

BEYOND — THE — AFTER

PRINCESS OLIVIA



C.M. Healy

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Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

By C.M. Healy

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For my first-year fans. Thanks for hanging in there, and believing in me.

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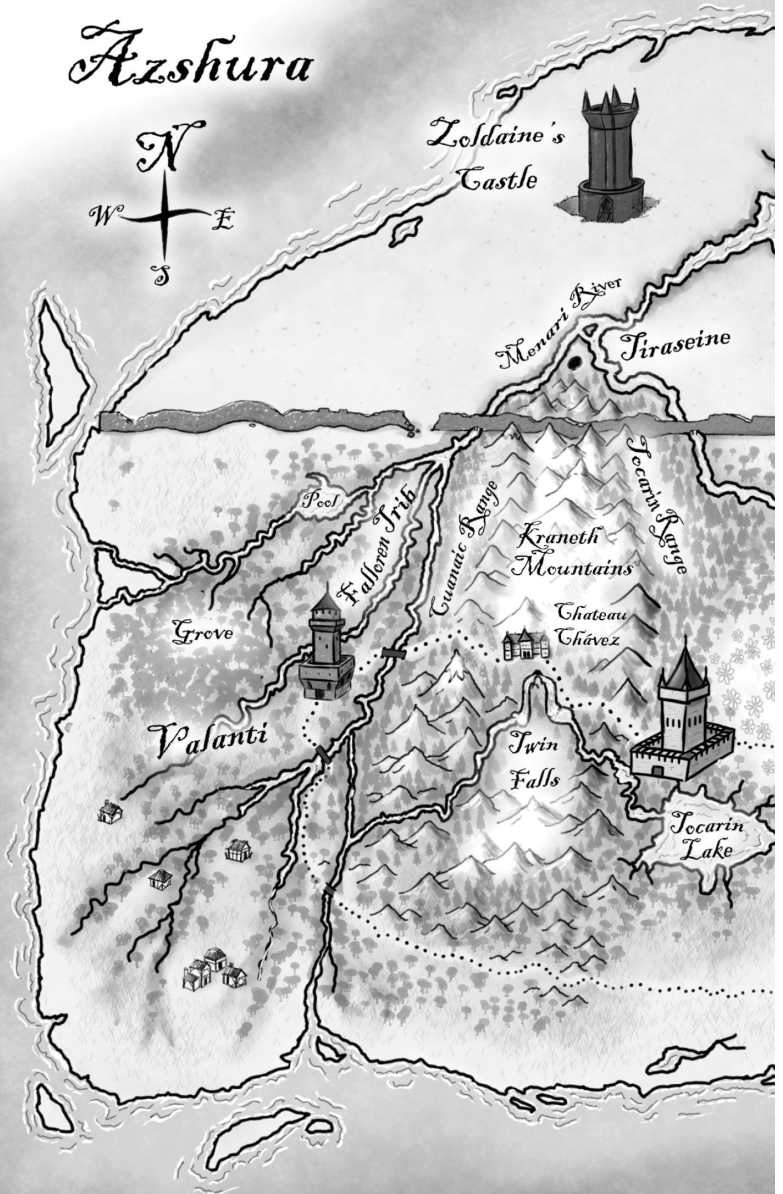
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Azshura





BEYOND — THE — AFTER

PRINCESS OLIVIA



Preface

Energy. Bringing forth the very universe itself, it has existed before Time. Light, gravity, the elements—it occurs in different forms, fills different vessels, but it is always there, flowing through and around.

One force, however, is stronger. One ability can manipulate energy, enabling its possessor to control the elements, defy gravity, even challenge the fabric of time. Over the ages, many have tapped into this source, whether by potion, artifact, or word. But its strongest bond has always been through the soul. All energies are neutral—bending to the will of the entity directing it. Some have brandished this ability for the betterment of mankind while others have wielded it for their own wicked gain. And even though its visible potency has waxed and waned through the centuries, its existence never wavers. It lies waiting to be channeled. Waiting for a person to unlock its secrets. A soul to unleash the true power—of Magic.

Prologue I: Creation

It was a millennium ago when the continent of Azshura was created. Two shifting plates of land slowly inched toward each other, striving to connect and finally unite a power separated and buried ages ago. It's said it was the will of a powerful gem that brought the two land masses together, yearning to once again be whole.

The gem's inevitable reunion was cataclysmic. An enormous mystic energy was released, cracking the land, heaving it upwards, forming the great mountain range cleaving the continent today. In a primeval reunion, the gem was once again fractured by the very force of its own need to unite, causing shards to splinter from the gem and be flung to far corners across the new continent. These incandescent scarlet pieces lay undetected for ages.

But the gem's powerful merger also created something else. As the wave of the gem's joining subsided, the residual energy coalesced. It was here the first Fae was born. She is known in the Olde Language as Al'Ariana, the mother of all magical creatures, earning her the affectionate nickname Faery Godmother. She gave each of her children a piece of her life force, weakening her with each creation but bringing her great joy.

Faery Godmother gave her creations free will, and though some chose to protect the land, others succumbed to the desire to control and rule others. And it wasn't long until some of Al'Ariana's creations sought to dominate the land by locating the scattered pieces of the gem and twisting its power to their will. Eventually, the defectors were disfigured by the gem's power to reflect the true intentions in their hearts, giving birth to the goblins, orcs, and other monstrosities found on Azshura, who made their homes in caves and other dark places. For centuries, the struggle proved futile for the defilers as Faery Godmother and her forces easily outnumbered them. Though a continual blight on the land, they were never organized enough to create a real threat. But one day, man came to Azshura—and changed everything.

Prologue II: The Rise of Man

As mankind's numbers grew on Azshura, some chose to befriend Al'Ariana and her faeries, becoming defenders of the gem. But the desire to rule and command the power of magic corrupted other men. At times, these men would join forces with the dark creatures to hunt for the fragments of the gem and battled alongside them for control.

These battles went back and forth for years, most often for control of the settlement where the gem resided, which came to be known as Tiraseine. Even though the insurgents now outnumbered the guardians, their internal division for power prevented them from ever overtaking Al'Ariana's forces and the faction of men who had built harmonious communities together. The protectors swore to defend the gem and the land they loved, living side by side in Tiraseine and the southern parts of Azshura.

As time went on, more forces came to Azshura on both sides as word quickly spread far and wide about the great source of magic residing in this land. And though the insurgents had never yet been able to unite to create a formidable force, a cunning adversary had heard of the gem and was enthralled. And he was exactly who the disjointed forces needed to unite them and succeed in overtaking Tiraseine, the gem, and ultimately Azshura.

A despicable foe known only by a single name—Zoldaine.

Zoldaine had already established himself as a fierce tactician on the battle field in his native land. He remarkably managed to gather key information about his enemy that no one else could, which he used to strike at their weakest points. His ruthlessness eventually became known on many continents for doing whatever it took to secure the victory for his king, even if it meant sacrificing his own troops.

But Zoldaine's most dangerous weapon, and greatest secret, was his understanding of magic. Although his gift was inherited, his ability was extraordinary—he was born with a bond very few sorcerers experience even after a lifetime of study. This was a crucial

reason he moved up in the ranks and was so successful in his attacks, a reason second only to his desire for power.

Zoldaine had heard about the magical source of Azshura and its primary protector, Al'Ariana. He had already been working on a plan to overthrow his ignorant king and take the throne for himself. But when the opportunity arose for him to lead an assault on Azshura, he knew that was his true destiny.

Before his deployment, he learned everything he could about the mysterious gem and the magical creatures who defended it. He had discovered an ancient text describing theories about the gem before its separation. This provided an important, if vague, glimpse into the gem's history.

Once Zoldaine arrived on Azshura, his natural zeal rallied and organized the fragmented rebels. He convinced his troops he alone should be in control of the collected random shards among them to ensure their victory, promising to distribute them back once the battle was won. The first of many lies to achieve his perverse desires. Unfortunately, with Zoldaine's mastery of magic and knowledge of the gem, he and his army were able to overpower Al'Ariana, forcing her and the protectors to retreat from Tiraseine. Zoldaine's troops suffered greatly, but Zoldaine didn't care; he had what he had come for. The gem. Power.

Zoldaine became reclusive, spending every waking hour with the gem, hardly sleeping and barely eating or drinking, drawing all of his sustenance from the gem. His remaining troops urged him to pursue Al'Ariana and the guardians to eradicate them completely. But he dismissed their recommendations and sometimes killed them for their interruption. Finally, he ordered a wall to be built to cut off the gem's protectors from entering the northern realm. His realm.

A decade passed. Zoldaine's followers ultimately left him, settling farther north and starting their own communities, awaiting the emergence of their king. To the south, the guardians took advantage of Zoldaine's absence and established new strongholds, hoping they could maintain and finally defeat Zoldaine. A day long to come.

Eventually, Zoldaine resurfaced with a terrifying creation. He brought with him his own protector of the gem. A dark fae. A sinister wraith capable of heinous acts of torture and cruelty, a reflection of her master. Zoldaine reemerged with a plan to claim the

entire continent and extinguish the protectors for good. He sent for his sisters, who were all too willing to come rule alongside their older brother. Being born with their own connection to magic, they were eager to revel in this gem their brother had informed them about.

Zoldaine and his equally sinister sisters lived for years beyond normal mortals, their life spans extended because of their evil connection with the gem. They waited patiently for the right time. Insidiously, the trio managed to infiltrate the southern part of the continent. One sister married the king of the Valanti kingdom, only to kill him and torture her subjects. The other sister cruelly cursed a princess and her kingdom, Caldera, putting them into eternal slumber.

The kingdom of Tapera was the only stronghold left. Blessedly, Al'Ariana discovered a vein of water running beneath the Kraneth Mountains that carried the magic of the gem, allowing her to once again draw from its power. She fashioned wands from the branches of a tree that drew its water from this river. These wands helped her faeries focus and control their magic gifts. It was here she and her faithful held fast, biding their time as well, waiting for their opportunity to once again reclaim Valanti and the sleeping kingdom of Caldera. The more time Al'Ariana spent with the humans, the more enamored she became with them, eventually coming to love them. And she understood how powerful this love could be. Al'Ariana sent forth three emissaries, placing her hopes in two brothers from Tapera, King Louis and Prince Harry, and the brave Prince Phillip from Caldera—each holding the power of a single kiss—to bond themselves to their true loves.

During this time, King Louis had been so busy protecting his people he hadn't had any time to look for a suitable queen. Al'Ariana didn't usually dabble in others' affairs, instead allowing things to take their natural course. But time was of the essence. Al'Ariana didn't change the direction of fate. She simply provided a quicker path for destiny to travel. No one would have suspected a mistreated, rejected daughter would be so pivotal in fighting the evil to come. One magical midnight initiated a relationship that would ultimately reinforce the faithful's hold on Tapera and give both Harry and Phillip the will, courage, and strength to overcome their adversaries, finally releasing Valanti and Caldera from evil's grasp.

Al'Ariana and the humans finally regained control over the southern part of Azshura. Now, all they had to do was prepare—and wait—to overthrow Zoldaine.

Prologue III: Ultimate Sacrifice

It was ten restless years before Zoldaine tried to regain control of the southern half of Azshura. But a servant he thought he could trust betrayed him, giving Al'Ariana and the royal families the opportunity they had been waiting for.

While the kings prepared their troops, Al'Ariana gathered hers as well. She knew the gem's resting place must be taken back. If the kings were to succeed, Tiraseine must be removed from Zoldaine's grasp. A task the Faery Godmother was not looking forward to. She had heard of Zoldaine's twisted dark fae creation and was concerned about her own power being enough.

Once she and the faeries helped with the wall curse, they parted ways with the kings and their troops, each with their own important mission to ensure success for the other.

Once at Tiraseine, the location seemed to be abandoned. It appeared as if Zoldaine had withdrawn the troops from here to be closer to his location for protection. But Al'Ariana knew better. He would not leave his most valued possession unguarded. As they neared where the gem resided, she and her company could feel waves of the malicious force emanating from the center of town. The dark fae. And she was not alone.

The battle was fierce. The earth itself seemed like it would crack in half from all the energy being released by both sides. Each side pulling power from the gem, each side suffering casualties. But Al'Ariana's forces were suffering more. She watched helplessly as friends, family, her children fell to the hands of the dark fae and her forces, slowly but surely overwhelming them to an imminent demise. Al'Ariana's decision was easy.

She gathered her faeries close, instructing them to protect her while she concentrated on her spell.

With her wand held close to her chest, Al'Ariana began to whisper an ancient spell. A spell to be used only in the most dire circumstances. A spell that would ultimately save the continent, the

kingdoms, her human companions, and her children. But a spell that would end her. A single tear ran down her cheek as she looked fondly on her children one last time before uttering the final incantation.

One moment she was there; the next, a brilliant flash of light so pure it could be seen from the heavens. The dark fae and her forces were incinerated to ash in an instant for a spell powered by pure love has no equal. Tears welled up in the faeries' eyes as they understood what their protector, their mother, had done. She had sacrificed herself, her very life force, to save them, to protect them one last time. Only her wand remained, which the faeries brought back to Cinderella.

There were many who perished that day. And many were honored in the days to come. But none more deserving than the mother who willingly gave her life so her children and friends could live on.

CHAPTER 1: Party Crashers

May 14

Whether it was the first time or the eighteenth, a royal party never failed to strike awe in its guests. Olivia had been to plenty, her own even, but she was still always impressed with how her aunt and uncle put together such elaborate celebrations.

They've really outdone themselves this time, Olivia thought as she glanced around. Of course, she couldn't blame them. Her cousin Lillian had just turned eighteen. Olivia attended the official coronation a few days ago, along with her parents and the royal family from Caldera, but that was an intimate affair. This was a party. And by the looks of it, half the kingdom was in attendance. Ornate streamers wrapped around the columns with connecting banners. Musicians and entertainers were sprinkled throughout the crowd so no one was without amusement. Games to delight the young and old alike. But what really amazed Olivia was the amount of food. Enough to feed not only all the guests but probably the entire kingdom also. She worried whether anyone would have enough room for the cake. *I wonder what flourishes Aunt Snow White will attempt this year.* Olivia smiled, remembering the unintentional fiasco with Andrew's cake a couple of years ago.

She and the other girls were having a pleasant time until Lillian suddenly screamed.

"Andrew!" Lillian yelled in pursuit of her little brother. "Come here, you little troll."

The duo disappeared into the crowd. Olivia assumed her younger cousin was seeking protection from his mom.

"What happened?" Olivia asked the group.

Party Crashers

“I think Andrew put cream in her hair again,” Sophie replied.

“That boy needs to find a hobby,” Jafria joked.

“What he needs is a good hand to his backside,” interjected Avery. “Layla would never do anything like that to me.”

“Oh please, Avery,” Lizzy scoffed. “Like you didn’t pester Jaccob when you were little.”

“I don’t remember,” Avery retorted, “but if I had, he would have twisted my ears.”

“Well where do you think Lillian was off too? Color her nails?” Jafria defended her best friend.

As the girls continued to discuss their own sibling encounters, they saw Lillian trudge up the stairs, hands fisted by her sides, presumably to take care of her now tangled, sticky hair.

Anyone could see Lillian was upset, but Olivia could tell there was more bothering her. Few knew about Olivia’s hidden gift. She didn’t even know it was special until she was talking to her mom one time when she was only six.

Olivia was too young to fully understand the concept of death. But Cinderella wanted to be the one to tell her children of the passing of Al’Ariana, a surrogate mom to Cinderella since that fateful night and grandmother to Marcus and Olivia since birth. Cinderella went to them heartbroken, wondering how to deliver the grave news.

“Olivia, sweetie.” Cinderella found her daughter playing in her room, not fully understanding the recent events that had taken place.

“Oh hi, Mommy.” Olivia looked up from her toys and frowned at her mom. “Mommy, why are you so blue?”

It wasn’t possible that Olivia could have heard the news yet. Cinderella was taken aback. Cinderella knew she had looked distraught but thought she had wiped all her tears away. “What do you mean, Livy?”

Olivia got up and moved to put her hands on her mother’s face. “Usually your color is pink, but today it’s blue. What happened?”

Cinderella was confused. “I don’t understand, sweetie, what do you mean I’m usually pink?”

“Poppy and Daddy are yellow, Marcus is orange, and you’re pink. I don’t know what color I am. I tried looking in the mirror, but I don’t see anything.”

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Cinderella realized what Olivia was talking about. Al'Ariana had told Cinderella it was rare, but some of those in tune with magic had special spells or gifts that never turned off. Olivia was one of those people. She had the ability to *see* the moods of other people. But not see as in get a feeling. She literally saw colors emanating from people. The faeries called them auras.

The queen discussed it with her husband, and they decided it was best to keep it a relative secret. They had a conversation with Olivia explaining how what she could do was different from other people and if they found out, they might feel bad they couldn't do what she could. To the young, innocent Olivia, that made sense. She didn't want to make people feel bad. So other than her immediate family and a few others, no one knew.

As Olivia grew older, her ability grew stronger. She became aware of the small lie her parents had told her to keep her gift a secret. Her ability wouldn't make others feel bad, it would make them feel *uncomfortable*. So with the help of some faeries, she learned to control it and "mute" it when needed, but it never truly went away.

But Olivia didn't feel Lillian's mood warranted invading her privacy. *It's probably about Richard again.* Lillian had confided to Olivia over the past few days about her newest suitor, Richard. How he was sweet and well-mannered but Lillian didn't feel a connection. It was something they had discussed before as all the royal couples had amazing stories of romance. Avery didn't join in their whimsical fantasies, but Lillian and Olivia both had divulged to one another their dreams of being rescued by their own princes.

"Has anyone seen Sir Laurel?" Lizzy interjected, glancing around.

"Have you looked over by the wine table?" Jafria's disapproving tone was hard to miss.

But apparently Lizzy either didn't catch the insult or she wasn't in the mood to defend her crush yet again. "That's a good idea, Jafria, thanks." And off she went.

Avery made sure her opinion was heard, as usual. "Is she really that daft? I'm on the other side of Azshura, and even *I* know rumors of his exploits."

Party Crashers

Sophie defended her friend, “Will you two just let her be? You know nothing will ever come of it. She can barely talk about him among friends, let alone say two words to *him*.”

“I know, I know,” Jafria relented, “but couldn’t she find someone else to fawn over? Like *anyone* else?”

“Oh c’mon, he’s not *that* bad. He does have nice hair for a man,” Sophie reminded them.

“He has nice hair for a woman,” Avery stated, not meaning for it to be a compliment, but the girls laughed at her unintended joke.

Olivia turned to look at the stairs to see if her cousin was returning yet. Before she got there, however, something caught her eye. *Two* somethings to be exact. She couldn’t discern exactly where or, more specifically, *who* had auras pushing through her muted ability, but she knew it was important. She had subdued her power before coming into the party to prevent the cacophony of colors that would have constantly bombarded her had she not.

However, even when she had it tamped down most of the time, occasionally an aura would come through. She had come to trust this sign over most others as it meant something significant was about to happen. That was the gift and curse of her ability. No matter what face people put on, they were hard-pressed to hide their true feelings.

It was that knowledge that made her so leery and apprehensive now. The two streams of colors she was seeing emanate from the crowd indicated something malicious. Each was a swirl of light greens, browns, and a few other mischievous colors. But the hue that concerned her the most was the oily black streak snaking among the other shades.

“If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I’m going to go check out who’s winning the Dragonfire Drops contest.” Olivia started to weave her way through the crowd to where the colors originated. For the moment, the auras were stationary behind a couple of pillars. She debated going to her father and alerting him, but he was across the room talking to her uncle. *If I go to him now, I might lose whoever is doing whatever*. She decided to press on and converse with him later.

As she neared the auras, she still didn’t see anyone attached to them. She was confused at first until two people stepped up from behind a display and started heading her way. Olivia quickly feigned interest in the juggler standing nearby as they made their way past

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her. Their auras roiled so strongly she could actually feel their emotions as they went by. Nervous, excited, scared, vindictive, angry, devious!

Usually, only direct contact elicited such a response unless the energy was intense. And it was. Penetrating and different—but she couldn't tell why. As far as their physical appearances, the man and woman were both dressed as servants for the party so as to blend in better. The man was tall, near six feet, unshaven, and had oily hair. The other was a girl Olivia thought she recognized from the regular castle staff. *What was her name again?* Olivia couldn't recall that or where she'd seen the girl. But describing her to others wouldn't help much since the girl was a little taller than her with a slender build and brown hair. Nothing to distinguish her from roughly half the castle staff.

Olivia waited for them to get a few paces away before investigating where they had come from while keeping an eye on where they were going. She was even more curious now that she had seen their auras up close. Within the oozing black haze twisted a small strand of red and green. She'd seen colors blend occasionally, but they were never combined like that. *I'll have to ask Faery Godmother Laleña about that.* Olivia went to where the two suspicious characters were crouching. It was behind one of Grayson's crackling-star deployments. They were smaller than the ones she had seen in the past for other celebrations but then, of course, those had been outside. She imagined a full-sized arrangement would likely take the roof off the main hall. As she began to examine the arrangement of pipes, she realized she had no clue what she was looking for. Some pipes were empty, as if they had already deployed their dazzling display. But there was no discernable pattern she could make out. Whatever disruption the two were planning, she couldn't tell. She decided it would be better to follow them and see if she could gather further information about who they were.

Even without her ability, the pair would have been easy to follow. They were making a fast path to what looked like the exit to the east garden. At the doorway, the man turned to look back. Olivia slowed down, but he didn't see her following them. Once they were out, Olivia quickened her pace so as to not lose them in the garden. There was a gravel path to get to the main topiaries, but if they got

Party Crashers

there before she saw which way they went, she might not find them again.

She made it to the archway accessing the garden. They were only halfway down the path and though there were several other partygoers out enjoying the spring weather, it would take greater stealth now to hide her intentions. She had barely gone two steps onto the path when—

BOOM!

Olivia whirled around to see the hall now filled with smoke and a frightened mob of people stampeding straight for her.

CHAPTER 2: Secrets in the Garden

Everyone was frantic! Olivia was barely able to jump off the path and out of the way before being trampled by the hysterical crowd.

“Out of my way!” Sir Laurel bellowed as he pushed men and women alike out of his way.

Olivia had no idea what had happened, but she knew without a doubt those two were responsible. It sounded like Grayson’s whole array had exploded at once. Smoke started to creep out of the doorway, then it eerily stilled before reversing, as if being swallowed back into the castle. Olivia managed to push her way to the door to see the smoke coalesce high above the confused crowd, forming two words: *Zoldaine Lives!*

This was no random prank. This was a message.

She quickly skimmed the crowd to find the two “messengers,” but they were long gone. Luckily for her, she knew how to track them. Olivia started scanning the large topiaries, tuning to the emotions she had felt when they passed her earlier, and had no trouble finding her foes. She quickly worked her way through the crowd, who was slowly realizing the threat had passed.

From all of her youthful rambles, she had a fairly good idea of the garden’s layout and was making up ground between her and her adversaries. She tried to keep track of the route. *Left, second right, left.* They seemed to be heading toward the northeast corner. *That’s strange—that dead ends into boulders. They’d have to double back.* Olivia started rifling through scenarios of what she’d do if she ran into them. *They’re almost to the corner; they’ll be coming back this way. I could always— Gone?!* Like a magic trick, the two auras disappeared. *But that’s not possible.* Olivia hastened to the northeast corner, not quite sure what to expect. The complete absence of a

Secrets in the Garden

person's aura meant only one of two things: They were powerful enough to hide it with magic or they were dead. And neither made sense to Olivia.

She rounded the last corner, trying to prepare herself for what was to come, but there was nothing. No powerful mages waiting to confront her or dead bodies on the ground. *That's not possible! Where did they go?* Olivia searched all over for something, anything, to help make sense of what had happened. She knew a few secret passages existed in the castle from what Lillian had shown her, but never in all the games of hide 'n' seek had one been discovered in the garden. Olivia searched for a while longer before she felt she finally had to get back to the castle before she was missed.



Back at the castle, things were getting under way again. The faeries were tending to any minor injuries that had occurred because of the ensuing melee. None from the blast itself—that was meant more to scare than harm, but the panicking attendees didn't know that. Olivia looked for Lillian but didn't see her. Olivia was curious to see if her cousin knew of any secret passages in the garden. Not spying Lillian anywhere, Olivia set out to find her dad, King Louis, but ran into her other parent first.

“Olivia!” Cinderella came running up to embrace her daughter. “I’ve been searching all over for you. Where have you been? Oh, I knew we should have brought Yindi.”

Olivia responded as best she could while being smothered. “I’m fine, Mom. I was out in the garden when everything happened.” She didn’t feel the need to tell her mother *why* she was in the garden.

Cinderella had become more protective since Marcus and Jacob had left on their quest to find a cure for the slumbering King Phillip. Olivia couldn’t blame her, but she was becoming a little overbearing. Now, even if Cinderella wasn’t around, she made sure Olivia’s personal faery, Yindi, was. Tonight, Olivia was thankful Yindi was back home or she would be fawning over Olivia too.

“Mom, I’m fine, really,” Olivia convinced her mom, who finally let go. “Have you seen Dad?”

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Cinderella checked her daughter for any injuries while she answered, “I think I saw him over by the stairs with your uncle. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Mom,” Olivia stated, “I’m fine. I promise. How about once I’m done talking to Dad, maybe we go play ‘Don’t Sit on the Cake’?”

“That sounds like a plan.” Cinderella gave her one more hug.

Olivia slowly picked her way through the crowd until she made her way over to her father and uncle Harry.

“I’m telling you, Harry, it was just some dumb prank. Trust me, I have a nose for these things, you know,” King Louis reassured his brother with a wink.

“And I’m telling *you* that all the same, I’m going to take precautions. This happened in *my* castle. *My* home. Not yours. And I think you’d feel differently if it did.” Even though Harry was younger, he was definitely the more cautious one of the two. “This one was different. Brazen. I just have a bad feeling.”

Louis clapped his hand on Harry’s shoulder, shaking his head. “You and your feelings.”

“Yes, me and my feelings,” Harry retorted back. “And if memory serves correctly, those feelings kept you out of trouble many times.”

“Oh, I would’ve been fine. Got the luck of the Fae with me.” Louis gave another wink and noticed Olivia walking up. “Olivia, speaking of luck. Looks like my girl stayed out of harm’s way, as usual.”

“Olivia, *are* you all right?” her uncle asked, giving his brother a disapproving look.

“I’m fine, Uncle Harry, thank you.”

“Of course she’s fine. My girl knows how to take care of herself.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I was just telling your uncle I think some Dainian Rogues had a twisted sense of humor.”

“I hate to say it, Dad, but I’m with Uncle Harry on this one.”

King Harry, along with his wife and daughter, knew about Olivia’s gift. So when she described the colors she saw with the two figures, both kings took it seriously. And when she explained how they simply vanished, they grew even more concerned because it meant stronger magic was in play.

“Looks like I might have been mistaken, Brother. My apologies,” King Louis offered.

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“Louis, I’m not jumping the wall or anything, but I think we need to relay this information to Queen Aurora and make sure we all keep in close communication for a while. I’ll let Kretcher know we might be in need of his services while he delivers his paper to stay in frequent contact.” Harry motioned for his right-hand man, Henry Watersworth.

“What is it, Sire?” Henry was as loyal as they come.

“First, how is everyone? My wife wouldn’t want anything to spoil the cake unveiling.”

“Just fine, Sire. The faeries are finishing up with a few minor injuries, and all the performers have been informed to carry on. I believe the games are—” A small ball of fire erupted by the Dragonfire Drops contest. “As I was saying, the games are back underway. The festivities will be ready for the queen’s creation, I assure you.”

Louis couldn’t resist, “Did you make sure Grayson protected the tapestries this year?” The group chuckled.

Harry poked his brother. “I’m going to tell my wife you said that.” He redirected his attention to Henry. “Everything sounds wonderful, Henry, thank you. Now, will you please inform Queen Aurora we need to hold a short conference with her in my study?”

“After the cake, of course,” Louis piped in.

“Yes, after the cake. Speaking of cake, excuse me while I go find the birthday girl.”

The king and Henry walked off, leaving Olivia and her dad relatively alone.

“Have you seen your mother yet?” her dad asked, looking through the crowd.

“Yeah. She was a little over the wall, but I think she’s fine now.”

“Well, with Marcus gone, you’re like an only child now. I know you’re sixteen and more grown up than most sixteen-year-olds, but you’ll always be her baby, so just try to allow her to mother you. You’ll understand someday.”

“I know, Dad, and I’ll try. We’re going to go play the cake game now.”

“Oh good, I’ll come watch. It’s been too much responsibility recently.”

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

He hugged her and became more serious. “I’m proud of you, Livy. Following those Rogues like that. It was very brave.”

“Thanks, Dad, but I just saw something others couldn’t. It wasn’t that dangerous though. Really, it’s not that big of a deal.”

He pulled away and looked down at her, as if saying, “Maybe.” Olivia knew there were a multitude of thoughts behind his pensive brown eyes. She had seen that look before, but as before, his eyes shuttered and the thoughts were hidden again. “You go get your mother. I’ll meet you there.” He managed a smile and kissed her forehead.

Olivia found her mother and headed to join the game, which was simple enough. Ten participants walked around ten chairs with small, collapsible boxes on the seats. Inside one box was a petit four, which the gamegoers didn’t want to sit on. But the sweet from sour was that if they did, they got to eat the squished confection. Each round, a petit four was secretly placed under a different box. The game continued until only two remained, and the winner received an actual cake or pie.

Olivia got out in the third round but enjoyed a flattened chocolate treat. Cinderella surprisingly made it all the way to the final round and won, sharing her winnings with the other contestants.

Soon after, Lillian’s cake was presented, and everyone sang “Birthday Merriment.” Olivia was impressed at her aunt’s concoction this year. Not only did it not run amuck, but it also tasted good.

After a while, Olivia rejoined her cousin and friends to discuss the day’s events. No new information really came about. Sir Laurel was still less than knightly, and Avery still had an opinion. However, Olivia noticed her cousin wasn’t quite engaged, even distant. Olivia didn’t usually peer at others without their permission, especially family. She never felt right about it. But in certain cases, she allowed her intuition to override the feeling of guilt.

Olivia focused more on Lillian’s mood. Olivia took a deep breath and calmed her mind. Usually it wasn’t difficult for her, but the number of people surrounding her forced her to concentrate more. Slowly, she felt her connection with Lillian grow, an invisible tether forming between them. The sounds of the party became muted and her peripheral vision hazed, leaving Lillian to be a clear beacon. Olivia’s face began to tingle, like walking through mist, and Lillian’s

Secrets in the Garden

aura appeared. Usually, her cousin's aura was a swirl of red and blue, but now it was filled with more orange. *Something has happened. She's excited. Nervous. Is it from everything that's happened? I'll have to ask. But now's not the time.*



The party drew on for a while longer until the sun made its daily farewell.

"I would love to stay," Queen Aurora said sincerely, "but I have a council meeting to get back to. With the season upon us, the shipping lanes will be open soon for trade, and there's business to discuss. I believe we're taking a couple of wagons of thackleberries with us, yes?"

King Harry responded, "Seth should have them ready to go with your carriages whenever you're ready, Aurora."

She, Avery, and Layla said their goodbyes and headed back to Caldera.

"Are you sure you won't stay, Brother?" Harry hugged Louis.

"Ah, I wish we could, but I'm afraid the power will go to the duke's head. You know how he can be. Another week and I may not have a job." They both laughed at shared memories. "Plus, we still like the night life. Beautiful weather. The stars. Reminds us of the time we met." Louis glanced over at his blushing wife. "My little midnight miracle."

"Louis, that's enough," Cinderella lightly scolded him.

As the families gave hugs and kisses, Olivia pulled Lillian aside.

"Are you okay?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, why do you ask?" Lillian replied, somewhat strained.

"You just seemed... somewhere else after your cake presentation. I just wanted to make sure those idiots didn't ruin your birthday." Olivia knew that wasn't it, but whatever Lillian was hiding was hers to divulge, not Olivia's to pry out of her.

Lillian paused, validating Olivia's suspicion, but didn't give any more than that, saying, "No, no. I mean my nerves were shaken, but it didn't break my wand or anything. I went for a walk, and I'm fine." Lillian paused again, "I wish you guys weren't leaving right now; it's nice having another girl around. I miss you."

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Lillian avoided saying what was on her mind, and Olivia wasn't going to press. "I miss you too, Cousin. Maybe I could come back after the Dawning Festival. Mom has been a little too 'momish' since Marcus left."

"Yeah, Avery said she's really had to step up her responsibilities since Jaccob left. Probably why she was a little intense today."

"Jaccob has only been gone a few months, Lillian, not seventeen years," Olivia jested, and the two laughed.

The families bid their final farewells, making comments about not waiting so long to get together again. King Louis and Queen Cinderella got into their carriage to lead the way home and Olivia climbed into hers, thankful for a change that Marcus wasn't with them so she could ride alone with her thoughts about the day's events. Unfortunately, two figures haunted her conscience as the rocking of the carriage lulled her to sleep.

CHAPTER 3: Chateau & Snow

May 15

As she awoke the next morning feeling refreshed, Olivia gazed out at the picturesque views rolling by. The dwarves had put one of their new advancements on the wheels and axels to make the ride smoother. Olivia would have to remember to thank them next time as previous trips had bumped and bounced her out of a few day dozes and deep slumbers.

As always, the voyage home was beautiful this time of year. The foliage in Valanti was in full bloom, and the weather, which was warmer on this side of the Kraneth Mountains, was perfect for an open-window carriage. Slowly, the fragrance of flowers was replaced by the fresh, cool scent of pine as they approached the mountains. It reminded her of home.

They had ridden through the night and would continue through the day until they reached Chateau Chávez late in the evening. The former fort was now a modest lodge in the Kraneth Mountains, situated about halfway between Valanti and Tapera. It had been built decades ago by order of Olivia's great-grandfather when Tapera was the only stronghold against Zoldaine. After his defeat, señor and señora Chávez procured the fort and spent a few years converting it into a sort of bed and breakfast, which served as an ideal midway point for the solid three-day journey. They even had stables where frequent wayfarers could swap out their horses. The Kretchers always had a couple on hand for their newspaper, and the royal families shared a few for whenever they traveled from one kingdom to another.

She pulled back a drape over the window, and as she suspected, there was snow on the ground. Even more than when they had

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passed through a few days ago. She got into the storage under the bench across from her and pulled out her coat. It wasn't long after that when Olivia felt the carriages slow, and she knew they had arrived.

Señor Chávez was the first to greet them. “Hola, Your Majesties. Welcome back. I trust your trip was eventful. How was Princess Lillian and the celebration?”

“Hello, Omar, my friend. Good to see you again,” King Louis greeted the owner with a handshake and a hug.

“It was wonderful, Omar,” Cinderella chimed in as she stepped off the carriage. “The festivities were breathtaking, and Lillian was beautiful as always. She appreciated your well wishes.”

Omar addressed the princess, “And what say you, Miss Olivia?”

“It was delightful, señor. I hated to leave, but I'm glad to be home. Well, almost home anyway—happy to be here.”

“My wife and I were hoping you'd stay the night as it is so late. She has already prepared a meal for you in anticipation of your arrival. So please, come in and rest while my staff takes care of your things.”

The party went inside, where they were greeted by a delicious aroma followed by the charming hostess.

“Lucia, look who has arrived,” Omar announced.

Lucia came out from behind a counter. “I know, Omar, I was the one who told you they were here, remember?”

“Yes, yes, mi esposa, I know. I was just excited is all. The king still owes me a rematch in Pinochle.”

“After dinner though. Come, Your Majesties.”

The Charmings removed their cloaks and walked through to the parlor. It was a large, open room with a stone counter for check-ins to the right. Large windows adorned the opposing wall so guests could take in the beautiful scenery. To the left, stairs led up to the rooms and down to the makeshift storage cellar. Beyond the stairs was a quaint area for guests to lounge. It was adorned by an ornate stone fireplace señor Omar had carved himself and provided a warm ambiance. The giant framed mirror above the mantel reflected the length of the room, making it appear larger than it was. The comfy, oversized chairs invited patrons to enjoy company, a hot beverage, or even a nap.

Chateau & Snow

The family continued farther into the dining room. It was much nicer than when soldiers had occupied it. Now chandeliers and paintings brightened the room at night, and an open wall of windows let in natural light. Currently, the only light coming in was the soft glow of the outside snow reflecting the light of a waning full moon. However, the atmosphere was overshadowed by the aromas of Lucia's cooking.

Olivia hadn't realized how famished she was. They had food along the way, but nothing compared to Lucia's home-cooked meal. The silence coming from the royal family was their best compliment.

"I take it everything is to your liking?" Lucia chuckled.

"My apologies, señora," Cinderella said, finishing a bite. "It is exquisite as always. Is this a new dish?"

"Not a new one, no, but I haven't made it in a very long time," Lucia reassured her. "It's called chile en nogada. I was hoping you'd like it. I'm planning on entering it into the Dawning Festival contest."

Louis gave a small pause in eating, "The stuffed peppers, are just... just..." He put another forkful in his mouth and sighed with contentment.

Lucia gave a thankful nod. "The trick is the right proportions of meat, fruit, and spices. I'll be able to properly garnish it with pomegranate for the festival in August. But I'm able to make a pretty good cream sauce up here in the mountains."

Omar joined the praise. "Well, I think it's perfect. Just like my little mojarra, isn't that right?" Lucia didn't acknowledge him. "Mojarra? Hola, Lucia?"

She finally responded, "What? Yes? Sorry, mi amor, I was just thinking of another recipe for the festival," she smiled. "I've been asked to help Boulanger Beaumont with this year's celebration treat."

Cinderella was excited for her friend. "Oh, that's wonderful, Lucia! I'm sure you'll do fine."

King Louis was hesitant. "I hate to discuss business on such a pleasurable evening, señor, but a recent event has... got my guard up. How have the creatures been behaving?"

Olivia wasn't sure why her dad wouldn't just say goblins and orcs. Maybe because they reminded him of a time where things weren't so civil and the "creatures" terrorized his people. It wasn't

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until Zoldaine's defeat that they retreated back into the caves and holes they had crawled out of. With a lack of direction, they were basically harmless. Basically.

Lucia shifted in her chair, upset at the question. "I think I'll go get dessert." She left, leaving an awkward silence.

The king apologized immediately, "I'm sorry, my friend, I didn't realize things had gotten that bad."

Omar consoled the king, "They're not, Your Highness, they're not. She's just not feeling well is all. We really haven't had many problems for a while now. Occasionally, we'll see them out and around, I'm sure scrounging for whatever meal they can find. My sweet Lucia has started tossing the scraps out in a bowl, thinking she can win them over. I've tried to convince her otherwise, but you know how she can be. A heart of unconditional love."

"Well, I can't say that I'd encourage that behavior, but she's your wife. Mine tends to have a heart of gold as well." Louis put his arm around Cinderella. "But if you have any disturbances, I'll be more than happy to send some of my guardsmen up here to help."

Omar leaned forward. "If you don't mind me asking, what event has happened?"

The king did not want rumors spreading around so soon. "Oh, some miscreants at the birthday party thought it'd be funny to pull a little prank. Nothing to be concerned with."

Olivia heard a looming "yet" that her father didn't finish but could read on his face.

The somber mood was quickly alleviated when Lucia carried out a tray of desserts with a smile, "Provecho!"

The company finished their meal with a delicious dessert of flan and sugared cream. The sugared cream was a year-round treat at Chateau Chávez. Usually, anywhere else, it was available only during the winter months because of its frozen consistency, but with the chateau being in the mountains, it was always cold enough to create, and the cellar proved the perfect place to cure and store it. Tonight's variety included thackleberry and a dulce de leche flavor, a special treat reserved for the Chávezs' favorite guests.

With full stomachs, the Charmings said their good nights and headed to their rooms. During the restoration, the Chávezs enjoyed the room renovations most, and now they represented different themes. Some reflected the Chávezs' natural heritage, others were

Chateau & Snow

more traditional, and still others had a magical motif. But each room lured their guests to relax and let their worries slip away once their heads hit the down pillows.

Once in her bed, Olivia tried to sleep, but she had slept too much in the carriage. She got up, thinking a nice mug of warm milk and cocoa by the fire might help.

Olivia smiled, thinking back to her Poppy. Sometimes during the summer, he would bring her up to the chateau, just the two of them, for some quality time. One of their favorite pastimes was playing checkers by the fire while sipping on mugs of hot cocoa. He never let her win.

“Olivia, my darling, if I let you win, how will you ever learn to play?” he asked while resetting the board.

“But Poppy, I’ll never win. You’re too good,” a young Olivia whined.

“That’s because I’ve had more practice than you, dear. When I played my grandpa, do you think I always won?”

Olivia shook her head.

“Of course not. But if you’re truly trying, failures are simply the steps to success. And one day, when you do beat me—and you will—just like I finally beat my grandpa,” he winked, “it will be a true victory and not one that has been handed to you. You must always face your adversary with determination, Olivia. Observe them. Watch for patterns and weaknesses. Even your strong Poppy has them if you look close enough. Now, are you ready for another game?”

Olivia missed his company—and his hot cocoa. It always tasted the best.

Downstairs, Olivia was surprised to see someone else up at this hour. An old man was having a discussion with Omar by the fire. Olivia didn’t recognize the man. She guessed him to be in his late seventies or early eighties. Even though he was by the fire, he was still wearing a purple cloak that struggled to stay upon his frail frame. As she observed him, Olivia’s eye was suddenly caught by a ring flashing on his left hand. Its green color seemed to dance with the firelight more than most gems. Not wanting to be caught staring, Olivia continued down to the cellar to find her ingredients.

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The Chávezs had previously invited her and the rest of the royal family to consider the chateau as their home, so she never felt strange helping herself. The cellar was an eerie place during the day, let alone at night. The dungeon décor was still very much a part of its atmosphere. The original doors remained, leaving a heavy, ominous feeling of those who had been imprisoned here in the years before. Only a minimum number of torches lit the walls to keep the temperature down. The natural cold made it perfect for storing food but uncomfortable for anyone staying more than a few minutes. Olivia walked past the first cell, paused, then stepped back to peer through the barred window. It was empty, but Olivia could have sworn she heard the cries of a forgotten prisoner. *It's just your mind playing tricks, Olivia. You know better.* And she did. When she was a child, she was sent down here to get some flour for Lucia, but before she had gotten to the last step, she came racing back up, swearing she heard someone. After some investigating by Omar and her father, a small crack was discovered in the ceiling of the far cell that was allowing a whistle of wind to come in. Omar had explained there were several fractures in the chateau's original stonework, and they would oftentimes produce ominous sounds with the drafts they created. *I'm sure it's just another crack. I'll have to inform Omar.*

Olivia hurried down, hunting for the cell that held what she was looking for. *Dry goods.* She figured the cocoa would be here. *Flour, corn, salt, sugar, spices...* Ah, here it is. Olivia picked up the jar labeled "Cocoa," ready to get out of the cellar.

But as she turned to leave, she bumped into an actual person, nearly making her heart jump out of her chest and her knees buckle.

"Oh, my apologies, Miss Olivia," Omar supported her. "I didn't mean to startle you. I simply saw you come down, and I thought you might want some help."

Olivia caught her breath and calmed down, "It's okay, señor. I just hadn't heard you come down. I couldn't sleep, so I thought some hot cocoa might help."

"Absolutely. That's always a good remedy. I see you found the cocoa. Mi esposa has sugar upstairs, but the leche is back in the second-to-last cell. However, may I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"I have found that when I have trouble quieting my mind, a nice walk in the cold, fresh air always does the trick. There's a couple of

Chateau & Snow

paths that would be lovely in the moonlight. I could have your drink ready for you when you get back.”

Olivia decided it was a good suggestion, headed up to the parlor, put her cloak on, and strolled out into the cold mountain air. The initial temperature change was a shock, but soon the air was a welcome crispness that really did clear her mind. Occasional snowflakes would flutter down from the trees when the wind blew through the pines. As she walked, Olivia began to feel like she was being watched. *You're the only one out here, Olivia. There may be some nocturnal creatures, but you're just rattled from the cellar.* She even stopped to look around and release her ability, but as she suspected, there was nothing. *Stop going over the wall. This is supposed to calm you down. There's no one out here this time of night.* She paused to take a breath and focus on the beauty around her.

The moon was high, illuminating the firs casting shadows all around her. An owl sent out its call, and she heard an answering response from his mate. This was what Olivia needed. She closed her eyes and allowed her mind to clear. She let the events from the party melt away like the snow falling off her shoulders. It was so quiet. She thought she could even hear the roar of the river at Twin Falls. But then the sound grew louder. Olivia opened her eyes to see more snow falling than before. *What is that sound?* It built to a deafening pound. The moon overhead went dark. Olivia whirled toward the sound as the ground around her began to shake. What she saw stole the breath from her scream. An avalanche was heading straight for her.

CHAPTER 4: Questions

There was nowhere to go. Olivia quickly did the only thing she knew would help and backed up against the mountain. She ducked down and prayed to the Fae as the roaring snow filled her ears. She braced herself for the blow... but it never came. Although the deafening rumble continued, Olivia looked up to see a seemingly impossible sight. It appeared all of the snow was being diverted around her, as if it were traveling down an invisible slide. She just stood in awe. *What's happening? Am I asleep?* There was no explaining it. As quickly as it had come down, the snow ran its course. Olivia was left standing untouched. It was then she finally noticed a thin dome of snow had accumulated over her. *What is going on? I have to be dreaming. There's no possible—* Before she could finish her thought, the dome dissipated, leaving her blanketed in a light covering of snow. The moon shone clearly overhead once again. As Olivia shook the snow off, movement caught her eye. Not just movement though—color. A bright red... something. It was in the forest, maybe thirty paces beyond the tree line, glinting in the moonlight. *What is that?* Olivia began to move closer.

“Olivia! Your Highness, are you out here?” Lucia’s voice was quickly approaching.

Olivia heard Lucia but was too entranced by the red. She glanced in Lucia’s direction for only a moment, but when she turned back, the red sparkle was gone. *Blast!*

“By the Fae, are you all right?” Lucia began checking over Olivia. Her touch brought Olivia’s mind fully back to the present.

“What? Oh, yes, yes, señora. I’m fine,” Olivia finally acknowledged Lucia’s presence. “Thank you, I-I think I’m okay. I must have just been out of its path.”

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“I was in the kitchen when I felt the chateau starting to rumble. I knew what it was but didn’t worry because of where the chateau was built. But then Omar came running up, yelling you were outside. He bolted out of the door, and I followed as fast as I could. He must have gone the other way. Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

The adrenaline was starting to wear off, and Olivia began to check herself over. “I’m fine, I think, I’m... Yes, I’m okay. I...” The events of the last few minutes flashed through her mind, ending with the flash of red. She thought about mentioning what happened, but she needed time to process everything. “I’m fine, Lucia. Please, let’s head inside. Hopefully your husband’s hot cocoa will be more calming than his walk!”

The two carefully picked their way back to the chateau, Olivia welcoming Lucia’s surprisingly strong, supportive arms. Olivia was fine physically but only now realized how mentally exhausted the encounter had made her. She felt wrung out. *I shouldn’t have any trouble sleeping now.*

Once inside, Lucia took Olivia’s coat and led her to the fire. A few of the guests had come down to see what was going on.

“Es bueno, everyone. Everything is okay. Just a small avalanche from the new snow. As soon as mi esposo gets back, he’ll have some warm milk for you all.” Lucia turned to Olivia. “It appears your parents slept through the disturbance. Muy cansados. The trip must have worn them out. Don’t you worry though, princesa, I will talk to them mañana when they wake up. Rest now for a moment.”

Lucia had Olivia sit down across from the old man. Olivia sank into the chair, finally allowing her tense muscles to relax.

“Glad to see you’re okay, Princess.” The old man’s voice was stronger than his body but raspy.

“Thank you,” was all Olivia managed to get out. Suddenly, her intuition was telling her to get away and now. She didn’t understand. She’d begun to relatively calm down from her experience, so she allowed her gift to come forward. For the second time tonight, Olivia had no explanation for what she was seeing—or *wasn’t* seeing. *He has no aura. That’s not possible.* She focused on the man and could swear he shifted in his seat as if he knew what she was doing.

His gaze met hers. “Is everything all right, Your Highness?” Dark eyes pulled her in. She needed to leave, but her limbs wouldn’t cooperate.

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Omar burst through the front door, breaking the spell the old man seemed to have had on her. “Olivia, oh thank the Fae you’re here.” Omar came running over. “Estás bien?”

Olivia had just enough strength now to stand and greet Omar, “Yes, señor, I’m fine. Let’s go get that hot cocoa you promised.” As she shambled off, arms linked with Omar’s, she turned back and looked at the old man over her shoulder.

“Be well, Your Highness. T’would be a shame if anything happened to Tapera’s beloved princess.”

Olivia knew no one else would even remember what he said, let alone how he said it. But the ominous tone was in contrast to the well intentions his words professed.

Olivia sat at the bar, attempting to allow the hot cocoa to do its job, but it wasn’t easy. Of course the close encounter with the avalanche was enough to shake anyone’s stability, but the old man shook her soul. Most of the guests had had their nightcap and were now moving back upstairs, leaving Olivia alone with the proprietors.

Lucia was drying the last of the mugs. “Omar, I can finish up here. Why don’t you go to bed?”

“Okay, mi amor.” He went in to kiss his wife, but she turned abruptly and held up her hand.

“Omar, remember I am not well. Both of us cannot be dragging the wagon. I’ll be sleeping in the side room again so I won’t disturb you.”

“I trust your judgment, but it’s been two weeks now. If you’re not better soon, I will take matters into my own hands and bring the physician. Have you taken your medicine yet?”

“Doing it now, mi amor.” And Lucia popped a lozenge in her mouth.

Omar gave Olivia a reassuring wink and headed off to bed.

“How are you feeling, Your Highness?” Lucia inquired as she tossed her towel on the counter and proceeded to pull a sandwich out of the icebox.

“Still a little uneasy, but I think the cocoa is helping. How can you still be hungry?”

Lucia opened a jar and scooped out a small spoonful of purple powder, bringing it over to Olivia. “Here,” she stirred it into the drink, “this will help you sleep. Dulce sueños. And the sandwich isn’t for me. We have a guest who enjoys a late-night snack. Why

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don't you take your drink up to bed and get snuggled in? That sleeping potion can sneak up on you."

Whether it was the warm drink or Olivia's nerves finally calming down, she was beginning to feel drowsy already. "Thank you, Lucia. I'll see you tomorrow morning." Olivia took her mug and walked back to the stairs, leery of seeing the old man again, but he was thankfully gone. *And I hope I never see him again.* Olivia crawled into bed, snuggling under the thick down comforter. Sipping her drink, she definitely felt the effects of the potion and slipped into a deep, warm slumber. Lucia was right. Not even one event from the decidedly odd night disturbed her dreams.

May 16

The mid-morning rays slowly woke Olivia as they illuminated her room. The smell of bacon and warm pastries managed to get her out of bed and downstairs to join her parents and some of the other patrons.

"Ah, Miss Olivia, you're awake. I take it the extra ingredient did the trick." Lucia set a platter of freshly cut fruit onto the table.

"Yes, thank you." Olivia lowered her voice, glancing toward her parents. "Have you, I mean did you tell them about last night?"

"Omar and I discussed it, and of course we told them about the avalanche and that they must have been snoring louder than a troll to have missed it," Lucia jested, "but seeing as you weren't hurt on your walk, we thought it best to leave that part out, or at least leave it up to you to divulge if you wish." Lucia came up closer. "I remember what it was like to have... *Cómo se dice?* A loving mother?"

Olivia understood Lucia's meaning. Olivia could only imagine how her mother would react after the incident in Valanti. To tell her about last night would put her totally over the wall. "Thanks, Lucia. I appreciate that."

King Louis greeted his daughter with a kiss on the cheek, "Good morning, sweetheart. We were beginning to think you were going to sleep the whole morning away. Come join us for another fantastic spread by señora here. And I think one of your friends is here this morning."

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Olivia knew that a few other families made the trip to Valanti, but none of her friends went as far as she knew. *Who would be here?*

“Olivia!” The young man flushed and quickly corrected himself. “I mean Your Highness. Princess. Over here.”

Oh great, Gavin.

Gavin got up and pulled out a chair where he was sitting with the Charmings. Olivia reluctantly went and sat down. It wasn't that Gavin wasn't a nice guy, or even unattractive, but he'd had a crush on Olivia for a while now, and it was obvious to everyone but her parents. He was always trying to impress her, and even though he was a year older, he acted like a young boy. Adorable but annoying. His father had been part of the high council, so Gavin was always around the castle hanging out with her and Marcus. She had always seen him as her more bothersome brother, but apparently he had seen her differently. Sadly, Gavin's mom had died when he was young and his father had passed away not too long ago, forcing Gavin to grow up quickly to handle the family business. This kept him away from the castle more but did not stifle his advances.

“Good morning, Gavin. Thank you.” She was still polite. “When did you arrive?”

“Last night. Right after the avalanche apparently. Pretty scary, huh? We could have been shoved down the mountainside!”

If you only knew. “Yeah, scary. You must have some pretty good faeries looking after you.”

It was a rhetorical statement, but of course Gavin rode the wind to keep talking. “Oh, yeah, Aethelwyne and Faylinn are amazing. But I didn't bring them on the trip. The Fae herself must be looking over us, I guess.” Gavin seemed fairly proud he was that important, even if it was only in his mind.

Olivia suffered through breakfast, being as courteous as she could, but she needed to talk to Omar before her parents were ready to leave. She finally was able to politely excuse herself and found Omar back in the kitchen washing the morning's dishes.

“Good morning, señor.”

“Buenos días, princesa. I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, thank you.” Olivia paused a moment, unsure she wanted to bring up the topic, but she had to know. “Omar, who was that man by the fire last night?”

Questions

“I don’t really know, Your Highness. He arrived a few hours before your family, coming from Tapera, according to him. Said he had some business to take care of in Valanti and left early this morning. Come to think of it, I never even got his name. Is everything all right, Princess?”

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine,” Olivia lied. “He simply reminded me of someone is all.”

Olivia returned to her room to pack her things. The night’s events ran through her mind. *How did the snow get diverted? What was that bubble around me? What was the red glimmer? Did I hallucinate it? Who was the old man, and why did I get such a negative vibe from him?* There were far too many questions for Olivia to be comfortable with. Usually she was in control of her surroundings, yet the trials over the past few days had left her anything but. She was also very uneasy that her gift had failed her last night, which had never happened before. *Maybe my gift is changing or doesn’t work under stress?* She tried to recall a time when she had been that stressed and needed her ability but couldn’t recollect one. She had a troublesome feeling, however, that there would be more chances for her to test her theory, sooner than she would like.

CHAPTER 5: Home

May 21

Hurrying a little, Olivia slipped on a comfortable but cute dress to wear into town. She hadn't visited since being back, and she was looking forward to seeing her friends and favorite shop owners.

She was glad it was a day without any royal duties because though she loved dressing up for parties, events, and other royal proceedings, she enjoyed being less fussy most of the time.

Olivia looked at herself in the mirror, twirling to make sure her skirts had settled properly. This was one of her favorite dresses: the bodice fit in just the right places, emphasizing her small waist and generous curves. She didn't have quite the height of her mother but was more voluptuous instead. From the portrait gallery in the castle, she resembled the women on father's side more, it seemed.

A tiny knock on the door told her it was time to go.

"Miss Olivia?" an almost child-like voice called out. "Miss Olivia, are you ready?"

"Almost, Yindi," Olivia replied, "but you can come in."

Olivia's door opened and in fluttered Yindi, wearing her usual teal dress. One of the "perks" Olivia had over the other royal children from living in Tapera was having her own personal faery. Although Olivia thought it was cool when she was younger, over the past couple of years, she found it to be cumbersome having what amounted to a constant chaperone.

Olivia sympathized with Yindi though. During the battle of Tiraseine, not only had Yindi's right wing been damaged, making flying more difficult, but she had also lost her twin sister, Yulia.

Faeries in general shared a special bond with one another, twin faeries even more so.

Olivia had been afraid Yindi wouldn't recover, as she fell very sick after the battle, and it took her many months to get better. Eventually, Yindi became well enough to resume her duties. However, as Olivia had gotten older, she found Yindi becoming more protective and clingy. Olivia could only surmise Yindi was unknowingly transferring some of the protectiveness she'd once had for Yulia, but it didn't make her easier to deal with. Olivia had never seen Yindi so upset as she was when Olivia left her behind for Lillian's coronation. Yet since Olivia's return, Yindi had been quite chipper and way less attached, which Olivia wasn't going to question.

"Oh, you're looking especially lovely today, Your Highness. Blue has always been a fantastic color on you. It always complements your hair," Yindi praised.

Olivia's hair used to be blonde like her mother's. But on her sixteenth birthday, she woke up to find it had turned silver overnight. The faeries couldn't explain it, and no magic could be detected or change it. The only other person they'd ever known to have such a color was Al'Ariana before she had passed. It had definitely taken some getting used to. She even tried Hair Hue, but her hair shimmered right back. Her friends all thought it was awesome and that it suited her well, so because she didn't have a choice, she eventually just had to accept and embrace it.

"Thank you, Yindi. It's a nice day, so I thought I'd go casual."

"Well, I think you look lovely. Here," Yindi flitted closer, "I brought something for your hair."

Olivia took the long, twisted piece of birchwood. "It's very nice, Yindi, thank you." Olivia twirled her hair up and threaded the stick through. The gray grain of the wood flowed almost seamlessly with her hair.

Yindi beamed with pride. "I made it while you were gone. I went up by the Falls a couple of times and found the perfect branch."

Olivia adjusted it a couple times in the vanity. "It's truly perfect. Okay, let me slip on some shoes, then we can go."



Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

It was a beautiful spring Saturday, and most of the faeries and townsfolk were taking advantage of it. Tapera was more developed and had more citizens and magical creatures than the other two kingdoms, simply because it was the one stronghold during Zoldaine's reign. And it had grown even more since the refugees of Drod had defected after his demise. The town did its best to integrate them, but living areas and jobs had been tough to find. Over the past few months, a group of refugees, along with some native Taperans, had been working to restore a dilapidated former village to the southeast to finally give the refugees a decent place to call home. However, this wasn't the view of all refugees. Some wanted to go back to Drod and restart there, where their homes used to be. There were rumors that some already had, but nothing could be confirmed. And even more nefarious were rumors of Dainian Rogues on the rise to reclaim Drod for their lord Zoldaine, especially after the incident in Valanti. Yet there was no support to those claims either. "Many people, many words; many geese, many turds," as some would say. But for now, they all managed to get along, for the most part, and all did their best to make due with the current situation.

The walk into town never got old for Olivia. She enjoyed the sights and sounds and, most of all, the people. It was here where she really had begun to hone her skill for reading people. It didn't take her long to realize which people were attracted to each other, which couples were about to fight, and which children were up to no good. She didn't usually meddle in others' affairs unless she found it to be truly serious or life-threatening, which wasn't often. But even without her gift, Olivia enjoyed watching people and how their lives intertwined and the way they interacted.

Although Tapera was larger, it wasn't as orderly or planned as Valanti, with shops haphazardly rising almost organically, creating a web of tangled streets and unique boroughs.

One of her favorite boroughs, Petit Gâteau, held some of her favorite shops. The most well-known, and usually the busiest, was Candie's Confections & Delights. The proprietor, Candie, specialized in edible magic—not cliché potions or tonics but an array of treats, pastries, and pranks for all ages. She recently debuted her latest dessert, the Wizard Wonderfall, which was being served and enjoying wild popularity at Talula's Tapas in Valanti. Candie's classic items included Giggle Gum, which made the eater giggle

with each piece; Poppy Corn, which didn't pop until it was in your mouth; and her famous Chocolate Surprise. Its astonishing surprise was that you never knew what delicacy would be discovered inside, not even Candie. But it wasn't a single surprise—each piece broken off the bar revealed something different, which provided endless excitement.

Olivia's vice was Fluff Busters, a bite-sized treat with a candied shell that burst with a mouthful of sugary, cotton-like fluff. One of King Louis's favorites was Troll Taffy. Wonderfully tasty to the unsuspecting eater but resulted in their breath smelling like troll butt. Her father was always finding new ways to prank her uncle.

After stocking up, Olivia stepped out into the bright sunshine and continued on her way with Yindi, who was now chewing her favorite candy, Burple Yurps, and happily burping bubbles in different colors.

As they walked along, they passed Penelope's Juice and Potions, home of the famous Finkle Wrinkler Potion and Dewdrop Daisy Drink; the *Tapera Tribune*, a modest newspaper that focused more on local news than the traditional *Valanti Valor*; and Henrietta's Hair & Flair, where stylists shined tresses and gave the most luxurious manicures. Mixed between were farm stands showcasing fresh produce and trade shops for cobblestone, iron, and woodwork; wagon repair; and leatherwork. They all nestled next to the town square where the great clock tower stood. Erected as a wedding present from the former king in honor of his son and Cinderella's first meeting, the clock had long been affectionately nicknamed "Midnight."

Olivia and Yindi walked past and headed to the right for Pepita's, home to Olivia's favorite food and best friend.

"Olivia!" A tall, athletic brunette jogged over to hug her friend.

"Abbey," Olivia returned the embrace. "I wasn't sure if you'd be here or home, but this was my first stop."

Abbey eyed the colorful bubbles coming from Yindi. "Apparently not your very first stop, which means you have something for me, yes?"

"Of course I do." Olivia pulled out a piece of Chocolate Surprise, and Abbey broke off a piece and popped it in her mouth. "Well?"

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Abbey held up a finger, closed her eyes, and moaned, “Oh, by the Fae.”

“That good, huh?”

“I wish you could try it. It’s amazing. She really has to start figuring out how to replicate certain flavors.” Abbey paused for a moment to relish the last bits of flavor. “It was like a caramel honey with a hint of orange.”

Yindi gave her last burp of colors. “You’re right, Miss Abbey, that does sound amazing.”

Abbey reached out and touched Olivia’s dress. “This looks beautiful on you, by the way. And where did you get that hair fastener?”

Olivia took it out so Abbey could better see it. “Yindi made it for me while I was gone. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

Abbey turned to the now blushing Yindi. “Well, you crafty little wood faery. Could you make me one?”

“Um, of course, Miss Abbey, it would be my pleasure.” Yindi was hesitant, “But I think cedar is more your color.”

“I agree,” Abbey nodded. “So, what are you ladies up to today?”

“Nothing much,” Olivia replied. “Really just came out to see you.”

“Aww, I’m touched.”

“You should be,” Olivia teased.

Abigail Leigh Thornton and Olivia Annette Charming were best friends in every sense of the word. She was one of the few people outside of the family who knew about Olivia’s gift. Even though Abbey was a few months older, they had always felt like they were somehow separated at birth. They couldn’t be more opposite in looks, however, with Abbey’s dark, olive complexion and Olivia’s peaches-and-cream coloring. Beyond that, their differing height and hair color made it even less likely—but they claimed it anyway.

The trio’s ears perked up as Midnight tolled a melodious tune followed by three loud *GONGs*.

Yindi looked in the direction of the clock. “Oh my goodness. Is it really already three? My apologies, Your Highness, I am needed elsewhere. Faery business. I shouldn’t be gone long. Back in time for dinner.”

Olivia was a little surprised but thankful Yindi was taking up other interests besides her. “That’s okay, Yindi. I’m probably just going to hang around here for a while longer. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Thank you, Miss Olivia. Again, I will try to be more mindful of my future engagements.” With that, Yindi flew out the door.

Abbey looked puzzled. “I thought she was attached to you. What was all that about?”

“I’m not really sure, but since I’ve come back she’s been... happy, I guess? I don’t know, but I’m not asking questions. It’s been nice not having two moms.”

“Well, you know you’re more than welcome to hang here, but I’m pretty busy helping my mom prepare for a big dinner party tonight. I’m sorry, Liv, I know you were wanting to hang out. Maybe talk about what happened in Valanti?” Abbey raised her eyebrows knowingly.

“So you heard, huh?”

“Are you kidding? It’s all everyone’s talking about. But there’s a lot of truths, half-truths, and no truths. I heard there was some sort of an explosion and Zoldaine himself appeared. Can you tell me what happened?”

Olivia told her friend everything, even about the man and woman she thought were responsible.

Abbey sat in silence for a moment. “Wow. That’s really over the wall. What did your dad say?”

“At first, he thought it was just a stupid prank, but after I told him what I saw, he took it more seriously.” Olivia considered telling Abbey about the avalanche and the old man, but Olivia needed answers before she divulged more and added any angst to her friend.

“So what do you think?” Abbey asked.

“What do I think about what?”

“Is Zoldaine back?”

“I doubt it. I mean no, I don’t think so. I think they just meant to scare as many people as possible and my cousin’s party was the right place. But I also think there’s a reason. I just don’t know what yet.”

Abbey’s mom called from behind a back door, “Abbey, darling? I need your assistance please. Is that Olivia?”

“Yes, Mama. I’ll be right there,” Abbey hollered back. “We’ll talk later. Oh, can you do us a favor?” Before Olivia could answer, Abbey hopped up and headed to the far wall to bring back a clock.

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

“Papa knocked it off again. I told him we needed to move it. It’s the third time this month. Would you be a dear and take it to Tinker?”

Olivia took the clock. “Of course. Okay, well, I’ll let you get back to helping your mom. But promise we’ll meet up later?”

“Definitely.” Abbey stood up and gave her friend a hug.

Tinker was a hard man to describe. To say he was eccentric was just one coin from the dragon’s horde. Olivia once heard someone explain him as a person you couldn’t describe but had to experience. He was a Drod refugee. The rumor was he had been the manufacturer of Zoldaine’s torture devices. Tinker’s creative mind knew no bounds, and Zoldaine had abused it for his own twisted means. After Zoldaine’s defeat, the poor inventor had been found rambling across Drod, starved half to death. A couple of soldiers found him and brought him back to Tapera. The faeries were able to repair what they could of his mind, but Zoldaine’s employment had taken its toll. He barely slept. He was constantly talking to himself. And he couldn’t tell good inventions from bad ones. The only thing that remained intact was his first love: fixing clocks. He was the one who added the melodies to Midnight and had pretty much made or fixed every clock in the Tapera Kingdom.

Olivia had learned to announce herself while entering. “Tinker, are you here? It’s Olivia.” She heard some shuffling coming from the back.

A slightly raspy old man’s voice answered to her and then himself, “Of course I’m here. Where else would I be? Such a silly question to ask. Now, I know I put it somewhere over here. *Well, of course you put it over here; where else would you put it?*”

Olivia smiled. “Tinker? Hello?”

Tinker’s head appeared from behind a table piled with various parts. He brushed his thinning, white hair to the side, looking at her with eyes magnified behind thick glasses. “Olivia, I didn’t know you were here, darling. How are you?” He came from around the table to greet her. His wiry frame embraced her with a hug.

Olivia had also learned Tinker wasn’t one to worry about personal space or filter what was on his mind. But he was one of the truest people she knew. “I’m fine, my friend. How have you been?”

“Oh, here and there, this and that, up and down. What is that you have for me?”

Olivia handed over the clock.

“Ah, the Thortons’ clock. He did it again. *You knew he would. You told them.* I know, but would they listen? Of course not. Never mind, never mind.” He turned the clock over in his hands several times then looked up. “Olivia, darling, when did you get here?” He set the clock down and gave her another hug. “How are you?”

Olivia allowed herself a chuckle. “I’m fine, Tinker. I just brought you the Thortons’ clock, remember?”

Tinker blinked owlishly at her behind his thick lenses, then back down at the clock. “Yes, yes, yes, don’t mind this old fool. My apologies.”

“No apologies necessary, my friend.” Olivia was quite used to his absentmindedness.

“So sweet and understanding.” He held her hand. “Oh! Here, over here, come, come, come, I have new things to show you. Come, come.” He all but dragged the princess across the room.

Olivia was always amazed Tinker could keep track of anything in his workshop. Its size could easily house a family of four. There were no rooms, just cabinets, shelves, and tables full of gears, clocks, and parts with no discernible system. But Tinker always seemed to find what he was looking for and always fixed everything on time. With all his repair orders, how he actually had time to invent anything else was astounding.

“Over here, look.” He unveiled a wooden dummy sitting in a chair. Its head was surrounded by a bunch of long, jointed pieces of wood connected by wires with scissors attached to their ends. Tinker turned a crank on the chair’s side a few times and flipped a lever, and the machine came to life. At first, the arms whirled around the head, the scissors mimicking cutting hair. Then it all stopped. Tinker casually kicked the chair like he’d done a hundred times before, and instantly one of the arms zoomed toward its head, lopping it off in one fell swoop.

Well, Henrietta’s Hair and Flair won’t have to worry about going out of business anytime soon.

Tinker appeared flustered and embarrassed, “Ah, well, yes. A few kinks to work out in that one still, but a minor setback is all. Minor setback.” He looked around for another contraption. “But, oh, there’s more. Here, here.” Tinker once more pulled the princess stumbling after him back across the room. “This one will change the

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

restaurant business. As soon as it's finished, I'm going to give it to the Thortons to try out." Tinker set a large wooden box in the middle of his table and opened up various panels on the sides and top. "It's a place setter. See, you just put the plates in here on top, and the silverware goes in the side compartments; set the dial over here to the right table size and..." He pressed a button and the box came to life. Olivia could hear several gears and springs churning. Soon, one of the plates slid out of a bottom slot onto the table where a person might be sitting. A couple more *whirs* and a knife came out one side while a fork and spoon came out of the other, resting slightly crooked in comparison to the plate. "I tried to get napkins involved, but the cloth kept getting stuck in the gears."

"Tinker, that's incredible."

"Keep watching." His eyes widened.

Once the box was done, it spun ninety degrees to set the next place, but the dial jiggled and clicked to a different position.

"Uh-oh. Stand back, princess." Tinker grabbed Olivia by the shoulders and pulled her back a few feet.

Next thing Olivia knew, the place setter shot a plate flying across the room, shattering it against the wall.

"Now the silverware..." Tinker had gone through this routine before.

A knife, fork, and spoon launched from the sides with the fork and knife lodging themselves well into the wooden wall. *Twang!*

"And done." Tinker quickly ran over to turn it off. "I still don't understand why the dial moves. *I told you, you used too much grease.* I did not use too much grease, there's a gear slipping somewhere inside. *Because there's too much grease.* I just need to find it." It was impossible for him to do, but Tinker almost talked over himself. Apparently, it was not the first time he had had that argument.

"Tinker, what happened?" Olivia could see that going very poorly for some dinner party.

"Eh, the dial keeps slipping to a larger table size. One that's specifically for gatherings in the castle and such with long tables. Don't worry though, I'll take care of it."

He continued to show her a bug catcher, a weed puller that couldn't tell the difference between weeds and flowers, a flapjack

flipper that sent one flying to the ceiling due to a spring being wound too tight, and a few other almost successful creations.

“Come, there’s one more thing I want to show you.” He led her back to a corner of his shop. “I’ve only had it for about a month, but it’s marvelous.” There was a large cloth draped over something he had by the windows. He grabbed a couple ends of the cloth and removed it with a flourish. “It’s called a telescope.”

“It looks similar to a spyglass.”

“Oh, it is, it is, but much better. Did you know that the moon is not a perfect circle? It’s bumpy. It has hills and craters and mountains just like here.”

Olivia gave him an incredulous look.

“No, no, it’s true. It surprised me too. But here, here, come see, come see.” Tinker went over to his west window and angled the telescope on the tripod to face the mountains. He peered through the small end for a second, pulled away, making a couple of adjustments, then peered through again. “Yes, yes, beautiful. Olivia, come have a look.” He stepped aside to allow the princess to see.

What she saw shocked her at first. The side of the mountain with its trees seemed as though they were right in front of her, as clear as if she was standing directly next to them. She pulled back for a moment to remind herself she was still in the shop.

Tinker chuckled, “I told you it was better.” Then he whispered to himself, “*You should tell her what you saw. No, not yet, I told you, I’m not done exploring. But you haven’t seen it since the full moon. We will see it again; I told you, you just have to be patient.*” He then looked back at Olivia. “Well, go on, dear, go on.”

Olivia looked through the eyepiece again. It was incredible. She carefully moved the telescope to scan the mountainside. She saw deer and their fawn munching on shrubbery in a clearing. A bird flew with grass for a nest. The Twin Falls were so detailed she swore she could feel the mist. Olivia started to tilt the scope down to see the pool made by the second falls lower on the mountain. Then she froze. A flash of scarlet disappeared as quickly as it had come. Then it flashed again. Olivia grasped the telescope in disbelief. *Could it be the telescope glass catching the light differently somehow? No, this isn’t a trick of the light.*

It was hard to see through the trees but it was definitely there... *And moving?* Then she suddenly remembered something her cousin

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

had told her about a mysterious figure that had been appearing at night over the past few months. *It's the ghost of Valanti!*



Whether Olivia's eyes were opened or closed, flecks of magenta danced in her vision as she lay in bed. She couldn't stop seeing the scarlet speck weaving in and out of the trees until finally disappearing. *There has to be some explanation. Was it the same thing from the other night? Is it the same apparition from Valanti? Why have I never seen it before? Did it save my life?* She would have to go out and investigate the mountainside to get her answers. Her thoughts drifted from planning a method of approach for the next day to where she would start searching to wondering what she might find when sleep eventually overtook her, leaving her to dream of glowing red rays.

CHAPTER 6: The Ghost of Valanti

May 24

Each day was less productive than the last, but Olivia would not be deterred and a new day brought new promise. She opened her eyes and her mouth began watering from the succulent aromas coming from breakfast downstairs. She got dressed, checked herself in the vanity, wrapped her hair up in a bun, fixing it in place with Yindi's gift, and headed down.

Yindi greeted Olivia as she reached the breakfast nook, "Good morning, Your Highness. I trust you slept well."

"Relatively well, thank you." Then Olivia heard another voice besides her parents' coming from the dining room. "Who else is here?" Olivia asked with dread.

Yindi grimaced, knowing the answer would not be pleasant. "Gavin, Your Majesty."

Olivia groaned.

"He has come by to discuss some business with your father. But," Yindi whispered, "I feel he might have some ulterior motive for being here so early. Perhaps a chance to finally catch the princess as she's been so preoccupied for the past few days."

Olivia sighed, knowing full well what Yindi was hinting at. Her parents had informed her Gavin had come by the past couple of days asking for her audience. It was presumed he was wanting to be her escort to the upcoming Midnight Ball, which was less than a month away. Olivia usually just went with a group of friends, but since her sixteenth birthday a few months ago, her parents were encouraging her to take a more active role at the dance, which meant having an actual date. *Blast!*

Olivia entered in mid-conversation.

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Gavin was talking to her father. “I don’t believe I have, Your Highness.” Gavin stood as Olivia came to the table. “Princess, good morning.” He eagerly came around the table to pull out her chair.

“Thank you, Gavin.” Olivia did her best to hide her annoyance. Gavin was genuinely nice; he just tried too hard. Especially with her parents.

“Here you are, sweetie.” The king handed Olivia a basket of croissants as she reached for some jam. “I was just about to tell Gavin why I still call your mom ‘Cinderella.’”

“Louis, this is really not necessary,” Cinderella said, blushing lightly.

“Oh, nonsense, he wants to hear the story,” the king said, gesturing to Gavin.

Cinderella sat back in her chair, knowing she could not talk her husband out of telling a “good story.”

Olivia started eating her breakfast, wondering which version her father was going to tell this time.

“So, Gavin, I’m sure you know the meaning of my wife’s forename and are also familiar with the legend of the phoenix?”

Gavin nodded his head.

“Well, it’s very simple. The phoenix rises, born again from the ashes to become a new, magnificent bird. So it was with my wife, rising from the proverbial ashes of her environment, to capture my heart, becoming a beautiful new queen.” The king beamed at his wife, who was returning it with a glare.

“Becoming beautiful? So you’re saying I wasn’t beautiful before I met you, is that it?” Cinderella raised an eyebrow.

The king quickly backtracked, “No, no, that’s not what I meant at all, my love. You were always beautiful. Just—the chores those wretched harpies had you do kept you dirty, which dulled your beauty.”

“Oh, so now I’m dirty?” Cinderella didn’t ease up.

“No, no, no. You know what I mean. Olivia, please, tell your mother what I mean. You know,” the king pleaded with his daughter.

Olivia smirked and shrugged her shoulders, knowing full well her mom was teasing her dad. “Sorry, Dad. I wish I could help, but I’m really not sure what you mean either.” Olivia gave her mom a sly glance, which Cinderella returned.

The Ghost of Valanti

The king turned back to Cinderella and attempted to smooth over his words. “Sweetheart, you know I love you and how special you are to me. You’re more beautiful today than the first day we met. All I meant was—” The king’s apology was cut short by a knock on the door. “Oh, thank the Fae,” the king exclaimed. “Please come in!”

A gangly young man of medium build carefully strode in. His dark hair and skin were mottled with patches of dried mud.

“My apologies for the intrusion, Your Majesties, but I need to discuss some schematics with the king before moving forward with the east wing renovations.”

The king was all too happy to wriggle out of his current situation. “Digger, nonsense. You have perfect timing. Would you like to take along something to eat?”

“Thank you, Your Highness, but not at the moment. It’s actually imperative we head over there now so the mortar doesn’t harden; otherwise, I wouldn’t have intruded.”

“Of course, of course.” The king turned to his family and guest. “If you will excuse me, duty calls.” He kissed his wife on the cheek. “I love you, my better half.”

“I love you too.” Cinderella’s response was still chilly.

Olivia saw her chance to evade whatever reason Gavin had come. “Mind if I join you two? I’d love to see the work you’re doing, Digger.”

Gavin saw his opportunity slipping away and quickly stood up, “Um, Olivia, if you could wait just a minute, I actually came here to ask you something.”

“Okay, what is it you needed?” She felt bad putting Gavin on the spot, having a good idea what he was going to ask, but she thought he might not when pressured to do it in front of everyone.

Gavin’s cheeks flushed. “Well, I-I mean I was wanting to see if...” He straightened his posture and took a breath. “I was wondering if you would do me the honor in joining me for the upcoming Midnight Ball.”

Blast! Blast! But I’m impressed, Gavin Dupre, you are courageous. Olivia worked to think of a way out. “Oh, Gavin, that’s terribly sweet of you, but I’m already going with Digger.” She gave Digger a smiling, wide-eyed, just-go-with-it look as she went and put her arm through his to make it official. “But maybe next time.”

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Gavin's face fell, but then his features firmed. "Of course. Well, maybe Digger will oblige me with a dance then. If you'll excuse me, Your Majesties, I must be getting back." He bowed to both the king and queen, exiting past Olivia and Digger.

Digger turned to Olivia, "I must say, Your Majesty, I'm a little confused. I understand why Gavin would ask you to the ball, but why does he want a dance with me?"

The king and queen chuckled along with Olivia. "I'll explain later, and I hope you don't mind me commandeering you like that. I really would enjoy going to the ball with you."

Digger bowed, "Then I am happy to be commandeered. Now, Sire, we really must be going. Olivia?"

Olivia realized Digger still thought she was going along, "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I just said that to, well..."

Then it dawned on Digger, "Oh, I'm with ya now. Okay, he wants to dance with you and you—yep, I got it now. Sorry, sometimes my spindle's a bit short of yarn up there." He knocked on his head.

Digger and the king left, leaving Olivia with her mom and Yindi.

"You know, Olivia, Gavin is a nice young man. You really should give him a chance," Cinderella suggested.

"With all due respect, Mom, you didn't really date that much. You went to one dance, made the prince fall madly in love with you, then became queen. So you'll have to excuse me if I don't take much stock in your dating advice," Olivia smiled. "But your story is really wonderful. You two are a perfect pair, just like your glass slippers. I guess I'm just looking to find the other half of my 'pair.' And while Gavin is nice, he definitely does not fit."

Yindi piped in, "I'd have to agree with Miss Olivia, Your Grace. Gavin is a sweet boy but not the right one for our young princess."

"Well, then, maybe your new date to the ball? He's pretty cute behind all that mud."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Okay Mom, I'm leaving now." Olivia gave her mom a hug. "I'm going back up to the falls again if that's all right."

"That's fine, sweetie, it will give me more time to think of an appropriate suitor for you," Cinderella mused. Olivia's jaw dropped. "Oh, Olivia, I'm only tugging your tail. I have plenty to keep me

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busy without interfering with my daughter's love life. Just be home in time for dinner, please."

"I will." Olivia headed back upstairs with Yindi. "Yindi, I just need to change and pack a lunch. Are you ready?"

"Of course, Your Highness, I can go prepare the lunch while you..." Yindi paused for a moment as if she heard something, and a thought crossed over Yindi's eyes. "Oh my goodness, Your Highness, I am so sorry, but I completely forgot Faery Godmother Laleña needed my help with something this morning. I hope this is all right. I can cancel, though, as you are my first priority."

"No, no, that's all right. I think you've discovered as much as you can up there anyhow." Olivia had taken Yindi with her to the falls a couple of times to try and detect any sort of magic that might have been involved with the mysterious red light, but there was nothing. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about the lunch. Go ahead to Laleña, I'll see you when I get back and let you know if I find anything."



Olivia had had no luck in finding any trace of the "ghost" at Tocarin Falls so far. But she knew what she'd seen and was bound and determined to find *something*. Growing up in Tapera, she knew magic could play a part in any mysterious situation, but she did not believe an actual ghost or spirit was behind this. With that notion, she scoured the mountainside, searching for any trace of a more *material* being. But whoever or whatever the ghost was had proved more elusive than she had anticipated. Olivia even went back to Tinker's to use the telescope again, making sure she was hunting in the right spot, but she still came up empty-handed. *Maybe the reason you can't find it, Olivia, is it returned to Valanti.*

Olivia sighed as she once again rode up to the familiar area. Snickers, her horse aptly named for his laugh-like whinnies, had been a good companion these past few days. Olivia didn't mind being around people, but she wasn't inherently the kind of person who enjoyed the whirls of a princess' social life. She preferred small groups of friends or, more often than not, simply being alone. So even though she wasn't making any headway, she found relief in the stillness after all the excitement of her trip to Valanti.

Beyond the After: Princess Olivia

Olivia dismounted Snickers, tethering him to a tree. She pulled out two apples from her satchel to treat him while she was gone.

Olivia had combed most of the area around Twin Falls and had slowly been working her way down the mountainside. She had been to the spring a few times where the water split, forming the two falls. One went down the Cuanaic Range and the other the Tocarin. The source of the spring came from the Menari River, starting in Tiraseine, where it traveled underground until it resurfaced high in the Kraneth Mountains. But the Tocarin Range had two falls. Farther down the mountainside was the smaller but still beautiful Tocarin Falls, which formed a small pool before running on and forming its own lake.

It was the pool that was Olivia's current destination. She breathed deeply, enjoying the scent of fresh pine mixed with the cool mist of the falls and... *thackleberry bread*? She sniffed again. There was no denying it. She had just recently eaten her fair share of thackleberry muffins at the celebration and recognized the scent. Even though the fruit was native to Valanti, thackleberry bread was still common in Tapera, easily found at most bakeries. But up here in the mountains? Olivia was both confused and curious. *Someone is up here*. Olivia quickened her pace but then considered it could likely just be a fisherman from town, even though the better fishing was at Tocarin Lake.

Olivia worked her way to the pool, staying behind a small cluster of trees till she discovered the source of the aroma. A half-eaten loaf of thackleberry bread sat on a large stone near the pool, along with a block of cheese and a recently cooked fish. Olivia paused, scanning the area for any indication as to who left their meal unguarded for any animal to nab. Not readily seeing anyone, she decided to open her ability and search to see if she could detect any auras. Still nothing. *Odd. Surely someone is nearby*. Finally, she decided to venture closer for a better look.

Olivia got about halfway to the pool when the back of her neck began to prickle. She felt like she was being watched again, much like that night at the chateau. She kept walking forward until she got to the food, then sank down alongside it. She hoped to give whomever was nearby a chance to reveal themselves, and when they didn't, Olivia decided to force their hand.

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“It’s not polite to spy on people, you know,” she called out. *Not that I’m being much more polite, but desperate times call for desperate measures and all.*

Silence.

Olivia sat for a moment, trying to think of a different approach. “Hello? I’m not here to bother you.” *That’s not entirely true.* “I’m looking for something—or someone, rather. I think they may have saved me from the avalanche the other night.” Olivia wasn’t sure about that, but she was trying anything to get a response. “I promise to leave you alone if you can help me. Please, I just want to thank them.” Olivia glanced around, hoping to catch any movement. “They’re wearing a piece of jewelry, perhaps a ring or necklace. It’s unique. It’s a red stone that flashes in both moonlight and sunlight.”

Olivia never heard the man who approached her from behind. The deep voice startled her. “Then I guess you’re looking for me.”