

## Chapter vi, We shall quit Ulthuan

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Before this day an

occasion for her to be riding her horse Nadimar would have been an event to enjoy, only Ae'thenal could find no pleasure in the act. At her side Si'anelle did sit motionless upon her horse Finaith, her hands loose folded on the saddle brow, while with the reins held in her grip Nimine did walk at Finaith's head to do the work of guiding the beautiful dappled grey beast for her mistress.

Thanks to the efforts of

Nimine's female guard Si'anelle was now bathed and groomed, her golden hair flowing loose over her shoulders, her armour over her long white undertunic and green leggings a flawless sheening silver. Even though that armour was a mix made from her father's long coat of scale mail and Si'anelle's own breastplate and helm with the worst of their ill-fated quest's dents worked out of the metal; her friend at least did have the look about her of being a Noble Lady of Avelorn, trained to the sword and bow and worthy to lead her retinue. The same work had been expended on Finaith, his coat was brushed into gloss and all the gear of his barding shone to rival his mistresses own wargear. Though as Ae'thenal did glance down at her friend's boots she did find a small regret that even all the skill of Nimine's ten female guard had not been able to entirely banish the wear and staining from the leather.

As for herself she had not escaped her foster mother's

attentions. Her scale mail worn over the same green and white clothing as her friend had been lifted from some store chest since her own father's wargear had been lost on the Plains of Finuval. Though like Si'anelle her helm and breastplate were her own. The shield slung at her back did bear the Eye of Isha as did her friend's and she like Si'anelle did carry a longbow and a full quiver of arrows at her saddle as well as her spear and sword. All this being the gifts of love and loyalty that Si'anelle's retinue had given to them in the hours after they both had walked out from the abandoned pavilion of their Everqueen clothed in the tatters and dirt of their foolish and ill-starred quest.

With her hand clenched tight about the smooth shaft that did

bear aloft the war standard of Arhaindir Moonhand Ae'thenal did not believe herself to be worthy of this honour. Might well she be of high birth, the last of the line of Telimis with no other living kindred.

Fostered into the household of Arhaindir Moonhand as an orphaned babe.

Companion and friend to the Noble Lady Si'anelle from childhood who is also the last of her line with no other living kindred. But all this could never make her worthy of this standard that did display the full moon in the night sky amidst seven bright stars as its device. For all the urging on Cedwyn Brighteye and her foster mothers' part that she should take this standard with its weight of honour up in her hand.

As she did wonder over the tides of fate that had brought her

as an orphan to become Si'anelle's friend in the aftermath of a most terrible war against the forces of Chaos. And how the innocent joys of childhood had led both Si'anelle and herself to this present moment; Si'anelle did speak quietly to her. "And who shall we fool Ae'thenal; with our bright armour and our banner. The journey we do make is a one that does have its ending beyond the shores of Ulthuan and if we are fortunate indeed we may be permitted to depart unmolested by Elvenkind." Her friend's tone was despair itself. Might well she be whole and in health, her face now more fair in its beauty than it had ever been; but despite this Si'anelle did sit her saddle with her

shoulders slumped and her eyes dull. Her hands like life did no longer dwell within them. "It would have been better if in truth we had been abandoned Ae'thenal, than make this false play between us that the House of Arhaindir is still worthy of honour."

"It is done for the sake of those would not abandon you Si'anelle," Ae'thenal did sigh as she did acknowledge the truth of it. "For ourselves it is easy to taste the word exile and not gag. Whereas for your retinue they do still hold to hope in their love and loyalty." "And do you hope Ae'thenal?" her friend did ask of her then as she did turn her head a little in her direction. "For I do not."

"I do no longer know Si'anelle," she did reply for she would not permit herself to shelter in a lie. "However know that I shall not ever abandon you while I do live."

"Sweet and foolish Ae'thenal," said Si'anelle and then she did laugh without humour, the sound despairing and terrible as they did make their way beneath the ancient trees of the Forest of Avelorn.

When Nimine Starbrow had led them out from the white pavilion that had been their Everqueen's the sight that did greet them had caused Si'anelle to weep. While Ae'thenal did wonder at what would be the final quantity of tears they would shed before death did close their eyes, she did look upon Si'anelle's silent retinue gathered in their ranks, beneath their proud banners that had been old even before the year of her own birth. 'So few,' she did tell herself, sensing the shadows of decline and the ultimate fading of Elvenkind from the World. If she did count Cedwyn but twenty archers stood beneath their banner; and of her foster mother's female guard gathered about their standard bearer there were but ten if she did count in Nimine. Upon the laden baggage wagon there did sit two male children of tender years supervised by Elanise who was with child. The first she-Elf to be with child within the household of Arhaindir Moonhand since the days of the Great Chaos Incursion, for the two children sitting silent and wide eyed beside her were but fosterlings without other kindred, their parents dead at fell hands these past four years.

Near blind with her tears Si'anelle had gone to her people, each a one of them taking her hands in their own in their turn and speaking kindly to her. Demonstrating by these small acts that they did still know her as Si'anelle their Lady, which Ae'thenal did know with regret in her heart, would only serve to deepen the wound her friend did carry within her. When all had given their greeting to Si'anelle and while her friend did now stand amongst her people as if she did in truth believe herself to be utterly alone, Elanise did call out to her by her name and title. Made ungainly by her pregnancy she did kneel within the baggage wagon and offer both her hands to Si'anelle. And Si'anelle did go to her, raising up her hands to Elanise when she came to stand beside the baggage wagon, but hesitating before their fingers did touch.

"You are my Lady, Si'anelle daughter of Arhaindir Moonhand," Elanise did say to her not disguising her impatience in any measure. For she was one of Nimine Starbrow's female guard and had fought the Chaos hordes on Finuval Plain when she was younger. "And you will also be the Lady of my babe; if I did possess any apprehension I would have departed yesterday evening with the Evercourt." Now she did reach out a little more and claim Si'anelle's hands in her own and say, "My Lady."

The shriek of utter despair Si'anelle did loose then caused all about her to stand as if transfixed, but moving quickly Nimine did hasten to gather her Lady into her arms and guide her towards her own pavilion that had not yet been struck. Nimine's female guard falling in with her and even Elanise calling for aid to be helped down from the baggage wagon and going into the pavilion to care for Si'anelle.

A hand did touch her arm then. "Lady Ae'thenal."

"Cedwyn Brighteye," she did reply as she did incline her head towards the archer champion. Cedwyn dark of hair and handsome in his prime, and with his keen eyes that had gifted him his name now focused upon her.

"I would ask of you if you did in truth know that the Lady Si'anelle did not intend to hunt within the forest when she did make her leavetaking of me."

Bowing her head and with her face colouring in her shame she did reply, "In truth I must tell you Cedwyn that I did know."

And the archer champion's hand did now grip her arm the tighter and he did shake her with his anger now worn openly upon his face. "To make search for the Baneppearl," he did accuse. "I did think of you as possessing some small measure of intelligence Ae'thenal." A scream of utter fury did build within her breast, "We did not know!" Her voice did cut across the clearing like a storm wind as she did break free of Cedwyn's hold. "We did not know Cedwyn Brighteye." Now all of Cedwyn's archers did look her way, weapons being touched in their uncertainty. When Cedwyn did take a step towards her she did hold him back with the blade of her spear, the Baneppearl's terrible strength within her, which did cause her to be of a sudden very afraid. Closing tight her eyes she did moan aloud and bury her weapon's blade in the ground before turning her back upon Cedwyn.

"The thing was beautiful Cedwyn," she did say as her tears did escape her eyelids, "its song was pure and it did heal our bruised and weary bodies. When we did make our returning, light did go before us driving away the night's shadow and not a one of the wicked creatures within the forest did prevent us." Sighing she did unbuckle her helm casting it aside, then she did draw her sword and discard it. "By the pool 'Despairing' a one of the Baneppearl's witch guardians did sieze me in her grip Cedwyn Brighteye. And she did mock me and my oath to Si'anelle; saying she would take me down into the pool if I did prevent Si'anelle from claiming the pearl. So chastise me if you will Cedwyn,

because you can not be the more harsh than I am with myself already."

Her hands had been busy with unbuckling her breastplate when Nimine her foster mother had quietly laid her hands upon her wrists and drawn her away towards Si'anelle's pavilion that did stand by itself within the clearing. She had gone without protest, not meeting the eyes of any of Cedwyn's archers in her shame as she had passed them by. Knowing in truth that she could not cast off her fault by the simple act of discarding her weapons and armour. And terribly afraid in the certain knowledge that if she had indeed been successful in removing her armour and clothing without interruption, she would have torn her flesh from her bones with the nails of her own hands.

Two hours afterwards she and Si'anelle had walked out from her pavilion flanked by Elanise, Nimine and her female guard. The both of them in appearance seeming to be two Elven ladies of high birth richly girt as for war in the absence of their Lord to lead his people. Save that Arhaindir Moonhand, and Telimis, called the brave, would not ever walk this World again. And that the silver Ithilmar, and the white and green of Avelorn did feel false upon their backs.

Si'anelle had raised up her voice as Cedwyn and his archers and the two children with Cedwyn had turned their faces towards them. "I shall quit Ulthuan," she had said, her despair locked in a fierce struggle to overpower her resolve. "For beyond our homeland's shores it will be the more difficult for the Baneppearl to work its evil against Alarielle our Everqueen. In this hour I do hold not a one of you to the oaths you did give to my father or myself. In the name of Isha go in peace." And Si'anelle had clung to her hand tight enough to bruise as the Baneppearl did punish her for speaking Isha's name, and clung on in her anguish while not a one of her people did make any move to abandon her.