

Praise for *The Whisperer's Wish*

Perfect for fans of *The Hunger Games*, readers will fall in love with this creative, vibrant, and compelling masterpiece. The mystery and romance are perfectly balanced throughout this fantastical read. *The Whisperer's Wish* keeps you guessing until the end. I highly recommend this book for anyone looking for a thrilling escape into the realm of magic.

— Tamara Grantham, bestselling fantasy author

THE WHISPERER'S
WISH

A CROWN. A CONSPIRATOR.
A RACE FOR THE CURE.

JANILISE LLOYD



Copyright © 2023 by Janilise Lloyd

Published by Expanse Books, an imprint of
Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
www.ScriveningsPress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy and recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-278-5

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-279-2

Editors: Erin R. Howard and K. Banks

Laurelin with Pygsmys Illustration by Chicken Doodle.

Map Illustration by Eric Dotseth.

Cover by Linda Fulkerson, bookmarketinggraphics.com

All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

*To my brothers, Spencer and McKay.
Thanks for all you have taught me.*

Livon



Amare

Hillsborough ★

The meo

Everark ★

The Mystic R

Lingua

Pygmy Pine Lake

Meadow ★

Aremia ★

The Shifting Tropics

Albia

Creo





Chapter One



As I crept down the pitch-black hallway, my toe caught on the uneven carpet in front of the bathroom door. I stumbled forward, bracing against the doorframe to stay upright. A hundred bleary-eyed, midnight trips to the toilet wasted in an instant. I'd been so confident I could walk this route in my sleep.

I crossed the short distance to Pippin's bedroom door and peered through the inch-wide crack. A sliver of moonlight fell over his sleeping body. The knot in my chest loosened a notch as I saw his green quilt rise and fall with each breath. I shouldn't have been surprised he slept through the noise. Lately, Pippin was nearly impossible to wake.

The doctor said that was to be expected as he neared the end.

The knot tightened once more.

Tonight, I'd cross a line that could not be redrawn, and it was all for Pippin. His freckled face and green eyes filled my mind, though it was the younger version, before cancer sucked him dry. I kissed my four fingers and pressed them to his door. "Love you, little brother," I whispered.

I tip-toed down the stairs, hoping not to wake Mom and

Dad. As I rounded the corner, my jacket caught on a chisel Dad had left on the kitchen table. It clattered against the checker-tiled floor. I flinched but scampered forward anyway, breathing a sigh of relief when I reached the back door.

Exiting the house felt like stepping out of my own body. The carefully crafted shell of Laurelin Moore, a typical Linguan girl, crumpled behind me. I knew that the next time I came home, I'd be someone else. Life would never be quiet again.

The iron gate at the front of our yard creaked as it closed behind me. "Lock," I commanded. The metal glowed a faint purple, a signal that my family's home was protected. I zipped my black jacket up to my neck and scanned the dark street, checking for prying eyes. Lingua buzzed with news of another pygmy whisperer—the first in ninety years—and everyone was trying to catch a glimpse of who it might be. By morning, the rumors would be confirmed. The entire province would know the whisperer was me.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, making sure I had the glass jar, an extra vial of elixir, and the hastily scribbled note that contained my confession. With my hood covering my long hair, I ran down the sidewalk toward the nearest rail station. My feet splashed in puddles left by the midnight rain, soaking my jeans as I went. Underneath the station's white canopy, a bean-shaped railcar waited. "Galena," I said as I hopped inside. The white car shot forward, taking me to the upper-class district of Lingua for the fifth night in a row. Tonight, I'd hit my biggest target yet: Silas Evermore, the Duke of Lingua.

Though the bright car was empty, I was too anxious to sit on one of the scuffed-up plastic benches. I clung to a black handle that hung from the ceiling and watched the twisting buildings of Lingua flash by my window. The patter of rain tapered off as we passed through the heart of the province. There, a statue of Mira towered over the city. As we flew by, I offered a silent prayer that she'd help me get through this night.

The Whisperer's Wish

The face of my watch peeked out under the sleeve of my jacket. There were two hours left until sunrise.

Only two hours.

I took a deep breath. I wanted to be Lingua's Rook in the Pentax, and the only way to impress Duke Evermore enough to be chosen was to reveal my magic.

Since Queen Isadora's death ten days ago, the streets had filled with gifted teens showing off their magic, hoping to be chosen to compete for the crown. Our next ruler could be Tom-the-neighborhood-drunk for all I cared. The fact that the winner of the Pentax would become king or queen was nothing more than an unfortunate side-effect in my eyes. I was in it for the wish that was given to the victor—a wish that would be granted by the Matrons, the most powerful beings in Ausland. It was my last shot to save Pippin.

The railcar slid to a stop in front of a wrought-iron gate set in a stone wall that kept the nobody's like me out of Galena. I pressed my palm against the door. It slid open obediently, releasing me. The black sky glistened with purple mist, a remnant of the magic used by Lingua's people day-in and day-out. I checked over my shoulder. The street appeared deserted, but I knew that this area was on high alert and I did not want to get caught. It would ruin my audition.

The muscles in my legs were tight with tension as I sprinted around the perimeter of the stone wall. The duke's white mansion was on the northeast corner of the extravagant subdivision. I ducked behind a bakery's dumpsters to avoid one police officer and crouched by a bench to dodge another.

Finally, I reached the back of Evermore's mansion. Beyond it was a forest of lyre trees, covered in berries: a pygsmys's primary source of food. Finding one here should be easy.

Lyrun rach min baum, I called through my thoughts, searching for the nearest pygsmys. I felt a prickle of consciousness from the closest one and latched onto it, pulling the mystic into me as I repeated the ancient pygsmish phrase that meant *help me serve*

and protect. I smiled as the tiny creature hovered in front of my face. Her green eyes matched the color of my own. She cooed as she bobbed up and down in front of me, her body shimmering in its translucent state.

I pulled a few lyre berries out of the jar and placed them on my palm. The pygsmys brushed her flowing, green tendrils across my skin, tasting to make sure I was safe. At last, she decided to trust me and landed in my hand. Her translucent color solidified as she did. Her long, needlelike nose pierced the first berry and the creature began to sip, twitching her wings with satisfaction. Vibrant, golden track marks swirled around her purple body, a sign that this pygsmys had plenty of elixir to share.

Harvesting elixir wasn't my goal tonight, but I found myself unable to resist a pygsmys full of the invaluable liquid. The elixir that ran through a pygsmys's wings could heal any broken bone, infection, or punctured organ. It could enhance a gifted person's powers or even temporarily give them a new one. Elixir had its limitations though. For someone whose condition was a part of their biology—like Pippin's cancer—elixir could only extend their time rather than heal. Still, pygsmys elixir was the most desirable commodity in Ausland, and people would go to extraordinary lengths to get their hands on some. The trouble was, pygsmies were almost impossible to catch—except for someone who could control them.

Someone like me.

While the pygsmys drank, I stroked the hard, thin edge of her wing, like running my finger across the string of a violin. The pygsmys watched with apprehension. Her mind was wary, and her legs tensed to fly.

Quickly, I began to sing.

*Lyrun rach min baum
Tre alis vera trinidad*

The Whisperer's Wish

The pygmy stopped, finding comfort in the words of the lullaby.

*Siv faer trialus mun
Plevun ris mylor vineer*

The creature's wing glowed. Excitedly, I tugged on the string of the vial of elixir I always kept around my neck and flipped open the top. From the bottom tip of the pygmy's wing, a drop of golden liquid waited to be collected. It splashed into my vial, mixing with the elixir already inside, swirling in milky-gold spirals. Five more drops followed after it.

I snapped the vial shut with satisfaction. *Sempr nots*, I thanked her.

As the pygmy finished eating, I spoke to her in her language. *I'm going to ask you to do something for me tonight. Well, more than you already have, I guess. I bit my lip. It's going to be uncomfortable, but I promise you'll be safe.*

What more could a human want than my elixir? the pygmy questioned.

All you have to do is stay in this jar. I held up the glass for her to see the fat berries littering the bottom. There will be plenty to eat, and I'll stay nearby. I only need a man to see you. Once he does, I'll let you go. I promise.

The pygmy withdrew her nose from the berry and turned toward me. *I do not want to, but I can feel that I have no choice, whisperer.*

I pushed away the guilt that flooded me. I rarely used the full sway of my powers on a pygmy. I didn't like forcing them to do anything. Instead, I tried to persuade but ultimately let the creature decide. Tonight was different—I couldn't afford a mistake.

Fly with me, I said.

With an edge of bitterness in her mind, the pygmy wrapped her elastic tendrils under my armpits. As she lifted me into the

sky, my body became weightless, allowing the tiny creature to carry me. We flew toward the duke's window, but I wasn't worried about being seen. As long as I was attached to the pygsmys, my body was translucent, like her own when she was in flight.

Sempr nota, I said as we landed on the balcony outside the duke's window.

The pygsmys did not respond.

I peered into the bedroom, feeling uneasy. The duke's wife snored loudly as she slept next to him.

Over the past four nights, I'd been to the homes of four prominent members of the nobility, leaving a pygmys in different locations throughout the homes for the people to find. A pygmys under that degree of control could only be compelled by a whisperer. I'd hoped to pique their interest and let the rumor mill do its thing, spreading excitement about a new whisperer in the province. My plan had worked. Tonight, the mystery would end. I would finally own up to my abilities.

I took a deep breath. I could do this for Pippin. Besides, if —*when*—I was selected as Rook, I'd face much more difficult tasks during the Pentax.

Be brave, I told the pygmys as I slipped her into the jar.

My courage is not in question, she bristled.

I gave her back a reassuring stroke and then placed my hand on the window pane. "Open," I whispered. The window glowed purple. The lock unlatched and then the glass slid to the side. The frame screeched, and I cringed, expecting the duke to wake. I breathed a sigh of relief when he did not.

I pulled myself through the window. The planks of the wooden floor creaked as I tip-toed to the duke's bedside. The ten feet from the window to his nightstand felt like one hundred.

I felt the duke's breath on my hand as I placed the jar beside him, the pygmys still inside despite the open top and her natural inclination to flee.

The Whisperer's Wish

Legin. I told her to stay.

I left the spare vial of elixir that contained only three drops on top of my handwritten note that identified me as the whisperer. I hesitated. For sixteen years, I'd kept this secret, enjoying a relatively normal life. Once it was known I could whisper, nothing would be the same. The demands for elixir would be relentless; I could be in danger. I nearly decided to snatch the note and leave before I could be found out. Instead, I took a deep breath and reminded myself that Pippin was worth it.

Before I could change my mind, I crossed the length of the room and slipped back out the window, leaving it open so the pygmy could escape in the morning.

I climbed over the side of the balcony railing and dropped into the flowerbeds below. Checking over my shoulder, I dashed across the carefully manicured lawn to a tall tree with a good vantage point of the duke's room and prepared to wait.

When the sun began to rise, the duke and his wife stirred. I chuckled as Evermore's eyes popped open. He clearly did not expect to be face-to-face with a pygmy. Most people never see one in their lifetime. He gasped and grabbed the jar.

Despite the brave face the pygmy had put on earlier, I heard panic in her thoughts. *Please don't hurt me*, she said.

I shoved away the fresh wave of guilt that brought. I knew she was safe. *You're going to be fine. I'll make sure of it*, I said.

I allowed the duke to look for another moment. Then I said, *Flevair*, and released the pygmy.

She darted out the open window, her mind elated with freedom.

My eyes returned to the duke, who grabbed the vial of elixir. Technically, harvesting elixir was illegal, so my stunt would either land me in the Pentax or in prison. But the law had always made an exception for whisperers. It existed because of poachers who hurt pygmies to get the elixir from them. I didn't know of any exceptions to the law against breaking and entering though.

Janilise Lloyd

At last, the duke picked up the note. I saw his mouth my name, *Laurelin Moore*, as he read my confession. There was no going back now.

One more time, I silently called for a pygmy, then I coughed loudly from my spot in the tree. The duke's eyes snapped up to where I was perched. I waved to him and his eyes grew wide.

"You know where to find me," I shouted as the pygmy lifted me into the air.

Duke Evermore ran to the edge of the balcony, the note and vial of elixir still clutched in his hands. His mouth hung open as he watched me disappear into the morning sky.