

The Wrong Magic

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"I must commend you for upholding your reputation for quick wit and shrewd bargaining, my lord," Adair said. "Most human lords merely sign their advisors' handiwork."

Wolfgang chuckled. "A—"

"We Landeschneans pride ourselves in doing our own work," said a raspy voice. Adair peered down the high table at Father Jervis, Wolfgang's spiritual advisor. It was a pity there hadn't been others of higher status to push him further down the table than second on Wolfgang's left and third on his own. "His majesty adheres to that tradition most admirably."

"Thank you, Father Jervis," said Wolfgang, but he kept his attention on the elf king. "As I was saying, a negotiator of your experience leaves me little choice."

Adair raised his goblet in thanks. "For my son's sake, I hope your daughter inherited that wit," he said, gesturing at the empty seat between his guests. Princess Lili and his son Tarian had grown bored of the feast some time ago, and left to play outside.

"I fear she's inherited her mother's," said Wolfgang, draining the wine from his own goblet. "Alexandra's much cleverer than I." Father Jervis winced as if recalling a painful memory.

"All the better," Adair said, sending a servant to fetch more wine with a glance. "The gods know he needs friends his own age to sharpen his mind."

"They do seem to be getting on like a house on fire," Wolfgang said.

Adair snorted. "I pray not quite so well," he said, surveying the hall. Fashioned from the hollow of a great oak tree, its sides flowed out from the polished floor, curving overhead into a dome. Growth rings converged at the dome's peak, mirroring those on the floor. "Ours are rather flammable."

Wolfgang laughed. "Fear not, such powers are beyond her."

"As they should be," Father Jervis added, unamused.

Adair's face fell. "Of course." Addressing Wolfgang, he said, "With our official business concluded, will you be staying long?"

"No, unfortunately," said Wolfgang. "We must return north before snow seals the pass back into Landeschne."

"A pity. Tarian will be sad to hear that."

"As will Lili," said Wolfgang. "She's been enjoying our stay here, prince Tarian's company especially. She even asked if we could stay longer."

Adair's pointed ears perked up. "Oh?"

"Perhaps . . ." Wolfgang hesitated, then continued. "For some time, I've contemplated sending my children, when they grow older, to stay abroad for months at a time, to broaden their perspective on the world, form bonds with their hosts, better position them to rule after me. Perhaps you would consider hosting Lili here in Forabhainn once spring arrives."

"I hardly think that is a good idea just yet, sire," rasped Father Jervis. "Princess Lili is only eight."

Adair weighed the request. "Unfortunately, I must agree with Father Jervis. Eight is not old enough to be travelling here alone, even with servants. Perhaps in a few years, she might visit."

"I see," Wolfgang replied.

Adair sat back and took a sip of wine, studying his guest. Wolfgang was conceding far sooner than he had in their haggling only hours prior. Why—

"In the meantime," Father Jervis said, interrupting Adair's contemplation, "my Vierish colleagues—"

Wolfgang's grip on his goblet tightened. "Absolutely not."

"But sire, queen Alice is a close ally, the temple would be overjoyed—"

Wolfgang shot Father Jervis a dark look. "We have discussed this. I will *not* send her to Viere-land alone."

"And you have yet to explain why," retorted Father Jervis.

"I am also curious why you would prefer Forabhainn over your nearest neighbour, my lord," said Adair.

Wolfgang declined to answer as the servant returned with more wine, instead murmuring his thanks as she coaxed the wine out of the jug and into his goblet. Seeing the floating wine, Father Jervis scowled and decided to scrutinise his now empty plate.

This gave the elf king an idea. When the servant stepped around his counterpart to refill the priest's goblet, he stretched his hand out under the table, weaving power through a knot in the floor, guiding it up . . .

The servant stumbled as she went to pour Father Jervis more wine by hand, and it sloshed into his lap. The priest leapt from his seat with a yelp, his face twisting into a snarl as he stared at the crimson stain on his ceremonial robes.

. . . then smoothing it back out again.

"I'm so sorry, your eminence," she said, examining the now innocuous floor, and then the priest's robes. "Let me clean that up for you," she added, lifting her hand.

"Don't—" Father Jervis snapped, but Adair cut him off. "No, Eluned. You know humans, the devout especially, are averse to magic, ours even more than their own spells." To Father Jervis, he said, "I fear that would just add insult to injury, no?"

Father Jervis glared at Adair. He opened his mouth, paused, then narrowed his eyes. "Of course," he said, then gave his king a curt bow. "I'll be right back." He strode past Eluned out of the great tree-hall, pausing only to say something to another priest.

Adair stood as Eluned gathered the rest of the spill and took the now soiled wine away. "My apologies for Eluned's clumsiness, my lord. Walk with me while we await Father Jervis's return."

Wolfgang arched an eyebrow at the elf but did not protest. Outside, rows of towering pine trees and immaculate hedges lined the streets of the forest city. Leaves stirred in the evening breeze as Adair led Wolfgang through the forest to a small garden sheltered under a sprawling beech tree. He turned to the human king and said, "Your preference for Forabhainn over Viere-land was . . . surprising, my lord."

"As was your servant's misstep, my lord," replied Wolfgang.

Adair said nothing, wearing a patient half-smile.

Wolfgang sighed. "You spoke—" he started, but was interrupted by rustling in a nearby hedge. He spun towards it, alert. "Is someone there?"

Only silence greeted him, until the hedge rustled again. A bird stuck its head out, chirping in greeting.

Wolfgang let out a breath, relieved. "Damn bird. Nearly scared me half to death."

"Yes, just a bird . . ." Adair said as it flew away. He scanned the trees past the hedge, but found nothing amiss.

"Anyway," said Wolfgang, "you mentioned the temples' aversion to magic. The Vierish temples are the most adamant in that regard. It would be a death sentence to send Lili there."

Adair frowned. "Why? She's a human child with no magic."

"You think so?" Wolfgang bade Adair to follow him, and started off through the forest. They soon came upon the beech garden Tarian and Lilike had taken to frequenting. The children were dangling upside down from the branches of the tree, giggling together at some joke. Seeing the two kings approaching, they dropped to the ground.

"Father. Your majesty," Tarian said.

"Is everything okay?" Lilike asked.

Wolfgang knelt before his daughter. "Yes, everything's fine, Lili. Do you remember that trick you showed me on your sixth birthday?"

Lilike furrowed her brow. "I remember. You said not to tell anyone, ever."

"I did, but I think Adair needs to see it," said Wolfgang.

Lilike thought for a moment, then looked at Adair. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

Adair sat down on the grass. "I promise. Your secret is safe with me. Tarian?" He glanced at his son.

"Of course," said Tarian, taking his friend's hand.

Lilike gave Tarian a grateful smile and squeezed his hand. She searched the garden, then picked a white rose from a hedge, cupping it in both hands. Adair watched as it lay still, having curled closed for the night, but then it began to unfurl as if to greet the sunrise. It curled back up, and Lilike held it close.

Adair stared at the rose, his eyes wide. "No human spellcaster could do that, not at your age." He looked at Wolfgang. "Is she—"

"Elf-born!" rasped a voice. Lilike dropped the rose, and Wolfgang scrambled to his feet. Adair turned to find Father Jervis clutching a pine tree behind him, his face drained of all colour.

"What are you doing here?" growled Wolfgang.

"Father Gregor alerted me that you'd gone off in the elf's company," Father Jervis spat, advancing on Wolfgang and drawing a dagger from his sleeve. "And here I find you conspiring with *them*! Mortal magic is a sin of its own, and I've suffered our hosts' begrudgingly, but *that*"—he jabbed the dagger at Lilike, who hid behind Tarian—"I will not allow."

"No!" Wolfgang roared, getting between the priest and his daughter.

Adair stood. "*You* will not allow?" He raised a hand, flexing his fingers. His power flowed through the beech tree's branches, and they reeled back. "You forget, priest. *I* reign here." Adair curled his fingers back, and the branches crashed down on the priest's shoulders. He crumpled to his knees with a cry of pain. A flick of Adair's wrist, and the beech's roots tore themselves up from the ground, spraying clumps of soil everywhere, and wrapped themselves around Father Jervis from head to toe. The priest strained against his bonds but they held tight and muffled his protests.

Satisfied, Adair turned to Wolfgang. "Your reluctance to send your daughter to Viereland wouldn't have anything to do with this sort of behaviour, now, would it?"

"Yes," said Wolfgang. "The temple would kill her."

Adair considered for a moment, then sat down before Lilike and Tarian. "Fear not, child. No harm shall befall you in my realm."

"Thank you, sir," Lilike said, taking a step out from behind Tarian.

"I hear you've enjoyed your stay in Forabhainn," Adair said with a gentle smile.

Lilike nodded.

"Well then, how would you like to live here for a while?"