

Chapter i, The Tragic Tale of the Noble Lady Si'anelle of Avelorn

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It is said that beside the pool named 'Despairing' within the Forest of Avelorn there does dwell a great toad...." The Elf lady did lower her lashes, her unpleasant smile hidden from Si'anelle's sight as she did continue to address her companions. "It is also said that this great toad does possess a pearl of peerless size and beauty. And should any of pure intent risk the dangers of the forest, asking of the toad to gift the pearl to them, the toad will give of it. So long as the pearl shall be a gift to another and the name of the one chosen to receive the pearl be spoken with an honest heart."

Becoming annoyed Ae'thenal spoke aloud from where she did stand beside her childhood friend. "My Lady, - and does this great toad of which you speak possess a storehouse of pearls to be gifted away. For it does seem to me that this is no more than an idle tale without substance."

Lowering her lashes a second time the Elven lady bowed her head, her beautiful face showing not a sign that she was discomfited in being contradicted in her tale. Though her haughty companions did make a gift of their scowls upon seeing that it was but the Noble Lady Si'anelle's unpleasant ill mannered friend who did dare interrupt their conversation.

"Lady Ae'thenal," and this was given with a sigh as if the sight of her wearing her light armour, cloak and mud stained boots was altogether too much to bear. "Before all here present I do assent that this tale is truth. The great toad does own but the single pearl, and the pearl will be gifted in the manner of which I have spoken." With a wave of an elegant hand the lady courtier of the Everqueen dismissed her. Now she did incline her head towards Si'anelle. "Noble Lady," she said her voice silken. "I do understand that soon our Everqueen will give thought to the selection of new candidates to her Maiden Guard." And having said this she did bow her head slightly a second time before departing with her companions.

Clenching her jaw upon the harsh curse she did fully wish to cast after the foolish creatures in their fine gowns and silks Ae'thenal gave her attention to her friend. Only Si'anelle did merely stand at her ease watching the lady courtiers as they did make their way across the clearing towards the pavilion of the Everqueen. "So it shall be soon then Ae'thenal," she did say quietly.

Knowing that since she was but a child Si'anelle had treasured the desire to be of the Everqueen's Maiden Guard, Ae'thenal placed her hand gently upon her friend's shoulder. "You should not hope too much Si'anelle." For how many times now had Si'anelle awaited the outcome of their Everqueen's selection of candidates. And how many times had Si'anelle wept in the aftermath.

"You do doubt my qualification Ae'thenal," accused her friend

and Ae'thenal sighed. "I have laboured long under Cedwyn's instruction until my fingers did bleed from contact with the bowstring. And I have suffered his drilling with a sword in my hand until my arms could not lift the sword's weight and I did sink to the ground afflicted with a great weariness."

"I do not question your skill with bow and sword my Lady," replied Ae'thenal knowing full well that it had been Si'anelle herself that had been driving the intensity of her instruction and not Cedwyn.

"My Lady?" Si'anelle threw at her annoyed. "And when has there been the need for formal titles between us Ae'thenal? I do possess a good singing voice, I am fleet of foot, my loyalty to our Everqueen is unquestioned."

Ae'thenal sighed. It was truth that perhaps their Everqueen did not possess a more loyal and willing servant in the Lady Si'anelle, but it was also truth that for one of the Elven race her friend was not remarkable in her beauty, and while Si'anelle did sing well enough, her voice was not especially fine. As to fleetness of foot and grace in movement none could question her friend's ability with weapons, though it did always seem that Si'anelle's grace did desert her in the moment she did no longer have her sword in her hand. "Perhaps it is your age that does tell against you Si'anelle?" she said in the hope that she had selected the least hurtful truth. For herself she had long ago abandoned any hope that her Everqueen would speak aloud her name within the secret glades and welcome her into her Maiden Guard.

"Now you will tell me it is well time I did chose a consort and forget the fancies of childhood Ae'thenal," said Si'anelle her violet eyes flashing accusations. She folded her arms the angle of her narrow chin warning Ae'thenal that now was not the time to make any such suggestion, nor any other that Si'anelle would not be glad to hear.

"Let us walk together Si'anelle," she did suggest. "The day is fine and mild and there are better matters for us to give thought to than tales told by cat tongued courtiers who do overtax their wits with their intrigues." Ae'thenal was glad when her friend did seem to be willing to agree with her suggestion and for a time they walked side by side beneath the trees of the ancient forest, though Si'anelle's silence did give her cause for concern.

"The lady courtier did assent before witnesses that this great toad does exist Ae'thenal," said Si'anelle at last breaking her thoughtful silence. On seeing the direction her friend's thoughts had been taking Ae'thenal was now indeed concerned.

"You can not be serious Si'anelle," she did immediately protest. "The lady did seek to discomfort you full in the knowledge that you do desire to be of the Maiden Guard. Any word she did speak in your hearing must be judged ill until it can be proved beyond question that it is indeed truth."

"I do accept that her words were spoken to wound me Ae'thenal," replied Si'anelle with a shrug that said she did think this to be of small account. "However I do not believe she did speak less than the truth in speaking of the great toad."

"Within the Evercourt truth is a many coloured creature given to glamors Si'anelle," warned Ae'thenal knowing that her friend's open and honest nature did leave her open to the many small cuts and wounds gifted by those who served the Evercourt. Si'anelle was all that she did see before her, a Noble Lady who did rule her household with a fair hand and whose retinue would serve her with devotion until her life's ending. Sharp tongues as barbed as any deamon's had passed comment that her friend did have the makings of a good war captain in her. And this was truth enough, despite the insult that did lie hidden within these words, that did imply that Si'anelle did lack an Elven Noble Lady's graces. However if it did come to a choice between her friend and the Evercourt's intrigues Ae'thenal was glad Si'anelle did not possess the doubtful qualities essential to survival within the Evercourt.

"Will you accompany me on a quest to seek out the great toad Ae'thenal?" Si'anelle did ask of her then.

"You do know I shall," replied Ae'thenal without hesitation for all her misgivings. "Did I not swear to you as a child that I would go with you to the very end of the World and face all dangers by your side."

"Only we are no longer children Ae'thenal," Si'anelle did say then with a sigh as her hand did come to rest on her sword hilt. "And the dangers will not be creatures of our imagination."

With a smile Ae'thenal did rest her hands upon her friend's shoulders, "And because we are no longer children we shall best the dangers within the Great Forest of Avelorn Si'anelle."

Though in truth she did wonder why Si'anelle did wish to seek out this great toad and it's peerless pearl. If the pearl could only be claimed if it was to be gifted to another why would Si'anelle wish to seek it? Then she did see the truth of her friend's intent. Si'anelle did wish to gift the pearl to their Everqueen in proof that she was worthy to be counted among the Maiden Guard. Well then, perhaps in this there would be the ending of the matter. Either Si'anelle would be chosen, or she would not in the aftermath of the giving of her gift. Ae'thenal did only hope that her friend would accept the finality of

her Everqueen's decision if she was once again not chosen.