Heirs of Wildwood

Book 2

of the Wildwood Series

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A Family's Story


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Chapter 1.

Heirs of Tomorrow.

The birth of Elian, their first born takes place as a flicker of candlelight bathed the royal bedchamber in a warm glow, the night stretching into early dawn. Outside, the kingdom lay still, unaware of the momentous event taking place within the palace.

Aurora lay exhausted, her face glistening with sweat, but a serene smile tugged at her lips as the midwife cleaned up. In her arms, swaddled in soft downy fabrics, lay their firstborn—the future king of Elysium's Eternal City, their home, and the city where they'd first met.

Dorian stood beside the bed, his heart swelled with pride as he gazed at the tiny, wriggling form cradled in Aurora's arms. He had seen battles, fought against both man and sorcery, and faced the darkest forces, but nothing had prepared him for this moment—the overwhelming sense of awe, of love, and responsibility.

"He's strong," Aurora whispered, her voice soft but filled with pride, as well, "I can feel it already. He'll make a fine king one day."

Dorian knelt beside her, his hand resting on her shoulder before slowly reaching out to touch his son for the first time. Elian's tiny hand curled around Dorian's finger, and in that instant, something shifted deep within. He had always known this day would come—the birth of his heir—but now it was real, and the weight of it pressed into him in a way he hadn't anticipated.

"He will be a great king," Dorian said, his voice rough with emotion. "Stronger and braver, smarter than I ever was."

Aurora smiled at him, her eyes filled with exhaustion and an unbreakable love. "He'll be the best of us."

As the days passed, Elian grew under the watchful eyes of his parents. From the moment he could walk, Dorian took him under his wing, teaching him the ways of kingship, as his father had once taught him. Though still small a boy, Elian showed an unusual sense of discipline and determination for one so young. Doubtless he learned it watching and following his father whom he admired, his eyes followed him everywhere as did his little feet.

By the age of seven, Elian already understood the weight of his future role. He followed Dorian through the courtyards, into meetings with advisors, and on patrols of the palace grounds. While other children his age played and explored, Elian was learning the art of ruling, his eyes fixed on his father, absorbing the rules of a kingdom, and of life.

“You must always be strong,” Dorian would say as they stood together in the great hall, the kingdom’s banners fluttering in the breeze. “The people look to us for guidance, for protection. It is our duty to give them hope.”

Elian nodded solemnly, his young face already set with a seriousness beyond his years. “I won’t fail them, Father.” Unseen by his parent, a flicker of fear burned inside. Elian knew he was not always strong. At time, he feared he could never be the man his father was. But this only fueled his desperate attempts to become stronger, braver and smarter so as not to disappoint his father.

And so, as he grew, Elian’s dedication became even more evident. He sparred with the finest knights, studied histories of their ancestors, and listened intently during council meetings. His mind was sharp, body strong, and his loyalty to the kingdom unshakable.

Every decision, every action, was measured against the legacy of his father—a legacy he was determined to live up to.

Dorian watched with a mixture of pride and sorrow as his son grew more like him each day. He recalled how he had looked up to his father who only scorned his attempts, and Dorian resolved not to do that to his son. So Elian’s path seemed destined, but the boy’s unwavering focus on duty left little room for childhood. There were no carefree days spent chasing the wind, no laughter echoing through the halls. In Elian, Dorian saw a boy who had taken on too much too soon.

“He’s growing too fast,” Aurora would say sometimes, her gaze soft as she watched Elian train with the knights in the courtyard.

“He’s becoming what he must,” Dorian would reply, though a part of him shared her concern.

Yet Elian never faltered. As the years passed, he remained steadfast in his devotion to the kingdom and to his father. He became the model of a future king—disciplined, dedicated, and driven by a deep sense of duty.

But with each passing year, Dorian couldn’t help but wonder if his son, like him, would one day feel the weight of that duty too heavily.

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The birth of Eryn was unlike any other in the royal family. Where Elian had been born with a sense of calm and purpose echoing the expectations of the kingdom, Eryn arrived like a storm—a force of nature destined to follow no one’s rules but her own.

Aurora held her newborn daughter close, marveling at the fierce energy that seemed to radiate from her tiny frame. Like herself, Eryn’s hair was red-gold, capturing the light of the sun during the day.

The night she was born, the winds howled outside the palace, the trees of the forest bent under the weight of the tempest that blew. Even the midwives whispered - the storm outside was a sign, a reflection of the spirit this child would carry. “She’ll be a fierce one,” they said.

Dorian stood beside the bed, gazing down at his lovely daughter with a mixture of awe and concern. He had already seen the disciplined focus in Elian, and knew his son would grow to be a ruler molded in his own image. But this daughter, Eryn—was different. He could sense it in the way she looked at him, her tiny fists clenched as if ready to fight, a scowl on her face as she surveyed her world from the moment she opened her eyes.

“She’ll be a handful,” Dorian murmured, his voice tinged with a hint of amusement. “But she is a beauty. The princes of the realms best beware.”

Aurora smiled, her fingers gently brushing Eryn's cheek. "She'll be more than that. She'll be a queen in her own right—if the world can handle her."

As the years passed, it became clear Aurora's words had been prophetic. Eryn indeed grew into a whirlwind of energy and defiance, seeking adventure beyond the confines of the palace walls. Where Elian followed his father with dutiful steps, Eryn ran free, climbing trees in the gardens, racing through meadows, and disappearing for hours at a time, only to return with a mischievous smile and tales of her escapades.

"Eryn," Aurora would chide gently when her daughter returned with dirt on her dress, torn hem and twigs in her hair. "A princess must at all times be presentable, if you want to catch the eye of a prince."

But Eryn would only laugh, her bright eyes twinkling. "A princess must live, Mother. Sitting in gowns and learning courtly matters to catch the eye of prince, humph. Who are they to demand so much?"

Aurora could not argue with that sentiment.

~

From a young age, Eryn knew her worth. She carried herself with a confidence that left no doubt she was a royal, yet she refused to bow to the expectations of others.

When courtiers and nobles come to visit, they marvel at her beauty and charm, but Eryn raises an eyebrow, her expression daring them to try to control her. As she grew older, her rebellious streak became more pronounced. She had no interest in the suitors who flocked to the palace, seeking her hand in marriage. Though she was too young to wed, her mother insisted she meet them. And she did, teasing them mercilessly, especially the ones who weren't of royal blood. It wasn't enough to be rich or powerful; Eryn sought only one who carried the weight of a crown. She would flirt, leading them to believe they might win her favor, only to dismiss them with a sharp wit that left them flustered and some more than angry.

"Royal blood or nothing," she would say with a smirk, her tone playful but resolute. "I won't waste my time on anyone less than a prince who has his hand on the future crown one day."

This boldness both intrigued and frustrated those who sought her attention. Eryn reveled in her freedom, choosing her path with fierce independence. She knew the world had expectations for her, but she refused to be confined by them. Even when Dorian or Aurora attempted to guide her more firmly, Eryn would smile and shake her head, slipping away to do as she pleased.

“I won’t be tamed, Father,” she told Dorian as they stood on the palace balcony, gazing out over Elysium's Eternal City. “You made me strong, and I intend to stay that way.”

Dorian couldn’t help but admire her spirit, even if it filled him with worry. Eryn was wild in a way he could not control, and though he knew she had the heart of a queen, he feared what path her defiance might lead her down.

In the court, whispers spread about the princess who dared to challenge the norms. Some admired her audacity, while others thought her reckless. But to Eryn, none of it mattered. She was determined to carve her own path, to find someone who matched her in strength and stature. And until that day came, she would live on her own terms, defy tradition and dare the world to keep up.

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Chapter 2.

Into the Unknown

The wind howled through the trees as Eryn's cloak whipped behind her, catching on the branches as she ran deeper into the forest. Her breath came in sharp bursts, exhilaration coursing through her veins as the thrill of the night pulsed in her chest. She ducked under low-hanging limbs, her footfalls light against the mossy ground. Above, the moon hung high, casting silver light on her path.

Behind the palace walls, the world felt small—suffocating even but out here, beyond the gaze of all those watchful eyes, she felt free. The dense woods closed in around her, shadows twisting into shapes that might have unsettled another, but not Eryn. She smiled, daring the darkness to show its hand. One day she hoped to enter the Wildwood, a forest where her father's mettle had been tested. She grinned.

A snap—a branch breaking underfoot—she froze. Eryn crouched, listening. Her heart quickened, not with fear but with anticipation. She knew she was not alone. Slowly, she straightened, her hand slipping to the hilt of the dagger she kept hidden beneath her cloak.

The woods held their breath. Then, a horn's distant blare shattered the stillness, sharp and ominous. The sound cut through the night air, sending a cold shiver up her spine. It was not one of the palace horns.

Who is following me?

Eryn spun on her heel, racing back to the clearing. Her boots pounded against the earth, each step faster. The forest felt different now—less of a playground, dangerous, more of a trap. The trees seemed to close in, the shadows darker, more alive.

~

At the palace, Dorian stood on the balcony, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the horizon. His grip tightened on the stone railing. Something was wrong. He could feel it. The horn in the distance did not belong to his guards. He moved swiftly, his cloak trailing behind him as he descended the staircase.

Aurora appeared in the corridor, face pale, eyes wide as she met Dorian's gaze. "Is it Eryn? Could she be in danger?"

"Yes," Dorian said, voice tight. "And we must find her."

Aurora did not respond, but her silence spoke louder than words. She had felt it too—the wrongness in the air. They moved as one, cutting through the palace like a blade, their footsteps quick, deliberate. It felt good to be on the move again doing something meaningful. Outside, the night greeted them with a chill. Dorian's eyes flicked to the tree line, where the moonlight barely touched the edge of the forest.

He mounted his horse with a fluid motion, not bothering with a saddle, the reins tight in his hands as Aurora followed suit on her golden pony, a sight to behold—both graceful creatures with coats that shimmer like sunlight on water. Their sleek, short hair catches every glint of light, giving the impression they are bathed in gold. Each pony's mane and tail flow like liquid amber, cascading in soft waves rippling with their movement, while their hooves, polished and smooth, seem to glint like polished brass as they race over the hard ground.

Their eyes are large and expressive, deep pools of molten gold with flecks of amber catching the light. Delicate patterns, almost like fine etchings of gold leaf, run along their flanks, resembling the intricate swirls of ancient artistry. These patterns seem to glow faintly, as though imbued with magic, enhancing the ethereal beauty of the ponies. But when they move, they are something to behold, their gait elegant almost otherworldly, as if they glide rather than walk, leaving a faint trail of gold dust in their wake.

In the sunlight, their figures seem to blur at the edges, giving them a dreamlike, almost mythical appearance, as though they are not entirely of this world but a fleeting vision of something divine. This pony had been ridden by Eryn and Aurora knew she could scent her daughter better than anyone, so she gave it the lead to follow her.

Back in the forest, Eryn's breath caught in her throat. Figures moved through the trees ahead—cloaked, silent, their faces hidden. She skidded to a stop, her heart hammering against her ribs. Slowly, she drew the dagger, its blade catching the moonlight. Her fingers flexed around the hilt, steady despite the growing dread.

The dark figures circled her like wolves.

Where Elian followed his father with dutiful steps, Eryn ran free, climbing trees in the gardens, racing through the meadows, and disappearing for hours at a time, only to return with a mischievous smile and tales of her escapades. Now Eryn wondered if her antics were all that smart.

~

Aurora recalled when she was just a young girl. "Eryn," Aurora chided gently when her daughter returned her dresses dirt-streaked hems torn and twigs in her hair. "A princess must be presentable."

Laughing, her bright eyes twinkling with mischief, Eryn tossed fiery curls over her shoulder, and scorn in her voice said, "Oh, mother. A princess must live, also. What good is a gown and talking about court matters?" Even at a young age, the way she carried herself left no doubt she was royalty. Head held high, shoulders back, she moved with a grace and confidence that defied expectation. She refused to bow—not to anyone, not traditions, nor to expectations.

But tonight, Aurora's heart was heavy as she urged her horse forward, following Dorian, the hooves thudding against the soft earth beneath. Her eyes scanned the dark horizon, seeking any sign of her daughter. Lord, please let her be safe.

The moonlight barely broke through the dense canopy of the forest, casting eerie shadows that stretched like dark fingers across their path. Aurora's hands tightened on the reins, and softly, she prayed. "Lord," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the howling wind. "Though we ride through this place of death, may your hand guide us."

The night swallowed her plea, the words vanishing into the shadows. Her pulse drummed in her ears, faster with each heartbeat, with each second that stretched between the quiet hoofbeats. The forest, the once familiar trees now towering ominously, their gnarled branches reaching out like claws.

Aurora’s gaze flicked between the shadows, searching for any trace of Eryn. The silence pressed down, thick and suffocating, broken only by the occasional snap of a twig beneath her horse’s hooves. The air, once cool and crisp, now felt heavy—pregnant with tension, like the moment before a storm.

She swallowed; her throat tight with fear she dared not name. Every rustle of leaves, every shifting shadow, made her heart leap. Eryn was out there, somewhere, defiant, and wild, as always. But tonight, the defiance felt different—dangerous.

Where are you, my love? Heart thudding in fear.

Aurora urged her horse faster, the wind picking up whipping her hair over her shoulder as they pushed deeper into the unknown, her prayer lingering in the air like a breath left unfinished.

Suddenly, Dorian's voice cut through the tense silence, as Aurora’s pony came to a sudden halt, his voice a whisper just for Aurora. "There she is, but who or what’s hunting—her?"

He could see Eryn slouched low behind a thicket, to hide, clearly, but it would do her no good in a moment. Then she moved suddenly and their eyes followed her, as she moved swiftly through the trees.

Aurora's heart leaped into her throat as she followed his gaze, squinting into the darkness, the dense shadows, she could barely make out the faint figure of Eryn, her cloak fluttering in the moonlight as she moved, her red hair a beacon. But it was not just Eryn out there—he discerned shapes moving in the shadows, too fast and too quiet to be her alone, and they were in pursuit.

Dorian pulled his steed to a halt, sliding to the ground with practiced ease with Aurora following, her feet touching the ground as her hands instinctively reached for the dagger at her side. Aurora’s breath caught as the dark shapes drew closer, indistinct but menacing, circling Eryn like predators closing in on prey.

“Eryn,” Dorian called, his voice low but urgent, trying to mask the fear that laced his tone, letting her know they were there. Eryn's head jerked toward the sound of his voice, eyes widening in recognition. “Dad.” She turned to face her attackers.

There was not much time to do anything but pull her dagger. The whine of steel sang against the leather then came another song one of magic surprising Dorian and Aurora.

“No worries, dad, mom,” she said with a grin. “I’ve got this covered. But a little help would be nice.” Her lips stretched into a wider grin as the first shadow came at her and she sliced the air, turning him into a whisper of smoke, vanishing into the air as Dorian with Aurora arrives at her side to aid in - well, not quite a rescue - rather, but to see Eryn home safe that night. Within minutes the other shadows had fled.

“What in the stars were those?” Dorian asked as he turned towards his daughter, brows drawn into a deep line between.

Eryn shrugs. “I have no idea. Many a night I have come to this forest and I’ve naught seen them before. I enjoy the night without the confines of the palace walls. I will have to find a new place.” She smirks as Aurora’s eyes widen and then narrow in anger.

“You could have been killed or captured by those creatures. None of us know what those things are.” She turns to Dorian. “Are you sure you’ve never seen them before?”

“Well, they remind me of the shadows of Wildwood but those never attacked with an intent to do physical harm. Then again,” a pensive look on his face, “in the past, I always overcame their tests or temptations. So, I do not know what they’d have done if I had not succeeded. Still, for the shades, another name for the shadows, to come here is unheard of. I wonder what test they had for you, if they were shades.”

“Let’s get back to the palace,” Aurora said. “We can discuss this later.” Without any argument, Eryn followed, which was a miracle as the three set off for home, Eryn behind her mother on her pony. However, upon their return, while her parents had hoped she would have learned some good sense, as the next noble suitor arrives they soon discover, nothing has changed for Eryn.

As times passes as do Eryn’s adventures she never again sees the shades or shadows, as her dad called them. Dorian surmised if they were what he suspected, then that night itself was the test.

~

Several more weeks pass and before Eryn knows it another noble party arrives in a grand procession, their horses draped in fine silks, banners fluttering in the breeze as they pass through Elysium's palace gates. Their leader, Valen, new king of Calorian a man of considerable wealth and influence, he seeks a wife for his youngest son. He dismounted first, his eyes immediately drawn to the young princess who stood waiting at the top of the steps.

Eryn's beauty was undeniable. Her red-gold curls sparkling in the sunlight, cascade over creamy shoulders. Her emerald gown shimmered with every subtle move. But it was her presence, more than her looks, that held the visitors in awe. Her posture was regal, chin tilted upward slightly, she radiating both confidence and defiance in equal measure. The noblemen exchanged glances, clearly entranced by her charm but his son merely smirked, he suspects this princess may be what his father wants in a wife for him but she is not what he wants.

Valen stepped forward, offering a deep bow, his voice smooth and practiced. "Princess Eryn," he said, his tone laced with admiration. "It is an honor to be in the presence of such beauty and grace. They spoke of your loveliness, but words do not do you justice." He turns to his son as he dismounts and saunters over. "This is my son, Aric."

Eryn's eyes flicked over him and his son, her expression unreadable as she listened to his flattery. The corners of her lips tugged upward, but there was a sharpness to her gaze, as though she saw through every flowery word. Slowly, she raised an eyebrow, her expression daring—no, challenging—him.

"Is that so?" she asked, her voice soft but edged with a quiet strength. "I suppose they didn't mention anything else about me, then?"

Her eyebrow remained raised, her expression a bold dare, as if she was inviting him to try and mold her into the obedient princess the court expected her to be." Prince Aric's lips curved up at the corners almost laughing at the unspoken message hanging between them like a blade: You may marvel at me, but you will never control me.

Valen hesitated for a beat, clearly unsettled by the intensity of her stare. His smile faltered, and he glanced briefly at his son, unsure how to proceed at the clear challenge she presented.

Prince Aric stared back at the princess, eyebrow arched and lips curved in a knowing smile. “She’s young, father,” he said, meaning immature. “I will not play the fool for some chit of a girl who has no manners.”

Eryn’s smile deepened, not out of warmth but satisfaction. She had made her point without saying another word but the prince did intrigue her for he clearly did not see her the same as his father. It was not long before Valen and his young son left, without any commitment to future proposed nuptials. Eryn’s attitude had again foiled plans her parents may have had for a future wedding with Caloria.

“Dorian, we must do something about her. Prince Aric would have been fine catch for Eryn, and a mighty handsome one. King Valen will likely never return.” It was sometime later when Dorian and Aurora received the news Valen had secured a betrothal between his son and Freya, of the Northern kingdom. She was a queen and ruled her own kingdom, a far better match than a rebellious princess.

Although it would be some time before the prince was old enough to wed so they said nothing to Eryn. After all, there was always hope, as some betrothals did not last, and Aurora heard by the grape vine, Aric was not pleased, knowing one day, should they wed, he would have to live in the North, a land of ice and snow.

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Chapter 3.

Time of Temptation

The grand throne room, once filled with light and laughter, now felt colder. Dorian sat at the head of the council table, surrounded by the kingdom's elders and advisors, but his mind was elsewhere. He listened, or pretended to, as they debated the latest issues—taxes, trade, border disputes—but his thoughts kept drifting back to his family.

Elian was strong. Of that, Dorian was certain. His eldest son, the heir to the throne, remained disciplined, devoted, and unshaken by the storms brewing within their household. He carried the weight of his future crown with ease, as Dorian had in his youth, not that his father had recognized it. Trained for ruling but given no responsibilities, Dorian began to live the life of a playboy, until Aurora entered his life.

But that was no comfort when Dorian gazed at the rest of his family.

Eryn, once full of fire and spirit, had grown wild, her rebellious nature slipping beyond his control. She refused to follow the path laid out for her, defying every expectation, every rule. Her sharp tongue and daring actions left the court buzzing with whispers. She toyed with suitors, led the sons of noblemen into dangerous games of chance, and laughed at traditions. She sought adventure, not duty, and every day, she seemed to drift further from him and the family

And Aurora, once his closest confidante and the heart of the kingdom, was slipping away from him. She had always been the center of his world, who balanced his burden with grace and wisdom. But now, even she seemed beyond his reach. The long days and longer nights spent ruling the kingdom had left little time for them. When he looked into her eyes now, he saw something he had not seen before: loneliness.

Dorian sighed, his hands tightening on the edges of the council table. The weight of his family's unraveling pressed down on him, but the kingdom demanded his attention. There was always a crisis to avert, some deal to be made. He had no time to fix what was breaking at home. So, he buried himself deeper in the affairs of the kingdom, letting work consume him –to escape the growing cracks in his life.

~

"Your Majesty," an elder said, pulling Dorian back into the present. "We have a guest join us in the council today. He has been offering some intriguing insights on matters of trade with the Wildwood."

Dorian blinked, shaking off his distraction. "A guest?"

"Yes," the elder replied, "Haman," nodding toward the far end of the room where a man sat, a familiar face but Dorian could not place him.

Haman he is called. Nay it was Dolion, a deceitful rogue. Dorian knew of him from Aurora whom he had tried to seduce. He had only seen the scoundrel once, a fleeting shadow in the Wildwood.

The rogue from the Wildwood sat among the council members, his sharp, cunning smile betraying nothing of the chaos he had caused with Aurora. Dorian had heard the story of his seduction from Aurora, and did not know what to think then or now. Dolion, or Haman, as he is now known, seemed to ingratiate himself with the council—how, Dorian didn't know. But he was here, leaning back in his chair, casually, as though he belonged - as if he had lived here his entire life.

"Your Majesty," Haman said voice smooth, bowing his head in mock respect. "I have come to offer my humble assistance. As you know, my knowledge of the Wildwood is extensive."

Dorian's eyes narrowed. He had not thought of the man in years, after all he had been no threat to him and Aurora had turned him down, now he was known as Haman, who had nearly led Aurora into scandal in her youth, intent on impregnating her they had learned though for what reason neither of them could fathom at the time.

The sight of him now, among the trusted council, set Dorian on edge. Yet, with the kingdom's needs pressing in, nothing could be done then.

Still, he would keep his eye on him, learn what he was up to. If he was from the Wildwood, then he was likely up to some mischief.

As the council meeting adjourned, Dorian leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he watched Haman weave through the crowd of nobles like a serpent in tall grass. The man was smooth—too smooth—his every move calculated. He shook hands with the council members, offered charming smiles, and exchanged pleasantries with a practiced ease that set Dorian on edge.

Haman, there was something about the way he moved, the subtle flicker of ambition in his eyes, that gnawed at Dorian's instincts. He had seen men like Haman—men who hide their true intentions behind a mask of civility, waiting for the right moment to strike.

As Haman approached, his gaze briefly met Dorian's. For a fleeting second, there was a hint of something Dorian could not quite place, but it was enough to stir the unease already brewing in him.

"Your Majesty," Haman greeted, voice as smooth as silk, the corners of his mouth curling into a smile. "I trust the meeting was productive?"

Dorian stood with stiff posture as he regarded the man before him. "As productive as these meetings ever are."

Haman chuckled, as though sharing a private joke. Dorian's expression remained stone. He had grown tired of these exchanges, the endless politics that seemed to define the council's every action. Yet, amidst the monotony, Haman's presence stood out—too eager, too ready to ingratiate himself with whomever might serve his purpose. But what was his purpose?

As Haman turned to shake another hand, Dorian's gaze lingered on him, suspicions swirling. Something about Haman's demeanor had changed over the years, subtle yet unmistakable, as though waiting for something—or someone.

Dorian's jaw tightened. He would have to watch Haman more closely.

As the meeting hall emptied, and Dorian made his way toward the door, he cast one last glance over his shoulder, saw Haman speak with one of the council members, his smile bright, voice low and conspiratorial. Whatever game Haman was playing at, Dorian intended to uncover it.

But for now, he would wait.

Yet He could not afford to let his guard down, this man being too much like Lord Arden had once been. And he had used his magic to entrance his wife away and use her poorly. Still, with other matters to attend to Dorian buried himself in duties, putting aside his personal concerns about Haman, while Aurora found herself in a far different situation, one very much involving Haman.

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It started innocently—a chance encounter in the corridors of the palace. Haman, ever the charmer, greeted her with a knowing smile, eyes twinkling with that same mischievous gleam she had once found irresistible except she had resisted him.

“Aurora,” he said, bowing low as she passed by, not noticing him. “It’s been far too long.” Aurora stopped, surprised by the familiar face, a small smile touching her lips despite herself. “Dolion,” she replied, eyes wide. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” Seeing him after so many years, she still felt his lure recalling how he came to her, to seduce her, so long ago. And she had nearly given in.

“My name is Haman. I found my way back to you,” he said smoothly, his heated gaze lingering. “The council seems to appreciate my expertise, and I am glad we have finally crossed paths once again.”

“Haman.” Aurora chuckled; the sound hollow even to her ears. “New name for new beginnings. But I have been - busy, as have you it seems.”

Haman stepped close his voice lowered like a secret between them. “Busy? Or lonely?”

Aurora’s gaze flickered, her lips parting as if to speak. No words came. His question lingered in the space between them, filling the air with a tension she had not felt in years.

Her eyes met his, and for a second, something stirred behind her calm facade—a glimmer of sorrow, a crack in the armor she had built around herself. She blinked away tears that welled in her eyes.

Haman's presence tugged at her, a familiar pull she had resisted once, but could she again? He stood there, a wild energy swirling around him, the same force had nearly swept her away all those years ago.

Aurora could almost feel the memory of his touch, a warm whisper against her skin, a reminder of what she had denied herself then, and now longed for. Her breath hitched, betraying her.

The dim light of the room caught the sharp angles of his face, his gaze piercing. It was as if he could see straight through her, to the hollow place inside where she had hidden her loneliness for way too long. Dorian's absence had carved it out, so slowly, over the years—each cold night, each silent dinner at the long, empty table. She had become a ghost in her own life, drifting through the palace halls like a shadow, unseen, unheard.

"Life has been lonely since you left." He did not speak again, but Haman did not need to, the message is clear. His eyes held hers, a challenge, and a temptation. He took another step, brushed against her, and Aurora's pulse quickened. It felt as if the walls of the palace closed in, the weight of the silence almost suffocating.

Haman sensed her hesitation, his smile widening. "It doesn't have to be this way," he whispered, his hand lightly brushing hers and she felt heat flow through her chest and into her core. "We can be friends, or more," his voice soft warm breath on her neck as he leaned in. Aurora, mind spinning, stepped away. She knew the danger, knew the consequences of falling for his seduction and into his arms again.

Aurora turned and walked rapidly away, not looking back nor hearing Haman's soft knowing chuckle.

Returning to her chambers that night, as she lay beside Dorian, longing for his touch, the temptation gnawed. She wanted Dorian, but when his head hit the pillow, he was asleep, leaving Aurora aching with need.

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The next day, as dawn broke over the Wildwood and the palace stirred to life, Aurora wandered the corridors seemingly without purpose, though her mind had been restless all night, thoughts of Haman, his gentle yet persistent hands, his strong body, crept in, her desire a shadow she could not shake. She tossed and turned beside Dorian, he unaware, not feeling the coldness between them in the silence of their bedchamber as her body heated with desire.

Now, as the light of morning spilled through the palace windows, Aurora knew what she was doing though she would never admit it.

~

And sensing Aurora's need, Haman's pursuit became relentless; it was executed with grace; it was impossible to call it anything but seductive. No one else seemed to notice, but Aurora did. He was everywhere, slipping into her life with a calculated ease leaving her breathless.

His presence lingered, the scent of the forbidden - tantalizing, and impossible to ignore. While he also spoke with the maids and other females, doubtless to lessen suspicions of his attending to Aurora, she knew what he was up to and did not dissuade him. Indeed, she looked forward to when the inevitable came about.

It started innocently enough. A knowing glance here, a smile there—subtle, fleeting moments she could dismiss as harmless, Haman knew exactly what he was doing, as did Aurora. His every word, every touch lingered a second too long, carefully crafted to remind Aurora of the passion she had once felt for him, the fire grown cold in her marriage - stoked red hot in his presence.

Haman had a way of appearing at the right moment—passing her in the corridors, eyes meeting with an intensity sent shivers down her spine, or her in the garden where she went to seek solace. Each time, his face appeared and a roguish grin greeted her, his voice smooth as silk, and filled with unspoken promises.

"Lady Aurora," he would murmur, tone oozing with charm. "You look particularly radiant." His hand briefly strokes her arm, fingers float over her cheek, sending heat throughout into her core.

His words were not compliments—they were declarations, reminding her she was not just a queen or a wife. She was a woman, desirable, cherished, and desired.

Aurora, found herself drawn like a moth to a flame. The way he looked at her, like she was the only person in the room, she felt alive for the first time in a long while; his attentiveness was deliberate too; he knew her schedule without needing to ask, always arriving in the right place at the right time.

He would offer to carry her books when walking to or from the library, or casually join her walks in the gardens and her heart raced.

He listened when she spoke, truly listened, as if her every word held the weight of the world. And it made her feel like she was seen again, something she had lost in the quiet distance growing between her and Dorian. She was ready to pull him into the shadows for an illicit liaison so great was her need.

But Haman drew out the seduction, making her wait. Haman wanted her more than willing. He wanted her eager to come to him. In court, his pursuit was subtler, but no less potent. He stood close during council meetings, his hand brushing hers as they passed papers, his voice low in her ear as a private joke made her blush. When they sat for meals, she felt his eyes on her, the heat of his gaze a constant reminder of what he wanted—and what she also wanted looked forward to.

Thankfully, everyone else, too involved in their own daily lives, were oblivious to it all. And then there was the physicality of it—the way his fingers would lightly touch her arm as he spoke, or how he would lean in too close when in conversation his lips almost but touching her cheek and his warm breath sent a shiver through her.

His touch, though always brief, always controlled, left a warmth on her skin lingering long after he was gone, but the build-up of heat became almost unbearable. It was not obvious—it was a subtle dance, a careful game that drew her deeper to ensnare her.

Aurora knew she should walk away, insisting Dorian send him away. She was slipping down a dangerous path, and Haman's pursuit was a siren's call—a promise of passion, desire, and a release from the emptiness she felt every day. His charm wrapped about her like a tantalizing fragrance, one she could not escape, nor wanted to.

~

She told herself it meant nothing. She was stronger than the temptation he offered. As in the Wildwood, she could resist him. Yet, she sought him out, looked forward to seeking him, wanting him in a way that filled her with both anticipation and guilt. Aurora's heart raced madly as she made her way into the garden, one day, the same one where Dorian had kissed her all those years ago. Hoping Haman was there.

She stopped near the statue of the ancient queen, hand touching the stone as memories of her encounters with Dorian swirled in her mind. A smile tugged at her lips—an expression she had not worn in a long time. Then she saw him and all thoughts of Dorian vanished.

Haman emerged from the shadows his eyes locked onto hers; he had been waiting. His lips curled into a roguish grin she found irresistible. Panting with excitement and anticipation, without a word, he closed the distance between them, his presence intoxicating. Aurora's heart pounded so loud she imagined he could hear it.

"Aurora," he said softly, voice like silk. She swallowed hard, her pulse quickening, heat building as he drew nearer. "Haman," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. Lord help, she spoke the words silently though His help was not what she wanted. She wanted this man whose fingers gently brushed her cheek, her skin ignited under his touch.

"I was hoping to see you today," he murmured, his gaze lingering on her face before dropping to her lips. Aurora's breath caught in her throat. A part of her screamed to walk away, to stop before it went any further, but the fire burning inside silenced that voice. Heated scoured her belly, moisture flooded her mouth and far below. How she needed this. And she almost moaned out loud.

Starved of affection, of desire for so long the heat Haman stirred was impossible to resist. "We shouldn't be here," she whispered. "Together. Someone could see us."

"But you are as am I. No one pays attention; they are busy elsewhere." Haman replied, his voice softly intimate as he stepped closer, his hand slid around her waist, and pulled her tight against him. She felt his erection hard against her, her breasts pressing into his chest as his lips hovered a breath from hers. "I know you want this as much as I do."

A flare of heat shot through Aurora, instantly she was wet, panting, her head spun, heart hammering. She knew this was wrong, a sin—knew the price she would pay if Dorian found out, if anyone found out—but in that moment, all she wanted was to feel again, to experience the passion she had been denied for so long, to feel him inside her, to fill the aching void inside her. She was almost begging him to take her but should she? Nostrils flaring, she scented his musky odor.

Without thinking, she closed the gap between them, her lips crashing into his. Haman responded instantly, his hands pulling her tight to him, roaming her body with a hunger matching her own.

Aurora moaned as his lips trailed down her neck, his hands pulling the edge of her gown up, fingers sliding claiming her with a tenderness she had not felt in so long. “Oh, god,” she moaned. “It feels so good. Please don’t stop.” And he didn’t. His fingers penetrated to stroke gently then more insistently to draw out her pleasure and his own.

Every touch, every kiss, ignited something primal within her. “I want more—need to feel you inside me, to lose myself with you inside me,” she whispered, an ache tore the words from her lips. “I need to forget the emptiness. Take and fill me, I beg of you.”

In response, Haman moved her deeper into the shadows of the garden, his hands leading Aurora away from possible eyes, their bodies pressed together in a heated embrace. Aurora’s breath came in ragged gasps as Haman’s hands explored her intimately leaving her dizzy and delighted. She couldn’t wait for him as they fell to the grass below, her gown riding farther up, and she didn’t care.

At that moment, she didn’t care about Dorian, the kingdom, or the guilt gnawing at the edges of her mind. All she cared about was the desire that pulsed inside her, the feeling of being wanted, of being alive again. She felt the pulse of muscles clenching, Aurora lay back in the soft grass, spreading her legs as she surrendered to the heat of the moment, falling into her passion, forgetting she has a husband.

His hands pull at her, his fingers stroking across the apex of her pleasure and then he was sliding inside her. So easily. She felt him enter, filling her with his hardness as he drove in, she cried out giving herself fully to him. She tensed her stomach, hips raised to meet his every thrust as he stroked inside pushing her toward a precipice so close.

Her cry of release was so loud of a sudden she feared it might bring the guards, but mercifully no one came, all was quiet, other than their panting breath in the still air, and she heaved a sigh of fulfillment.

Afterward, he lay beside her as Aurora rested her head on his chest, his arms about her. Her finger traced his rough jaw and she marveled at how grand she felt.

Later, she would hate herself for allowing this. But right now, all she wanted was to nestle in his arms for in a moment it would be over and he would be gone. Except, Haman had other plans and he took her again in the garden, she crying in ecstasy each time.

After those moments, all hesitation was gone. Haman came for Aurora whenever the two of them could find a moment together to be lost in one another. Aurora began to ride again, leaving the palace on her pony she would meet Haman by the river and together the two would come together again and again.

~

The soft murmur of the river filled the air as Aurora dismounted her pony, heart racing as her eyes scanned the familiar clearing. The sun dipped low in the sky, casting a golden light over the water, the world a shimmering, dreamlike haze. She could see the meadow beyond, where the wildflowers swayed in the evening breeze, but it was here, by the river, where she was drawn.

And then, she heard the nicker of another's horse as Haman stepped out from the shade of the trees, his dark eyes finding hers with a look that set her pulse racing. Aurora swallowed the guilt that surfaced, her fingers tightening around the reins of her pony before she tied her to a branch nearby. The palace felt so far away now—its heavy walls, its duties, and its watchful eyes. Here, by the river, none of that mattered.

She didn't have to wait long. Haman moved toward her with an easy grace she had come to crave, his presence a welcome relief from the suffocating pressures of court life. The absence of her husband. His hand reached out, taking hold of her arm as he leaned in, his breath warm against her skin.

"You came," he murmured, his voice low, almost a whisper.

"Of course I did," Aurora replied, heart fluttering as their gazes locked. She smiled, one that only Haman ever saw anymore. "I always do."

There was no need for further words. She moved quickly to him, and they sank down together on the soft grass, hidden from the world by a gentle bend in the river. His hands, familiar now, slid across her waist, pulling her close as their lips met. It was not hurried or desperate—there was time, after all. They always found time.

The sound of the river, the rustling leaves, and the songs of distant birds wrapped around them as they lay entwined in the fading light. Haman's touch sent warmth coursing through her, and Aurora, for just a moment, allowed herself to forget. To lose herself in the feel of him, in the way his hands knew every inch of her, the way his voice made her heart skip. As he entered her, hard and stroking strongly, she pulsed around him as the pleasure gave way to an intense overwhelming sensation and the entire world was lost in that moment.

He came for her whenever they could steal a moment away—whenever the palace was quiet enough, whenever the duties of her royal life felt like they would smother her. He was her escape, her secret, the one thing truly hers. And here, beneath the trees beside the river, they shared that thrilling intimacy again and again.

As the sun slipped below the horizon, casting the meadow in shades of twilight, Aurora rested her head on Haman's chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns along his skin. She knew they could not linger much longer, but for now, she allowed herself the comfort of the moment. There would be time enough for guilt later.

For now, there was only the river, and the meadow, and Haman beside her. And she didn't want to let any of it go. Then, one day, he told her, "I am returning to Wildwood."

"No," Aurora cried. "You're leaving? You cannot."

"I'll return precious. But I have business I must attend to just as you do." He smiled. "Keep an eye out for me." And he rose to his feet, pulled on his clothes. She watched as he mounted his horse, and without a glance back at her, Haman rode out of Aurora's life.

~

Aurora's fury drove her through the palace gates, her pony galloping wildly as her anger spiraled unchecked. She screamed at the servants, rage an uncontrolled storm no one dared to question. They whispered behind her back, exchanging glances as she stomped through the halls, her face flushed, eyes blazing.

After Haman's departure, Aurora was a shell of herself. The change was swift and unmistakable; her usual grace and warmth seemed dimmed, as though some vital spark had flickered out. She moved through the

corridors of the estate with a distant, vacant expression, her eyes dull and rimmed with shadows. Her maids exchanged worried glances, never having seen her in such a state, so visibly raw and unguarded. Aurora, who had always worn her emotions with dignity, now appeared vulnerable, and it unsettled everyone who crossed her path.

But no one knew the truth. She kept it locked within her heart, a secret that weighed heavily on her. Only she knew the reason for her despair: Haman had abandoned her. It wasn't that she loved him in the way one might assume—no, her heart had been Dorian's and Dorian's alone. But Haman had been her sanctuary, her refuge in moments of loneliness or doubt, a source of comfort she had come to rely on without realizing how much he meant to her until he was gone.

In the privacy of her chambers, Aurora allowed herself to feel the full weight of her heartbreak. She sank to the floor by the window, knees drawn to her chest, as the twilight shadows lengthened across the room. She closed her eyes, and memories of Haman's presence flooded her mind—the strength of his arms around her when the world felt overwhelming, the steady cadence of his voice as he reassured her, the quiet way he listened when no one else could understand.

How foolish I've been, she thought bitterly, a lump rising in her throat. *I imagined he'd always be.* She hadn't realized how deeply she'd come to depend on his calm presence until now, when it was gone.

She fought against the tears that pricked her eyes, but the grief was relentless, a tidal wave of emotions she could no longer keep at bay. Haman had been more than a friend, more than a source of comfort. He had filled a void she hadn't known existed, a quiet bond had allowed her to release her burdens without fear of judgment or expectation. And now, that bond was broken.

Aurora's fingers tightened on the fabric of her gown, her knuckles white as she tried to steady herself. She knew that, in truth, it wasn't Haman she loved. Her heart had always been Dorian's, from the first time they had locked eyes. Dorian was the one who had ignited a fire within her, who made her heart race with a single glance.

But Haman had been there in the quiet moments, offering a warmth she'd come to cherish more than she ever expected.

And now, he was gone.

Aurora felt hollow, as though a part of herself had been taken with him. She couldn't confide in anyone; no one would understand the strange mixture of pain and loss that twisted within her. To others, she was the noblewoman whose heart belonged to Dorian, but in the solitude of her own mind, she knew that Haman's absence had left a scar.

The door creaked as one of the maids peeked in, concern etched on her face. "Milady, do you need anything? Shall I bring some tea?"

Aurora forced herself to sit up, brush a hand over her face to compose herself. "No, thank you," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

The maid hesitated, worry deepening in her eyes, but she nodded and withdrew quietly, leaving Aurora alone with her thoughts. As night fell and the stars blinked into view, Aurora gazed out the window, her heart aching with the weight of her unspoken grief.

And in her chamber, with no one to witness, Aurora allowed herself to mourn—not just for a lover, but for a companion, one who had become intertwined with her in the most unexpected of ways, ways her husband would never understand, indeed no one would.

~

Seeking comfort, in Haman's absence, desperate for someone to cling to, Aurora found herself standing before the door to Dorian's chambers. Years before, a separate sleeping chamber was set aside for him so he would not disturb her rest when he was called out in the night. For once, on this night the demands of the kingdom had loosened their grip, and when she knocked, he was surprised but pleased to see her.

"Aurora," he said, stepping aside to let her in. She didn't speak, didn't say a word. She let him take her hand, leading her into his bedchamber, to where he pulled her close, fingers stroking her cheek.

Dorian's touch was gentle, as if sensing the vulnerability beneath her fury. He didn't ask why she was there, nor did he ask for explanations. His hands moved with care, slowly untying the laces of her gown, letting it fall to the floor as he laid her down beside him. Her breath uneven as her thoughts raced, tangled between anger and longing.

“Now, tell me, darling one, my queen” he murmured, his lips brushing the side of her neck. “What made you so upset?”

Aurora closed her eyes, her hand resting on his chest. She couldn’t speak of Haman, the betrayal and the hollow feeling. She didn’t want to admit to herself how deeply it had cut. But Dorian—her husband—was here, and right now, that was all she needed.

“What does it matter?” she whispered, her voice thick with tears and emotion. “I need you. You’re always off dealing with some affair of the kingdom. Right now, we have a moment... let's not waste it.”

His eyes searched hers for a second, and without a word, he began to undress her fully, his hands reverent as they traced the familiar lines of her body. She was no longer the girl she had once been, but to Dorian, she was still beautiful, still the woman he had fallen in love with.

In that moment, as he looked down at her, Dorian wondered why he had waited to truly see her again, to touch her like this. Her beauty, though changed, was still something he gloried in.

They didn’t need words. Aurora reached, pulling him down to her, her lips finding his as the tension between them melted away. Whatever had haunted her faded into the background, replaced by the warmth of his touch, the comfort of his body against hers.

For a while, there were no betrayals, no kingdom matters, no lovers slipping away returning to the shadows of Wildwood. There was only the two of them, together again, if only for this stolen moment. Aurora wondered why she had never come to him before.

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Chapter 4.

Hope and Despair

The palace was quiet on the night the boy was born, nine months later, the sounds of bustling servants and lively chatter replaced with a hushed anticipation. Dorian paced the hall outside the royal chambers, his mind raced listening to Aurora's muffled cries within. He clenched his fists, helpless against the storm of emotions swirling. He had faced armies, dark sorcery, and threats to his kingdom, but nothing filled him with such dread as this moment. They'd come together once before she announced her pregnancy and he had been delighted, never once considering the child could not be his.

Inside, the queen's attendants moved swiftly, guiding Aurora through the final moments of her labor. Her brow was damp with sweat, her body trembling with exhaustion, yet her resolve remained unbroken. She had always been strong, stronger than anyone knew. And when the first cry pierced the air—a high, sharp sound—her heart swelled with relief and love. A son.

Aurora's gaze softened as the midwife laid the child in her arms. She cradled him close, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, her heart full of emotion. He was perfect—tiny, fragile, and so full of life. She whispered his name softly, a name she and Dorian had chosen weeks ago, though neither had spoken it aloud until now, Rowan.

When Dorian finally entered the room, his heart caught in his throat at the sight of the boy. Aurora, pale but smiling, looked up at him with tear-filled eyes, and for a moment, everything felt right. He knelt beside her, his hand trembling as he reached out to touch his newborn son.

"He's beautiful," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "Rowan."

Aurora nodded, her smile widening as she gently touched the child's face. "He is." She recalled Haman and their moments of passion, and the few days after he'd left she initiated lovemaking with her husband, Dorian. Now Aurora wondered, whose child had she birthed today?

And as Dorian gazed at the boy, a strange unease stirred within him. He couldn't explain it—couldn't place the source—but it gnawed at him. There was something about him, a flicker of doubt came to his mind. But he pushed the thought away. This was a day for joy, not suspicion. What could be wrong?

The palace rejoiced the next morning. News of the child's birth spread throughout, and the people celebrated in the streets, voices ringing through the air in jubilant song. Within the palace, however, the new additions brought a subtle shift. The royal family had grown, and so had undercurrents of tension.

As time moved on, the boy, Rowan, grew quiet and withdrawn, misunderstood by those around him. His gentle nature set him apart from his siblings, his quietness often mistaken for weakness. No matter how hard he tried, he could never quite find his place within the family. He was different, and he knew it.

But there was one person who understood him—Eryn, his elder sister. Fierce and rebellious, she had always resisted the constraints of royalty, and in her brother's quiet strength, she found an unexpected ally. They formed a bond the others couldn't understand, an unspoken connection forged from their shared sense of being outsiders.

"You don't need to be like them," Eryn would say, pulling Rowan aside during one of the many formal gatherings their parents hosted. "We don't belong in this world of crowns and titles."

Rowan would nod, grateful for her presence, though he never said much. Eryn was the fire to his water, but together they found a balance, a comfort in each other's company.

~

The kingdom thrived under Dorian's rule. The lands prospered, the people content, and peace stretched across the Eternal City like a warm blanket. Yet within the walls of the palace, the royal family slowly crumbled. Dorian felt it in every quiet glance, in every strained conversation,

and most painfully, in the distance between him and his wife, Aurora. At first, after the child was born, the two seemed to have found each other again, but that didn't last for, it was Rowan who gnawed at the edges of his mind.

Dorian stood on the balcony overlooking the bustling courtyard, watching the daily activities of the palace's inhabitants. He saw his children below—Elian, the responsible heir, speaking with the knights, giving instructions with the confidence of a future king. Eryn, independent and fiery, teasing the young noblemen who flocked to her like moths to a flame. And Rowan, wandering aimlessly, his movements unsteady, undoubtedly, he was recovering from the previous night's indulgence.

Yet to Dorian, there was something off—something he couldn't ignore. His black hair and olive skin, a question haunted him, a whisper at the back of his mind that grew louder with each passing day: Was he truly his?

Dorian recalled the rogue from the Wildwood he had wormed his way into their lives months before, and years earlier nearly leading Aurora into scandal in their youth. He too had curling black hair, olive skin though he was anything but morose like Rowan. Now, he had returned, ingratiating himself with the council and, if Dorian's suspicions were correct, renewing his efforts toward Aurora. Had he been with her in the past, before the boy's birth, before he had left? It was then Aurora had been so distraught and had come to him that night. Could it be?

Dorian clenched his fists at the thought, the familiar anger rising in his chest. He wanted to confront Aurora, to demand the truth, but he couldn't bring himself to speak the words. The doubt festered, growing like a thorn in his heart, and yet he was paralyzed by fear of the truth. If he voiced his suspicions, there would be no going back.

So, he remained silent.

The distance between him and Aurora grew wider with each passing day, the love they had once shared and renewed, was now buried beneath secrets. They barely spoke other than matters of the kingdom, and when they did, there was a coldness in her eyes he had not seen in a while. Dorian had once been her everything, but once again, he felt like a stranger in his own home.

And so, the family drifted.

Elian remained strong and resolute, the perfect heir to the throne, but even he could not mend the fractures forming between them all. Eryn grew more rebellious, threw herself into pursuits that took her further from the family, while Rowan disappeared, slipping away into the comfort of drink to dull his own pain.

Dorian felt powerless to stop it. His kingdom was thriving, but his family was falling apart, slipping through his fingers like sand. And at the center of it all was Rowan, a reminder of the question that haunted him, that kept him awake at night:

Is he mine?

***

Chapter 5.

The Revelations

Dorian moved quietly through the corridors of the palace, his mind preoccupied with the day's affairs. The kingdom was flourishing, but the weight of his crown felt heavier than ever. As he approached the gardens, a familiar laughter drifted in the open windows —soft, lilting, unmistakably Aurora's. Eagerly his pace quickened, impatient to see his wife in such a delightful mood. Perhaps they could enjoy a moment of intimacy. It was a rare occurrence nowadays. He smiles in anticipation.

He stepped out into the garden, where the roses bloomed, their deep red petals swaying in the breeze. At first, he didn't see anyone. His eyes scanned the familiar paths, the trees that framed the horizon, the stillness of the afternoon. And then he saw movement.

At the far end of the garden, near the statue of the ancient queen, Aurora stood with her back to him. She was not alone.

A man leaned close to her; his tall frame silhouetted against the sunlit sky. Dorian's blood ran cold as he recognized him. Haman was back!

Years ago, Haman, then known as Haman, had been a fleeting shadow in Aurora's life, a rogue in the Wildwood who had once nearly led her into scandal. But she had remained faithful then—or so Dorian had believed. His jaw clenched as he watched, hidden behind the hedges, his eyes locked on the two figures.

Haman leaned down, and before Dorian could fully process what was happening, he saw it. A kiss—not a simple, fleeting touch, but one of unmistakable passion.

Haman's arms wrapped around Aurora, pulling her against him as though they had done this a thousand times before.

Aurora's hand pressed against Haman's chest and Dorian felt delighted for a moment, thinking she might push him away. But then, she laughed—light and carefree—her voice like the breeze that rustled the leaves around them.

"Haman, no," she said, voice a soft whisper, the amusement cut through Dorian like a blade. "Not here. We could be seen by anyone."

Haman chuckled softly, his lips grazing hers. "Let them see," he murmured, his voice low and dangerous. "What does it matter?"

Aurora pushed Haman away this time, though her laugh lingered in the air, soft and seductive. "You rogue," she whispered, voice filled with affection. "How I want you, but we must be careful."

Haman pulled her close, his eyes dark with hunger. "Careful?" he echoed, his tone teasing. "Since when has careful ever suited us?" He pulled her deeper into the shadows, his hand reaching, fingers pulling up her gown, moving farther up and Dorian hears Aurora moan her breathing heavy as the two of them vanish into the shadows.

"Quickly," she pants with a rustle of clothing. Dorian can only imagine what takes place out of his sight in the next few moments. He stands transfixed listening to the sounds. "Damn. You're irresistible." He says his breath short gasps, "I love being inside you; you are so hot, the flame that lights my passion." He's moaning and Dorian would like to strangle him, but then he hears Aurora's cry of completion, then she sighs.

He imagines her leaning into his embrace. "You know he suspects, the boy isn't his." Dorian hears movement, a rustle of clothes as Haman leaps back as if stunned. Now he is within Dorian's sight. "No! You don't imagine he's mine? Impossible. Why didn't you tell me before - when you were pregnant. We could have done something about it."

Aurora's straightening her gown as she comes closer, eyes widening she stares, mouth twisted in anger. "First, you left; you were gone. What do you mean, do something - destroy him? Of course, he is yours. You knew Dorian and I rarely were together, so how could the boy be his? I thought you knew it was possible." She goes up to him, wrapped her arms about his waist but he pushes her away.

Haman paces back and forth, then Aurora snaps. "You do not mean to say, you care nothing for your child? Here I thought you were a man of

honor. I was mistaken it seems." Aurora's face, a mask of rage snarls, "You tried to seduce and impregnate me once, in the Wildwood and failed. Well, now you have. How is this child any different from what you imagined then?"

Not waiting for an answer, Aurora turned and stalked away. Haman stares after her. Dorian watched until Haman too left the garden. He didn't see the other set of eyes that watched from nearby, listening.

~

Dorian's world tilted. Her words reverberate through him, the ground trembling beneath him. As he watched the scene unfold—his wife and queen, the mother of his children, in the arms of another man. Now the boy may not be his! His suspicions are now confirmed.

Dorian's heart pounds in his chest, blood roaring in his ears as he steps back away from what he'd seen and heard. His mind raced, his blood now boiling with a mix of rage and devastation. He turned, leaving the garden because if he remained, he'd beat him senseless.

The sight of Aurora in Haman's arms is now seared into his mind. The image burned into his very soul.

As Dorian stalked through the halls of the palace, his thoughts spiraled. The boy —Rowan—had he been blind all this time? He had suspected the boy was not his, yet the truth tore through him like a violent storm, and with each passing second, the anger grew, until it became a living thing inside him.

Aurora's laughter echoed in his mind, mingled with Haman's words, twisting the knife deeper. He had fought for this kingdom, bled for it, sacrificed his life, his everything, and now—the very foundation of his life was crumbling beneath him.

Dorian's fists clenched as he reached his chambers, slamming the door behind him. He couldn't face her, not yet. The truth of what he had seen would unravel everything. But the truth was there, undeniable. Dorian knew he would never look at his wife—or their son, Haman's son—the same ever again.

~

The royal hall hummed with quiet conversation as Elian, heir to the throne, stood, deep in discussion with their advisors. He had grown into a fine young man—tall, broad shouldered, and every bit the future king his father had trained him to be.

Years of training had made him disciplined and focused, but there was a distance in him, a coldness he noticed recently had appeared. He was dutiful, yes, but less and less like the carefree boy who had once chased dreams with his siblings.

Elian's commitment to the crown was unquestionable, yet his relationship with his family had become strained. He spoke to Aurora only when it could not be avoided, and Eryn had long gone her own way.

And Rowan, his teasing the boy had evaporated replaced with a coldness Dorian did not understand. And though Elian had once cared deeply for his mother, now there was a growing distance between them. It seemed as though Elian had locked himself in a world where no one could enter.

Until he met her.

~

Dorian stood at the edge of the hall, watching his son as he prepared to introduce a visitor to the court, he'd told Dorian earlier. Elian had been uncharacteristically excited when he announced her arrival, speaking of a woman from the Wildwood who had captured his attention in a way no other woman had. It was unlike Elian to show such enthusiasm, toward anyone, much less a woman. He had always kept his distance from matters of the heart, his relationships with females brief and fleeting. But now, it seemed that had changed.

Dorian's brow furrowed as Elian beckoned the woman forward. His heart tightened with unease. The Wildwood had become a strange place—first Haman had reappeared, weaving his way back into their lives, then he left only to return sometime later, possibly the father of Rowan. Now, this woman from the same enigmatic woods had captured the heir to the throne.

As she stepped into the light, the hall fell silent.

Dorian's breath caught in his chest.

She was beautiful, but it wasn't just her appearance that stunned the court. There was something familiar about her, something that twisted in Dorian's gut. Her raven-black hair cascaded down her back, a midnight waterfall, no longer entwined with leaves and such, and her eyes—sharp and knowing—glimmered with a hidden depth. She moved with a grace belying her origins, her steps confident, and yet…

Aurora, seated at his side, gasped softly. She knew her, too.

The woman reached Elian's side and offered a graceful bow, her eyes flicking toward Dorian for the briefest moment. And then, it hit him a punch to the gut, memories from long ago came rushing back.

The woman from the Wildwood. They'd met years ago, enjoyed a few days together and then the woman had offered herself to him, wanting to bear his child. The words came back to Dorian as he stared. Nay she had wanted to wed him by the light of the moon with silver bells. Then Aurora had come for him and together they had fled from the woman and the forest, returning to Elysium.s

She had been untamed, wild in every sense of the word. They shared moments of fun and a dangerous flirtation, yet he had never given in to his passions, and claimed her, the intensity of her had haunted him. How she raged when he had left with Aurora.

Now, here she was, standing before him—calm, composed, but undeniably the same wild woman. Dorian's head spun with confusion. Why had she come? And why draw Elian, his son and heir to her?

Aurora's hand tightened on his arm. Dorian's eyes turned to her, and in her eyes, he saw the recognition. She was no ordinary visitor. Aurora had never known the full extent of his encounter with the woman, but even she could sense the danger lurking beneath the surface.

Elian, oblivious to his parents' inner turmoil, introduced the woman with a proud smile. "Father, Mother, this is Aelara, from the Wildwood. She's helped me see life in ways I never imagined before."

Dorian's throat tightened at the sound of her name. Aelara, he'd not known her name, yet the name now sent a shiver down his spine and a cold hand of fear enveloped his heart. Het, he forced a smile, while his mind raced with questions he couldn't answer.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice steady, though his heart was anything but. “I remember the Wildwood well.”

Aelara smiled in return, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. There was something hidden there, something more than what she showed. “It is an honor to stand before the king and queen of Elysium. The Wildwood has changed much since your last visit.”

“Indeed,” Aurora said, voice steady, expression carefully neutral, and Dorian knew there was a tension beneath the surface. “The Wildwood has a way of keeping its secrets,” she said softly.

Aelara’s gaze flickered briefly to Aurora. Something unspoken passed between them. “Indeed,” she echoed, her voice smooth.

Dorian knew the danger of the Wildwood, its magic pulsing through the ancient trees, whispered through the air like an ever-present echo. The forces lurking within it were beyond human understanding, always waiting and watching. It was a place of legend, where even the bravest souls had been known to lose their way—or their lives.

And now, something had stirred within it, drawn Haman and Aelara into their lives, but for what purpose?

~

Later that evening, once the encounter was over and Elian had left with the wild woman, though Dorian would never call her that to Elian’s face, he considered, “What is happening in the Wildwood?” He paced, the question burned in his mind like a fever. He had thought those days were behind him, but it seemed the past was determined to find him, to unravel everything he had fought to build and protect.

The Wildwood was its own realm, where normal rules didn’t apply. He needed to know more. He needed to understand why these figures—Haman, Aelara—were reemerging now, as if drawn by something greater than mere chance.

Dorian paused at the window, gazing out toward the distant line of trees that marked the Wildwood’s edge. He would find out what was happening, no matter the cost. His kingdom, his family, and his son were at risk. And whatever dark forces had been stirring in that forest, Dorian would face them head-on. He had no choice.

As the court resumed its usual hum of activity, Dorian watched Aelara with Elian. He needed to speak with his son without that woman. But what would he say? At the thought, his heart pounds with dread, the pieces of the puzzle seem chaotic, out of place. Haman had captured Aurora's affection, much as Lord Arden had, though without magic, and now Aelara had captured his son. What next?

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Chapter 6.

The Adventure

As the years passed and Eryn grew older, her rebellious streak became undeniable, woven into every aspect of her life. It wasn't just in her words, but in her actions. Yet her parents continued to invite nobles of the nearby realms in the hopes of one prince capturing Eryn's attention and gaining a marriage proposal.

One evening, as the grand ballroom filled with nobles for yet another tiresome gathering, Eryn decided she had enough of the stiff, proper behavior expected of her. The noblewomen sat in their jeweled gowns, discussing politics and marriages, while the noblemen whispered about alliances as Eryn fumed in boredom.

Dressed in a gown that clung to the court's expectations, Eryn felt the walls closing in around her.

Her father, King Dorian of Elysium, had made it clear this event was important for her to attend, as a princess she needed to make a good impression on potential allies and suitors.

While Eryn had nodded, she also had other plans.

Slipping away from without so much as a glance over her shoulder, she darted through the palace corridors, her footsteps light and quick. The night air called, and soon, she found herself at the stables. Without hesitation, she saddled her horse and rode off into the night, gown be damned, the wind tangling her hair as she galloped toward the forest.

The palace staff, of course, would search for her—they always did—but Eryn didn't care; they would never find her where she had gone.

"I am not a bird to be caged by duty or tradition," she once told her father and he agreed privately, not in his wife's presence.

The freedom of the forest, the thrill of the unknown, was far more appealing than dull conversations stifling gowns and annoying people.

Hours later, when she returned, once again, her gown disheveled and hair tangled and wind blown, her father was waiting, his face a mask of disappointment. “The nobles noticed your absence, not that you care,” he said. “Eryn, this is an affront to custom, to me and to your mother.” Eryn simply shrugged, her eyes flashing with that familiar defiance.

“You wanted me to make an impression?” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “To marry and mate with a son of one of those boring nobles, each one doubtless just as boring as his father.”

Dorian clenched his jaw knowing there was no controlling her spirit—not without breaking her completely; that was a line he could not and would not cross, not yet anyway.

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The suitors arrived in droves, flocking to the castle like moths to a flame, each one seeking the favor of Princess Eryn and, perhaps, a chance at her hand in marriage. They came with grand gifts—ornate jewelry, fine silks, and promises of alliances—but Eryn greeted them all with the same disinterest, her gaze distant as she listened to their rehearsed speeches of devotion.

It was her mother, Aurora, who insisted she meet them, reminding her - duty often required sacrifice. So, Eryn complied, though her heart was far from the matter. She attended the meetings, stood gracefully as they introduced themselves, but it was her sharp wit and merciless teasing that made her true feelings clear.

One afternoon, a particularly eager suitor—a baron’s son of little consequence—was introduced with much fanfare. The young man, flushed and nervous, recited his rehearsed lines with an almost desperate energy, hoping to win favor.

“My lady,” he stammered, bowing awkwardly, “I have heard much of your beauty and strength, and it would be an honor to—”

Eryn silenced him with a raised hand, her lips curving into a sly smile. “You’ve heard much, have you?” she said, her voice dripping with amusement. “Tell me, my lord, did they mention I enjoy falconry and

swordplay as well? And I often outride the men, and my patience for pompous speeches is... limited?"

The young man blinked, visibly flustered. "I, I had not heard of such, no."

Eryn stepped closer, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "And did they also tell you," she continued, her tone sweet with mockery, "I'm far more interested in a man who can hold his own in a duel not one who spends his days counting coins and polishing titles?"

He swallowed hard, visibly faltering. "No... but I—I can certainly—"

"I doubt it," she interrupted, arching a brow as her gaze swept over him, assessing, dismissing. "You don't look the type. No offense, of course." Her words, though polite, were a dagger wrapped in silk.

The baron's young son, uncertain whether to bow or flee, stood frozen under the weight of her gaze. For a moment, her dazzling smile seemed genuine, but the glint of amusement in her eyes shattered the illusion.

Eryn turned away, already bored, her attention shifting elsewhere. Before she left, she tossed one final jab over her shoulder. "Perhaps you'd do better impressing my mother. I hear she has a fondness for well-behaved gentlemen."

The young man flushed a deep red, stammering his excuses, but Eryn had already moved on, her thoughts far from him. What amusement she gained was fading quickly—until she caught sight of her mother nearby. Her heart sank expecting another criticism.

Aurora sighed in exasperation, striding toward her daughter. "Eryn, must you tease every suitor who comes through these doors? And then you imply I would entertain the likes of him!" Her voice was sharp, though the hurt beneath was unmistakable.

Eryn shrugged, a smirk lingering on her lips. "If they're going to waste my time, I might as well make it entertaining. I apologize, Mother. I wasn't thinking."

Aurora's expression softened, but only slightly. "Yes, you never do, and you don't seem to care who you hurt." She turned away, tears in her eyes. "I will not tell your father. He has enough to worry about." Her voice was quiet, pained, as she walked away.

Eryn watched her mother walk away, the usual fire in her replaced by a sinking, unfamiliar feeling. Guilt. The word tasted bitter on her tongue. For a moment, she stood frozen, feeling the weight of her mother's disappointment press on her. The defiance that defined her felt out of place now, overshadowed by a shame she couldn't easily shake.

She clenched her fists, eyes narrowing in determination. No, I will not let this feeling control me, she mused.

Eryn had never been one to back down, but now—this was different. This was about more than just rebellion. It was about freedom, about finding her own path, away from expectations and the burdens placed on her by family. She took a deep breath, resolving what she'd known all along but hadn't admitted to herself until now.

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The next morning, she stood before her parents, the weight of her decision heavy on her shoulders but her voice steady.

"Mother, father, I'm leaving, to seek my fortune—or a suitor worthy of me—elsewhere," Eryn declared, her voice firm. "You've put up with me this long, but I'm old enough to find my own way in the world. I'm not that innocent young girl you tried to foist marriage upon once. Now I'm old enough to make up my own mind."

Aurora remained silent, torn between relief and dread, while Dorian started to argue, voice tight with worry. "Eryn, you cannot wander the kingdoms. It's not acceptable for a princess to travel alone."

But even as he spoke, Dorian felt the weight of her defiance lift from his shoulders. Yet, like Aurora, fear for their daughter lingered beneath the surface. Still Eryn was determined to enjoy an adventure before she agreed to settle into a marriage with some boring noble simply to please her family.

Eryn stood in the quiet of her room, the early morning light filtering through the curtains in soft, golden hues. The space, usually filled with the warmth of her presence, now felt strangely empty. Her heart raced, but her hands were steady as she folded the last of her clothes into the leather satchel that sat on her bed.

She hesitated over a tunic, its fabric soft between her fingers. It was a gift from her mother, the embroidery along the collar a reminder of home, of days spent in the gardens, of lessons learned and moments shared. With a sigh, she set it aside. There was no room for sentiment, not where she was going. Only the essentials.

Her hands moved swiftly after that—packing her sturdy riding clothes, a cloak for warmth, the silver dagger her father had given her after her first training session, and a pouch of coins she'd managed to collect over the years. She tucked a carefully wrapped bundle of dried meat and bread into the bag, along with a water-skin and a small flint for starting fires, and a small flask of brandy.

At last, Eryn's fingers grazed the leather-bound journal that lay on the corner of her desk. She grabbed it without thinking, along with a quill and ink, stuffing it into the satchel. Perhaps she'd find time to write about her adventures. Or not.

Once packed, she slung the bag over her shoulder and glanced around her room one last time. It was odd to imagine she might never see it again—or at least, not for a long while. With a quiet breath, she turned and left, the door creaking softly as it closed behind her.

Outside, the morning air was crisp, and the stable yard was still quiet, save for the soft whinny of her horse, a sleek mare with a glossy gold coat. Eryn approached her, rubbing a hand over the horse's neck before expertly fastening the saddle. She strapped her bag securely to the side, double-checking the knots to make sure nothing would come loose during the ride.

"Easy, girl," she murmured as the horse shifted beneath her touch, sensing the tension in Eryn, her heart pounding with the anticipation of what lay ahead. She glanced back toward the palace, where her brother slept soundly, unaware she would be gone by the time he woke.

"Take heart," she told her parents, "I may find a prince I can live with," she then turned her horse, placed a foot in the stirrup and swung up onto the saddle. For a moment, she sat still, the weight of her decision pressing down on her as she gazed at the familiar path leading away from the palace until the thrill of it all—the unknown, the adventure—sparked inside her once more.

With a determined nod, she gave a nudge to the golden-mare's side. The horse snorted and started forward, hooves clopping against the cobblestones. Eryn didn't look back. The wind tugged at her hair as she rode toward the horizon, her heart filled with the promise of a grand adventure - the adventure she had been waiting for.

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PART 2

Eryn's Story

Chapter 1.

Affair to Remember

The wind whipped through Eryn's hair as she rode hard toward the looming gates of another kingdom, the third since she had left home, uncertain where she'd end this time. The sprawling towers and stone walls of the capital rose like sentinels in the distance, but her mind was not on the grandeur of the city. Her thoughts were on the adventure, the sense of freedom she craved after leaving her family behind.

The road was lined with merchants and travelers, the hum of the city filling the air. She had been to two other kingdoms and found them as unexciting as their rulers had been when visiting her home - boring.

~

Eryn sat at the long banquet table, her eyes glazing over as another lord droned on about his family's lineage. The flicker of candlelight reflected off the polished silver and golden platters that adorned the table, but even the lavish spread could not distract from the crushing boredom settling over her like a heavy cloak. She offered the lord a polite smile, when he offered to introduce her again to his equally boring son, her thoughts had already wandered far beyond the hall.

In the first kingdom, she endured days of formality—touring the grand castle, exchanging pleasantries with the queen, and sitting through endless courtly performances. Even the thrill of riding out with the king's hunting party dulled quickly when she realized it was nothing but a carefully orchestrated display. The lush forests she admired from the castle's towers now were reduced to mere scenery, no different from the walls that confined her.

The second kingdom had promised excitement but delivered only more of the same. She rode through its bustling markets, visited its legendary libraries, and attended its renowned performances. But the city's famed

scholars had even failed to hold her attention. The ruler, a brooding king with dark eyes, tried to woo her with talks of his son, politics and many alliances, but Eryn found his ambitions as tiresome as the other suitors who fawned over her.

Now, in another grand hall, she felt her patience fraying. The evening dragged on, the noble's voice a monotonous hum in the background. She glanced down the table, past the rows of finely dressed courtiers, and caught the ruler's eye. The king raised his goblet to her in a silent toast. Eryn, her face impassive, inclined her head before setting down her own untouched glass.

By the end of the evening, she had made up her mind.

The next morning, Eryn packed her bags in silence. As she fastened the last strap to her horse, the stable hand approached with a curious look. "Leaving already, my lady?" he asked.

She gave him a brief smile, her heart soaring at the thought of the open road ahead. "Yes," she said, swinging up onto the saddle. "This place was never meant to hold me."

With a light kick, her pony trotted forward, hooves echoing against the cobblestones. The grand castle behind her faded into the distance, forgotten like all the others. She rode with a single thought in mind: the adventure she longed for was still out there, waiting.

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About the Author

Brandy was a licensed mental health and biblical counselor over thirty years. Previously, she worked as an R.N. in an emergency department and critical care units of a hospital with a mental health ward for over nine years then left to enter the counseling field. Brandy worked for mental health agencies after earning her Master of Education in guidance and counseling and as a volunteer counselor for Good Samaritan Ministries in Vancouver WA for 25 years. She opened her private practice in 2009, after earning a doctor of religious studies in biblical counseling.

After opening a private practice, Brandy wrote self-help booklets for clients. Those then became a book, 'Words of Life' for lay and professional counselors.

While writing a book on Angels and Demons, Brandy asked her friends what would happen if Lucifer were redeemed? Several said, "no way; it could never happen." To which she responded, "when Yeshu'a was asked, 'Who then can be saved?' He said, 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'"

She wondered, what would it take for Lucifer to be redeemed; Love of course. Brandy then began to write Lucifer stories.

Brandy lives in Vancouver Washington, writing paranormal novels about Heaven and hell, angels and demons with Fae, seraphs, cherubs, and a dragon or two for good measure.

Her nonfiction books and paranormal novels with audio excerpts can be found on her website:

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