

## The Past Rising

“You’ve been awfully quiet the last few days,” Father Garnell told Callidus in a near whisper. The two sat off to the side at the edge of their camp. Dawn was still hours away and the two men were keeping watch despite the magical wards that protected their resting area. While not strictly necessary here, it seemed good practice for the coming areas where doing so would be a must. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” the wizard replied quietly, giving his head a little shake. “Sometimes certain memories arise on their own. Bittersweet these memories....”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

With a self-mocking grin, the wizard said, “It’s an old story. Boy meets girl. Boy kills girl’s cousin. Boy is banished from the girl’s homeland for a thousand years. Boy misses girl.”

“I believe I’ve heard a portion of this story. She was an elven princess, was she not?”

“Aye. With eyes of the purest emerald green you ever saw. Honey colored hair which framed her lovely face. Features strong, yet at the same time incredibly delicate. Skin which the finest silk must envy. Her laugh the most joyous sound I’ve ever heard. Her counsel the wisest. I once went an entire year without thinking about her. The longest length of time by a long span.”

“Allow me to guess. A very busy year?”

“Yes. There was a war. I spent many years crossing worlds and hunting down dark wizards and practitioners of dark arts. The first year I had so much to learn that I pushed her memory away. Then, like now, it came back to me. Bittersweet.”

“How much time is left on the thousand years?”

He frowned, “I’m not honestly sure. The elven calendar is a little different from that of mankind. I.. I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Are you worried that it might be finally closing on the time or are you worried that it is not?” the priest asked gently.

“Maybe both,” Callidus replied a bit distractedly with a suddenly thoughtful frown.

“Why?”

He shook his head as his frown turned inward, “I’ve changed. I was more innocent then. More foolish. Over the years I’ve matured. And hardened. I was full of myself then. Very proud. Perhaps arrogant even.”

“Some might say that hasn’t changed,” the priest told him with a gentle smile.

“Perhaps,” Callidus nodded, not seeing the humor or ignoring it. “But I can back up my arrogance now in ways I could not have dreamed about then. When the incident happened, I was only just coming into my true power. Now I am here. I can do things even you probably can’t imagine. Things I myself could not have imagined at the time. I’ve done things I had not done back in those long past days. The first person I ever killed was her cousin. He challenged me to a duel and I had no recourse but to kill him. Or so I thought at the time. Since then, I’ve thought of any number of alternate things I could have done.”

Shaking his head, the wizard continued, “During the wars that have come and gone, I killed many, many people. Having seen what those butchers did, I have no regrets about having done so. But every experience changes a man. The war made me harder of spirit. I know this. And I am not sorry for it. But I’m also not sure she’ll recognize me. And that’s assuming she’s still waiting for

me. She swore an oath to do so, just as I swore to wait for her. Doubt burns like no other fire and cuts deeper than any blade ever forged by the hands of mortals.

“Yet at the same time there’s so much I’d like to share with her, Garnell. Wonders I have seen and experienced. Traveling across worlds. So many new places and peoples. Riding gryphons and dragons. The inner and outer planes of existence. Incredible scenes of beauty, both natural and those crafted by the hands and appendages of intelligent beings. But will she know me? Does she still love me? And if she does either, will she fear me?”

“And that last question haunts my dreams....”

“I cannot know what rests within the heart of another,” the priest said slowly. “But I can tell you, if she loved you truly then, that flame will likely rekindle quickly. You are different. And she will most certainly be different as well. Perhaps the same fears burn in her heart as well. Do not expect an instant return to the way things were between you. Instead, perhaps you should take the time immediately following your reunion to get to know her all over again. And give her time to do the same.”

“You’re not like most priests,” Callidus replied after a moment with a thoughtful frown.

“How so?”

“You actually make sense. Too many simply shrug their shoulders and throw it all to the angels or the Creator. Not terribly helpful that. What you’ve told me though... that I can think about... and perhaps build upon.”

“Then I am glad we had this talk.”

“Surprisingly enough, so am I,” the wizard replied before walking off into the night.

“These are the hills of Dain Brannagh,” Callidus declared, gesturing towards the distant hills ahead of them.

“Then we’ll be out of these accursed badlands?” Katha half asked, half demanded as she wiped sweat off her brow for what seemed like the thousandth time today.

“For a little while,” the wizard agreed.

“Where’s the elven outpost?” Naeline ask as they resumed walking. “Assuming it still exists of course.”

“You see that slightly higher hill near the horizon?” Callidus asked, pointing. “That hill is actually several hundred paces higher than the ones around it. The elves keep watch from there. In a little valley at the base on the backside of the hill there is a town. Or there was a town.”

“Have you tried scrying to check and see if it’s still there?” she asked, studying the distant hills.

“No, I haven’t. Hadn’t really thought about it. I suppose the danger of someone counter-scrying is minimal. I’ll do so when we camp tonight and see what there is to see.”

“Are we that far away from the hills that we won’t get there tonight?”

“I seriously doubt we can make it with what’s left of the day. Determining distance in the badlands is difficult, but at this pace I don’t think we’ll get there. Perhaps tomorrow.”

From further back in the group, Denny demanded, “So why don’t you just whisk us there by magic?”

“Because you people still need physical conditioning and hardening,” Callidus replied absently. “You less so than the others but even your endurance has some room for improvement. As a group

you are gaining endurance and muscle tone. You'll need that and more before it's all said and done."

"Well, the elven outpost is still there. It would appear the town has added some counter-detection magics but they seem to be standard elven work and I'm familiar enough with it to peek around despite them. The town is a little larger than I remember it but I suppose that's to be expected."

"How will we be received?" Katha asked.

"Well," Naeline began quietly, eyes looking ahead, "as a noble of the House of Casserni and a member of the Dolgath senate, I should be able to get us quarters as visiting dignitaries. Both my house and my country have always gotten along well with the elven nations and to my knowledge have a good reputation with them. I don't think that will have changed."

"Then I should probably enter separately from you," Callidus stated, looking ahead towards the top of the watch hill.

"Why is that?" Naeline asked.

"I have history with the elves. Some of it not good."

"What exactly does 'not good' mean?" Denny asked before the noblewoman could respond.

"It means I killed a prince of the high court some time ago. The elves will not have forgotten."

"The Princess Ephillia," Katha blurted out, to everyone's surprise including her own.

"Just so," Callidus agreed.

"Are there any who would look upon this as a good thing?" Naeline asked, thoughtfully.

"A few," he admitted. "The prince I killed was arrogant in the extreme and not a particularly nice person. He persecuted the Aurenstayas or Daystar clan mercilessly. He was also rumored to have attacked a princess of the Vioshalli or Eldar clan but I never heard if that was more than rumor or not."

"Who controls this town and lookout post?"

"Last I heard they were part of the Caspiallosi or Silver Ash clan. Chances are they will not remember me fondly. Those who are old enough to remember me anyway."

"Odd to think of a human man being older than elves," Father Garnell said with a smirk.

"I suppose it is at that," Callidus conceded without truly paying attention. Just where his attention truly was remained unclear but no one in the little band truly thought he paid attention to where his eyes looked..

"Well, these are certainly nice rooms," Garnell stated with a smile.

"And they include a bath!" Katha declared in a voice filled with jubilation.

"Think we'll be able to find a suitably talented silversmith while we're here?" Denny asked, smiling at Katha's happiness. More seriously, his gaze turned towards his leader, Naeline. "And will we keep up a watch while we're here?"

"I don't think we'll need to keep watch," the noblewoman replied after a moment. "However, a warding on our doors would not be amiss," she said with a look to the priest.

"That won't be a problem," he agreed with a smile. "I'm getting to be most proficient with

that particular prayer thanks to all the recent practice. And I must admit, I'm looking forward to a day or two without wearing this infernal armor."

"We all need a little rest and relaxation," Naeline agreed. "Just don't overdo it. And by all means stay out of trouble. That goes double for you two," she said with a grin for Katha and Denny.

"What me?" Katha asked feigning shock.

"Yes you!" the noblewoman replied with a fond smile. "Now I'm off to see if the baths are up to the quality they should be. I'll let you know how they are in a day or two when I get out."

"What bathing facilities do they have?" the priest asked.

"Huge copper tubs which they fill with hot water," Naeline replied. "At least that's what the mayor's wife assured me...."

"Do you hear that?" Denny asked interrupting, turning his head towards the door.

Katha nodded, "Sounds like a commotion downstairs." The four of them exchanged looks between them before walking quickly back down the stairs.

"I never would have believed it!" the elven man who ran the guesting house declared in his nearly musical voice as they entered the main room.

"Believed what?" Naeline asked, looking around for any sign of what the commotion might be about.

"Callidus! The exiled elfslayer himself! He's here. In our little town!"

"The wizard?" Katha asked.

"The very one!"

"What's he doing here?" Naeline asked.

"I don't know," the elven man replied sounding worried. "I think he was wanting to stay in town. That's what Errilos, the baker said. Of course the guard captain will have told him 'no' by now. I certainly hope this night does not see the wizard spilling more elven blood."

"I will second that hope," Garnell stated, looking outside into the bustling little town with a little frown.

"What do you know about the duel in which Callidus killed the prince so very long ago?" Naeline asked curiously.

"Well, as you said, it happened long ago, even by elven standards," the elven man began, his eyes focused on the windows. Turning back, the guesting house keeper was surprised to see he had a most interested audience. "It is said that the wizard and the Princess Ephillia of the Jerrenarri were in love. However, she was to become betrothed to her cousin, Prince Sellirri also of the Jerrenarri. Their marriage was intended to heal a growing schism within the clan."

"What happened?" Katha asked.

"Well, the prince received word that the woman he was supposed to marry had been seeing a human. He immediately went to the capital. According to the stories I've heard, there was much arguing amongst all three of them. The wizard challenged the prince to a duel and struck him down. He was later charged with illegally dueling and banished from the elven wood of Varinheim for a thousand years. For not doing more to stop the duel, Ephillia was sentenced to not leave the Varinheim for a thousand years. It is said she walks in sadness to this day."

"When was the thousand years over?" Naeline asked.

"It's not," he replied. "This is the last year. And by the elven calendar, it ends upon the spring equinox. We were actually talking about it earlier this year... and about a decade ago as well as I recall. We'd have never guessed that the wizard would come here though."

"How long until the equinox?" Garnell asked. "According to the elven calendar?"

“A little under two months. Not that you can really tell here on the edge of the badlands.”  
The four of them exchanged looks again.

“Is there a silversmith in town?” Naeline asked.

The elf blinked for a moment at the sudden change of topic but quickly recovered his thoughts. He was quite happy to recommend a fellow not three streets from the guesting house.

“Well, that was weird,” Denny declared four days later as they rode out of town leading a pair of pack mules.

“It was at that,” the lady Naeline agreed with a frown. “How well do you think these horses will hold up sergeant?”

“The fellow said they were bred from a desert horse of some kind from some elven desert kingdom I’ve never heard of. They’re supposed to be very tough and used to rougher environments than the badlands. And if they’re not, we can always eat them.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Naeline replied dryly.

“So when will Callidus be rejoining us?” Katha asked.

“I’m already here,” the wizard replied, dropping down somewhat on a flying carpet.

“Oh!” Katha startled. “Hey, nice carpet!”

“Thank you,” he replied. “Do you like the amulet? I scribed a bit while in town and watched their crafting. Have you noticed any difference wearing it? Either of you?”

“I do like it and yes, I’ve noticed a difference... but I can’t really explain what it is. Father Garnell, can you explain it better?”

“I feel more in touch with my angelic benefactor,” the priest replied with a smile. “I also feel more at peace with myself... and more sure than ever that we’re doing the right thing by putting a stop to the production of the soul metals that our quest ultimately entails.”

“Let’s hope you still feel the same way when the going gets rough,” the wizard said quietly.

After riding for a while, Denny asked, “I take it that your talks with the elves didn’t go well?”

“No, not well at all,” the wizard acknowledged with a shrug.

“Well?” Katha asked when she figured out he wasn’t going to elaborate.

“Well what?”

“Well, please tell us about what happened!”

“There’s really not that much to tell,” he replied with a small frown. “I asked to stay in the inn and was denied as soon as I gave them my name and they figured out I was the ‘elfslayer’ as they seemed to like referring to me. The guard captain from the outpost then showed up along with the town mayor and half a dozen wizards and warriors. First they wanted proof that I was who I said I was. Then they insisted that I leave. I didn’t care for their tone of voice.”

“And that’s when you turned them into toads?” Denny asked.

“What?!” he demanded, sounding annoyed. “No. I most certainly did not turn them into toads... I turned them into goats. Toads are not very useful. Goats however, make great garbage disposals. And then I summoned one of my towers from out-world and placed it in that delightful little park.”

“We noticed,” Naeline replied with a moue. “As did everyone else in or near the town.”

“You know,” Callidus said with a smile, “It was rather humorous. I met with the mayor’s wife when she came to pull her husband away from the flowers he was eating and to lead him home.

She asked me if I planned on undoing the transformation when I left town. I told her that yes, I would do that. She asked me when I would be leaving. I told her Midweek.” He then laughed aloud, “Her response was to ask me to stay a few extra days until Endweek. Turns out I wasn’t the only one annoyed with the fellow.”

Denny chuckled at this while the others smiled.

“So,” Naeline began, a short while later. “Where are we bound to this time?”

Callidus gestured vaguely ahead of them, “There’s a mine about fifty leagues into the badlands. This is one of the places where the base material for the soul metal comes from. Seemed like it might be a good idea to find out as much about these infernal metals as possible.”

“Whatever this metal is, it will be the lesser component,” the priest stated.

“That it will,” he agreed grimly. “But every little bit of knowledge helps. And so will disrupting production.”

“Now you’re talking my language,” Denny chimed in with a wide grin.

“We’ll discuss details about the mine after we camp,” Naeline stated with a concerned look ahead.

“As you wish.”

A little while later Garnell cleared his throat a touch anxiously. “Umm, Callidus... we heard something back in town that you need to know.”

“What’s that?” the wizard asked, flying lower.

“We spoke to the elf who kept the guesting house. It would appear that this is the last year of your exile from the elven land. In fact, there’s only two more months left of it. Evidently you were exiled on the spring equinox and this coming equinox is when your sentence ends.” The wizard didn’t seem to hear for a moment but simply rode along on his carpet staring ahead. He then started quietly chanting a spell. As the others rode, they wondered what he was doing besides making the already brilliant sunlight brighter. Soon they were having to shield their eyes against the intense white light. Then suddenly the light was gone. And they were no longer riding through the badlands.

Instead of bare dirt beneath their horses hooves, they now rode over green spring grass. Ahead of them some five hundred paces, a forest spread out to the left and right as far as the eye could see.

“Let me guess,” Naeline stated with angry eyes. “The elven wood.”

“Welcome to a good view of the Varinheim,” Callidus answered. “Yes, this looks like a good spot to do some training. You should also be able to trade with the elves if you so desire to try. Being here with me will probably damage your reputations with them but you’ll also probably be quite popular as they will most likely be curious about me.”

“We have a quest that needs attending,” Naeline declared, making an obvious effort to rein in her temper.

“Yes, we do,” the wizard agreed, eyes locked on the great forest ahead of them. “I have not forgotten. This little side trip won’t take too much of our time. And with a little luck you can all find elven trainers to help you hone your skills. When I’m done here, I’ll accelerate our approach to the mine and we can pick up ahead of where we left off.”

“What is your plan?” Garnell asked, studying the wizard.

“To camp. I’ll summon one of my towers. You’re all welcome to stay within or not.”

“And then?” the priest pressed.

“Then we talk to the elves.”