

THE MARKED SOULS

The path of light and darkness

Part 2 Healian -- Series

Written by

CYDER

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HEALIAN- SERIE

(Fantasy)

The lost kynsera – Bound by magic, Driven by fate.

The marked souls – The path of light and darkness

A black and white illustration featuring a dragon perched atop a silhouette of a castle with multiple spires. The dragon is shown in profile, facing left, with its wings spread. The background is a dark, cloudy night sky filled with stars. A large, bright crescent moon is positioned on the left side of the image. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

SOMETIMES IT'S OKAY TO STOP FOR A MOMENT AND
TAKE THE TIME TO BREATHE"

ZETH.

FOREWORD

To all the readers who devoured *The Lost Kynsera* and were so enthusiastic that I immediately started working on its sequel—thank you. Your reactions, messages, and support inspired me to keep building this world and its characters. You gave me the confidence to believe that this story is worth telling.

When I started writing *The Lost Kynsera*, I knew I wanted to create something different from the standard fantasy tale. No clichés, but a world filled with unexpected twists, complex characters, and deep emotions. A story where nothing is as it seems and where every choice carries consequences. My goal was to keep readers on the edge of their seats, and I believe I succeeded.

The Marked Souls is the natural continuation of that adventure. This second installment is not only more intense but also rawer, more emotional, and more magical. Writing it was a unique experience—full of passion and dedication. Knowing how well the first book was received, it felt as if this world continued writing itself. As if Syrah, Zeth, and Oryn refused to let me go, and their story simply had to be told.

What made this journey even more special was the collaboration with the book art. The illustrations truly bring the world to life, making it so much easier for readers to immerse themselves fully in the magic and atmosphere of the story. They are the perfect complement to the words, sparking the imagination even further.

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's a tale that will sweep you away and stay with you long after you've turned the last page.

I wish you all the best as you dive into this second chapter of Syrah's journey. It promises to be an intense story filled with intrigue, sorrow, magic, and passion. Let yourself be carried away—and remember—nothing is as it seems.

Thank you for believing in me and my books.

— Cindy

DICTIONARY

KYNSERA

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

ZONTA

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

ZUANA

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

SKYPEN

A form of magical teleportation that the Fae and Alerians use to move quickly 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.

WĒRVICKEN

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.

HIGH ALERIAN

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.

ALERIA

A half-human, half-Alerian species.

GUARDIANS/BOARD MEMBERS

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 high Fae and Alerians to connect worlds.

COMPANIONS

A unique and rare connection between two souls, which goes beyond ordinary love

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, linked to the heritage magic of the Alerians

DRAECKEN

Older creatures than anything else, they have the ability to transform from dragon form to an Alerian. But never do it again for protection, because they are as good as extinct.

VÍ'LAER AN SYLTHAR E SYLTHARA. VÍ'LAER ORAE EN SERETH.

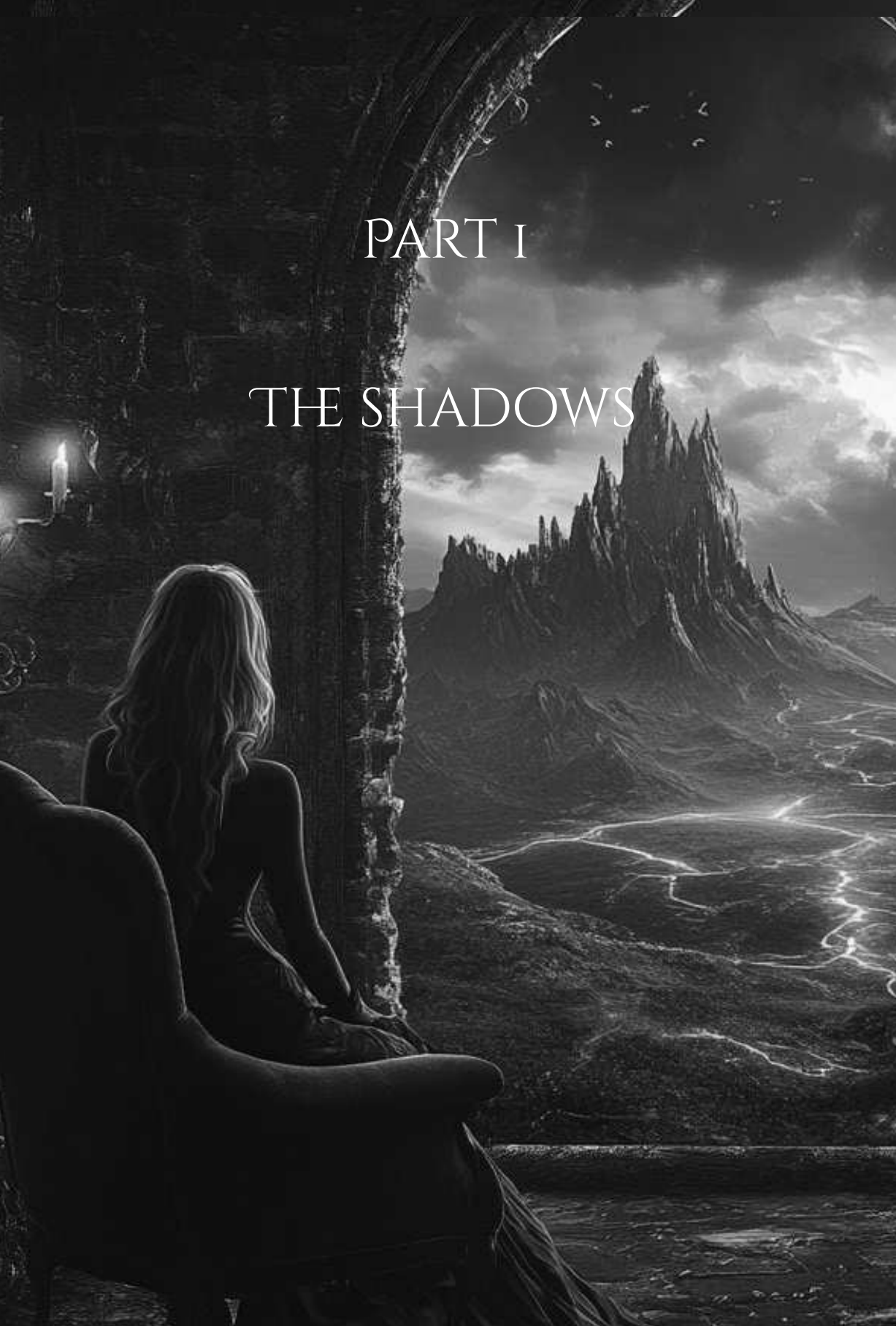
Glory to the Sylthar and Sylthara. Honor to their souls and strength

SYLTHAR'AE VI'KALAE SYLTHARA. KA'RETH OM VARA THAL AE'RAHN

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

PART I

THE SHADOWS



PROLOGUE

ORYN

6 years ago



watch Syrah and Zeth as they stand facing each other, training swords raised.

Zeth grins confidently, his feet firmly planted on the ground, ready to block Syrah's every move. Syrah's eyes gleam with that same determination she always carries. She's fast, agile, as if she already knows exactly what she's going to do.

Our father stands nearby, his gaze fixed intently on them. He nods approvingly when Syrah spins swiftly, dodging 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 a little harder. Why does he always look at Syrah and Zeth like they're the only ones who matter? I want him to see me too—to notice how hard I train, how much I'm capable of.

"Asena," I say, turning to my younger sister. As usual, she's buried in a book, completely lost to the world. Her fingers follow the lines carefully, and I see how her eyes race across the words, as if searching for all the answers within them.

“Do you want to practice with me?” I ask, my voice softer so I don’t startle her. She looks up from her book. “No, Oryn... I’m not really into that,” she replies quietly. Her voice trembles slightly, and her gaze flickers toward our father. He remains focused entirely on Syrah and Zeth, as if we don’t exist. I notice the way she glances at him, almost afraid he might scold her for preferring books over fighting or magic. But Father doesn’t seem to notice—his attention stays fixed on the training session.

“Asena,” I say again, even softer this time, 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, smart, always ready to do something remarkable.”

She looks up at me, eyes wide and surprised, as though she isn’t sure if I truly mean it. But then, slowly, a smile spreads across her face—a soft, genuine smile that lights up her entire expression. She clutches the book closer to her chest, like it’s part of her. “Books... they give me peace, Oryn. They let me get lost without doing anything wrong.”

I nod, my voice warm and sincere. “And that’s your strength, Asena. You discover the world in your own way, and that makes you special. Being strong isn’t just about fighting; it’s about knowing, understanding, and believing in what you can do.” Her smile grows a little wider, her shoulders relaxing. “Thank you, Oryn,” she whispers, her voice almost fragile. “Always,” I say, giving her shoulder a brief, reassuring squeeze. “You’re exactly who you’re meant to be. And I’m sure one day, everyone will see that—just like I do.”

Syrah notices us and reaches a hand out to me. “I’ll practice with you, Oryn,” she says kindly, her smile genuine. My cheeks grow warm. She’s really looking at me—not like when she trains with Zeth—but it’s a start.

“Okay,” I reply, my voice softer than I intended. I catch Asena grinning before I turn to face Syrah. I want to show her I’m good—just as good as Zeth. Maybe even better. We start slowly, but soon I realize how sharp Syrah’s movements are. Her eyes track my every move, countering my attacks with ease. She’s fast, but I can keep up. I feel strong, focused—until I hear Father’s voice. “Watch out, Syrah! He’s coming from the right!” he shouts.

Syrah reacts immediately, dodging my strike with a fluid motion before pinning me to the ground in one swift move. Before I know it, she’s standing above me, her eyes bright with determination. Our gazes lock, and my heart skips a beat. She’s different from anyone I’ve ever known—wild, determined, impossible to ignore. There’s something about her that draws me in, something I barely dare to acknowledge. As she stands there, fire burning in her eyes, I know one thing for sure:

One day, she’ll be mine.

Her face breaks into a warm, genuine smile, and for a moment, the whole world seems to stop. “Well done, Oryn,” she says, her voice filled with honest kindness. “You’re really strong!” I nod, but my stomach feels heavy and unsettled. I want her to keep looking at me like that—with the same admiration and respect she always shows Zeth.

I want Father to look at me the way he looks at Zeth—filled with pride and approval. But all I feel is that I’m falling short. Like there’s something I’m missing—something they both have. Zeth steps up beside us, grinning. “Not bad, Oryn. But you’ll have to be faster if you want to keep up with Syrah.”

He reaches out and helps Syrah to her feet, ending the moment between us in an instant. His words sting, and I force myself not to look at him. Syrah smiles at him—a smile that feels like it’s meant just for Zeth. As if he’s said something only

the two of them share. It's always Zeth. Zeth who draws her attention. Zeth who earns Father's approval.

One day, I'll be the one standing at the front.

I promise myself that.

One day, I'll show them what I'm capable of.

And then—then they'll see that I'm just as good as Zeth.

Maybe even better.

I

SYRAH



Let. Me. Go!"

I twist in his grip, but Oryn doesn't yield an inch. His fingers clamp around my wrist like iron claws, as if he never intends to let me go. A shiver runs down my spine as he leans in closer.

Behind us, it churns—a dark vortex of magic swallowing the light, leaving only shadows behind. The portal. Ominous. Foreboding. I'm certain this must be the gateway Zeth and Elyndra spoke of. A passage to another world.

"Shh, princess," he whispers, a grin curling his lips, making my skin crawl. "You don't want to make this any worse than it already is." His breath brushes against my ear—cold and threatening.

My heart pounds in my chest. How did everything go so wrong, so fast? Just yesterday, I was surrounded by those I trusted, safe in the Valley. But now, trapped in his grasp, that world feels like a distant memory.

"You've been so naïve, Syrah." His voice is soft, almost mocking, and I feel anger bubbling up inside me. "Did you really think you could defeat me? That you were safe—with him? You, the core of Haelian..."

He laughs, a low, poisonous sound seeping through my veins.

My jaw tightens. “You have no idea what I’m capable of,” I hiss, my voice low and threatening. “I’ll fight you to my last breath, Oryn. I’m not giving up without a fight.”

His eyes gleam—a sick, twisted glint I’ve seen before. “Oh, I’m counting on it, princess. But it doesn’t matter how hard you fight—I’ll always find you. Because we’re destined to be together, Syrah. Whether you believe it or not.”

A cold chill creeps through me. I force myself to meet his gaze, refusing to cower beneath the darkness radiating from him. “You’ve lost my trust, Oryn. And you’ll never get it back.”

His grip on my wrist tightens, a sharp pain shooting up my arm. I bite back a cry. “Trust,” he scoffs, smiling coldly. “What an empty promise. Power is what matters in this world, Syrah. And I’m the only one who knows how to wield it.”

Before I can respond, another voice fills the space—dark, commanding, like thunder rolling through my bones.

“Oryn. Enough.”

I gasp as Lorecàn appears—an imposing silhouette almost dissolving into the shadows. His movements are fluid, almost inhuman, as he approaches.

Oryn keeps his hold on me, but I feel his attention shift toward the man standing before us.

Lorecàn stops, his gaze locking onto mine. Slowly, he reaches out. His fingers grip my face—cold and unyielding—forcing me to look at him. His eyes are deep pools of swirling darkness.

“You see, princess,” he murmurs, satisfaction dripping from his voice.

“I’ve got you now. Your pathetic attempts to escape were all in vain.”

My stomach turns. His touch feels like it’s draining all the light from the world. But somewhere deep inside, a small flame ignites.

With the last ounce of strength I have left, I spit in his face, my gaze unwavering.

Lorecàn freezes. Slowly, he pulls back, wiping the spit from his cheek with a single finger. His smile fades. His eyes change. The cold, calculating glint turns darker. More dangerous.

“That,” he says with terrifying calm, “was a mistake.”

My heart slams against my ribs. My body tenses like a drawn bow. I search for my magic—feel it coursing through my veins—a warmth fighting against his cold presence. I have to do something. Now.

A final surge of determination floods me, and I try to summon my magic.

But then Lorecàn begins to speak. His voice is low. Rhythmic. Filled with words I don’t understand. It feels like an invisible hand wraps around my throat, draining my strength. My legs tremble. The ground beneath my feet slips away. The world dims. Darkness closes in, like I’m falling into an abyss. The last thing I see is Lorecàn’s icy smile—a memory searing itself into my mind—before everything goes black.

2

ZETH



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

I storm toward the council, who stand frozen in shock by what just happened. It feels as if time itself has stopped, as if no one realizes that Syrah was just taken from us right before our eyes.

The silence in the hall weighs heavily on my chest. “Do something! Syrah was taken right in front of us, and you’re doing nothing!”

My voice trembles with rage and desperation. It feels like my words are crashing against a wall of stone. No one moves. No one responds.

Elyndra stares at me, her eyes wide with shock. She slowly shakes her head, her gaze filled with a mix of fear and resignation. I see the glimmer of tears in her eyes, though she refuses to let them fall. “We... we can’t do anything... Lorecàn used dark magic...”

Her voice sounds broken, as if she can hardly believe her own words. She glances briefly at the other council members, who look just as confused and defeated. “We can’t feel her anymore... She’s no longer in this world, Zeth. We’ve lost her.” Her words hit me like a punch to the gut.

I try to reach her, try to connect with her through the bond, but just like before, there's nothing. Only emptiness—so vast it hurts. It feels like a part of me has been ripped away.

The ground beneath my feet feels as if it's crumbling. Everything I've ever known, everything I've ever loved, torn away in an instant.

Desperation and rage surge through me. Before I realize it, I'm destroying everything in sight. Chairs, vases—anything within reach shatters beneath my hands. The sound of splintering wood and crashing glass fills the hall.

I scream. I roar. My voice echoes through the council chamber like that of a wounded animal searching for its lost soul. "Zeth!"

A strong hand clamps down on my shoulder. I turn sharply, my breath ragged, my eyes wild. My gaze locks onto Arion's. His expression remains steady—stern, but not without sorrow.

"Calm yourself, Zeth," he says, his tone firm yet concerned. "We will find her. No matter what Lorecàn has done. But right now, you need to get control of yourself. If you don't, the council will turn against you."

His words strike me as a final warning.

I try to let them sink in, but it feels as though everything inside me is fracturing. How am I supposed to stay calm when Syrah—my Syrah—is lost in a world of darkness?

Still, I see the seriousness in Arion's eyes. I hear the uncertain shuffling of the council members who now watch me with wary eyes.

With great effort, I force myself to slow my breathing. But the rage still simmers beneath the surface—like lava waiting to erupt.

“We have to do something,” I say through gritted teeth, pulling away from Arion. My hands still tremble, but I clench them into fists to regain control. “We can’t just give up on her.” Arion nods, his gaze steely with determination. “We won’t abandon her, Zeth.”

There’s a promise in his voice—a vow as resolute as my own. “But we have to be smart about this. Syrah is strong. She can handle herself. She’s not the helpless girl she used to be.”

His words spark a flicker of hope within me—a lifeline in the suffocating rage. 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 vow, turning my gaze to Elyndra and the rest of the council. My voice cuts through the silence—sharp and unyielding. “I’ll fight Lorecàn himself if I have to.”

The council remains silent, caught in their own fears. But I don’t care. Their doubts won’t stop me. No matter how deep Lorecàn hides her, no matter how powerful his magic is—I will find her. I must find her.

3

SYRAH



blink, trying to take in my surroundings.

The room feels strange and cold. The air hangs still, as if time itself has frozen here. My breath comes in shallow bursts, unsteady, until a scent drifts toward me—citrus and pine. Soft. Subtle. Unmistakable. Zeth.

My heart skips a beat, hope sparking in my chest. My gaze sweeps across the room, searching for a sign, anything to confirm that he's here. But there's nothing. Only silence and the steady rhythm of my breathing.

Then I hear it—the sound of running water. Dull and rhythmic, like a distant call, drawing me in. My feet move almost instinctively, pulled forward by the scent and the sound. The bathroom door stands ajar, a faint glow of steam slipping through the gap and brushing against my skin. I inhale deeply, fingers grazing the wood as I push the door open.

But the moment I step inside, I freeze. It's not Zeth. It's Oryn. My stomach knots, a wave of confusion crashing over me. He stands beneath the shower, head bowed, hands pressed firmly against the wall as water streams down his body. His eyes are

closed. He looks lost in the warmth and silence of the water, surrendering to it completely.

I know I should leave—I need to leave. But my feet refuse to move, my gaze locked on this unexpected, almost vulnerable moment.

This is wrong. So very wrong. I force myself to step back, hoping to retreat unnoticed. But his voice cuts through the silence—calm, smooth, and dripping with that familiar, mocking tone. “Not joining me, princess?”

The words slither through the air like a poisonous invitation. Disgust surges through me. I straighten my back, forcing steel into my voice. “Keep dreaming, Oryn.” I meet his gaze for the briefest moment before turning sharply and marching back into the bedroom. My breath stutters in my chest, uneven and ragged. Reaching the door, I grab the handle and pull. It doesn’t budge. My heart thunders in my ears. I pull harder, desperation creeping into my movements. Still, the door won’t move.

Frustration burns in my throat as I let my hand drop. I scan the room, searching for another way out. But there isn’t one. Panic curls its fingers around my neck. My magic. I reach for it, summoning the power I know should be there, ready to force the door open, to break free. But nothing happens. It’s as if an invisible barrier is devouring everything. The sound of the water stops. Footsteps follow. Slow. Confident. Measured. Each one draws closer. My heart pounds against my ribs. I clench my fists, forcing the panic down. I may be trapped, but I will not surrender. I refuse to let him see fear in my eyes.

Oryn appears in the doorway, dressed in nothing but his pants, his skin still glistening from the shower. My gaze flickers, against my will, to the black tattoos covering his chest—strange symbols I don’t recognize. The markings seem to move, shifting subtly as though they’re alive.

For a moment, I'm caught off guard. But then our eyes meet. His gaze is steady, self-satisfied. As if he controls every moment—as if he controls me. “Where do you think you’re going, princess?” he asks, voice low and taunting, laced with quiet threat. I swallow hard, lifting my chin. I force myself to meet his eyes. If I show fear, he wins. The air feels heavier now, thick with something oppressive. My mind races for a plan, for an answer.

“Where are we?” I snap, my voice sharper than I feel. “What have you done?” He leans casually against the doorframe, his expression unreadable. “We’re in the Dark Realm, Syrah.” The words drop like stones into the air between us. “Lorecàn’s creation. He put you to sleep and brought you here through the portal.” The Dark Realm. The phrase echoes in my head. My breath catches as broken memories surge forward—faint flashes of light, the scent of magic, Lorecàn’s cold voice. “My son.”

The memory stabs into me with renewed clarity. Lorecàn’s voice, heavier than I’ve ever heard it, laced with something I couldn’t name at the time. I narrow my eyes. “Lorecàn called you ‘his son.’ What did he mean by that?” For the briefest moment, something flickers in Oryn’s gaze. Not hesitation, but something that nearly cracks the mask he wears. His jaw tightens. The room seems to still.

But then it’s gone. His face hardens again, cold and untouchable. “What Lorecàn means to me doesn’t matter,” he says flatly. “In the end, you’ll accept his plans—whether you want to or not.” “Never.” The word leaves me like a blade, sharp and certain. “NEVER,” I repeat, letting every ounce of defiance bleed into my voice. “You’d have to wipe my memory again to make me forget why I hate you. But even then, I’d find my way back—just like last time.”

A flicker of something crosses his face. Not doubt—amusement. As though my resistance only entertains him. He steps closer. Slowly. Deliberately. “I look forward to that fight, princess.” Before I can react, he reaches out and brushes a loose

strand of hair behind my ear. His touch burns like fire against my skin. But I stand my ground, breath held, refusing to flinch.

He leans in. His voice drops, a whisper brushing against my ear. “But you will be mine... soon.” The words slip into my mind like poison, but I show nothing. No fear. No weakness. He studies me for a moment longer, lips curling in a faint, knowing smirk. “Just a few more days, princess.” And then, without warning, he vanishes in a flicker of dark magic.

The air chills where he stood, as though the room itself can’t forget his presence. Silence crashes in, deafening and suffocating. I collapse against the cold stone wall, fingers digging into the unyielding surface. My breaths come fast and shallow. My thoughts race—frantic and tangled. But through the haze, one truth remains clear: No matter what he tries, no matter how he manipulates or threatens—I will never be his.

My jaw tightens. This isn’t just his game. This is my battle. He thinks he can break me. That he can shape me to his will. But what he doesn’t understand is that my strength runs far deeper than he could ever imagine. Slowly, I lift my hand. A faint spark of magic dances across my palm. Small. Weak. But there. Ready to grow..



4

SYRAH



he room feels almost like a challenge.

It's as if the space itself is watching me, waiting for me to show weakness. But I won't. 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 a few hours? Days? Everything is hazy since Lorecàn spoke those strange words and the darkness swallowed me. My memories are shattered—fragments of magic, Oryn's face, and that swirling portal. After that... nothing.

Slowly, I rise to my feet and let my gaze sweep across the room, searching for something—anything—that might tell me where I am.

The walls are smooth, gray stone. Cold. Bare. Functional. Designed to intimidate rather than comfort. Yet despite the minimal furnishings, there's something refined about the space—elegant lines, subtle details that suggest someone actually lived here.

I turn toward the only window and stare at the strange world beyond. The sky glows with a dark violet hue, caught in perpetual twilight—never fully night, never truly day. In the distance, jagged mountain peaks rise, sharp and foreboding against the heavens, illuminated by an ominous nebula of stars. Whatever lives here feels cold and abandoned. As if hope once tried to take root in this place—but failed.

Turning back to the room, my eyes linger on a large chair by the window. The armrests show signs of wear, as if someone spent hours sitting there, staring at the endless sky. A shiver crawls down my spine.

Slowly, I sink into the chair, a lazy smile playing on my lips. They expect a desperate prisoner? Let them. I'll show them exactly what I want them to see. My fingers brush over a book resting on the armrest. I pick it up and flip through its pages. The language is unfamiliar, the script twisting and strange. Handwritten notes fill the margins, accompanied by sketches of dragons and creatures I don't recognize. It pulls me in—fascinating and mysterious.

But then I hear it. The door's locks disengage. I close the book and set it aside, a practiced smile curling my lips as I stand. Oryn steps into the room. I meet his gaze with a look that's calm—challenging.

“So, this is it, Oryn?” I say lightly, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from my sleeve. “Is this your idea of winning? Locking me in a room? Stripping me of my magic? Honestly, I expected more from you.”

His eyes narrow. For a moment, I see a crease in his brow—the first crack in his perfect composure.

“I don't think you fully understand your situation, princess,” he says coolly. But there's a flicker of irritation in his voice.

I smile, slow and easy, letting mockery drip from every word. “Oh, believe me, Oryn. I understand perfectly.” I walk toward him, unhurried and casual. “You, on the other hand... I expected more ambition. But it seems you’re satisfied playing the role of a pawn.” His jaw tightens. My words hit their mark.

He takes a step closer, posture challenging, but I see it—the slip in his control. “Pawn?” he repeats, his voice low and dangerous. “I’m no pawn, princess. You have no idea what’s at stake. You refuse to see beyond what Zeth and that council have told you.”

I turn away, my expression indifferent. “Oh? Then tell me—what exactly does Lorecàn have planned?” My voice remains light, teasing—like I’m asking for entertainment rather than answers.

Oryn’s eyes narrow. He hesitates. I can see him weighing his options. But I know him well enough to understand his pride won’t let him stay silent. And that’s exactly what I’m counting on.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he says finally, a smug smile curling his lips. But there it is again—that flicker of excitement in his eyes. He likes the idea of watching me fall. The door opens again. I glance over my shoulder as several figures step into the room. My gaze flickers over them—until it lands on her. My breath catches. Niessa.

Oryn’s grin widens. Arrogant. Mocking. “I assume you remember Niessa, princess?” he says, watching me carefully. “She’s here to help you get ready for dinner.” With a casual flick of his hand, a gown materializes. Midnight blue, adorned with silver embroidery. “Lorecàn expects us in an hour.”

And just like that, he’s gone. Niessa steps forward, her gaze locking onto mine. Her eyes gleam—triumph, bitterness, and something else I can’t quite place. I hold her stare, cold and unflinching. But I can’t hide the edge in my voice when I

“What are you doing here?” Her lips curl into a smirk. “Oh? Didn’t expect to see me here, kynsera?” Her voice drips with mockery. “What do you hope to gain from this?” I demand. “What did they promise you?” Niessa raises an eyebrow, amused. She lets her fingers trail over the silver embroidery of the gown, pretending to inspect it.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Her voice softens, but there’s no warmth. Only venom. “This isn’t just about you. It’s about where I belong. I’m more than a shopkeeper. I’m more than... you. You’ve always been the center of everything. The Kynsera. The chosen one. But some of us? We get tired of living in someone else’s shadow.” Her eyes glint with something sharp. Cold.

“Believe what you want, Syrah. But it won’t matter. Lorecàn and Oryn will see their plans through—whether you agree or not.” She leans closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “And when that happens, I’d rather stand with the conqueror than the loser.” The satisfaction on her face is clear. She’s enjoying this. But then I see it—just for a moment—a flicker of something raw beneath her smug smile. Jealousy. “Jealousy?” I whisper, arching a brow. “That’s what this is about?”

Her face hardens. “I had a purpose,” she hisses, bitterness dripping from every word. “And you ruined it, princess. You were supposed to marry Oryn. But you—like the spoiled child you’ve always been—had to take everything for yourself.”

And suddenly, it all clicks. The resentment. The bitterness. The hatred. It’s all about Zeth. She couldn’t stand that I was the one he chose—that I took the place she believed belonged to her. The puzzle finally comes together.

All this time, while I was trapped in the human world, unaware of who I was, she had him. She must have believed the emptiness I left behind would remain. But I’m back. And everything has changed. A slow smile curves my lips. “How pathetic,” I say lightly, as though her words mean nothing.

“Holding onto something you never had. But thank you, Niessa, for confirming what I already knew.” Her face twists, her grip tightening on the gown until her knuckles turn white. She steps closer. Her eyes shine cold and sharp. “Get ready,” she snaps. “Lorecàn has his ways of teaching lessons.”

Her smile returns—triumphant and cruel. “And I’ll enjoy every second of it.” I meet her gaze steadily. Unflinching. “Enjoy your supporting role, Niessa,” I say calmly. “Because I won’t be brought down by someone who’s satisfied with another’s leftovers.” Her face freezes.

But she recovers quickly, turning away with a final, sharp glare. As she begins her preparations in silence, I watch her closely. Not just an enemy. But someone lost in her own bitterness. And I will never let that define me. Not now. Not ever.

5

ZETH



he days slip by, each hour eroding my patience further.

Five days. Five days without answers, without progress. The restlessness grows—an empty ache gnawing at me, impossible to ignore.

“We need to approach this wisely,” Arion says, his voice calm but filled with gravity.

He sits across from me in the empty training hall, where the soft glow of candlelight flickers along the edges of the room. His gaze stays fixed on me, as if he’s trying to break through my frustration.

I pace the room, unable to still my racing thoughts. Every second feels like wasted time, every breath a reminder that Syrah drifts further from me with each moment that passes.

“It’s taking too long, Arion. We should have left days ago. It’s clear the council won’t lift a finger.”

My voice trembles with barely contained fury. Arion's brow furrows slightly in response.

"Sit down, Zeth," he sighs. "Pacing won't solve anything."

I hesitate before sinking into the chair opposite him, though tension coils in my muscles, begging for release. My fists clench on my knees.

"The council can't help us," Arion continues. "Their priority is protecting the Valley. If they make a move now, everything could be for nothing. They can't afford that risk. Besides, we don't even know where to start looking. She could be anywhere."

His words hit their mark, but the helplessness burning in my chest only grows hotter. Sitting here, doing nothing, while Syrah is out there—alone, in danger—unthinkable.

"And what then?" I snap. "What do you suggest? Waiting until the council decides it suits them? We can't just leave her out there. Who knows what they're doing to her? If I have to search alone, so be it. I've done it before—when no one else would help."

Arion's sharp gaze meets mine. His expression is tired but resolute.

"I understand your frustration, Zeth. Believe me, I feel it too. But charging in without a plan is exactly what Lorecàn expects. He wants us to come for him in a blind rage. If we do, we'll lose. You can't let your emotions lead you—it never ends well."

His words pull me back from the brink, though the fire inside me still burns. He's right. Lorecàn is cunning—every weakness we show, he'll exploit. But the thought of sitting here, powerless... it still feels wrong.

“So what’s your plan?” I ask at last, my voice still low with anger.

Arion leans forward, his gaze steady.

“We have two choices. We could search all of Haelian, but I doubt she’s still in this world.” He pauses, considering his next words carefully. “Or we go straight to Prezzie and warn Syrah’s parents. They have a right to know what’s happened to her—and who Oryn truly is.”

His words hit harder than I expect.

Syrah’s parents.

The thought of them twists something deep inside me.

“They won’t listen,” I say finally, the bitterness clear in my tone. “They’ll blame me. To them, I’m the one who took her. The one who bewitched her. Not Oryn.”

“Maybe,” Arion concedes. “But no matter how difficult it is, it might be necessary. She’s their daughter. Whatever they think of you, that won’t change. If we approach them the right way, they could become allies instead of obstacles.”

“And if they refuse?” My voice rises before I can stop it. “What if they try to lock me away again instead of helping?”

“That’s why we need a plan,” Arion replies, calm as ever. “A strategy that doesn’t leave us relying entirely on them. Even if they won’t help, they might know something. They understand Lorecàn better than anyone—he is the king’s brother, after all.”

I swallow hard. The weight of his words settles heavily on my shoulders.

Approaching Syrah's parents feels like walking a blade's edge. If it goes wrong, they could ruin everything we're trying to do. But if it works...

"Fine," I say, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me. "We'll try it. But only with a solid plan. We need to approach them in a way that forces them to listen." Arion watches me for a moment, as if gauging how certain I am. Then he nods.

"We leave as soon as we're ready. But Zeth—" His voice softens slightly. "We can't use magic from the Valley. Lorecàn is watching. The moment we use it, he'll sense it. He'll react." "Then we go on foot," I say without hesitation. Arion places a hand on my shoulder, his gaze unexpectedly gentle.

"We'll get her back, Zeth. But we have to be careful. Lorecàn's been playing this game a lot longer than we have. One wrong move, and he'll have you exactly where he wants you. If that happens... we'll lose Syrah for good."

His words echo in my mind—cold and absolute. "I know," I murmur. "But I won't stand by while Syrah remains in his grasp. We will get her back. Whatever it takes."

Arion holds my gaze for a long moment, as if measuring the depth of my resolve. Finally, he nods. "Good. We'll map out a route. But think carefully about how we approach her parents. That's what will make the difference." I stare at the door of the training hall. The torchlight flickers across the stone walls, casting warmth that feels far too distant from the chill nesting in my chest. "We have to do this, Arion. There's no other choice." He nods again. And in that moment, a silent decision passes between us. The plan was set. No turning back now.

6

SYRAH

et out, Niessa.”

I drop onto the bed, arms and legs crossed, fully aware of the arrogant posture I’m displaying. “I don’t want you here. I’ll dress myself—or better yet, I’ll just sit right here. I’m not joining some cozy dinner with Lorecàn and Oryn.”

Niessa laughs, the sound sharp and mocking. Her gaze meets mine, dark with promise—none of it good.

“Do you really think you have a choice?” she sneers, stepping closer with a smirk. “Take a good look around. Your precious Zeth isn’t here to protect you. You will attend that dinner, you will marry Oryn, and then—” she turns away with a satisfied grin, “—then I’ll be there to comfort Zeth.”

Her voice drips with smug confidence, each word meant to wound.

“You’re weak. I don’t understand why everyone’s so obsessed with you. You’re nothing but a pathetic girl—lucky enough to be born the daughter of a king...”

But then, something shifts. A strange, intense energy builds around me. The floor beneath my feet begins to tremble—faint at first, but growing stronger with each passing second. It’s subtle, almost unnoticeable, but the air thickens, charged with something powerful.

Niessa stops mid-sentence. Her smile falters. Her gaze darts around the room as the trembling intensifies. The lamp in the corner flickers, a soft hum rising in the air before the glass shatters with a sharp crack. The room feels alive—responding to me, echoing my fury.

I take a step forward. The trembling worsens. A voice inside my head warns me to control it. But the rage flows freely, a river of power rushing through my veins—untamed, unstoppable.

“I’m not some helpless girl, Niessa.” My voice is cold, quiet. Deadly. I smile. Slow. Icy. “And Zeth?” I step even closer. “You’ll never have him.” The door bursts open with a deafening crash.

Oryn storms inside, his eyes wide with shock. “How—how is this possible?” The words slip from his lips in disbelief, as if spoken to himself. “There are wards on this room... You shouldn’t be able to use magic.” His gaze locks onto mine. Hard. Searching. “Everyone. Out.” His voice is sharp, commanding. “But... she—” Niessa stammers, her voice suddenly small. “Now!”

With a single, dismissive wave of his hand, Niessa and the others vanish—swallowed by a swirling mist of shadows, leaving no trace they were ever there. I blink, startled by how effortlessly he did it. “Where did they...?” I begin, but Oryn is already moving.

He crosses the distance between us in a heartbeat, faster than I can react. His hands slam against the wall on either side of my head, trapping me between his arms.

The cold stone presses against my back. His breath brushes my skin. Close. Too close.

His eyes burn into mine, flickering with emotions I can't quite read—shock, curiosity, and something darker. “How?” he whispers, more to himself than to me. He searches my face as if the answers are written there. Don't back down. Don't show fear. I force a smile onto my face.

“Something wrong, Oryn? Is your little plan not working?” I shove him back, harder than I thought I could. Surprise flickers across his face, and he steps away—just a little. “Shouldn't you be getting ready for dinner?” I taunt, brushing imaginary dust from my sleeve. “I'm sure Lorecàn is waiting.” His eyes narrow again. The irritation returns—sharper now, burning just beneath the surface.

“We are expected there,” he growls. “So get dressed, princess. Or I'll do it for you.” My gaze meets his, steady and unyielding. “I'd like to see you try.” The words leave my lips light and airy, but my heart hammers against my ribs. Oryn's eyes darken. His jaw tightens, fingers curling as though he's weighing the threat.

He steps closer, hand outstretched. But I stand tall. Unmoving. My eyes locked on his. “Don't play games, princess,” he hisses. “This isn't a request.” “I'm not afraid to play.” A shiver runs down my spine, but I don't let it show.

This is what they want—to break me. To see me cower. But I won't. I turn away from him slowly, a smile tugging at my lips. “What's wrong, Oryn? Afraid I'll ruin your evening?” I let my fingers brush over the gown laid out for me—midnight blue with shimmering silver details—but I don't move to pick it up. “You might be able to choose my clothes, Oryn. But my will?” I glance back at him.

“That's not so easily broken.” Frustration flashes across his face, sharp and unguarded. His gaze hardens, eyes glittering with something that could be confusion—or something darker.

“You’re making a mistake if you think you can manipulate me,” he says at last, voice low and dangerous. “This isn’t your choice.” I lift my chin, unflinching. “Then I guess we’ll find out tonight, won’t we?” His mouth tightens into a thin line. He holds my gaze for a moment longer before turning sharply toward the door. But just before he steps out, he pauses. Glances over his shoulder.

His eyes glint with something new—curiosity? “And if you want to know what he’s planning...” His lips curl into a smirk. “You’d better hurry.” With that, he’s gone. The door slams shut behind him with a sharp finality. Only when the echoes fade do I finally let out the breath I’ve been holding.

7

ZETH



e have to try one more time.

If we can convince the council, we won't have to involve Syrah's parents—a step that would only complicate everything.

"Elyndra, you have to help her," I say firmly, my voice low, laced with urgency. My gaze searches hers for any sign of understanding, any glimmer of hope that this can still be resolved without escalation.

But Elyndra doesn't meet my eyes. Instead, her gaze remains fixed on the table in front of her, as if the answers she refuses to speak lie hidden there.

"Zeth," she begins softly, "we understand your desperation. Truly. But our priority is protecting the dragons, the skylio, and the last of the Alerians. We can't risk Lorecàn finding them. If he does, he'll destroy them all. He already knows about the Valley. That alone is a risk. Syrah wouldn't want that."

Her words hit harder than any blade could. "Syrah fought for you," I snap, my voice trembling with rage. "Even though she wasn't fully recovered, she was willing to give everything for you. And now, when she needs you—"

I stop abruptly, turning away. I can't bring myself to finish the sentence.

When I finally look back, Elyndra's expression has softened. Her voice drops, barely more than a whisper, as if sharing a secret she isn't ready to face.

"I'm sorry, Zeth. But as long as Syrah is in Lorecàn's hands, we can't intervene. The longer we delay, the better. The balance between our worlds is too fragile."

She glances briefly at the other council members.

One of them—an older man with silver-gray eyes—seems as though he wants to speak. But he doesn't. He remains silent, watching.

Something shifts inside me. "What are you hiding?" The question escapes before I can stop it. It cuts through the room, sharp and sudden. Silence follows—heavy, suffocating. Elyndra's eyes flicker to the silver-eyed councilor for a heartbeat, and in that moment, I know.

They're holding something back. "We've told you everything you need to know," she says eventually. Her voice is cold, distant. But her eyes betray her. I stare at her for a long moment, my jaw clenched so tightly it aches. "I see." I nod slowly.

"You won't help her because something else matters more to you than Syrah's life." No one answers. The only sound in the chamber is the faint crackle of torches lining the walls. I let my gaze linger on each of them—these so-called protectors—before turning away. The indignation burns in my chest like fire. But worse than that—worse than the anger—is the cold, sinking weight of despair. Syrah is out there. Alone. And the ones who should have protected her have turned their backs.

Outside, I find Arion waiting. He leans against one of the stone pillars near the council chamber's entrance, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the ground. When he sees