

## A Matter of Changes

“Who are you?” Callidus asked with a frown. He watched the woman approach from his position sitting on the steps of his tower. A tower he’d literally summoned to appear in this field before the deep, elven forest of Varinheim.

“I am Daselpha, a handmaiden to the princess Ephillia,” the elven woman replied as she stopped at the base of the stairs, looking Callidus over with a disapproving gaze. Behind her, the horse she’d ridden to meet with the wizard turned to smoke and drifted away.

“And why have you come to my camp rather than Ephillia?”

“As you are being blunt, I’ll be equally so,” she replied with a little frown. “The princess’ father and the council of elders are not happy to have you return. However, they acknowledge that your exile is almost at an end. A thousand years is a long time for a human man. They are under the impression that you are here to resume your relationship with the princess. His majesty and his council wish to know what manner of man you have become during your exile. And that is why I am here: to determine what sort of man you now are. However, it is mostly for Ephillia’s sake I have come. She wishes to know more about you. About who you have become since last you two were together. She cannot be here in person, but she grows impatient. Thus, I am here.”

“And just what is your relationship with Ephillia?” Callidus asked quietly, taking a more serious look at the woman before him. “Beyond your position of handmaiden?”

“We are friends,” the disapproving elf replied, her tone showing how she felt as clearly as spoken words. “The princess and I are confidants of each other’s secrets. Companions. Fellow students of the arts.”

“I see. And how does Ephillia feel about all of this?”

“In a word: conflicted,” she replied without altering her expression. “It’s been many, many times the entire number of years the two of you were together since you last saw one another. She loved you deeply then. But she is not the foolish young princess she used to be either. The other handmaidens and I feel equally sure that you’re not the same brash young wizard you were then either.”

“Yes, many changes have taken place within me,” he agreed, looking through the woman for a moment at things only he could see. However, it was only a moment and his gaze quickly and sharply refocused. “Now show me proof you’re here at Ephillia’s request.”

“My lady thought you might require proof,” Daselpha told him, apparently unphased by his penetrating gaze. She slowly pulled out a sealed scroll tube and handed it to him.

“Why are we taking classes on swordmanship from the elves again?” Katha asked as the four of them walked towards the training area they’d helped make yesterday.

“Because the elven bladesters tend to be the very best. Lots of time to practice, you understand,” Naeline replied with a grin, referring to the elves’ nigh immortal life spans.

“And they’re going to be able to impart what on us in the few days we’ll be here?” Katha asked.

Just one new trick can save your life in combat,” Denny suggested with a smile. “I know I’ve

been saved by various fighting tricks I've learned with the axe."

"I'll admit," Father Garnell, said with a frown. "Just becoming more confident with a sword would be a big improvement for me."

The noble woman nodded. "I'm sure we can help you with that Father. Beyond what we learn over the next couple of days."

"Yeah," Denny agreed. "I hadn't thought about it before, but I can train you on pretty much every weapon known to the alliance. In case you didn't know, I was the weapons master for the fifth army."

"Really?" Katha asked, apparently surprised. "I never knew that."

"I'm just full of surprises," the big man replied with a smile.

"Good," a droll voice declared from ahead in the training area. "I've been bored lately. A surprise or two would be a welcome diversion."

"Everyone," Naeline said with a gesture towards the tall, elven man, "This is Maestro Taelias Morrenstairis. He'll be our teacher."

"Yes," the elf agreed with a less than friendly smile. "Let's get right to it. I've only got two or three days to make you hate me. Let's not waste a moment."

"What are you doing?" Daselpha demanded of the wizard.

"Preparing," Callidus replied shortly.

"For what? And what are these items you lay out?"

"Each of these bricks is one of the foundation stones upon which a world was built. Placed there by the Creator or perhaps one of the great apprentices long, long ago. A brick for each world."

"So many worlds..." she whispered in surprise. In a more normal voice, she asked, "Why do you lay them out?"

"They are part of a thamaturgical defense spell I'll be casting soon," he replied absently and without slowing his preparations.

"Why would you need to cast such a spell? You're on the edge of the great elven wood of Varinheim. Surely nothing here warrants such a potent defense."

"The elves are about to be upset with me," he replied still appearing distracted.

"Oh?"

"Yes, it's true," he told her as he continued his preparations.

"Explain yourself human," she demanded with a full blown scowl when he failed to elaborate.

"Anything for a handmaiden of my dearest love," he replied with a combination of sourness and mocking in his voice. "I'm about to cast this particular elven forest into darkness. I'm thinking about adding a perpetual storm but I haven't really made up my mind about that yet."

"Why would you do such a thing?!"

"Because I came here to see Ephillia. Instead, I receive a letter from a handmaiden who is unknown to me. Until I see my princess, I'm not leaving. And until I get what I want, the elves are going to become increasingly uncomfortable. Uncomfortable people often take steps to relieve that discomfort. Hence the thamaturgical defense spell... and no few others as well."

"Surely you cannot hope to stand against the entire elven nation? This is madness!" the elf woman declared, becoming visibly upset.

"Actually, I *can* stand against the entire elven nation. And quite a bit more besides. I sent

a messenger into the wood. If I don't get a reply by midnight, I'm going to get started."

"You cannot do this," she declared, looking a tad desperate about the eyes.

"Oh, you are most mistaken, handmaiden Daselpha. I most certainly can do this. And I will."

She took a deep breath. "Please do not do this. I tell you true, this would be Ephillia's worst nightmare. She sent me and the letter to put you at ease. She will see you in due time. Forcing her hand... at the cost of the well-being of her people... that would not be good for anyone. Not you, not her, and not your relationship. She loves you and she loves her people. Making her choose between you... you might just as well cast her into the pits of hell."

"So there is more to you than a bad attitude," he stated with a raised eyebrow. After a moment of silent consideration, he continued, "You are here to learn my measure as a man. Very well. We'll be leaving soon. If you need provisions beyond what I can provide, I suggest you call for them. You'll probably need armor, weapons, and whatever magical protections you can bring as well."

"That was a very fast turnaround on your part," she replied with suspicious eyes. "You seemed quite determined to cast your foolish spell and yet you gave in most quickly."

Rather than reply, he looked her in her doubting eyes and began sending his various components he'd laid out away with a gesture for each and every item.

Eventually she determined that he truly wasn't going to answer her. "Where are we going to that we'd need armor and weapons?"

"The badlands... and beyond."

"Well, that should certainly be interesting. Ephillia," she declared, looking back at the woods, "My princess, you're gonna owe me for this."

"Oh, by all the horny demons in hell I loathe that man," Katha declared with a groan as the four students of the sword plopped themselves down wearily around the firepit Callidus had placed outside the tower.

"I think I may actually be in need of healing," Garnell agreed with a grimace. With a pained sigh he began pulling off his armor and boots.

"He does seem more... cruel than I'd expected," Naeline acknowledged, rubbing sore muscles in her arms.

"He's a good instructor," Denny stated, planting his axe into the ground behind him by way of the haft spike. "He knows there's not a lot of time to teach us. Therefore, he goads every last bit of effort from us. His use of pain and taunting as motivators are fairly common. His mastery of their use is not. Nor is his mastery of the sword. He may very well be the best swordsman I've ever seen. And that's saying something."

"Having fun?" Callidus asked cheerfully, walking out of the tower with several heavy, iron pans floating behind him, each of them emitting a sizzling sound and a delicious smell. Daselpha followed him, wearing a fine gown of yellow silk.

"Fun is definitely not what I'd call it," Katha replied with a frown. "You getting some training too?"

"In a way," the wizard agreed with a smirk. "This is Daselpha, one of Ephillia's handmaidens. She's here to accompany us and to renew and refresh my learnings in the arts of deception." Each of the pans landed in front of one of the tired members. Large goblets followed them as did packages

of silverware contained within napkins. When Callidus and Daselpha sat, the last of the floating dinnerware settled before them. "I thought you might appreciate an informal dinner after your long day's training."

"Mmm," Katha agreed.

"Mmph," Denny replied with a full mouth as he gave the wizard a quick tip of his goblet.

Daselpha gave the wizard a hard look for his comment about deception which he either ignored or failed to notice.

"So," Naeline began after swallowing a mouthful of sizzling meat, "You're here to join us on our quest. Do you have any idea of the dangers this will entail?"

"No," the elven woman replied with a shrug. "It makes no real difference. My lady asked me to go where the wizard goes. She would know the manner of man he has become. Therefore, I will go where he goes and learn what I can learn. It matters not whether you go to the next kingdom or to the far reaches of Hell. I will accompany you and I will learn."

"I can tell you what manner of man he is and save you a lot of trouble," Denny declared with a wicked grin. "He's a pain in the butt."

Callidus barked out a laugh, "You should listen to him little handmaiden. He's right."

"I know he's right," the elven woman replied, and though no heat touched her voice, there burned a definite fire in her eyes. "And I would appreciate it if you left off the descriptors when addressing me. 'Handmaiden' is sufficient. I also respond to 'enchantress' or 'mistress of illusion'. I am also a first knight of the bow and a scion of the dancing blade. Or, if you prefer, you may call me Daselpha or Lady Yurenni."

"It's been a long time since I've had an elf to torment," Callidus said with a lazy smile as he took a bite of his dinner.

Daselpha's angry look first became sour before a certain thoughtful calculation seemed to enter her eyes. Her small smile immediately faded as her attention focused on the skillet before her. "This is almost entirely made up of animal flesh," she stated with a frown.

"But of course," the wizard replied, apparently surprised. "The others have been training with the sword all day long. They need nourishment. This is the best nourishment available."

"Corima would have been a much better choice," she disagreed, referring to a meatless elven dish.

"Maybe for an elf," he replied with shrug. "Maybe. However, these are all humans."

"Oh," she muttered, pulling up a piece of meat on a fork. "Venison," the elf woman looked decidedly queasy.

"I'm surprised you don't like it," Callidus said, looking surprised. "Ephillia absolutely loves venison."

"Your memory has played you false," she responded with a dark look. "The princess cannot stand venison. It's incomprehensible how one could consider eating a creature one spoke with earlier."

"Ah, my mistake," the wizard replied with neither surprise nor apparent care. "But you need not worry about having had prior conversations with this particular deer. It lived and died on another world. It's been in stasis in my pantry for some time now."

"I think you mock me," the elf woman declared, standing up abruptly. "And I shall not stand for it." With that she turned and stalked off into the tower. Denny shrugged and pulled her pan of food over to him and started working on it.

"Why is she here again?" Naeline asked with a curious frown, looking after the departed

woman with a slight crease between her eyebrows.

“To learn about me,” Callidus replied before resuming his eating.

“So she’s going to report back to the princess about you?” Katha asked, taking a sip from her goblet.

“Something like that,” the wizard agreed.

“Then shouldn’t you be nicer to her?”

“No, I want her off balance,” he replied before taking a small bite of the hot food.

“Why?” Naeline asked with a puzzled frown. “Why are you playing games with this woman?”

“Because the game is there. You know, I think Daselpha and I will join you for your sword practice tomorrow.”

“I only paid for the four of us,” Naeline replied, blinking in surprise.

“That’s okay,” he said with a smile, his gaze far away again. “We’ll be practicing a little off to the side of the rest of you.”

“This should be good,” Denny stated with a grin and a shrug before taking a long drink from his goblet.

“You truly want to train with the sword?” Daselpha asked as she and Callidus stopped within view of the others in their training circle in the middle of a small, open field.

“Yes,” he replied, looking at the distant others a moment before focusing his full attention upon the elf woman. “I do indeed want to train with you, with swords. Is this acceptable to you?”

She looked at him a moment before nodding. “Yes, I think this will indeed be acceptable.”

He pulled out a pair of blades from his backpack. “Which would you prefer?”

“I can feel the enchantments upon them,” she said, reaching a hand over the blades. “Numerous spells preventing harm. And actually, I’d prefer them both.”

“Oh. Well, that’s unexpected. However, I’m pretty sure I have another training blade around here somewhere,” he said, reaching in up to his shoulder in the backpack and apparently feeling around for the sword in question. After a couple of minutes, he pulled out a sword in a worn leather sheath. “Yes, I believe this is it.”

Daselpha stepped forward and held her hand out over the sword. “Yes,” she agreed. “Very similar enchantments.” She then stepped back a few steps from him and took a defensive stance. However, seeing the look upon his face and his focus upon the blade in his hand, the elf woman relaxed a bit and commented, “That’s an odd look upon your face, human.”

“It’s been a couple of hundred years since I’ve held a sword. It feels strange... yet strangely familiar.”

“You were once very talented with such a weapon. Such talent fades, perhaps goes dormant, but it does not simply disappear. Something I will have to keep in mind during our training session.”

“Don’t you need to warm up or something?” he asked with a little concerned frown which was obviously meant to change the subject. He seemed to dismiss his own preoccupation with a deep breath.

“No, I do not,” she replied with a knowing little smile. “I’m an elf, remember? Our muscles and sinews are always ready for motion.”

“Actually,” he began, drawing his blade and taking up a defensive stance of his own before

relaxing again, "I'm not sure if I ever knew that or not. Ephillia and I practiced together with swords almost every morning for five years. However, we always practiced after we'd been up and about for a while. No real need to warm up or stretch out." He gave a quick salute and began circling around to her left. She returned his salute and shifted stance slightly with each of his steps.

"After I was banished, I spent a lot of time campaigning against the demon-tainted. However, I avoided working with the elven troops whenever possible. Didn't want to tempt any of them should fate present the chance for me to conveniently die if only a little help was given." He lunged at her and she easily beat aside the blade and counter-attacked. Callidus retreated quickly as she now began circling him.

"That was a waste of time," she declared with a frown. "No elf would have thought of such a thing." She feinted a lunge with her left sword and then came in with a sweeping attack from the right blade. He barely blocked her blow and this immediately led to the two of them rapidly exchanging thrusts and counter-thrusts. An onlooker might almost have thought the two of them were dancing.

"Don't be naive," he replied a few minutes later as she began circling him again. He had several small bruises to show for her efforts. "Elves are morally no better and no worse than humans. Which means supporters of Prince Sellirri would have been more than happy to help me move on into the next life. Don't delude yourself into thinking otherwise."

Daselpha blushed but said nothing. Her circling suddenly erupted into another prolonged attack which ended up with the point of one of her swords pressed into his ribs.

"Well, well," an almost musical voice said from nearby. "Handmaiden Daselpha, this is not the sort of behavior you should be involved in. This man has already slain a member of the nobility in such a duel. Best not to give him the chance to repeat the crime." Denny, Katha, Naeline, and Garnell standing nearby indicated that the elf speaking to them was the blademaster teaching them.

"Bladedancer," she acknowledged with cold eyes. "I understand the king is in court this morning. Perhaps your efforts would be more productively spent telling his majesty how best he should run the kingdom?"

"Ah," he replied with a mocking smile. "You think I speak above my station. I do not. I remain part of the defense forces, though I am mostly inactive in that role these days. Still, considering this man's history, you sparring with him is clearly putting your life in danger. Therefore, I must speak out... as my oath of defense requires."

"Very well," she returned coldly. "You have spoken as you feel your oath requires. You may now leave."

"Dismissed already am I?" he asked with an insolent smile. "Well, I can't say that comes as much of a surprise. Still, you are not the only one here, are you? And if I'm not mistaken, we are currently outside the elven kingdom as described by the laws of Ascillis. Therefore, in this place your command carries no more weight than a suggestion." He turned to Callidus. "What say you killer? Would you like to spar with another master of the blade?"

"Thank you, no," he replied sardonically. "I'm quite happy sparring with this master of the blade. And as I was just telling her, I've been rather avoiding situations which might bring more temptation to an elvish soul than the heavens... and my continued health... can easily bear."

"Really? And you used to be so good you needed not fear such things. Too bad time seems to have dulled your talents."

Callidus laughed and turned a more real smile upon the elven blademaster, "Are you trying to goad me into fighting you with a sword? That's funny. Sword fighting was a hobby of mine. A

hobby I enjoy but that's it. Now, if you really want to duel me, challenge me to a battle of magics. Please. I have need of a new house cleaner... though there's no guarantee that's the position I'll end up assigning you once you've lost."

"Ah," Maestro Morrenstairis replied with a sneer. "Well, it's good to see you still have the same cockiness that led you to murder so many years ago. Humans never change. I doubt they ever will."

"So says the cocky bastard who convinced a certain prince that because he was an elf, he was naturally superior to any human," the wizard replied with derision. "You're a racist bigot. Were then, apparently still are. Pathetic. All that time has taught you nothing. Go away Taelias Morrenstairis. And stay away until you've gained some wisdom." An unseen force moved the surprised elf away until he stood some hundred paces distant at the edge of the trees. Turning his attention back to Daselpha, he shook his head, "There's one in every crowd. Doesn't seem to matter about the race or the planet. I think the stones spawn them because they display a like intelligence unto rocks and they seem to always be crawling out from under them."

Against her wishes, the elven handmaiden laughed even as the swordmaster Naeline had hired stormed off into the elven forest.

"Oh, thank the angels," Katha sighed. "An early day. I was already sore and tired."

Frowning, Naeline asked, "That man. The one I hired. He put the prince you challenged, dueled, and killed up to thinking he could win?"

Daselpha's smile disappeared and Callidus' sardonic grin returned. "He's the one who put the prince up to challenging me," the wizard replied, his grin darkening and deepening. "It didn't take much to be sure. Prince Sellirri was hot tempered, especially for an elf. Full of himself too." He barked out a laugh. "I suppose that was a trait we both shared."

"Was?" Daselpha asked, her voice neutral as she looked into the woods where the other elf had disappeared.

"I suppose that's a matter of perspective and degree," he replied, wishing he could see her face to better judge her mood.

"Wait a minute," Denny stated, sounding as though what he was asking made no sense at all. "Are you saying you actually killed him in a duel using swords?"

"Oh yes," Callidus agreed with a frown, looking down at the practice sword he still held. "It was a long time ago. Back then I thought I could do anything. One day I met an elvish sword dancer. I thought I could do that. And I could. But not as well as I thought. Otherwise, I never would have had to kill him." There was no bitterness in his voice. Only the very faintest strains of an old, faded sadness.

"I always assumed that you'd killed him in a magic duel," Katha replied. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I've heard a minstrel sing that."

"Back in the town," Naeline began, sitting down with a wince, "An elf told us that you'd challenged the prince. It seems that no one remembers history perfectly."

"Only those who made it," Daselpha whispered, still looking into the forest. "And as with shaping trees, even memory slowly turns towards what we want to think and believe."