

## Chapter iv, The Gift Freely Given

Wednesday, 08 June 2005

Last Updated Monday, 05 September 2005

Alarielle, Everqueen

of Avelorn did speak to her then, her voice pitched to carry to her ears alone. "Lady Ae'thenal, I would ask you to recite the oath you did make to your friend, the Noble Lady Si'anelle, when you were but a child."

Among the Elf Kindred of Avelorn it was not a secret that she and Si'anelle were the most close of friends, but it did amaze Ae'thenal that her Everqueen did know of her oath. However at this present time her oath was not a thing of which she did wish to be reminded. "Lady," she did reply as her eyes did sting with her tears, "you do mock me."

As she did draw herself to her full height her violet eyes made severe by her anger Alarielle did make it plain to her that she would not suffer a refusal. "In this hour of all hours Lady Ae'thenal will you wallow in your self indulgence. Do as I have commanded you and recite your oath."

Bowing her head in her misery Ae'thenal did recall to memory the day that she and Si'anelle had captured the small green creature they had dubbed the Deamon King of Frogs. For the sake of their game imprisoning the imagined fell beast in a magic casket they had then locked and warded with mighty spells, even though the casket had been but a jewellery box with a broken catch that had belonged to her mother. With a deadfall branch in her hand, that was her mage-forged runesword to her child's imagination, she had knelt before Si'anelle in the aftermath of their hard won battle and said.....

"Before Isha," said Ae'thenal as she did meet and hold her Everqueen's level and commanding gaze. "I do swear this oath to you my Lady Si'anelle. With my life I shall ever ward your life; where you go I shall also go constant at your side; the dangers that you shall face, will be the dangers that I shall also face, even if we do journey together unto the end of the World." And then she did raise her hands to her face and did weep, not seeing her Everqueen's now gentled expression nor the bow she did make to her.

She did not have long in which to weep however, for Si'anelle's child-like cry of triumph did send a chill touch down her spine. Blinking aside her tears Ae'thenal did not fail to see that her friend had widely strewn the contents of her pack in her impatient search to bring forth her gift before her Everqueen. Even now Si'anelle's fingers were busy with tugging aside the careful wrappings of sky blue silk that she had laid about the pearl beside the pool 'Despairing'.

Beside her Naideth Morningstar did firm the grip she did have upon her arm, as if sensing the sudden fierce urge within her to lay her hands upon the pearl and run with it into the forest. Not pausing so long as life was within her until she could cast the thing into that foul pool; and if the fell pale guardian did take her alive down into the chill waters then she did deserve no less.

Then Si'anelle did raise up the pearl in both her cupped hands and Ae'thenal's cry of awe was but one among many in the pavilion of the Everqueen of Avelorn. If the pearl had blazed with light beside the

pool 'Despairing', here it did blaze sevenfold. Its sweet music a chorus that did make the blood of all within the pavilion sing, easing care and soothing all wants.

"Behold," Alarielle did say then as she did stand before Si'anelle's upraised hands, her fair beauty that even the gods did acknowledge rivaled by that of the Noble Lady Si'anelle of Avelorn who did kneel before her robed in her tatters and her dirt. "Behold," she did say again, "this perfect seeming treasure that has been hard won at the greatest cost." The Everqueen's eyes did touch all within her pavilion before she did speak again.

"Only a one who did possess a pure intent to gift this great pearl to another did own the power to claim it. All others becoming the property of the witch deamons who do dwell in the pool 'Despairing'." And in that moment it was if Ae'thenal did hear again the hissed whisper in her ear, 'Worthy.....Ae'thenal Oathmaker...'

"Watch now all of you and see," Alarielle did cry aloud of a sudden, her voice ringing with command. "Watch and see how this thing of perfect beauty does mask itself." And bending towards Si'anelle she did lightly touch her face with her hand saying, "Lady, your gift is not the fair treasure that is before me in this hour. And may Isha forgive me for now I must do you harm."

Even though she did stand behind her friend Ae'thenal did sense Si'anelle's child-like bewilderment, the ebbing of her joy as she did look with confusion upon the great pearl she did hold in her hands. Naideth Morningstar's grip did bruise her arm as she did make an attempt to join Si'anelle, the maiden champion a match for her strength despite her age being the less. "Si'anelle," she did cry aloud and now the maiden champion's other hand was a crushing weight on her mouth forcing her silence. As others of the Maiden Guard did move to offer threat with their spears' sharp blades Ae'thenal could do naught but watch as Alarielle did shift her hands to almost touch the flawless surface of the pearl her friend did hold.

Of an instant the pearl did become black as night, oozing blood that did spill over Si'anelle's hands. The sweet music and pure light utterly gone as if it had never been. The moan Si'anelle did give voice to then was like unto the chorus that had arisen from the pool 'Despairing'. Her friend's voice rising to a shriek as she did stare in terror at the wicked object she did now hold in her hands. The eyes of all within the pavilion were claimed by this black orb that did draw all light unto itself and the sight of the blood that did stain Si'anelle's pale hands. Even Alarielle, Everqueen of Avelorn did stand as if transfixed, her violet eyes focused in horror upon the terrible thing Si'anelle did hold.

And then Si'anelle did shriek again as if her living heart had been torn from within her breast, her scream of agonising pain and loss causing all to flinch as the black orb did now rise but a little from her bloodied hands. For the barest of moments Naideth Morningstar's fingers did falter in their grip and Ae'thenal did sieze that moment in

which to twist herself free of the maiden champion's hold. A spear blade did skid against her breastplate, the force of the thrust upsetting her balance so that she did stagger. Drawing her sword the sudden weight of the weapon was near more than she could wield as she did meet and parry Naideth's sword strike. And then fling the weapon at maiden champion before she did cast herself on unsteady feet that were bare her own towards the foul object that was even now rising towards Alarielle. The Everqueen falling back before the black orb as she did work to gather power born of the land to her defense.

A spear did thud into her back, the thrust confounded by her armour as Ae'thenal did fall across Si'anelle's limp form, reaching out with her desperate bone thin hands to snatch the black orb from the air. Clutching tight to the wicked thing that did writhe and quiver in her grip she did crawl to cover her friend with her own thin and wasted body even as a dozen sharp spear blades did thrust in to end their lives.

"Hold!" At the Everqueen's command the twelve spears in the hands of her Maiden Guard withheld their gift of death. But did not withdraw. "Guard them and prevent any move of escape, but do not take their lives," was Alarielle's further command as she did stand before her throne, the Staff of Avelorn haloed with power gifted to her by the very land itself. Then with a sigh she did say, "The Lady Ae'thenal did well, for it does seem the Baneppearl will tolerate her touch. The wasting of her body now that the Baneppearl has quit its pretense of glamor does inform me that her friend, the Noble Lady Si'anelle, did freely place the wicked thing into her hand; - the act being one offered in the innocence of her love and being intended to ease her fatigue."

As Ae'thenal did cling to her unconscious friend, Si'anelle's wasted limbs an all too perfect match for her own, Naideth Morningstar's shadow did fall across them. "The evil thing does possess them Lady of Avelorn, it would be a kind act to end their lives. For to permit them to live would be to perpetuate the foul mockery that has been made of their love for you."

"Save for a factor that I do not possess the power to alter Naideth Morningstar I would in regret gift such a release," was Alarielle's reply as now her tears did spill freely down her beautiful face. "The Baneppearl was not given into my hand by the Noble Lady Si'anelle who alone does possess the power of its giving. And when the Baneppearl did seek me out in the aftermath of its evil magic being unlocked; - knowing me to be the one named to receive it the Lady Ae'thenal did intervene and take it into her hands."

"Therefore the Baneppearl must now again be offered for its powerful and evil magic to be made effective against me." And here

Alarielle's right hand did tighten the grip she did have upon the Stave of Avelorn, "So long as the Noble Lady Si'anelle does live I shall be safe Naideth Morningstar, for the knowledge is certain within me that the Noble Lady will not make her gift offering to me a second time in her joy and love."

"And the Lady Ae'thenal My Lady?" asked Naideth then.

"The Lady Ae'thenal has sworn before Isha to ward her friend's life forever Naideth Morningstar," Alarielle did reply. And now her gaze did harden as she did look upon her maiden champion. "As you did yourself discover when I did most cruelly put the Lady Ae'thenal's oath to the test."

Any protest Ae'thenal might have found the strength to make did die on her tongue as now Alarielle, Everqueen of Avelorn did turn her gaze upon her silent and shaken Evercourt. "This has been a fell and wicked day to befall Avelorn," she did cry aloud. "By the intriguing of a lady of my Evercourt against the Noble Lady Si'anelle, in the hope that she would meet her death or be maimed within the forest of Avelorn, a great evil has been brought out into the World. And love and a true desire to serve me did prove in the end to be a poor defense against this poison. Be warned my people, so long as one Kindred does seek its advance over another in the attempt to seek of my favour, so shall the ashes of our downfall be within us. Our numbers have become the less as the years increase, we are beset by enemies from beyond our shores, and our doom will be to go down into the dust forever and be no more if we are ever divided among ourselves." Gasping in her weakness Ae'thenal did weep, for she did know in her heart that the Elf Kindred of Ulthuan would not take of this warning. For the High Elven race were too old and proud a people to become other than they were. Too quick and passionate in their anger, and too slow to give of their forgiveness once an offense had been made. As she did cling to Si'anelle weeping, the Baneppearl a chill shape against her fever hot skin, a seductive desire to sleep did begin to steal over her despite her distress and her tears. Barely did she hear her Everqueen as she did give her final command with an urgency that would have disturbed her if she did still possess her wits.

"Go now all of you and tell those of your kindred what has passed here. Then strike your pavilions and gather your possessions; - for the Evercourt may not remain in this place and we must take our leave before the sun does set on this fell day."