about the birth of Andrew. And he knew the prince's birth would entail a

royal coronation, which would require the audience of the other kings and queens, their royal guards, and most of the magical creatures of Azshura. Once the date was set, the informant went back to his master.

When Zoldaine invaded Valanti, he quickly realized the betrayal of the informant, but it was too late. The battle was quick, and Zoldaine was forced to retreat to avoid losing all of his forces as well as his own life. It was then that the kings and queens realized they could not allow this threat to fester any longer. This brazen attempt by Zoldaine while they were surrounded by loved ones put an urgency in their hearts. They had always discussed plans to overthrow Zoldaine and release his people, but now he had given them an opportunity they could not overlook. His forces had been cut in half, if not more, and Zoldaine himself was weakened by his encounter with the faeries. The rulers knew following him to Drod increased the risk, as he would begin to regain his strength, but it was worth the ultimate price if it meant a life of freedom for their families and kingdoms.

Prologue III: The Price of Victory

The kings quickly sent for all available knights to assemble in the Valanti Kingdom. Everything was prepared within a few days of Zoldaine's attack. Sir Aaron from Caldera led the band of troops. He had done some reconnaissance in Drod for a few months after the marriage of King Phillip and Queen Aurora to ascertain Zoldaine's power and if it was possible to rid Azshura of this evil once and for all. He didn't advise the attack then, but he did manage to map out most of Drod, including the location of Zoldaine's castle.

There was a small discussion of who was to go and who was to stay. Good-byes were said. Kisses were given. The soldiers and kings mounted up and waved farewell one last time before heading out on their quest.

The trek to the wall wasn't a long one, but the solemn mood of their purpose still took its toll on the crusaders. Too soon for some, they finally reached their destination. The faeries did their part and cleared the wall from any curses or wards. Next, the dwarves used

their expertise of the black powder to clear a path through the wall for the troops.

Word spread quickly throughout Drod that they were there. Depending on who was doing the talking, the kings were either saviors or sinners.

Some fought, loyal to death.

Some left, eager to flee.

Some stayed, afraid to leave.

Now, I could go into the details of how the battle went. The close calls, mighty blows, the near misses. But that is a tale for another time. What concerns us at present is the outcome. Zoldaine was defeated, but not without inflicting a mortal wound of his own. King Phillip was struck by Zoldaine's enchanted sword. The wound was devastating in its own right, but it was also infected with the poison of dark magic. Try as they might, the faeries could not repair the injury, and King Phillip lay slowly dying after the battle's end. They finally resolved to put the king into a magical sleep, much like his wife had been in years before. This would at least preserve him until a cure could be found—if one existed.

News of Zoldaine's defeat spread quickly. Most of Drod's citizens left with what they could carry, many of them taking pieces of the wall as their own personal victory, and took up residence in one of the other three kingdoms.

Moods were cheerful but somber back in Valanti as Queen Aurora dealt with the news of her husband. The faeries assured her they would not rest until they found a cure. The dwarves offered to build a protective enclosure from diamond so no harm would come to the king before that time. King Louis and King Harry told her their kingdoms' resources were at her disposal as well.

She was very grateful for all the support. She smiled and accepted consoling hugs. She was hopeful on the outside, but dying on the inside. She had not wanted to burden her husband before going into battle, but she had needed to tell him something. Zoldaine's attack had interrupted her opportunity, but it did not change the fact that she was pregnant. And the thought of their new child, not to mention Jaccob and Avery, growing up without a father saddened her deeply.

But unfortunately, nothing could be done about the past. She and the rest of the inhabitants of Azshura had to push forward and hope that brighter days lay ahead in the years to come.

CHAPTER 1: Party Crashers

May 14

Before the sun had kissed the horizon, the celebration was in full swing, which was understandable seeing as half the Valanti Kingdom was in attendance. It was Princess Lillian's eighteenth birthday. The party was more of an informal celebration with the entire kingdom invited to give the princess their well wishes. Her actual birthday had been a few days ago, when they had held her official coming-of-age coronation to ensure that if something should happen to her parents, Fae forbid, she would become queen. A lot to take in for an eighteen-year-old, even though she'd been preparing for this moment since birth. It also meant her dating life was going to become more serious as well, which she was not too sure about.

Not only was the coronation an important rite of passage but also a time to join the royal families together, which was becoming hard to find time to do, now that the children were getting older. Royal guests included Queen Aurora, her children Avery and Layla, along with Queen Cinderella and King Louis with their daughter, Olivia. Both Marcus and Jaccob were absent. Not because they were too old for such things—quite the opposite. They had been away now for almost a year on an important quest searching for a cure for Jaccob's father, King Phillip. The princes had kept some correspondence and last said they had a promising lead on a reclusive wizard named Merlin on the continent of Britania who might be of assistance. In the meantime, they sent their best wishes to Lillian on her important day.

The royal party was a sight to behold. Carriages outlined in gold and decorated with the most luxurious fabrics were pulled by

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

beautiful white horses down a sweeping drive that circled a great fountain at the end. Smiling valets opened doors and helped guests down. Stairs led to the fantastic double doors with the kingdom's great seal placed proudly in the center. These doors were slowly opened by doormen who bowed and invited all into the festivities. A symphony of sounds from musicians, games, laughing, and joking greeted the guests' ears. The great hall was a dizzying display of activity. Tricksters, jugglers, acrobats, dancers, magicians, people, and food. Oh, the tables of food! Aromas of the most succulent delicacies flowed over the crowd like a gentle wave. Exotic fruits from all over the continent. Roasted pork, chicken, and smoked salmon. Pastries, chocolates, and the sweetest sweets to tempt the most diligent wills. A different bottle of wine to complement each type of cheese. Decorations garnished the hall and elaborate banners trimmed in gold stitching hung from every corner. Streamers flowed from column to column, accenting the glorious colors that adorned the hall. And, of course, the occasional confetti popper was heard from the children who were weaving in and out of the crowd. Laughs spilled out around the silly games being played like "Don't Sit on the Cake" or "Pick the Basket." An older group of children cheered on two others to see who could handle their Dragonfire Drops, a sweet yet intense candy that would enable a brave soul (if his tongue could last) to breathe a burst of fire from its liquid elixir encased inside.

Grayson, the resident wizard, had even managed to manifest a dazzling light show with his crackling stars that was nothing short of spectacular.

A good time was had by all until...

"Andrew!" Lillian chased her little brother with the ferocity that only an older sister could. However, Andrew was quick on his feet and made his way to his mother, Snow White, before suffering Lillian's wrath.

"Mom, help me, she's going to twist my ear off!" Andrew cried as he hid behind the queen.

"Come here, you little troll," Lillian fumed.

"I didn't do it, Mom, I swear."

"He's lying, Mom. This is the third time he's put cream in my hair, which now looks like a swamp rat," she explained as she lunged for Andrew.

Party Crashers

“No, I didn’t. It was Ethan this time!”

Snow White looked down at her son. “This time?” It was hard to hear the disdain in her voice as heavenly as it was, but her look conveyed the meaning perfectly.

Andrew realized he had unintentionally incriminated himself. “I mean every time. This was the first time, I mean. It’s all Ethan’s fault.” Andrew was quickly failing at any plausible explanation to exonerate himself and was convicting his best friend at the same time. Usually, Andrew and Ethan romped around with Marcus and Jaccob during these engagements, which kept the younger boys out of trouble—mostly. But in the older boys’ absence, Andrew and Ethan had become quite the pests as of late. Lillian had taken the brunt of their practical jokes, unfortunately, and she was ready to tear his ears off.

“Lillian, calm down, sweetie.”

“But Mom, he...”

“I said I will handle this,” Snow White reassured her.

“Go upstairs and have Alondra help fix your hair. It will be fine.”

Lillian gave one last disgusted look at her brother hiding behind the queen and turned to go upstairs. She hurried past her father, King Harry, who was conversing with his brother, King Louis, and his wife, Queen Cinderella, rulers of the Tapera Kingdom. King Harry almost asked Lillian what was wrong but thought better of it when he saw her face. He had seen that look before and knew Andrew was up to no good. The king caught the eye of his wife, who motioned to him she had things under control.

Lillian walked up the winding staircase, leaving the festivities of her birthday behind. *Some birthday.* She quickly walked to her room on the second floor and sat down on her bed almost in tears. It was a conflicting scene to see someone so beautiful in such a luxurious room so upset. Alondra entered shortly after, and Lillian wiped her eyes.

“Pardon, m’lady,” Alondra apologized, “but your mom said you required my assistance?”

“Yes, yes.” Lillian waved her in. “It’s okay, Alondra, come in.” Alondra walked over and joined Lillian on the bed. “I’m sorry, I’m just upset.”

“About Andrew, m’lady?”

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

“Oh, to be certain, I’m angry with him, but this isn’t about him. He just happened to be the raindrop that caused the flood. I just...I don’t know. It’s nothing—forget it. Let’s just go back to the party. I am the guest of honor after all.”

“Not before we get you looking like it. Now, let’s see what that ornery brother of yours has done this time.”

They walked over to the vanity, and Alondra did her best to remove the sticky mess from Lillian’s hair. Lillian liked Alondra. She had been the maidservant to the princess since her birth. Alondra was someone Lillian respected and could talk to without getting a lecture about her duties as a princess. The older woman entertained Lillian with stories that always seemed to help Lillian through her difficult times.

“It’s a boy, isn’t it, Miss Lillian?” Alondra asked as she combed out some tangles.

“What? Of course not, it’s just...” Lillian let out a sigh. “You always seem to know.”

“It’s Richard Burkhardt, isn’t it? The merchant’s son? The one who’s been courting you for, what now, a month?”

“Six weeks,” Lillian interjected.

“Six weeks. What has he done to get you so upset? He seems like a nice enough young man, and he sure is handsome.”

“Alondra?” Lillian was surprised her maidservant took notice of such things after being married for so long.

“Sweetie, I may be married, but there’s no harm in lookin’.”

Lillian sighed. “He is nice. He treats me like a true gentleman would. Not like Reginald, who was only after my crown and the royalty perks. Can you believe he had the audacity to ask me if I would ask *my dad* if we could use the royal cottage to throw a party for his friends? He even wanted to take the royal carriage. What a jerk.”

“Aye, I didn’t see you shedding any tears over that one, handsome or not.”

“I know. And Richard is very attractive, but...”

“What, sweetie?”

Lillian turned to face her friend. “It’s just that... I don’t feel what I think I should be feeling. He’s nice. He’s smart. He’s funny. He’s good-looking. He comes from a good and respected family.

Party Crashers

He's everything a girl should want, but I just get this sense like we're missing something."

"Why do you think that is?"

Lillian pointed to a portrait of her family hanging over the hearth. "My parents. They are so happy with each other. And the way it all came together almost seems magical. Like some greater force pulled them together because they were made for each other. And sure, Richard makes me happy, but I don't know if I'm happy *with* him. Is any of this making sense? I just want what they have. A prince rescuing a princess, sweeping me off my feet, love's first kiss, the happily ever after. I mean, I'm a princess. Isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

Alondra took a deep breath. "Sweetie, every girl wants and deserves those things, princess or not. A magical relationship isn't just reserved for those of royalty. Take my husband and I, for example. Well before he was to become your father's head advisor, he worked in the stables. I had just been hired as your maidservant and had headed down to get some fresh milk for you. When I walked in, no one was there. I waited for a couple of minutes and had turned to leave when I walked Henry, with his shirt off no less. My heart skipped a beat, and I even forgot to breathe for a second, not to mention why I had come down there in the first place."

Lillian smiled.

"But I somehow managed to get out 'Milk.' He smiled that gorgeous smile of his and turned to help me get some. Unfortunately for him, he had forgotten where he had set some buckets and tripped over them, falling headfirst into a big pile of manure."

"No way!" Lillian said, wide-eyed.

Alondra held up her hand. "Truth to the faeries. So, not exactly your first-kiss-under-the-glass-lid kind of impression." Alondra winked. "I later heard from Elise in the kitchen that Henry had been just as flustered as I was. Apparently, the sun was coming in from a hole overhead 'illuminating me with a ray of heavenly beauty,' as he put it. After two weeks of shy exchanges of smiles and glances, he finally asked if he could court me. When I said yes, it gave him the confidence to talk to your father about some ideas he had, ultimately becoming your father's right-hand man. Eighteen years later, here we are, still as happy as ever. Although there is always the inside joke of him being full of it after his plunge."

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

Both women laughed at this thought.

“But you know what?” said Alondra.

Lillian gave her an inquisitive look.

“My heart still skips a beat whenever Henry enters the room.”

Alondra blushed at the thought of it. “But not everyone’s story is like that, sweetie. Most people go months before they get that feeling. Even I wasn’t totally convinced about Henry until after we had been seeing each other for about six months. So, I guess my point is, it doesn’t matter who it’s with or what the circumstances are, but if you’re with the right person, you’ll just kind of know.”

Lillian smiled.

“And however you meet, *that* will be *your* fairy tale. Your ‘happily ever after’.”

“Thanks, Alondra, I really...”

BOOM!

Lillian’s statement was cut short as a thunderous blast from downstairs rocked the room.

CHAPTER 2: Resurgence

Items on her vanity shifted as the concussion was enough to shake several bottles and dislodge dust from the ceiling. Lillian immediately jumped up and raced to the door with Alondra close behind. The hallway was thick with smoke, but surprisingly the ladies didn't choke as they breathed it in. The party was in pandemonium as the great hall below echoed with screams, cries, and yells. Lillian and Alondra cautiously made their way downstairs, feeling along the wall for the banister. Then suddenly, the "smoke" was whisked away like it was being sucked up by a giant wind spinner. But instead of disappearing, it coalesced to form a message of two horrifying words, *Zoldaine Lives!*

Lillian raced down the stairs. She used the height advantage of the stairs to locate her dad in the hysterical crowd, who was now exiting the great hall through any door they could find.

"Dad!" Lillian shouted over the noise. "Dad!"

"Lillian!" King Harry pushed his way through the crowd toward the stairs. He met her three stairs from the bottom and embraced his daughter tightly. "Oh, Lily Pad, thank the Fae, you're okay."

Normally the king's use of her nickname from childhood would put a smile on her face. But only concern lingered there now.

"What happened? What was that?" Lillian asked, looking over her shoulder. Most of the guests were either outside or calming down, now realizing the threat was empty.

"It appears another rogue Dainian snuck into the party and released a shock bomb. Harmless really but still gets the job done. Panic and chaos."

"How did a Rogue get in here?" Lillian was stunned.

"That's what I plan to find out." The king turned and shouted for his advisor "Henry!"

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

A shorter stocky man raised his hand and weaved his way through the remaining guests. “Right here, Sire.”

“Henry, please spread the word to the guests that things are under control and the party will resume shortly. Are there any injured?”

“Minor scrapes or bruises from the initial chaos, Sire, but nothing the faeries can’t handle.”

“Good. Make sure no one leaves until we account for everyone on the list. We’ll have to interrogate them eventually, which I’m not fond of, but I don’t want to ruin the celebration. We’ll show them just how ineffective their ploy was.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Tell the faeries I may have need of their services. And have Grayson put up the barriers.”

Henry nodded his head and left to do the king’s bidding.

The king turned back to his daughter. “Sweetheart, I am so sorry they ruined your birthday party.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. It was just the icing on the cake. I’ll be fine. Do you think it would be terribly rude if I left my own party?”

“I’m sure if the birthday girl slipped out for a bit, I could cover for her,” the king said with a wink and gave his daughter a big hug. “Just don’t be long because—and you didn’t hear it from me—your mom has another one of her cake creations to bring out soon.”

Lillian groaned just a little. Her mom, Snow White, had always made it a point to make her children’s birthday cakes personally. They were okay most of the time, edible at least. The times when she incorporated some magic for “flair” were when things got out of hand. One time, she tried to enchant a cake for Andrew’s eighth birthday. It was *supposed* to sing “Birthday Merriment” once the candles were lit. Instead, it leapt off the table, almost catching the tapestries on fire while trying to eat him. It was definitely something one doesn’t forget.

Lillian headed back up the stairs. She just needed some time alone to breathe and compose herself. She went back past her room and down another corridor to the right. Past another couple of doors there was a column that looked like all the other columns, except that it moved. That was one of the good things about living in a castle. There was always some secret way to get out somewhere.

Resurgence

This particular passage would take her to the back of the castle close to the woods. A favorite place of Lillian's.

When she finally opened the other side of the passage, she had to squint her eyes against the sun beaming down. Even before her eyes adjusted, she traversed the terrain with ease just as she had before, even in the dark of night.

Not too many people ventured this far behind the castle because of its close proximity to the former Drod border. The dilapidated barrier wall was still a good half-day's walk away, but superstition was always closer. Over the last few years, there were rumors of a white ghostly figure with one red eye that roamed the woods. Story goes, it was a lost Drodic soul who had forfeited its life during the great battle and hadn't realized its death had come, still looking for freedom. Because its death had come before the true release of Zoldaine's power, it was doomed to stay close to the magic that had imprisoned it for so long. Forever wandering the forest, free from one gloomy grasp only to fall into another. Or so the story goes.

Lillian didn't believe in such nonsense. She had never seen the ghost, and she had been roaming these parts of the kingdom since she had discovered the passage when she was eight.

She found the passage quite by accident, as discoveries often go. She was playing hide 'n' seek with Alondra and had decided to hide behind a suit of armor standing beside a column. When she finally settled behind the legs, she felt a slight draft coming from the column. Lillian put her face up against the stone, and strangely, she could smell the woods coming through the small separation between the wall and pillar. And a small round pebble that didn't quite match with the rest of the stone wall tipped her off. Push. Click. All it took was a small shove to slide the pillar back into the false wall, revealing a spiral staircase going both down and up. She chose down. There was just enough light from some cleverly disguised slots in the wall. She descended the stairs cautiously, occasionally overhearing conversations from various rooms adjacent to the tunnel. Another quick search of the "dead end" at the bottom of the stairs revealed another matching pebble that opened up the door to the world outside the castle. Since then, she had ventured here often until she knew almost every stick and stone the nearby forest contained.

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

When she got to the small creek about fifty yards away, she slipped off her shoes and left them on her usual rock, hiked up her gown, and waded in the ankle-deep water that rippled by. The instant she stepped into the cool water, she felt her problems and tension start to wash away. The creek had no imbedded magic, it was just soothing. A couple of small fish seemed to play a game of weaving between her feet, occasionally tickling her foot with their tails. She crossed over through the soft mud squishing between her toes and onto the soft, moss-covered bank. Her hair, a dark brown that shimmered with gold, swayed playfully in the light breeze. She moved with her mother's grace as she slipped deeper into the forest. The canopy of trees slowly blocked out the sunlight, giving a warm glow to her surroundings. The forest's inhabitants didn't always flock to her the way they usually did to her mother, but they didn't flee either as they recognized their old friend. Rabbits munched on the vegetation. Squirrels scurried up trees with a treasure in their mouth. A pair of fawns and a doe looked her way before leaping off into the thicker part of the woods as if to say, "Come play with us." Yes, she knew her friends and surroundings well. She even knew the best thackleberry bushes to plunder and had become fairly adept at picking them. She hadn't gotten a scratch in nearly two years.

The berries' delicious flavor of honey, blackberries, and cinnamon all rolled into one made them sought after by both people and animals. But they were hard to come by because their thorns carry a poison that makes the skin swell and itch ten times worse than a stickle bug. Get too many scratches, and not only can you barely move but also you become very nauseated.

She found her regular patch of bushes and noticed the scarcity of berries. *That's odd. The animals usually only eat the ones that fall on the ground. It was a pretty hard winter, though.* Either way, she knew how to find more. She navigated her hand through the outside thorns like a weaver carefully threading a design. She felt a grouping of plump thackleberries, slowly plucked them from the stem, and pulled them out. Pulling them out was always much more difficult because now your hand was in a fist. Concentration was the key to not letting any distraction startle you. The slightest jerk could mean several scratches and dropping your reward. But as she had many

Resurgence

times before, Lillian managed with nary a tickle and popped the first juicy, bright purple prize in her mouth.

She continued on only a little farther, knowing she must not be too much longer, as her absence would most assuredly be noticed. Especially when the cake was brought out. But she just wanted to visit her favorite place quickly before going back. She picked up her pace a little, careful not to harm her dress. After about a minute, she came into a clearing that separated the forest in half. Some time ago, the ground had split, causing a great chasm called Goblin's Gorge, effectively dividing the woods and allowing a tributary of the Menari River to run through. Someone, although she wasn't sure whom, had managed to create a narrow yet sturdy wooden suspension bridge joining the two parts of the woods. As far as she knew, time and people had forgotten all about it. And why should they remember, for there was a perfectly good stone bridge connecting the kingdom not too far away on the more traveled road where the chasm was not nearly as deep. That bridge, of course, had been built by the dwarves. Lillian still remembered the trepidation of her first step onto the wooden bridge. It had been scary at first, but now she knew every creak and groan of its wood and rope. Some of her favorite times were when she was on the bridge in the wind. Some people might have been fearful of falling. But standing on the bridge while the wind whipped around her made her feel like she was flying.

So, she walked out onto the weathered wooden planks with as much peace and ease as walking on any trail. She still tread carefully, respecting the old bridge, but relishing the sense of freedom that came over her body. She stopped right in the middle. The wind was just right today. Just enough for a sway, but not so much that she had to hang on. That was the perfect moment. She could close her eyes and imagine herself far away, high above her kingdom, soaring amongst the clouds. The feeling of gliding along the wind currents was almost indescribable. But suddenly something was wrong.

The wind quickly picked up, twisting the old bridge awkwardly. Lillian opened her eyes just in time to see the bracing ropes passing by her. The planks beneath her feet had finally given way after all these years. Lillian was not flying anymore. She was falling.

CHAPTER 3: Ghost in the Woods

Grasping, frantically searching for anything to hold, but all Lillian found was air. After what felt like decades, Lillian finally dug her fingers into one of the planks beside her. Adrenaline racing, senses heightened, she dangled above the great chasm desperately looking for a way to pull herself up. Now the wind was not her friend, as it seemed to have picked up even more. It blew her body around, all the while flinging the bridge around like a swing, making it impossible for her to even attempt to grab the supporting ropes that hung just outside her reach. She thought of yelling for help but knew no one was remotely close enough to hear. Everyone was at the party. Waiting for her. How ironic. Left to die by her own birthday party.

SWOOSH!

Lillian felt a quick blast of air rush inches past the left side of her face. That was not the wind. She looked in that direction to find a small, silver-colored rope in front of her. Not wanting to relinquish her grip for a possibility, she tested the tension by leaning her head against it. Taut. She was running out of options and couldn't hang there forever, especially since the wind was growing stronger. She counted down. Three...two...one...*LUNGE!*

Her left hand grabbed the new line of salvation. She began hauling herself up slowly but surely. She heard several rips and tears redecorating her dress, but there was nothing to be done about that now. By the time she had hoisted her body onto the remaining wooden planks, the wind had died down. She gave herself just a moment to realize her safety and then quickly found her way to solid ground.

Once she caught her breath, she came to her senses. Someone had saved her. She examined the silver cord that had saved her life.

Ghost in the Woods

It was taut for a reason. As she followed the rope with her eyes across the bridge, she saw it was attached to an arrow that was stuck deep into a tree. Back the other way, the rope had been tightly secured around another tree about ten feet behind the forest line. Now Lillian was no fool. Whoever made that shot was either very lucky to have missed her head or an expert marksman. She was betting on the latter. And the rope would have had to have been tied to the other tree before the shot. So, whoever made that shot not only positioned the rope perfectly past her head by mere inches, but also knew the exact distance from tree to tree. Lillian started to run through her head anyone she knew who could have made such a precise shot. There was Sir Alger, trainer of the royal archers, but he would be back at the castle. Her cousin Marcus was rather talented with the bow as well, but he was away with Jaccob. There was that one boy from town who had won the archery contest last year. What was his name? Ugh. She couldn't remember, but why would he be out here during the celebration? He wouldn't. Which still left the question, who?

Well, it was something she would have to ponder later because she desperately needed to get back. Lillian was sure her father was searching for her by now, having exhausted all means to delay her mother's grand unveiling of the birthday cake. She would also have to change, giving a glance down at her once-pristine gown now adorned with several tears and painted with dirt and grass stains. *Ophelia's going to kill me*. She hiked her dress up to keep from tripping and jogged back toward the castle. Along the way, she looked around, unable to shake the feeling of someone watching her, but she never saw anyone. She splashed her way through the creek and grabbed her shoes, not wasting time to put them on. As she reached the wall where the passage was, she bent down to hit the same familiar pebble in the stone. Slowly the weighted pulley system shifted and a portion of the once-uniform wall swung inward. Lillian took a step inside but couldn't shake a feeling of being watched. She turned to look one more time and couldn't believe what she saw. About a hundred yards away in the forest, something white floated a few feet off the ground. Then a small red eye twinkled at her right before disappearing behind a tree.

Lillian could not erase that image from her head as she started up the passage stairs. There was no way that she just saw the ghost,

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

right? She had heard the stories and scoffed at them before, but now? There had to be a logical explanation. She couldn't remember hearing of anyone seeing the ghost during the daytime. Was it the ghost that had saved her? How could it have fired an arrow? And why would it choose to show itself to her now? She'd been in that forest a thousand times and had never felt like she had been being watched like today. Or had she? Now that she thought about it, there had been a few times that she had gotten the same prickly feeling on the back of her neck, but she had just attributed it to the wind or such. She didn't know now. But she'd have to think about it later, because she was nearing the top of the stairs.

She made it to her room and quickly decided on a light blue dress, and if anyone asked why she had changed, she'd say it was because there was cream on it from Andrew. As she went downstairs to rejoin the celebration, she caught her father's wide-eyed *Thank-the-faeries-you're-back* glance followed by *Come save me!* He waved her over, and she made her way through the crowd, who was back to enjoying the festivities.

"Sorry to be gone so long," Lillian apologized as she greeted her father with a kiss on the cheek.

"Not to worry, dear," the king reassured her with a wink, "your mother and I were just discussing that maybe this year you're too old for a cake. Faeries know there's already plenty of food."

"Ah, yeah, you're probably right," Lillian admitted, recognizing the game. Her mother had tried to do this for a couple of years now. The queen liked to baby her children, as anyone in the kingdom knew. Not that she spoiled them, but she was just not ready for them to grow up. Especially Lillian, her first. Snow White just wanted to be reassured that her efforts were wanted and that she was not imposing.

"I'm sorry, honey, I've just been so busy with the council and making sure your brother's keeping up with his lessons," said the queen. She knew the game too, but that didn't change the fact that she needed to be appreciated.

"It's okay, Mom, but just so you know, I was really looking forward to it this year, with me being eighteen and all. As long as the cake didn't try to eat me and burn down the kingdom." Lillian gave her mom a sly smile.

Ghost in the Woods

“Were you really looking forward to the cake?” Snow White asked.

Lillian knew what that meant. “Of course. I know it’s something really important to you. Some of them are even edible.” She started looking for the obvious entrance of a cake.

“Pierre!” the queen called for the head chef. That was the cue. Everyone started singing “Birthday Merriment.”

*Today is the day we celebrate your birth
We’re all here to show just how much you’re worth
Eat a piece of cake, play a couple games
Everyone rejoice in singing out your name
Lillian, Lillian, Merry Birthday, Lillian.*

A huge cake rolled out from the back of the party. The crowd had to part about ten feet just to let it through. The towering pastry was a beautiful lilac-frosted confection with indigo-swirled trim and consisted of several layers. The outermost rose in a spiral all the way up to the top. So far, the only magic Lillian could make out was the eighteen candles rotating up the ramp, and once at the top, they dropped down into the middle of the cake only to reappear at the bottom of the ramp to start the whole process over again. It would definitely make blowing them out a trick. But as the cake slowly approached her, the candles slowed down too and finally stopped as the cake halted in front of her. Lillian looked at her mom who was beaming now, as apparently the cake presentation was going off without a hitch. Lillian leaned over to blow out the first candle at the bottom of the ramp, and to her surprise, the rest of the candles started to go out in succession. All the way to the top until the very last candle suddenly shot out a small display of fireworks. This drew a couple of cringes from the crowd and even the king, as they’d seen the queen’s creations go awry before. But as the last firework fizzled out, everyone relaxed and eagerly anticipated tasting the queen’s newest confection.

After thanking her mother for the beautiful and surprisingly tasty cake, Lillian rejoined her friends Jafria, Sophie, Elizabeth (who everyone called Lizzy), and Princesses Olivia and Avery. Lillian wasn’t as close to the two princesses as her other friends simply because she didn’t see them that often. Usually they stayed in touch

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

only at occasions like this or through letters they would write back and forth. Forming a close bond with someone was hard if you had to wait a few days for a reply. But since the princesses were so close in age, they did share a lot in common, especially when it came to royal duties. Venting was hard to do to your regular friends who wanted nothing more than to trade places with you. None of them resented Lillian, mind you, they just couldn't find the problem with having to entertain dignitaries at various functions in fancy dresses eating fancy food. Especially when the dignitaries included Duke Taylor and Sir Chandler. Sure, they were nice to look at but were absolute bores when it came to conversation. So, Lillian found solace in writing both Olivia and Avery because they understood that being a princess was not all it was portrayed to be.

"What did your mom do to Andrew?" asked Jafria, always the nosey one.

"I'm not sure," replied Lillian. "I went upstairs to fix my hair. Did any of you get hurt during the chaos?"

Sophie didn't hesitate. "Sir Laurel pushed me into the doorway while trying to get out. So much for his chivalry."

"I'm sure he was pushed himself, Sophie," Lizzy defended her crush.

"He didn't even apologize though," Sophie retorted.

"I have seen him overlook a couple of ladies in need, in the times I've seen him," Olivia piped in. "Not that I'm judging, I'm just saying." Olivia saw Lillian more than Avery. One, because they were closer, and two, because they were family.

"Whatever. You're all just jealous that he fancies me over you," Lizzy concluded.

"He's all yours, Lizzy." Sophie winked at the others, and they all had a giggle.

There was a small pause when finally Avery could take it no longer. "So, what's the deal with the bomb? I thought we had either killed or imprisoned all of the Dainian Rogues."

"Apparently not." Jafria always had to state the obvious too.

Avery scoffed, "I realize that. What I meant was, where did they come from, and how did those stinky Rogues get in anyway? I thought your dad would have better security for your party."

Some of the girls rolled their eyes. It wasn't that they didn't like Avery, but she could come off as a little too grown-up and a know-

Ghost in the Woods

it-all for their taste. They didn't blame her, though. She had always had to be a little more responsible in her family because of her father's absence. Her mother was usually busy taking care of the kingdom's affairs, which caused Avery to have to step in to a mother role of sorts. Especially for Layla, but also for Jaccob, as he only just recently assumed more kingly responsibilities. Plus, his being away for so long affected Avery more than she'd care to admit. So, most of girls just ignored her haughty comments, knowing while she meant well, she just had a hard time communicating it sometimes.

"I'm sure Henry and my dad will take care of it," Lillian said, reassuring her friend. "My dad has already started a list of who to interrogate. He just didn't want it to ruin my party, so he's not acting like it's a big deal. But believe me, King Charming can be very, um, let's just say persuasive when it comes to protecting his family and kingdom." Lillian had only overheard her dad lose his temper once, and that was a few days after the victory over Zoldaine. She was in the secret passage when she had heard shouting. He had been questioning a prisoner about the hidden faction of Dainian Rogues who had infiltrated the Valanti Kingdom. Their sole purpose was to burn the kingdom to the ground to honor their lord who would someday return. The voice of her father and the whimpering of the captive was enough to make her continue on her way. She had never seen that side of her dad before. Part of it scared her. The other part made her feel safe, like he would do anything to protect his family and stand up for what he believed in.

The party resumed without any further interruptions and as the sun began its decent, the crowd thinned, quite a few of them leaving just hoping to remember where they lived. The king and queen always offered their abode to Queen Aurora and her family as well as the Charmings. But both declined. Aurora had an important council meeting to get back to, and the Charmings always enjoyed traveling under the stars. They had been night owls since the whole midnight thing.

Everyone said good-bye as the servants started the great undertaking of cleaning up. Lillian was eager to see their guests off so she could go talk to Alondra about everything that had happened in the forest. She *would* find out what that "ghost" really was and who had shot that silver arrow. She owed him her life.

CHAPTER 4: A friend?

May 18

After four days Lillian hadn't seen even a wisp of the ghost. She went back out the very next day after her fall to examine the arrow and rope again but there was nothing. A single mark in the tree was the only evidence anything had been there at all. That and the missing plank. Since then, she had gone out during all hours of the day and night, not really even looking but mostly just sitting and hoping to see it again.

She had just finished a filling breakfast of scrambled goose eggs, fresh apple juice, and coconut toast with thackleberry jam. Andrew had somehow managed to get jam on his fresh shirt and was already getting a lecture from his mom about wasting the launderers' time with his carelessness. It was bad enough they practically had to hire another seamstress just to keep up with his boyish play outside with Ethan. So, that just left Lillian and her father at the table. He was reading the latest issue of the kingdom's newspaper, the *Valanti Valor*. There were a few news distributors for the kingdom, but the *Valor* was the most reliable periodical and was published bimonthly by a local family, the Kretchers. It had most of the up-to-date information on what was going on, not only in the Valanti Kingdom but the other two realms as well. Douglas Kretcher Sr. sent his two sons, Douglas Jr. and Stephen, across the continent on a weekly basis to get the newest scoops on important information. They had the fastest horses on the whole continent. *The Valor* had a small gossip column as well, which was usually the king's favorite part, though he would never admit it. The "who's who" of the kingdom, if you will, and "what's posh or wash." Lillian had to tell him that the advice didn't always apply to him though. One time the column said

A friend?

feathers were in and felt was out. The king walked around for half a day looking like a peacock before she finally saw him and gave him a lecture of her own. Since then, he'd enjoyed reading it but always asked her for her opinion first before doing anything drastic. She actually enjoyed the new hairstyle he picked out a couple of months ago. It fit his age a little better as well as his personality.

Lillian was about to get up when her father asked her a question from behind his paper. "Where are you off to so early, m'dear?"

Lillian was a little taken aback. Did he know? Had he sent someone to spy on her? No, that was ridiculous. Her dad had always been forthright before now. He was not one to keep secrets, nor would he want them kept from him. It was part of what made him such a good king and father.

"What do you mean?" Lillian asked as nonchalantly as possible.

"I mean, you've just seemed a little preoccupied. Miss Cecilia said you've been distant in your studies the last few days. I just want to make sure everything's okay."

Lillian hated lying to her dad, but she really didn't feel like it was lying since she hadn't discovered anything yet. She had eventually come forth about her fall at the bridge because there was no way to explain her tattered dress, but she made no mention of the mysterious figure she saw. "Yeah, Dad, everything's fine. I've just been going out behind the castle. Since the weather's been so nice, I've been thinking about it a lot. I'm sorry, I'll try to focus more with Miss Cecilia."

King Harry stood up to come over and give his daughter a kiss on the forehead. "That's fine, sweetie. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything you needed to talk about. Just because you're eighteen doesn't mean you're not still my little girl."

"I know, Dad." She stood up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I promise, if there's anything I need to talk to you about, you'll be the first to know."

Lillian started to walk away when her father stopped her once more. "By the way, how's the dating, or whatever you guys call it nowadays, going with Richard? You guys have another outing soon, right? You and your friends?"

That was another reason her dad was a good king, but sometimes an irritating father. Nothing ever got past him. She had

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

almost completely forgotten about the date; her mind had been so preoccupied lately with the ghost.

“Um, yeah, we do. Uh, things are going okay, I guess. I haven’t really gotten a chance to know him too much yet because we’re usually with a bunch of other people. This is only our fifth date, and yes, we still call them dates, Dad.”

“Okay, well, if you ever need some help…” the king gave his classic wink. A wink that meant he was kidding, but not if you didn’t think so.

“No, Dad, I’m fine on my own, thank you.” The first date Lillian went on was a complete disaster because her father had sent about twenty “undercover” chaperones along with her. Her date had started to put his coat around her because it was cold, but some of the chaperones jumped to conclusions and pounced on him thinking he was trying to cover her up for a kidnapping. Lillian didn’t get another suitor for three months after that.

She went upstairs to her room to change into more appropriate attire for going out into the forest. Her mother had a fit about her dress. She had been “grounded” to spend a week with Ophelia the seamstress and help her make another one. Lillian could definitely think of worse punishments, so she politely obliged and didn’t complain.

After changing, she went out the west-wing exit. She only used the secret passage when it was necessary and she didn’t want anyone to know where she was. She hadn’t been secretive about where she was going really, just why she was going there. Her outings weren’t hard to explain since it was spring and perfectly logical to go outdoors. Even a castle could feel small when you’re pretty much stuck there during a harsh winter.

Going out the west wing to get to the backside of the castle meant passing through the stables. Lillian didn’t mind that much. The smell of manure could be a little overwhelming at times, but even that reminded her of the outdoors and riding across her kingdom. Her kingdom. It was an interesting thought that she tried not to think of much, but the truth was, once her parents passed away or got too old, it would become hers to rule. That’s why she had been courting different men over the last few years. Finding a respectable “king” was hard.

A friend?

“Hello, Your Highness,” a burley yet handsome young man offered with a smile and a bow as Lillian walked through.

“Quit it, Seth,” Lillian replied with a punch to his arm. “You know I don’t like it when you call me that.”

“I know, I just like teasin’ ya ‘sall,” Seth said as he rubbed his arm as if it hurt. He was basically all muscle from the chores he did around the castle. His main job was taking care of the horses, but he was also a crafter of any cloth: stable boy, wall repairer, baker, furniture mover, tapestry hanger. If there was a chore to be done around the castle, he’d probably done it. But the task of stable boy, or stable hand, as he liked to be called, to the fifty royal horses usually kept him pretty busy.

“Well, stop it. I have enough on my mind without you harassing me.”

“What’s going on now? You goin’ back out to the woods again?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s out there anyways? You find that ghost or something?”

“Something like that.”

“For real? You’ve finally seen the ghost?”

“No, Seth, I haven’t seen the ghost.” Lillian still wasn’t convinced. “I’m just going to pick more thackleberries for Pierre. Mom wants a pie for dessert tomorrow for some dinner party she’s having.”

“All right then. Oh, your dad said that he wanted me to go out and fix that plank on the bridge that you fell through, so next time you’re going out there, let me know and you can show me where it is.”

“Okay, I will.” Lillian had had a brief discussion with her dad about the bridge. He wanted to have it taken down all together to prevent something worse from happening. But it didn’t take long for her to bat her beautiful hazel eyes and call up a couple of tears for the king to realize that wasn’t going to happen. So, they compromised by having Seth and maybe the dwarves help reinforce the wooden bridge. She was okay with that as long as it still swayed in the wind.

Lillian continued on through the stables to get to the castle gate. She said hello to the two guardsmen as they opened the passage for

Beyond the After: Princess Lillian

her. Usually, there was only one and not even all the time, but her father and his head of security, Sir Alger, had both agreed that the feeble attack the other day was only a warning of more to come.

There hadn't been a lot of disruption over the last three to five years. During the first few years of the Dainian Revolution, there were several uprisings in all of the kingdoms, as well as others trying to take Drod for themselves. Rogue citizens planted by Zoldaine. Sleeper agents that went insane after his death. But most disturbances were small and ill planned. There hadn't been any real threats until now. This one was different. The king was taking this one very personally. There had not been an attack during a major gathering of the royal families in many years, let alone *inside* the castle. Lillian did not envy the guards on duty that day.

She continued on around to the back of the castle when an interesting aroma wafted past her nose. She had smelled it before from the kitchen, but that was on the other side of the castle and the wind was blowing the wrong direction. There was also something unusual about this familiar bouquet. Pleasant, she thought, but different. She followed the scent toward the creek and finally saw what she expected to see but in a very unexpected place. There on "her" rock was a fresh loaf of thackleberry bread. She looked around, trying to find any indication as to who could be out there having a picnic and why they would leave such a temptation to the animals.

As she got closer, she realized there was a note lying underneath the bread.

Could that be for me? Who would know I was even coming? Seth knew I was coming. So did Father. But they're both back at the castle, right? What does it say? Should I pick it up? What if it's not for me?

All of these thoughts spun through her head in the last remaining steps it took her to get within arms' reach of the bread. She finally resolved her thinking.

"Hello?" she called out to no one. "Hello?" This time louder. "Is anyone there?" All she could hear was the babbling of the brook. She looked down at the rock. It had to be for her, she thought. This was *her* rock. She carefully slipped the note out from under the bread and opened it up.

A friend?

Princess, I hope you are well.

A friend

She looked around again. Still no one. She picked up the loaf of bread and sat down on the rock. It was warm from the midmorning sun, which made it feel like it was fresh out of the oven. Even though she had just eaten breakfast, the aroma made her mouth water. It smelled delicious, but she still couldn't place the slightly unusual scent. She was very much like her mother in that she always tried to see the best in people and never truly understood how malicious they could be. A blessing and a curse, it was this quality that had landed Snow White in her eternal slumber. She had been lucky to have been rescued so soon by true love's kiss. But Lillian also had her dad's sense, and what with the incident at her party, ultimately decided against trying any of the bread. She set it back down on the rock.

A strong male voice came from behind her. "It's not poisoned, if that's what you're thinking."

Lillian froze.