

Chapter Two



The wooden chair creaked beneath me as I shifted my weight. Pippin lay unmoving in his bed as some color returned to his pallid face. Mom had given him tea with the elixir I had collected in Galena. I was glad to see it still had some effect on his health, but we'd been running on borrowed time since he was diagnosed with liver cancer at ten years old. In the four years since then, Pippin had gone from needing the elixir every other month to once a day. At some point, it would stop working. I couldn't think about what would happen then.

The noise from the crowd that had begun to gather outside my house drifted up through the window. I expected them to come, but that didn't lessen my annoyance with the mob. News about my powers traveled even faster than I expected, and I could no longer keep the truth from Mom and Dad. They knew I'd outed myself. They'd been huddled in the kitchen, trying to decide what this meant for our family ever since.

Whispering was a gift my parents decided to keep secret when I was a child, and I'd chosen the same when I was old enough to understand. Nearly a century ago, the last whisperer, Eva, had been kidnapped for her power. Though in the eyes of the law, it didn't count since it was the king who ripped the five-

year-old girl from her parents' arms in order to exploit her power. At least she'd been well-fed and reasonably cared for during her time as an elixir-producing slave. In all, she had it better than many whisperers before her. Countless others had been captured by hawks on the black market and kept alive only if they continued to hand over elixir that made the thieves fat with riches. Or some other villain would hold a whisperer's loved one hostage for elixir. Few people who had my gift had stories with happy endings.

Mom and Dad were less than thrilled I'd exposed myself to such danger. Still, I'd seen the hope flash through Mom's eyes. She knew if I was chosen to compete in the Pentax, it could be our chance to save Pippin. Dad would come around, too.

Finally, Pippin's green eyes fluttered. I grabbed his hand expectantly. We shared a lot of characteristics, but hair color was not one of them. His was like a flame; the burst of wild red curls demanded attention. Mine, on the other hand, was vanilla ice cream—pale, flat, and forgettable. I studied the freckles dotting his cheeks. His were darker and more abundant than mine. Most teenage girls couldn't stand their little brothers, but the feeling that Pippin could slip away in an instant somehow erased any of his flaws. He was perfect.

"Hey, Laura." Pippin's voice quivered, his eyes open now. "You a Rook yet?"

I laughed. "Not yet, but I gave it my best shot a couple hours ago."

Pippin smiled weakly. "You'll make it. The duke won't be able to pass up a whisperer, even if she's not nobility."

I prayed to the Matrons that he was right. I ruffled his hair. "It's nothing for you to worry about either way. You just work on getting better."

"I'm not getting better, Laura. We both know that."

I hated the way he said that with such finality. I rearranged the green quilt that lay over his shrunken body. "Hang in there a little longer—just until I get my wish from the Matrons. Their

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magic is so much stronger than a pygmy's. It can heal you. Promise me you'll hang on."

There should be a law of the universe that little brothers couldn't die.

Pippin gave a feeble laugh. "I promise." He turned his head to the window. "What's all the noise out there?"

I was careful not to let any of my annoyance with the growing mob show on my face. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Pippin pulled himself into a sitting position, his face scrunching with the effort. He straightened his back, trying to see what was going on.

I sighed. "Stop. You're going to hurt yourself. It's just some people who want me to get them elixir. Ignore them."

Pippin removed the quilt from his lap and threw his bony legs over the side of his bed. He wobbled as he stood, and I rose to catch him.

"You need to lie down." Panic fluttered in my chest.

"Take me to the window," Pippin said.

Reluctantly, I helped him over to the pane and averted my eyes. I hated the way the crowd made me feel selfish with their cries for help. I'd done my best for years, secretly leaving elixir at the homes of people I knew were in need—neighbors with sickness or injuries and poor people who could sell it for profit. But lately, Pippin had needed so much that I rarely had any to spare. Only six drops of elixir could be taken from a pygmy without killing it, and it took a full year to regenerate one drop.

"Who's that?" Pippin asked.

I followed his eyes and my heart stopped. Silas Evermore was pushing through the throng. He paused at the gate and rang the bell. Dad appeared on the porch in his wheelchair.

"That's the duke," I answered Pippin robotically.

"Well, there's only one reason he would come here." Pippin bounced on his toes. "He's chosen you to be the Rook! You did it!"

“I can think of two reasons, actually. But let’s hope you’re right and he’s not here to arrest me.”

After years of hoping for a break that never came, I was used to being disappointed. But as I watched the duke follow Dad down the path to our front door, I wondered if this might be the day that changed everything for Pippin.

“C’mon. Let’s go see what’s up.” I scooped Pippin into my arms, which was far too easy to do. He had to weigh less than sixty pounds.

We jogged down the stairs. Mom stood in the living room looking out the front window, her fingertips at her mouth. Her eyebrows hadn’t relaxed in four years, but the line between them now was especially deep. She wore her silver-streaked, brown hair in a messy bun, a floral-print apron tied around her waist.

The front door opened, and Dad came in with Silas Evermore following behind. His jet-black hair matched the dark pants of his official Linguan uniform—dress slacks, a button-up shirt, and a purple suit jacket with winding, golden embroidery meant to mimic the markings of a pygmy. When his brown eyes connected with mine, he straightened his jacket lapel, as if searching for an excuse to look away.

“Welcome to our home, Your Grace.” My mother tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she offered her hand.

“Nora Moore, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for allowing me to come in. You have quite the gathering out front.”

Mom’s smile wavered. “Yes, we were rather hoping to avoid that. But I suppose it was inevitable with Laurelin’s decision.” Her eyes flashed to me before she focused on the duke again. “Please, have a seat.” She gestured toward our brown leather armchair, the nicest piece of furniture we had, even with its long tear in the front.

Carefully, I placed Pippin on the lumpy, green couch next to me. Mom sat on his other side, and Dad placed his wheelchair between us and the duke.

As usual, a pile of wood shavings from Dad’s latest project

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had collected in the corners of his wheelchair, but his face lacked his genial smile. “We don’t want any trouble. We know that we should have registered Laurelin’s gift with the province as soon as we discovered it, but you have to understand. You see the crowd that has gathered outside our house. You know the stories of the mistreatment of past whisperers. We don’t know why the Matrons decided to give Laurelin the power to whisper, but we just wanted her—”

The duke raised his hand. “Alexander, please stop. I am not here to punish you or your daughter. If you recall, my great-grandmother was Eva Evermore, the last known whisperer. Eva kept a journal that detailed many of the struggles she faced because of her gift. I understand why you would be reluctant to acknowledge Laurelin’s power openly.”

The duke looked at me now. “That said, I hope you realize that your gift can do a lot of good. Today, each province must decide which young person will represent them in the Pentax, which will determine Ausland’s next ruler. As you have chosen this specific time to reveal your magic, I can only assume you’re hoping to be chosen as the Rook from Lingua. There are many talented young people in our province, and plenty of those talents exist among the children of the nobility. It would be typical for me to select one of them to be our Rook. So, Laurelin, I must ask. Why do you believe I should choose you?”

I felt like an inchworm crawled around the pit of my stomach. My eyes bounced around the room as I tried to think of what to say. Dad’s nails dug into the pads on the arms of his chair. Mom twisted the tie of her apron between her fingers. Pippin slumped against the back of the couch, staring at me without a trace of worry in his face.

I couldn’t acknowledge the real reason I wanted to compete. As understandable as it may be that I hoped to save my brother, it wouldn’t be a good enough reason for Duke Evermore.

I cleared my throat and put together a half-truth. “I’m tired of being seen as weak, and I think Lingua is too. As the province

of Language, our gifts for storytelling, songwriting, persuasion, and orating are overlooked by the other provinces. Imagine—Lingua, the capital of Ausland. The wealth and the opportunity that would come to us would be unlike anything we've seen for centuries. I can make that happen. I'm different than the others. I want this more than all of them combined."

Silas watched me carefully as I spoke, but his eyes slipped to Pippin for a moment. "It does appear that you have great reason to fight." He paused. "I'm pleased to hear your conviction. As the great-grandson of the fearless Eva, I think I have more confidence in whisperers than most. The other members of the nobility will despise my decision, but I am willing to take that risk for the good of the province. I believe you have what Lingua needs to win. I'm extending the offer to you, Laurelin. Will you be Lingua's Rook?"

Mom let out a little squeak and squeezed my knee. Her eyes watered, but a smile stretched her lips. This was the chance she didn't know she'd been waiting for.

"You don't have to agree, Laurelin. Think this through," Dad urged. "How much time does she have to decide?"

"None, I'm afraid. Ausland's tradition dictates that the first competition of the Pentax happens fifteen days after the death of the previous monarch. There are three days required for training and pre-competition events. That means we leave for Creo in two days. I must insist Laurelin decides now. If she declines, I need time to make other arrangements."

Knowing Dad's opposition made this harder, but I couldn't pass up the chance to save Pippin. This was our only option. Still, I intended to squeeze everything I could out of the deal.

I cleared my throat. "I would be honored to represent Lingua, but I do have a few conditions that would need to be met, of course."

The duke blinked and sat back in his chair. "I see. An opportunist. Very well, what do you have in mind?"

"Those of us who are born into nothing have to take

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advantage of the chances that come our way, Duke Evermore. I wouldn't expect you to understand."

He gave no response aside from a half-smile.

"Laurelin, manners," Mom whispered.

I ignored her and pressed on. "My first condition is that I choose my trainer for the Pentax. I know the requirements. The trainer must be at least eighteen years old, gifted, and from the province of the Rook. I know just the person for the job. You can choose my handler, though. All that fashion and interview nonsense isn't important to me anyway."

Silas thought for a long moment. "Very well." He managed to force a smile. "You may choose your trainer."

"My second condition is that my family will receive 150 darics for each round of elimination I survive."

Beneath his blonde hair, Dad's face was beet red, but I didn't care about his embarrassment. I cared that my family would be well off while I was gone. Dad worked hard, but he didn't make nearly enough from his carpentry. The accident that left him wheelchair-bound happened before I was born, and it made finding regular work a challenge. Mom had left her job at the hospital when Pippin got sick. They spent all the money they received from the sale of Grandma and Grandpa's farm in the first year of Pippin's treatments. For a while, things were okay because I was able to sell elixir on the black market, but I hadn't been able to spare any for that in several months.

"That's a lot of money," Silas grumbled.

"I'm aware, but it will be easily made up to you when I win. I also want a pair of police officers assigned to my house at all hours. The family members of whisperers are always in danger, and I'm not willing to take chances while I'm away. Those are my conditions."

Evermore let out a long breath, and drummed his fingers on his knee. After a pause, he said, "I must be crazy, but you shall have what you demand. I need to know who your trainer is no

later than tomorrow evening. The announcement of my decision will be in tomorrow's papers. I suggest you stay low."

I snorted. "You don't need to worry about that. We're already hostages in our own home." I motioned to the mob outside the gate.

Silas smirked. "I will meet you at the rail station in two days. A police escort will arrive that morning to get you there safely. Expect to receive more instruction from me then. Oh, and pack light. Your handler will take care of your wardrobe."

Silas pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and put them on. "Best of luck to you, Laurelin." He extended his hand to me and then my parents.

I didn't like the way he ignored Pippin.

As Dad showed the duke to the door, Pippin threw his arms around my neck. "Thank you, Laura."

I laughed and hugged him back. For the first time in a long time, I felt hope. Now I just had to deliver on my promises.