

POISON OF POWER

MAGE LORE PREQUEL

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PROLOGUE

AYLA,

You will be pleased to hear that my health is improving. I plan to travel with the Jahl clan's representatives when they leave for the Midwinter festival in Shal city. Since I doubt there will be enough time for us to catch up before the festival, I am sending this ahead of me.

Delna-jah and I have been spending time together as they have charged her with nursing me back to health. The arrangement has given us time to compare our memories of the events leading up to her sister's death. Each evening, after she retires, I've taken to filling the pages of this journal with my version of the story.

I don't know how much, if anything, you have been told about what happened and the role I played, and I thought it best that you heard my version of the events as they unfolded. This, combined with what Delna tells me was included in the journal she passed on to you, should give you a more thorough understanding of the blessing, or burden, you have inherited.

I only ask that you keep this information to yourself, for now. As you will find when you reach the end of my account, there is one important detail missing. I have left it out to prevent the knowledge escaping, in case this journal falls into the wrong hands. After the lengths I've gone through to keep that last

secret safe, I think it best to wait to share that final piece of information with you directly.

Looking forward to our reunion.

With love,

Sera

I SUPPOSE it all started when I returned to the plains to attend the Nahl's funeral. Though the story I want to share with you now isn't all sadness, it is a tragedy, so it seems fitting that we begin with death as well.

My mother, may her soul rest among the stars, was the Nahl before your father inherited the title. She was a fearsome woman, and I loved her even more because she was the one who let me go. Encouraged me, even when the elders tried to sway her mind.

I feared my brother, when he became Nahl, would rescind our mother's wish to see me educated as a mage, so that I might eventually take Mage-nah's place when he retired. Teron was so much older than me that we'd never been close. When he approached me as Mother's ashes drifted up to Estrel's waiting arms in the sky, I made my position clear.

"I won't stay." I frowned at the sky, resisting the urge to cross my arms like a stubborn child.

"Sera," he said, stretching his arm across my shoulders so he could tuck me against his side. "I didn't come to order you home. I came to comfort you."

His words caused me to tear my attention away from the pyre.

Certain that he was attempting to manipulate me with his kindness, I pulled away so I could meet his gaze. "I'm returning tomorrow."

"I know." He squeezed my shoulder. "I heard you the first time. I won't try to stop you."

Through narrowed eyes, I searched his face for the catch. "Perhaps *you* won't. But what about your guards? Will they? They are yours now, brother. Nahl. You can't say the elders haven't counseled you to—"

He raised his brows. "Marry you off to secure our alliances? Of course, they have. They remind me endlessly of your beauty and grace and how appealing you might be to Jeln-sha or Vehlm-jah, or even the Ruhlini's son."

"And you told them..." I let my voice drift off on the breeze, inviting him to fill the pause with his response.

"That they are correct?" He shrugged. "Of course. But I also informed them I will *not* be arranging marriages for any of my siblings unless it is what *they* want."

"Good." I sighed with relief. "Because I refuse to marry."

He scrubbed at his chin as he studied me. "None of them spark any interest in you?"

"None."

"Does anyone, sister? You know it matters nothing to me if you marry someone from a leadership family or not. I only wish for you what I have with Ema."

I stepped into his embrace and let my head drop onto his shoulder as I turned my attention back to Mother's ashes, drifting up into the darkening sky. "You take care of Ema and the baby she's carrying. Worry about them. I can take care of myself."

"You don't need to be alone to be a mage, you know." He put his arm around my shoulder.

A laugh bubbled up from my chest. "I know."

"Someday someone will see you for who you are, Sera. I know it. The question is, when they do, will you let them in?"

I shoved at his side, pushing away, but still smiling. "Your beliefs are

touching, but quite naïve. I sincerely doubt I will ever be troubled to answer such a question.”

“Because I’m wrong and you have every intention of giving your heart away once you find the right person?”

I snorted. “No. Because no one ever bothers to see past my title and appearance to really know me. Not well enough for me to feel as you do about Ema.”

He bent his head to whisper to me. “The gods can hear you.”

“So?” I folded my arms across my chest. “Solnat knows my feelings on the matter.”

“Solnat isn’t who I’d invoke in this case.” A frown tugged at the corners of Teron’s mouth.

“No?” That caught my attention.

“No.” He pulled something from his pocket and held it out for me to take.

I stared down at the rune inscribed on the polished stone he placed in my palm. “Forsla’s Navel?”

“You know the runes better than I do, but when Mage-nah helped me set out Mother’s Testament of Runes, that is the card I picked for you.”

I swiped the pad of my thumb across the inky black paint he’d used to transfer the rune marking onto the pale grey stone. “Acceptance of self. Really?”

Teron nodded. “Mage-nah also said something about courage, I think? Or that may have been the rune I picked for Harn.”

I slid out from under his arm. “Rune readings aren’t really my strength. Mage-sha always seems to be disappointed in the connections I fail to make between the cards. Connections that seem so obvious to her.”

“You still have another year of study at the Magery. I’m sure it will come with time.”

Caressing the smooth edges of the stone helped calm my tumbling thoughts. “Mother believed in me, and now she’s gone. What if the

elders are right? Tell me what you really think. Should I be satisfied with beauty and an advantageous political marriage?"

Teron wrapped his hand around mine, curling my fingers around the stone and pressing it firmly into my palm. "Mother is not the only one who believed in you. I do, too. You will make an excellent mage. And the last thing I want for you, or Harn, or Feln are loveless political marriages."

Tears stung the corners of my eyes. "Thank you."

He patted my hand. "Now come. As Mage-nah's future apprentice, I want you to have a look at Ema before you go. I was hoping you'd return for the birth, but I don't want to keep you from your studies. You'll meet the babe when you are home at midwinter, instead. You are returning for the festival, aren't you?"

I hadn't planned to return until after graduation, but it seemed one thing or another was bound to lure me back to our clan's compound. If it hadn't been for Mother's death, I might have considered returning to assist with Ema's delivery. But Mage-nah thought Ema's time would come before the full moons of the Gathering. It would be easier to stay and wait than to leave and return so soon. I was disappointed to miss the opportunity to learn. But I reasoned I'd have time to practice deliveries with Mage-sha, alongside the other apprentices in the city.

In hindsight, it might have been better if I had stayed. Perhaps then I might have gleaned some additional morsel of information that might have helped me later. But at the time, there were other aspects of serving as clan mage that seemed to be more immediately applicable given the few and far-between births that blessed our small clan.

"Mage-nah suggested that I assist with the naming and maturity blessings at Midwinter," I said as we made our way back toward the cluster of elders where Ema sat, waiting.

"It will be good for the clan to see you working alongside him," Teron agreed. "The vision of you in mage robes might even encourage a few more of those being named to choose the path of mage apprentice. Ever since the Jahl announced his tournament, we have more youth apprenticing as guards than ever."

“That bad?” I asked.

“He’s planning to host the first contest after our Gathering festival, when Uthea fully wanes. And he asked if I’d like to host the second event here, closer to Midwinter, when Saros disappears from the sky for a night.” He glanced up at the two waxing moons rising over the trees in the distance.

“Interesting. I’ve heard nothing of these events among the Shal clan in the city. Are they all combat related?”

“They weren’t invited.” Teron didn’t offer a reason. Instead, he explained, “Wrestling and knife throwing are the first two events. Eventually, there will be sword fighting and archery, but most guards don’t train with swords, or bows, for that matter. So, the Jahl agreed to give those who plan to compete more time to practice those events.”

It sounded like a waste of time to me. The veil surrounding our lands kept out foreign enemies, and there was almost never any danger within our borders. The Nahl clan barely had need of the guards we had, let alone more that were better trained killers. But Teron was Nahl, now.

I thought perhaps he was humoring the Jahl and assuming it would all be an engaging diversion, so I shrugged it off. “I suppose it will provide plenty of entertainment for the winter season.”

Our conversation ended there because we’d returned to the small gathering of elders and family, clustered together on the bluff to watch the pyre burn. The rest of the clan stood back from our group, giving us space to grieve in privacy, but still wishing to pay their respects to their departed Nahl.

When Ema spotted us, she pressed herself up from the boulder she’d found to rest on, preparing to greet me.

I waved her back down. “Rest. You don’t need to get up. You’re the Nahlini. You outrank me now.”

She remained half-sitting, half-standing and held out her hand to me. “Help me up, anyway. If I don’t move around a bit, I’m afraid I’ll lose all feeling in my toes, and I do hate the prickle-nettles.”

I took her hand and let her pull against me until she was upright. "You look healthy."

"You're kind." She smiled, steering me away from the elders and closer to the pyre. "I'm tired. Ready to be done."

"Not much longer now, according to Mage-nah. Then we'll have our heir." I winked at her.

She grimaced. "Gofye-nah left large boots to fill."

"Teron seems to handle it well enough, though."

Ema shrugged one shoulder. Her dark grey shawl slipped down, bunching in the crook of her arm. "It will be a long winter."

"Bad omens or bad harvest?" I asked, unsure what caused her concern.

"Neither." Her head turned to the side, eyes fixing on the mountains in the distance. "He told you of the tournament?"

I nodded. "It sounds like a harmless distraction."

She made a humming noise in the back of her throat. "Harmless is not how I would describe it."

"The Jahl clan have always been our allies."

She met my eyes, lips pursed. "Perhaps. But the Jahl is hungry, and he knows Teron isn't Gofye-nah."

I glanced over at my brother, talking with the elders. "Not yet, perhaps. But give him time."

"That is what I ask Jusala for every day. Time." Worried lines creased her forehead as she rubbed a palm across her round belly.

"It seems I should be directing my offerings to Forsla. At least according to Teron." I held out my palm to show her the rune-marked stone my brother had given me. "What did you get?"

That brought a smile to her face. "Solnat's Seeds. As though that weren't obvious."

"You will be an excellent mother." My heart twisted, thinking of my own mother, and my attention drifted upward, watching for her star to appear.

"I hope so." Her eyes followed the ashes floating up to the darkening

sky where the first pinprick of light glimmered to life, close to Estrel's star.

I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek at the first chapters of the upcoming Mage Lore prequel novella!

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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.

