

Part Three: Nemesis and Ally

Saturday, 26 August 2006

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Brenguard sat in the inn with his back to the other patrons, brooding over Peter's™s desertion. But if anyone could take care of it, Kurt could. He turned his thoughts to things that still rested in his own hands. The army was on leave until Marcus returned, and Brenguard decided to force himself to enjoy it. He called the bartender over and ordered another ale.

A man entered the inn. He was finely dressed, rivaling even some Marienburgers in decadence. The fellow seemed rather upset about something and quickly moved toward the bar, a quieting of the patrons following in his wake. The man leaned over the bar and whispered something to the bartender who pointed down the bar to where Brenguard was sitting. Brenguard grimaced as the man made his way toward where he was seated. Brenguard gulped down the last bit of his ale and turned to fully face the approaching man.

"Captain Brenguard?" asked the man, sitting down opposite Brenguard.

"At your service," answered Brenguard, "what may I do for you sir?"

"My name is Count Vilhelm, I am a merchant from Averheim, and I was traveling to Kislev. We made a stop at the Moot, and it seems we got rather lost."

"I don't suppose you're asking me for directions, so the short story would help here," interjected Brenguard, in no mood for stories from a trader.

"We ended up in Sylvania, and when a storm rolled in, our caravan got split up. One of the carts never met back with us, and we were forced to leave without them when we were attacked by a great number of wolves. My daughter was on that cart, and I'd do anything for you if you could bring her back," pleaded Vilhelm.

Brenguard leaned back in his chair and sighed to himself. This was exactly the sort of thing he was here to help with, but he dreaded going back into Sylvania without Marcus.

"Count, where did you last see her?" asked Brenguard, trying to gather as much information as he could about what he was getting himself into.

“Hard to say, like I said, we were lost and there was a storm, but I asked some of the locals about it, and based on my descriptions of the terrain that I was about 5 miles west of Castle Vandenberg.”

Brenguard nearly fell off his chair. Was this man really asking him to go within 5 miles of Castle Vandenberg? No wonder he had come to the captain of the Sylvan Guard, no one else would even consider doing it! A thought crept into Brenguard’s mind. No one else would do it. No one was brave enough, save for him.

“My good Count, consider it done. I will search for her myself, as one man can more easily slip unnoticed through those lands than a whole army,” answered Brenguard with a grin.

“Oh! Why thank you Captain, I owe you everything for even accepting my request! Everyone else I’ve asked has been terrified of that place. It’s good to see that at least our officers are still brave enough to enter that land!” said Vilhelm as he extended a hand across the table to Brenguard.

“It’s my duty Count, what good would the Royal Sylvan Guard be if we were afraid to enter the land we’re patrolling?” offered Brenguard shaking Vilhelm’s hand.

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Brenguard set out from the small town before sunrise, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself. While he loved adoring crowds and sendoffs from the young women of the town, he much more valued the safety of few knowing exactly where he was headed and how far he had gotten. He wouldn’t put it past the vampires to have spies in the towns near the Sylvanian border. He set out with a light load of equipment, just a bedroll, a couple canteens, food, his pistol, his sword in scabbard, shield tied over his pack on his back, and his rifle, also slung over his back. The hike ahead was daunting, but a horse was about as much a giveaway to scouts as would be Count Vilhelm’s ridiculous hat.

A day and a half of grueling hiking was not a pleasant thought, but it was duty, and Brenguard wasn’t one to say no to rescuing the daughters of rich merchants. The most unnerving thing was that this was his first time in Sylvania alone. He wasn’t scared of being ambushed, he was afraid of no one knowing how he might die, he was afraid of falling in noble combat without a soul to tell the story, but above all, he was afraid of dying in Sylvania without anyone to carry his body out. One death was enough, and Brenguard had no intention of serving his killer.

Shifting the weight of his pack to his other shoulder, Brenguard

cleared the thoughts from his head and began the long hike to Castle Vandenberg, praying he'd make the hike back too.

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Brenguard hadnâ€™t seen a soul all day, living or otherwise. Heâ€™d covered quite a bit of ground, and he guessed that if he kept up, and timed it right, heâ€™d get to Castle Vandenberg just as the sun came up. The prospect of not facing the castle in the night was more than enough to keep him going through the night. Honestly though, he didnâ€™t really know what to expect once he got there.

As he came up over a ridge, he got a good look at the horizon, although he wished he hadnâ€™t. Before him a vast forest spread across the horizon. It was dark, every tree looking gnarled, mangled, and nearly dead, despite the thickness of the forest. Brenguard stopped for a moment before the daunting forest. Heâ€™d simply assumed nothing but wasteland lay between himself and Castle Vandenberg. Brenguard loosened his pistol from its holster at his hip and made sure he could get to his sword quickly, and then began to move toward the forest.

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Three hours of walking through the ancient wood, and Brenguard was utterly lost. The gnarled branches above him were so dense even without foliage that he couldnâ€™t see the sky. He guessed himself to be headed the right direction, but his usually impeccable sense of direction had failed him only a quarter of an hour after entering the forest. A sudden hiss sent a shiver up Brenguardâ€™s spine. It was reminiscent of a breeze through leaves, but there were no leaves here. The sound was decidedly hostile, and made Brenguard very anxious.

The sound came again, this time, though not any language he knew seemed

to say "why do you come here?" It wasn't spoken, just understood, plain as day.

"Show yourself vile creature!" shouted Brenguard in no particular direction, "if you mean to kill me be done with it!"

"Brave, that's good, you'll need to be," answered the voice, whispering and echoing inside his head.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" asked Brenguard dropping his pack and drawing his pistol and sword.

"What I am is not important," answered the voice harshly, the sound making Brenguard cringe. "What do you seek in the woods?"

"Passage, nothing more, why do you hinder me?" answered Brenguard as confidently as he could muster.

"Nothing lies beyond this forest but Castle Vandenberg and with it certain death for one like you. Why do you seek that place?"

"A woman was kidnapped, and I suppose she was taken there"

"Yes," hissed the voice, "yes, I remember. It was only just now that they passed. For you it may have been some time ago, but for me it is hardly separable from the present."

"Listen, I just need to know which way they went, please, whatever you are, please tell me," pleaded Brenguard, hopeful to escape the attention of this eerie voice.

"They went north, but you will want to be headed west, for that is where the girl is. I have been protecting her. It took all the strength I had been gaining these past ages, but she is safe for now."

"What are you? Why did you help her?" asked Brenguard, very worried.

"I am naught. I don't exist in the same sense you do. I am but spirit, once powerful and manifold, but ever since this land was damned to house the undead my power has waned."

Brenguard contemplated momentarily. Whatever it was, it seemed hostile to the vampires, and it seemed to be trustworthy.

“What kind of spirit are you then?” asked Brenguard apprehensively.

“Once, long ago, before the coming of the elves and the days of dwarves I was a part of Athel Loren. In those days the forest covered the entire land, but as creatures began populating the world they began cutting apart the forest. Before long, I was cut off from the rest of the forest. I am dying. You are probably the last one I can help, but I can sense that you are worth helping.” Was the voice’s answer, suddenly sounding weak and tired.

“Why am I worth helping?” asked Brenguard, reholstering his weapons.

“Because in days to come they will fear you. You will be the terror of the terrors themselves. It is the same bravery that preserves you here that will preserve you against them. Now hurry, for I cannot keep that monster from her for long. I will mark the path for you, you will know the way. Be swift Brenguard of the Humans, for even my domain is not safe for you to linger in for long,” answered the forest with a sudden sense of urgency.

Brenguard sprinted off down a path that had suddenly opened to the west, happy to be away from the voice and to have an idea of where he was going.

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Brenguard sprinted as fast as he could down the forest path. Not a single root or stone lay across his path. Up ahead the path turned south, and Brenguard instinctively drew his sword with his right hand, and his pistol in his left. The eerie voice of the forest still rang in his ears, and he still wondered at the spirit’s words. In days to come they will fear you. Was his destiny here in this land? Was Brenguard really to become a hero of the Empire, and turn back the powers of the Vampires like so many men of the past?

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Brenguard had little time to consider the future further, as he rounded the bend of the path, and found himself in a clearing. The grass here was green, a stark contrast to the dead forest around it. A small stone fountain stood in the middle of the clearing, and upon the edge of the fountain sat a young woman. She wore an elaborate blue dress, which looked to be rather beaten up, and torn in several places.

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“Miss Vilhelm I presume?” called Brenguard across the clearing with as much calm as he

could muster, which given the circumstances, wasnâ€™t much.

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The lady turned around, startled by the sudden interruption of the peaceful aura of the clearing. She quickly sprang up from the edge of the pool, and drew a long dagger, which she directed menacingly at Brenguard. She opened her mouth to speak, then faltered.

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She dropped the dagger, and shouted back, â€œIâ€™m sorry, I thought you were!â€

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â€œIâ€™m sorry to have startled you, my name is Viscount Brenguard, captain of the-â€

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â€œDid my father send you?â€ Lady Vilhelm interrupted, making her way across the clearing after picking up her dagger.

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Brenguard was a bit flustered at having been interrupted by the very person he was rescuing. Clearly these damsels in distress werenâ€™t all they were supposed to be.

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â€œYes, Count Vilhelm asked me personally to see to your safe return,â€ answered Brenguard with a forced smile.

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â€œYou?â€ she asked incredulously, â€œwith all the riches at my fatherâ€™s disposal he sent one brigand to save me?â€

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The smile on Brenguardâ€™s face quickly turned itself into a scowl. This clearly wasnâ€™t going the way he had hoped. â€œI have you know, Iâ€™m the only man brave enough to hunt down a vampire alone!â€ retorted Brenguard.

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â€œOr the only man dumb enough to come here without an army,â€ Lady Vilhelm answered, reaching Brenguardâ€™s position at the edge of the clearing. â€œNow come on, we have a long way to travel before nightfall if weâ€™re to out-distance this vampire.â€

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As the young daughter of the count marched off through the forest, Brenguard hurried to keep up. He wished his troops had half her pluck. He also wished she would have taken a little more kindly to him. After all, who was she to call the captain of the Sylvan Guard a brigand!

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Lady Vilhelm turned around, â€œand try to keep up.â€

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Brenguard finished rolling up his bed roll which he had loaned to Lady Vilhelm. His back hurt from sleeping on the ground, and he wished for a horse to give his legs a break. He could travel large distances on foot, but Lady Vilhelm's pace was unbearable, it was just short of a jog. Of course, he couldn't very well ask her to slow down, he'd never hear the end of it if his men found out.

Ready captain? called Lady Vilhelm coming back from the steam with a freshly filled canteen.

Of course m' lady, answered Brenguard with a forced smile.

Aliena.

What? asked Brenguard, confused from the short retort.

My name, it's Aliena. Stop with all the fancy titles, she answered with a sigh. Brenguard was taken aback. What time he had spent in Wurtbad taught him that you always used titles for nobility.

Ah, yes, well, Aliena. I think we got on the wrong foot, m Brenguard, he answered, offering his hand.

Just Brenguard? Don't you military types have first names? asked Aliena with a laugh as she shook his hand.

Ah, well, Brenguard is my first name. I dropped my father's name so people wouldn't respect my just for being his s

Hmm, that's interesting. From what I've heard of you, you love glory more than anything else. Funny you'd give up some just to re-earn it.

Ah, well, glory's no good if it's not yours. Wait, you said you'd heard of me? asked Brenguard proudly.

Oh, yes. Every town we stopped in people referred us to you as the best guide and guardian in eastern Stirland. Although, often they put it less tactfully.

Such as? inquired Brenguard.

“The only one foolish enough to go into Sylvania,” Aliena answered with a chuckle.

“I would have to agree,” answered a voice from behind them. Brenguard spun around, already with his sword and pistol drawn.

“Put down your weapons captain, you know they are of no use,” laughed the figure. Before them stood a well dressed aristocrat, dressed in black. The figure was extremely pale however, almost revoltingly so.

“I’ve killed one of your kind before, and I’ll do it again,” answered Brenguard as he stepped between Aliena and the vampire.

“How rude of me, I know your name, but I’ve failed to introduce myself, I am Count Vandenberg. Now, if you’ll please just put your weapons away, we can talk like gentlemen.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll keep my pistol up, and you’ll talk, how’s that?” answered Brenguard with a sneer.

“Fine then, have it your way captain. I think you’ll find my offer to be rather generous. I recently had an apprentice run away. I think you can sympathize with that, I hear you recently had a desertion yourself.”

“How did you...?”

“I know more than you could ever hope to captain. Now please, don’t interrupt, it’s rude,” answered the vampire, slightly annoyed. “My apprentice stole a very important book, the central work in my library. Your deserter has it, and I need it back, so it seems our fates are intertwined.”

“And if I don’t bring it back to you?” asked Brenguard hesitantly.

“She dies, that simple really,” answered the vampire with a smile.

“I think not,” answered Brenguard. Besides, I’m already ahead of you. One of my men already has the book,” bluffed Brenguard, hoping Kurt was already close on Peter’s trail. The vampire looked shocked. He obviously hadn’t expected that. He looked a little uncertain.

“If that’s true, then the trade ought to occur as soon as possible. Now, if you’ll hand over the girl, you can go and retrieve my book for me,” answered the vampire smugly.

“New plan,” said Brenguard. A shot rang through the forest, and Aliena screamed. Brenguard watched in awe as the bullet tore through the right side of the vampire’s face, blasting off pieces of the creature’s skull. Then, as if the entire thing was going backward in slow motion, the skin and bone of the vampire’s skull grew back before their eyes.

“I don’t think you understand captain, the thing you killed before was one of my thralls, a simple creature new to the undeath. I am older than your family line. And I will not be outdone by some upstart captain!” roared the vampire, causing the color in Brenguard’s face to drain.

“I may not be able to kill you, but I won’t let you take the girl,” answered Brenguard, reholstering the pistol and readying his sword.

“I’ll kill you and take the girl captain. Think carefully before you throw your life away,” warned the vampire, drawing his own saber.

“Then kill me, you’ll have to if you want to get to her,” retorted Brenguard more bravely than he felt.

“So be it Brenguard. I had looked forward to a worthy adversary, but it seems your destiny and mine are but intertwined for mere days.”

The Vampire made his way toward Brenguard, a grin on his face.

“Aliena, run as fast and as far as you can,” whispered Brenguard, “I’ll try to keep him busy for as long as possible. Just keep going west until you get to a village. Tell them I sent you and they’ll give you a horse to get back to your father.”

“Thank you Brenguard, I’ll never forget you.”

Aliena sprinted off, and the vampire made to follow her, but Brenguard intervened with a blow directed at the vampire’s neck. Vandenberg deflected the blow, and moved to better engage Brenguard. Brenguard’s next blow contacted with the vampire’s leg, hoping to limit his mobility. To his surprise, the sword passed straight through the leg without severing it. Brenguard’s spirit sank as he realized there was no way at all he could win.

The vampire brought his sword down on Brenguard's shoulder, but Brenguard managed to dodge enough to have only the blunt edge of the sword hit him. The blow still caused a white hot pain in his shoulder, and he suspected it had fractured a bone. The vampire, seeing Brenguard was distracted by the pain, kicked his legs out from under him.

As Brenguard looked up at the vampire towering above him, he reflected that this wasn't a terrible way to go, at least it was a noble death. Just then, as the vampire lifted his sword into the air to deliver the killing blow, Vandenberg let out a shriek. As the vampire turned and fled off into the forest, Brenguard saw the sun coming up over the canopy of the forest, and passed out from the pain.

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When Brenguard woke he had a terrible headache, but the pain had otherwise subsided. He immediately picked up his sword and put it back in its scabbard. Brenguard carefully reloaded his pistol and replaced it in his holster, keeping his right hand on the butt of the gun just in case he should need it. He carefully made his way west in the general direction he had seen the countess run.

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Brenguard moved through the forest for almost a quarter of an hour with no signs of the countess. Suddenly, a cracking sound caused Brenguard's head to snap left, just in time to see a figure hit him at a run. Both went sprawling to the ground, but the assailant was the first one up. The assailant, brandishing a hefty tree branch, stood over Brenguard, blocking any chance for escape. Brenguard got his first good look at his attacker. To his utter shock, above him stood Aliena.

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"Captain? I'm so sorry! I thought you were well, anyone but you. How did you escape from Count Vandenberg?" asked the countess incredulously.

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"The...", Brenguard stopped. A little embellishment might not hurt at this point he decided. "The creature didn't expect me to put up such a fight, and after we exchanged quite a few blows, he ran off. No doubt he intends to come back tonight with some minions to ensure an unfair fight."

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"I meant how did you keep from dying until the sun came up," answered the countess with a slight laugh.

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"I don't think he realized how close to sunrise it was, and he talked a bit more than he

should have before finishing me off," confessed Brenguard, embarrassed.

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"You fought a vampire count, a descendant of the Von Carstein line no less, and survived. That's no small feat captain," answered the countess reassuringly.

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"You, my lady, seem to know quite a bit about the denizens of Sylvania. For that matter, I don't think I've ever seen a count's daughter ambush an Imperial captain and win either. Care to tell me what's going on?"

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"It seems we're destined to be allies, so it's probably time I told you the truth. We should discuss it while we travel," answered the countess, offering Brenguard a hand to help Brenguard up.

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Brenguard took her hand, and the two began to make their way west again, heading toward the safety of the Empire again.

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Once the pair was safely out of the forest and nearing Imperial lands, they sat down to rest and eat what little provisions they had left.

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"I suppose the best way to begin is to tell you what I'm not. I'm not a countess," began Aliena.

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"So the man who asked me to find his daughter isn't a count?" asked Brenguard dejectedly. He had wagered a lot on this rescue mission, his life in fact; on the basis that Count Vilhelm might help finance his army.

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"He's one of my agents, a scout and informant. His act as my father was our backup plan should I fail to return from Vandenberg quickly," answered Aliena.

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"Your agent? Who exactly are you then?" asked Brenguard hesitantly, wary of the answer he might receive.

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"I'm a servant of the Emperor, like yourself. I also have the backing of a powerful religious group."

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"A Witch-hunter! You

don't hit me as the holier than thou Sigmarite type. Why is a witch-hunter in Sylvania?" inquired Brenguard.

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"Heavens no! I wouldn't risk my life messing with chaos for all the gold in Altdorf! I work for the church of Morr. I'm a vampire hunter," clarified Aliena with a smile.

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Brenguard tried to absorb the news. He had heard tales of vampire hunters; dirty, death-crazed men who scoured graveyards and swamps until they succumbed to madness. The charming, beautiful young woman before him contradicted everything he thought he knew about vampire hunters.

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"How long have you been working here then?" asked Brenguard, still trying to come to terms with this new information.

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"Three years. I've been gathering information for the church of Morr on the level of activity within Sylvania. It seems Count Vandenberg finally figured out the schedule of my reconnaissance runs."

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"What kind of organization are you running then?" asked Brenguard amazed that this young woman seemingly unarmed was used to spending long periods of time in Sylvania alone.

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"There are a dozen of us officially. I also have contacts and spies in every town in eastern Stirland. My usual group is mostly mercenaries and priests. The mercenaries are becoming harder to come by now that you're in the area, they seem to be flocking to your banner or hiding, I'm not entirely sure which," answered Aliena lightly, flashing another smile at Brenguard to try to reassure him that she was being honest.

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"How long have you been keeping tabs on me?" asked Brenguard, his continence finally returning to his usual mixture of bravado and sternness.

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"What?" asked Aliena, completely taken off guard.

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"Peter, they young recruit who seems to have obtained the vampire's book. He must have been one of your men. Fantastic work then! I was sure he was a deserter," laughed Brenguard, genuinely impressed with the vampire hunter's resources.

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“I’m afraid you’re wrong. The young deserter wasn’t one of mine. I do have an informant in your ranks though, so you weren’t entirely wrong. I was worried that you might draw the vampires into a fight, but it seems you’re smarter than I gave you credit for. You said you had already recaptured the book, I assume that was a bluff?”

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Yes and no. I have someone trustworthy in pursuit of it, but as of yet I’ve heard nothing back from him. I assume you sent someone too?” asked Brenguard.

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Yes, I sent my apprentice. He’s an able young man, but I fear that if your deserter has learned anything from those tomes my apprentice might not be up to the challenge of a small undead horde,” answered Aliena grimly.

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So, once we get back to a civilized town what do you plan to do?” asked Brenguard with a shrug.

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I’ll honestly don’t have any idea. No doubt Vandenberg will be keeping an eye out for me, so my days of traveling alone inside Sylvania are numbered. I suppose I’ll write to the church and see what they’d have me do,” answered Aliena uncertainly.

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I think I have a better idea,” countered Brenguard, “my second in command is still away, and I could use an expert on the enemy on my staff anyway. Any chance you’d be interested in serving with the Sylvan Guard?”

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Aliena looked thoughtful for a moment then smiled warmly. “I accept. Your boys could use some disciple. Besides, not every vampire is going to be dense enough to let you get a good shot right at his face,” she joked good naturedly.

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Discipline? I’ve never had a problem with discipline!” exclaimed Brenguard. “Well, except for that desertion.”

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And I hear your men have emptied more taverns than any other army in Stirland, and they’re half the size of any other fighting force!” replied Aliena mock-accusingly.

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That’s not a discipline problem, that’s a problem with how little the taverns stock,” answered Brenguard with a laugh. For a woman who chased after the dead for a living, she was making him smile more than anything in this Sigmar-forsaken land.

