

## Chapter v, The Begining of Exile

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Wednesday, 08 June 2005  
Last Updated Monday, 05 September 2005

Her eyelids did open,  
the act achieved with reluctance, for to awaken to the physical  
weakness of her body and the wound within her spirit was sufficient  
cause for her to wish that she was dead.

"Ah, you do awake at last; I did begin to wonder if I did but  
stand watch over a pair of corpses." Dragging herself to her knees, the  
effort causing her stick-like limbs to begin trembling Ae'thenal did at  
first make the mistake that it was Naideth Morningstar who did lean  
upon her spear. Only it was not, for it was Nimine Starbrow who had  
stood a night's watch over them. Nimine with her armour and weapons  
that had been hers when she had been of the Maiden Guard, her seven  
years of service at an end before both Si'anelle and herself had been  
born into this World.

"It is my true desire that I had not awoken Nimine," Ae'thenal  
did reply as her eyes did fall upon the Banepearl where it did lie half  
covered by the tattered ruin of her cloak. Dark as the night's core a  
flicker as of flame did show itself beneath its smooth surface as if it  
did give acknowledgement that she was now one of its damned guardians.  
Casting her cloak the more fully over the hateful object she did say,  
"To sleep forever in death, to know no more of this World, this is my  
one and true desire."

And in response Nimine Starbrow did take the three quick steps  
necessary to reach her before she did bestow a ringing slap upon her  
face. As Ae'thenal did raise a trembling hand to her cheek, her sudden  
tears wet on her face Nimine did knot her fingers in her cloak and by  
main strength lift her to her feet. "Might well you stink unwashed as  
if you were numbered among the beast creatures of a Chaos Lord  
Ae'thenal, daughter of Telimis; - Telimis, your father who did breath  
his last in my arms on Finuval Plain. But you shall not give voice to  
the Doom that does lie upon you while the entire company of Si'anelle's  
household does stand outside this pavilion; in hope that by their love  
and continued service they shall see the day in which their mistress is  
restored."

Releasing her Nimine did now shove her towards a basket that  
did lie upon the ground within the empty and bare pavilion. "You live  
Lady Ae'thenal, so eat and gain you some small measure of strength. Or  
will you have me feed you by force?" With the weakness that was  
afflicting her, she could do no more than fall to her knees beside the  
basket that did contain small loaves of waybread, a flask of water and  
an assortment of fruit. Her shame did now lend a hot flush to her  
cheeks and it did seem Nimine did take a measure of satisfaction at the  
sight as she did stand over her.

"When I was a child you did also chastise me," Ae'thenal did  
say as she did lift a weary hand to claim a small loaf. Nimine did wait  
to see if she would indeed eat before she did go to kneel at

Si'anelle's side.

"And I shall chastise you again as often as is needed in the coming days since your father did give your care into my hand Lady Ae'thenal," was Nimine's reply as she did put out a hand to awaken Si'anelle. Though her hand did pause as she did speak again, the gaze she did lay in her direction level and without compromise. "You did make an oath to your friend Si'anelle; I would now remind you of it. For it is that oath alone that may serve to ward and protect Si'anelle until the day her Doom may be undone."

"It does seem all do know of my childhood oath Nimine," Ae'thenal did sigh as she did take yet another unwanted bite at the loaf in her hands.

Nimine's expression did remain severe as she did tell her, "When Alarielle our Everqueen did see that Si'anelle's household would not abandon their mistress and that all her arguments for a flight to safety did fall on deaf ears; she did seek me out and inform me of your oath Ae'thenal. Our Everqueen did most carefully instruct me that the Banepearl's hold upon Si'anelle is in a small fashion confounded by the love you do hold for your friend. And that perhaps it shall prove to be the Banepearl's undoing in the end."

As Nimine's hand did at last begin to shake Si'anelle awake Ae'thenal did drop her eyes to look upon the ruin her tight clenched hands had made of the small half eaten loaf of waybread. "You were all foolish indeed not to abandon Si'anelle and I Nimine," she did say.

"Aye Lady Ae'thenal, foolish indeed," was Nimine's reply.

If her own despair had been a dreadful thing, in Si'anelle it was the worse. For alive within her friend was the full knowledge that in claiming the Banepearl beside the pool 'Despairing' she had become its servant. That the Banepearl did possess the terrible power to destroy Alarielle, Everqueen of Avelorn, and that it had been her love and desire to serve her Everqueen that had been the key which had released the Banepearl upon the World.

On Si'anelle's awakening Nimine did have take her sword from her, for in the moment Si'anelle's eyes did flutter open, her hand had sought the blade that had been Arhaindir Moonhand's own sword. And in her friend's despairing act Ae'thenal did herself perhaps discover the means to confound her own despair. For her love for Si'anelle had reawakened within her and to spite the Doom that did lie upon them she did now struggle to aid Nimine as she could to tend to her friend. By every means that did fall to her wits she did labour to persuade Si'anelle to eat. By open pleading, by sharing alternate bites from the same loaf, by the use of coarse language in her frustration that would cause an Orc to blush; Ae'thenal did not care. Though once or twice she did observe Nimine's habitual severity surrender to a smile while she was about her task.

While she had given herself to the business of making Si'anelle eat, Nimine had been gathering together their few sorry possessions

that did lie scattered about within the pavilion. With care Nimine had even collected together those parcels of waybread that still did have their wrappings secure about them and had placed them once more in Si'anelle's pack. Apart from the carpet upon which Si'anelle and herself had passed a night in fevered sleep the pavilion was bare of all its former furnishings which did tell Ae'thenal that many hands had been busy around them while they did lie unknowing.

"I can eat no more," Si'anelle did tell her in a soft sad whisper as she did push away her hand. Between them they had eaten a good half of the basket's contents so Ae'thenal did decide that even Nimine would not find fault if she did now cease to harass her friend. "We were to be abandoned Ae'thenal," said Si'anelle as now she did let her eyes range over the pavilion's interior. Those eyes well sunken in their sockets and set within a face in which her skull did lie close beneath her pale skin.

"However your household retinue did refuse to abandon you Si'anelle," Ae'thenal did reply. "They do wait outside for us." Si'anelle's thin fingers did knot together as she did stare at them as if she could not believe they were her own. Of the blood that had stained her hands there was now no sign and Ae'thenal could predict that this was a part of the cause of her friend's agitation.

"None the less we were to be abandoned Ae'thenal," she did say. Putting her feet under herself Si'anelle did stand, sway and go down on one knee and finally rise with the aid of Nimine's hand upon her arm. Her eyes did find the Baneppearl then and with a cry she did fall upon it and take it up in her hands. Flame did crackle between her thin fingers as the wicked thing did awaken at her touch and this time when Si'anelle did rise to her feet she did need no aid.

"Behold," she did hiss in a voice filled with hatred for the object she did hold in her hands, "the death of the Elven race."

"Only if you do permit it to be so My Lady Si'anelle," Nimine did say then her expression calm before the mistress of her household's anger. "As your champion and commander of your female guard I do claim the right to ask of you My Lady, if you are still worthy of our oaths of loyalty. For I did observe as you did take up the Baneppearl in your hands that your health did once more become restored to both yourself and also your friend the Lady Ae'thenal."

At this Ae'thenal did now find her feet and stand, discovering that the weakness and trembling in her limbs had departed. And that her body was no longer a wasted thing within her armour and clothing. Her eyes sought out her friend seeing her fierce beauty, though whereas yesterday there had been love and joy shining from Si'anelle's face, in this present hour her friend's features had become hard and cruel.

"You dare to question me Nimine Starbrow," said Si'anelle her voice tight with a cold fury. With a tensing of her hands and with her jaw set she did extinguish the flame within the Banepearl in proof that she was its mistress and not its slave. "Both my mother and my father did die at the hands of the Dark Kindred. This trap of Chaos did use my love for our Everqueen of Avelorn to bind both myself and Ae'thenal to its fell purpose; - and you do ask if I am still worthy of your oath."

Standing straight and with her hand resting on the hilts of her sword Nimine did reply, "Yes, I do ask this of you Si'anelle, daughter of Arthaindir Moonhand, and more I will demand. Speak aloud the name of Isha."

With her fierce gaze leveled on Nimine her champion Si'anelle did say, "I do ask for Isha's mercy upon Ae'thenal and I Nimine Starbrow." And when the Banepearl did quiver in her hands and hiss with renewed fire she did make it once more still and quiet despite the pain it did cost her.

"And now you Lady Ae'thenal," Nimine did demand of her as her eyes did seek her out.

"Am I so marked that you do need this test Nimine?" she did ask. "Our Everqueen did think me worthy of her trust to guard and ward Si'anelle forever." Except that the severity of Nimine's expression did inform her that she would indeed have this test of her, or else she would die by her hand for all her being her foster child. Biting her lip she did first look towards Si'anelle and then she did say aloud, "Isha alone is my protection." The pain that did knife into her in the aftermath was not more than she could bear, though it did display itself to her foster mother's eyes in the tight tensing of her jaw.

"Not yet then numbered among Chaos's servants," Nimine did say her eyes upon them both. "Our Everqueen was wise to command me to make this test."

"A foolish test," Si'anelle did reply with a fierce impatience, "for it may have cost your death Nimine Starbrow."

In response Nimine did but incline her head, "In failing my death would have been but the first of all our race My Lady Si'anelle. However now we do know we are safe for a time and perhaps we may in the days ahead learn the means to undo your Doom." Bending a little she did pick up Si'anelle's sword from the cache of their belongings at her feet and offer it to her mistress. Taking her sword from Nimine's hand Si'anelle did kiss the blade before sheathing it, her act strange and fierce and not an act that Ae'thenal did recognise as being a one her friend had made before this. Next Nimine did put her spear into her hands and Ae'thenal inclined her head to acknowledge her foster mother's trust while Nimine did exchange a rare warm smile with her.

Si'anelle did moan softly then as her fierce cruel manner did seem to slip away from her as if it was a discarded cloak. With her voice now marked with the beginnings of despair Si'anelle did tell them both, "The Banepearl hungers," as she did raise it in the cup of her left hand, the wicked object a denial of light in its blank darkness. And may Isha give of her mercy Ae'thenal could feel the whispers of that restless hunger within her own soul as her friend's fearful gaze did touch her. "I do pray Ae'thenal that we shall find wicked creatures in need of death and soon." Si'anelle did say softly as she did claim her pack from the ground and begin to wrap the Banepearl in sky blue silk.