

HEIR OF GODS

MAGE LORE BOOK 1

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Cover design by Elizabeth Mackey

Editing by Shannon Page

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ISBN-13: 979-8-9856303-3-6

First Edition: December 2022

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THE dust cloud on the horizon, rising and billowing over the fields, signaled the arrival of the Ruhl. Each hoofbeat brought him closer to our compound. I lifted my hand so the swirling debris haloed my fingers. Squinting, I twisted my wrist, letting sunlight and shadow play across my palm, imagining for a moment that I could cast magic to send him and his party away. But if the clans ever had access to magic, that power was long gone. Traded away to the Inahi in exchange for the gods' protection.

But that protection was weakening—the raiders had returned. Somewhere deep in the forest, the veil was fading, and the Inahi were hiding. I'd left a bit of travel cake on a flat rock next to the creek, but the messengers of the gods continued to refuse my offerings. It was beginning to look like my father was right to insist I leave communicating with the Inahi to the Ruhl, as much as I hated to admit it. Perhaps the Ruhl would succeed where I had failed.

I shifted to a more comfortable position on the boulder at

the edge of the creek, stretching my bare feet into the water. The cool, clear liquid caressed my ankles, providing some relief from the late afternoon heat. I wiggled my toes as I returned my attention to the edge of the forest, even though I knew I'd stayed as long as I could. It was time to go home.

With a sigh, I lifted my dripping feet from the creek and pressed them against the warm boulder to dry them. Then I stood, brushing the loose dirt off my leggings. Taking my time. Delaying the confirmation of my disappointment. Finally, after slipping my feet back into my boots, I walked over to get a closer look at my offering.

I inspected the travel cake first. *Not even a nibble.* Then I spotted a tiny blue flower with no stem resting on the dirt next to the rock, as though it had blown there on the wind. Two more identical flowers lay nearby. Each had five sky blue petals surrounding a bright golden center. They appeared to have fallen around the rock, marking the points of an invisible triangle centered on my untouched offering.

Those had definitely not been there earlier. I released a small squeak of excitement, careful not to be too loud or move too fast and risk scaring the Inahi if they lingered nearby. My hands clenched and flexed as I scanned the ground between my offering and the brush that bordered the forest.

There was no obvious sign that they'd been here. Not that I knew exactly what I was looking for. The clan folklore offered little in the way of descriptions.

The rhyme the mage taught us as children was: *Gods above and gods below with Inahi to go between. Always watching, always listening, even if they walk unseen.* If the Inahi had emerged from wherever they hid, then they hadn't left even a footprint in the soft soil to give their presence away. Only the stemless flowers near my offering hinted at anything un-

usual.

I picked up one flower to study it, careful not to damage the delicate petals. Their familiar scent, like honey drizzled over ripe marsh berries, triggered a memory of fishing with Rys along this same stream at the bend where the water pooled deeper in the woods. He'd picked one of these flowers and tucked it into my hair. My heart raced as I remembered what had come next: our first kiss. My lips tingled, but I pushed away the memory and focused on the soft petals tickling my palm.

These flowers were a sign. They had to be. Moonbursts only grew under the shade of the tall trees, deep in the forest, not out here on the plains. So, it wasn't likely the wind had carried them this far. My mind raced through the stories I'd memorized, trying to remember if any of them mentioned these particular flowers. If I hurried, there might be just enough time to search Father's books before I needed to join my parents in the great hall for the Gathering.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins, and I cupped my hand around the flower, careful not to crush it in my palm. I left my offering behind and began running through the fields, back toward the gates of the compound. Tassels of tall grasses brushed against my leggings, and dry stems crunched under my feet. The tents inside the tall wooden fence surrounding the compound grew larger on the horizon as I approached. Figures scurried between them, setting up for the Gathering festival that celebrated the start of the winter season, when our clan retreated to the safety of our walled compound to weather the storms.

I smiled and waved to the guards at the gate as I raced past them. They stood at attention, waiting to relax until after I passed. When I reached the market, I slowed to pick my way

through the maze of brightly painted hides stretched taut over tent posts. I swerved around people carrying baskets of harvest tithes for the blessing and armfuls of purple lantern stars to hang in the courtyard for the festival.

Slipping between two of the tents, I emerged with a clear view of the only permanent structure within the compound—our clan’s winter lodge. Shaped like a rectangle with an open, interior courtyard, the stone building held a large, empty room for clan meetings that doubled as a dining hall, plus adjacent wings that housed my family, the clan elders, and any visitors from the neighboring two clans who shared our sacred peninsula.

I headed for an archway on one side of the building that led to the courtyard at the center and joined a family carrying benches for the feast, following them through. Inside, I spotted my sister Cala’s auburn hair. Lorjad’s Luck, she had her back to me, shouting instructions and standing watch over the festival preparations. So I ducked behind another group and slipped into the lodge near the great hall.

With the clan preparing for both the arrival of the Ruhl and the start of the festival, there were people everywhere. Pushing through the crowds already clustering in the great hall, I hurried to the far side, then slipped through the archway that led to the family wing.

The first door I passed led to my father’s private meeting chamber. I would need to cross through that to get to the small study where he and Mage-nah kept the books of lineage and folklore.

I took a breath, hoping Lorjad’s Luck would hold, and the room would be empty. Then I pushed aside the tapestry hanging across the entryway and immediately crashed into another body going the opposite direction, too thin to be my

father, but tall like him. I glanced up and breathed a sigh of relief when I realized it was my older brother, Dern. At least it was him and not Goff.

“What are you doing?” I asked before taking a quick peek at the flower cupped in my hand to make sure I hadn’t damaged it.

“I could ask you the same.” Dern towered over me, blocking my path. “You’re going the wrong way, Ayla. Cala sent me to find you. She wants our help in the courtyard.”

I cringed and tried to squeeze around him. “I can’t right now. I need to look something up in the study.”

“Hiding in the study is a terrible idea.” He grinned and moved to block me again. “Everyone knows it’s the first place to look for you. If you want to avoid work, come with me. I’m going for a ride.”

“Tempting.” I tried again to push past him. “But there’s something I need to do first, so move.”

He refused to budge. “You’re not actually planning on wasting your day memorizing the Ruhl’s lineage, are you?”

My eyes narrowed as they met his. “I’ll memorize the lineage of his stone-loving Shal clan when they can recite the five blessings.”

He laughed and stepped out of my way. “That sounds more like my favorite sister.”

“Give Arge a carrot for me,” I called over my shoulder.

“Cover for me at the meeting,” he called back.

Once Dern was gone, I hurried to the opposite side of the meeting room and pushed back another tapestry, this one marking the entrance to Father’s study. Inside, I inhaled the smell of leather and dust, instantly relaxing as I exhaled.

A large table sat at the center of the room, piled with books. I recognized the leather-bound volumes my brother Goff had

left out for me. This was where I should have been all morning, studying the lessons he'd assigned. I twisted the stack so I could read the titles. As I suspected, they were all related to clan politics or the lineage of the leadership families.

Mother had been the one to supplement the basic clan education of my three older siblings. She had taught Goff, Cala, and Dern everything they needed to know to serve as Father's heirs. They were the ones meant to play all the important leadership roles. Including educating their younger siblings. That's how Kilm and I ended up with Goff assigned as our tutor.

Even though he was younger than me, Kilm didn't need extra lessons, but I did. At least according to Goff. He wasn't wrong, exactly. Kilm was better at this sort of thing than me. And my inability to retain any lesson unrelated to magecraft or folklore was especially infuriating for Goff now that the newly confirmed Ruhl was visiting.

But I didn't need Goff's books this time. I knew all I needed to know about the former heir to the Shal clan leadership that had been chosen as Ruhl. His grandmother had been the last person in any of the clans to have direct contact with the Inahi. According to our treaties, the title and ability to speak with the Inahi passed to her eldest child. But that child died just a few years after coming of age, and the clans were left without a Ruhl until the eldest of the next generation reached their maturity. For eighteen years, the clans had been unable to communicate with the Inahi.

Until now. I uncurled my fingers to check the flower in my hand.

The only problem was no one was going to believe me. I had no connection to the Ruhlini. According to the elders, I shouldn't have been able to receive a message from the Inahi.

Though, there was nothing written in the folklore about the Ruhlini. Based on what I'd read, I believed that anyone could petition the Inahi and potentially receive a response.

After receiving what seemed like a message, I needed to figure out what it meant. Then I could prove that I was right, and the elders were wrong. Then they might believe that we didn't need the Ruhl to save our clan from the raiders.

Cradling the flower in my palm, I hurried over to the shelves that lined one wall of the study and searched our small collection for our book of folklore. I let my fingers crawl along the spines until they touched the familiar worn leather cover, imagining what it would be like when I finally got to attend the Magery in the spring. They had shelves and shelves of books that contained all the knowledge an apprentice needed to eventually become clan mage. Once I used this discovery to prove what a good mage I would be, there was no way Father would refuse my request to go after I came of age. And then, like my elder siblings, I would be able to finally have a place of importance in our clan.

With the book in one hand and the flower in the other, I returned to the table and collapsed into one of the hard wooden chairs. I pushed Goff's selections off to one side with my elbow to make room and gently set the book down. Before I opened the cover, I released the flower from my cupped hand and set it next to the book.

Flipping to the first story, I skimmed through the familiar tale of how the Inahi led our people to this land. This was one of the few legends that spoke of the Inahi revealing themselves to a human. My eyes scanned the page as I read the story of the last true mages.

I thought I'd memorized every word, but there, near the bottom of the first page, was a sentence I'd nearly forgotten.

A single, stemless purple flower rested in its place.

I kept reading until the rustle of the tapestry in the entry caught my attention. Then I lifted my head toward the sound and prepared my excuses.

My shoulders relaxed as Rys stepped into the room, still dressed in the black tunic with orange sunburst embroidered on the shoulder, marking him as a guard of the Nahl clan. Over his tunic, he wore a long vest woven with armor threads. His sword and a hunting knife hung from the belt wrapped around his narrow waist. My whole body warmed at the sight of him.

I leaned back in my chair and smiled. "You found me."

"I thought you might be here." He took a few tentative steps into the study. "I'm off duty until the clan meeting, but Dern said that I might find you here. He also said I should tell you that Goff's looking for you, too, now."

I sighed. "Is that supposed to be a warning? Or am I being summoned?"

Rys shrugged. "I'm just the messenger." He lifted the corner of his mouth in a half-grin.

I pushed my chair back from the table and stood. "Can I pretend I didn't get the message?"

Rys took a few more steps toward me. "And allow Dern to think that I ignored orders from a Nahlo?"

I closed the distance between us and reached for his hand to pull him closer. "Do you think he knows about us?"

Rys frowned. "He might suspect." He looked down at me and reached to rub a smudge of dirt off my face before letting his palm rest against my cheek.

I leaned into his hand. "I don't care, you know."

I searched his face, watching for a reaction. The Gathering festival marked the start of our courting season, and I

would come of age at the Midwinter festival in a few moons. It wasn't too soon to hope he might declare for me.

Rys leaned toward me and rested his forehead against mine. I shifted my weight onto my toes and pressed up until my lips were touching his. Then I wrapped my arms around his waist.

His lips brushed against mine with a teasing kiss. I pulled him closer, and he slid his palm from my cheek down along the side of my neck before kissing me again. I melted against him as his fingers slipped under my braid and caressed the back of my neck.

My lips parted under his, and for a few moments, there was nothing else. Just me, and him, and every place where our bodies touched. Then Rys pulled his lips from mine and sighed. He kept his arms wrapped around me and his forehead pressed to mine.

I opened my eyes. "Why did you stop?"

"We shouldn't. Not here."

"Where someone might see us?" I narrowed my eyes. "You think we should keep hiding?"

His thumb brushed against the side of my neck, just behind my right ear. Directly over my clan tattoo. The horizontal black bar had been inked into my skin during my thirteenth-year naming ceremony. The same tattoo marked my siblings and my father. It claimed me as part of the direct lineage of the leader of the Nahl clan, even if I was just an insignificant spare.

"This isn't the way I want them to find out," he said.

Hope flared in my chest, but before I could respond, Rys let his hand drop to his side. His eyes drifted to the table behind me. He nodded at the book and the flower lying on the table. "What's all this?"

“I think the Inahi left me a sign.” I stepped away from him and lifted the flower off the table. “I went to the edge of the forest to leave an offering, and I waited.”

“Did you see them?” he asked, eyes sparking with excitement.

“No. But...” I held the flower out to him. “This time, when I checked, I found these scattered around the rock.”

Rys pulled my fingertips closer so he could get a better look at the flower. “Moonbursts? Don’t they grow deep in the forest?”

Of course he recognized the flowers from our childhood afternoons spent hunting for signs of the Inahi and the fierce stormcats the folklore said they rode. All that changed the summer before my Naming, but the fact that he remembered stoked the little flame of hope that had sparked at his earlier response. I banked the embers and focused on my discovery.

“That’s what I thought too. But there were three of them spaced around the rock.” I drew a triangle in the air between us to illustrate. “They weren’t growing there. There were no stems, just the flowers.”

“What do you think it means?” He cocked his head to one side and lifted the flower to inspect it.

“I think it’s a sign. I’ve been re-reading the legend about the origin of the three clans. The one where Ruhala leads our ancestors to safety in the lost lands beyond the mountains. You remember that story?” I gestured at the book I’d been reading when he arrived.

“Of course,” he said. “Doesn’t she speak with the Inahi in her dreams?” He glanced down at the text. “I don’t think she ever sees them, does she?”

“No. She doesn’t. But listen to this.” I plucked the flower from his hand and set it down on the table before pulling the

book toward me so I could read the passage I'd found aloud.

“When they rested each morning at dawn, Ruhala would prepare food, leaving a portion of their meal for the Inahi. She stayed awake long after her children had fallen asleep, hoping the Inahi might come to her and offer their guidance. They never appeared before her eyes closed and she fell into dreams. In her sleep, she saw villages burned, destroyed by the invaders. She saw the last two mages drained of their magic. Thick grey clouds shielded her people from the eyes of Estrel, god of miracles and guidance. But Estrel’s son, Lorjad the Lucky, beckoned to Ruhala from the mountain peaks. Ruhala woke to find her offering had disappeared. A single, stemless purple flower rested in its place.”

“This has to be a sign from the Inahi. I’m so close. I know it.” I searched his face for a hint that he felt the same excitement bubbling inside that I did, but the only change I noted was a crease in his brow.

Rys bent over the book, but his eyes weren’t on the text. He studied the inside margin, then skimmed the pad of his forefinger down the crease between the pages. “It looks like there’s a page missing here.”

I nudged him over so I could look. Hidden deep within the crease were the jagged edges of a torn page. I flipped ahead a few pages, checking each seam. Then I flipped backward, checking again. “You’re right.”

Rys scowled. “I’m surprised no one noticed.”

I pointed at the text. “You can’t tell unless you look closely, and it seems like a reasonable end to the story. The next one starts on the next page. I wonder what could be missing. Maybe Mage-nah knows.”

“Maybe.” His hand rested lightly on the hilt of the knife in his belt. “But listen, if you go back out to the edge of the

forest, promise me you'll be careful. Please?"

I squinted at him, wondering what he wasn't telling me. "Why? The last attacks happened a full day's ride from here."

"Still. Did you bring your hunting knife with you?" His hands gripped my waist and guided me closer to him.

I nodded. "Of course. And the ones you gave me." I tilted my head so he could see the knives disguised as hairpins that he'd given me on my naming day. "Why are you so worried?"

"It might be nothing." He grimaced. "When I was on patrol last night, someone spotted a flash and movement in the forest. A few of us rode out to investigate. We didn't see anything, but I thought I heard something." He released me, then ran a hand through his hair. "It sounded almost like screaming, but it could have been the wind."

"You think it might be Merluks." I thought of the attack on his own family's camp years ago. The summer after his naming and before mine. Before the Scattering that year, we swore that we'd both declare as apprentice mages during the Midwinter festival. By the Gathering, everything had changed.

His family had taken their herd close to the coast to graze that summer. The elders blamed the attack on Agrion raiders that had somehow crossed the seas and made it past the veil. But Rys told me what he saw. He believed it was one of the creatures that the folklore warned lived in the deep forest. Since the veil was supposed to keep them out of our lands, no one we knew had seen one. Many in the clan believed they weren't real. Just stories meant to scare clan children away from the dangers of wandering beyond the protection of the veil.

The attack on Rys's family came in the dark of night. He stayed protected inside the tent. His father, who went out to defend them, died. His mother, who ventured out at the

sound of her partner's screams, barely survived her injuries. When they returned to the compound for the Gathering, Rys announced his intention to apprentice with the clan guard, instead. Nothing I'd said would change his mind.

He caught my hands in his. "The captain still thinks it's raiders, but I'm not sure. Just be careful, all right?"

"I will." I wasn't sure which would be worse, Merluks or Agrion raiders. Both should be impossible with the magic that protected our borders.

"I should go," he said, tugging me closer.

"I suppose I should, too. I need to get ready for the Gathering. Father will confine me to the lodge for a week if I show up looking like this." I gestured at my dust-covered tunic and leggings.

He bent his head for one more lingering kiss. "I'll see you there. We can talk more about your sign from the Inahi after," he said, before leaving.

But when I returned to the table, the flower was gone.

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