

## Part Two: Desertion In The Ranks

Contributed by Tyler  
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Brenguard tried to ignore the looks he and his men were getting from the locals as they came into town. Anybody who went into Sylvania was treated as some kind of heretic here. The thanks you got for defending their towns.

"You're free to wander the town till daybreak tomorrow. Buy any personal supplies, send any letters, and stay out of trouble. If your unit needs any supplies or weapons, tell Marcus and he'll take care of it," ordered Brenguard as the army dispersed through the town's square, each going their own way. Brenguard himself made for the pub, he had business to attend to.

The pub was a fairly clean establishment, with an inn above it. Brenguard stepped in and made his way toward the bar, picking up a bit of the conversation from the far end.

"I'm telling ya, that place is bad news. Nobody in their right mind goes in there. My father fought in Hel Fen, was never the same afterward. If those vampires decide to bring up an army, nobody's gonna stop em with some motley crew of volunteers,"

Brenguard sat next to the man, facing away, and ordered a drink, smirking to himself. Maybe this wouldn't be as hard as he thought.

"Nobody can defeat a vampire, they're immortal I hear," added the man, with a sense of finality as he picked up his mug again.

"Nah, they die easy enough," commented Brenguard nonchalantly, not even turning to face the man.

"Anybody who says that's obviously never seen one fight, my pa said they monsters were unkillable, it took Count Martin to kill one!" roared the man, slamming down his mug and turning to face Brenguard.

&ldquo;Well, no offense to your father, but I killed one myself not three days ago,&rdquo; answered Brenguard smugly, eliciting gasps and a few skeptical laughs from the crowd in the bar.

&ldquo;Who are you anyway, some sorta mercenary, tryin to drum up business with some ridiculous story like that?&rdquo; The man demanded, putting a rough hand on Brenguard&rsquo;s shoulder.

Brenguard turned around, calmly removing the man&rsquo;s hand, &ldquo;I, sir, am Viscount Brenguard, and I am offended. I am no mercenary. I&rsquo;m a captain of the Emperor&rsquo;s army.&rdquo;

The man bit his lip, trying to cover up his embarrassment. &ldquo;And if you doubt my claim, you can ask the priest of Morr here, I gave him the body and effects of the vampire to dispose of just this morning. It was just a thrall of course, but a bullet to the face stops just about anything,&rdquo; Brenguard smirked as he looked around at the looks of awe on the faces all around. This was going better than he could have hoped

&ldquo;My men and I just stopped to resupply before we move back to Sylvania. Now, if you&rsquo;ll excuse me, I have to find some lodging for the night.&rdquo; Brenguard began to get up, but the roar of the crowd, demanding for more tales from Sylvania, brought him back to his seat. It&rsquo;ll be a long evening he thought to himself with a smile.

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Brenguard woke with the sun, and donned his armor as he prepared to set out. The innkeeper had hospitably offered him the room free of charge, one of the many perks of being a captain of the Empire in these backwater towns. Hero-worship was one thing Brenguard never got tired of, he lived for the stories and the questions.

He made his way out of the inn and headed for the town square, receiving kind looks from everyone he encountered, apparently his fame had already spread throughout the town. As he approached the square, he saw his men already assembled, and a crowd gathered, all dressed in the nicest clothes they could muster. Many of the maidens and children were presenting the soldiers with gifts, blocks of cheese, hats, new boots, and a multitude of trinkets. The crowd parted to make way for Brenguard, and somewhere a band struck up an old tune from the days of Count Martin.

A group of young men approached Brenguard, a few dressed in what he assumed to be their father&rsquo;s old military uniforms. The tallest of the boys stepped forward, and offered a hand to Brenguard.

&ldquo;Captain, sir, my name&rsquo;s Peter, and my friends and I, well, we were

wondering if you could use any more men," the boy said sheepishly, obviously excited to be in the presence of a real military man.

"You boys know what kind of hardships come from a military life? The constant marching, low rations, danger, and not to mention having to stand fast in the face of the enemy, a foe that feels nothing, that doesn't sleep?" asked Brenguard solemnly.

"Yes sir, and we thought it over, and we decided that a life in the army was more than we could ever do here, the adventure, glory, and protecting our families, well, sir, we'd be honored to be part of your company,"

Brenguard patted the young man on the shoulder, "Then welcome to the Royal Sylvan Guard of Stirland. My second in command over there is Marcus, go talk to him and he'll supply you with all the equipment you'll need and tell you what units you'll be assigned to."

Brenguard noticed the crowd had swelled; it must be nearly every person in the entire town. He moved toward the center of the square, and swung himself up on top of a pedestal housing a bronze statue of some forgotten hero of Stirland.

"Good people of the Empire," began Brenguard, summoning the people's attentions and quieting the band, "I thank you on behalf of the Emperor's soldiers for your hospitality. I ask that you remember us in your prayers to Sigmar, and we will remember you as we fight the Emperor's enemies." A cheer went up from the crowd, and Brenguard continued, "However, our forces have begun to wane somewhat after our recent battle with the forces of Sylvania, and we ask that if any of you desire service in the name of the Emperor, that you join us today as we march back out. I assure you that there is no finer outfit in all of Stirland than the Sylvan Guard, and you'll earn honor and glory beyond your wildest dreams"

The band picked back up again, and Brenguard mixed with the people, glancing at Marcus and the long line of enlistees with a smile.

Brenguard pulled his coat tighter as he fought the strong wind to remain in the saddle. The past week had gone well despite the cooling weather, and the new recruits were starting to fit into the unit. Brenguard looked over the column of spearmen behind him, an interesting combination of veterans that had been here in Sylvania longer than even he had, and some of the fresh troops who'd never been away from home. In the midst of the unit was Peter. Brenguard had noticed that Peter had already won the respect of not only all the new recruits, but also some of the veterans.

"Let's set up camp here men, looks like as good a spot as any we've

seen all day," ordered Brenguard, sighing to himself over the lack of wood. He could really do with a nice fire all to himself, but they were only carrying enough wood to light one fire for the whole group, and it would be needed for cooking. Brenguard rode over to Marcus who was directing the setting up of tents.

"We made good time today, considering the weather. The recruits kept up too, not a bad bunch, all young, eager for battle," said Brenguard dismounting.

"Yeah, good lads for the most part, that Peter fellow's already in good with the men. He's got a good respect for the older men, and he's becoming a regular spokesman for the recruits," answered Marcus as he helped unload the supply wagon. "Where are we headed tomorrow sir?"

Brenguard glanced at the horizon as he tried to keep his feathered cap from blowing away in the wind, "I think we'll head north, we'll start setting up some way stations and outposts for the winter patrols. The last thing I want is to get stuck somewhere in Sylvania in the dead of winter without food or water."

Marcus started to answer, but stopped as something caught his eye between the two of them. Brenguard followed his gaze, and grimaced as he watched the single snowflake waft down to the ground. "Well that's no good, an early winter it looks like. At least the snow will make tracking the undead easier."

"Yes sir, you want me to set up watches?" asked Marcus, unperturbed by the snow.

"Yes, we'll want to keep the watches short, let all the men get some sleep, and stay warm. Why don't we let Peter over there take a watch, let's see how he does without the rest of the troops to keep him company, true test of a soldier's capacity to handle fear," commented Brenguard as he gazed out across the camp. With the new troops he was able to rebuild every unit to its original size, as well as add a unit of ten militia men with a motley assortment of weapons to help guard the cannons, or do scouting if need be, but it wasn't nearly as many as he wanted. The Empire wasn't built in a day, Brenguard silently said to himself, even Sigmar couldn't do that.

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Peter shivered in the cold dark. He looked up at the sky, a few stars showed through, but a thick layer of clouds blocked out most of them. He moved closer to the fire, the crack of the snow under his boots echoing across the camp. The howling wind had only picked up at sunset, as had the snow. Peter couldn't remember another year when winter had come so early and so hard. There was already a good inch and a half of snow on the ground, and it showed no sign of stopping. Peter scanned the horizon, but he couldn't see much with the visibility so limited by the snowfall. He

could hear the footsteps of the other 2 watchmen, the cracking of the snow cutting through the crisp, bitter night air.

A sudden crunching noise off to the west brought Peter's attention back to his duties, and he snapped his head in that direction. He couldn't see anything, but he wasn't one to be unwarily, especially having been personally been picked by Captain Brenguard for this duty. Peter drew his cutlass in one hand, and his father's old pistol in the other, and slowly made his way toward the sound, trying to be as quiet as he could. As he crept forward, another crunch sounded, this one quieter, and nearer, directly in his path. Slowly, methodically, Peter cocked his pistol, and taking a deep breath, carried on, peering through the snow in the direction of the sound.

A rough crunch sounded behind him, and he turned to see a fist sized rock protruding out of the snow a few feet behind him. Before he had time to react, a heavy figure dove from behind him, and knocked Peter off his feet. Scrambling to regain his footing, Peter loosed his grip on his sword, needing the hand to get off the ground. Turning, he found himself face to face with a horrendous sight. The face he was peering at was almost like that of an old man, wrinkled, but with one gross difference, half of it was gone, the bone of his jaw uncovered by skin. The old man contorted his face into a wicked grin, pulled a small curved and jagged blade from a fold in his dirty cloak, and lunged at Peter. This time being prepared, Peter dodged the intended blow, and wrapped an arm around the old man's neck. With a quick move, Peter used the man's momentum against him, and pulled him off his feet, flat on his back. Putting the gun to the man's head, Peter looked with disgust at the deformed face, "who are you?"

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Jacob stifled a yawn, and looked over to the west. he had heard quite a lot of noise from that direction, sounded like footsteps, but surely the sentry between himself and Peter would have said something if it was anything out of the ordinary. Jacob wondered how Peter was doing. The two had been friends for some time, going hunting and fishing together as kids, and before they had volunteered, they were both apprentices with the local Blacksmith.

"Oh well, might as well check, a little company wouldn't hurt anyway," he said to himself as he began to walk toward the sounds. Three steps were all he got though, before the giant bat swooped by, breaking his neck in a single instant and carrying the body off.

"I came to offer a deal to any wishing to listen," said the old man with a wicked smirk.

"What kind of deal old man?" asked Peter, trying to get some information out of the man before reporting to Brenguard.

"You, young man, wouldn't understand, what I have to offer is better appreciated by those with more years under their belt," croaked the old man with a weak laugh.

"I may be young, but I'm destined for great things, tell me what you're deal is old man, or you'll see what kind of deal my pistol can make."

"I offer the greatest gift of all, greater than power, riches, something even your Emperor can't obtain. I offer immortality."

"Immortality? You want to add me to your legion of undead? I think I'll pass," smirked Peter as he tightened his grip on the pistol.

"No! The undead are no more alive than those in coffins. Simple reanimation can be done by any old hag. The true arts of necromancy apply to the living. I myself have been taught them, and I wish to offer my services, I seek an apprentice." said the man with a wary glance at Peter's pistol.

"Tell me more" said Peter, hesitantly drawing the pistol away from the man's head, but keeping it pointed at him none the less.

"I have everything you'll ever need to know about extending your life, right here in these books," said the man, patting a thick satchel under his cloak.

Brenguard passed from under the entry flap of his tent. He headed west of the camp, to check on Peter, and have a word with him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a bit of movement, up above the line of tents. Turning, he saw the black shape cross the sky, the leathery wings unmistakable. Quickly bringing his rifle up, he sighted in on the monster, and fired. A loud screech broke the silence of the night, and men popped out of tents across the camp. Brenguard ran across the cap, jumping over a few cots along the way. He stooped over his kill. The large bat was lying awkwardly over a figure. Moving the wing out of the way, Brenguard recognized the young boy, one of the watchmen he had set.

"To arms! To arms! We're under attack!" shouted Brenguard, running from tent to tent waking the men. An attack at night, whoever had done this was serious. A true enemy, someone worthy of his time. Brenguard smiled widely as he put on his own armor. This was what he lived for!

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Brenguard watched as the men began heaving the bodies of the attackers to the east edge of camp. Five giant bats and a couple largish wolves all told, not quite the attack force Brenguard had assumed was coming. A few matters remained though, he knew that 3 of his watchmen were dead, but one was still unaccounted for; Peter. Brenguard moved west, keeping his pistol in one hand and a lantern in the other, just to be safe.

Roughly 100 yards out from the camp, Brenguard stumbled over a figure in the snow. He looked down, to see a body, covered in reddened snow. Holstering his pistol, Brenguard crouched over the figure and wiped the layer of snow off of it. It was a ghastly figure, a robbed body, but where the head should be was nothing more than a small bloodied lump on its neck. Brenguard wrinkled his nose at the grotesque sight, but he had seen worse. Quickly searching the body, he found that it had numerous satchels about it, all of them empty. Brenguard sifted through the surrounding snow, finding a great number of bizarre items; bones, books, lockets, rings, and then he found a letter, folded in quarters and soaked, but still intact. Sitting down, Brenguard brought the letter close to the light, and read it.

Marcus directed the men to set fire to the carcasses of the slain beasts, not knowing what kinds of disease the servants of the dead might carry. Marcus turned around at tap on his shoulder, to see a shaken looking Brenguard standing there.

“I need to see to it that this letter is sent post haste, it’s of vital importance. I want our fastest rider to take it to Kurt in Wurtbad as fast as can be done,” ordered Brenguard, handing him a yellow envelope, closed with a green wax seal bearing a Maltese Cross and the words “Royal Sylvan Guard of Stirland.”

“Yes sir, I’ll see to it,” answered Marcus, knowing that this must be of vital importance to have Brenguard this worried.

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A sudden knock on the door stirred Kurt from his book by the fire. He made his way toward the heavy oaken door, wondering who would be calling on him at his late hour. Opening the door, he smiled. Even this weathered and battered, Marcus was easily recognizable.

“A letter sir, from Captain Brenguard. It is important, and for your eyes only. You must read it at once and I’ll take back your reply myself,” announced Marcus urgently, stepping inside.

Kurt was taken aback. Marcus had always been one for niceties, and this blunt command caught Kurt completely off guard. Whatever this was about had to be important though, Brenguard was loath to be without Marcus’s advice for long. Taking the letter, Kurt broke the seal. The letter was on yellowed parchment, but the writing was nearly illegible, obviously written in a hurry, it read:

“Dear Kurt,

Something of dire consequence has occurred here in Sylvania, which could have serious repercussions. I was attacked recently by a Necromancer, and it seems the fellow that killed him took all of his possessions and deserted. Normally this would be left to local authorities to clean up, but it seems the man has stolen a tome of

great power, and I dare say most probably of great evil. I am told by the local clergy of Morr that the book in question is an artifact dating back to the days the first Von Carstiens, and can corrupt even the most pious. Thus, with such a heavy duty upon me, and my own responsibilities here in Sylvania, I have sent Marcus to you, to seek your aid. I request that you hunt down this young man, Peter. What his intentions with this book are, and why he stole it, I know not, but Marcus will tell you all I know of him, and where I believe he may be. If you are willing and able to assist me, I thank you a hundred times over, and I pray that Morr and Sigmar may guide you and protect you.

Forever in Your Debt,

Captain Brenguard of the

Royal Sylvan Guard of Stirland&rdquo;

&ldquo;Marcus, give me an hour to gather my things, and then you may tell me the rest of the tale on our way to Sylvania. We must make haste if I am to catch this man&rsquo;s trail!&rdquo;