

GIFT OF GODS

MAGE LORE BOOK 2

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NOTE

This is a sample file and is not the complete book.

THE COLD WIND blowing down from the mountains nipped at my face and hands as soon as I stepped out of the forest and onto the plains. The grasses that had covered the land surrounding the Nahl clan holding no longer bobbed their heads to me in greeting. It was too late in the season for that. They'd all gone dormant. Now their frosty stems crunched under foot Arge's hooves as I rode across the field, heading home.

I couldn't bring myself to hurry, even though I knew, with just over a week left until the Midwinter Festival, I was cutting it close. Still, another few moments of silence under the clear night sky wouldn't matter. Not enough to make me push Arge to move any faster.

I was still processing my incomplete training with the Inahi. It had been almost a full moon cycle since I'd seen or spoken with another human. In that time, the Inahi had taught me how to identify the potential mages and connect them to their magic, at least well enough that they wouldn't lose their dormant abilities after reaching their maturity.

As I approached the compound, I dropped the hood of my cloak to give the guards plenty of time to notice my approach and iden-

tify me. They bowed as I passed through the gate, signaling that they still recognized me. I must not have changed that much in the few months I'd been away.

On such a cold evening, so close to nightfall, there weren't many people out. Still, heads turned and whispers followed as I continued past the market to the stables. I didn't bother waving as I led Arge the long way around, preferring to avoid unnecessary conversations.

When I arrived at the stables, I found Dern leaning against the door frame, watching my approach. "When the guards sent a bird to alert us of your arrival, I didn't believe it. Shouldn't you be on your way to the city?"

"Good to see you, too, brother." My voice croaked from lack of use. I grimaced, then cleared my throat before dismounting and leading Arge inside.

Dern called to the stable hand, waving the closest one over to help me, as he pulled the door shut against the cold winter winds. "Don't get me wrong. It is good to see your smiling face. But haven't you been in some sort of novice mage seclusion? I would have thought you'd be in a hurry to get back to your betrothed, what with that Midwinter wedding you have planned. Unless you've come to drop more family secrets on us..."

I couldn't help scowling. Both at the reminder that I should have gone straight to Ezri, and at the memory of what my father and the late Jahl had done.

"You didn't." Dern said, setting a hand on my shoulder. "Come with more secrets? Please tell me you didn't. We've only just managed to sort out the mess you left behind last time you passed through here."

I reluctantly handed Arge's reins to the stable hand. I would have preferred to take care of my horse and get her settled, but it appeared my brother would not give me any peace until I responded. Watching the youngster lead Arge away, I wondered

what sort of magic she held in her slight frame. But she was young still. There would be time to test her after Midwinter.

I turned my attention to my brother. "I didn't come for that."

Dern exhaled loudly. "Thank the gods."

"Indeed." I paced toward the stable door, whispering Salnut's blessing as I reached out to brush my fingertips against the wall. *Home in my heart, hearth at the core, blessings to all who shelter within these walls.*

That I still considered this home after everything that had happened, after everything I'd learned, was something I would consider later. Or not. In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to make sure that our clan was ready.

"Has the group celebrating their maturity left?" I asked, stepping outside.

"You would know that if you'd gone to the city instead of coming here." Dern hugged his arms around himself to keep warm as he hurried after me toward the lodge.

"You didn't answer my question." I took the long way around, once again avoiding the market.

"They're supposed to depart in the morning." Dern blew warmth into his hands, then rubbed them together. "And now that I've answered your question, perhaps you will answer mine? Why are you *here*, Ayla-ruh?"

Dern's use of the Ruhl family's honorific made me pause. I shot him a glance over my shoulder. "Stop it. I'm not married yet. And I'm still your sister."

He shook his head as he pushed past me, leading the way through the great hall to open the door to Father's study. The soft glow from a lamp spilled out into the hallway, but it wasn't Father who was waiting for me inside.

Goff looked up from the papers spread out across Father's desk. "Ayla?"

My eldest brother didn't even stand to greet me. No matter how high I rose in the hierarchy of the united clans, I could always

count on Goff to see me as his little sister. His consistency was a relief after Dern's uncomfortable attempt at deference and repeated reminders that this holding was no longer my home.

"You didn't come to burden us with more family drama, did you?" Goff set his pen down and leaned back in his chair.

"No." I sank into one of the empty chairs facing him.

"If you came to see Father, you just missed him."

Dern leaned against the side of Father's desk. "I think she came to check up on us."

"No." I glared at Dern. I couldn't tell them what I knew, or where I'd really been. But for the good of our clan, I needed to make sure I didn't miss a single potential mage. "I came to make sure everyone reaching maturity is going to the Shal clan festival."

Goff ran his hand through his hair. "It's just a party, Ayla. I don't see what all the fuss is about, even if it is to celebrate you marrying the Ruhl."

"It's more than that." I wanted to tell them, but I couldn't without revealing the truth about the Ruhl. "It's a new beginning."

"If you say so." Goff shrugged. "As long as you're here, perhaps you could accompany the caravan to the city so that Mage-nah doesn't have to leave. He's getting too old for Midwinter camping. Without him, you can bypass the roads and maybe make it in one day."

"I said I'd take them." Dern poked at the fire in the hearth, stoking the flames before adding another small log to the fire.

"And I said I need you here." Goff grimaced. "I'll need all the help I can get just to get through the naming ceremony without mucking things up."

"What about Mother and Father?" I asked. "Why can't they help you?"

"Mother and Father left for the city this morning to prepare for your wedding. Remember?" Dern squinted at me. "You are still getting married, aren't you?"

Just as I was about to say, "Yes, of course I am," a knock on the

door frame stole our attention. Instead of confirming my intent to marry Ezri, I found myself facing the last person I wanted to see.

Rys stood in the doorway, eyes locked on mine, fingers gripping a tube sealed with the wax imprint of the Ruhl. "I have an urgent delivery for the Nahl."

My brothers greeted him like nothing had changed. They acted like Rys was still a Nahl clan guard, and they didn't know he'd been spying for the Ruhl for years.

"Hand it here." Goff half-stood so he could stretch his hand across the desk.

Rys glanced at Goff long enough to place the tube in my brother's open palm. Then his eyes found Dern's before returning to meet mine.

I glanced away, fixing my eyes on the fire in the hearth. An awkward silence followed the crack of the seal and the unfurling of paper.

"It's been a long day." I stood, deciding to make my escape while Rys was forced to wait for Goff's response. "I'm going to bed."

Goff lifted his gaze from the message he'd been reading and looked at Dern. "We haven't put anyone in her room yet, have we?"

I set my hands on my hips. "You can't just give away my room. I still live here."

Dern shrugged. "Do you though?"

"He has a point, Ayla." Goff sifted through the loose papers covering the desktop. For a tense moment, I stood there, glaring at him, until he plucked a scrap of parchment out of the mess and waved it at me. "Ah ha! Here it is. You're in luck. I haven't signed it."

"Signed what?" I snatched the paper from him and skimmed the few lines my cousin had written. "You were going to give my room to Wesl? Really?"

Someone behind me snickered. I wasn't sure if it was Rys or Dern, but it didn't matter. I needed to escape the heat from the blazing hearth, as well as my exasperating brothers and the piercing eyes of the guard I used to love.

“Be reasonable, Ayla. You aren’t using it, and he comes of age this winter. It isn’t fair to leave your room empty when there are others in the family who can use them. Father already gave Cala’s room to Megh. Wesl is the next eldest of Uncle Feln’s children. He honestly should have signed off on it half a moon ago, but I suppose there’s been so many other things to deal with...” He gestured toward the desk with a sweep of his hand.

I took a breath and let the tension drain from my shoulders. “Fine. Wesl can have my room, but not until after he returns from the Festival. I will use it until we depart tomorrow.”

Dern shook his head. “They won’t be ready to leave early enough to make the entire journey in one day. Really, Goff, I can take the caravan and return before our clan’s festival. That way, Ayla can return with Rys at first light.”

“Why would Rys be going to the city?” When I’d last seen him, he’d been packing to leave. I’d assumed he’d returned to the Nahl clan guard, never bothering to tell them about the oath he’d sworn to Ezri.

Both of my brothers looked at me with wide eyes, but it was Goff who responded. “Rys transferred to the Shal clan guard.”

I glanced at Rys, my eyes searching his tunic shoulder. Instead of the Nahl clan sunburst, there was a rose embroidered on his uniform tunic. “Why?”

“Father made a deal with the Ruhl,” Goff responded, returning his attention to the paper in his hand. “One of our guards in exchange for three units of Shal clan guards. Rys volunteered.”

Dern had his eyes fixed on me, and I knew he was watching how I reacted to the news. I tried to keep any hint of emotion from my face.

“One guard for three units? What sort of deal is that?” I asked.

“A symbolic one among allies,” Goff replied, sounding distracted. “I believe that’s how Father explained it.”

Dern smirked. He crossed the room and slung an arm around Rys’s shoulder. “I thought you might be pleased at the news, Ayla. I

mean, it's Rys. We've all been friends since before you could walk. Won't it be nice to have a familiar face in the city?"

I sighed. On the one hand, I was pleased Rys was no longer in a position to spy on our clan for Zan. On the other, it didn't matter anymore. Or it wouldn't after I married Ezri. And I didn't want Rys in the city. But I'd deal with that after I returned. In the meantime, I needed rest so I would be ready to test the potentials.

"I'm going to my room to get some sleep," I said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Dern stepped aside to let me leave, and I squeezed past, careful not to look at Rys. Regardless of my brothers' fondness for him, I wasn't ready to forgive him for the way he'd betrayed me.

I made it halfway down the hall before the soft scuff of boots scraping against stone caught up to me.

"Ayla, wait." Rys fell into step beside me.

I squeezed my eyes shut and kept walking. I knew these hallways like the back of my hand. I didn't need to see to find my way safely back to my room. "I have nothing to say to you."

The footsteps beside me stopped.

I opened my eyes. A quick glance confirmed Rys was no longer at my side. Rather than relief, anger burned in my chest.

I spun to face him. "Why did you follow me? What are my brothers going to think of you chasing after me down a dark hallway after everyone's gone to bed?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "The Ayla I knew never cared about that sort of thing."

I stalked closer to him. "The Ayla you knew wasn't betrothed to the Ruhl."

His eyebrows quirked upward. "That's not true. The Ayla I knew was always destined to marry the Ruhl."

I sighed. "I'm tired, Rys. What do you want?"

"Why are you here?" He gestured back toward my father's office. "Why didn't you go back to the city? To your betrothed?"

"I live here." The words came out in an exasperated rush and were much louder than I'd intended.

"You haven't lived here since the morning I kissed you goodbye in your room." He took a step closer to me. "Why are you really here, Ayla?"

I lifted my eyes to meet his, but the only thing I could think, looking at him like that, was *spy*. I stepped back and wrapped my arms around my waist. "Nice try."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm sure your captain would love to know what I'm doing here, but I'll be the one to tell him when I see him. He doesn't need to hear it from you." I let my arms drop to my sides and turned to leave.

"I'm not asking for him." Something in his voice made me pause. "I know that may be hard for you to believe, but I'm not."

"Then why are you asking? Why did you come after me now?" I asked, my shoulders dropping with exhaustion.

"Because I wanted to talk to you. I..." His voice trailed off. When he spoke again, it was barely above a whisper. "I wanted to know."

"Know what?" I glanced at him over my shoulder.

"What happened? You found them, didn't you? The Inahi?" He rubbed the stubble shading his cheeks. "That's where you've been for the past moon cycle, isn't it?"

"I don't know anything about the Inahi," I lied. "I was in seclusion for my training at the Magery. I told you."

"You're lying." His eyebrows lifted, daring me to challenge his statement.

"I suppose you would know all about that. Wouldn't you?" I glared at him.

When his eyes fixed on mine, the look I remembered so well had returned. That look of curiosity and hunger. The one he got whenever we talked about finding the Inahi. "What are they like? What did they teach you?"

As much as I wanted to share this with the boy he'd been, I owed the man he'd become nothing. I shook my head before pivoting and continuing down the hall to my room.

"Goodnight, Rys," I called over my shoulder.

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Elizabeth Menozzi is an award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy with romance. A former Midwestern girl, she currently resides on Orcas Island with her husband. In her spare time she is a competitive swimmer, trail runner, and devourer of books.