

Part One: From Humble Beginnings

Contributed by Tyler
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The two friends settled in at the table, drinks in hand.

"Bregaurd, I'm not sure you realize what you're getting yourself into," warned Kurt mildly, refilling his mug.

"It wasn't my first preference for an assignment," answered Brenguard seriously, "it's a dismal land Sylvania, rather a lonely command."

"Haven't you learned anything about Stirland's history!?! You'd think being the son of one of the province's most prominent counts, you'd know our history!" chided Kurt with a smile creeping into his countenance.

"Ah yes, the vampire wars, Hel Fen, true warriors of honor, epic campaigns. But you fail to realize my dear Kurt, Sylvania is dead," answered Brenguard with a slight smirk at his play on words.

"Let not any priests of Morr hear you joke like that. The lands of the undead are terrible. Dangerous even without a leader," chastised Kurt.

"Ah, if only it were as dangerous as you make it sound! How unfitting is it for a count's son to patrol the borders of a wasteland? Shouldn't I be leading men in the northern forest? Or even a position with the river patrol would be a more glorious place to launch my career from," protested Brenguard.

"Why so eager for military conquest? What's wrong with a position here in Wurtbad? With your father guiding you, it would be merely a matter of time before you rose to the rank of ambassador, or diplomat to our fair capital."

"Kurt, I was not born for politics. I think the constant squabbling of the politicians would be the end of me. My place is at the forefront of battle, winning honor and glory for Stirland and my family!" answered Brenguard exuberantly.

"Then why did you accept the position in Sylvania? You know your father only offered it to scare you away from a career in the military."

"Ah! Now you ask the right questions! The reason, my dear friend, is that in Sylvania I am no man's subordinate. I am my own commander. I can build my army to my specifications, no history to build from, no traditions to adhere to, a fresh start. Can you imagine, 'The Sylvan Guard, Brenguard's Own.' My name will be remembered long after I am gone."

"Ha! By the time you get to Sylvania you'll be having your aides call you 'The Vanquisher of the Dead.' Sylvan Guard you say? Has a ring to it, but you've named an army you don't even have yet!" laughed Kurt as he took another drink from his mug.

"You're right, I am getting ahead of myself. I do have troops though. You remember Marcus?" asked Brenguard.

"Of course I do! Half the city thinks he's your brother, the other half that he's your servant."

"If it were up to me, he would be my brother. Here in Wurtbad the fact that he is born of a lesser noble makes his friendship with me looked down upon. I plan to make him my second in command in Sylvania. If any man deserves a raise in status, it is he."

"So you leave with yourself and a single commander?"

"No, my father has granted me some of his state troops. One unit of gunners and a cannon as well."

"Not nearly enough even for a small patrol," answered Kurt apprehensively.

"I'm told that there are levies of militia and some rag-tag patrols already there, mostly working as mercenaries. I'll simply assert the authority of the Count of Stirland, and if that doesn't go over with them, then I'll put a little fear of the Emperor into them."

"Be sure to write back, I doubt that someday people will believe that I was once friends with the famed captain of the Sylvan Guard" joked Kurt, rising from the table.

"I will write. Rest assured that I will miss Wurtbad dreadfully. Come and visit, if you can find the time to do so what with your knightly training."

"Vacation to Sylvania! Wouldn't quite be like old times now would it?"

"Not quite, but close enough. I'll still have my rifle, we could always go hunting."

"Hunting! In Sylvania!?!!" laughed Kurt, half expecting it to be but a joke.

"Of course! No game there, but I hear they have fantastically large bats, and of course wolves. I even hear rumors of

cannibalistic loners, called ghouls by the locals I believe. Just more of a challenge, that's all."

"My friend, if anyone is well suited to this job, it's you. May Sigmar watch over you," wished Kurt, extending his hand.

"And may Morr keep those I vanquish firmly underground."

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"Sgt. Marcus, any word from the scouts?" called Brenguard, as he ducked out of his tent into the balmy, putrid air of the nearby bog.

"No sir, sentries haven't spotted them yet," reported Marcus with a stiff bow.

"Let's just hope they haven't tried to desert, they could have gotten anywhere by now," speculated Brenguard out loud while pacing just outside his tent.

"Sir! Scouts have come back!" called one of the sentries, a rough looking fellow brandishing a bow. The group of scouts, five total, entered the makeshift camp. Four of them returned to their unit, a rough looking group of militia troops. Their leader headed toward Brenguard.

"Reporting sir, group of creatures headed straight toward camp. Foul things, the smell was really what tipped us off, smell like rotting carcasses," reported the scout, wrinkling his nose at the mere mention of the scent.

"Zombies then? I thought there had only been the one necromancer." Mused Brenguard, "It's not possible that there's another and the one we found is dead for good this time."

"No sir, these things moved too fast for zombies. They didn't seem to be under anything's control either. They carried pieces of some unfortunate soul's body with 'em."

"Hmm, sounds like ghouls. Five of them you say? Are you sure they weren't just scouts?" asked Brenguard inquisitively, readjusting his plumed cap.

"Yeah, just five sir. Possible they could be scouts. We turned tail and came back after a few whiffs o' 'em. I've seen some rough stuff, but that was just unbearable."

"Dismissed, get your men ready to move out," ordered Brenguard, casting his gaze in the direction of the motley unit. Had Brenguard envisioned this kind of rabble when he was leaving Wurtbad, he and Marcus would have scouted every village and farm on the way to Sylvania to find any respectable troops.

"Aye, sir," answered the scout as he moved back to his group of brigands.

"What do you think Marcus? Just some ghouls or a screening force for the rest of a band of abominations?" asked Brenguard with a sigh.

"After we defeated that necromancer's force I think we've got the last of them here. Probably just some ghouls wandering around, looking for a graveyard," answered Marcus as he adjusted his scabbard on his belt.

“Maybe so, but I want the patrol ready for a real fight, regular formation, your unit of halberdiers in the middle, guns on your right, free company on the right flank, and spearmen on the left flank.”

“Aye sir, you want me to call in the archers to form up on my unit, or wait ‘till we move out?”

“Call them in now, if things go well we’ll be out of here in a few minutes,” answered Brenguard as he moved back to his own tent.

Brenguard had been in this command for 6 months, straight from his time spent with the rest of his father’s army in Wurtbad. As a young noble he had expected command of a garrison of some small farm town, but instead he had ended up here, on the borders of Sylvania. Apparently Brenguard’s friends from the officer’s training academy were scared to death of the place. He wasn’t afraid, just found the place terribly disgusting and bothersome. So here he was, son of one of Stirland’s leading nobles, leading a group of no-goods and backwoods hunters across the abominable swamps of Sylvania, protecting tax collectors and farmers. At least his old friend Marcus was here too, his company alone made the command bearable, one civilized soul to discuss things with.

A week back the patrol had run into a necromancer and his force of skeletons, the first real skirmish Brenguard had fought here. The cold savagery of the undead had nearly frightened him enough to make him flee the field. He hadn’t of course, but it had occurred to him to do so. Brenguard had held, and under his command the foul rouge wizard had been cut down as per his orders to take no prisoners of the denizens of that dark and foul land. In the following week Brenguard had ordered his men to scout the surrounding area, making sure the necromancer hadn’t left any other small forces behind. This was the first he had run into and he wasn’t taking any chances.

Inside his tent, Brenguard grabbed his trusty handgun, a present from his father on his sixteenth birthday. Brenguard thought back to the happy days spent hunting with it on the fringes of the Great Forest with his friends. Most recently he had used it to blast a hole through the blasphemous imitation of a steed the necromancer had ridden. After having also grabbed his shield, Brenguard exited the tent as some of the archers began pulling it down and rolling it up.

“Form up! Halberdiers in the middle, guns on my right, free company on the right flank, and spearmen on the left

flank, let's move!" ordered Marcus to the troops, prodding them with the flat of his sword to get them moving as Brenguard looked on, noting that the sun was beginning to set. Hopefully they'd be able to bring the ghouls to combat before the sun set. Being this close to the Sylvanian border at night was not a pleasant prospective.

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Brenguard brought his horse to a stop on top of the small hill. He looked out at the landscape below. It was a flat plain, barren desolate wasteland. Absolutely no terrain to utilize, if anything happened it would all depend on his commanding and the troops' bravery. Brenguard looked on to the horizon, and his jaw dropped at the sight. He had expected nothing, maybe some hills or a forest, but instead the horizon was dotted with figures. Too far away to tell what they were, but Brenguard knew, deep down in his gut, he knew what it was. A sense of absolute and utter terror welled up inside of him as he stared out at what was an army bigger than anything he had faced to date. What terrified Brenguard more though was who must be leading it. The undead don't march to war on their own, and the necromancer had been cut down before his own eyes. It must be a vampire. No doubt existed in Brenguard's mind about the matter. He quickly turned his horse around and spurred it on as fast as he could back to his troops.

"Marcus!" exclaimed Brenguard once he was within earshot of the column, "Get the men on the move, double time! There's a good hill up about 10 minutes if we march fast enough. We're going to need that high ground for the cannon!"

"Yes sir! You heard the Viscount, let's move!" relayed Marcus to the troops. The whole assembly began to move out at a rapid march that was just short of a jog as the sun began to sink below the horizon, leaving Brenguard's column to move under the waning twilight. Brenguard himself set off back to the hill at a gallop to keep an eye on the approaching enemy.

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By the time Marcus and the troops had arrived at the hill, the sun had almost completely set, the dark setting in abnormally quickly. Brenguard oversaw the deployment of the cannon on the peak of the hill, giving it a commanding view of the field below. Marcus moved the halberdiers into position in front of the cannon to the right, while the handgunners set up on the right flank. The free company formed up on the left flank supported by the archers. Brenguard kept a nervous watch on the approaching enemy, which was now fully in view and slowly marching across the plain toward his position. It looked to be about a hundred strong, two blocks of skeletons, twenty strong each, and two similarly sized units of zombies on the flanks. What really worried Brenguard was the commander of the force. The figure sat upon a warhorse, and was dressed much like any nobleman he might have expected to find in Wurtbad, though maybe in slightly better taste, and a bit less gaudy. This figure was certainly a vampire. Too clean and distinguished to be a necromancer. That rider was where the biggest threat lay.

"Men are in order and ready Viscount," reported Marcus from the base of the hill, now bearing the Viscount's standard. The flag was a dark green velvet, with a black Maltese cross over it. Bright red letters above and below the cross claimed it as the standard of the Royal Sylvan Guard of Stirland.

"Bring the cannon into line with the left unit of skeletons. Fire as soon as you're in range" ordered Brengaurd to the cannon's crew over his shoulder, never taking his eyes from the vampire across the field.

The undead host marched on across the field, never slowing or altering pace. The only sound that filtered across the field was the sound of rattling armor and the pounding of the vampire's steed's hooves upon the baked and parched ground. The eerie quiet was broken abruptly by the boom of the cannon. Every head in Brengaurd's army followed the shot as it flew toward the enemy. Even Brengaurd broke his stare toward the enemy commander to watch it. The shot closed with the unit, and landed not three feet behind the last rank of the skeletons.

"Enemy at four hundred paces sir," reported the lead gunner of the cannon even as he rushed to reload the cannon.

A lucky shot, thought Brengaurd, not a hit, but we got the range after one shot. The cannon ought to break that unit before it even gets to us. "Gunners load! Prepare to fire volley on my mark!"

The undead host marched on, seemingly oblivious to the cannon shot, although Brengaurd knew better. The unnerving effect of the silence of the undead had begun to wear off of Brengaurd, and he resumed thinking rationally, this was just a regular skirmish, if such a thing existed. He fought hard against his own fear, and looked once more toward the enemy general, the certainly ancient vampire. Brengaurd sheathed his sword and slung his shield over his back as he brought up his old hunting rifle. Brengaurd spurred his horse forward, passing the halberdiers and coming a quarter of the way to the enemy. In full sight of both armies he leveled his gun, and stared down the sight. To his dismay his view of the vampire was blocked, so he instead took careful aim at the left unit of skeletons, picking out one with seemingly more armor and less rusty weapons. The single shot echoed across the plain. For a second it seemed he had missed, the target skeleton took a half step forward, then wavered, and finally crashed to the ground. A cheer went up from the empire soldiers, and Brengaurd smirked as he began to reload his rifle. First blood belonged to him. A second later the cannon echoed his shot, firing at the left unit of skeletons again. This time the shoot landed not a foot in front of the block of infantry, bouncing clean through it, shattering bone and armor.

Brengaurd wondered what his opponent was thinking. He himself was simply trying to keep his men from running. Most commanders would lead from behind the line, riding back and forth shouting encouragement and orders until the enemy closed. Brengaurd had been blessed to have Marcus to do that for him. For that matter, Marcus could inspire the men more than he could, between the rousing speeches and the banner, not to mention his personal bravery. As he finished reloading the rifle, Brengaurd noticed that the injured block of skeletons had silently and seamlessly moved in to close the gap in their ranks. The cold indifference to the casualties put a chill in Brengaurd. He brought up his rifle again and fired, this time the shot sailing over the head of the intended target. Brengaurd swore as he reloaded again. He considered a prayer to Morr, but he had never been a religious man, and doubted any deity could save him from the silent hordes of undeath before him.

The cannon boomed again, once more crashing through the unit of skeletons, leaving only twelve of the skeletons remaining. Brengaurd brought up his rifle once more and snapped off one last shot before he turned back to his army. He didn't even bother to watch his shot, he smile and nod of Marcus told him it had been a hit. Brengaurd knew that two kills

was nothing, but the boost to the upsettingly poor morale of the army was invaluable. The cannon boomed again, smashing through four more of the skeletons. Brenguard silently made a note to himself to give extra rations and ale to the gunners. As he passed his ranks and formed up between the halberdiers and the free company men, he called out last minute orders.

"Remember men, we're in Sylvania! If we lose this battle and retreat, nothing remains for us but to face our fallen comrades reanimated at our next battle. With every battle we lose, the bigger our foe will be when next we find them. The best thing we can do is stand our ground and face these abominations to the man! No one runs, and we will never be granted surrender!" proclaimed Brenguard, his speech being supported by the boom of the cannon, wreaking more havoc on the skeletons. The units of undead neared, and the eyeless sockets and putrid stink of the foes assailed the soldiers.

"Gunnery, fire!" ordered Brenguard, firing off his own gun with them into the left unit of skeletons. Numerous skeletons in the first two ranks of the unit fell, and Brenguard gave the final order, "Men of the Empire, Charge!"

The Halberdiers were first to move, Marcus leading the charge brandishing the standard and his own trusty saber. The free company was quick to follow, recklessly charging into the nearly broken unit of skeletons. The archers fired a volley into the left most unit of zombies. The halberdiers crashed into the skeletons, bringing their heavy weapons into the lightly armored skeletons with devastating results, and both units swept into one another. The free company swarmed the smaller unit of skeletons, making quick work of it. Brenguard slung his rifle back over his shoulder and drawing his sword and shield, charged forward, rushing between the two units of skeletons, and made straight for the vampire.

The cannon turned to open up on the right most unit of zombies, hitting it from the front left corner and bouncing across to the back right, cutting a diagonal clearing through the unit, which the zombies were slow to reform. Marcus's banner waved valiantly above the fray, leading the halberdiers through the combat, slowly cutting down the skeleton ranks.

Brenguard quickly closed on the vampire, and the two commanders rode by one another, swinging out to score hits on one another. Brenguard winced as he felt the vampire's blade slice through his heavy armor and make a bloody cut across his sword arm. As he turned back to the vampire, he saw that he had also scored a hit, leaving an open wound on the vampire's shoulder. They closed again, this time staying close to one another. The vampire lashed out with a vicious attack, which Brenguard was hard pressed to deflect. The sharp reports of rifles told Brenguard that the gunners were still firing on the closing zombies, and the following boom of the cannon meant more havoc on the other zombies. Brenguard launched his own attack, but was unable to penetrate the vampire's defenses. The vampire attacked again, this time knocking Brenguard's sword from his hand. Thinking quickly, Brenguard reached down to his hip and pulled up his dueling pistol. One quick shot to the vampire's head and the fight between the two commanders was over. Brenguard silently prayed a thanks to Marcus for having made him pre-load the weapon against his wishes.

Looking back, Brenguard saw that the two units of skeletons had already been wiped out, and the halberdiers were holding the zombies on the left flank. The ragged free company and archers, who had drawn hand weapons, were finishing off the zombies on the left flank. Brenguard quickly dismounted, and searched around for his sword. He eventually found it, remounted his steed, and rushed toward the right flank, hitting the zombies just in time to finish off the

last two.

A cheer went up from the bloodied army, the first real victory, and a great victory at that. A vampire, I've just killed a vampire! Thought Brenguard to himself as he looked around the battlefield. There were casualties though, and lots of them, he'd have to find some new recruits. Brenguard pushed those thoughts out of his mind, now was a time for celebration, a real victory for what was now a real army, tried and proven in battle.

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Brenguard poured himself a cup of coffee as he sat back against a tree, watching Marcus makes the rounds from fire to fire, checking on the men. It had been a long day, and he hoped the night would prove to be uneventful. Brenguard watched as some of the ragged free company men sorted through the various items found on the body of the slain vampire, marking some of it to stay in Brenguard's own possession, and the more suspicious articles, as well as the body, to be sent to the nearest priest of Morr.

"Sir, I've got the final tally," announced Marcus with a salute as he approached Brenguard's tree.

"How bad is it?" asked Brenguard wearily, even the coffee doing little to revive him.

"Well, all the handgunners are alive, all their equipment's fine too. The archers took a couple of casualties; they got into a little bit of hand to hand on their flank. Free company took the biggest hit, only eight of them left. My own unit took five casualties, but most of the equipment is fine, some's a tad beaten up, but it's all intact."

"Hmm, the free company can be replaced, but those five halberdiers are near invaluable. We'll have to head back to a town, we need fresh powder and food anyway."

"Should I order the men to prepare to march sir?" asked Marcus hesitantly.

"No," answered Brenguard as he took another sip from his mug, "they've seen enough for one day. Post some gunners and halberdiers on watch and we'll spend the night here. Ought to be safe enough now that we've crushed the local forces."

"Yes sir. I'll go organize the watches," answered Marcus with a salute, showing no signs of fatigue himself.

"Thank you Marcus, best color sergeant a captain could hope for," added Brenguard as he settled in for the night, making

sure to keep his rifle close just in case it should become necessary.