The Wildwood

Romantic Fantasy Adventure

4-book series

BRANDY MARKS

DOTCross

The Wildwood, a 4-book series

Check out my website for podcasts and blogs about my books. Podcasts are just getting started so be patient. Thank you.

www.brandymarks.com

DOTCross Publishing

Contents

Author's Note

This is a high-stakes fantasy romance with content that might be triggering for some. Violence: imprisonment, severe injuries and assault (all with human adults—NO children or animals).

Verbal abuse.

Scenes of consensual and manipulative sex.

No graphic language

Whispers of the Wildwood

Book 1

BRANDY MARKS

Part 1: Where it Began

Chapter 1:

DORIAN

The grand ballroom glittered beneath a thousand crystal lights, their brilliance fractured across marble floors polished to a mirror's sheen. Music swirled like silk ribbons, weaving through laughter, whispered intrigue, and the delicate chime of glass on glass. The perfume of gardenias and jasmine clung to the air, sweet enough to veil the sharper bite of wine and ambition.

At the center of it all moved Prince Dorian. Dark-haired, ice-eyed, and wickedly amused, he prowled the gilded cage of nobility, flashing smiles that made maidens forget propriety and their fathers remember caution. Every inch of him gleamed with effortless charm—velvet coat embroidered in gold filigree, a polished smile sharpened like a blade.

And yet beneath the surface, a restless hunger gnawed. Every coy smile, every flutter of a fan, felt like a script he'd recited too often. They saw only what he allowed, and he allowed nothing that touched him.

Until his gaze caught on her.

She stood near the archway, just within the glow, though not of it. The nobles wove their endless dance, every step a game, every smile a weapon, yet none of it touched her. Her dark eyes lingered, steady and unmoving, watching what others mistook for spectacle.

She was not among the dancers. She did not flit or flutter or beg for his attention. She stood apart, near the marble colonnade, robes of white and silver falling in unadorned grace. Aurora. The priestess. Her presence was quiet, but it cleaved through the glitter and noise as surely as a sword through fine silk.

Others admired her as one might an angelic figure, distant, untouchable. But Dorian felt the weight of her attention like a flame against skin. She did not look away. She never looked away.

His lips curved, knowing and challenging, but the smile faded almost at once. Her gaze was steady, unflinching, stripping past his practiced veneer until he felt laid bare.

For the first time that night, Dorian's charm failed him.

"Your Highness," came a soft voice at his side. Lady Celia, golden-haired and sweetly smiling, dipped into a graceful curtsey. Her perfume—roses and spice—rose up like a veil between him and the priestess. "Will you not ask me to dance?"

Dorian turned, offering his hand out of habit rather than desire. "How could I refuse?" Head tilts towards her practiced smile in place.

Celia glowed under his attention, her laughter tinkling light as glass bells as they moved together across the floor. Yet no matter how closely he drew her, no matter how many polished words spilled from his lips, his eyes strayed again and again toward the colonnade.

Toward Aurora.

The priestess did not move. Did not smile. Yet, Dorian felt her watching, as though she could see the cracks in his armor—the man hidden beneath the prince. It both unsettled and intrigued him.

And for the first time that evening, Dorian's smile felt like something he should not let her see. Her gaze stripped past the charm he wore like armor, and his skin prickled as though her eyes had drawn blood. Heat crawled up his neck, the practiced smile tugged too tightly at his mouth. She saw too much. Far too much.

"Shall we take some air, Lady Celia?" he said lightly, guiding her toward the garden doors. Anything to get away from Aurora's piercing gaze. But even as they stepped into the cool night, her gaze lingered unseen– a phantom's hand at his throat.

With a coy smile and a hand on his arm, Lady Celia followed him away from the lights and frivolity –outside into the garden.

She waited, then drifted along the edges of the crowd, keeping him in view as he guided Celia into the torchlit garden.

Moonlight draped the garden in silver, weaving softness over ivy arches and marble fountains. The roses scented the damp night, brushing aside the cloying perfumes and false laughter of the dance hall. Dorian drew in a slow breath, savoring the quiet.

“You’ve gone silent, Your Highness,” Lady Celia teased, tilting her head to study him. “Surely I haven’t lost my charm?” Her laughter sparkled like the fountain’s spray, clear and refreshing.

“Unlikely,” Dorian said, his chuckle low, though a glimmer in his eyes betrayed amusement—and perhaps something more.

"Then what weighs on your mind?" she pressed, her gaze sharpened.

A direct question. *I need to be careful with this one*. Dorian considered her, the faint glow of torchlight flickering in her golden curls. Celia was not as foolish as she pretended to be.

"Tell me, Lady Celia," he stepped closer. "Do you believe in fate?" While Dorian was thinking of Aurora, he imagined Celia was considering her own future, possibly with him.

She hesitated, just a breath. Then, "No. Only choices."

Dorian smirked. "Wise, indeed."

Yet he wondered if she saw the irony, that his choices had never been his own. Not truly. Before Celia could respond, a sharp voice cut through his thoughts and the close quiet.

"Your Highness." The courtier bowed slightly. “Pardon the interruption. He stood at the garden entrance. "The king requests your presence." Dorian sighed, dramatic. "Duty calls. Lady Celia, will you forgive me?"

"I always do, Highness." She watched as he walked away, and smiled an almost relieved look on her face.

Chapter 2

KING ALARIC

The warmth of the ballroom vanished like a dream. Heavy tapestries swallowed the firelight, and the air smelled of parchment, leather, and lingering smoke.

King Alaric sat behind an oak desk piled with scrolls. He looked up, his sharp gaze pinning Dorian in place.

"Another scandal. Another family paid off." The parchment landed on the desk with a dull thud. "How many more will there be?"

Dorian smirked, but it felt brittle. "Must we do this tonight, Father? The wine is flowing, the music is sweet…"

"This is not a game!" Alaric's voice cracked like a whip. "You are a prince, not a common rogue. Do you think your actions have no consequences? Do you think you can flirt and drink your way through life without endangering the throne?"

Dorian's jaw tightened. "Perhaps I never wanted that throne."

The silence that followed was suffocating. Alaric exhaled, the fire in his gaze dimming. "You think you're rebelling against me, son. But you're only hurting yourself."

Something lodged deep in Dorian's chest, an old wound he had long since stopped acknowledging. "Then perhaps you should find someone else to wear your crown."

With that, he turned and strode from the chamber, the heavy door slamming behind him.

The hallway outside was cool, the air biting against his heated skin. He exhaled, rubbing a hand through his tousled hair.

You're only hurting yourself.

The words clung to him like damp linen.

Ahead, the glow of the ballroom beckoned. Laughter, music, the promise of indulgence, his carefully crafted world waiting to swallow him whole.

But tonight, it felt like a cage.

Without a second thought, Dorian turned.

The night air called, untainted by wine or duty. With one last glance at the gilded prison behind him, he slipped through a side door, disappearing into the gardens once more.

The palace gardens lay cloaked in the soft hues of dawn, the sky painted in gold and pale rose as the first light crept over the horizon. Dew clung to the petals of roses and lilies, each droplet glistening like a tiny gem in the early light. The air was crisp and cool, carrying the sweet scent of blooming flowers and the faint rustle of leaves stirred by the breeze.

It was a world untouched by the weight of politics, untouched by the demands of kings and courtiers, a fleeting sanctuary caught between night and day.

Unknown to Aurora, Prince Dorian walked the cobblestone path with an unhurried stride, hands tucked behind his back. The scent of wine still lingered faintly on his coat, and Lady Isabelle's laughter echoed in his ears, a sound he dismissed with a quiet chuckle. Yet the weight of his father's words pressed heavily on his shoulders, the sting of Alaric's disappointment clinging like a shadow.

Away from the stifling grandeur of the palace walls, the prince allowed himself to breathe. But as he turned a corner, his steps faltered.

Aurora stood at the edge of a low stone terrace, bathed in the molten gold of sunrise. The light kissed her features, igniting her dark red hair into a halo of fire. Her emerald-green gown, simple, elegantly trimmed in silver, rippled in the breeze, and her posture, straight-backed, unyielding yet serene, spoke of an unshakable strength.

She was unlike the painted court ladies with their silk whispers and honeyed smiles. Aurora stood as though she belonged here, not as a guest but as something elemental, woven into the fabric of the dawn itself.

Aurora wasn't the delicate flower Dorian spun across ballroom floors nor the coy noblewoman like Celia, fluttering her fan in anticipation of his attention. She was solid, real, and impossibly out of reach. He watched her as she stood calmly.

Sensing his presence, Aurora turned.

Her green eyes met his, clear and piercing, holding none of the flirtation or flustered awe he was accustomed to among the court ladies. In that gaze, Dorian felt something shift, a faint flicker of recognition, as if they had met before in some half-forgotten dream.

Dorian recovered first, his smirk sliding into place like a well-worn mask. "Lady Aurora," he said, inclining his head with a flourish. "I didn't expect to find such a vision at this hour. Do you often greet the dawn like this, or am I simply extraordinarily lucky today?"

Aurora studied him, her sharp gaze peeling away the layers of his charm with precision. In her eyes, a flicker of amusement, and a guardedness, like a shield held just out of sight.

"I find peace in the early hours," she said evenly. "The world feels… unburdened by expectation. And you, Your Highness? Do you often seek solace in gardens at dawn, or am I the one fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the kingdom's most elusive prince?"

Her voice was smooth and calm, yet there was a faint edge beneath it, and a subtle challenge in her green eyes.

Dorian chuckled softly, the sound low and warm. "I find myself wandering more often than I should. The court is… loud, and I've always preferred conversations that don't have to compete with string quartets and clinking glasses."

Aurora's lips curved into the faintest smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I imagine you have many conversations worth hearing, Your Highness. Stories told in quiet corners, perhaps?"

He tilted his head, intrigued by the way she met his words without flinching. Most women in court either batted their lashes at him or shrank away under the weight of his gaze. But Aurora… Aurora matched him, step for step.

“Yes, Aurora, the best. But few listeners are as discerning as yourself.”

Aurora’s smile deepened slightly before fading, emerald eyes narrowing as she searched his face. “You wield charm like a fencer wields a blade, Prince Dorian. But beauty and clever words only get you so far.”

Her words landed softly but carried the weight of truth, and for a moment, Dorian felt something stir, a flicker of vulnerability, sharp and unexpected. It unnerved him.

He took a step closer, the distance between them shrinking, though he remained careful not to invade her space. “And what, Lady Aurora, do you think lies beyond charm and clever words?”

Aurora held his gaze, her voice steady. “Substance. Purpose. Something worth following.”

For a heartbeat, the world was silent. The wind stilled, and the golden light of dawn wrapped around them like a fragile cocoon.

Dorian let out a soft breath, his smirk softening into something closer to a genuine smile. “You’re not like the others, are you?”

Aurora raised an eyebrow. “Would you have preferred I were?”

He laughed, a real laugh, not the rehearsed chuckle he often employed in court. “No, Lady Aurora. I think I like you just as you are.”

She studied him a moment longer, and for a flicker of time, her guard.

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, longing 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 whispered to her soul.

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

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 pondered the question himself but answers. "I'm not sure... perhaps that's what I'm trying to find out."

In the moment of silence, they look at each other, the world around them forgotten. The connection between them is undeniable, a magnetic pull neither of them can ignore but they must. Both carry 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.

"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 when he spoke, "Until we meet again, my Lady." 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.

Chapter 3

AURORA

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 near the city disappearing into the Wildwood, a dangerous forest 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, their scent intoxicates and 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, she followed the stag 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 expressed. It wraps her in a comforting embrace. 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."

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 Dorian, his face coming into focus, voice low, commanding, the feeling of his presence, so close it made her breath hitch in her throat, heat pool low.

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 and mystery 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. But this dream felt different, more vivid, 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. For that to happen, she would have to renounce her vows, a serious step she would consider only for the right man, someone who moved her heart in ways that transcended her current life. Someone who would not break her heart.

And she knew it could not be Dorian. The mere idea was almost comical. 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.

As twilight settled, the sky above the Eternal City deepened into 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 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 wondered why she'd come.

"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, expression unreadable. "I had no idea anyone else was here. My apologies for disturbing your tryst, Prince," she replied, voice calm as she turned, wings spread for flight until he quickly stood, hand outstretched.

"No, don't leave," almost panicked, his voice.

"Dorian," the silver-haired girl protested, voice a sultry whine. Moments earlier, she had been curled in Dorian's lap, all curves and soft skin, now rising with a dramatic flourish. Scarlet lips pouted as she clutched her cloak tight around her shoulders, glaring at Aurora with contempt. "Dorian, send her away!" she hissed.

With a dismissive flick of his fingers, Dorian gave a lazy command: "Return home." In an instant, the girl vanished in a shimmer of light and offended pride. Turning, Dorian offered Aurora a sly grin. "So nice to see you," he drawled. "Do you make it a habit to wander these woods at night? I wouldn't have intruded had I known this was your sacred grove."

His smirk deepened. "As you saw, I was merely seeking privacy… for my tryst." The word rolled off his tongue with theatrical flair, cheeks tinged with the faintest blush of amusement.

Aurora's face flushed, wings had flared in alarm when she first arrived, seeing him and his lady friend. Now they relaxed slightly at his invitation, but her expression remained wary.

"Do you always treat women so poorly?" she asked, cool and composed. "As if they're pieces you shuffle off the board when a new game catches your eye?" Brows drew slightly together in a pretty frown.

Dorian shrugged. "Only when someone far lovelier appears." His eyes sparkled, and he reached for her with an easy charm. "Come, sit with me. The night's too beautiful to waste alone."

Aurora flinched at his touch. Her wings snapped open with a sharp gust of air, forcing him to step back. "I have no intention of sitting with you," Aurora said, voice like flint. "Not here. Not anywhere." The smirk slipped from his face.

She held his gaze, unwavering. "I've seen how you treat your companions, and I want no part of it or you. Whatever charm you wield, prince, try it elsewhere."

Dorian stared at her in stunned silence, her wings shimmered like silver fire in the moonlight. And then, he bowed, not mockingly this time, but with something that almost looked like regret in his eyes.

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 seeing one of his father's guards arrive 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. Please accompany me?" For a 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. “Barely clothed, I could see her nether parts when her legs splayed as she fell.”

“That Trollop was a princess whose father’s 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 as well. After all, she’d heard the rumors as had Dorian no doubt, but as always, he’d ignore them.

Chapter 4

DORIAN

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 many, with the court gathered in revelry, and whispered secrets. But tonight, something was different. 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 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 consequences at that moment. He was a prince, after all, and rules had always bent to his will.

He noticed Aurora as she stood at the edge of the room, her emerald eyes narrowing as she watched his brazen display. He saw her look of disappointment. She imagines I'm capable of so much more, but it's the same old games I'm familiar with, and he turned back to the woman pulling her into the shadows, his hand sliding beneath her skirts, as his lips murmured promises he would never keep; it sent a wave of disgust through him at his own foolishness.

She knew he was nothing more than a charming rogue, a prince who flouts his duties with a wink and a smirk, hiding beneath his charisma. His resolve hardens. He could not afford to be distracted by Aurora any longer. After all, she was a priestess and he was a rogue.

Later that evening, as he wandered, Dorian was surprised to find he was not alone in the palace gardens, his earlier conquest nowhere in sight. Surprised by her approach, Dorian tenses as Aurora turned to leave, her steps deliberate.

Suddenly he called to her, “Please don’t leave.”

“Dorian,” she said in surprise, turning back, voice steady. “What is it you want? You’re playing a dangerous game, one I want no part of. I will not be brought down by you or with you”

He looked at her with feigned innocence reverting back to his usual self. “Aurora, darling girl, you worry too much. It was just a bit of fun. Nothing more. She was – convenient.”

“Convenient? Your indifference to the feelings of others is unconscionable. The divine council, your father, what will they think when they hear? 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. “Oh posh. 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 and shame even for he knew what his guards likely had thought of Aurora, seeing her leave him and a supposed illicit tryst..

“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 in his eyes, fear, perhaps, or regret, but it was gone just 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, voice authoritative and cold as ice on snow.

"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 opened. "What? On what grounds?" He steps away from the guards, preparing to flee as his eyes flicker between them deciding to flee and if so, to where?

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

Before he could move, 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 magical abilities.

Aurora's heart pounded. It happened so fast, she hadn't expected the council to act this swiftly. "Wait!" she called, trying to step between Dorian and the guards. "This must be a mistake." But her plea fell on deaf ears. The guards pushed her aside without apology, as they led him away. His earlier bravado crumbled. "Aurora!" he cried, a hand reaching out. "Do something."

Do something, What can I do? she wondered, watching him being hauled off leaving her alone in the garden, the weight of failure pressing in on her. I warned him but he would not listen. And his magic had been stilled. So often, she had tried to steer him from the path he was on, but he hadn't listened. Now, he was paying the price.

Only later would Aurora learn of what happened, the following day. The council gathered in the grand chamber, their judgment swift and unforgiving. “Dorian you are 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.

Chapter 5

DORIAN

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 of 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.

Remembering when I took my first step away from the gate, how it felt as the magic of Elysium, vanished. I stumbled, feeling suddenly weak and vulnerable. The magic had always been part of me. Now exposed to a harsh unfamiliar world it was disquieting. The sky, once bright with the light of heaven, overcast now with dark clouds, as if it too turned its back on me. I had no destination, no plan , knowing nothing would ever be the same.

Climbing on my horse, together we rode away into the night.

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 when I'd passed Moonshadow valley on the other side of the mountains, and so, I circled and passed them by. Not that I would have stopped in that place of magic and being seen as an outsider.

The terrain grew wilder as I pressed on, trees crowding close, their roots clawing at the narrow, uneven path. Each step seemed a dare against

the wilderness, but I had no choice—something deeper than fear drove me forward, a need to flee the life already torn from me.

When I reached the river Oceanus, its fury nearly stole my resolve. The torrent raged below, white spray burst like breath from a monster's maw. Only a footbridge spanned the chasm—if such a thing could be called a bridge. Bare strands of rope strained against the pull of the river, holding up a row of crooked boards that groaned with every breath of wind.

My horse balked, tossing his head, hooves skittering backward from the swaying contraption. I whispered to him, pulled at the reins, coaxing, but he would not move. At last I removed the saddle, laid a trembling hand on his flank and released him, knowing he would find his way home. I would have to leave the saddle and face the crossing alone.

The first step sent the bridge rocking, the ropes creaking in protest. My grip tightened until the fibers cut into my palms. I fixed my gaze on the far bank. Looking down was madness—the river snarled below, eager for my fall. The boards shifted beneath my boots, slick with damp, bending as if they might break free at any moment. The wind caught me, swaying the bridge violently, and for a heartbeat I thought Oceanus and the rocks below had claimed me.

But I pressed on, one step followed another, though my knees trembled and my breath came sharp and ragged. Halfway across, the sound of the river filled my ears until I could hear nothing else, only the thunder of water and the frantic beat of my own heart.

And then—almost before I dared believe it—the ground rose up before me, as my boots struck solid earth, and I stumbled forward, clutching at a mossy rock. The bridge swung behind me as if waving farewell. I drew a long, shaking breath, the first deep breath in what felt like hours. Relief crashed through me like the river itself. I was across and I was alive.

The world of Elysium, with its order and light, I had left gave way to something dark, untamed and wild. I now would find my way 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.

Chapter 6

AURORA

As the court disbanded, I 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, spirit broken. When he saw me, a bitter smile tugged at his lips.

“Come to gloat, to say goodbye?” he asked, voice hollow.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, tears welling. “I tried to warn you, and I did speak to the chancellor but to no avail. He simply refused to listen. I could tell he didn't believe me.”

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

“He accused me of being with you that way. Why would he think such a thing?” The words tumbled out before I could stop them. I stepped closer, reaching for his arm, desperate for the truth.

He pulled back, shrugging me off as though my touch burned. “I don’t know,” he said flatly, but the lie curled in his voice like smoke.

“Leave me be, priestess,” he snarled. Yet I knew; they had asked him, and he had not denied it. I could see it in his eyes—knowing Dorian, he had smirked, let their suspicions coil and twist, savoring the thought that others believed he could undo me, that he could corrupt what I was sworn to protect. I felt sad for him, at that moment. I swallowed the lump in my throat, forcing myself to nod, though the ache inside me screamed otherwise. “Alright, if you say so. But… where will you go?”

“Somewhere far from here,” he muttered, avoiding my gaze. “Somewhere I can forget.” And I knew he also wanted to forget me though I'd done nothing but try to help.

When he swung onto his horse, a sudden surge of loss hollowed me out. My voice wavered as I called after him. “Please—be careful. The mortal realm is unforgiving if you go there. And you’re still…”

The word *prince* clung to the edge of my lips, but he finished for me, his mouth twisting into a sad smile. “A fool?”

I shook my head, but the protest never reached him. He spurred his horse forward, dust rising in the night air as each hoofbeat carried him further away. I stood, helpless, watching him vanish into the darkness, my heart breaking with every echo.

I had warned him of the consequences, yet even I had not imagined they would cut this deep.

When silence finally settled, I found myself alone—caught between the divine calling that bound me and the feelings I could no longer bury. I pressed a hand to my chest, recalling the dream that still lingered in the edges of my memory. And I wondered—was it only a dream, or a prophecy of what was yet to come?

I 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. 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. 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 concerning Dorian." A suspicion of the chancellor warning the king about me only fueled my distrust of everyone, even my friend, Gloria, at 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. 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 quietly 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.

I was trapped in guilt, having arrived after the trial, seeing Dorian on his way out of the palace escorted by guards. The look on his face, broke my heart regretting every word I'd spoken against Dorian unintentionally, 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. Terrified of what the king would do to me, if he believed I'd been with Dorian, his mind conjured 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, and believed I was part of it, then 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 her with dread. No way could she remain, not after everything that has happened. Nor could she let Dorian face the world alone in god knows where he ended.

I returned home only long enough to gather what I needed for the journey—warm clothing, a satchel of coins unseen, I was a shadow slipping through familiar halls, a wraith moving through memory.

I was so very wrong.

…

Heirs of the Wildwood

Book 2

BRANDY MARKS

Part 1: A Family's Story


HEIRS OF THE WILDWOOD
NORTHLANDS
ELYSIUM
THE WILDWOOD
ETERNAL CITY
CALORIA

Chapter 1

AURORA

The birth of Elian, their first born takes place as a flicker of candlelight baths 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. Only Dorian was a much different person than the Dorian, the ne'er-do-well prince, who seduced females at the drop of their panties.

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 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 and a secure kingdom.”

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 was 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. Yet, he also remembered the times his father had tried to turn him into a king, through discipline and criticism. Not so Dorian and his son, though he also warned him of the dangers of being too strict.

~

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 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. 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 were 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 chided 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 smirk on her face, a raised eyebrow, and 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, 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 one who carried the weight of a crown but also a sense of humor. 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 with a smile on his lips."

This boldness 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. I will not be a sopping milkmaid bending over for any man who doesn't deserve me."

Dorian couldn't help but admire her spirit. "I do worry for her, Aurora. One day she will need to wed, and it may not be someone she chooses. I hate the idea of saddling her with a pig in a poke."

Aurora laughed yet also feared they would have to choose a husband for Eryn if she did not do so herself. She was wild in a way neither could control. "She has the heart of a queen, but the mind of a wild woman." Dorian sighed, "What path will her defiance 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, and the council encouraged the king and queen to find a husband who could control her. What they really wanted was to get her out of their hair and off to another kingdom. But to Eryn, it mattered not. 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.

***

Chapter 2

ERYN

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 a 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.

***

Chapter 3

DORIAN

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. Always she'd been the center of his world, balancing his burden with grace and wisdom. But now, she seemed beyond his reach more and more. The long days and longer nights spent ruling the kingdom left little time for them. In her eyes now, he saw something he had not seen before: boredom and 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 solid as 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, like a puppy he eagerly strove to ingratiate himself with whomever might serve put their hand to 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.

~

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 and you are lovelier than ever.” Aurora, surprised by the familiar face, stopped, a smile curving her lips despite herself. She recalled the scoundrel from Wildwood who used to set her nether parts on fire. “Dolion,” she replied, eyes wide. “I didn’t expect to see you.” Seeing him after so many years, she still felt his lure recalling how he tried 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. “I’ve missed you. Fortunately your council seems to appreciate my expertise, so now, I’ll be around for a while. I am glad we have finally crossed paths with you, once again.”

“Haman.” Aurora tasted his name on her tongue, chuckling; the sound hollow to her ears. “A new name for new beginnings. But I have been - busy, as have you it seems.” Seducing Dorian’s council, she mused.

Haman stepped close and leaned in, his voice lowered as if to share a secret between them. “Busy? Or lonely?”

Aurora’s gaze flickered, her lips parting as if to speak. No words came. She swallowed as his question lingered in the space between them, the air filled with a tension she had not felt in years. And she felt a familiar stirring below as memories of his touch invaded her. Her eyes met his, and for a second, something stirred, 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 feel the memory of his touch, a whisper against her skin, teasing, a reminder of what she had denied herself and now longed for. Her breath hitched, betraying her.

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

“Life has been lonely since you left.” He stopped, not speaking 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 and he licks his lips. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” he whispered, his hand brushing hers and she felt heat flow through her chest into her core. “We can be friends, or whatever you desire.” The words heated with emphasis, voice soft she felt his warm breath on her neck as he leaned in. Mind spinning, Aurora 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, in bed she lay alone, longing for Dorian, longing for his touch, the temptation gnawed. When Dorian came to be, oh how she wanted him, but when his head hit the pillow, he was asleep, leaving Aurora aching with need.

~

The next day, as dawn broke over the Wildwood and the palace stirred, Aurora wandered the corridors seemingly without purpose, though her mind had been restless all night, thoughts of Haman, his persistent yet gentle hands, his strong body, how it had felt pressed close to her.

Thoughts unbidden crept in, her desire a shadow she could not shake. The night before she had 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. And thoughts of Haman. Now, as the light of morning spilled through the palace windows, Aurora knew what she was doing though she would never admit it.

~

It was like he sensed my need, though I scarcely admitted it myself as Haman began his pursuit. He was so artful and relentless but draped in grace and innocence. I found it infuriating, every glance, every word felt wrapped in silk as he slid through the shadows arriving suddenly in a corridor. He would smile and walk past but too close, hand brushing mine and even in the gardens, he seemed to appear out of nowhere just when I thought myself alone. And my hunger grew.

No one else seemed to notice. But I felt him long before he arrived and slid into my world like mist beneath a door, uninvited yet welcome. A book left open to the perfect page. A goblet refilled without a word. I tried not to respond. But every time his heated glance fell on me, my breath caught. I found myself panting. "Are you alright?" a friend asked. "Oh yes, it's nothing, just a slight dizzy spell."

He never touched me other than a brush of the hand. It was the way he said my name was a caress, “Aurora, sun of the morning, how you warm my day,” voice whispered low and seductive, breath warm on her as he passed by. Never within anyone else’s hearing. The way he looked at me his dark eyes filled with a hidden promise. And deep within, buried beneath duty and decorum, something stirred. And I was terrified, not of him, of myself and where this was leading. How I wanted it.

His presence lingered, the scent of the forbidden, hot and tantalizing, and impossible to ignore. While he spoke with the maids, teasing and taunting, doubtless to lessen suspicions of his attending to me, which sent my jealousy soaring. I knew what he was up to and did not dissuade him. Indeed, I looked forward to when the inevitable came about.

One day in the library, dark eyes flicked a knowing glance my way, then a smile, as he asked, “What is it you need?” And I wanted to drag him into the shadowed corner and show him my need.

I knew he carefully crafted every move as a reminder of the passion I’d once felt, the fire grown cold in my marriage - stoked red hot and now the throbbing between my legs became persistent.

I was drawn by the way he looked at me. Only I was not the moth drawn to flame, I was the fire. Merciful heavens how I wanted him. I was ready to pull him into the shadows and make it happen.

But Haman drew out his seduction, making me wait. He wanted me more than willing so I could not blame him for destroying my marriage. He wanted me eager to come to him so, I began my pursuit. If he stood close during council meetings, instead of my hand brushing his, I turned away and my hand brushed the front of his pants. My lips curved in a smirk feeling him rise to the occasion as I walked away.

I should walk away, insist Dorian send him away. But I was slipping down a dangerous path, and Haman’s pursuit was a siren’s call, a promise of heated passion, and a release from the emptiness I felt every day. The intrigue of what we were doing was too tantalizing.

I knew it meant nothing and I was stronger than the temptation but to tease and tempt was fun. And in the Wildwood, I could resist him. Yet,

now I sought him out, looked forward to seeing him, wanting him in a way that filled me with anticipation and guilt. My raced madly as I made my way into the garden, knowing, hoping Haman was there.

Chapter 4

AURORA

And I stopped near the statue of the ancient queen, hand touching the stone as memories of my first encounters with Dorian swirled. A smile tugged at my lips, a pleasantness I'd not felt in a long time. And then all thoughts of Dorian vanished as Haman emerged from the shadows his eyes found and locked onto mine; he had been waiting. His lips curled into a roguish grin, so irresistible. Panting with excitement and anticipation, without a word, I closed the distance between us, his presence intoxicating. Heat pooled below and I was so wet my heart pounded so loud I imagined he could hear it.

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

"I was hoping to see you today," he murmured, his gaze lingering before dropping to my lips. I licked them as my breath caught as I screamed to myself, "just walk away, stop before it goes too far," but the fire burning inside silenced that voice. Heated and moisture flooded my nether part. How I needed this and I almost moaned out loud.

"We shouldn't be alone" she whispered. "Someone could see us."

"But you are as am I. No one is here; they are busy elsewhere." Haman replied, voice softly intimate as he stepped closer, his hand slid around my waist. He didn't need to pull me tight to him. I fell into him, felt his erection hard against my belly, 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 me, I was wet, panting, my head spun, heart hammering. This is so wrong, a sin. The price I would pay if Dorian found out, if anyone found out. But all she wanted was to feel him inside me, to experience the passion I had been denied so long, to have the aching void inside filled. My body was begging him to take me.

As my lips moved up to his. Haman responded instantly, his hands pulling me tight to him, roaming over my body with a hunger like my own. A hungry moan pushed through my lips as his lips trailed down my neck, hands pulling the edge of my gown up, fingers sliding between my legs into the wet, claiming me with a tenderness I desperately needed. “Oh, please don’t stop,” I moaned. And he didn’t. His fingers penetrated to stroke gently then insistently to draw out my pleasure.

Every move ignited something primal within. “I want more, need to feel you inside me, to lose myself with you inside me,” I whispered, an urgent ache tore the words from my lips. “I need you to... take and fill me completely, now.”

Suddenly, Haman moved with me deeper into the shadows, his hands leading me away from prying eyes, our bodies pressed tight together in a heated embrace. My breath came in ragged gasps as Haman’s hands explored me intimately. I couldn’t wait for him as we fell down to the grass, gown riding farther up, and I didn’t care as he pulled it up around my waist exposing me further.

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

His hands move down, fingers stroked across the apex of my pleasure and then he was sliding inside. So easily. I felt him enter, filling me with his hardness as he drove in, I cried out giving myself fully to him. My stomach tensed, hips raised to meet every thrust as he stroked inside

pushing me toward a precipice so close. Suddenly I was over the edge, and with a cry of release so loud I feared it might bring the guards, but mercifully no one came, all was quiet, other than our panting breath in the still air, and I heaved a sigh of fulfillment.

Later, I would hate myself for allowing this. But now, all I wanted was to nestle in his arms because in a moment it would be over and he would be gone. Except, Haman had other plans and he took me again in the garden. Neither of us saw the two pairs of eyes that had watched, filled with pain and anger.

~

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, slid across her waist, pulling her close as their lips met. It was not hurried, 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 for a moment, Aurora 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, he'd had a separate sleeping chamber 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, 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 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 these brief stolen moments. Aurora wondered why she had never come to him before. And in the weeks to come, occasionally she would, once again, go to him.

***

Chapter 5

ROWAN

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. 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 a few times 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 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 the boy, 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 life 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?

***

Beyond the Wildwood

Book 3

BRANDY MARKS


KING ELIAN
BEYOND THE
WILD WOOD
A TALE OF LOVE

BEYOND THE WILDWOOD

In writing “Beyond the Wildwood” with Elian and Jin Daiyu, I researched ancient Chinese cultures their customs regarding Emperors and their daughters, for what I deemed relevant to the story. This briefly offers some of what will be read in the story, though it is not always pleasant it is culturally accurate for the proposed time in the story. However, this is not intended to be a historical novel, but a fantasy.

Main Characters book 3:

Elian - King of Elysium

Jin Daiyu - Daughter to Emperor Jin Xian

Jin Xian - Emperor Jin of the Moonlit Kingdom

Shenzi - Daiyu's cunning companion

Ming-Na - Daiyu's advisor and, secretly, her sister

Myeong-gil - the emperor's advisor, a cold calculator

Vaelon - King Elian’s advisor

Part 1: Weaving the Silk Net

Chapter 1

JIN DAIYU

The throne room of the Moonlit Kingdom had always felt oppressive to Jin Daiyu, but today, the weight of its grandeur bore down like never before. The gleaming limestone beneath her feet, polished to perfection, reflected the cold splendor of the chamber. Tall columns, etched with coiling dragons, rose to the heavens, their silent watch an unrelenting reminder of the empire's unyielding legacy. Above, a massive mural stretched across the ceiling, depicting the Jade Emperor's triumph over chaos, each brushstroke a testament to power and order.

At the center sat Emperor Jin Xian, her father, whose presence filled the room like a storm contained by gilded walls. His robes, deep sapphire embroidered with gold, rippled faintly as he shifted his bulk, the fabric catching the flicker of torchlight. His almond-shaped eyes, dark as obsidian, bore into her with the intensity of one who saw everything, and allowed nothing to be seen in return.

Jin Daiyu stood at attention, her body still, her mind a whirlwind. Summoned without warning, she had learned long ago to mask her thoughts, to anticipate the worst while showing only calm. Yet, as her father descended from his throne, the echo of his footsteps a deliberate cadence, she felt her pulse quicken.

"You are exceptionally beautiful," he said, his voice smooth and measured, each word laced with intent.

The compliment, hollow and perfunctory, struck like a blade dulled by use. Beautiful. Huh. That is all you see in me, she thought, the bitterness barely restrained.

His hands, adorned with a jade ring inscribed with the characters for "wisdom" and "strength," rested on her arms in a gesture that feigned

paternal affection. She felt none of it. The touch was calculated, as cold and deliberate as his every word.

“You have been trained well,” he continued, his tone as sharp as the ceremonial sword mounted behind the throne. “Seduction, diplomacy, survival, you are perfection incarnate, my daughter. A weapon honed for the good of the empire.”

Daiyu’s stomach turned, but her face betrayed nothing. A weapon, she thought bitterly. Not a daughter.

“You will use these gifts,” he said, his gaze unyielding, “to secure the alliance we need. The King of Elysium is strong, but strength can be swayed by beauty. Ensnare him. Bind him to our cause.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with implication. Daiyu’s nails pressed into her palms, the sharp sting grounding her against the rising tide of fury. She had expected this, had known that her father would demand nothing less. Yet hearing it aloud, framed so plainly, filled her with a rage she dared not show.

“Do not fail,” he added, his tone dropping to a cold finality. “And do not bring shame to our house. Seduce him, but only after you the wedding takes place.”

The dismissal was as sharp as the command and he turned away, his robes sweeping the floor like the tide retreating from the shore. Daiyu stood motionless, the silence of the throne room oppressive in his wake.

The storm within her churned violently as her father ascended back to his gilded seat. Shame? she thought. You speak of shame as if you have not already heaped it upon me. Her chest tightened with the weight of unspoken grievances the scars of her father’s actions carved deep into her soul. Yet, as always, she swallowed her anger, letting it fuel the embers of her resolve.

If she was to be a pawn in his schemes, she would choose how to play the game. She would walk into the court of Elysium with her head held

high, not as prey, but as a hunter. If her father sought to use her, she would use him in turn.

I will not be broken, she vowed. Not by you, and not by any man.

The dream came later, vivid and surreal, pulling her from restless sleep into a realm where reality and imagination blurred. She stood barefoot on an endless plain of soft grass, her gown a masterpiece of artistry. Silk from the East and brocade from the West intertwined in a dance of cranes and dragons, the threads shimmering with ethereal light. The air was thick with the scent of jasmine, undercut by the metallic tang of an impending storm.

Before her, a lone figure emerged from the mist, his presence commanding yet familiar. Her heart quickened, a mixture of apprehension and curiosity tightening in her chest. As the mist receded, she saw him clearly: King Elian. His piercing blue eyes, like the sky before a tempest, met hers, steady and unrelenting.

“Jin Daiyu,” he said, though his lips did not move. His voice resonated within her, deep and resonant, like the tolling of a distant bell.

She tried to speak, but no sound came. The air around her rippled, and images flashed before her in rapid succession. A golden crown, resting lightly on her head. A calloused hand, warm and steady, clasping hers. The laughter of a feast, two kingdoms united in celebration.

Then, the vision shifted.

The crown cracked, its pieces scattering into shadow. Blood stained the grass, banners torn and lifeless in a cold wind. A blade gleamed beneath the light of the moon, its edge poised to strike. A cloaked figure whispered words she could not hear, their presence suffocating.

The ground beneath her feet gave way, and the plain turned to an ocean. The water surged around her, rising steadily as waves crashed and receded. Elian stood unmoving, his gaze locked on hers, unflinching as the tide threatened to swallow them both.

“Save me!” she cried, her voice breaking free at last.

His hand reached for hers, but before their fingers could meet, the waves consumed them, and the vision shattered.

Daiyu woke with a start, the silk sheets of her bed tangled around her like bindings. Her breath came in shallow gasps, her pulse racing. The faint light of dawn seeped through the curtains, casting the room in muted hues. She pressed a hand to her chest, willing her heart to steady.

“What path must I choose?” she whispered to the stillness, her voice trembling. The dream lingered, its meaning elusive but undeniable. Across the vastness of the palace, she knew there was another caught in the same web of uncertainty.

Somewhere, King Elian dreamed as well.

The moon’s silver light spilled over Elysium, brushing the palace spires with an ethereal glow. Elian barely noticed it. His thoughts were heavy, his body heavier as he exchanged a brief farewell with Vaelon and trudged to his chambers. Each step seemed to echo louder in the quiet halls, a reminder of how the weight of the day lingered like a second shadow.

When Elian finally sank into bed, the cool sheets offering some relief to his weary body, sleep claimed him quickly. But it wasn’t the deep, dreamless slumber he had hoped for. Instead, he was pulled into a dream, no, something more. A vision that hummed with the weight of meaning.

Wind howled around him, cold and biting, as he stood on the edge of a cliff. Below, the ocean churned, waves crashing against jagged rocks with a force that made his chest tighten. The sky mirrored the water’s chaos, clouds swirling in hues of gold and violet, as if the heavens themselves were unraveling. He strained to hear the whispers carried by the wind, faint and elusive, yet they stirred something primal within him. A warning? A plea?

The air shifted. The waves seemed to grow louder, more restless, and from the roiling sea emerged a figure. She walked on the water as if it were stone, steps deliberate, presence undeniable. A shimmer of light cloaked her, rippling like silk in the storm's chaos, before it faded to reveal her fully.

Jin Daiyu.

His breath hitched, the sound lost in the cacophony around him. He had never met her, not truly, yet her features were unmistakable. Almond-shaped eyes as dark as an unlit night locked onto his, and for a moment, the storm seemed to still. Her hair cascaded down her back, catching faint glimmers of light, and her robes flowed as though the wind itself obeyed her.

"You," he managed, his voice foreign to his own ears. "Why are you here? For what have you come?"

She didn't answer. Instead, her hand extended toward him, palm open. Resting on it was a single golden leaf, its delicate veins glowing faintly, as if it held the essence of life itself.

"Do you see?" she asked. Her voice wasn't carried by the wind but seemed to resonate within him, a haunting melody that left no room for misunderstanding.

The question struck something deep inside him, a place he rarely allowed himself to visit. What was he meant to see? The leaf? Her? Or something beyond either? He reached for the offering, unsure whether it was curiosity or compulsion driving him. Before his fingers could close around it, the ground beneath him shifted.

The cliff dissolved, and he was suddenly back in the great hall of the palace. Candlelight flickered, casting jagged shadows across the walls. Though she was gone, her presence lingered, the faint scent of jasmine threading through the air.

Ahead of him stood the throne, his throne. But it was no longer whole. A jagged crack split it in two. One side gleamed with the familiar gold and blue of Elysium. The other bore intricate, unfamiliar designs,

patterns that reminded him of the east. The two halves pulsed faintly, alive but apart, the gap between them growing wider with each beat.

“To unite or to destroy. The choice is yours. Choose well, Elian.”

The voice reverberated through the chamber, deep and resonant, though he couldn’t tell if it was his own or another’s. It carried an authority that left no room for dismissal, a weight that pressed against his very being.

Elian turned, searching for the speaker, but the hall dissolved once more into mist. He was back on the cliff, the ocean now eerily calm, its surface glassy and still. Jin Daiyu stood closer this time, her face less ethereal, more human. Vulnerable, even.

“Our fates are bound,” she whispered, her words barely audible yet impossible to ignore. “But which thread will you pull?”

Her hand rose again, but this time, she didn’t hold the leaf. Instead, she held his crown. The gold shimmered brilliantly in her grasp, but as he reached for it, the crown changed. It was no longer his, reshaped into something simpler yet unfamiliar, a plain circlet of gold, unadorned and unpretentious.

He hesitated. Something in the air shifted, a tension that built with every heartbeat. Before he could make a choice, the ocean surged, the waves rising like a beast awakened. They crashed over him, swallowing the vision whole.

Elian woke with a start, his chest heaving as though he had been submerged in the ocean itself. The room was dark, save for the faint glow of moonlight filtering through the arched windows. His sheets were twisted around him, damp with sweat, and his hands trembled as he ran one through his hair.

The dream clung to him, vivid and unyielding. His fingers tingled as if he could still feel the weight of that golden leaf, or was it the crown?

“What thread will I pull?” he murmured, the words rasping from his throat. The question lingered, heavy and unanswered, as the first faint light of dawn seeped into the sky.

Chapter 2

JIN DAIYU

The streets of Elysium stretched out like a labyrinth of light and shadow, alive with the cacophony of life. Jin Daiyu's gaze swept over the polished limestone streets, the way they gleamed beneath the midday sun as though burnished by the very hands of heaven. Cascading fountains whispered in the warm air, their mist catching the light, while gilded spires rose to pierce the sky. A city reaching for divinity, and one determined to press its grandeur upon her.

She rode at the head of the eastern procession, her back straight, her expression as composed as still water. Around her, the chaos of the markets churned. Merchants called out, their voices competing with the hum of haggling crowds, while the clinking of her jade ornaments punctuated the rhythmic steps of her steed. The embroidered silk of her robes whispered with every motion, delicate and deliberate, yet her heart thudded beneath its protective layers, each beat a weighted drum of uncertainty.

Their eyes were everywhere, sharp, blue, assessing. Jin Daiyu's dark gaze darted over the pale faces that turned toward her, some openly staring, others sneaking glances from beneath furrowed brows. Narrowed eyes. Lips curling, not quite into smiles. Disdain? Curiosity? Or something more veiled, insidious?

Under an ornate awning, a group of nobles stood apart, their muted finery blending with the soft light of the market. Their laughter faltered as her procession passed. Whispers replaced it, hushed and biting, their meaning carried not by words but by the prickle that crawled over her skin.

Her fingers tightened around the reins, leather cool and firm against her palms. She focused on the sensation, grounding herself in its simplicity as the air around her seemed to grow heavier. What do they see? Her thoughts bit at the edges of her composure, her lips remaining still. Is it my eyes, too dark against my skin? My hair, black as ink? Or perhaps it's my sun-kissed complexion, too golden, too foreign for their liking.

The scents of the city mingled in the air, lavender from nearby planters, the sweetness of fresh bread, and the faint, metallic tang of the fountains. It filled her lungs, but no breath could ease the weight pressing on her chest. She had prepared for this moment, hadn't she? Years spent perfecting her poise, her movements, her words, each one honed to a razor's edge. Yet no amount of training had prepared her for this, the way they stared, as though trying to unravel her like a puzzle whose pieces they didn't quite trust.

The knot in her stomach tightened with every scowl, every lingering glance. Each one was a stone, another weight pulling her resolve taut. But she would not falter. Could not. Her chin lifted, her face unyielding, a mask carved from porcelain like the ones worn by performers in her homeland. Let them look. Let them judge. If they saw only what was foreign, that was their ignorance, not hers.

The palace gates rose up ahead, a formidable boundary between this sea of murmurs and the world she would soon face. Intricate carvings caught the golden light, casting shifting shadows that seemed almost alive.

Jin Daiyu forced her focus away from the scrutinizing eyes, away from the whispers that nipped at her heels like wolves circling their prey to the palace before her.

But as her gaze climbed higher, her breath hitched. A figure stood at the gates, his silhouette tall and imposing. The sunlight caught on him, framing his presence like the subject of a master's painting. He was as unyielding as the stone walls that flanked him, yet there was something alive in the sharpness of his posture, in the weight of his gaze.

Elian.

The name seared through her, unbidden, as recognition struck with startling clarity. The dream, she thought, the memory crashing over her like a wave. She had dismissed it as an illusion, a figment born of restless nights and the burden of her father's decree. Yet here he was, the man who had stood on the edge of that storm-tossed cliff, his gaze unwavering even as the world churned around them. That same look pierced her now, almost as if daring her to flinch.

How had I not realized it sooner? The thought gnawed at her even as she forced her face to remain impassive. Of course, it's him. The king I am meant to wed. The man her father had chosen as the lynchpin of this fragile alliance. "You must wed," he had decreed. "And you will marry the king of Elysium, so as to bind our lands together."

She had accepted then, bowing under the weight of duty. It was what she had been trained for, after all, to serve, to obey, to endure. Yet as her gaze locked with his, even from a distance, that duty shifted. It was no longer a simple command to follow. The magnitude of it bore down on her, heavy and sharp, as if each of her father's expectations had forged a link in a chain now wrapped around her chest.

Elian was not just a king. Not just a man. He was the figure who had haunted the edge of her dreams, his presence weaving itself into the threads of her destiny in ways she was only beginning to comprehend. And now, as she squared her shoulders, forcing her focus back to the gates, she felt the stirrings of something unfamiliar, something that whispered of both fear and possibility.

Whatever lay ahead, the fulfillment of a prophecy or unraveling of her resolve, she would meet it as she always had, with calm determination and a mind as sharp as the black diamonds they mistook her eyes for.

The morning air carried a sharpness Elian usually found invigorating. Today, it felt heavier, tinged with the weight of expectation. Standing atop the palace steps, he surveyed Elysium's sprawling city below. Its golden spires caught the early light, a dazzling display against the soft hues of dawn's sky. Beneath them, the eastern envoy approached, their

banners of jade and gold rippling in the breeze. Serpents and clouds twisted in an intricate dance across the fabric, a testament to the precision and elegance of their culture.

And at its center was her.

Jin Daiyu.

Elian's breath caught, sharp and unbidden. She moved like still water gliding through chaos, her posture regal, her steps measured with deliberate grace. Her robes shimmered in the muted light, the interplay of jade and gold making her seem like a vision conjured from ancient stories. Her face remained calm and composed, offering nothing to grasp, yet her dark eyes, sharp as obsidian, darted across her surroundings with quiet vigilance.

Beautiful. The word rose unbidden, unwelcome. But her beauty was not the kind that stirred warmth; it was distant, untouchable. Like a statue carved from moonlight, flawless in form yet cold. Elian clung to that impression, using it as a shield against the strange pull she seemed to have on him.

He forced his gaze away, his jaw tightening. He had seen beauty like hers before, enticing, beguiling, and treacherous.

Aelara.

Her name struck like a phantom blow, a ghost from a past he had tried to bury. Aelara had been wild and untamed, a creature of secrets and magic. She had walked the Wildwood as though she were its queen, her effortless beauty disarming and her laughter intoxicating. She had carried the forest with her, wearing vines in her hair and a tunic stitched with leaves, a crown of enchantment and mystery.

And she had betrayed him.

Aelara's charm had been a weapon, her beauty a blade hidden beneath silk. She had used him, twisted his heart and his trust, until her betrayal left him hollow and broken. Love, he had learned, was a storm, a chaos that left only wreckage in its wake. He had locked his heart away since

then, vowing to rule with quiet strength, free from the vulnerability desire could bring.

And yet, as Jin Daiyu drew closer, something within him shifted. It wasn't the consuming fire Aelara had ignited, but something quieter, a flicker of warmth that threatened to grow. Her controlled movements, her inscrutable gaze, made him wonder what lay beneath the surface of this enigmatic woman.

God help me, he thought, the weight of his own history pressing against his chest.

He shook his head sharply, banishing the thought. This was nothing more than the council's ploy for alliances, heirs, and treaties, his father's ambitions, now passed to him. Marriage was a solution they dreamed of, a salve for the kingdom's wounds. But Elian knew better. A union would not heal wounds carved deeper than any treaty could mend.

Marry her? The thought churned like a storm within. She was a stranger cloaked in silk, a mystery he was not inclined to unravel. Let the council spin their webs of diplomacy; he would not be caught in them.

And yet,

As she reached the base of the steps, she lifted her head. Their gazes met, and Elian froze. There was no coldness in her eyes, though they were guarded. Instead, he saw strength. Pain. A depth that mirrored something within himself.

The breath caught in his throat, and the memory of his dream surged forward, her name, carried on the wind, an echo of something he could not yet grasp.

Her serene expression faltered for the briefest moment before settling again. The parasol she carried, white silk painted with crimson blossoms and delicate dragonflies, shifted in the breeze. Sunlight caught her hair, a cascade of shimmering black that framed her face and flowed down her back. Her gown, adorned with golden cranes, gleamed subtly with each movement, mesmerizing in its grace.

Behind her, the envoy moved with precision, their movements choreographed to perfection. Yet Elian's gaze lingered on her. Just her. A quiet rage flickered within him, though he knew it was unfair to her. She was not Aelara.

His thoughts tangled as he turned away, unwilling to let them stray further. No. He would not allow himself to be caught in a web of illusions again. Not again. Not ever.

Reentering the palace, leaving the envoy, and Jin Daiyu, to the care of his advisors, Elian's resolve hardened. Whatever threads of fate had brought her to Elysium, they would not bind him. Not unless he chose it.

Chapter 3

JIN DAIYU

The streets of Elysium teemed with life as the eastern procession moved through the capital. Children pointed, their high-pitched voices rising with excitement, while merchants paused mid-bargain to steal glances at the foreign delegation. Jin Daiyu kept her gaze steady, her expression calm, though the weight of countless eyes pressed against her like a tidal wave. Whispers followed them, fragmented and sharp. She caught hints of curiosity, unease, and something sharper still.

To them, I am only a spectacle, a curiosity, she thought. The ignorance of strangers was not new, yet this felt heavier, a mixture of fascination and fear.

Her grip tightened on the reins of her horse, the cool leather grounding her. Years of training had prepared her for this moment. She was here as her father's envoy, as the pride of her kingdom. And yet, no amount of preparation could have readied her for the sheer enormity of Elysium's presence. The opulence pressed against her senses, a sharp contrast to the simplicity and balance of home.

Ahead, the royal palace loomed, its golden spires reaching toward the heavens. As they passed through the grand ebony gates, Jin Daiyu felt the shift in the air, a new set of eyes watching her every move.

At the far end of the courtyard, a figure stood waiting. Even from this distance, she knew who he was. King Elian.

Jin Daiyu studied him carefully, hiding the flicker of recognition that sparked within her. He was the man from her dream, his name entwined with hers though they had never met. His presence was commanding, yet his attire was unassuming, a tunic of deep sapphire edged

with silver, a gold circlet resting lightly on his brow. His simplicity mirrored her own, though she suspected his reasons were not the same.

As their eyes met, the world seemed to narrow. The whispers, the tension, the weight of expectation, dissolved in a moment. There was strength in his gaze, but something else, something darker. Pain, perhaps. Or was it resolve?

The moment broke as Elian's expression hardened. He turned away, leaving her standing at the base of the steps, dismissed without a word.

The rejection landed like a blow. She had expected indifference, even suspicion, but this was something else entirely. This was erasure, a calculated refusal to acknowledge her existence. The thought clawed at her resolve, but she forced her expression to remain serene, the perfect mask of composure.

If he thought her so easily dismissed, he would learn otherwise. The game had only begun, and Jin Daiyu intended to win.

The golden light of late afternoon filtered into the audience chamber, muted by the painted walls of the tent where dragons chased pearls through swirling clouds. The faint scent of jasmine mingled with sandalwood incense, curling in lazy tendrils that teased Jin Daiyu's senses. She stood before her father, the silk of her robes brushing lightly against her ankles as she shifted. Yet her posture remained straight, her face composed, weakness, even the faintest hint of it, was a luxury she could never afford in his presence.

Emperor Jin sat on the raised dais, framed by the regal splendor of phoenixes embroidered in shimmering gold. His gaze, sharp as the edge of a blade, softened slightly when it landed on her. It was a rare warmth, one reserved for moments when he wanted something, or when he wished to remind her of the bonds that tethered her to his will. He gestured for her to sit, his voice calm yet commanding, as if the weight of the world rested on his every syllable.

"Come, daughter. Speak your mind."

Her heart fluttered, just once, a fleeting betrayal of nerves. His focus was a gift and a weapon, a force that had made kings falter and advisors tremble. She stepped forward, lowering herself gracefully into the seat across from him. Her hands folded neatly in her lap, a perfect image of demure strength.

“The envoy and I met with several members of Elysium’s council,” she began carefully, each word selected like a stone placed in a precarious tower. “They are not as pliant as we were led to believe. Their caution borders on mistrust, particularly of your terms. I have not yet been granted an audience with the king.”

Her father’s lips curved into a faint smile, his eyes glittering with interest. “What would you suggest, Daiyu? How does one persuade the unpersuadable?”

The way he said her name sent a ripple of unease through her. It carried the echo of pride he’d used when she was a child, before the lessons began. She shoved the thought aside, straightening. Her voice was steady when she replied.

“Show them strength, but temper it with patience. If they sense desperation, they will exploit it. Let them believe the alliance is their idea. The king’s slight, I’ve ignored it for now, but it may be a test to see how I respond.”

He leaned back, stroking his silver-threaded beard, his expression contemplative. “Astute, as always. Your mind is sharper than most of my seasoned advisors.”

The warmth his praise kindled within her was treacherous. For a fleeting moment, she felt the child she once was, craving his approval. But that flicker was extinguished as memories surged unbidden: his hands, firm and controlling, shaping her into the woman she was today. Not out of love, but ambition. Always ambition.

Her nails pressed into her palms beneath the folds of her sleeves, grounding her. “You taught me well, Father,” she said, her voice as

smooth and polished as jade. The words carried a subtle edge, but if he noticed, he gave no sign.

“I did what was necessary,” he said, his tone resolute, unyielding, as though his choices were as immutable as the stars. “You are who you are today because of it.”

She inclined her head slightly, masking the anger simmering beneath her calm exterior. “I hope I serve you well in Elysium, my Emperor.”

“You will,” he said, leaning forward. His voice softened, quieter now. “You are my pride, Daiyu.”

Those words shackled her as surely as iron chains. Rising with precision, she bowed deeply, her movements deliberate and controlled. “If there is nothing else?”

He dismissed her with a wave, his attention already shifting to another matter. She turned and left the tent, the cloying scent of incense following her like a shadow, clinging to her skin as if it, too, sought to bind her.

Back in her chambers, the elegance of Elysium’s understated style surrounded her. The smooth wood of the ornate table beneath her fingers grounded her. For a moment, she allowed herself to exhale, the weight of her father’s gaze replaced by the oppressive stillness of solitude.

A sharp knock startled her. Before she could respond, Myeong-gil entered unbidden, his stride brisk, his expression unreadable. She straightened, her gaze sharpening as she turned to face him. The casual intrusion might have gone unnoticed in the Moonlit Kingdom, but here in Elysium, it was a breach of decorum that could not be ignored.

“Myeong-gil,” she began, her tone measured but firm. “Your loyalty to my father is unquestionable, and your presence here invaluable. However, we must adjust to the customs of this kingdom. Appearances are everything in Elysium.”

His brow furrowed slightly, confusion and irritation mingling as he remained silent. She pressed on, her voice unyielding.

“I am a princess of the Moonlit Kingdom,” she continued, her words deliberate. “Perhaps soon, queen of Elysium. While you are my father’s trusted advisor, here you are my subordinate.

Entering my chambers unannounced will not do. Knock, yes, but wait to be summoned before entering.”

A flush crept over his face, whether from embarrassment or indignation she could not tell. Her tone softened, but her resolve remained firm. “Do not mistake my words for offense. You have served my family with distinction, and I trust you to understand the importance of what I say. We must play their game and follow their rules if we are to succeed.”

After a pause, he bowed, his movements stiff. “It will be as you wish, Princess. My apologies for my oversight.”

She inclined her head graciously, relief mingling with the faint warmth of triumph. “Be seated. Let us discuss my father’s instructions.”

…

North of Wildwood

Book 4

BRANDY MARKS

WARNING:

There are scenes of a delicate nature some may find difficult. One is in Part Chapter 30 Althea is with the Frost King and Draelis, the Fae.

North of the Wildwood is a story woven from starlight and shadows, where visions blur the past and future, and dreams hold the keys to destinies yet unwritten.

In this mystical continuation of *The Wildwood Chronicles*, one family lives within this realm of ice and frost, memory and prophecy, where ancient powers speak through the icebound and visions ripple into life. Each dream is more than a dream; each vision, a summoning.

From a young boy entranced by the Ice Maidens, to a cursed prince haunted by the beast within… a daughter of the North who she strives to save the prince then glimpses her reflection in a future queen, to a boy carried eastward by dragon-fire and fate, this is a dance of hidden truths, silent oaths, and echoes that cross generations.

If you are a reader who loves stories where the veil between worlds is thin, yet unseen, where dreams shape decisions and visions rewrite destiny, *North of the Wildwood* will speak to you.

May you enjoy your journey.

Brandy Marks

Aether

🔬 Scientific Perspective (Classical Physics)

In ancient and classical science, Aether (also spelled "ether") is a mysterious substance filling all space, through which light waves traveled, much like air carries sound.

Aristotle called it the "fifth element" (after earth, air, fire, and water), associated with the heavens.

In the 19th century, physicists used the idea of luminiferous Aether to explain how light could travel through a vacuum.

🔍 Einstein's Theory of Relativity (1905) showed that light doesn't need a medium to travel, it moves through space-time itself.

But remember it is but a theory, and next year who knows.

✨ Spiritual / Metaphysical Perspective

In metaphysics and esoteric traditions, Aether often refers to:

An energy or spiritual plane that underlies and connects all things.

A medium for psychic, magical, or divine communication.

The "fifth element" as in alchemy, Kabbalah, or Eastern philosophies.

In these frameworks, Aether is real in a spiritual or energetic sense, not detectable by scientific instruments, but still vital to how people understand consciousness, magic, or the divine.

📚 In Fantasy (like my stories) The Aether is:

- an interdimensional realm (spirit world, magical plane).
- a medium through which magic or the souls travel.
- the breath of gods, divine energy, or the source of life.

In *Wildwood Chronicles* (series) or *Celestial Guardians*, the Aether is real and is seen as a bridge physical and spiritual be it the origin of magic, or house divine beings, as a prison for corrupt beings.

Magic

Whether Magic is real, the answer depends on one defines *magic* and if you're asking from a biblical, spiritual, or cultural view.

✦ In the natural world, there's no scientific proof for magic as the use of supernatural forces. What we call "magic" today may be:

- Illusion (stage magic)
- Psychological suggestion
- Cultural belief (e.g., charms, spells, folk traditions)

But in spiritual or biblical terms, the Bible *does* affirm the existence of supernatural power, both divine and demonic.

✦ The Bible clearly distinguishes between: God's power (miracles, prophecy, divine acts) and human or occult use of power (sorcery, divination, witchcraft)

✦ God consistently warns His people against using or trusting in magical or occult practices.

"Let no one who sacrifices their son or daughter… [one could argue this includes abortion] who practices divination, sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft… is detestable to the Lord."

Deuteronomy 18:10–12

The Bible doesn't treat magic as fake, it treats it as real but forbidden, often linked to demonic influence or false gods.

✦ What's the Difference Between Magic and Miracles?

Magic (in Scripture) = human or demonic attempts to control spiritual forces or manipulate outcomes for personal gain.

Miracles = acts of God's will, not controlled or summoned by people, but sovereign, purposeful, and holy.

✦ Many Christians wonder about magic in fiction (like in *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Lord of the Rings*, or books such as mine).

In that context, magic is usually symbolic, representing:

- Light vs darkness
- Creation vs destruction
- Power used for good vs power abused

C.S. Lewis and Tolkien both use magical elements as allegories for spiritual truth, and most readers distinguish this imaginative magic from the real-world occult practices the Bible condemns.

And so, let the story begin…

Chapter 1

Beneath the boughs where silence clings,
Old shadows stir on ancient wings.
The forest holds what men forget,
And whispers truths they'll soon regret.

ROWAN & ELIAN

The wind swept through the high branches of the ancient Wildwood, stirring the last golden leaves clinging to their gnarled boughs. Below, on a ridge overlooking a crystalline river, two half-brothers stood, their cloaks rippling in the chill of autumn's breath. And, as the world turned the sun cast long shadows across the land, painting the horizon with hues of amber and crimson as it slowly sank into the purple hills to be lost in the dark of night.

Rowan, taller and broader from years spent braving the untamed North, rests a calloused hand on the hilt of his sword. His dark eyes scan the horizon, stance grounded, as if the earth itself answered to his quiet strength.

Beside him, King Elian leans on his staff, the carved runes along its length faintly glowing in the waning light. His dark wavy hair caught the slanting sun's rays, framing a face both somber and reflective, his eyes deep blue gleamed with the fading light.

"It been ages since we set foot in those woods," Elian murmured, nodding across the river into the dark Wildwood, his voice soft with reminiscence. "The trials we faced forged us into men we scarcely recognize. Though I dare say my journey was longer than yours," he smirked, "though not as tumultuous."

Rowan nodded, a wistful smile tugging at his lips. “Aye, it was there we journeyed into the Shadowlands to rescue my daughter, Althea, as I recall. Though little did we know how much it would demand of us. The Wildwood, flaming stars, the world, forced us to give more than we thought we had, or so it seemed then.”

The silence stretched between them, the Wildwood's whispers rustling through the trees. Rowan spoke again, his voice quieter now. “It feels different here. Quieter. Almost peaceful.”

Elian frowned, his gaze fixed on the forest’s shadowy edge. “Too quiet, perhaps. Something likely is stirring within.”

Rowan turned, curiosity piqued. “What is it you sense?”

Elian’s fingers tightened around his staff, unease tangible. “The Wildwood has never been a place of trust, even after we emerged from its dangers. Now... it’s like the forest is watching us, like it knows something we don’t.”

Rowan studied his brother’s expression, a shiver running through him despite the warmth of his cloak. “Do you think whatever power we quelled here might be stirring again?”

Elian shook his head, though doubt clouded his eyes. “Not the same power. Something older. Forgotten. I wonder if its roots travel north as well.” A deep line forms between his brows.

Rowan stepped closer to the water's edge, his boots crunching against the rock. Tilting his head, he listened, his instincts sharpened by years of survival in the harsh northlands. The Wildwood spoke in whispers, in sensations that clawed at the edges of perception.

Tonight, it felt different. Ominous, like the silence before a storm.

“Elian,” Rowan said, stepping back. “If something stirs here, I also fear for my home in the North. You have Vaelon if needed but I must return to Freya. Vaelon’s more attuned to the unseen. And the Wildwood isn’t what it once was, not since before.”

Elian nodded slowly, knowing what he referred to, his expression remained troubled. “Vaelon is invaluable, but he isn’t you.”

“You’ve never needed me here more than Freya and Althea need me at home,” Rowan said firmly, though his tone softened. “And soon, there’ll be another little one to worry about. Do you still seek the Lord only when reminded? Need I send a prompt – so you know your help comes from the Lord?”

Elian chuckled, knowing Rowan spoke truth, yet he often let life get in the way, the weight of his kingdom and even his brother’s impending departure pressed heavily on him. “That doesn’t make it easier to let you go. But thank you. I’ll do my best.”

Rowan clapped a reassuring hand on Elian’s shoulder, his grip warm and steady. “You’re not alone, brother. Elysium is stronger than ever. And whatever stirs over there and North, we’ll face it like we always do, head-on. And if you truly need me, send a word, and I’ll come.”

”And I you.” Elian said and hesitated, “Or I’ll send Vaelon.”

“Whoever, help is always welcome.” A slight smile curves his lips.

Torn between instinct and the wisdom of Rowan’s words he knew the shadows of Elysium were his to guard, and Heaven was there to guide him. His brother’s place was in the North, with his family and the new life they’d built and the new one to come.

Sensing Elian’s growing inner conflict, Rowan grinned and to ease the tension said, “You know, if the Wildwood gets out of hand, Vaelon will be more than happy to scold it into submission. Perhaps the Lord will send an angel if magic becomes a problem again.”

A faint smile broke through Elian’s worry. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I could live forever without that blasted magic.”

As they turned back toward the castle, Elian cast one last glance at the forest across the waters. The air felt heavier, as though the woods held a secret, more than usual, waiting for the right moment to reveal itself. He swallowed the unease and pushed it aside, for tonight at least.

The brothers paused at the edge of the courtyard, where their paths would diverge. Elian’s gaze shifted to the horizon. “You’re returning to

the North, to Freya and Althea. How does it feel, leaving, perhaps for the last time? It's possible you may be the one in need of help."

"So, true." Rowan exhaled deeply, breath a plume of white. "My heart belongs there with them, not Elysium and the Wildwood… it will be with me always. It's where we reclaimed our honor, where we found hope again, and our brother Vaelon." They both recall Rowan's last visit when Elian had been ensnared by a sorceress, and Rowan's daughter, then an infant, had been stolen from them.

Elian's expression softened, a hand resting on Rowan's shoulder. "You're not leaving it, Rowan. Wildwood's legacy flows through you, through all of us. Its roots run deep, perhaps deeper and farther North than we know. and as far as we know, the evil that once flourished there has been destroyed."

"Glad I am." Rowan's smile widened as he turned to Elian. "And you. What legacy will you forge?"

Elian's gaze turned inward. "I will continue to strive for a kingdom where justice and mercy walk hand in hand. A place where the mistakes of the past do not dictate the future. And I have Ming Na. She has stood in Daiyu's shadow, and now is an essential part of my life as you know, steady and unwavering," he said, sorrow in his eyes.

Rowan recalled Elian's wife, Jin Daiyu and her being taken from him so soon after they wed. But he found a companion in her sister, Ming Na. He clasped his brother's forearm in a gesture of solidarity. "Then the Wildwood chose well for you, brother, King of Elysium."

The river murmured, its song a reminder of time's unyielding march. Even as near immortals, both felt the passage of time, though much slower than some. As the sun dipped below the horizon, Rowan turned and began his descent toward the river, where his party awaited to return home to the North.

Elian watched until his brother's figure vanished into the shadows, then turned back toward the heart of Elysium.

The Wildwood whispered its secrets, its ancient voice a reminder some legacies endure, shaping the lives of those who carry them. Neither Rowan nor Elian was aware the North had its own legacy, one rooted in the frost and shadow, waiting to be confronted.

As Rowan turned his face toward the North, his steps quickened with anticipation. Freya and his daughter awaited him, and with them, the promise of a new life, their second child. His thoughts lingered on his daughter, Althea, nine years now, bold and as restless as the untamed winds of the North.

What would our son be like, he wondered? They had waited many years for this one to come along. The thought warmed him against the tundra's chill.

Elian turned hearing footsteps, sees Vaelon approach. "Did Rowan leave all ready?" His question was answered as he glanced down the hill to see Rowan about to board the boat that would take him up river on his first leg of the journey home. "Skies above! I was hoping to see and speak to him a bit before he left."

Together they stood and watched as the boat swept out into the waters, on its way North. "What's so urgent?" Elian said, glancing up at Vaelon who stood a few inches taller. "You'll be heading up North before long. Is it something that can't wait?"

A faraway look in his eyes, Vaelon is silent for a time, then answers: "No, it can wait. It's just that I've been meaning to share something with him that's been on my mind for a while."

Heading down the hill, away from the river, they're on their way back to the palace with the crunch of rock underfoot and the sweet scent of flowers and pine in the air, Elain asks. "Care to share what it is?" He pauses. "If it's none of my business, I can live without knowing." He chuckles lightly and continues walking.

“No. You can hear about it. After all, you’re part of the story.” Hands in pockets, a look of discomfort on his face, he says nothing for some time as the two continue on towards the city.

Elian’s curiosity has him almost wanting to push Vaelon for the story, except he holds himself back, waiting patiently. That’s one thing he’s learned after his and Eryn’s father, Dorian, and Aurora, the mother of all four, had left on a world tour.

Elian, then chosen King of Elysium, striving to unite a nearly fractured kingdom learned patience was needed to gain order from chaos. And now he waited for Vaelon to share whatever was bothering him.

“Been on my mind for a while,” Vaelon said, voice rough. “You know Aelara, she chose you because she wanted to be queen of Elysium. But what you didn’t know is… she’d had a child long before that.” He paced a few steps, then turned. “I have no idea who the father was. Could’ve been me, Arden, or Haman. She didn’t seem to care, and back then, neither did I. She enjoyed intimacy like it was a power she could wield, maybe it was.”

He sighed hard, fingers tightening. “Anyway, she disappeared for a time. Pregnant when she left. Not when she came back. Said she ‘gave the child to the forest.’ Whatever the in the Oath that meant. Gave it to someone? Left it for the trees? Ridiculous. I never asked. I wasn’t ready to care for a child. Neither was she.”

He hesitated again, several seconds. “What you may have suspected but never knew for certain, Lord Arden was half Fae.”

Elian turned, eyes wide in shock. “Fae, you say. No, I never knew nor suspected even. But that explains a lot.” Vaelon nods.

“Yes, because Aelara was also a Fae, which you knew I’m certain.” As Elian nods, Vaelon says, “Were it not for that, and Dolion or Haman, as you knew him. He was one of the Fae. I’m surprised you never figured it out, but then, Aelara was secretive. She kept a lot hidden from everyone.” His eyes turn to Elian. “It’s likely the reason Aurora was able to

bear not just two children with Dorian, but two more, myself and Rowan, both half Fae."

Elian stops. Slumps down on a fallen tree nearby head in his hands. "Heavens. I've always wondered how it was possible for her to have not just one or two children but four. Now I know."

"It's why I wanted Rowan to know. He's half Fae so his children have the blood of the Fae. And with Freya's silver-white hair, very unusual and very Fae, I'd not be surprised to learn she is as well."

At this news, Elian looks up, speechless, head turns side to side. He has trouble believing Vaelon's story. Finally, he speaks. "This is most astonishing, and bears no relevance to our lives now, at least I can see none, unless you have more to add. But Vaelon shakes his head. "Rowan needs to know because the fate of his children may depend on it especially if someone from the Fae realm comes for them. And even more so, if Aelara and possibly your child was secured from the forest by one of the Fae."

"I'm almost certain she was. The king of the Fae was in the area then and surely would've sensed her and, assuming she was whole and healthy, he would have taken her" Vaelon said. "From what I recall, there was nothing wrong with the child."

"Is there anything else?" Vaelon stopped pacing and looked at the river flowing by, not meeting Elian's eyes. "Aelara's child was gone, and then she came to you. You know what happened after that, and now know her reason. She couldn't be queen in the Fae realm but she was determined to become queen somewhere."

A deep silence hung between them. Vaelon gave a mirthless chuckle. "Aurora had Rowan with Haman. And when Arden bewitched her, she bore me, though she never knew, until you and Rowan came searching for his child." He ran both hands through his hair, gripping it tight. "Skies above! This tangled mess seems to plague us even now. and I'm trying to untangle it, which is why I told you."

He paused, then spoke slower, quieter. “I’m not sure about this God you and Rowan follow. But I’ve heard the fates, whether angels or another, were sent by Him to deal with the messes of men.” A small laugh escaped him, dry, almost reverent. Almost.

“It sounds crazy. But it makes sense. Because something in me, call it a premonition, I don’t know, is telling me this isn’t over. All of this is going to come back on us. I don’t know how but I’m certain it will.” He looked up, his expression concerned and certain. Vaelon silent, thoughts trailing off into the evening that had fallen as they spoke. For a while, neither of them said a word.

Elian looked toward the palace, as the wind whispered through the branches of the trees. “Yes, it will all come back. It always does.”

Chapter 2

Beneath the moon wild magic stirs,
A child lay swaddled in root and firs.
She's chosen by fate's unseen hand,
To rise with the stars and rule the land.

THE FAE

Many years before, Vaelon would not have been surprised to learn, the Fae King, Elarion, had indeed come upon the female child and returned home with her, a gift to his Queen, Lysira.

"What is this child, my king?" his queen asked. "She is a beauty, and one of us, or so it would seem." Her hands reach to take the infant from him and pull the blanket snug about the girl child. She could see tiny hands and fingers wave then reach for her face. She smiles and leans down to place her lips softly upon the infant's cheek.

"Indeed. Her mother wisely left her in the forest, doubtless hoping, wanting us to find her." He pulled back the soft blanket covering the child's face. Her pointed ears peeked out beneath silken strands of silver hair. His fingers brushed her cheek, a smile flickering across his usually stern face. "I suspect she is our daughter's child. She's been wandering the forest since she left our halls, a free spirit."

The queen tensed, the unspoken name hanging between them. "She always was a free spirit but she chose poorly with her companions. None would make a good father. I am glad the last is not, she bore the child before meeting him."

"Yes. I watched from afar. Fae, mostly, until the end." He sighed. "Had I been able to turn her from the dark, but evil became her close companion. Still, the one she chose to wed, his god it seems sent one of his to escort her –not home to him –but to a place of safety."

"I presume you speak of the Aether where she may learn and grow, and become a stronger soul. So, husband... do we raise her, with our son, Draelis?" the queen asked gently.

"Tell me again the dream you had, Lysira. Perhaps it was of her." The king sits beside his queen eyes on her face in rapt attention.

The queen closed her eyes, pain flitting across her brow. Her hands tightened on the child's blanket. "It came long ago, before Draelis could speak. I thought it only a dream, born of moonlight and fear, my fear. But now..."

The king waited.

"I stood in a forest older than ours. Trees of bone-white bark and golden veins. The sky was violet, the stars bled silver. She lay cradled between two branches. Not crying. Just waiting. She had no name, but I knew her. She did not belong to the trees, but was born of them. A child of two worlds. And she had your eyes." She smiled for both had eyes of obsidian black. “They turned up at the corners, as do yours, Eli. Her pet name for the king spoken only in private.

“A shadow had moved beyond the trees. I remember how my heart pounded. Cloaked in frost, the figure stepped forward and knelt. A boy, barefoot, crowned in silver fire, eyes gleamed like black opals. He touched the child’s hand, and the forest bowed.

"Draelis," the king murmured.

She nodded. "He was older then. As he may one day become. And as I gazed upon him, a voice, ancient and not my own, whispered in a voice not loud, yet it filled the air like thunder in the distance: 'Left to the trees, she is bound to the land, imprisoned for a time, but not forgotten. If she is claimed, the new king must choose.'"

The fire crackled as silence settled. The queen looked at the child. "So, I ask again: do we raise her? Or let fate do what it will?" Briefly, she hesitated, uncertain if she should reveal the other. “There was more, husband. ’One will come,’ he said ‘to bear what she could not.’ He did not explain the meaning.”

The king stared into the flames. Their daughter had chosen her path, danced with forbidden magic, and vanished. Taken, not by death, but by an angel, they had said, and taken not in wrath but sorrow. Now it seemed they'd been given a second chance at raising a new daughter though one not their own.

"She made her choice. The world claimed its due. But the child is innocent. She bears no sin, only blood." He stepped closer to her. The infant's hand curled in sleep, clutching his wife's fingers, and something stirred in him. Hope.

"Yes. We will raise her. As our own. Let no one call her cast-off. She is Danique. And when the time comes, she will walk beside Draelis, not as sister or servant, but as his equal." Many will still say she is his sibling but in his heart, he knew she was meant to be more. His voice lowered. "If the dream holds true, she may be the only one who can keep him from the fire of his passion."

The queen said nothing only nodded, arms cradling Danique tighter. Outside, the forest sighed. The queen turned and opened the door, calling to a servant. Soon a chamber was prepared for the infant, her bed upon the moss-covered floor, vines woven about as a hedge to protect her from crawling off into the forest until she was older and could sleep in the trees with the other teens.

Most adults lived in their homes, but the king and his queen lived in the palace where the community had daily access to them, while children lived close to the forest and trees learning about life from their adventures and the animals within. A hedge of magic also kept the dangerous ones at bay, and so it was until they were old enough to join the adults in their homes or the palace.

~

Years passed. Danique grew sharp-eyed, lithe and full of questions. She danced among groves, leaves in her hair, riddles on her lips much as had her mother, but her mother kept a close eye on her and did not allow her to stray too far. Danique had tighter boundaries than their lost

daughter, Aelara who'd become entangled in dark magic. Not so Danique.

Draelis watched her. Not like a brother. Something else. He called her a moon-ghost, then shadow-flame, because by then, she had begun to burn, or was he the one who burned. Sometimes he had trouble telling the difference. He knew about her mother, who was not his, and found it puzzling. Still he was glad she was not his sister by blood and he could imagine as he pleased.

The queen, wise in the ways of boys and girls said nothing. The king, seeing only fire and ruin, watched in silence. He had seen it all before and warned his wife: "Inform both, separately, of the things that caused Aelara to fall into darkness. They need to know, to become wiser and better rulers one day." And so, she did.

In the sparring circle, sunlight flickered through the branches colors like stained glass sparkled. Danique moved like the grace of wind over water, blade gleaming. Draelis lunged, too fast. She dodged, barely. "Reckless," she snapped.

He grinned. "You were slow." He winked.

She lowered her blade. "I'm not your servant to scold, prince."

"I'm not your playmate to mock." Eyes narrowed as he drew closer, a mischievous smirk curving his lips. "I dream of you, Danique."

"And what is it you dream?" She stepped back, eyes sharp. "Perhaps you'd best not tell me. But tell me, what am I to you? You treat me like a rival in sword play, until I win, then like something fragile."

Silence. The trees stirred. Hands on hips she stood stiff-legged and glared at him. "I am not your fragile darling, prince, nor a pantry maid for you to accost in the dark alcoves."

He muttered, sheathing his blade, "I've never touched any maid who first did not willingly offer. And I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me. From what? The dream or fire?" A coy look in her eyes, cheek bunches as her lip curved up. “What did you dream, naughty boy? Would your father the king…?” She stopped talking seeing him turn away, his cheeks turn bright red.

"The fire is in you, not me," she said quietly.

"Exactly. That’s why you’re dangerous. You burn without trying. And I, " I burn for you all day and all night, he wanted to say but did not.

She stepped closer. "You what?"

His voice dropped. "I’m afraid of what I’d do if I lost control."

She hadn’t expected that –vulnerability.

"You won’t," she said. "Because I won’t let you."

He looked up. In his eyes, everything he’d buried shimmered as if it’s there. He reached for her, not as heir, rival, but as something – someone he could not lose and desired to claim.

She leaned in, breath catching. His lips crashed onto hers, desperate. Everything he’d buried spilled out, not words, but hunger, longing. She clung to him, fingers in the fabric of his cloak. He trembled. A storm under his skin and knew she could feel his passion pressing tight to her. So, he pulled back. "You should leave."

"What?" Confusion billowed like a main sail in the wind dragging her thoughts into disarray. He kisses her then demands she leave!

"You don’t understand. The dreams. They always end in ruin."

She touched his arm. "I’m not made of glass. You won’t shatter me. And even if you could, I’d still come back."

"Why?"

"I’ve seen your darkness. And I stayed. When you kissed me... it felt like the silence after a storm, like I could finally breathe."

A chime rang and they stepped apart as the door opened.

The queen entered, cloaked in shadows as she looks upon the two. Her gaze softened. Draelis stepped farther away, posture straight fearful of what she might say. Had she heard them, knew of the kiss? Would she forbid them, for they were siblings, though not of blood?

"What am I seeing? You are no longer children," she said voice gentle a soft smile on her lips for she knows what went on between them. "But even desire must wait for a proper time." She turned, hearing again the soft chime of a bell and footsteps approaching.

The king then entered, clearly have heard her words, voice solemn. "The forest has spoken. The bond between you is not forbidden, but it must be sealed with honor. Beneath the arch, by moonrise. Then may your union be whole."

Draelis looked to Danique. “Then let it be so.”

But even as he said it, his heart thudded with uncertainty. Her eyes searched his face, not for doubt, but for a promise. And he gave it, not in words, but in the way his hand reached for hers as the elders turned away, a slight smile on the queen’s face.

Her voice though lingered in the air, softer now. “You were shaped by a father’s grief and a mother’s longing. Do not let haste steal what fate crafted with scare.” Her robe swirled as she opened the door to leave.

Danique’s fingers threaded through Draelis’. Her voice was steady. “I’ve waited longer than you know.” Felt his hand squeeze hers, a finger tickled her palm, and she almost grinned.

The king paused at the door, cast a final glance their way. “Moonrise comes swiftly. Prepare yourselves not only in form, but in soul.” He followed his wife through the door. It closed into stillness.

Danique leaned into Draelis, pressing her forehead to his. “You said your dreams end in ruin. But I say, this time, they begin in light.”

And for the first time in memory, he believed her as she danced away a wicked gleam in her eyes. “And I’ve news for you.”

“What is that?” he queried, pulling her into his arms

“I’m to start training. To be a Velarieth, the One Who Weaves Magic, Midwives Magic.” She grinned.

Together they sat in the grass and he leaned into her, “And who will birth your children, wife-to-be?”

Her face blushed bright red. “We’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

***

Chapter 3

North wind bites, yet welcomes too,
A land of silence, vast and true.
Through frost and fire, hearts remain,
Love burns bright beyond the pain.

ROWAN RETURNS

The North greeted me with its stark beauty upon my return home with endless stretches of wintered plains beneath a sky heavy with snow-laden clouds. The wind howled, carrying a bite sharp as wolf's teeth through my furs. At the sight of the fortress, I heaved a sigh of relief seeing it stand resolute against the frozen wilderness. It sent warmth through my chest. The torches atop the walls flickered like distant stars, their glow promising shelter, safety… home. A flick of the whip and the dogs surged forward, the sled careening faster over the snow, all of us eager to be home.

At the gates, what I longed to see, the face of Freya waited, her smile radiant despite the weariness in her delicate features. She clutched her fur robe tightly about her rounded belly, booted feet moved carefully as she crossed the icy threshold. It took a moment to loosen the harness and free dogs who scrambled quickly past to find warmth and shelter in their kennels, not far off.

“Thank you, Lord, for your mercies,” Rowan whispered before turning to Freya. He could only stare, silver-white hair cascading over her shoulders, cheeks flushed, lips curved in a smile he hadn’t seen in too long. He was home at last.

“You made it,” she said, voice soft. Then silence as his lips crashed down upon hers. Enfolding her in his strong arms, together the two entered the great hall, a blazing fire sending heat into the room for which Rowan was most grateful having left the frozen expanse behind upon his

return. Nothing was better than his wife's welcoming embrace and a hot fire burning bright from the hearth.

"Elian and I had a grand time in the Wildwood. I wish you could've been there with me." He reached, brushed a strand of hair from her forehead before pressing lips to hers again, her warmth chasing away the ice that had settled in his bones. She smelled of firewood and spiced honey. Rowan's arms encircled Freya, pulling her tight against him, as if she could anchor him, in this moment, and never drift away like in the past when he'd sought his comfort elsewhere.

"I'll not leave anytime soon," he murmured against her temple, breath stirring loose strands of hair. "Not until long after the little one is here. Elian is doing just fine and has no need of me, nor has the Wildwood as if it ever did." His voice was low. "Lord, how I wish the pregnancy was over so I could take you to bed." A wicked smile curved his lips. "You'll taste all the sweeter for the wait." He nuzzled her neck.

The words felt good to say and the fire in Freya's eyes was but a hint at their joining to come. His hands roamed her swollen belly, lovingly not sensual, just to feel the movement of life within her body. "All in good time," she whispered as her hand reached to curve his jaw and pull him into a sweet kiss. "But tell me more about Wildwood. Did you find what you'd expected?"

"Not exactly." He stared into the flames, their light flickering across his face as Freya curled against his side, hands resting atop her belly, calm and patient, though he saw the storm behind her stillness. She'd waited for him before, through mistakes and a long silence. Now, she waited for the truth.

He ran a hand through his snow-dusted hair. "The Wildwood's not the same as when I left. Or maybe it is, and we're the ones who've changed. But what we found…" His voice trailed off, heavy with memory. "Elian was restless, he kept saying the trees remembered him. As though they whispered his name. I used to think that sort of talk was madness. Now I'm not sure." He also recalled the woman of Wildwood who'd tried to

entrap him and make herself Elysium's queen. Indeed, she almost had, for a time.

Rowan shifted, boots stretched toward the hearth. "We crossed the same path where I once chased the sorcerer who took our daughter. It's overgrown now, but the magic clings, thick like fog. We passed the glade where Elian's father and Aurora met up in the forest after their expulsion, before she became my mother, before she was enchanted and bore him another son, Vaelon."

He looked up, and voice quieted. "I saw her, Freya. Or we did, a vision of the woman she was then. Perhaps the forest wanted us both to remember. She stood, hair gleaming like fire, green eyes looking not directly at but through us, like she was caught between moments in time. I knew Dorian and Aurora had left the city after Elian took the throne, so this made no sense.

"Do you imagine she or they passed on in their travels?" He paused. "I suppose not, else we'd have heard by now, after this long. I imagine it were no ghost we saw."

Freya didn't speak as he leaned forward, hands on knees.

"We followed an old trail, deep into the roots of the forest where it seemed time unravels itself. That's where it showed us Dolion, before he called himself Haman. We saw him and Aurora together, laughing and not in love but just having fun. It wasn't right, nor was it evil. Just… human; just memories, forest memories."

"Elian didn't speak for hours after," Rowan said as he rose and went to the fireplace, set another log on the dying embers. "He needed to see her then, in that time, I imagine. To see what had happened, that he was not the only one enchanted, made a fool of, and how far he'd come, how far we all had come. It gave him a certain peace."

Rowan hesitated, turned and came back, sat down again, then adds, "We found Vaelon's first sanctum. Hidden under a ruined shrine with vines thick as arms. The place reeked of old power, his, the mage's who spelled Aurora. There were carvings on the stone, names not spoken in

ages. Vaelon's was there. A child's scrawl etched beneath it: *I see you, even when you forget me.*"

"How sad," Freya said, eyes gleaming with moisture as she waited for Rowen to continue with his story, his and Elian's.

Rowan's voice cracked. "It wasn't a rescue all those years ago; it was a reckoning. And still is. That forest holds every choice we've ever made… and throws them back in our faces like mirrors."

Freya leaned forward, touched his knee. "And yours too?"

"Yes." He turned. "A drunk I saw. One who ran from pain. But no more. The fire that nearly consumed me… now forged me.

"And then, I saw you and her, our daughter." A smile filled with joy flushed his face. "Myself standing tall, holding a sword, no flask in hand, and I realized... I didn't go there to run away. I went to find myself, to become the man worthy of coming back home to you."

The fire crackled while outside, wind howled against the frost etched windows. Inside, all was quiet. "I'm not the same now," he said, "nor is the Wildwood. It remembers and it forgives, as does the Lord in heaven. Him I can thank for it all."

And now I paced, days later, anxiety mounting as the days passed in a flurry of preparation. The winter winds seemed to grow harsher, as Freya's time draws near, howling through the trees and around the ramparts. I had not been with her for the birth of our daughter, Althea, for after we married, while I had left Elysium, I had not left the drink. But upon my return, I had promised Freya would be different this time, and not just my drinking but I would be here for her in all the ways a husband should be. And I had been, proud of myself for doing so.

I stared in wonder at her belly swollen so huge I just knew there had to be more than one child within. Freya laughed at me. "I was just as big the first time but you didn't see me else you'd know better," she spoke without accusation. Then, she took my hand and placed it atop her belly to feel the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle movements of the babe

within. It's not as if I'd never seen a pregnant woman before but this one was my mate and partner, and the child within also came from me, and that I found astonishing.

Freya walked about the cold floors of the palace with delicate steps, every move cautious as I watched, fearful of her feet slipping on the cold stones. And so, I'd had wool rugs laid down.

Within weeks of my return, the midwife arrived, assuring us all was well after checking Freya. Then I knew it was time as the midwife scurried about preparing the birthing chamber.

Althea, our first born, curious, peppered us with questions" "What is it like to give birth"; "does it hurt?" and "is it a new brother or my sister?" Her questions were shushed away for another time, with promises of answers when she was older.

How do you explain to a nine-year-old about birthing a baby?

Freya shared as much as she could about her birthing. "Each differs, sweetheart. Some are easy but rarely the first, some take a long time and others no time at all. You were in no hurry, as I recall."

Rowan remained silent on the matter.

When the labor began, the midwife moved swiftly, her voice a steady hush in the rising storm, guiding Freya through each wave of pain. She tried to rush Rowan from the room, but he refused for a time and stayed, hovering at the threshold, feeling utterly powerless.

What use were his hands, calloused and strong, against the force of something so raw, so elemental? Finally, the midwife insisted he leave. As the door began to close, he caught Freya's trembling fingers in his, desperate to anchor her somehow or himself, more likely. The midwife shushed him gently, prying their hands apart. He stumbled back, heart splitting in two, a glimmer of hope emerging.

Still, he whispered words of love through the narrowing gap, though they felt pitiful against the storm she was forced to endure. Her cries tore through his heart like a well-honed blade, each carving a deeper understanding of the pain she bore, to bring forth another child for him,

for both of them. He prayed for his wife and child, prayed the birthing would be unhindered and safe.

They had waited so long, nine years, for their second. And likely, it would be the last she would bear. Being near immortal, births were rare among their kind. It was a miracle she had conceived a second time, and now, that small miracle struggled to enter the world through blood and painful sacrifice, his wife's. For Rowan there was only the waiting.

He'd always marveled that Dorian and Aurora had managed to produce two children, Elian and Eryn. Then a third, himself, though he was not Dorian's but Haman of the Wildwood, a truth he would prefer to leave in silence. Then, the fourth had been fathered by Lord Arden, Vaelon. Aurora, his prisoner, trapped by dark magic dark. Likely, even Vaelon's conception was twisted by that sorcery he suspected was Fae.

Still, that Aurora had conceived four times, and carried each to term, was a wonder their people whisper of would praise the god above, the he and Elian worshipped. And as he remembered, the hours dragged, stretching into eternity. Shadows deepened as the fire in the hearth burned low, the scent of sweat and fear thickened the air until every breath tasted raw and primal.

Then, finally, the cries came, not Freya's. Another strong and lusty, pierced awakening the dawn. My heart clenched as the midwife opened the door. I rushed to Freya's side, seeing in her arms a writhing, red-skinned miracle. When the midwife placed him in my arms, my breath caught, tears gleamed and tore my heart. I had held weapons, shields, men broken and dying. But never this, something so fragile, impossibly small. My hands engulfed him. I held him as if he were made of glass, terrified even my breath might shatter him.

Freya watched amused as the midwife cleaned her up, eyes heavy with exhaustion shining with something deeper. Love. Relief. Knowing she had given everything, and here was the proof of it. I knelt beside her, placing our son in her arms, tucked the blanket around them securely as she looked upon him. It was as if the whole world had been remade at that moment, and indeed, in a small way it had.

“What will we name him?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper as he began to root about, searching for sustenance. Freya pulled the blanket back to allow the infant success in its endeavor to find the nourishment it sought and take hold like a hungry bear.

I studied the child, his tiny fingers curled into fists, lungs filled with a fight greater than his size. My mind turned to the legends of our home. The North was harsh but unyielding, its people forged in the crucible of ice and endurance. We always endured and so would the child should he choose faithfulness to the One above.

Then I knew. “Caleb,” I said. “It means ‘faithful’ in the old tongue.”

Freya nodded, a tired smile ghosting her lips. “Yes. It’s a fitting name for a boy who will endure.” Her eyes fluttered then closed, and soon, both mother and child slept.

I watched them for a moment longer, my chest tight, heart clenched in a way I couldn’t explain. Then I rose, stepping back into the quiet, the weight of something new pressing into my soul. I had gone to war within myself, built, fought, and survived. But here, in the hush of our home, I learned what fear truly was, and heartfelt love. Now, I had something I could not bear to lose. While I also had a daughter, I remind those who might scold, I had not been here then so, this was a first for me.

The warmth of that night faded swiftly. Days passed, the child began to struggle. Caleb’s health took a turn for the worse, high fever, a cough rattled in his tiny chest. The healers cautioned the cold could claim him if he was not carefully guarded and kept warm. And so we wrapped him in blankets, kept the kettle steaming nearby, and prayed.

The following days were fraught with worry. I hovered over his crib, the crib that once held Althea, looked down upon his pale sweaty face, his breath came in sharp short gasps. Each seemed to be the last he would ever take. My heart was breaking and so I turned towards the heavens: “Lord I know you hear. This child of yours is so young, do not take him. You can’t mean for his rich life to end in such an impoverished way.” I went to my knees. “Lord, I give him unto you.”

Freya worked tirelessly, tending to our son with a vigilance that left her exhausted. Even then she did not relinquish his care into the hands of others, although the servants helped as best they could and I also did what I could but there were limits. Still, I continued to trust in the Lord, though it did not stop my fears.

Althea, sensing the gravity of the situation, grew increasingly quiet, her exuberance replaced by a fierce determination to help however she was able. She sent the maids scurrying away with a frosty glance, fetching fresh water, cleaning cloths, and herself emptied the trash, caring for our son, her brother and love him as if every day was his last.

Then one morning, having fallen asleep by the fire in the great room, quietly I came awake, hearing no cough, no sound, only silence. Fear was a great bear that crushed my chest, I leapt from the chair. “Lord no. I pray you’ve not taken him.”

Wide awake now, heart racing in terror, despair creeping in, I rushed to the door, opened into the child’s chamber and I gasped at the sight, not of Freya who slept soundly nearby, in the bedside chair, her hand laying atop Caleb’s. Rather the child’s dark eyes were open wide, sparkled, his cheeks still pale, but a soft smile curved his rosebud lips as his arms with tiny hands and fingers reached out.

I fell to my knees at the bedside, clasped the boy's hand in mine, upon which my wife, Freya, awakened. She took one look at me and my hand and her eyes traveled up to Caleb’s face. “Glory be,” was all she said. “The lad, our son is awake and well.”

As the crisis passed, Caleb gained strength and began to fill out. We all heaved a sigh of relief. For the first time, Freya went to chapel and knelt down, giving thanks to God. She’d never been a believer but it seems the Lord used Caleb's illness to bring her to himself.

And, as the first heavy snowfall blanketed the land, I stood alone on the battlements, cradling Caleb against my chest, the infant wrapped warmly in a soft wool comforter. His breaths warm against my neck, a reminder of life’s tenacity.

I looked out over the frozen expanse of our kingdom, the stars glinting like shards of ice in the night sky and I prayed. “Lord, keep him strong and I will give him to know You are the Lord, he shall be faithful to you and you will be his God.”

I then vowed to protect my son, my family, and the North itself. Little did I know what a fruitless quest that would be as the wind howled around us, carrying my words off, knowing He watched over the tundra. I did not know then the challenges this daring boy would one day face, many of his own making.

Chapter 4

The restless heart will chase the night,
Through frost and fire and distant light.
But tales once whispered on the air,
May you rise in truth, and not beware.

CALEB'S ADVENTURE

The winds howled outside the stone walls of the great hall, while within, the hearth blazed, casting golden light over the tapestry-covered wall, revealing its tales of past victories over hardship, and the enduring strength of the North and its peoples.

Ten-year-old Caleb sat cross-legged on the floor, dark hair falling into his blue eyes as he closely examined a tattered map spread before him. The parchment, old and faded, its edges browned and curled as the rivers, mountains, and distant forests it depicted thereon ignited a fire in the boy's imagination.

"Caleb," his nineteen-year-old sister Althea called, tone exasperated and amused. "You've been staring at that map for hours. Are you even listening?" Hands on hips, her honey blond hair falling in waves over her shoulders. "You haven't heard a word," she said, blue eyes snapping with fire as if she were born of dragons.

"I'm studying," Caleb replied, not looking up, finger tracing a rough line marking the mountains to the east. "This is the way the Star Maidens would have traveled, right, across the Icefang Ridge?"

Althea sighed and knelt beside him, her hair falling forward, she leaned closer, ice-blue eyes bright with amusement. "It's a story, Caleb. You can't believe everything you read in the books."

Caleb looked up, green eyes lit with excitement. “What if it’s true? What if the Star Maidens are real? Maybe their swirling robes are out there, waiting for someone brave enough to find them.”

Althea smirked. “And you think that someone is you?” She stood up, laughter now in her eyes.

“Why not?” Caleb grinned, not bothered by her scorn, a mischievous streak now lit his eyes. “Father says we’re meant to protect the North. What better way than to find ancient magic?”

Althea rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide a smile. “You’re impossible.” Then a line deepened between her brows. “You do know dad says magic is not what the Lord wants but for us to depend on him? Be careful.” Althea knew about magic: “Before spells had names and scrolls written, magic lived in the elements. Fire spoke. Water remembered. Earth held power, and Air carried the voices of those long gone. Ancient magic,” she would say “was divine and woven into the creation.”

Caleb nodded, believing magic simply was part of life. Rowan’s view was of course very different: Magic, he said, is a mystery, the breath of God singing through creation, echoed through the prophets’ visions, danced in the fires of Sinai, crossed the desert with the mighty Seraphs, and ripped open the veil between heaven and earth. To some, it’s a miracle. To others, it’s pure madness.” He scowled. “Magic is not real. Keep your eyes on the stars and your mind on God above.”

That night, as the household settled into the quiet breathing of sleep, curiosity got the better of him. Clad in his fur-lined cloak, Caleb slipped out of his chambers, excitement sparking in him. He crept through the shadowed halls, barely daring to breathe, pushed open the heavy door leading out to the courtyard, the cold slapped his cheeks sharp, like a hungry wolf. He hardly noticed, too eager, and quietly eased the door shut behind him, careful not to let the winter’s breath wake the house.

The idea of adventure had taken root hours ago and refused to die, no matter the late hour or the biting air. His boots crunched softly as he

made his way to the stables, the moonlight silvering the landscape with snow covering the ground in a thick layer.

Inside, the warm, musky scent of hay and horses filled his nostrils. His father's warhorse snorted deep in its stall, the sound low, nostrils flaring blowing steam like a warning. Caleb glanced at the towering beast, then at the smaller ponies. While he would love to ride his father's warhorse, he knew the beast would not allow it. And he was too terrified.

One nearby nickered, a chestnut mare, called Cinnamon, a streak of white down her nose. She tossed her head when she saw him, and Caleb's heart swelled with joy. One day, he thought, he'd be granted a great warhorse to ride, like Father whose great black stallion whinnied also and stomped his hooves. But not yet. Not for a very long time.

He was still too small, and his magic, what little he had, wasn't strong enough to command such power. One day, though. One day.

The pony he chose, Snowflake, was no ordinary creature. She was a Northland frost-horse, bred and shaped by icy storms of the North like Cinnamon, Althea's pony.

Both had thick, double-layered coats that kept the cold at bay, the outer hairs slick and coarse shed snow, the soft undercoat thick as a wolf's pelt. On their sides and chest, a soft padding of fat protected from bitterest frost, like the great elk that roamed the tundra.

Feathered legs, thick-furred down to their heavy hooves, kept ice from latching onto their skin. And their nostrils flared wide, warming each breath before it ever touched their lungs. Even their eyes were strange, pale-ringed and luminous, made to face the blinding glare of snow that seemed to go on forever.

Some said the first frost-horses had been born from mountain dogs, or even blessed, cursed even by the gods of winter themselves. Whatever the truth, Caleb knew: a Northland frost-horse wasn't just a mount. It was a lifeline, for those who dared to ride the frozen wilds.

He adjusted the blanket over Snowflake's back, patting her strong neck. "Just a little ride, my beauty," he murmured against her fur, though both knew, nothing was ever just a little ride in the North.

The moonlit landscape stretched out before him, glittering with frost, vast and wild. His heart pounded with pure exhilaration as he mounted up and nudged her forward, Snowflake's hooves crunching over the hard-packed snow not seeing the shadow move behind him.

He didn't have a destination. Caleb only knew he needed to go, beyond the walls, beyond the rules and the waiting. The thrill of freedom was a fire in his veins. But it wasn't only adventure that drove him tonight, and whoever followed might have had the same idea.

There were rumors, stories whispered, about the Ice Maidens. And Caleb, stubborn and curious, had to see for himself.

The world outside wasn't kind. The hills rolled away into shadow, trees heavy with snow loomed like sentinels. Deep within lurked the wolves of the North. And the deeper he went, the more the landscape blurred, the familiar landmarks swallowed by night. Snowflake's ears flicked as a distant howl split the cold.

"Easy, girl," Caleb whispered, his voice tighter than he intended as he tugged her reins, trying to retrace their steps, but the paths all looked the same, white and endless.

The cold, once an exhilaration, began to gnaw at him. Fear, sharp and real, clawed up his spine. Then, A beam of light sliced through the dark. A lantern swung high in the air, its glow revealing a shadowy figure dead ahead astride a great black stallion. His face hidden beneath a dark cowl so Caleb could not see his face.

I froze, both terrified, imagining I would either have my throat slit or taken as a captive and sold as a slave or worse. Heart racing, I trembled in fear as the figure dismounted with practiced ease, strode across the snow, looming taller as he drew closer. Then relieved and mortified as father's voice boomed across the snow-covered expanse.

"Caleb! What in the stars are you doing out here?"

Rowan's expression a mixture of anger and concern as he approached. I opened my mouth to explain, about the Star Maidens, but the words faltered under my father's piercing gaze.

"I wanted to, " I began, but Rowan raised a hand to silence me.

"You could have been lost," Rowan said, his voice softer now but no less firm. "The North is not a playground, Caleb. It's beautiful, yes, but also dangerous. You must respect it. And we've spoken of the dangerous should a young boy such as yourself be found alone out here."

All I could do was hang my head, shame prickling me. "I just wanted to see where the Star Maidens might have gone, if they were real."

Rowan's expression softened further, and he knelt, his eyes on me, and a soft chuckle emerged from his lips as he held me close briefly.

"You've a brave heart, Caleb. Bravery without wisdom is recklessness. One day, you'll need to trust not just your courage, but your mind and the guidance of those who love you."

Chest tight, a mix of emotions swirling within. Rowan placed a hand on my shoulder, it was both reassuring and understanding. "Now, let's get you home before your mother turns both of us into icicles."

Turning my horse, I followed dad home, and it was a few weeks later when he handed me a gift, a mithril cloak made for me, knowing this would likely not be my last adventure.

I swelled with pride and anticipation, for I knew it would save me from the cold and dangers of the North. Little did I know what was coming my way and the Mithril cloak would not provide the needed help.

As time passed, one twilight, overhearing whispers in the frosted halls, the people whispered of legends, one of the Tundra's Star Maidens who descended to Earth when the nights grew longest, their celestial robes held the power to grant one wish, but only if asked with a selfless heart. Doubtless their stories came about because it was that time of year.

Driven by curiosity (and a bit of mischief, or madness), I slipped into the bitter night, forgetting all about dad‘s warning of my last adventure. It had been long enough for me to have forgotten. With my mithril cloak, flapping like dark raven wings, I ventured out into the night across what looked like desert dunes only made of frozen snow. I was older now too and felt stronger and more capable, though no less foolish.

Nevertheless, this time, I knew where I was headed, and before long my pony brought me to the Frozen Mirror Lake. And under the pale light of the moon, astonished, I beheld them, the Star Maidens, swirling like silver white mist across the ice. "They're real, not a legend" I whispered, transfixed for I’d not truly believing they were real.

I’d heard the stories, imagined what they must look like, but to actually see the Star Maidens, it was beyond astonishing. In a flash I forgot the warning, and raced forward boldly calling out. "Hello." Intending to ask the question I’d set upon my tongue but I froze before the words could tumble from my lips.

One maiden turned, face luminous, shawl aglow in starlight woven of impossible patterns, runes of some sort. Her eyes wide, clearly, she’d not expected me. I lunged, grasping at her shawl, to ask the question hovering on my lips. Before I could speak, the shawl began to dissolve in my fingers, stardust cascading into the night as the Maidens began withdraw moving silently higher into the night.

"No." I shouted. "Do not leave. I have a…"

The maiden’s eyes filled with sadness as she spoke. "You have taken without asking. Now, the Frostbound Oath must be paid."

"Wh-what? But I just wanted to…" The ice beneath me cracked, sharply, followed by a thunderous boom echoing across the lake into the stillness, then a shattering as if a glacier had split asunder. I was pulled into the frozen depths below.

A scream of terror from my throat unheard by any as I catapulted into the icy depths. The last sight my eyes beheld was the maiden's ice blue eyes filled with tears as I slid down the icy slope, far below the snow-capped dunes into a world of blue-green shadowed ice.

Caleb soon learned, a mithril cloak might save his life in battle but it did not waylay the ice that soon wrapped its cold hands about him.

Chapter 5

In stillness deep the secrets lie,
Beneath a hush of silver sky.
A brother lost, a thread remains,
Heavens proof through icy plains.

ALTHEA'S RESCUE

The night before, I heard a thunderous crack, like a glacier shearing free, echoing across the frozen land. A warning, I'd thought. But by morning, I had forgotten.

Rising from bed, I dressed and raced down the hall, knocked on Caleb's door. Receiving no answer, I peeked inside but he was not in bed or in his room. I hurried downstairs to find my brother and break the nights fast only to see Caleb was not there. His bed had not been undisturbed, and he'd not eaten the maid said. Puzzled, I ate the porridge set before me, waiting for him but he did not enter the dining hall.

I assumed he had risen early and gone on an adventure alone. But his bed unmade was questionable. He never made his bed. He had not broken his nights fast so would return soon, hungry. Mom and Dad had eaten and were off and gone doing what they did best, ruling our kingdom and keeping it safe from whatever was out there to do it harm. There were some things, however, they could not protect us from.

Caleb didn't return by midmorning. The unease that had been gnawing quietly now flared into full alarm and by late afternoon, I was in total panic mode, knowing something was very wrong. So, I decided to set out before sunset to find him, though I had no idea where he might've gone except for the Frozen Lake. Could he be there, sitting and waiting for those maidens to show up. What a foolish boy.

Not wanting to worry our parents, I wrote a quick note, placed it on the fire place mantle, dressed in warm clothes, shrugged on my fur cloak, and hurried out the door to find Caleb. I noticed Snowflake was missing from the stables and was certain where he'd gone. Saddling Cinnamon, my pony, quickly I rode out in search of my brother.

As I travelled, my eyes scanned the frozen ground where a light snow had fallen during the day, and soon found evidence of his pony's hooves where they had left their mark in the snow. And so, I followed his trail footprints half-buried under snow, faint signs of his passage all along until I reached the frozen lake.

The wind had softened to a hush, as if the world itself paused to listen. Althea stood near the edge of the lake, the stars gleaming like scattered embers across the northern sky. She saw a bit of colored fabric, reached and picked it up, a gift left in silence. Each thread shimmered faintly, as if sewn from constellations, the soft blues of nebulae, the argent glow of moonlit frost, the deep indigo of dreams held too long in silence.

As she held it, within the weave it stirred, sparkling not from light, but from something older. Wishes. Names. Love. Loss. "They wove this?" she whispered.

No one answered, but she felt it, the whisper of fingers that once spun light from darkness. A presence that knew sorrow and yet chose beauty. She turned, the threads of the shawl trailing, and stepped into the cold the stars at her back, returning to Caleb's pony.

Snowflake stood at the lake's edge, waiting patiently. "Oh, foolish boy," she murmured, clutching the threads, holding onto whatever Caleb was after. Not wanting to waste time, I placed a hand upon the muzzle of his pony. "Show me what you've seen, Snowflake." Then I whispered the ancient words and the scene unfolded before my eyes.

I stood amazed at what the ethereal scene revealed though softer and more muted of what Caleb had seen. I imagined him being entranced by the Ice Maidens as they danced above the frozen waters of the lake, and recalled what I'd been told about the Frostbound Oath, though I'd given it no credence at the time:

“Long ago, when stars hung low and the North still breathed with magic, the Ice Maidens were born, wild, untamed, and loyal only to the land. But men grew greedy. They tried to take what should never be theirs. So, the guardian of winter vowed, ‘No hand shall guide the Maidens’ fate unless they choose it freely,’ the white wolf said.”

And so, it was, at least for a time. Those marked by frost on the hand could call for aid in danger, and the spirits would come. But the oath was broken, long ago and the cold came in vengeance, burying cities in silence. "That’s why you must always ask before stepping where the old magic sleeps. For the North remembers, even when we forget.”

Althea startled at the words she heard and as the memory came, in the vision, Caleb’s eyes grew wide in wonder. He stepped upon the lake and reached for the maidens’ shawl, I wanted to cry a warning: “No, Caleb. You must ask their consent first.”

But that time was past and her shawl dissolved into mist and vanished into the air, except for the fragment I’d found.

"Why had she allowed it?" I wondered. Perhaps it was so those who came seeking would know and save him. I knew then there was a chance he could still be saved from the Ice Maidens Frostbound Oath; though it must be paid, there is always a way out. Or so I hoped. I just didn't know how as I scanned the ice for entry into the realm where I knew my brother had gone.

Determined, I stepped onto the iced saw a slight crack, and whispered more words from ancient text. The ice opened before me.

Walking to the edge, It was easy to see where Caleb had fallen. Instead of stepping over and falling myself, I hesitated not knowing what to do and not trusting magic and its secrets. So, I prayed to the One above for guidance. Only then did I again speak the ancient words and set my feet to descend into a cavern of blue glass and swirling frost with heart thundering in my chest, for I was terrified of what I would find.

As I stepped out past the edge, it was as if an invisible hand held my feet as I descended and came to rest on a smooth glasslike surface of ice.

Caleb, now frozen in a cocoon of what must have been enchanted ice, was guarded by a towering figure who glared down at me:

His shadow moved, a figure towering. Broad as a mountain, carved as if from frozen stone. Hrímvald, one of the Hrímþursar. His breath froze the air in shards. I inhaled slowly, too fast and it would slice me from the inside out. I could feel the cold slowly creeping up and over my feet, doubtless beginning to encase me in a cocoon.

"The boy stole what is the heavens," Hrímvald said, voice cold as ice like grinding glaciers. "The price must be paid." I stood before the giant. "Then let me pay it. Release him, and take me instead." Of course, he had me in the vault, a frozen casket about to seal me in.

The Frost Giant tilted his colossal head. "Your love is pure, but your bargain is folly. For one life does not erase another's debt." And then a shimmering in the air had both of us turning our heads to see its cause, and as the Giant hesitated, I felt the ice slowly recede.

Chapter 6

Winged in light, now shrouded flame,
I walk the edge of wrath and shame.
Yet still I heed the silent call,
To rise, though I have dared to fall.

AEZARIEL

Above the tundra, where the howling winds carved whispers into the frozen night, a celestial presence stirred. A lone figure descended to the edge of the Frozen Mirror Lake, its silhouette framed by the blue-green aurora's cold breath. Wings of tarnished silver arched behind, its once-brilliant feathers dulled by time. The figure was Aezariel, a fallen angel whose name was etched in forgotten tongues, a being bound between heaven's realm yet drawn to moments of reckoning.

"What is this you want from me, oh One above? Have I not paid for my folly and now, after all this time, you demand another payment?"

A silent voice whispered into Aezariel's ears His eyes not seeing the One above. Cast from the heavens long ago, he was not allowed to see any of Heaven but he heard His messenger's voice, and the words spoken, he obeyed without further questioning.

Beneath the icy crust of the lake, Hrímvald's cavern awaited, the Frost Giant's icy throne pulsing with the rhythm of ancient power. The cavern walls glittered with frost-runes, a testament to the giant's dominion over winter's wrath. These thing Althea noted as she waited watching her brother slowly freezing to death within his icy casket.

Caleb, upon entering his realm, now lay trapped in a crystalline prison, his breath shallow his eyes glazed. He could not move but he could see his sister Althea who knelt before Hrímvald, hands trembling but her voice resolute as she pled for her brother's life.

“No.” Caleb wanted to shout but could not. Her words had entered his ears and distraught that she would give her life for his, he could not abide what she vowed of this giant. Then he too heard the other as the angel descended into the ice bound cavern.

“Enough,” Aezariel’s voice resonated throughout the cavern, a sound neither loud nor soft but filled every shadow and the silence. The angel stepped forward, his tarnished armor glinting faintly in the chamber, gaze, sharp and unyielding, it was fixed upon Hrímvald.

The Frost Giant turned, icy eyes narrowing at the sight of the intruder. “Who dares enter my realm unbidden?”

“I am Aezariel, as you well know,” the angel replied, tone of authority. “A witness to mortals’ folly and a guardian, even in my fall. I come not for conquest but to intervene in an imbalance that must not be. And you must know I’ve been heaven sent.”

Hrímvald’s laugh rumbled like an avalanche. “You, a fallen one, dare to lecture me on balance and claim to be heaven sent? These children, both fools trespassed upon sacred grounds; their fates are sealed.”

“They are children, and the cavern is sacred only to you. Heaven lays no claim to such a thing. Should you continue in your intent, their souls will also remain, engendering heaven’s wrath.”

Aezariel’s wings shift as if brushing against unseen forces. “Their actions were borne of ignorance, not defiance. The boy sought understanding and to aid his family, a noble undertaking. The girl offers herself out of love. Also, an act of bravery. Is there no place in your heart for mercy? You too were once an angel, an archangel, until fallen.”

Hrímvald leaned forward, his immense form cast shadows that flickered like dying flames. “Mercy is for the weak. Did he show mercy for those of us who were tricked by Lucifer?”

Aezariel could not stop the laughter bubbling forth. “Tricked? How very humorous. You knew long before Morningstar contrived his plans. You too sought to take over Heaven but were too fearful. Morningstar was the one brave enough though foolish as well to nearly succeed.”

“It matters not. This is my home. I am its lord. No mortal nor immortal will take what I have claimed as mine.” Hrimvald’s brows pull together as he scowls down at the children and waves a hand to continue the sealing of Althea in the frozen cocoon. Aezariel can see she’s already turning blue, her lips and fingertips, and it won’t be long now.

“Then let me propose a trial, one fit for a being of your stature,” Aezariel said, his wings spreading to fill the cavern with a faint, radiant glow. “Release the children and bind their debt to a new Frostbound Oath, one only they are responsible for keeping.

“They will safeguard the sanctity of the Star Maidens and ensure your domain remains as is for generations,” he said, voice firm. “They dwell in the North now. Their blood is of its ruling line. Let their lives become your legacy, not their deaths your curse.”

A hush fell over the clearing as the wind stilled. Frost shimmered faintly in the air, like breath held between worlds. Hrimvald debated within what the curse might mean for him. The one he already lives out as a frost giant in a frozen land is bad enough but to add to that. He almost shudders at the thought but doesn’t want Aezariel to see.

“There is more,” he continued. “To fully restore the Frostbound Oath, consent must be honored. As with the Maidens of old, these heirs may not be interfered with, not by spirits, not by guardians, unless they give it freely. Their lives are their own.”

And then images flared above: a fox, clever and swift; a wolf, watchful and loyal; a bear, mighty and awed; and an eagle, fierce and far-seeing. The animals circled in light, symbols of the spirits who served the oath, and who would do so again.

“If consent is withheld,” he said, “none may act, not unless their lives are in mortal peril.” Aezariel’s expression remained grave as he turned to the children. “Do you both understand? Do you accept this bond?”

Caleb’s eyes flickered, some unspoken truth dawning behind them. Still encased in ice, yet he appeared in agreement.

Aezariel turned to Althea. Her gaze was steady, uncertain, perhaps, but unafraid. “I speak for both of us and I agree,” she said.

Now, even the wind seemed to listen. Aezariel stepped back, his wings faintly outlined in light. “Speak the words,” he said, voice thundering though soft, “so the spirits may know your hearts.”

Althea looked at Caleb, eyes steady, a flicker of agreement in them as Althea raised her hands, palms open to the cold sky, and spoke:

“By frost and flame, we plead your *aid*.” The final word lingered like a breath in the frozen air. For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then the wind stirred with *purpose* as a fox appeared, slender and silver white, eyes gleaming. It gave a sharp cry, then vanished quick as it came.

Next, a wolf emerged, white-furred and silent. It padded over, locked eyes with Althea, and bowed its head solemn then fading into the mist. As it did, the ground rumbled beneath them, a bear arose, turning once to face them, it roared, then disappeared into the whiteness.

Above, a piercing cry echoes through the cavern as an eagle soared, its wings edged in white light. It circled once, its shadow passed over them, Althea staggered, not in fear, but something that felt like *awakening.* Then, without sound, it too was gone.

Althea looked down, her palm glows. Faint, frost-like veins shimmered across the skin, a mark, delicately etched, it spiraled outward like the veins of a frozen leaf. She gasped seeing Caleb’s hand, glow as the same pattern emerged then faded until only a cool tingle remained. But the mark was there. It would return when called.

Aezariel bowed his head, just slightly. “It is done.” He turned to them and spoke: “When danger comes, the mark *burns cold*, acting as both a warning and a call for aid. Each spirit will respond according to its nature and as it wills. You may see one or all, depending on the need.

The cavern fell silent, the air thick with tension as Hrímvald’s red eyes glimmered, his thoughts moved slow and inexorable as glaciers. Finally, he rose to his full height, voice causing the cavern walls to tremble.

“And when they fail?” A hand moved as if to brush the answer away. “If I agree, and the new Frostbound Oath is broken, winter’s wrath will claim them both, this I promise.” His word hard a cold stone.

Hrimvald knew Aezariel oversaw the area from above. He had fallen but his fall had not taken him into the Darkness or Aether. and so he was heaven sent to them, and he would know if they broke the Oath.

“So be it,” Aezariel agreed, his voice steady as he stepped forward. He placed a hand on Althea, a warmth incongruous in the frozen depths. “You are spared, but this does not mean freedom. It is a covenant.”

Hrímvald’s massive hand lifted then came down and struck the icy floor, and a cascade of frost and light erupted from the impact, sealing the Oath with a power unyielding. The ice imprisoning Caleb shattered, and he fell to the glassy surface, blue and shivering.

Althea gathered him in her arms, breath hitching as life and warmth returned to his body. The numbing cold gradually began to be replaced with warmth, her arms wrapped tight about him. His Mithril cloak the only thing that had protected him while in the ice cocoon.

The Frost Giant’s form began to dissipate, his voice echoed through the cavern a fading whisper. “Go, children of the North. Remember: winter watches. I look forward to both of you here forever in my domain.” His laughter echoing as he vanished into frozen mist.

Althea looked up at Aezariel, her voice trembling. “Who are you? Why… why would you help us?”

The angel’s face softened, the sorrow in his eyes remained. “Because even the fallen seek redemption. And the One above sent me.”

He’d resented it at first but recognized a part of himself he’d thought lost long ago. Reminded of his former nature, he had agreed to aid the children and did. “Now it is time I returned whence I came.”

Aezariel’s wings swept wide, and with a gust of wind, he ascended up through the cavern’s icy ceiling with the siblings in tow. And as they emerged from the cavern, the first rays of dawn broke over the tundra,

a rosy glow illumined the light over the Frozen Mirror Lake and the ascending sun set it ablaze as Aezariel disappeared.

Althea looked at Caleb, voice resolute despite her weariness. “I hope it’s not the last we see of him. We made a promise, Caleb. One we cannot break. But this is the second say we’ve been gone and must also get home. Mom and dad will be furious. ”

Caleb nodded, his gaze looking out over the dawn sky. “We’ll protect the North and guard the promise given. But, what does it mean, Althea? All contracts like this, have ‘fine print’ What could break the covenant, do either of us know?”

Above them, unseen, Aezariel watched from the snow-laden skies, a silent sentinel over a covenant forged in frost and light. He chuckled, “The boy is wise to question, and will ask for help when needed. I pray his sister does as well, so he does not suffer for her mistakes.”

East of the Wildwood

Book 5 of the Wildwood series – Coming in 2026

A prince gone missing.
A cousin chasing shadows.
A daughter of dragons refuses to bow.

Beyond the North, a realm of fire and prophecy awakens as Sorin, son of Eryn and Aric, taken from home by magic, to a place where myths breathe flame, and a dragon and an ancient prophecy claim him.

But he is not alone.

Caleb, chasing the vision that shattered his peace, flees to the East, a land of mystery. There he meets Danqing, the emperor's unruly daughter who dances with blades and commands whispers of magic and ink.

Together, they must uncover the truth behind the bound dragons, the fractured oaths prophecy, an evil force that threatens to engulf both East and West, and in the clash of fire, who will rise to claim the sky?

The final battle is stirring.
The dragons are not sleeping.
And war is coming.

Books by Brandy

Angels and Demons

This book explores heavens elect and the devil through biblical insights, separating truth from myth. A must-read for seekers of spiritual truth and those curious about the unseen realm.

Aramaic New Testament in English

A modern translation of the Aramaic New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs, designed for seamless reading without verse numbers. Dive into scripture as it was meant to be read, simply and profoundly.

Eli the Eagle

Follow Eli as he learns to soar above self-doubt and life's challenges. A heartwarming story that teaches children the value of perseverance, confidence, and healthy self-esteem.

Jerusalem Bible

This edition of the Jerusalem Bible includes Apocryphal texts for deeper exploration including apocryphal psalms, it's perfect for curious readers of scripture, with enhanced navigation

Relapse Prevention

A biblical guide to breaking free from addiction, this workbook delves into the roots of destructive behaviors and tools for healing.

Daughter of the Fallen:

Sara's life turns into an adventure as she learns to battle demons to save her world, but is she prepared for the sacrifices she must?

All books by Brandy are on Amazon and many other online retailers.