

## Chapter I, Sebekneru, Prince of Battles

Contributed by Lady Si'anelle of Avelorn  
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As told by Anne Welborn

Praise be to Isha, holy mother Isha who is the mistress of the dawn.

As the band of warrior women broke cover, scrambling down between the high boulders that stood like sentinels at either side of the trail as Bronwyn had said they might, Ae'thenal did hold no surprise that her left hand had fallen to her sword's hilts. Nor did she hesitate in drawing her mage wrought blade as Nadimar did side step and prance beneath her; her right arm and hand wound tight about the shaft that did hold aloft Si'anelle's new banner that the kindred of Athel Loren had crafted for her. Except that Bronwyn Half-Elven's strong hand now did fly to lock about her wrist as she urged her horse Rascal to her side. The Half-Elven woman's green eyes were bright with amusement as she did meet and hold her gaze. Then did Bronwyn ever be other than amused at all within the world, as if Orcs and Skaven were but naughty children who did cast stones at their betters. Cocking her chin at Si'anelle who was seated upon her horse Finaith at her left hand as if she was in truth a spirit daughter born of the mountains that did surround them; and in equal kind as cold and hard in her aspect as these mountains for all that her violet eyes were fever bright in their sockets; Bronwyn did quietly say to her. "There is no call upon your oath here Ae'thenal." "Then these women are indeed known to you Bronwyn Half-Elven?" These words of Si'anelle's were softly spoken, breaking the silence that had been like a heavy cloak upon her ever since this day's dawning. Now Ae'thenal did glance at her friend. Her Si'anelle had not so much as moved a single muscle of her body save to speak, and her eyes remained focused upon the band of wild seeming women standing on the trail before them. These women garbed in mail and leather and gathered about the black skinned female giantess who was their leader. "Aye my Lady I do know them aright," was Bronwyn's reply as she did swing herself down from Rascal's back. Though Ae'thenal did not fail to note that Bronwyn did still have her shield upon her arm and that her hand had risen to loosen 'Ironfang' a little within its scabbard at her back.

While Ae'thenal watched their friend begin to walk towards the warrior band, a tall lean shape in her battered and hard used armour, Nimine came to stand at her stirrup. "Are these unruly human woman in truth bandits Ae'thenal, or friends as Bronwyn would have us believe?" Nimine did ask her then and Ae'thenal discovered herself to be smiling in amusement at her fostermother's present critical scrutiny of this band of a bare dozen female warriors. A member of their Everqueen's Maiden Guard in her youth, Nimine did still hold close within her hand the same exacting degree of martial discipline in her prime. And Ae'thenal did know her fostermother sufficiently well to predict by her expression that Nimine Starbrow, blooded champion at Finuval Plain, did consider these near feral women to be at a lack in their martial prowess. "Bronwyn does know them Nimine," was her reply, "though I do think in truth that she may not entirely consider them to be friends." "Before this day I did not know a human woman could be so black of skin; - nor to be of such a stature," Nimine did say to her in a voice pitched for her ears alone. By the present shape of her expression it was plain that her fostermother did already consider the huge woman to be as unruly as those she led; though her features did ease in some measure as now Jean-Marie d'Quenelles and the Gladerider champion Peledym Ashleaf did come to ride past the ranks of their small army to join them. "No

ambush does gather about us in this place," Jean-Marie did say with her relief evident in her voice as she did rein in her mare Cloud. The young scorceress did seem to be more than a little breathless and Ae'thenal could predict that she had given to herself the task to accompany the Gladeriders of Athel Loren on their swift reconnaissance once the column had been halted. "Though I shall say that I do not enjoy being made to stand at a pause in this place," said Peledym as he ran his eyes along the long straggling line that the narrow pass had made of their company. "Even though Cedwyn Brighteye does have every hand that is skilled with a bow turned to watch the skyline...." And here he did nod towards Nimine, "And the spears and bows of your she-Elves Nimine Starbrow set to watch the rear of our column in company with Talieth Mistborn and the Swordmasters of Hoeth."

Now

at last Si'anelle did make a movement. As Peledym had spoken of the Swordmasters that were with their company her head had turned. Her illness bright gaze had touched the Gladerider champion then she had looked away once more; returning her eyes to where Bronwyn was now speaking with the huge black woman that was these warrior women's leader. Ae'thenal did know it as a certain fact that her friend did hold a coal of resentment in her heart towards the six Swordmasters who were of their company. For had not but a single day passed since their own ship had found port on the shores of Bretonnia these months past than another Elven sail had been sighted upon the horizon. That the Loremasters of Hoeth had sent these six to act the part of guardians towards Si'anelle and herself was perhaps in itself not an ill intentioned thing. But within her heart Ae'thenal did hold close her secret fear that should they both fail in their keeping of the Banepearl and become stained by Chaos's taint it would be these six who would spill their blood and close their eyes in death. And that the Wood Elf enchantress Talieth Mistborn did ever keep the Swordmasters' company did not further serve to ease her heart. All her senses did tell her that the enchantress could be called no friend to them both, sent as she had been by Ariel of Athel Loren's hand to join with their company and to watch over them. And this despite the fact of the care and healing that Ariel had bestowed upon Si'anelle and herself in Isha's name during their sojourn in Athel Loren. For Talieth Mistborn did have too much of the Mother of All's dark face in her aspect; - and Ae'thenal had also marked her well, - as a one who would be charged with their deaths on the fell day that they both should fail. "Free to walk the wide World sweet Ae'thenal," Si'anelle did whisper to her then, the bond between them that was the Banepearl gift giving her the knowledge of her thoughts. "Though for all our fair seeming freedom imprisoned still." For a bare moment her fever bright gaze did touch her except that Ae'thenal did not look away as others often did do. "Death is not for the likes of us," soft her friend did say to her, her empty right hand straying to lightly touch her arm. "Do not fear those who watch, for they do lack all power to gift to us a release." Though for all her Si'anelle's clear sight into her heart, and for all that her dear friend did know well the nature of the Banepearl's hold upon them both Ae'thenal could not cast aside her doubt. Which allied with her despair did now seem to work anew within her breast, for why else were these watchers with them if not to seek the means by which they were to be cast out from the World. "Isha," said her friend softly before she bared her teeth against the following agony and her eyes did once more return to watch Bronwyn who was indeed a true friend to them both.

'The one good thing about this',

Bronwyn told herself as she crossed the two hundred paces worth of empty gravel that separated the Elf host behind her from the waiting shield maidens ahead of her, 'Is that this time I do have friends concerned for my safety at my back'. Without having to look over her shoulder she did know that the Noble Lady Si'anelle was closely wrapping every step of her progress the Banepearl hidden within its wrappings of silk in her left hand. Bronwyn did not have the smallest

hesitation in addressing the Lady Si'anelle's childhood friend and companion as Ae'thenal. And even the simple act of sitting at her ease with Ae'thenal at the day's end and making conversation with her was a well worn habit between them despite the curse that did lie upon the high born she-Elf. Except that Bronwyn did know it as a certainty within her heart that such simple acts of friendship did lie beyond her reach when it did come to the Banepearl's keeper. For it seemed that none save Ae'thenal of Avelorn alone in all the World did own the ability to ease her childhood friend in her despair, and then but by the slightest measure. Bronwyn knew that beneath the ancient trees of Athel Loren the Lady Si'anelle had for a time found an easing of her spirit. Only now the forest's borders were ten day's ride behind them; and the Lady Si'anelle's despair had returned once more to claim her in full measure. As if these were the days before she had come to Athel Loren when the Banepearl wreathed in fire was still the device upon her banner. In all her life's wide experience Bronwyn knew it to be a certain fact that she had not ever met any such as the Lady Si'anelle who did lie so close with Chaos, but yet did not become its servant. Though despite this she was still glad before Holy Sigmar and Isha both to name her as her Lady and to give freely the gift of her strength to her cause.

Raising her head Bronwyn locked her green eyed gaze with that of the huge black woman who was seemingly leaning at her ease on her great broadsword four square at the trail's centre. Sebekneru's eyes were as green as her own, which was a rare enough thing among those of her race, except that Bronwyn had not failed to note that the black giantess's eyes were as hard as the boulders that were scattered about them for all of her casual seeming manner. "The last time you came this way you Half-Elven bitch I told you I'd shake you outta that rusty tin suit and brand you as my slave if you showed your face around here for a second time." Knowing it would be unwise to approach any closer Bronwyn stood her ground hand on hip. Drawing Ironfang would be a mistake she would very swiftly regret because each and every one of the shieldmaidens with Sebekneru were tense as a bowstring as if but waiting for her to commit herself to such an act. And to her eye Helene the Orcslayer Sebekneru's standard bearer most of all. For the tall lean muscled blonde woman standing at Sebekneru's right hand did have a look about her that did say she had not forgotten being stunned senseless with the flat of Ironfang's blade on their last meeting. The ice in her pale blue eyes beneath her horned helmet telling Bronwyn that most of all Helene did regard not being killed outright at her hands to be the principal offense to her pride. "I have come in company with these friends to ask for passage across your lands Sebekneru," replied Bronwyn entirely brushing aside the matter of her previous offense. Raising her hand she indicated the Elf host behind her, well knowing the significance of her gesture. She was not alone and the company with her was more in number than Sebekneru would wish to pick a fight with. Sebekneru's wide mouth did tighten then, behind the mask of her helmet her eyes did become the more hard as she did tell her, "You're already making passage across my lands half-breed, - you and these friends of yours both. Or are you all so thick witted as to not know you're in the Borderlands and not in Athel Loren anymore." Which did serve to inform Bronwyn at once that Sebekneru's scouts had been keeping them under close observation for a good day at least. As Sebekneru swung up her massive sword that even a well built man would find difficult to wield and did rest it upon her shoulder the black giantess jabbed a sizeable finger towards the Elf host. "Those with ya have got the look of High Elves about them never mind the pretty green banner with the Tree on it that hard eyed she-Elf bitch with the sword in her hand is hanging onto; - so what's a pack of superior up themselves 'skinnies' doing with the likes of you anyway Bronwyn of Nuln?" "You do also have the 'Tree' upon your banner Sebekneru," Bronwyn did now quietly point out to the annoyed giantess, even though that particular tree did have a Norsca origin. "This war host is not your enemy." "War host!" spat Sebekneru at her and her sword swept from

her shoulder with a swiftness that Bronwyn did still hold vivid in her memory. "And just who are you and your 'skinny' friends coming to fight Bronwyn of Nuln?" As she took the blow upon her shield Bronwyn did fall back a step her shield arm soundly wrenched in its socket. Though despite this she made no move to draw Ironfang for all that her shield did now bear yet another considerable notch upon its edge.

"Orcs,"

she did reply with her grin wide on her face even as Sebekneru did make the beginnings of another sweeping blow. Now Bronwyn stood at her ease while the black giantess thought that over, the blade of her great sword 'Wraithhammer' now lowered to almost touch the ground; - for it was true enough that Sebekneru was no friend to any Orc. And did near lose her head as the great sword was of a sudden swung at her. "You go find your own Orcs bitch," Sebekneru told her as her shield suffered yet more punishment. "Because all mine've got my marker on their hides."

The sudden gritting of hooves upon gravel

behind her told Bronwyn that Ae'thenal had spurred Nadimar to come to her aid. It might be true enough that Sebekneru was angry with her and fully wanting to strike off her head, except that Bronwyn knew that she did not want Ae'thenal charging into the midst of her delicate negotiations in this present moment. Flinging out her hand she managed the act of grasping Nadimar's reins and halting the Elven steed's charge even though her arm soundly protested the wrench it had just received as the beautiful creature snorted and stamped its iron shod hooves too near to her booted feet for comfort. For a bare moment Bronwyn caught Ae'thenal's eye, the she-Elf's features cold and dark with the Banepearl's power as she raised her sword flickering with flame that had the night's darkness at its heart. Though before Bronwyn could say a word the battle standard Ae'thenal was carrying was thrust into her hands as the she-Elf broke Nadimar free of her grip. "Draw steel upon my friend Bronwyn Half-Elven of Nuln and you shall fight with me," Ae'thenal did say to Sebekneru her cold depth of anger a quality that could be felt upon the air as Nadimar's hooves caused the giantess to retreat three steps. And as the Banepearl's lesser servant swept her gaze over the shieldmaidens at Sebekneru's back, their shrieking charge died in the moment it had begun. The warrior women's weapons slipping from their slack fingers as they near turned and fled their fear worn openly upon their faces. With a sudden curse of fury at this 'skinny' she-Elf who had just unerved her shieldmaidens with no more than a glance Sebekneru thrust herself forward, one huge hand reaching out to pluck Ae'thenal from the saddle. And the danger of that was more than real, for a time or two before this Bronwyn had seen Sebekneru, Prince of Battles hoist an armoured horseman bodily from his horse and dash him to the ground. Except that now Ae'thenal turned her gaze upon Sebekneru in her turn and if any did think a negress could not become paleskinned with fear then they were wrong in their assumptions.

For Bronwyn her sense of

being ill at ease was small since she did still hold a clear memory of the day when she had first seen a Black Orc falter in his charge before that pair of cold violet eyes. Though in truth she felt some measure of compassion for Sebekneru as her huge sword fell from her hand to the ground like a thing forgotten. While she stood watching with the battle standard's scarred shaft still gripped in her hands, she saw Ae'thenal raise her Elf made blade in threat towards Sebekneru. The Elven runes wrought in the metal smouldering like ruddy creatures trapped within dark hued flames. "You offend my Lady Si'anelle of Avelorn by your act of aggression against our friend; and before Isha you shall not bring her harm." And here Bronwyn did not fail to miss that Ae'thenal's eyes had taken fire with her agony as she did speak Isha's name. "Speak you now fairly with Bronwyn of Nuln and hear out her words, for if you do not you shall die here in this place and we shall ride on, the hooves of our horses trampling your still warm corpse into the stones." No sooner than Ae'thenal had spoken her threat and had flashed her cold

violet gaze over the women with Sebekneru, her teeth bared as if she was a great cat scenting prey and not a daughter of Elf-kind, than Bronwyn did find the standard pole being reclaimed from her hand as Ae'thenal did now spur Nadimar past her to rejoin the Elven host. And in the silence of that moment she did discover herself to be once more standing alone upon the trail with Sebekneru's green eyes upon her.

"Who

in all the hells does that skinny bitch think she is?" spat the black giantess now openly furious in the aftermath of Ae'thenal's departure. The slack limbed state of fear that had formerly held Sebekneru in thrall was swiftly ebbing away. Though Bronwyn did know she should not be so suprised, for Sebekneru had faced down more than her share of terrors in her long life. "I got as much right as any Border Prince to this land since I fought and bleed to own it. And I got the right by that blood to say who comes in and who stays out." If she was to now laugh aloud at Sebekneru's indignation Bronwyn did know it as a certain thing that Sebekneru would again seek her out as a target to rain sword blows upon. Which would only cause Ae'thenal to return to enact her threat and thereby ruin the present hope she did hold that she might persuade Sebekneru to aid their cause. So instead she did merely stand at ease her mirth silent within her breast. "Her name is the Lady Ae'thenal of Avelorn, companion and friend to the Noble Lady Si'anelle also of Avelorn who does command this war host," Bronwyn did say at last with a following sigh. "And since the Noble Lady Si'anelle does wish to carry war to the Orcs and Goblin tribes in the lands that do lie beneath Thunder Mountain the Lady Ae'thenal does become impatient that you do delay her Sebekneru." Now she did have all of Sebekneru's attention. After first swiftly bending to retrieve her sword the black giantess did shake the sizeable weapon at her. "Thunder Mountain!" she did say to her before she did laugh aloud her voice booming back from the high walls of the pass. "By the Mother you tell some crazy tales Bronwyn. Still going to have to do better than that if you want to pass me by without a fight though." "Before Isha and Holy Sigmar both I do tell you I do speak true Sebekneru," Bronwyn did reply. And for this one rare occasion her face did have a serious caste to it as she did speak. "My Lady Si'anelle would go into the country inhabited by the Orcish tribes to claim back an artifact of power that was stolen but recently from the Elf-kindred of Athel Loren." Behind the eyeslits of her helmet Sebekneru did now narrow her gaze as she did stand with her sword resting on her shoulder. "Since when did you ever go calling anybody, 'My Lady' Bronwyn Half-Elven? Bitch like you never bent the knee to anybody alive or dead in your whole life." "Perhaps I have found a worthy cause at last Sebekneru," said Bronwyn as her grin did return to her face. "Perhaps somebody might a banged you too hard on the head as well," was Sebekneru's response as she now turned and waved her hand towards her warrior women to tell them to fall back. Which did inform Bronwyn that now at least Sebekneru was willing to give an ear to what she did have to say. Though Bronwyn was in no measure suprised that Helene Orcslayer did not go with her companions and remained nearby close at Sebekneru's right hand. Now once more she did have Sebekneru's green eyes upon her as the black giantess leaned at her ease upon her huge sword. "Your 'Lady' has sent you out here to say something so say it Bronwyn," said Sebekneru pointedly and Bronwyn did take note of the edge to her tone. After first mock bowing her head towards Sebekneru to show her that she was not in any measure discomfited and causing the black giantess to tighten her mouth in annoyance Bronwyn did then draw in a good breath and begin.