Whispers of the Wildwood

Paranormal Romance

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Chapter 1:

The Prince

The grand ballroom is a glittering sea of nobility, filled with the finest lords and ladies of the kingdom. Crystal chandeliers cast a golden glow over the marble floors, where couples waltz to the music of a string quartet. The air is thick with the scent of flowers and expensive perfume, mingling with the low hum of polite conversation and the occasional burst of laughter.

At the center stands Prince Dorian, a striking figure of regal charm and careless confidence. His dark hair, tousled just enough to seem artfully disheveled, frames a face that is handsome and almost seems unfair. His ice blue eyes gleam with mischievous, a hint of roguish intent behind a practiced smile that has already won over half the women in the room and soiled a few on the outskirts, much to his father's dismay.

Dorian's clothing is impeccable—a striking contrast of black velvet and gold embroidery. The fabric of his coat sways gracefully with each step, and the intricate patterns catch the light and reflect it in dazzling ways. A ruby-encrusted sword at his side glints with the same regal opulence, but it seems more decorative than functional.

Despite his flawless appearance, there is something about Dorian that sets him apart from the rest of the aristocracy. As he moves through the opulent ballroom, his expression remains composed and polite, but there is a hint of rebellion in his posture and his gaze. Unlike the other men at the ball, who seem to relish in their titles and wealth, Dorian's demeanor hints at a deeper understanding beyond his privileged upbringing. His eyes, sharp and observant, take in every detail of the room with a critical eye.

As he passes by, Dorian's eyes, the color of polished sapphires, scan the room, lingering momentarily on the clusters of giggling debutantes. Their laughter rings out like chimes, each dressed in elaborate gowns that shimmer in hues of emerald, ruby, and gold. The fabrics catch the light with every movement, and the air is thick with the sweet scent of perfume and anticipation.

The young women exchange excited whispers, their gazes occasionally darting toward him, hopeful and intrigued. Dorian takes in the scene with a slight, knowing smile, the familiar pull of his reputation weaving through the space between them. He spots the posturing gentlemen, their tailored suits and stiff collars a stark contrast to his own relaxed stance. With a smirk on his lips, he effortlessly navigates through the crowd, his steps commanding attention and admiration from all.

Though he may be surrounded by wealth and extravagance, there is something about Dorian that suggests he does not truly belong here. And perhaps that's exactly how he likes it. As he makes his way to join a group of guests, one lady in particular who is engaged in conversation with another, one can't help but wonder what secrets lie behind those strikingly handsome features and enigmatic smile.

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Lady Celia is adorned in a flowing gown of ivory and gold, her soft golden curls cascading down her shoulders. Her bright eyes dance with laughter as she smiles at Dorian, revealing a set of perfect pearly white teeth. Her cheeks with a light flush, add to her ethereal beauty along with a subtle waft of perfume as Lady Celia dances with Dorian, a hint of floral and spice that lingers in the air and adds to her allure.

She moved like a swan gliding across a tranquil lake, her laughter like the tinkling of wind chimes in a peaceful garden. As Dorian whispered in her ear, her cheeks bloomed with a rosy hue, making her even more radiant. He deftly spun her around the dance floor, his touch lingering,

leaving her under his spell. And how he reveled in his power over her, knowing she was helplessly drawn to him.

Dorian leans in, whispering, “You dance like a dream, Lady Celia. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to steal my heart.” Her perfume, light and musky warred with her female scent.

Lady Celia giggles, blue eyes wide with admiration, captivated by his attention. One of his favorites he’s been trying to get into his bed, or even into hers, he’s playing tonight to capture the affection of the golden-haired beauty. Delicate and slender with small mounds of breasts she pushes to him and she feels his heat rising. His intent seems to be working for her scent is intoxicating and he is delighted that tonight could be the night. He smiles in anticipation.

Again Celia giggles. “Ah, Your Highness. Though I hear your heart is not so easily captured. Many a lady has lost her, dare I say purity to your charms. I’m not sure I want to be another of your conquests without some assurance.” A smile curves her lovely lips and her lashes shadow soft blue eyes flutter teasingly. She takes a deep breath inhaling the heady scent of his male aroma.

Dorian’s smile widens, a glint of arrogance in his eyes. “Surely you cannot imagine I would take advantage without sharing something of myself.” He leaves the meaning open to interpretation and they always imagine he means to sharing his crown. Foolish females.

Dorian's voice, smooth as melting butter, carries a hint of mischief as he murmurs, "For a beauty like you, I might be persuaded. You are delightful, and those lovely lips are so very tempting." His words hang in the air like a soft caress, making her heart race.

As the final notes of the dance fade away, Dorian gracefully lifts her hand, his eyes never leaving hers. With an air of practiced elegance, he bends forward and brushes a gentle kiss across her knuckles. The touch of his lips sends a shiver coursing down her spine, a sensation that

tingles and spreads through her. She can feel the heat rise to her cheeks as his eyes darken, sensing the faint, scent of her desire.

His smile deepens, a knowing curve of his lips, as if he's tasted a secret only he can savor.

Then Dorian catches the eye of another lady across the room—Lady Isabelle, who offers him a coy smile. Dorian winks, already planning his next conquest, as he continues to charm Lady Celia, moving her away from the dance floor, towards the gardens.

Suddenly, a courtier approached, bowing. “Your Highness, your father requests your presence.” He bowed again, posture humble but firm, as if accustomed to delivering unwelcome messages.

Dorian's smile faltered for a moment, a flicker of irritation flashing in his eyes but he masked it with a sigh of mock disappointment. “Lady Celia, it seems duty calls,” he said, his tone light but his gaze betraying his frustration. “But do save me another dance, won’t you?”

Lady Celia nodded, her heart racing from their encounter. Her cheeks flushed, her breath quickened, and she felt a surge of longing in her chest. The heat that had flared within her, he was certain, burned hot, a fire kindled by their brief exchange. He could see in her eyes she would eagerly anticipate their next meeting, but for now, he knew she would find another to satisfy her.

As the courtier led Dorian away from the dance floor, the prince's easy demeanor began to shift. The charming smile that had graced his lips moments ago melted away, replaced by a look of simmering resentment. His jaw clenched slightly, his steps growing heavier as he followed the courtier out of the ballroom.

The music and laughter faded into the background, and with every step, Dorian felt the weight of duty settle back onto his shoulders. “Damn,” he muses. “What does *he* want?” It would not be a conversation Dorian

welcomed. He prepares for what lay ahead, his mind working through the possibilities as the glow of the ballroom recedes behind him.

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Approaching the king's chambers, Dorian hesitates, then knocks before entering. The scent was thick and oppressive, a blend of old wood, leather, and something sharper, ink or oil. The dark oak paneling, polished to a deep sheen, carried the earthy aroma of aged timber, mingling with the cool, damp smell of stone walls behind that had weathered countless winters. The air was heavy with the musty undertone of parchment and wax, a reminder of the endless decrees and edicts that had passed through this room, each one bearing the weight of the kingdom's affairs.

King Alaric's aroma was both sharp and musky — a mix of sweat and a smoky cologne hints at cedar and vetiver, and a note of old leather, a raw, masculine presence, radiating authority.

The faintest hint of smoke from the fireplace blended into the background, adding a slightly acrid, woody edge to the air as if the very atmosphere of the room was infused with the king's stern demeanor, and the weight of his decisions hanging in the air like a tangible thing, pressing in on all who entered.

Dorian strides in, a hint of defiance in his step, and bows with a mock flourish. And the king smells the fear on him as he speaks, his voice tinged with sarcasm, "You summoned me, Father?"

King Alaric looks up, gaze cold and scrutinizing. When he speaks his words are firm with a hint of anger. "Another family paid off." He threw down the parchment. "I've had enough of your antics, Dorian. Roving around the court, seducing every noblewoman who glances your way. You're a prince, not a common rogue."

His eyebrows draw together, nearly meeting in the middle. Dorian almost laughs because it reminds him of the swamp slugs he'd once seen.

Instead, Dorian's tone turned sharp. "Ah, but Father, isn't that the point? A prince must be charming, keep the court entertained"—his voice takes on a sarcastic tone —"and above all, secure alliances, isn't that what you always say?"

King Alaric's expression hardens. Gravely he says, "I say a prince must be responsible, think of the kingdom first, not just his own pleasures. You shame this family with your behavior." The king shakes his head and a look of disgust crosses his features.

Dorian's smirk fades, a flash of anger in his cold blue eyes as he takes a step closer, his voice low and challenging. "And you shame this family by chaining me to a destiny I never chose. You want me to be a puppet, to dance to your tune. But I'll live my life as I see fit."

For a moment, there's silence between them, tension thick and almost suffocating. King Alaric's eyes, usually warm like honey, now resemble hard amber — cold, unyielding, and unbreakable. They narrow as he studies his son, his gaze sharp and penetrating, voice dangerously calm, cuts through the stillness.

Unexpectedly, his tone softens, a hint of weariness slipping through. "You think you're rebelling against me, Dorian," he murmurs, his words steady but laden with a deeper meaning, "But one day, you'll realize it's you you're hurting." The statement hangs in the air, a stone dropped into a still pond, sends ripples of tension through the room.

Dorian's jaw tightens, "then I suggest you find someone else to rule once you're gone," he snarls as he turns on his heel and stalks from the room, the door closing behind him with a solid thud.

The hallway outside the king's chamber smells fresher and lighter than the heavy air within. Dorian took a deep breath and sighed. The aroma of beeswax polish clung faintly to the smooth stone floors and wooden panels, mingling with the crisp, clean scent of recently laundered

tapestries hanging along the walls. A hint of lavender and rosemary with other scents from an herb garden, drifted through the air, offering a calming fragrance that helped to soothe the senses.

Occasional drafts brought in the cool, slightly metallic tang of fresh air from the high windows lining the corridor, the glass slightly fogged by the evening mist. He could smell the courtiers and guards who had long since passed leaving traces of leather, the faint spice of cologne. The hallway's atmosphere offered a breath of lightness in an otherwise weighty place.

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The corridor was dark, the shadows stretching long against the stone walls. Sconces lined the hallway, their flames igniting one by one as Dorian approached, each burst of light an unwelcome reminder of his presence. He longed to tear them from the walls, to shatter the damn things into a thousand pieces, except he knew they'd only reappear, glowing defiantly once more. There were times when he preferred the darkness, where he could be just another shadow in the castle's labyrinth.

As he walked down the dimly lit corridor, the distant echoes of laughter and music from the ballroom lingered faintly behind him, a reminder of the life he had left behind for now. His face was a mask of conflicting emotions, a storm beneath the facade. He paused by a window, gazing out into the night, where the moon cast a cold, silver light over the gardens below.

For a brief moment, something flickered across his features — a flash of regret, a hint of doubt — but he buried it quickly beneath the easy, practiced smile he wore as the light sound of footsteps approached, and he turned, a sly grin on his lips. "Well, if it isn't Lady Isabelle," he said, smile broadening, his eyes lighting with familiar mischief.

Lady Isabelle, the woman he'd flirted with earlier, stood before him with a seductive smile playing at the corners of her lips. Her voice was

soft, like a caress. “I was hoping you might want some company, Your Highness,” she murmured, her thick, dark lashes fluttering as she leaned in closer. “How may I be of service, my Lord?” Her intent was unmistakable.

Her scent enveloped him, a heady mix of jasmine and rose, with a hint of something warmer, like amber or musk. It clung to her, mingling with the warmth of her body, creating an intoxicating allure that filled the space between them. An undertone of sweetness, like honeyed wine, rich and inviting, was drawing him in. The fragrance seemed to dance around him, teasing, enticing, as if it carried a promise of pleasures yet to come.

He inhaled, feeling the familiar tug of desire, even as a small part of him resisted, caught in the brief memory of something—or someone—else. But Lady Isabelle’s scent was persuasive, a subtle spell that clouded his thoughts and pulled him into the moment, where only her soft words and closer proximity mattered.

Dorian’s smile widened, the charming rogue slid effortlessly back into his role. “I’m sure we can think of something,” he replied, now teasing. “H ow could I refuse an offer from such a beautiful, charming, and, may I say, sexy lady?” Her cheeks flushed as her eyes heated with desire.

He took her hand, leading her into the shadows, away from prying eyes. A whisper of conscience intruded, a nagging voice warned him of the consequences, but he brushed it aside with a practiced ease, focusing instead on the moment — the thrill, the secrecy, the intoxicating blend of danger and desire that clouded his thoughts. The shadows deepened around them, a curtain to the world, leaving them in their own private reality, where the rules felt distant and irrelevant.

Lady Isabelle sensed his need, the urgency beneath his calm demeanor. She knew her role, knew it well. She sank gracefully to her knees before him, her hands moving with practiced ease as she began to loosen his trousers, her gaze never leaving his, her smile never wavering. Dorian

let the shadows take him, burying whatever conflict still lingered deep within, surrendering to the fleeting pleasure Lady Isabelle brings.

Chapter 2:

The Encounter

Hours later, the dance now at an end, the palace gardens are bathed in the soft hues of dawn, the first light of day creeps over the horizon casting a golden glow over the world. The flowers, still wet with dew, glisten like jewels, their colors vibrant in the early morning light. The air is cool and crisp, filled with the sweet scent of blooming roses and the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze. It is a place of peace and serenity, a sharp contrast to the turmoil within the palace walls.

Prince Dorian strides along a cobblestone path, posture relaxed but his thoughts are distant. The night's revelry lingers—the faint scent of wine and the memory of Lady Isabelle bring a chuckle. But now he seeks solace in the garden, away from the suffocating expectations of court life and the lingering echo of his father's stern words. The morning's peace is a balm to his restless spirit, though he carries the weight of his rebellion deep within.

As Dorian rounds a corner, intent on finding peace and quiet, he stops abruptly, his breath catching in his throat.

Aurora stands not far off, bathed in the golden light of the dawn. Gazing into the distance at what he knows not, but she is radiant, her dark red hair catches the sunlight in a fiery halo, her emerald green eyes like the clear sky just before sunrise. Dressed in a simple but elegant gown of vivid green that matches her eyes and silver trim, she seems almost otherworldly, as if she herself had stepped from the dawn.

Aurora possesses a unique grace that blends both gentleness and command. Her presence is marked by an undeniable strength that is reflected in her robust, not-so-delicate appearance. Tall and well-built, she stands apart from the fair flowers that often populate his

conquests; Aurora is a different kind of allure, one that commands attention with both her poise and her power.

Dorian's gaze lingers, in admiration and curiosity. He's heard of her—Aurora, named for the goddess of the dawn, a woman of impeccable reputation and unmatched beauty, known for her role in the court and her deep sense of duty to Elysium. But seeing her now, she seems far more than just a name whispered in the halls of power. She seems... real, tangible, yet unattainable, and no doubt with high expectations for any would-be suitor.

Aurora, sensing his presence, turns to face him. As their eyes meet, time itself seems to pause, the world holding its breath in anticipation. An unspoken connection flickers between them, an inexplicable spark of recognition that neither of them fully grasp. It's as if they have known each other longer than a fleeting glance, though the meaning of this moment remains just out of reach.

Dorian recovers first, a wry smile curls his lips as he inclines his head in greeting. Smoothly as ever, drawing on his false persona, Dorian smirks. "Lady Aurora, I didn't expect to find such a vision in the garden at this hour. Do you often greet the dawn like this?"

Aurora's eyes narrow slightly, detecting the hint of flirtation in his tone, but she does not shy away. Instead, she tilts her head, studying him with a mixture of curiosity and guardedness. She knows of Dorian—charismatic yet mischievous, well-known for his roguish charm, soft lips and smirk—with his more scandalous actions, a prince who is dangerously seductive yet easily navigates social graces while indulging in more forbidden pleasures. Still, there is something about him that piques her interest, a depth behind his easy charm that she finds intriguing.

Calmly, Aurora speaks. "I find peace in the early hours, when the world is quiet and the day's not yet begun. And you, Your Highness? Do you often wander the gardens at dawn, or am I simply fortunate this

morning to meet your royal self?" A hint of flirtation in her voice catches him off guard while the twinkle in her eyes tells him she could be teasing. Yet there's also a subtle challenge in her words, a question of whether his presence here is as genuine as her own.

Dorian is briefly taken aback, used to women fawning over him, eager to please, but Aurora... She is very different. She meets his gaze unflinching, her poise unshakable.

Dorian feels excitement and is intrigued by this woman. He chuckles. "Fortunately, I was drawn here by the promise of the beautiful and serene. Though I must admit, I didn't expect the beauty to be quite so... captivating." His head tilts to one side as his ice blue eyes warm slightly and twinkle with merriment.

Aurora allows a small smile to grace her lips, but it doesn't reach her eyes. Rather he sees a wariness in her having seen Dorian's type before—men who seek to charm and conquer, leaving a trail of broken hearts behind. Yet, something in his words stirs a flicker of interest within her, a curiosity that she can't quite dismiss.

"You speak as if the world is yours to enchant, Your Highness. But beauty is not so easily won, nor hearts so easily swayed. Some things require more than a silver tongue and a pretty smile." Now she presents the challenge and he is further intrigued. Dorian's not used to being challenged, especially not by someone so disarming. He feels a surge of admiration for her, mingled with frustration.

She is unlike any woman he has ever met—strong, intelligent, and not the least bit impressed by his usual charms. And yet, he is drawn to her in a way that unsettles him. Dorian steps forward, wanting to be closer to this lovely yet bold female.

"Perhaps... but I've always believed the most precious things in life are worth the effort. And I've never been one to shy away from a challenge, especially one such as you seem to offer."

Aurora held Dorian's gaze, her heart pounding faster with every passing second, despite her best efforts to remain composed. She sensed the sincerity in his words, a rare glimpse of the man hidden beneath the prince's title. His expression, earnest and unguarded, revealed a vulnerability that stirred something deep within her—a quiet longing that she hadn't allowed herself to feel for so long.

Yet, alongside this attraction, there was a tension, a silent battle between desire and duty. Aurora knew the peril of letting herself fall for a man like Dorian, a man whose very presence could shatter her carefully constructed world. He was compelling and enigmatic, a force of nature that could just as easily uplift her as devastate her. She felt drawn to him, almost against her will, like a moth to a flame, fully aware of the risks but unable to ignore the pull.

But the weight of her responsibilities pressed down heavily on her. As a servant of the temple of Elysium, her life was bound by oaths and expectations. Every decision, every feeling, was scrutinized under the watchful eyes of the pious and devout. Taught to temper her emotions, to prioritize her sacred duties above all else, and to resist the temptations that might lead her astray.

Aurora's heart ached with the conflict. She longed for something beyond the walls of the temple, something real and unrestrained. Yet, she knew she could not afford to let her heart decide; she had seen too many hearts broken by Dorian—charming, intense, and ultimately unattainable. She fought to keep her voice steady, to quell the tumultuous feelings swirling within her. Her gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, as if trying to memorize his face, to remember the spark she saw there, before duty inevitably pulled her back into its unyielding grasp.

For now, she would stay on her path, even if it meant denying what her heart was beginning to whisper to her soul.

“What is it you seek, Your Highness? A fleeting thrill? Or something more lasting?” A slight smile flirts at the corners of her lovely lips, lips Dorian would like to kiss.

The question hangs in the air between them, laden with unspoken possibilities. Dorian hesitates, caught off guard by her directness. He is used to pursuing without consequence, to charming his way into people’s lives and hearts without ever having to question his own intentions. But Aurora’s question forces him to confront something deeper, something he hasn’t fully acknowledged within himself.

His ice blue eyes soften into warmth as he considers her question and he ponders the question himself but answers. “I’m not sure... but perhaps that’s what I’m trying to find out.”

~

A poignant pause, a moment of silence where they simply look at each other, the world around them forgotten. The connection between them is undeniable, a magnetic pull neither of them can ignore but one of them must. Fraught with tension, and with the knowledge their lives are on divergent paths—his filled with rebellion and recklessness, hers with duty and sacrifice both know nothing could ever be between them.

Aurora breaks the silence, her voice almost wistful. “We all have our roles to play, your Highness. Our duties, our dreams... they don’t always align. But perhaps…” Aurora hesitates, then she continues. “Perhaps in this moment, we can find something in between.”

Dorian studies her, a mixture of admiration and something deeper in his eyes. He sees a conflict within her, the struggle between who she is and who she wants to be. And for the first time, he feels a pang of understanding, of shared frustration. He knows what it’s like to be trapped by expectations, to yearn for something more.

“Perhaps,” Dorian says with sincerity. Again, the moment stretches between them, filled with unspoken promise and what could be. There is

a connection here, something neither of them expected, something that goes beyond mere attraction. It is the beginning of something deeper, something that will challenge them both in ways they have yet to understand.

As the first rays of the sun break over the horizon, casting the garden in a golden light, Aurora steps back, breaking the spell between them. Breasts heaving and slightly breathless, she speaks, “The day is beginning, your Highness. We should return before we’re missed and gossip of impropriety flies off loose tongues.”

Dorian nods, though he feels a strange reluctance to leave. He knows this is the beginning, their paths will cross again, or so he hopes, and this brief encounter has awakened something within him—a desire for more than just fleeting pleasures, a yearning for something real. His voice quiet, “Until we meet again, my Lady. I look forward to it” Dorian bows slightly.

Aurora offers him a small, enigmatic smile, one that holds the promise of more to come. “Until then, my prince among princes.” She turns and walks away, her figure disappearing down the garden path, leaving Dorian standing alone in the dawn light. He watches her go, his mind racing with thoughts of what just happened, of the strange and undeniable connection they share.

As the sun rises fully, banishing the shadows of the night, Dorian realizes something within him has shifted. He may not know what the future holds, but he knows one thing for certain: Aurora touched something deep within him, something he cannot ignore.

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At first, flashes of lightning struck the earth, thunder roared across the landscape and Aurora caught a glimpse of Dorian, the crown prince as he fled through the fields surrounding the city disappearing into the

forest known as the Wildwood, a dangerous place with terrible creatures, or so she'd heard.

Aurora finds herself standing at the edge of a serene, moonlit lake surrounded by an enchanting forest. The water's surface is so still it mirrors the star-studded sky above, creating an illusion of endless depth and infinity. The air is cool and carries the subtle fragrance of night-blooming flowers, and the soft hum of nocturnal creatures fills the atmosphere with a gentle melody.

As she gazes across the lake, a mist begins to rise, slowly swirling and forming intricate patterns that dance above the water. From within the mist, a majestic silver stag emerges, its antlers adorned with shimmering crystals that reflect the moonlight. The stag's luminous eyes lock with Aurora's, giving her a sense of familiarity and gentle strength. It bows its head slightly, inviting her to follow.

Compelled by an inexplicable pull, Aurora steps onto the lake's surface, which solidifies into a path of glowing lotus flowers as their scent intoxicate they unfurl with each step she takes. As she follows the stag across the lake, the forest transforms; trees twist and sprout thorns but as she delicately makes her way through they turn into elegant arches, and delicate fireflies illuminate the path, guiding her deeper into this mystical realm.

On the far shore, the stag leads her to a grand, ancient tree whose branches stretch across the sky, leaves glistening like emeralds. Dark shadows loom and a soft seductive voice tempts her with desires she's never before expressed. It wraps her in a comforting embrace, smothering. Aurora struggles to breathe – to break free and when she does, beneath the tree stands Dorian, clad in ornate attire. His ice-blue eyes now are warm and inviting, filled with a tenderness she has never seen before.

As Aurora approaches, the silver stag transforms into a cascade of sparkling light encircling both her and Dorian, intertwining them in a

luminescent embrace. The ground beneath them blooms with countless Lunar orchids—golden pearlescent beauties —that weave together, creating a beautiful tapestry giving a sense of harmony and perfection, though not the perfection of Elysium.

Dorian extends his hand and as their fingers touch, energy pulses through the surroundings. The night bursts into a brilliant display, a multitude of colors, auroras weaving across the heavens in vibrant shades of purple and green. The radiant lights reflect in their eyes as they draw closer, the world around them dissolving into a swirl of sensations of joy, peace, and profound connection.

As the dream fades, Aurora hears a whisper on the wind—a blend of her voice and Dorian's —saying, "Together, we are whole."

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Awakening, Aurora found herself tangled in the remnants of a dream that made no sense. Images flickered like half-remembered shadows — a journey through danger to reach Prince Dorian, his face coming into focus, his voice low, commanding, the feeling of his presence, so close it made her breath hitch in her throat.

And then there was his scent. It lingered in her mind like a phantom, rich and compelling. Dorian smelled of leather and fresh pine, a rugged, earthy aroma that spoke of forests and untamed places. There was a deeper note beneath, something darker, the faint hint of heated embers, as if he carried the remnants of a fire that had burned long into the night. Intertwined was a touch of spice — perhaps sandalwood — that gave warmth and complexity, adding an air of mystery that seemed to surround him.

His scent had enveloped her in the dream, pulling her closer, making her feel both comforted and unsettled. It was a scent that whispered of strength, of secrets held close, and of a life lived on the edge. Even now, in her chambers, she could almost feel it lingering around her, and her

heart quickened despite herself. Looking out the window of her chambers, she saw the dawn and knew it was just a dream, trying to shake off the strange sensations. But the scent of him… it stayed with her, as if woven into her very skin.

She knew of him, of course, but the idea of a relationship with Dorian seemed absurd, almost laughable. Not that she hadn't daydreamed of such things before — who hadn't? — but this dream felt different, more vivid, yet still it was just a dream, far removed from the reality she lived.

Her life was within the temple walls, a priestess dedicated to her sacred vows. She'd met Dorian briefly once before, a fleeting encounter, but she knew the rules that governed her station. For a priestess like her, any relationship with a prince could only exist with the king's consent and with the intent to wed. And for that to happen, she would have to renounce her vows — a step she would consider only for the right man, someone who moved her heart in ways that transcended her current life.

And she knew it could not be Dorian. The mere idea was almost comical; it was impossible. She had her duties, her faith, and her commitment to the temple. Dorian, for all his charm, was not the man she envisioned surrendering to, giving up everything for. No, she told herself, pushing the idea away. Whatever that dream was about, it wasn't her reality — and it never would be.

Chapter 3:

A Dangerous Liaison

As twilight fell, the sky above the Eternal City deepened into rich hues of indigo, violet and scarlet, casting long shadows across the golden streets. Stars began to sparkle in the distance, their light adding a subtle shimmer to Elysium, the Eternal City below basked in the soft ethereal glow of evening.

Aurora stood on the Seraphim Cliffs, hair tightly bound, her alabaster wings spread as she soars into the evening sky. Aurora's heart stirs with joy as her gaze drifts over the Eternal City below thoughts wandering to Dorian, and for a moment, she is lost in a daydream of possibilities of what might have been.

As Aurora landed softly upon the cliffs, her wings folding gracefully behind her, a gust of wind rustled the nearby trees, their leaves whispering secrets to the evening sky. The air was charged with a peculiar tension, and her senses prickled with awareness. She paused, her gaze narrowing as she sensed a presence nearby in the shadows.

Turning swiftly, she saw him — Dorian, the crown prince, sitting casually on a stone bench, lips curved in a self-assured smile. On his lap, sat his latest conquest, a beautiful courtier draped in jewels, her laughter a tinkling sound grated against the serenity of the moment. Aurora's eyes flash with a mix of recognition and disdain; it was a scene she preferred not to witness, and wondering why he'd come to this place.

"Aurora," Dorian murmured, his voice smooth as velvet, his gaze drifting over her with a practiced ease. "What brings you here?" His tone light, almost careless, as if he had forgotten the woman he had held in his arms just moments before.

Aurora turned to face him, her expression unreadable. “I had no idea anyone else was here. My apologies for disturbing your tryst, Prince,” she replied, her voice calm as she turned, wings spread for flight until he quickly stood, arm outstretched.

“No, don’t leave.” The slender, delicate female who moments before had been in his embrace, a beauty with silver-white hair and barely enough clothes to keep her warm in the chill air, slid from his lap, glaring at Aurora her full scarlet lips in a pout, smooth forehead crinkled in a frown as she pulled on a cloak. “Dorian,” she cried. “send her away!”

"Return home," Dorian commanded, flicking his fingers without a care, and she vanished. "So nice to see you. Do you often come here?” His full lips curve in a grin. “I would not have intruded on your private place if I’d known. As you see I was seeking privacy too.” A blush pinked his cheeks. “For my tryst, as you say." A broad smile played on his lips, and his blue eyes sparkled with amusement.

Aurora wings had relaxed when he asked her to stay, but appalled by his behavior toward the young woman she hesitated before speaking, "Do you always treat your women so rudely?"

"Only when someone lovelier appears," he replied. "I’m glad you stayed though.” Reaching to touch her arm, he said, “Come, sit with me and we can enjoy the evening?" His lips curled into a smirk.

Flinching at his touch and surprised he suggested such a thing, Aurora’s wings unfurled with a snap, forcing Dorian to step back, his smirk fading into a scowl. “I have no intention of being here with you or anywhere,” she declared, her voice unwavering. “I’ve seen how you treat your female companions. For shame.”

Aurora spread her wings then took flight. Dorian's black brows drew together sharply, his eyes narrowing as he observed her in flight. "Pity," he remarked, then Dorian's jaw tightened as one of his father's guards arrived in time to observe Aurora's departure. Dorian did not bother to dissuade him of any assumptions he may have erroneously drawn seeing her with him.

"My prince, the king requires your presence. If you would please accompany me?" For a brief moment, Dorian seemed to struggle with an inner conflict, then with a sigh of resignation, he turned, opened his wings and flew with the guard back to the palace.

~

Aurora noted the exchange, from a distance, her heart pounding seeing the anger and rebellion within Dorian at what likely had been a request to return to the palace and one did not deny the king, not even a Prince. She knew his rebellion would lead him down a dangerous path one day. And his careless use of women infuriated her, but he was also the one who heated her blood.

"He'll not treat me like one of his trollops," she fumed to her close friend, Gloria then grinned. "She slid off his lap onto the ground." Their laughter tinkled in the air. "She was barely clothed. I could see her nether parts when her legs splayed as she fell."

"That Trollop was a princess whose father is in delicate negotiations with the king and has been for days," Gloria said, chuckling. "Lover boy is in big trouble." Aurora's heart hurt at her friend's words. She knew Dorian could talk his way out of trouble, but she also knew his comeuppance was on its way.

~

The torches flickered in the cool night breeze as Dorian strode down the marble hallways of Elysium, the golden spires of the palace casting long shadows under the moonlit sky. The evening had begun like so many

others, with the court gathered in revelry, and whispered secrets. But tonight, something was different. Tonight, Dorian felt a restlessness gnawing, a desire to break free from the gilded cage that had held him captive for so long.

Aurora's words from their last meeting still echoed in his mind, her voice a mixture of concern and hope. She spoke of change, of a better world beyond the strict rules of Elysium. Her fiery spirit had ignited something within him, something that could not be contained. But as he entered the grand ballroom, his gaze caught sight of a silver-haired beauty, her pale skin glowing in the soft light, full breasts and a tiny waist above rounded hips and all thoughts of rebellion and ideals faded into the background.

He approached her with his usual charm, a smile playing on his lips as he whispered sweet nothings into her ear. The woman, clearly captivated by the prince's attention, giggled and leaned into him. Dorian's hand drifted to the small of her back, pulling her closer, not caring for any consequences in that moment. He was a prince, after all, and rules had always bent to his will.

But Aurora had seen it all. She stood at the edge of the room, her emerald eyes narrowing as she watched Dorian's brazen display. Her heart sank as she saw the man she thought capable of so much more, reduce himself to the same old games as he pulled the woman into the shadows, his hand sliding beneath her skirts, as his lips doubtless murmured promises he would never keep; it sent a wave of disgust through her then rage as she stormed away.

~

Aurora's heart felt heavy with disappointment. How could she have been so foolish to think he would change? Dorian was nothing more than a charming rogue, a prince who flouted his duties with a wink and a smirk, hiding his true self beneath layers of charisma. Aurora's resolve

hardened. She could not afford to be distracted by him any longer. After all, she had her duties to perform.

Later that evening, as she wandered alone in the gardens, she found Dorian also alone in one of the palace gardens, his earlier conquest nowhere in sight. Surprised by her approach Dorian tenses as Aurora turned to leave, her steps deliberate.

“No,” he almost shouted. “Please don’t leave.”

“Dorian,” she began, as Aurora turned back, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her, “you’re playing a dangerous game, one I want no part of. I will not be brought down with you”

He looked up at her, his look one of feigned innocence. “Aurora, darling girl, you worry too much. It was just a bit of fun. And no one knows we’ve spoken, and certainly nothing else.”

“Fun? Your indifference to the consequences will eventually bring disaster upon you. The divine council—your father—what will they think when they hear of this? And as I recall, a palace guard saw me with you on the cliffside, though it was innocent. He may not have thought so. And your lady friend, she is the daughter of…”

Dorian interrupts as he waves a dismissive hand. “You’ve naught to fear. And they’ve heard worse. I’ve always managed to charm my way out of trouble.” Yet deep inside he felt a quiver of misgiving.

“Not this time,” Aurora warned, her voice sharper. “There’s a line, Dorian. You’ve crossed it… your behavior is shameful.”

Briefly, Dorian’s facade cracked, and she saw a flicker of something deeper in his eyes—fear, perhaps, or regret—but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. He turned away, his gaze lost in the distance. “Maybe,” he admitted quietly, “but I am who I am.”

Aurora's heart ached for him, but she knew she couldn't let herself be pulled into his downfall. "If you continue down this path, Dorian, you'll lose everything. I can't stand by and watch that happen."

"Then don't," he said, his tone bitter. "I never asked you to. Listen darling girl, I adore you but leave me to go my way and you go yours." A sadness in his eyes halted Aurora.

~

Before she could respond, the sound of footsteps echoed through the garden. Elysium guards, in their gleaming armor, approached. The commander stepped forward, his voice cold and authoritative.

"Prince Dorian, by order of King Alaric and the divine council, you are to be taken into custody." He nods at the guards on either side of Dorian who moved in closer.

Dorian's eyes widened, mouth opens. "What? On what grounds?" He steps away from the guards, preparing to flee it seems.

"Your actions this evening have brought shame upon your father, King Alaric, and the entire court," the guard stated coldly. "You are to face judgment tomorrow."

Then, one of the guards clamped a silver band onto his arm. Aurora's eyes widened in recognition—it was a band designed to suppress any and all magical abilities.

Aurora's heart pounded. This was happening too fast—she hadn't expected the council to act so swiftly. "Wait!" she called stepping between Dorian and the guards. "This must be a mistake—"

But her plea fell on deaf ears. The guards pushed her aside, as they led him away. His earlier bravado crumbled into panic. "Aurora!" he cried, a hand reaching out.

She reached for her magic, but it was foolhardy to use it to help him. She watched him being hauled him off leaving her in the garden, the

weight of her failure pressing down on her. His magic had been stilled. She had warned him, tried to steer him away from the path he was on, but he hadn't listened. And now, he was paying the price.

The following day, the council gathered in the grand chamber, their judgment swift and unforgiving. "Dorian you are now stripped of your rank and any rights as a prince are revoked."

King Alaric, face a mask, silently listened as they made it known his son was cast from Elysium, exiled for his transgressions.

Aurora watched from the shadows, her heart heavy with sorrow as he was escorted from the palace, denied entrance again. While there was little she could have done, and she had tried. But the chancellor ignored her pleas.

"No, Aurora. And I don't know why you've aligned yourself with the prince. There are rumors about the two of you since that last night on the cliffs. You could be in danger as well."

In stunned disbelief, Aurora didn't know how to answer. "I've never been with Dorian in that way, chancellor," she argued except the Chancellor wasn't listening, rather he turned and walked away.

~

As the court disbanded, she hurried to find Dorian, desperate to see him one last time before he left, banished forever. She found him in the palace stables, slumped in defeat as he saddled his horse, preparing to leave. His eyes were dull, his spirit broken. When he saw her, a bitter smile tugged at his lips.

"Come to gloat, to say goodbye?" he asked, his voice hollow.

"I'm sorry," Aurora whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "I tried to warn you, and I did speak to the chancellor but to no avail."

He shook his head. “I told you so, eh? Well, I appreciate you trying, and It’s too late for apologies, I fear. I made my choice.”

“He accused me of being the one with you on the cliffs. Why would he have thought that?” She stepped closer, touched his arm, but he shrugged her off and pulled away. “I don’t know,” he said softly, the lie bitter on his tongue. “Don’t make this any harder.”

Aurora nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Alright, if you say so. But where will you go?”

“Somewhere far from here,” he replied. “Somewhere I can forget.”

As he mounted his horse, Aurora felt a surge of loss. “Please be careful. The mortal realm is unforgiving, if you go there. And you’re still—” She wanted to say, a prince, regardless of the lost title, but Dorian finished for her, “A fool?” he said, a sad smile on his lips.

Without another word, he spurred his horse forward, riding off as Aurora watched him go, heart breaking with each hoofbeat that echoed in the darkness. She had warned him of the consequences, but even she hadn’t imagined they would be this severe.

As the dust settled and the sound of his departure faded, Aurora stood alone, torn between her duty to the divine and the feelings she could no longer deny. She recalled the dream and wondered.

~

I had watched as he disappeared into the darkness. My heart ached for him but I would not give up, not yet. For in the depths of Dorian’s rebellion, I still carried a spark of hope—a flame of love that, if nurtured, could one day light his way back to Elysium. So I turned to re-enter the palace and the throne room, where I’d promised to meet my friend, Gloria.

As the doors opened, I see the throne room, the usual invitation to enter was replaced by a different, unsettling sight. The king's face, lined with age, turned in my direction, a deep frown etched across his

features. I watched as he called a guard, glancing my way again. A chill ran down my spine, and a sense of foreboding settled in—his next words were not going to be in my favor.

Not stepping forward, and not spotting my friend, hesitantly I slowly retreat from the throne room. As soon as the heavy doors closed behind me, my pace quickened, nearly breaking into a run as I left the palace. I then knew the meaning of my recent dream. "The chancellor must have told him he suspected I was with Dorian," she muttered under her breath, realization dawning with each step.

Finding my way to my friend Gloria's, I learned the king indeed had intended to question me. News spread fast; it wasn't that long since I'd left the palace, except, Gloria's mother was on the council, so she would have known right away. "I'm afraid, Gloria. What will he do?"

More than one person had ended up in the dungeons when the king didn't believe answers to his questions. She knew he would be unhappy with Dorian's being cast out as well, and need someone to blame. And he knew I'd been with Dorian and may have helped him, though not with his lady friends, not that it would stop King Alaric from blaming me. My heart hammered in fear.

"What should I do, Gloria?" Watching my friend's face with concern. "You know how unreasonable King Alaric can be when it concerns Dorian." A suspicion of the chancellor warning the king about me only fueled my distrust of everyone, even my friend, Gloria in the moment.

"Well, you could always take a vacation to Moonshadow. I hear it's lovely this time of year" Gloria said a knowing look in her eyes.

"So leave. But Moonshadow?" Aurora knew what her friend was saying, without using the exact words, and so, she was determined to quietly leave the Eternal City that night through a secret passage. "I'll leave as soon as I gather a few things…"

Gloria interrupted, “Aurora, do keep any plans to yourself. Plausible deniability, you know.” Eyebrows raised, lips curve up at the corners. “They’ll question me so the less I know the better.” Walking Aurora to the door, Gloria says, “If I don’t see you again, go with god.”

With those parting words, Aurora slipped out the door, her heart pounding as she hurried back to her chambers, her mind racing as she gathered what little she could carry. There was no time for second thoughts, no time to consider the consequences. She had already lost too much. She couldn’t bear to lose him as well.

Chapter 4:

LEAVING ELYSIUM

My father, King Alaric, had not spoken a word during the council's judgment. His silence had cut deeper than any reprimand, a silent confirmation I had not merely failed my duties, but I had lost the respect of the one man whose approval I had sought my entire life. I wanted to scream at him, 'say something, anything; oppose them.' But the king remained silent and resolute.

The pain of that was almost too much to bear, more agonizing than the exile. I had always known our relationship was fraught, but to see him stand in silence, as I was stripped of everything, was a wound that would never heal. I hated him then.

The gates of Elysium, once welcoming and bathed in divine light, now loomed a gaping maw of a beast, ready to swallow me whole. The words of the divine council echoed—cold, unforgiving, and final. As I stood at the gates, I stared into the abyss of exile. My heart thuds heavily as the reality of what had happened crashed down upon me like a tidal wave.

Images of the women I'd seduced flashed through my mind like ghosts of a past I could no longer escape — their faces, their eyes once filled with longing, I imagine them with disdain for I had used them shamefully, drawn them close with whispered promises and soft caresses, only to leave them to the consequences.

Now, my life as the prince of Elysium had ended, and with it, the only existence I'd known. The women who once eagerly sought my touch, who had gazed at me with desire and devotion, now would turn away. Their contempt the final judgment, a reckoning I never anticipated but one that had come with unyielding force, stripping me of all I had taken for granted.

I was no longer prince of Elysium, but an ordinary man facing the harsh reality of his choices, left to navigate the darkness I'd sown. Now, I stood at the threshold, my gaze lingering on the golden spires that reached toward the heavens with such promise but not for me. Those spires, symbols of aspiration and glory, once like the bars of a prison, now hold me back from entering. The weight of my exile settled heavily on me, crushing any remnants of the bravado I had tried to muster in those final moments before the council's judgment.

I could feel the cold sting of shame, knowing everything I had built, every moment I had relished in the splendor of the court, came to this. I had been stripped of my title, my privilege, my future, and yet, somehow, in the midst of my despair, there was a strange clarity. I had been cast out of the city of eternal light and released from its gilded cage.

And, with a heart full of fear and a spark of perhaps hope, I turned away from the gates of Elysium and stepped into the unknown, knowing my life, whatever it might become, would never be the same again, and I was poorly prepared.

~

I took my first step away from the gate and, as I did, the magic of Elysium, always a part of me vanished. I stumbled, feeling weak, vulnerable, exposed to a harsh unfamiliar world. The sky, once bright with the light of heaven, grew overcast, as if even it turned its back on me. I had no destination, no plan —knowing nothing would ever be the same. Climbing on my horse, I was surprised they had even let me take him.

Aimlessly, I let my horse carry me away from the city. I was so consumed by the storm of emotions raging within me I didn't pay attention to where I was going. I sensed more than knew when I'd passed by Moonshadow, on the other side of the mountains, mountains I had no intention of climbing, and so, we circled them and passed on by.

The terrain grew wilder, the trees thicker, the path treacherous, but I pressed on, driven by a need to escape the life that had been torn from me. I even crossed the river Oceanus on a footbridge. My horse refused to step foot on the narrow swaying contraption so I released him to return home making the treacherous journey alone. And, before I knew it, I was across. The world of Elysium, with its order and light, I had left gave way to something dark, untamed and wild. I had stumbled into the Wildwood.

I had only ever heard stories about this place—tales told to scare children to keep them within the safe borders of Elysium. It was said to be a place of danger, where rules didn't apply, and where creatures neither mortal nor divine roamed. Now, here I was, no way to turn back, nor did I want to. Danger, bring it on, I mocked the dark, silent forest. Whatever lies ahead, I was ill prepared but did I have a choice? No.

~

Meanwhile, in the heart of Elysium, not knowing what had happened to Dorian, Aurora was trapped in guilt, having arrived after the trial, she had seen Dorian on his way out of the palace escorted by guards. The look on his face, broke her heart regretting every word she'd spoken against Dorian but nothing to cause this tragedy.

I had known his actions would bring consequences, and warned him, still, his punishment shook me to the core. And terrified of what the king would do to me, if he believed I'd been with Dorian. Would his mind conjure up vile thoughts with the council's help? If so, they would come for me and god alone knew what they would do.

If the king blamed me for his son's downfall believed I was part of it. I too could be cast out of Elysium—or worse sent to the dungeons? It's not unheard of and no place I want to be, parted from my magic and my friends. Never mind the temple. Many were left to starve down in that cold harsh place, and a woman would be preyed upon by guards more savage than the criminals.

The thought had filled me with dread. No way could I remain, not after everything that has happened. Neither could I let Dorian face the world alone in god knows where he ended. I prayed he had not entered the mortal realm or the Wildwood. If not there, where would he have gone? He had pushed me away in his despair, yet I couldn't abandon him. I owed it to myself—to help him return home to Eternal City.

~

As she prepared to leave, a sudden knock on her door startled Aurora. Briefly, she froze, heart pounding. Was it the king's guard, come to arrest her for her part in Dorian's fall or for what they imagined she had done? She braced herself for the worst, but when she opened the door, it was the guards eyes narrow with malice.

"Aurora," the maid whispered urgently, her eyes wide with fear, "you are to be taken to the king… he knows you tried to help Dorian and you were with him." A smirk on his scarred face.

Aurora's blood ran cold. Her worst fears were unraveling right before her. The words hit her like a blow, and a wave of panic surged through her, constricting her breath. All she saw was the image of herself thrown into the dungeon, the cold stone walls, and the torture that would break her in ways she could scarcely imagine.

She could almost hear the chains clinking in the shadows, feel the damp chill of the prison air against her skin. She knew what the guards did to prisoners, especially female prisoners. The horror of that image was more than she could bear to consider.

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to remain calm even as her mind raced with a hundred possibilities, but she could not discern a way out. She nodded quickly, her voice tight, each word a struggle against the terror clawing at her insides. “Alright,” she whispered, barely able to keep her voice steady or to breathe. “If you’ll give me a minute, I’ll go with you. It won’t take me long to gather what I need.”

Scowling at having to wait, the guard nodded. “You have five minutes, priestess; it won’t be pleasant if you make me wait.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel, heart pounding fiercely, every instinct screaming - run. She had little time—moments, before they would take her magic as they had Dorian. Aurora entered her bedroom, grabbed a cloak and pulled it around her, trying to gather her courage. She had to move fast, slip away before the guards came in and escape became impossible.

With a final glance at the door, trembling in terror, Aurora slipped into her closet, opened the secret door, hearing the guards footsteps outside her door, praying she was not too late, she whispered a transfer spell and instantly found herself on the temple steps. The hoarse cry of the guards echoing as they had burst into her room to find her gone.

She pushed open the heavy doors, feeling the cold air of the temple like a solemn whisper. Once outside Elysium, her magic would be useless, so she grabbed a pair of boots for climbing and a warm winter cloak. The night was quiet, the only sound the soft rustle of her cloak as she moved swiftly down the marble hall.

Inside, the great hall was deserted, the silence almost oppressive in its stillness. Aurora paused, taking a deep breath to steady herself she offered a brief prayer. The temple, once a place of solace and guidance, now felt like a tomb—silent, cold, and unforgiving. She glanced around, half-expecting someone to emerge from the shadows and accost her, but there was no one. The guards would be here any minute.

She sighed, knowing she had at least avoided the guards, yet the fear in her heart was far from quelled. Leaving the safety of Elysium behind was terrifying. But there was no turning back not when she had already come this far. To escape the guards she had already convicted herself as guilty and there would be no mercy.

With renewed resolve, Aurora made her way to the back of the temple, stepped down the stairs behind the platform to where the tunnel lay concealed behind a tapestry. Pulling it aside—a narrow, passageway led down even more stairs, then the tunnel beneath that would take her through to the mountains. Aurora was soon on her way out of the city, her heart racing as she made her way along.

Aurora took one last look behind her imagining the Eternal City, the only home she'd known. Steeling herself, she stepped into the darkness, the cold stone walls closing in and the further she went, the more distant Elysium became. Once past the city's limits, as had Dorian, Aurora felt her magic leave. She nearly collapsed, as a wave of vulnerability swept over her. The once-familiar hum of magic had always pulsed through her veins, like a second heartbeat, it had vanished, leaving her feeling exposed, as if a vital part of her essence had been stripped away.

Her hands, which could summon light, warmth, and protection, indeed they'd helped her escape to freedom, now trembled with an unfamiliar vulnerability. The world around her seemed colder, more dangerous. She then realized her power had been a shield against the unknown and fear clawed at the edges of her mind, but she was resolved—an instinct to survive, even without the magic that had always defined her.

Aurora felt a deep, aching loss, not just of her abilities but of the connection to something that had made her feel special. It was as though a piece of her soul had been ripped from her, left in Elysium, and now, in the harsh reality of this world, and now, she would discover who she truly was without it, as Dorian no doubt had. Instead of grief, she turned her face forward and walked on.

After what felt like an eternity, Aurora finally reached the tunnel's end. Now, she needed to find the hidden lock that would open a small door and grant her escape. She searched through the dusty shelves, her hands brushing over cobweb-covered relics as she hunted for the elusive lever. Just as frustration began to creep in and she considered giving up, her fingers grazed a cold, metallic edge. With a quick twist, the mechanism clicked, and the door slid open with a low groan.

Aurora stepped out into the dim light of dawn, blinking as the fresh air hit her face. She was finally outside the city walls. The world before her felt vast and overwhelming, the unfamiliar landscape stretching out in every direction. Above her, the sky was still painted in deep purples, a scattering of stars twinkling coldly, indifferent to her struggles. As she took in her surroundings, her gaze fell on the looming mountain ahead, its towering, jagged peaks casting long shadows across the land. The path before her was daunting, the climb promising to be as perilous as the unknowns that awaited her beyond.

The climb up the mountain toward Moonshadow was nothing short of treacherous for Aurora. The rocky path was narrow and jagged, forcing her to focus on each precarious step. Loose stones crumbled beneath her feet, threatening to send her plummeting off the sharp edge into the abyss below with every misstep. The air grew thinner the higher she ascended, making each breath a labored effort, and the biting cold of the higher altitudes cut through her clothes, chilling her to the bone.

Her fingers, raw and stiff from gripping jagged rocks for support, ached with each pull. Climbing without her magic felt like wrestling with the very forces of nature, where every gust of wind pushed her off balance and every chilling gust made her limbs feel heavier. She was grateful for the heavy cloak. Dark clouds began to close in, rumbling with the threat of a storm. The distant growl of thunder echoed ominously around her, making the rocks beneath her feet vibrate, and sharp flashes of lightning illuminated the steep, unforgiving path ahead.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on her body, her muscles screaming with the effort of pulling herself higher and higher. The sheer cliffs offered no mercy, no flat surface for rest, and no shelter from the oncoming storm. She could feel her body teetering on the brink of collapse, but she couldn't afford to stop. The Moonshadow was her only hope, and the thought of its magic, magic to help renew her, was the only thing that kept her moving forward.

As she reached a particularly steep section of the climb, a boulder shifted beneath her hand. She gasped as it tumbled down the mountain with a deafening crash, taking with it part of the path she had just traversed. Her heart raced as she clung to the rocks, the weight of fear and fatigue pressing down on her. But she couldn't turn back. The way was now gone, and the only option was to continue up.

With each painstaking pull upward, Aurora's resolve hardened. She was alone in this, without magic, without protection, just raw determination and sheer willpower. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she reached a small plateau near the summit. She collapsed onto the icy ground, her chest heaving as she gulped in the frigid air. The Moonshadow valley lay just beyond the ridge, and the downhill journey would be easier but the path ahead was still uncertain, she felt a flicker of hope spark within her—a glimmer of the strength she had never known she possessed, even without magic.

It was as if the very essence of the place was pulling her in, drawing her away from the light and into the unknown. Aurora’s heart pounded with a mix of fear and resolve. The journey ahead would be fraught with danger, but she pressed on, her thoughts focused on Dorian. She didn’t know where he had gone, but she couldn’t stop now. Not when everything she cared about was at stake.

As I found my way to the bottom of the mountain and crossed over into Moonshadow, the last of Elysium’s warmth faded. The shadows my only companion, and I pulled my cloak tighter, breath visible in the cold night

air. Alone now, but I was resolute. Somewhere in the vast, shadowed expanse was Dorian, and I would find him.

She had no idea where he had gone, but she doubted he would go to Moonshadow. It wasn't his kind of place—too dark and shrouded in mist. Not enough sunshine for him. A small chuckle escaped her lips as she recalled how he loved the sun, rising early to greet the dawn, his face brightening as the first rays of golden light spilled over the city.

He had a way of basking in the sun's light, as if the sun itself was a source of strength for him. She could still picture him standing at the garden, eyes closed, a serene smile playing on his lips, the dawn's glow washing over him. No, Moonshadow would never be where he'd hide—not in a place where the sun struggled to break over the surrounding mountains, where the moon and shadows lingered long into the day.

If anything, he'd be somewhere bathed in light, a place where he could feel the sun on his skin and see the sky stretch endlessly above him. She felt a pang of longing as she thought of him, his love for those sunlit mornings, and wondered where his journey had taken him now.

With a heavy heart, I crossed the mountains to Moonshadow, the realm bordering the mortal world and Wildwood, a place where exiles often went to disappear, far from the light of Elysium.

Dorian wouldn't be there but he might go to Wildwood; it was all too easy to find one's self in the Wildwood after crossing the river Oceanus! Was the footbridge still passable? I'd have to find out if I were to go there to find him, but first, Moonshadow to renew my magic.

Chapter 5: The Wildwood

The night was thick with blackness as I stumbled through the underbrush, breath ragged. My hurried flight from Elysium circumventing the mountains left me disoriented and exhausted. I had no sense of where I was or where I was going, only that I needed to put as much distance between myself and the gates of my former home as possible. I'd last stopped at the river, and crossed alone on my own.

I'd entered the Wildwood or so I imagined, nerves on edge I recalled the stories I'd heard of the Wildwood; they'd been more than enough to dissuade any sane person from entering, but sanity had long since abandoned me. The world I'd known had crumbled beneath me, and now I had no choice but to press forward into the unknown.

The air in Wildwood was different—thicker, as if the atmosphere was alive with some ancient, hidden force. The trees towered above me, their twisted branches intertwining to form a dense canopy that blocked even the faintest glimmer of sunlight. I'd be lucky to know when dawn arrived it was so dark.

That thought reminded me of Aurora and her talk of Moonshadow and I was glad she was safe in the Eternal City. The shadows here were deep, almost tangible, and they seemed to shift and move of their own accord, as if watching me with unseen eyes. What I'd give to be able to fly from here, but with Elysium's magic gone, I was earthbound at least to Wildwood's forests.

~

It wasn’t long before I began to sense I was not alone. A rustling in the bushes nearby made me freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. I turned slowly, my eyes straining to see through the darkness. At first, there was nothing, just the oppressive silence of the forest. But then, from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of something—a flicker of movement, a pair of glowing eyes reflecting the faintest hint of light.

My breath hitched as I realized I was being watched. Panic set in, and I began to move again, faster this time, though I had no idea which direction to go. The forest seemed to close in around me, the trees growing denser, the path more treacherous with every step. The stories of the Wildwood’s dangers came flooding back and my heart raced as my breath shortened.

Tales of creatures neither animal nor spirit echoed in my mind—stories of plants that could ensnare the unwary, their tendrils tightening like ropes around a limb, of flowers whose petals hid poisonous thorns, and of the very air itself turning toxic, thick with unseen poisons that could bring even the strongest to their knees. A cold vise of fear clutched my heart, tightening with every step. I dared not breathe, imagining the invisible toxins swirling in the air, waiting for the chance to seep into my lungs.

But I couldn't stop myself from breathing, no matter how much I might want or tried. My chest burned from holding my breath, and my body screamed for air. If I was going to die from a toxin, I thought grimly, then let it happen quickly—better than the slow torment my imagination conjured.

With resignation, I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the searing pain I was certain would follow, the sensation of my lungs collapsing or ceasing to function altogether. Instead, the cool, fresh air rushed into me, filling my lungs with unexpected purity. The relief was immediate

and overwhelming, the tightness in my chest easing as my body greedily drank in the oxygen.

A shaky laugh burst from me, sudden and unexpected. I laughed at my foolishness, at the way my fear had spiraled into something absurd, conjuring horrors out of thin air. The air was clear, and I was fine. My heartbeat slowed, the vise around my heart loosening as I realized I had let my imagination run wild. For now, at least, I was safe, and I felt a small surge of courage returning as I pressed on, determined not to let the whispers of the forest haunt me any longer.

Then my foot caught on a root, and I fell hard, the breath knocked out of me as I hit the ground. As I struggled to rise, something cold and slick wrapped around my ankle. I looked to see a vine, writhing as though alive, tightening its grip on me. I gasped and kicked out, trying to free myself, but the vine only coiled tighter like a snake it pulled me toward the base of a gnarled tree. Good grief, was I to be a meal for a tree? I was not okay with it.

Panic surged and I reached desperately for a nearby branch to free myself, thankful the branch had no designs on having me for its next meal. Using it as leverage to pry the vine away with a frantic pull, the vine came loose from my leg and I scrambled to my feet as panic began to set in. What a nightmare.

~

I could feel the forest closing in, as if it were a living entity intent on trapping me forever. Perhaps I could breathe the air but that didn't mean I'd live long in the embrace of the forest itself.

Stumbling forward, soon I came upon a small clearing where the air seemed to shimmer with an unnatural light. The trees were less menacing, their branches gently swaying as if in greeting rather than in threat. But I was wary; I knew better than to trust appearances in this place as delicate, glowing creatures flitted through the air—like fireflies

though smaller, their wings iridescent—casting soft light on the forest floor.

Tentatively, I held out a finger to one of the creatures, only for it to dart away, a trail of sparkling dust left in its wake. As the dust settled, the air around me seemed to hum with magic, a low, thrumming I could feel in my bones. It was mesmerizing and terrifying, reminding me in this forest the rules of the world I knew no longer applied. What sort of magic did those little creatures use and what would it do to me? I didn't want to find out.

So I push onward, each step taking me deeper into the Wildwood and more strange sights —trees that whispered to one another in a language I couldn't understand, flowers bloomed with a brilliance that hurt my eyes, and shadows that seemed to have substance, shifted and writhed just beyond my vision. Every moment was a test, every breath a reminder of how alien this place was.

Exhausted, I needed rest but I was terrified to sleep for fear of where I would wake up, inside a tree if such a thing was possible, or bound by magic I couldn't escape. Yet, despite the fear and confusion, I felt something else stirring within me—a sense of wonder, of awe at the sheer magic of this place.

The Wildwood was dangerous, yes, but it was also alive with a beauty unlike anything I had known. Sure we had magic in Elysium but nothing like what I was experiencing; it was as if the forest was forcing me to confront my fears and adapt, or perish.

If I were to adapt, what would that mean? I had felt some change happening inside me. But I couldn't tell what it was though it was there. Was I becoming part of the wild magic? That in itself was frightening and exciting.

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As dawn broke over the tree tops, casting golden light across the rugged landscape, I descended the last stretch of the mountain and stepped into the boundary of Moonshadow. It was a meadow of soft grasses and flowers their petals gleaming in the moonlight. It was also considerably warmer than the mountain air, and I basked in its warmth, grateful to free of the chilly air above.

Here, the air carried the scent of rich earth and blooming flowers. The shadows that had clung to me on the mountain seemed to lift, replaced by a sense of calm. Gazing up, the moon hung low in the sky, its silver light bright and glowing over the landscape. I knew the sun was a long way off for the tall mountains kept it at bay except for a brief part of the day.

I'd heard stories of Moonshadow, it was a refuge, a sanctuary for those who had nowhere else to turn. It was supposed to be a place of second chances, where the exiled and lost could find solace and begin anew. But it had its own rules, and was governed by ancient enchantments that both protected and controlled the lives of those who dwelled within its borders. Would it accept me?

Standing in the meadow at the edge of the sanctuary, I took in the sight before me. A path led to the village of Moonshadow; it was nestled in a valley surrounded by the towering mountains and trees, the whole area ringed by a shimmering barrier of magic I could feel, and it glowed faintly in the early morning light. It was like something out of a dream, untouched by the world I'd left. For a moment, a strange sense of peace washed over me.

It didn't last. Reality settled in quickly. I had left everything behind to escape yes, and to find Dorian. Now I was—in a place as welcoming as it was unfamiliar. I didn't know the customs of Moonshadow, how I would be received, or where I should begin the search for him. It could be he passed through the village. I'd have to ask, but who?

Entering the village, people with a wary eye kept a safe distance from me though their magic could have stopped any danger I might pose, not that I carried danger with me. Elysium's magic and my wings had left me when I left Elysium but that didn't lessen the suspicions of those who watched me from the shadows.

As my feet moved me further into the village, I felt the eyes of its inhabitants watching, warily. The people here were a mix of races, each carrying their own story of exile or escape. Some looked at me with curiosity, others with suspicion. I tried to ignore their stares, focusing instead on the path ahead.

I slowly walked through the village toward a large fountain in what was its center. Realizing I was thirsty, a drink of water sounded like a grand idea. As I walked, cautiously, soon I was in the central square, where the fountain stood, its waters sparkling in the light of dawn the sun still hidden behind the mountains.

Around the fountain, small shops and homes spread out, blending with the landscape like they belonged and were a part of it. The air felt thick with shadow magic, the very stones of the village humming with an energy I couldn't quite place. It was quite exhilarating and my body responded to their magic.

In leaving the Eternal City my magic had left me, but as I approached the fountain it seemed to surge within me. Drawn to the fountain's its intricate carvings adorning its base—I saw there were ancient symbols of renewal I instantly recognized. And kneeling by edge of the fountain, I dipped my fingers into the cool water.

A soft tingling sensation spread up my hand, as though the magic of the place were acknowledging me, welcoming me. It was comforting, but fleeting. Still, I could feel my own magic renew within me and wondered, but was grateful. I sensed no return of my wings and was saddened for I enjoyed being able to soar through the sky.

Still, my concern at present was elsewhere, to gain help, yet I knew it wouldn't be simple. I would have to earn the trust of the people, prove I wasn't a threat but someone seeking refuge, just as they once had. Taking a sip of water, I felt my own magic surge once again as though it were being renewed. Heat flushed my face from the magic and pleased, I rose to my feet, scanned the square, searching for someone who could guide me, someone who might help me navigate this strange, new world.

My gaze settled on a figure standing near one of the shops, an older woman with silver hair and piercing blue eyes. She watched me with a mixture of curiosity and something else—something I couldn't quite place. My heart pounded in my chest as I gathered the courage to approach her.

"Good morning," I greeted, doing my best to keep my voice steady, though uncertainty clung to every word. "I'm new here… which I'm sure you already know. I've come from Elysium."

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The woman's eyes narrowed slightly, but she nodded. "You're far from home, child," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "You had to have crossed the mountain to get here. A formidable feat. It must have granted you passage. What brings you to Moonshadow?"

"I was compelled to leave, and I'm searching for someone," I replied, my voice softening as the weight of my mission settled over me. "Someone who was exiled recently… His name is Dorian."

Her expression softened a little, though I could still sense a trace of caution in her eyes. "Dorian," she repeated, testing the name. "The prince of Elysium… He never came through here but he passed close by on his way to Wildwood not long ago."

My heart skipped a beat. "Wildwood. Do you know how?"

The woman shook her head. “Nay. I didn’t see him, merely felt his passing. He was in a hurry, but the Wildwood lies across the river, Oceanus. If he went there, it was by way of the river.”

The Wildwood. The name sent a shiver down my spine. I had heard stories—of its dangers, its magic. A place where few dared to go. If Dorian had gone there, I would have to follow, and was resigned, no matter what risks awaited me.

“Thank you,” I said. I turned to leave, but her voice stopped me.

“Be careful,” the woman warned. “If your prince entered, be extra cautious, for he’ll not be the same; before long its magic sinks into your soul and change what was into something else. You’re welcome to remain and perhaps take time to rest, to adjust.”

I nod, but my resolve remained. Moonshadow could be my home, for now, but the Wildwood would be my next stop —the place where my journey would begin. What dangers would I face there; what dangers was Dorian facing?

Aurora and I stood in, holding each other, feeling the warmth of the people, the love between us. This was not just our victory, but the victory of everyone who had fought and suffered, who had dared to hope for something better.

The future stretched before us, filled with promise. A new child, a new heir to the throne of Elysium, a symbol of the unity between realms who would grow up in a world forged by peace, we had fought to create.

As the music swelled and the people danced around us, I leaned down and kissed Aurora, bursting with love and gratitude. "We have so much to look forward to," I murmured against her lips.

She smiled up at me, her eyes shining with tears of happiness. "Yes," she agreed. "So much."

A new dawn was rising as we celebrated our love and the harmony we had achieved, I knew whatever the future held, we would face it together. Aurora, our child, and I—for all who lived in it.

THE END

About the Author

Brandy Marks is a licensed mental health and biblical counselor. She worked as an R.N. in a hospital with a large mental health ward for several years before leaving nursing and entering the counseling field. Brandy worked for mental health agencies after receiving her Master of Education in guidance and counseling and worked as a volunteer counselor for Good Samaritan Ministries in Vancouver Washington 25 years. She opened her private practice in 2009, after earning a doctorate in biblical counseling.

After receiving her doctoral degree, she began to write self-help booklets for clients and later those booklets became '**Words of Life'** for counselors. While writing a book on **Angels and Demons,** Brandy asked the question, what would happen if Lucifer were redeemed? Several individuals in the Christian community said, no way; it could never happen. To which Brandy responded, "But the bible says, with Adonai, all things are possible." So, she wondered, what would it take for him to be redeemed; what would be his motivation?

Brandy wrote the first story, **Lucifer Unbound: Hell's Retribution** followed by **Heaven's Redemption**. She is writing a series titled **Children of Adonai**, now, which, so far, has seven novels.

A single mother of two sons and a professional nurse, she left her nursing career and entered a life of addiction. She entered recovery in 1989,

and a follower of Yeshu'a she became a biblical counselor earning a doctor of religious studies in biblical counseling.

Brandy wrote books on counseling including Relapse Prevention. She resides in Vancouver Washington, writing paranormal romance and adventure novels about heaven and hell, angels and demons as well as seraphs, cherubs and a dragon or two.

Her nonfiction books and paranormal novels and audio excerpts are on her website: www.brandymarks.com

SHADOWS OF ELYSIUM