

Chapter iii, A Returning

Contributed by Anne Welborn
Wednesday, 08 June 2005
Last Updated Monday, 05 September 2005

The path beyond the clearing was deserted to Ae'thenal's relief and of the imp who had been their guide there was no sign. But to her amazement the path that did run its way between the great trees was not in darkness, for as they did take their first steps upon it pure light did go before them defeating the night's deep gloom. Further amazement did soon follow; - whereas before their journey into the forest had been one of difficulty as they had searched out the way past cruel thorns, deep bogs and other obstacles. Now it did seem as if the forest did open a way to them, permitting them to walk beneath the ancient trees in safety. No hosts of fell creatures did gather to oppose them, though Ae'thenal could sense well enough that many eyes did watch their passing as they did journey on through the silence of the night.

As the dawn did begin to colour the sky they did find themselves standing within a clear space amongst the trees looking down upon the bright pavilions and tents of their people. The white silken pavilions of their Everqueen that did serve as her palace at the centre of this her city in the forest clearing below them.

"A single night Ae'thenal," Si'anelle did laugh then as she did look out over the bright and colourful pavilions and did raise her hands to the dawn sun. Surrounding the pavilions of their Everqueen and encircling it with their long bright bladed spears gripped in their hands did stand at least a full fifty of their Everqueen's Maiden Guard. Si'anelle's smile as she did look upon the Elf maidens in their white cloaks and bright silver armour did rival the sun and Ae'thenal was not suprised to discover that she too was smiling. They themselves were not a sight to rival the Maiden Guard with their cloaks stained and in tatters, their helms and light armour bearing dents and smears of mud, and their boots loud with slime. Though despite this they were both well and whole, bourne up by the pearl's sweet music so that they were neither afflicted with weariness nor marked and pinched by hunger.

"Let us go down and make our returning Ae'thenal," said Si'anelle her joy making her seem as if she was a child again, free of spirit and innocent of the World's cares. Infected by her friend's mood Ae'thenal did laugh aloud her own spirits light and soaring free. Claiming Si'anelle's hands in her own they did run in wild circles amongst the trees giggling as if they had forgotten they were adults who did have sober responsibilities. Until finally some measure of sense did return to them and now rendered breathless they did begin to descend the wooded hillside arm in arm.

When the ground beneath their feet did become the more level and they did see the morning's light spilling between the great trees and the clearing beyond, their spirits did soar free again. And so it was that they made their returning, bursting out from the forest near to the white silken pavilions of the Everqueen as wild and uninhibited as two children playing a game. Those Elves who were abroad, courtiers in their fine silks and gems, messengers and attendants of the Evercourt, did cry out and flee the moment they did sight them. Which did give Ae'thenal cause to wonder if with their tatters and dirt she and Si'anelle did own a fearsome appearance.

"Alas we are no longer children Ae'thenal," Si'anelle did sigh then. "Perhaps we should now remember that we are high born Elven ladies of Avelorn. And I of noble blood and owning a retinue's love and loyalty." Again she did sigh, sadness and regret laying their touch upon her for a time. Softly the pearl's sweet music did reach their ears and where it did serve to lift Ae'thenal's spirits, with Si'anelle the music did transform her until she did glow with life and health. Now she did laugh aloud as joyous as a child once more, so that when Naideth, champion of their Everqueen's Maiden Guard, was seen to be approaching them at a run her sword naked in her hand and six of the Maiden Guard with her, Si'anelle did burst into uncontrolled peals of laughter at the sight.

Lending her support to her giggling friend Ae'thenal did find her own lips beginning to twitch as Naideth did slow to a walk her expression one of disbelief.

"My Lady Si'anelle, Lady Ae'thenal?" Naideth did say, her perfect features beneath her helm displaying such a depth of surprise that Si'anelle was sent giggling anew. "Are you well and unharmed, whole in body and spirit?"

"If you do ask if we are mad Naideth Morningstar we are perhaps a little," replied Ae'thenal as she did sigh. "For Si'anelle and I did face many dangers within the dark places of the forest and have fought hard against creatures of misrule who did gather against us to dispute our passing." A tear did escape her eyelids then as she did remember the pale guardian of the pool 'Despairing' who had siezed her by the leg. Her terror at the unnatural strength of the fell creature and how her precious oath to Si'anelle had been mocked and proved to be without worth. Only before her distress could move her to open weeping the pearl's sweet music did touch her driving away all care.

Lightly Si'anelle's fingers brushed her cheek as she did raise her head, and then she did kiss her as if she was her true born sister. "Sweet Ae'thenal, do not weep," she did whisper in her ear. Her friend's face shone with her joyous mood as she did continue to hold her hands in her own and soon Ae'thenal could bare remember the pool 'Despairing' and its pale guardian. In all this Naideth had stood in silence, her six Elf maidens waiting with her, as if the Everqueen's Maiden Guard champion was uncertain whether indeed it was the Noble Lady Si'anelle and the Lady Ae'thenal who were before her.

"You both are changed," Naideth did say at last. "There is an strange ease of spirit within you; even though your tears did for a small time betray the trials you have endured Lady Ae'thenal. And also, despite the wear of hard useage upon your gear and clothing you are whole and in health; - more fair to look upon than the day you did enter the forest."

Quietly in answer Ae'thenal did reply as her hand did seek out Si'anelle's hand, "We have been but two nights and two days in the

forest Naideth Morningstar."

The maiden champion was among the fairest of the Maiden Guard, but now her violet eyes did harden, her beauty made severe as she did contradict her. "A two month Lady Ae'thenal."

Flanked by the six Elf maidens of the Maiden Guard and led by Naideth the champion towards the pavilions of their Everqueen Ae'thenal would have known fear had it not been for Si'anelle's hand in her own. Her friend's face shone so that she did seem to be the more beautiful than any of the Maiden Guard who did escort them. Si'anelle's joyous mood was not dimmed in any measure by Naideth Morningstar's unspoken accusation that they both had survived the dark places within the forest by unnatural means. Her intent did burn within her like the sun, her desire only to bring the pearl to her Everqueen that she might demonstrate her bravery and her love by gifting this perfect treasure to Alarielle, Everqueen of Avelorn.

As they did pass though the ward circle of the Maiden Guard that did surround the pavilions of their Everqueen, each second Elf maiden did turn to face inwards her spear held in readiness in her hands. Naideth did pause and speak then, "My Lady Si'anelle, my mother did die at the hands of the Dark Kindred, and when her body was found it was huddled close against the body of your own dead mother in the wreckage of her pavilion." Her eyes did then seek out Ae'thenal then in her turn, "And Lady Ae'thenal, your father and my father did fight side by side against the Chaos Hordes at the Battle of Finuval Plain. Therefore I shall not demand your weapons from you, nor shame you by bringing you bound into the presence of our Everqueen."

Because Si'anelle did seem to be oblivious to all about them Ae'thenal did ask for them both, "And why then Naideth Morningstar do you treat with us as if we are the servants of Slaanesh?" For a long while Naideth Morningstar did hold her level gaze and then she said, "If you did in truth serve Slaanesh, Ae'thenal, daughter of Telimis you would be already dead."

Upon entering the white pavilion of their Everqueen the watchful silence did inform Ae'thenal that all within the silken pavilion had been awaiting the moment when Naideth Morningstar would bring them into the presence of Alarielle, Everqueen of Avelorn. Aware that her boots did soil the fine carpet as she did approach her Everqueen's throne of living wood Ae'thenal did act as Si'anelle's guide, for her friend did seem as simple as a child and barely aware of where she was. In her white gown and with the Shieldstone of Isha upon her breast and the Star of Avelorn upon her brow Alarielle did draw her eye and claim it. Her Everqueen's expression calm but thoughtful as she did study her at length the Stave of Avelorn held in her right hand.

As she did drop to her knees Ae'thenal did expect that Si'anelle would do likewise, but instead her friend did continue her

approach her smile wide upon her face as if entranced. Thrusting herself upright Ae'thenal did reach Si'anelle in the same moment that a barrier of spears in the hands of Maiden Guard were raised against her. Warding her friend with her own body she did hold her close while Si'anelle did tremble in her arms. Quietly Alarielle did speak then, "Permit the Lady Si'anelle to come to me, and also the Lady Ae'thenal. For I do think the Lady Ae'thenal shall not permit her friend to harm me."

In the moment that the sharp spear blades withdrew Ae'thenal did draw in a breath to steady her nerve. With Si'anelle still held close against her breast she did say, "Lady, Si'anelle would not knowingly offer harm to you for she does love you and does desire nothing more than to serve you." In silence Alarielle did incline her head towards her before she did raise a hand. Summoned a lady courtier of the Evercourt did approach Alarielle's throne coming to stand at the Everqueen's left hand and Ae'thenal did know her at once to be the lady of the Evercourt who had told the tale of the great toad and its peerless pearl.

"Lady Ae'thenal," said Alarielle her voice gentle, "for two long months we have believed yourself and your friend to be dead. When you did not return a search was raised and long did Cedwyn Brighteye quarter the forest seeking for you until even he did admit the search futile. However I would not allow the matter to rest and did enquire of all my people as to whether any had word of where you and your friend may have intended as your destination when you did enter the forest." And here she did of a sudden put out her hand and claim the lady courtier's wrist, her violet eyes bright with her tears. "I have heard a tale, Lady Ae'thenal, of a great toad who does own a pearl of great size and beauty. And now I would ask of you a question, full in the knowledge that you shall answer my question truthfully. Did either you, Lady Ae'thenal, or your friend, the Noble Lady Si'anelle did find this pearl?"

Softly Ae'thenal did reply, "Lady, we did find this pearl."

With a sudden cry of pain Alarielle did fling the lady courtier's wrist aside, and at once the lady of the Evercourt did flee the pavilion weeping, her hands pressed to her face to hide her shame. For a time Alarielle did sit without moving her head supported in her left hand, then she spoke, "Upon the death of her parents and while but a young maiden The Noble Lady Si'anelle did inherit both her title and a household retinue. Her retinue but a handful of my people, well thinned by the Dark Kindred and grieving their loss." Now raising her head Alarielle of Avelorn did look Ae'thenal full in the eye. "Did not your friend, the Noble Lady Si'anelle, understand that in drawing this remnant of her household to herself and earning their love and abiding loyalty that she did more to serve me than could be ever done by her being of my Maiden Guard."

And Ae'thenal found that she could not answer, for within her was growing the full knowledge that at the pool named 'Despairing' she had indeed failed her oaths to Si'anelle. Even before she had set foot within the forest on that fateful morning she had failed her friend for in her heart she had known that the tale of the great toad had been told in Si'anelle's hearing with ill intent. Blinded by her tears she

was unprepared when Si'anelle did of a sudden quit her arms and fall to her knees before Alarielle.

Raising her hands as she did bow her head Si'anelle did say, "Great Lady of Avelorn I do bring you a gift." And when she did lift her head the joy and love in her expression did seem to shine from her face reaching into all the corners of the pavilion. Ae'thenal did take a step then her intent to draw her friend away from the Everqueen of Avelorn, but both Naideth's hand upon her arm and the piercing look Alarielle did give her as she did rise to her feet served to forestall her purpose.

"You do me honour Lady Si'anelle," Alarielle did say in response her tone gentle. "What is the gift you bring?"

And while her friend's hands were busy in her pack Ae'thenal could only stand restrained by Naideth Morningstar's hand while on quiet feet Elf maidens of the Maiden Guard did move past her to protect their Everqueen.