

Chapter iv, For I Am the Lesser Servant

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Again she held the Banepearl in her hand; - and again the Banepearl had so sorely harassed her Si'anelle with its hunger that her dear friend had fainted in the saddle from the punishments it had wrought upon her flesh. With her mouth a tight line upon her face Ae'thenal now swung her leg over Nadimar's back to dismount. It would have been better if they had not had that month of rest with the Elf-kindreds of Athel Loren, for after knowing an easing of their burden it was now the more difficult to once more suffer the Banepearl's wicked demands. Soft within her mind the Banepearl whispered to her in its hissing speech as she did make shift to go to aid her friend, though as its lesser servant it did not have so great a hold on her as it did Si'anelle and she could find strength enough within her in this hour to ignore its threats. 'At least for this present time,' Ae'thenal did tell herself. For soon enough the wicked thing would begin to work upon her, testing her will with its punishments until it did at last force her to obey.

Bronwyn and Jean-Marie both were endeavouring to lift Si'anelle down from her saddle as she did join them, Finaith standing patient as they struggled in their attempt. Ae'thenal did know in truth that she would have flung the Banepearl down in the dust and given of her full strength to the task had not Sebekneru amazed them all by stepping in close to Finaith then and bodily lifting Si'anelle from their hands. The black giantess thrusting them all aside, though not in an unkind fashion, as she had taken up Si'anelle as if she was but a child in her arms. "Ain't no weight at all in the skinny bit," Sebekneru did say before she began to stride towards the doorway of the stone tower with her burden. Though for a single moment the giantess's face had betrayed her concern at the wasting that did lie upon Si'anelle's flesh. This change having been wrought upon her face and body during the hours of their march to this valley. Ae'thenal did know well enough this extremity of the Banepearl's punishment, for had not the wicked thing worked the same wasting upon her own flesh often enough before this when she would not obey. Now Jean-Marie was hastening after Sebekneru and giving instructions to the giantess that she did want Si'anelle placed within a good bedchamber, and that she did want certain items swiftly brought to her. An earthenware bowl of clean water, a brazier; - then she did turn her head to call to Bronwyn to bring her pack from Cloud, - but Bronwyn had already anticipated her need and had claimed her pack before a one of Peledym's Gladeriders had come to lead their horses away.

Before this day Jean-Marie had employed her craft twice to bring to Si'anelle a temporary release, even though the task would leave her fatigued and trembling in the aftermath. And if by Isha's mercy Jean-Marie could win her friend a release in this hour then Ae'thenal did know she would also benefit for a time. Which they did in truth greatly need, for there were none who were deserving

of sudden death close by, and the Banepearl's increasing rage at its unsated hunger would soon cause it to seek to force them to take of any who were of the living. Even if they were well beloved companions or kindred or not.

As Ae'thenal made haste to follow after Jean-Marie and Bronwyn, Sebekneru having already ducked her head beneath the tower's portal, she was forestalled by a hand that did grip her arm. "A word Lady Ae'thenal," a well spoken voice did say to her. Though as she did now fling off that hand with a fierce strength that the Banepearl had shifted itself to gift to her, a long sword blade fell lightly to her shoulder, coming to rest with a touch that was near gentle against her neck. And others in a like fashion did also come to rest about her throat as the six Swordmasters of Hoeth moved in close to surround her. "My Lord Sindinath," she did tightly hiss at the principal one of their company. "Is this in truth the day you shall spill my blood and close my eyes in death?" Her defiance alive within her gaze she did look over each a one of them. The secret fear within her heart had been spoken aloud, and speaking aloud her fear did seem to serve well enough as a dispell for her secret terror, for in this moment she was not afraid. Except that now her eyes had fallen upon Talieth Mistborn who stood beside the high born Elf and it did take all her strength not to play hazard with the sharp blades about her throat and close with her.

Her face impassive as she gazed upon her the Wood Elf enchantress did for a moment stand with her staff held tight gripped in her hand before she spoke aloud. "See my Lord Sindinath she does in truth hate us and would harm us." "No, not so Talieth Mistborn," Sindinath did say then as he did firmly shake his head. "We have afterall prevented the Lady Ae'thenal from attending her upon her friend. And since the Lady Si'anelle is unwell I do think we sorely test the Lady Ae'thenal's patience at this day's end." At that Ae'thenal did incline her head towards the Swordmaster glad enough to discover a wiser head in her present company, for all that she did not trust Sindinath Swordmaster's motives. Though she did perform the act with care given the six sharp blades at her neck. "Then my Lord suffer me to go to my friend for I do not know of any word that may be spoken between us that will make shift to the curse that is upon me."

"Oh sly," Talieth Mistborn did say then with a harsh laugh. "My Lord, she is given by the Banepearl to know our thoughts as if they are her own; - and now she does attempt to seek a twisting path to elude us in our purpose." Which did cause Ae'thenal to cast back at the enchantress with a rising anger, "Do you truly believe I would wish to invade the thoughts of all about me Talieth Mistborn? Even though by the Banepearl's gift that I could do if I did want such a knowledge. If I do use the gift at all I do use it to the avoidance of harm to our company." "Indeed," Talieth did smoothly reply, "then it is true enough that you and your dear friend do heavily depend on us all for your continued safety do you not?" Without a thought that she did hold the Banepearl cupped in her left hand Ae'thenal did immediately tell the enchantress, "It is Isha's hand alone that is over us all and is our true protection....." But she could not complete that which she would have said for her nerves had taken fire within her

flesh and she could do no more than scream aloud in agony. And then did fight against the wicked thing that did blaze with dark fire beneath its silken wrappings in her hand. Crying out, "Isha, Isha, Isha....," until at last she could finally snuff out the flames and she spilled over slack limbed to fall heavily with a clashing of her armour upon the beaten earth of the compound, the Banepearl rolling free of her hand to lie more dark than the deep places of the World upon the ground.

It was Sindinath Swordmaster's arm that did raise her up so that she could sit and catch her breath. Taking the flask he did now offer her Ae'thenal did swallow a little of the watered wine it did contain. As always in the aftermath of such a fight she did feel clean and pure, as if the flames had searched her and burned away the dross. For a time her despair would be gone and she could deceive herself that the Banepearl's power had in truth been broken by her act of defiance. "So do you consider her to have passed the test my Lord?" As her eyes did flick up at Talieth Mistborn Ae'thenal would have sprung to her feet and struck the Wood Elf enchantress, save that Sindinath was swift to restrain her. "Go now Talieth," he did say to her as Ae'thenal struggled against the Swordmaster's strength, five long blades a barrier against her and their sharp edges too close a warning for her to ignore. "Before the new day does dawn we shall again meet with you to discuss these events and make a judgement."

Pursing her lips Talieth did then gather her Autumn toned gown about her and make to depart. Though before she did this, she paused her staff in her hand. The crystal bound to the top of the length of green and living wood gleaming with its own inner light. "Slaanesh does seek after you Lady Ae'thenal," she did say softly as if in warning. "When I do look upon you and your friend it is as if I can taste the cloying sweetness that is that Lord of Chaos's mark. Think you on this Lady Ae'thenal; - in those days before the Banepearl did enslave you was it commonplace for your friend to ever name you 'Sweet Ae'thenal' at each time she did speak with you? Or for you to clasp her hand and hold it close to your breast?" For a brief moment the enchantress's severe manner did seem to soften but a little and her eyes seemed to be more kind. "Indeed Isha is our protection Lady Ae'thenal. Even unto death when Isha shall gather our souls close in her arms," she did quietly say. "If I did sorely test you this hour, and have so raised your anger with my close watchfulness these past days that you did wish to slay me barehanded it was done to a good purpose."

On hearing the enchantress's word's the desire to lay a hand on her to do her harm did fade away within her. Now thoughtful Ae'thenal sat quiet and watched as the enchantress quit the circle of Swordmasters that did still surround her. Talieth Mistborn walking with an unhurried step as if the

scattered groups of
 Sebekneru's women who did stand and stare were of no concern to her.
 That none of Elf-kind within the compound did seem to hold an interest
 did not a thing to
 sooth Ae'thenal's pride, for she did know well enough that her own race
 tended to be the more subtle about their observations. And in the
 aftermath their gossip
 and speculations would be in truth no less than that of Sebekneru's
 women. "Talieth Mistborn does serve the Mother's darker face," she did
 say then speaking to her own inner knowledge and as she did raise her
 eyes to meet and hold
 Sindinath's gaze the Swordmaster did silently nod his head once in
 answer. "Before Si'anelle and I did go upon our ill-starred quest
 within the great forest of Avelorn, neither a one of us did know in our
 innocence of the tastes that all do
 seem to wish to accuse us of," was her further comment as she did now
 find her feet wary of the blades about her and stand upright. "Perhaps
 in truth it is no
 more than the fashion in which Isha did make us....." And here
 Sindinath did have to lend her his support as she did once more
 discover that the Baneppearl's
 hold on her had not been defeated afterall.

"Then you do admit the truth of it Lady Ae'thenal?" The
 Swordmaster did now quietly ask her, his words seemingly polite enough.
 Though perhaps to her ears
 there was the sound of an accusation in his tone. "And how may I know
 what is true my Lord?" she did ask as swift as an arrow from the
 gathering dusk her despair did make a return. "If now Si'anelle and I
 did
 still walk the glades of the forest of Avelorn in innocence, and
 without any knowledge of the perfect pearl the great toad did own; -
 would we in truth still hold
 such a tender love each for the other, - tell me that? Before this we
 did name it a true and close friendship, - now others would give it a
 different name." Sindinath did look grave before he did speak again,
 though Ae'thenal did wonder if his manner was as sincere as it did
 seem. "I do have no answer for you Lady
 Ae'thenal," he did say at last. "But I and my companions shall think
 hard upon it and perhaps with Isha's grace we may find a truth that we
 may honestly give to
 you." "I cannot look upon you save as my executioners my Lord," was her
 blunt reply as her fear of him did reawaken within her breast. "I am
 fearful indeed that any
 truth you may find shall spill my blood and the blood of my dear friend
 upon the ground." And as she did now turn to go she did say, "At the
 ending of the
 World we shall be the last of Elf-kind and alone; - perhaps then our
 destruction at your hands will be the kinder fate Sindinath
 Swordmaster."

The circle did part for her and let her pass, the long sharp
 blades about her withdrawing, but for all that the eyes of the six
 Swordmasters of Hoeth did betray a
 trace of compassion for her so that Ae'thenal could not bear to look
 upon a single one of them. Bending she did pick up the square of sky
 blue silk from the
 ground, the memory raw within her of how Si'anelle had folded it within
 her pack before they had set out to seek the pool 'Despairing'. Sighing
 she did put out a
 hand to scoop up the Baneppearl, though before she did her anger did
 rise anew and she did speak aloud Isha's name to taunt the thing of
 Chaos. And did say it

again as pain like knives did search her flesh. And yet again until she did burn clean and new, her despair having fled into the young night so that she was free once more. She did hear Sindinath Swordmaster's voice behind her then. "Beware Lady Ae'thenal, for though you do call on Isha to ease your spirit, first you must cross a dark landscape sown with pain to attain your release. Already you do begin to delight in the agony you must suffer to earn the few spare moments of freedom you do crave." Without turning her head she did say, "Before you Dechala servant of Slaanesh did speak to Si'anelle and I in a like fashion my Lord." Sindinath Swordmaster's hand did fall upon her shoulder then and he did by force make her face him. His eyes were hard as he did say to her, "And that wicked creature of Chaos did speak true Lady Ae'thenal; - for even a servant of Slaanesh will betimes tell a truth amidst the lies. Be warned, for even Dechala did at one time pray with an honest heart to Isha before Chaos did seduce her to its service."

"Then slay me now," she did shriek at him as her hand fell to snatch up the Banepearl and clasp it close. "For I am indeed doomed and beyond all hope." Then springing to her feet she did run out into the night, thrusting her way past the tall Norsca women who guarded the holdfast's gate. The warrior women calling out to her in their surprise and alarm. And she did run hard across the night's country until she could run no more and she fell on her face beneath a stand of dark and silent trees. Then she did weep as if her heart would break, the loamy ground her pillow and the dark night her blanket.