

THE MARKED SOULS

The path of light and darkness

Part 2 of the Healian series

Written by

CYDER

Author: Cindy Devijver, Cyder Cover design: ©Cindy Devijver & Wellowr
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SOMETIMES IT'S OKAY TO STAND STILL
FOR A MOMENT AND SIMPLY BREATHE."

~ZETH



FOREWORD

When I first started writing the Healian series, I never dared to hope it would be received with such warmth and enthusiasm. And now, being able to create a special edition makes it even more extraordinary.

So, to all the readers who read *The Lost Kynsera* and were so enthusiastic that I immediately began writing the sequel—thank you. Your messages, reactions, and support inspired me to keep building this world and its characters. You gave me the confidence that this story deserves to be told.

When I began writing *The Lost Kynsera*, I knew I wanted to create something different from the typical fantasy tale. No clichés, but a world filled with unexpected twists, complex characters, and deep emotions. A story where nothing is quite as it seems, and where every choice has consequences. My goal was to keep readers on the edge of their seats—and I truly believe I succeeded. *The Marked Souls* continues that journey. This second book is not only more intense, but also rawer, more emotional, and more magical. Writing it was a deeply personal experience—one filled with passion and surrender. Knowing how warmly the first book was received, it felt as if this world began writing itself. As if Syrah, Zeth, and Oryn refused to let me go, insisting that their story had to continue. What made this journey even more special are the illustrations. They truly bring the world to life and make it so much easier to fully immerse yourself in the magic and atmosphere of the story. They are the perfect complement to the words, allowing imagination to run even deeper.

I am proud of what this book has become. *The Marked Souls* is a story of love and betrayal, of magic and darkness, of hope and sacrifice. It is a story that pulls you in and refuses to let go—even after you’ve turned the final page.

I wish you all an unforgettable experience with this second part of Syrah’s journey. Expect an intense tale filled with intrigue, sorrow, magic, and passion. Let yourself be carried away—and remember nothing is ever as it seems.

Thank you for believing in me and in my books.

DICTIONARY

Kynsera

A princess of the fae, specifically the heiress to the throne of Prezzie. It is an honorary title that implies both respect and responsibility.

Zonta

The title for the queen in Prezzie, a Healians kingdom. Mother of Syrah.

Zuana

The title for the king in Prezzie, a Healians kingdom. Father of Syrah.

Skyping

A form of magical teleportation that the Fae and Aleria use to quickly move from one place to another.

Fae

A magical race that is connected to nature and magic. They cannot spontaneously summon magic but manipulate existing magic or use spells to harness their powers.

Wervicken

Evil, magical creatures that once entered Healian through cracks. They are dangerous and feared by the residents of Healian because of their destructive powers. They were created by Lorecàn

Tuk

A drink that they drink in Healian, similar to coffee in the human world. It is a spirit with a complex taste, which stimulates the senses.

Aleria

A magical race that can handle magic out of nowhere.

High Aleria

They are the powerful heirs of pure magic, able to create magic from their own magical core. Their immense magical power often aroused the jealousy of the Fae. In addition, they always have a deep, unbreakable connection with a dragon. They were known for their loving nature and lived in harmony and joy with other races, such as the Fae, humans, Aleria, and many others. They seemed to be extinct.

Members of the council

Guardians or protectors of ancient magical knowledge and locations.

Skylio

Magical creatures, mighty large lions with wings that act as protectors.

Portals

Magical passages created by Fae and Aleria to connect worlds.

The Circle

The Council of the Valley of the White Mountains, the magical guardians of the world of Healian.

Sylthar(a)

The title for the king or queen who ruled over all kingdoms, connected to the heritage magic of the Aleria

Draecken

Older than any living being, they possess the ability to transform from dragon form into an Alerian. They no longer do so except in protection, for they are all but extinct.

Vi'laer an Sylthar e Sylthara. Vi'laer orae en sereth.

Honor to the Sylthar and Sylthara. Honor to their souls and their strength.

Sylthar'ae vi'kalae sylthara. Ka'reth om vara thal ae'rahn

The Sylthar and Sylthara, united by blood. Bound by magic, unbroken by time.

PART I
THE SHADOWS



A decorative header featuring two dragons. On the left, a light-colored dragon with wings spread is flying towards the right. On the right, a dark-colored dragon is shown in profile, facing left. The background is filled with soft, wispy clouds, a crescent moon, and several small, star-like symbols.

PROLOGUE

ORYN

6 years ago



watch Syrah and Zeth as they face each other, their practice swords rai-

sed. Zeth wears a confident grin, his feet firmly planted, ready to block every move Syrah makes. Syrah's eyes gleam with the same determination she has always had. She is fast, agile moving as if she already knows exactly what she's about to do. Our father stands nearby, his gaze fixed on them. He nods approvingly when Syrah spins smoothly and dodges Zeth's attack.

"Well done, Syrah!" he calls. "Watch your balance, Zeth. Syrah is faster than you think." My jaw tightens, and I grip my sword more firmly. Why does he always look at Zeth and Syrah as if they're the only ones who matter? I want him to look at me too—to see how hard I train, how much I can do.

"Asena," I say, turning toward my little sister. As usual, she's sitting with her nose buried in a book, completely forgetting the world around her. Her fingers trace the lines as her eyes race over the words, as if she's searching for answers to questions only she knows. "Will you train with me?" I ask, softening my voice so I don't startle her. She looks up from her book.

"No, sorry, Oryn... I don't really like it," she says quietly. Her voice trembles slightly as her gaze flicks toward our father standing nearby. His attention is fully on Syrah and Zeth, as if the rest of us don't exist. I see the way Asena glances at him, almost nervously—as if she's afraid he'll scold her for choosing books over fighting or magic. But Father doesn't notice. His focus never wavers from the others.

"Asena," I say more gently, placing a hand on her book to draw her attention. "You know, one day you'll become one of the people you love reading about."

Strong. Clever. Ready to do something extraordinary.” She looks at me, eyes wide with surprise, as if she’s not sure whether I truly mean it. Then she smiles—a soft, sincere smile that lights up her entire face. She hugs the book to her chest, as though it’s part of her.

“Books... they give me peace, Oryn,” she says quietly. “They let me get lost without doing anything wrong.” I nod, my voice warm and honest.

“And that’s your strength, Asena. You discover the world in your own way—and that’s what makes you special. Being strong isn’t only about fighting. It’s about knowing, understanding, and believing in what you can do.” Her smile grows, her shoulders relaxing.

“Thank you, Oryn,” she whispers, her voice almost fragile.

“Always,” I reply, resting my hand briefly on her shoulder. “You’re exactly who you’re meant to be. And one day, everyone will see that—just like I do.” Syrah notices us and gestures toward me.

“I’ll train with you, Oryn,” she says kindly, her smile genuine. Warmth rushes to my cheeks. Syrah really looks at me—not the way she looks at Zeth when they train, but it’s a beginning.

“Okay,” I say, my voice softer than I intended. I exchange a quick glance with Asena, who starts to grin as Syrah takes her place opposite me. I want to prove myself—to show that I’m good. Just as good as Zeth. Maybe even better. We start slowly, but it doesn’t take long to notice how sharp Syrah is. Her eyes track every movement I make, blocking my attacks with ease. She’s fast—but I can keep up. I feel strong, focused— Until I hear our father’s voice.

“Careful, Syrah, he’s coming from the right!” She reacts instantly, slipping past my strike in one fluid motion and driving me decisively to the ground. Before I fully realize what’s happening, she’s on top of me, her eyes fierce and unwavering. Our gazes lock, and my heart stumbles. She’s unlike anyone I’ve ever known—wild, determined, impossible to ignore. There’s something about her that pulls at me, something I barely dare to acknowledge. As she looks at me with that fire in her eyes, I know one thing with absolute certainty: One day, she will be mine. Her expression softens into a warm, sincere smile, and for a moment, the world seems to fall silent.

“Well done, Oryn,” she says, genuine kindness in her voice. “You’re really strong.” I nod, but my stomach twists uncomfortably. I want her to keep looking at me like this—with the admiration and respect she so often gives Zeth. I want Father to look at me the way he always looks at Zeth—with pride. Instead, all I feel is that I fall short. As if I’m missing something they have. Zeth steps up beside us, chuckling.

“Not bad, Oryn. But you’ll have to be faster if you want to keep up with Syrah.” He offers Syrah his hand and pulls her to her feet, shattering the moment between us. His words sting, and I force myself not to look at him. Syrah smiles at him—a smile that feels meant just for Zeth, as if they share something I’m not part of. It’s always Zeth. Always him who draws her attention. Him who earns Father’s approval. One day, I’ll stand at the front, I promise myself silently. One day, I’ll show them what I can do. Then everyone—even Syrah—will see that I’m just as good as Zeth. Maybe even better.



SYRAH

Let. Me. Go!" I twist in his grip, but Oryn doesn't yield an inch. His fingers I twist in his grip, but Oryn doesn't yield an inch. His fingers clamp around my wrist like iron talons, as if he never intends to release me again. A shiver runs through me as he leans closer, his face inches from mine. Behind us, magic churns—a dark, swirling vortex that devours the light and leaves only shadows behind. The rift pulses with menace, unmistakably the portal Zeth and Elyndra warned me about. A passage to another world.

"Shhh, princess," he whispers, a grin curling his lips, making my skin crawl. "You don't want to make this worse than it already is. If you'd just listened to me, none of this would have been necessary." His breath brushes my ear, cold and threatening. My heart hammers in my chest. How did everything go so wrong so quickly? Only yesterday I was surrounded by those I trusted, safe in the Valley. Now, trapped in his grasp, that life feels like a distant memory. "You were so naïve, Syrah," he murmurs, his tone almost mocking. "Did you really think you could defeat me? That you were safe—with him? You, the very core of Healian..." He laughs softly, the sound seeping into my veins like poison. My jaw tightens. "You have no idea what I'm capable of," I hiss, my voice low and sharp.

"I'll fight until my last breath, Oryn. I won't give up—not without a fight." His eyes glint with that same sickening gleam I've seen before.

"Oh, I'm counting on it, princess. But it doesn't matter how hard you fight—I will always find you. We are destined to be together, Syrah. Whether you believe it or not." A chill slides down my spine. I force myself to meet his gaze, refusing to crumble beneath the darkness radiating from him.

“You’ve lost my trust, Oryn,” I say. “And you’ll never get it back.” His grip tightens around my wrist, pain shooting up my arm. My breath catches as I suppress a cry.

“Trust,” he scoffs, smiling cruelly. “What an empty promise. Power is what matters in this world, Syrah—and I am the only one who knows how to wield it.” Before I can respond, another voice cuts through the air—dark, commanding, like thunder vibrating through my bones.

“Oryn, that’s enough. Surely you don’t want to reveal all our cards so soon.” I gasp as Lorecàn steps forward, his form almost dissolving into the shadows around him. His movements are fluid, unnaturally so, as he approaches. Oryn still holds me, but I feel his attention shift to the man now standing before us. Lorecàn stops inches away. His gaze locks onto mine as he slowly raises his hand. His fingers seize my face—cold, merciless—forcing me to look at him. His eyes are swirling pools of darkness.

“You see, princess,” he says with quiet satisfaction, “I told you I’d catch you. Your pathetic attempts to escape were always futile.” My stomach twists. His touch feels like it drains the light from the world itself. But deep inside me, something ignites. With the last of my strength, I spit in his face, my stare unwavering. For a heartbeat, Lorecàn is still. Then he steps back slowly, wiping the spit from his cheek with a single finger. His smile fades. His eyes darken—becoming something far more dangerous. “That,” he says calmly, “was a mistake, girl.” My heart slams against my ribs. My body coils tight as a drawn bow. I reach for my magic, feel it surge through my veins—warm, defiant, fighting against his cold. I have to act. Now. A final wave of resolve crashes over me as I try to summon my power— But Lorecàn begins to speak. His voice is low, rhythmic, filled with words I don’t understand. It feels as though an invisible hand closes around my throat, draining my strength bit by bit. My legs tremble. The ground seems to slip away beneath me. The world darkens. As if I’m falling into an abyss. The last thing I see is Lorecàn’s icy smile—burning itself into my mind before everything goes black.

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2

ZETH



“What are you all standing around for? Do something, damn it!

I storm toward the Council, who stand frozen by what just happened. It feels as if time itself has stopped—like no one truly realizes that Syrah was taken right before our eyes. The silence in the chamber presses heavily against my chest.

“Do something!” I shout. “Syrah was taken in front of us, and you do nothing!” My voice trembles with fury and despair. It feels as though my words slam into a wall of stone. No one moves. No one responds. Elyndra looks at me with wide, shocked eyes and slowly shakes her head, her gaze filled with a painful mix of fear and resignation. Tears glisten in her eyes, but she refuses to let them fall.

“We... we can’t do anything...” she says. “Lorecàn used black magic...” Her voice sounds broken, as if she can barely believe it herself. She casts a brief glance at the other members of the Council, who look just as shaken and defeated. “We can’t feel her anymore... She’s no longer in this world, Zeth. We’ve lost her.” The words hit me like a blow to the gut. I try to find her—try to skype to her—but just like before, there is nothing. Only emptiness. A void so deep it hurts, as if a part of me has been torn away. The ground seems to vanish beneath my feet, as though everything I’ve ever known and loved has been ripped from me in a single moment. Despair and rage crash over me, and before I can stop myself, I begin to destroy everything around me. Chairs. Vases. Anything within reach shatters beneath my hands. Splintering wood and breaking glass echo through the hall. I shout, I roar—my voice bouncing off the walls of the council chamber like that of a wounded beast searching for its other half.

“Zeth!” A strong hand clamps onto my shoulder. I spin around, breath ragged, my gaze wild. My eyes meet Arion’s—steady, controlled, yet not without sorrow. “Calm yourself, Zeth,” he says, his voice firm but laced with concern. “We will find her, no matter what Lorecàn has done. But right now, you need to regain control. If you don’t, the Council will turn against you.” His words land like a final warning. I try to let them sink in, but everything inside me feels on the verge of breaking. How can I be calm when Syrah—my Syrah—is lost in some dark world beyond my reach? Still, I see the gravity in Arion’s eyes, and the uneasy shifting of the council members who now watch me with doubt and fear. With great effort, I force my breathing to slow, though the anger continues to simmer beneath the surface—like molten lava waiting to erupt.

“We have to do something,” I say hoarsely, pulling free from Arion’s grip. My hands still tremble, but I curl them into fists, fighting for control. “We can’t just give up on her.” Arion nods, his expression resolute.

“We won’t leave her behind, Zeth,” he says, his tone carrying the same determination burning inside me. “But we have to be smart. Syrah is strong. She knows how to survive. She’s not the helpless girl she once was.” His words give me a spark of hope—something to cling to amid the chaos inside me. Syrah *is* strong. Stronger than anyone. I know she’ll fight. But I won’t let her fight alone.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to bring her back,” I say, my gaze locking onto Elyndra and the rest of the Council. My words cut through the silence, leaving no room for doubt. “If I have to, I’ll fight Lorecàn myself.” The Council remains silent, trapped in their fear. But it no longer matters to me. Their hesitation will not stop me. No matter how deeply Lorecàn has hidden her. No matter how powerful his magic is. I will find her. I *have* to.



3

SYRAH



blink to take in my surroundings. Where am I? The room feels

strange and cold, the air heavy and unmoving, as if time itself has frozen here. My breathing is uneven when a scent reaches me—citrus and pine. Soft. Subtle. Unmistakable. Zeth. My heart skips as a spark of hope flares inside me. My gaze drifts through the room, searching for a sign, any confirmation that he’s here. Then I hear it—the muted, rhythmic sound of running water, pulling at me, guiding me somewhere. My feet move almost on their own, my body drawn by the scent and the sound. The bathroom door stands ajar. Steam spills out, brushing along my skin. I inhale deeply, my fingers grazing the wood as I push the door open further. And then I freeze. It isn’t Zeth. It’s Oryn. My stomach tightens as confusion crashes over me. He stands beneath the shower, head bowed, hands braced against the wall while thick streams of water run down his body. His eyes are closed, completely surrendered to the warmth and the silence. I know I should leave. I know I shouldn’t be standing here. But my feet are rooted to the floor, my gaze trapped in this unexpected—almost vulnerable—moment. This is wrong. Very wrong. I try to retreat silently, but his voice cuts through the steam, calm and edged with mockery.

“Not joining me, princess?” The words sound like a calculated invitation. Disgust washes over me. I straighten my spine.

“Keep dreaming, Oryn.” I force myself to meet his gaze—only for a heartbeat—before turning sharply and hurrying back into the bedroom, my breath coming fast and uneven. I rush to the door and grab the handle, yanking it down. Nothing. I pull again, harder, my heart hammering, but the door doesn’t budge. With a frustrated exhale, I let my hand fall and look around, searching for another way out. There isn’t

one. Cold fear tightens around my throat. I reach for my magic—try to summon it, to force the door open, to escape—but nothing happens. It’s as if an invisible barrier absorbs everything I touch. Behind me, the shower shuts off. Then footsteps. Slow. Deliberate. Coming closer. My heart pounds, but I clench my fists and force the panic down. I may be trapped—but that doesn’t mean I’ll surrender to fear. Oryn appears in the bathroom doorway, wearing nothing but his trousers, his skin still damp. My gaze flickers over the black tattoos covering his chest—tattoos I don’t recognize. The lines seem to shift, almost alive. For a brief moment, I’m distracted. Then his eyes meet mine. Self-satisfied. Challenging. As if he controls every second of this moment. ...as if he controls *me*.

“Where do you think you’re going, princess?” he asks, his voice smooth, threaded with quiet menace. I swallow my panic and lift my chin, forcing myself to hold his gaze. If I give in to fear, he wins. My thoughts feel tangled, smothered by a suffocating haze, but I steady myself.

“Where are we?” I ask sharply. My voice barely trembles, though it costs me everything to keep it steady. “What did you do?” He looks at me with casual indifference, as if my questions hardly matter.

“We’re in the Dark World, princess,” he says coolly, like he’s stating a simple fact. I stare at him, confused, as he sighs and pulls on a shirt. “It’s Lorecàn’s creation. He put you to sleep and brought you here through a portal.” The Dark World. I repeat the words in my mind. My breath catches as I search my memory. Everything is blurred—the scent of magic, a flash of light, Lorecàn’s cold voice. Then it returns. *My son*. The weight in his voice. The undertone that made my skin crawl even then.

“Lorecàn called you *his son*,” I say. “What did he mean by that?” Oryn’s expression hardens. His jaw tightens, though his eyes never leave mine. For a fraction of a second, it looks as though something cracks—something raw. Then the mask snaps back into place.

“What Lorecàn is to me doesn’t matter,” he says at last, his voice cold and controlled. “In the end, you’ll submit to his plans. Whether you want to or not.”

“Never, Oryn. *Never*.” My voice shakes with fury and revulsion. “You’d have to erase my memory again to stop me from hating you—and even then, I’d still find my way back. Just like last time.” Something flickers in his eyes—not doubt, but interest.

As if my resistance amuses him. His lips curl into a mocking smile, like my words are nothing more than a challenge.

“I’m looking forward to that fight, princess,” he says calmly, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His touch burns against my skin, but I don’t move. I hold my breath, fighting the shiver threatening to betray me as he leans closer. “But you *will* be mine,” he whispers. “And soon.” The words creep into my thoughts like poison. I give him nothing—no fear, no reaction. “Give it a few days, princess.” Then he turns and vanishes in a flash of dark magic. The air seems to freeze where he stood, as if even the room remembers his cold. The silence that follows is unbearable. I sink against the wall, my fingers digging into the stone as I force my breathing to slow. My thoughts race—images and words colliding—but one thing is certain. No matter what he tries. No matter how he manipulates or twists the game— I will never be his. I close my eyes, jaw clenched. This isn’t just *his* game. This is my fight too. He thinks he can break me. Shape me to his will. What he doesn’t understand is that my strength runs deeper than he could ever comprehend. Slowly, my hand opens—and I feel magic stir. Small. Flickering. But alive. Ready to grow.





4

SYRAH

The room feels almost like a challenge. As if the space itself is watching me, waiting for me to show something fragile. But I keep myself firmly in check. whatever they think they'll achieve—it won't happen. I'm stronger than that. How long have I been here? The question gnaws at me. Was I unconscious for hours? Days, perhaps? Everything has been blurred since the moment Lorecàn began speaking those strange words and the world went black. My memories are shattered fragments of magic, Oryn's face, that swirling portal. After that... nothing. I rise slowly and let my gaze drift through the room, searching for something—anything—that might tell me where I am. The walls are smooth gray stone, austere and functional, exactly what you'd expect from a space designed to intimidate rather than comfort. And yet, despite the sparse furnishings, there's a surprising refinement to it. Clean lines. A sense of intention. As if someone actually *lives* here. I turn toward the single window and look out at the strange world they're keeping me in. The sky glows a deep violet, as if it's forever dusk, never quite night. In the distance, jagged mountain peaks rise sharply against the horizon, silhouetted by an ominous haze of stars. Whatever lives in this world, it feels cold. Abandoned. As if hope once took root here—and then withered away. When I turn back into the room, my attention catches on a large chair near the window. The armrests are worn, lightly scuffed, as though someone sits there often—perhaps staring out at that same endless sky. A shiver slides down my spine. I lower myself into the chair and let a casual smile settle on my face. They're expecting a desperate prisoner? Not happening. From now on, I'll show them *exactly* what I want them to see. I pick up the book resting on the armrest and flip through it. The language isn't one I fully understand, but the handwritten

notes—sketches of dragons and creatures I don't recognize—draw me in. It fascinates me. But when I hear the locks slide open, I rise at once, place the book back where it was, and summon a smile. Oryn steps inside. I meet his gaze, unapologetically defiant.

“So, this is it, Oryn?” I ask lightly, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from my sleeve. “This is your idea of winning? Locking me in a room? Stripping me of my magic? I expected more.” His eyes narrow, as if he's deciding whether I'm serious. A faint frown appears—the first crack in his composure.

“I don't think you fully understand your situation, princess,” he says coolly, though I hear the edge of irritation beneath it. I smile lazily, my gaze openly mocking.

“Oh, believe me, Oryn. I understand my situation perfectly.” I stroll toward him, unhurried. “You, on the other hand... I was hoping for a bit more ambition. It seems you're content playing the role of a pawn.” His jaw tightens. I see it—the moment my words hit home.

“A pawn?” he repeats, his voice low, dangerous. “I am no pawn, princess. You have no idea what's at stake. You refuse to see beyond what Zeth and that council dictated to you.” I turn slowly, my expression one of idle curiosity.

“Oh? Then tell me—what exactly does Lorecàn have planned?” My tone is light, almost amused, as if I'm asking for entertainment. Oryn shoots me a sharp look, clearly debating whether to say more. But I know his pride well enough. he *needs* me to see that he's more than what I implied. And that's my opening.

“You'll find out soon enough what our role is,” he says with a smug smile. I catch the excitement in his eyes, the thrill of imagining me put in my place. The door opens again, and several people shuffle inside. My gaze moves over them—until it stops. My heart stutters. Niessa. Oryn grins, arrogant. “I assume you remember Niessa, princess?” he says mockingly. “She'll be preparing you for dinner.” With a casual gesture, a dress appears—deep midnight blue, threaded with silver details. “Lorecàn expects us in an hour.” Before I can respond, he's gone. Niessa's eyes gleam as they meet mine, filled with a mixture of triumph and resentment. She steps closer, her self-satisfied smile sharpened by a clear desire for control. I give her a cool look, though I can't entirely mask my surprise.

“What are *you* doing here?” I ask sharply. Her lips curl into a mocking smile.

“Didn’t expect to see me here, Kynsera?” she says, her voice laced with contempt.

“What do you think you’ll gain from this, Niessa?” I press. “What do *you* get out of helping them?” She arches a brow, clearly amused by my directness.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Her fingers trail over the silver details of the dress, inspecting it idly. “This isn’t just about you. It’s about where *I* belong. I’m more than a woman who runs a dress shop. I’m more than...” Her eyes harden. “...you. You were always the center of everything. The Kynsera. The chosen one. But sometimes you need to understand that not everyone wants to live in your shadow.” A cold glint flashes in her eyes. “Believe whatever you want, Syrah. In the end, it doesn’t matter. Lorecàn and Oryn will see their plans through—with or without you.” She leans closer, her voice low and penetrating. “And I’d rather stand with the conqueror than with the defeated.” She’s enjoying this—every second of it. But then I catch it. Another emotion. Jealousy.

“Jealousy?” I murmur, brow lifting as I study her. “That’s what this is about?”

“I had a future,” she hisses, bitterness seeping into every word. “And you ruined it, princess. You were supposed to marry Oryn. But like always—spoiled and entitled—you had to take everything.” And suddenly, it all makes sense. The hatred. The resentment. Zeth. She can’t stand that he chose *me*. That I took the place she wanted for herself. While I was trapped in the human world, unaware of who I was, she had him. She must have believed that emptiness would last forever—that she could claim that place without resistance. But I’m back. And that changes everything. Incredible—how blind she was. How blind she still is. I offer her a faint smile, as though her words don’t touch me.

“How sad, Niessa. Clinging to something you could never have.” I tilt my head slightly. “But thank you—for confirming that I *am* important.” Her face tightens. Her grip on the dress hardens, knuckles whitening. She steps closer, her eyes cold and threatening.

“Get ready,” she snaps. “Lorecàn has his ways of teaching lessons.” A triumphant smile curves her lips. “And I’ll enjoy every second of it.” I don’t move. I meet her stare without flinching.

“Enjoy your supporting role, Niessa,” I say calmly. “Because I won’t be diminished by someone who’s content with another’s leftovers.” Her expression freezes—but she recovers quickly. She throws me one last sharp look before turning away, her face set as she begins the preparations.



5

ZETH



he days drag on, and with every passing hour, I feel my patience crumble further. Five days now. Five days without answers. Without progress. The restlessness grows—an gnawing emptiness I can’t fill.

“We need to approach this intelligently,” Arion says, his voice calm but weighted with urgency. He sits across from me in the empty training hall, where soft candlelight traces the edges of the room. His gaze stays fixed on me, as if he’s trying to break through my frustration. I pace the floor, my thoughts racing, sharp with anger. Every second feels wasted, as if with each step Syrah is slipping farther away. “This is taking too long, Arion. We should’ve left days ago. It’s obvious the Council isn’t going to lift a finger.” My voice trembles with restrained fury, and I see Arion frown briefly.

“Sit down, Zeth,” he says with a sigh. “Pacing holes into the floor won’t help.” He looks at me steadily, serious but composed. “The Council can’t act. Their foremost duty is to protect the Valley. If they move now, everything they’ve safeguarded would be at risk. They can’t afford it. And besides—we don’t even know where to look. She could be anywhere.” His words land hard, but the helplessness burning in my chest only flares hotter. Waiting here while Syrah is out there, in danger? It’s unthinkable. I force myself into the chair opposite him, though the tension in my body is nearly unbearable. My fists are clenched; I have to fight to keep my anger in check.

“So, what then?” I snap. “What do we do, Arion? Wait until the Council finally decides it suits them? We can’t just abandon Syrah. She’s out there—and who knows

what they're doing to her. If I have to, I'll search for her alone. I've done it before. No one wanted to help then, either." Arion meets my stare, his expression tired but resolute.

"I understand your frustration, Zeth. Believe me—I feel it too. But charging off without a strategy is exactly what Lorecàn wants. He expects us to rush at him in blind rage. And if we do, we lose everything. You can't let your emotions lead you, Zeth. That never ends well." His words cut through my heated thoughts, if only slightly. He's right. Lorecàn is cunning, calculating—any weakness we show, he'll exploit. Still, the idea of sitting here powerless feels unbearable.

"So, what do you suggest?" I ask at last, my voice still low with suppressed anger. Arion leans forward, his gaze intense.

"We have two options. We could search all of Healian—but I doubt she's even in this world anymore." He pauses, weighing his words. "Or we go to Prezzie immediately and warn Syrah's parents. They deserve to know what's happened—and who Oryn truly is." I freeze. Syrah's parents. The thought alone knots my stomach.

"They won't listen," I say finally. "They blame me. To them, I'm the one who abducted her. The one who enchanted her—not Oryn." Arion nods slowly.

"Maybe. But difficult as it is, it might be necessary. Syrah is their daughter. Whatever they think of you doesn't change the fact that they want to protect her. If we approach them carefully, they could become allies instead of obstacles."

"And if they refuse?" My voice comes out harsher than I intend. "What if they lock me up again instead of helping?"

"That's why we need a plan," Arion replies evenly. "A strategy that doesn't leave us entirely dependent on them. But even if they won't help, they may have valuable information. They know more about Lorecàn than anyone—he *is* the king's brother, after all." I swallow. The truth of his words weighs heavily. Approaching Syrah's parents feels like a blade that cuts both ways. If it goes wrong, they could destroy everything we're trying to do. But if it works—

"Alright," I say at last, my voice firm. "We'll try. But only with a solid plan. We need to approach them in a way that *forces* them to listen." He studies me for a moment, gauging my resolve. Then he nods. "We leave as soon as we're ready. But

Zeth—we can’t skype from the Valley. Lorecàn is watching us. If he senses magic, he’ll feel it immediately. And he’ll react.”

“Then we go on foot,” I say without hesitation. He places a hand on my shoulder, his gaze softer than I expect.

“We’ll do this, Zeth. Lorecàn has been playing this game far longer than we have. We have to be careful. One wrong move—and he’ll have you exactly where he wants you. And if that happens, we lose Syrah for good.” His words echo in my mind like an icy warning.

“I know, Arion. But I won’t stand by while Syrah remains in his grasp. We’re bringing her back—no matter the cost.” Arion holds my gaze a moment longer, measuring the depth of my resolve. Then he nods.

“Good. We’ll start by mapping a route. But think carefully about how we approach her parents. That will make all the difference.” I stare at the door of the training hall, the torches along the walls casting a warm glow that stands in stark contrast to the cold settling in my chest.

“We have to do this, Arion. There’s no other choice.” He nods again. And in that moment, the decision is made between us.



6

SYRAH



G

o away, Niessa." I drop onto the bed, arms and legs crossed, deliberately exaggerating my arrogant posture.

"I don't want you here. I'll dress myself—or better yet, I won't dress at all. I'm not about to have a pleasant little dinner with Lorecàn and Oryn." Niessa laughs mockingly, her gaze promising nothing good.

"Do you honestly think you have a choice?" she sneers, laughing harder now, her eyes filled with contempt. "Look around you. Your brave Zeth isn't here to protect you. You'll go to that dinner, you'll marry Oryn—and then I'll be the one comforting Zeth." She turns away smugly, clearly intent on humiliating me further. "You're weak. I don't understand why everyone is so obsessed with you. You're nothing more than a pathetic little girl—just the king's daughter by chance..." Something shifts. A strange, intense energy builds around me. The floor beneath my feet begins to tremble—subtle at first, then stronger, as if the room itself is reacting to my fury. Niessa falls silent. Her confident smile vanishes, replaced by raw fear as she looks around. With every step I take toward her, the trembling intensifies. The lamp in the corner flickers—then shatters. A chill ripples through the room. A voice in my head warns me to hold back. But the anger surges through my veins like a raging river—wild, unrestrained.

"I am not a helpless girl, Niessa," I say, my voice low and icy. "And Zeth..." I smile now. "...you will *never* have him." The door bursts open. Oryn storms into the room, his eyes wide with shock.

“How is this possible?” he murmurs, more to himself than to me. “There are suppression wards on this room. Using magic should be impossible for you. Everyone out,” he snaps, never taking his eyes off me.

“But—she—” Niessa starts, her voice unsteady.

“NOW.” Power floods his command. With a careless flick of his hand, Niessa and the others vanish in a cloud of shadow—as if they were never there at all. I stare, stunned.

“Where did they—” I begin, but Oryn is already moving. He closes the distance in seconds. I try to step back, but he traps me against the cold stone wall, his hands braced on either side of my head. His eyes burn with disbelief—and something else I can’t quite name. His breath brushes my skin as he speaks softly, almost to himself.

“How can you still use your magic?” His gaze searches mine, as if the answer is hidden there. *Don’t give in, Syrah. Don’t let him see you’re afraid.* I force a laugh.

“What’s wrong, Oryn? Didn’t your little plan work?” I shove him away. Clearly surprised, he takes a step back. “Shouldn’t you be eating, Oryn?” I add lightly. “Lorecàn must be waiting for you.” His eyes narrow, irritation flaring.

“*We* are expected,” he says, his voice dark. “So, get dressed, princess—or I’ll do it for you.” I meet his stare, defiant, even as I feel my calm stretching thin.

“I’d like to see you try,” I reply mockingly, keeping my tone light while my heart pounds. His jaw tightens. For a moment, it looks like he might follow through. He steps closer, his hand lifting— But I don’t move. I hold his gaze, unflinching.

“Don’t play games, princess,” he hisses. “This isn’t a request.”

“I’m not afraid of games,” I answer coolly, though a shiver runs down my spine. This is what they want. To break me. To make me small. It won’t work. I turn away calmly, a faint, amused smile on my lips. “What’s the problem, Oryn? Afraid I’ll ruin the evening?” My fingers brush the dress laid out for me—but I make no move to put it on. “You may choose my clothes, Oryn,” I add lightly, “but my will isn’t so easily bent.” He watches me, frustration boiling just beneath the surface. His eyes flash—not only with anger, but confusion. As if he expected me to break. And I didn’t.

“You’re making a grave mistake if you think you can manipulate me,” he says finally, his voice low and dangerous. “You’d do well to remember that no one here has any authority but Lorecàn.” I turn my head slowly, meeting his gaze head-on.

“Then I suppose we’ll find out tonight, won’t we?” His mouth tightens into a thin line.

“Get dressed. I’ll be waiting outside.” He turns to leave but pauses in the doorway. He looks back at me, his eyes glinting with something that almost resembles curiosity. “And if you want to know what he’s planning,” he adds with a mocking smile, “you’d better hurry.” With that, he strides out, shoulders tense with barely contained frustration. The door slams shut behind him. Only then do I release the breath I’ve been holding. And damn it—he’s right. I *do* want to know what they’re planning. What they want from me so badly.