

## Chapter Three

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When I stepped into the night air, the cool mist that brushed my face was a welcome relief. The atmosphere in the house had been smothering since the duke left. Mom alternated between tears of joy at the possibility of saving Pippin and tears of sadness that I was going to face the dangerous tasks of the Pentax. I tried to remind her that it was only a couple short weeks, but that only seemed to bring on a new round of crying. Dad, on the other hand, rolled around in his wheelchair, brooding.

And then there was the growing crowd outside our house. Though the announcement about my selection wasn't news-official yet, the word still traveled fast. The shock of someone outside the nobility being chosen as Rook seemed to have pleased at least a few, as some in the crowd held up signs of support. I probably should have tried to talk to them, but I was no good with speeches—just another reason I didn't want to be queen. If I didn't have to save Pippin, I'd probably use the wish given for winning the Pentax to get out of being queen instead.

I snuck around to the side of the house and watched the few stubborn stragglers who remained, despite the chilly weather and dark night. They slumped against the front gate or sprawled

out on the ground, sleeping. I didn't know why they thought I'd choose to give them elixir at midnight as opposed to mid-afternoon, but I had to give them credit for their determination. I'd have to use other means of transportation tonight.

With my eyes squeezed shut, I searched the skies for a pygsmey. When I felt one, I chanted the familiar phrase, *Lyrnach min baum*. Compelled by my call, the pygsmey began to fly to me.

One of the beautiful creatures appeared, his markings dull. At some point, I must have taken this pygsmey's spare elixir.

*Will you fly with me?* I asked in pygsmish, feeling guilty. I didn't like using pygsmies as my personal taxi system. They were magical, glorious beings—the offspring of the Matrons. They deserved more respect than carrying my butt across the province.

*You're not after elixir tonight?* the pygsmey asked. *I don't have more to give.*

*No, not tonight. But thank you for sharing with me in the past. You helped my brother survive.*

*He's better now?*

I swallowed loudly. *No, he's not. But I hope to change that for good, and I need your help to do it. I have to talk to a friend in Meadow. Will you take me to the Careen?*

The pygsmey hummed in front of me, considering. His green tendrils flowed like jellyfish tentacles around him. *You're kinder than the others who seek our elixir. I will help you tonight.*

I exhaled. *Thank you very much,* I said as he wrapped his tendrils around me and lifted me off the ground.

Guilt washed over me as we soared over the desperate people in my front yard. If only the supply of elixir was really as endless as they all thought, I might be able to help them.

The weightlessness that came with flying filled my heart, and I concentrated on the beauty of *Lingua* at night, with its swirls of magic hanging in the air. The glittering mist was a welcome sign

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that our gifts remained in the province tonight. The Matrons were generous to share their magic at all, but they were also eager to remind that it could be taken at any time. A few times a month, our magical gifts would disappear for a day or two, and there was no way to predict when. It hinged on the whims of the Matrons. Their magic was projected through crystals worn around their necks, so maybe it was when they took off their necklaces? Those days weren't all bad, though. Because so much of the province relied on magic to function, most businesses shut down and people stayed home with their families.

I pulled a scarf over my mouth to keep from inhaling the glittering streams of magic as we darted through the sky. Below, the land was full of oddly shaped buildings that bent and curved in ways that defied laws of physics. Our buildings stayed in place because high-level orators commanded them to. Dad said the know-it-alls from Scentia hated coming here because it bothered them so much to see their perfect logic tossed out the window. That was okay. I doubted I'd like the buttoned-up, futuristic province of Scentia very much either. I supposed I would find out soon enough. I'd compete in almost every province during the Pentax.

In the distance, the Careen rose above the many skyscrapers in Meadow. There was far more concrete than grass everywhere I looked, but our city wasn't named for the landscape. It was named after the meadows, home of the Matrons and hundreds of other mythical creatures.

We began to lose altitude as the pygmy swooped down behind the Careen, the center of Lingua's cultural life. The pygmy left me right where I asked. *Sempr nota*, I said to him. The gentle creature brushed my neck with his wings before he flew off.

I did a quick sweep of the area. On a bench between the building and the rail tracks, a man sang and played his guitar with no audience. That was typical of Meadow—I'd never

walked more than a block without hearing someone perform, no matter the time of day.

A hand reached out and grabbed my arm. Startled, I whirled and took in the face of a middle-aged woman, wrapped in a wool shawl to keep out the night's chill. Her brown eyes were wide and manic. "Laurelin Moore, the whisperer in the flesh. I knew Julian's curse would have to end. The Matrons would send us another whisperer. We shouldn't be punished for one man's greed. And here you are." Her chin quivered as her sharp nails dug into my bicep.

I tried to yank my arm free and take a step back, but the woman pulled me closer, pressing her face nearer to mine. The wrinkles around her eyes lessened as, impossibly, she pushed them even wider.

"I have a daughter," the woman continued, her breath hot on my skin. "Only three years old. She has the Cripps. It's only a matter of days until it's too late. Please, just a few drops of elixir would save her life." A tear streaked her cheek. "Can't you spare any?"

The vial of elixir I'd brought for a very specific purpose burned in my pocket. I couldn't shake the image of a sweet child, lying in bed, her body speckled with oozing, black sores and a raging fever.

"Fine," I grumbled, reaching into my jeans.

The woman's expression melted with relief. "Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

I pressed the vial into her hand. "Don't tell anyone I did this for you."

She nodded, sending her brown curls bouncing. "You have my word. Praise the Matrons!" she shouted as she rushed off down the street.

I continued toward the tracks. Such silly superstitions. I hadn't heard Julian's curse mentioned since I left public school to be taught at home with Pippin. Kids used to say the kingdom was cursed because Julian, a whisperer who lived at the same

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time as Eva, tried to steal the Matron's crystals for himself. Eva stopped him, but some said the Matrons had decided humanity wasn't worthy of whisperers anymore.

Before then, Ausland had always had at least one whisperer and sometimes a few at a time. Of course, I always knew there was no curse. I was proof against it. But I did wonder why there had been such a long gap. Previous whisperers were able to train each other and pass down knowledge. I had to figure out what I knew all on my own. I was sure there were parts of my powers I was missing because I'd never been properly taught.

As I ran toward the tracks, I patted my chest to make sure I still had the vial of elixir on my necklace. It pained me to know I'd have to give it up. It was habit to keep the extra vial on me for emergencies, but the woman had taken the elixir I planned to use tonight, and I needed a good trainer to win. The right trainer.

I looked across the street at the woman's retreating figure, hoping she'd get good use out of the elixir. I was filled with rage when I saw the woman stop in front of the guitarist on the bench. I heard the clang of coins as she passed him the vial.

The woman had no sick daughter. Like so many others, she only wanted the elixir for profit.

I ground my teeth together. She had no clue how valuable that was to me.

Forcing myself to let it go, I squeezed into the narrow space between the tracks and the sidewalk. It had been a while since I last came here, and the cramped space always sent my heart racing. I tried not to panic and forced myself beneath the rails. The rush of a railcar roared overhead and blew my hair over my face. That was a close call—I hadn't seen a car coming.

In the darkness, the only company was the noise of scampering rats. Tiny paws ran over my shoes as I placed my hand along the cement wall and felt my way forward. After about twenty feet, I found the divot in the cement I was searching for. My fingers brushed against a metal handle and I pulled, hearing a

faint ring of a bell that was inaudible when I visited during the day.

A sleepy, male voice came through a crackling speaker. "I'm closed. Come back tomorrow," he grumbled.

I pulled the handle again, holding it down so the bell continued to ring.

"For the love of the Matrons!" the voice said, angry now. "Go away!"

I sighed. Aaron's door was well protected. A low-level, magical command wouldn't work on it, even for a great orator. The door required a password. Fortunately, I knew what it was since I was the one who placed the enchantment. I put my palm against the door and whispered, "Pygsmys brew." The disguised door glowed around the edges and then slid to the side.

"Hey!" Aaron shouted. "Who are you? I'm armed! Don't go any farther."

I stopped, raising my hands in the air. "Relax. It's me, Laurelin."

The dingy light in the cement hall flipped on and Aaron stood at the end of it, a metal baseball bat in his hands.

"A bat? In your line of work, you don't have a better weapon?"

Aaron frowned. The bat glowed purple and changed into a six-inch dagger.

"Yeah, that will do it." I laughed nervously.

The knife glowed once more and shifted back to a bat.

I blushed as I realized Aaron wore only boxers and a white T-shirt. He shied away from the light in the hall and rubbed his blue eyes with his free hand. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night, El? You better tell me Rosita's having a midnight sale on her flatbread, or I'm going back to bed."

"Sorry I woke you. I came with a peace offering. It's not flatbread, but I think you'll like it anyway." I held out the vial of elixir, feeling another twinge of regret. Every drop mattered.

Some of the annoyance left Aaron's face. He crossed the

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distance between us and reached for the elixir, but I closed my palm and shoved my hand in my pocket. "First, we need to talk."

"Of course, it's not that easy," Aaron sighed. He stalked off down the hall, leaning into his bedroom to slip on a pair of pajama pants. Then he gestured for me to follow him to his living room that was more cluttered than a sixty-year-old cat lady's. Where most people had pianos, coffee tables, and couches, Aaron's shelves were crammed with boxes of random knick-knacks. For someone who could turn a rusty spoon into a shiny bracelet, nothing was considered garbage.

Aaron plopped down on a torn bean bag. Packing pieces puffed into the air, then dusted his hair white. He gestured for me to take the three-legged stool across from him.

"So what's up?" he asked as he rubbed the sandpaper stubble on his chin.

I blurted out, "I want you to be my trainer in the Pentax," but a railcar rumbled above us and my voice was lost.

"What?" Aaron shouted over the roar.

I waited for quiet. "I said, I want you to be my trainer in the Pentax."

Aaron's eyes looked like they'd pop out of his head. "The Pentax? Whoa, wait, back up. You're a Rook?"

I blushed. "Um, yeah. I thought everyone knew by now."

"I only got back from a trip to Amare a few hours ago. I went straight to sleep when I got home."

"Well, surprise! I guess you're the last in Lingua to know I'm a pygmy whisperer. And yes, I've been chosen as the Rook. Watch for it in the papers tomorrow if you don't believe me."

Aaron scoffed. "I'd say I was the first to know you're a pygmy whisperer, but you're right about the other half. Total shock. What do you want be a Rook for anyway?"

"You knew about my gift?" I asked, ignoring his question.

He laughed. "El, you regularly supplied me with elixir for three years before you suddenly stopped coming around these last few months. Even the best poachers can't do that. Yes, I

knew. Never thought you were the power-hungry type though. You seriously want to be queen?”

I picked at a fuzzy on my gray jacket. “This isn’t about power.”

Aaron looked at me, puzzled. “Then why would you—” Comprehension dawned on his face. “You want the wish! Can’t see why though. Anything you want, I can get for you.”

“Not anything I want.” My stomach squeezed at the thought of Pippin. “Anyway, this conversation isn’t about my reasons. I need to know. Are you in? Will you be my trainer?”

“Why would you want me? I don’t know anything. I’m just a black market hawk—the lowest of the lows. I don’t think they’d let me be your trainer even if I agreed.”

“I’ve already taken care of that, so yes, they will. And your black market skills are exactly why I need you. You’ve been to every province a zillion times. Nobody knows them like you do. You can help me figure out everything I need to know. I can win this thing with your help.” I didn’t care that I sounded desperate. Aaron was the closest thing I had to a friend. He saved my life when my first attempt at selling elixir on the black market went terribly wrong. His arrogance could be grating, but I needed him now.

Aaron shifted uncomfortably. “You need someone who can help you learn to fight and strategize. If you need something stolen, I’m your guy, but I don’t think that’s the goal of the Pentax. Find someone better, El.” Aaron stood and headed for the door, making it clear he was done talking.

I jumped in front of him and placed my hands on his chest, refusing to be distracted by the surprising firmness of it. “I’ll give you whatever you want. A lifetime supply of elixir. All the money in the world—after I win, of course. Anything. Please, just help me.”

His eyes dropped, looking at my hands on his chest. “I don’t play the government’s stupid games. I can’t be your trainer.” His



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tan face was exhausted. For a moment, he looked thirty rather than eighteen.

"I don't either. Don't you see? This is our chance to prove ourselves. I'm not some upper-class snob. I'm just a poor girl from Lingua, the province everyone thinks is weak. Wouldn't it be great to come out of this thing on top? We could change the rules. We could change everything. And the future queen of Ausland would owe you a major favor. Besides, think of the possibilities. You'd travel around the country on the government's dime. You can do all the trading you want in every province we visit."

I could see it in his face. He was considering it.

"A lifetime supply of elixir?" Aaron repeated.

For a moment, I paused. Selling Aaron elixir had always bothered me. Though he was far better than most hawks on the market, I still hated the thought of how it was used by the people he did business with. I wanted to use elixir to help people who really needed it. But Pippin's life was at stake. Nothing was too costly.

"Whatever you want. Just help me win."

Aaron covered my hands with his. For a moment, I thought he was making a move. My breath caught in my chest. Then he pushed my hands away, and gave a half smile.

"Okay. Count me in. But remember—you owe me big time. And I expect flatbread. Lots of flatbread."

I rolled my eyes. "I have a feeling you'll never let me forget."

It was a big price to pay, but with Aaron on my team, I actually stood a chance.