

A Blessed Life

The inquisitor towered over Brenalt, her face impassive and stern. “Explain to me how you survived, Soldier.” The threat hung plain and heavy in her voice. If his story did not satisfy the inquisitor, Brenalt would never rise from his hospital bed.

The young soldier’s wounds were serious—several deep cuts and gouges, two broken ribs, and a fractured shield-arm. But despite the pain he was in and the obvious threat to his life, Brenalt seemed calm, almost serene.

“I don’t think you’ll believe me, Ma’am. I don’t entirely believe it myself.”

The inquisitor scoffed: “Here’s what I believe. Your squad was overrun by a band of the undead. Each of your comrades died doing their duty. But not you. You alone returned, your miserable life intact. I believe you made a deal for your life, and the seed of darkness is now within you. Confess it now, and I can make your end a merciful one.”

Brenalt smiled weakly. “You are half-right, Ma’am. I did make a deal, but not with a demon.”

Brenalt threw his entire weight against the decaying door, and it slammed shut with an echoing boom. The ruined shrine was remarkably intact, considering how long this region had been behind the undead lines. The walls would hold for a little while. Time enough to consider, breathe, and mourn. Tomas, Edrick, and Stanton were dead. His best friends. The four have been inseparable as boys, and now Brenalt was alone for the first time. Mattias was slumped down next to a cracked and crumbled statue; he wouldn’t last the night with wounds like those. Brenalt had no idea what had happened to the rest of his squad. This was supposed to be a simple reconnaissance mission, light resistance if any. It hadn’t worked out that way.

“I could use some water.” Mattias’s voice was cracked and raspy. Brenalt’s waterskin was mostly empty, but he eased a few last drops into Mattias’s mouth. Mattias sputtered and coughed. “Probably a waste of water, but thank you. You should run, Bren. You should run until you can’t. You’re not too bad off, you might make it. Tell our families.” Mattias coughed, groaned, and slumped down a little deeper.

Mattias’s eyes shut and did not open again.

The wind was rising outside, and it whistled over the gaps in the roof tiles. Brenalt looked around the shrine, looking for anything to brace the door, or maybe a place to hide and rest. There was almost nothing left. The icons and statues had all been torn apart, deep gouges were dug in the stonework as the monsters defiled this once-sacred place. But an altar remained, largely intact, and a shaft of moonlight shone down on it from above. Brenalt limped over to it, and got down on his knees. His prayer was wordless—a simple expression of fear, hope, and need.

The wind changed.

Brenalt was not alone. He opened his eyes, and was surrounded by warmth and light. At the center of it all was *her*. His heart felt as if it were being pressed by her presence and beauty. Not beauty in the normal sense—there was absolutely nothing human about her. This was a creature from a different world, as alien in thought and mind as she was familiar in form. Her expression was calm, entreating, and almost amused at the young man kneeling before her.

“Uh... hello.” The angel’s expression did not change. “I need help. I don’t know if you... if you’re watching, if you even know what’s happening down here, but we’re fighting a war, and we’re losing. My squad is dead, and I don’t think I’m going to make it home, either. But I want to. A lot of people are giving up, but I’m not. I’ll keep fighting, I’ll do everything I can, but... I don’t have the strength to do it alone.”

The angel’s smile widened, and she nodded once. Somewhere deep in his chest, Brenalt felt a welling of strength. A pact had been reached.

The inquisitor’s eyes were closed. Her face had softened, and she weighed her thoughts for a long time before speaking.

“I believe you, soldier. There hasn’t been a verified visitation in decades, but... I believe you. Maybe I’m wrong, maybe you’re lying and you’ll be the death of us all. But I think I need to believe.”

The inquisitor held the young soldier’s hand in silence for several minutes.

“We’re running out of ideas, General Brenalt. Even our clearest victories are losses when it comes down to numbers. Most of their dead just get stitched back together, alongside *every* man and woman we lose. We’ve deployed clerics to the front lines. But if we lose them, and we do, they rise as a perversion of what they once were.”

Brenalt had risen through the ranks quickly—he had been promoted to Captain within weeks of returning to duty, and after a further series of improbable victories, promoted again and again over the last four years. Had the war’s progress been less dismal, his rise would have been unlikely. As it was, the ranks of officers needed replenishing on a regular basis.

The men and women who fought with him knew he had been blessed. He didn’t speak of it himself, but the rumors flew through the camps. General Brenalt had been blessed by the angels, and no matter how bad it got, Brenalt managed to emerge victorious.

Those victories were relative, however. Ranks and ranks of the dead could be destroyed, but there never seemed to be an end to them. Since the war began, there had never been a report of any sort of commanders among the undead. The existence of a necromancer or demon as the driving force behind the enemy had been theorized, but if that enemy existed, it had never shown itself. A council of the remaining generals and political leaders had been assembled to try to come up with a new strategy, as the end of the entire human population was coming into view.

“And what of the angels, Brenalt? What do they say to you? Why haven’t they come to help us?” Another commander, younger than he was, had a look of hope in his eyes that Brenalt had come to recognize.

“They don’t speak to me. I don’t know why they do, or don’t do, anything. I’ve talked to the elders, I’ve talked to the priests, and all that I can say for certain is they are very, very different than we are. We see them as beautiful, but I do not think we see what they *are*. Perhaps those are merely the forms they choose to show us. Forms that we can understand. We see a radiant smiling face, and we think that *means* something. But they are as different from us as we are from a hound. Perhaps our worship is nothing more than the wagging of a hound’s tail. Yet I have stood in the presence of an angel, and I have felt her benevolence. I know with absolute certainty that they are powerful. The angels answered my call once, and whatever they are, I still believe that they might come to our aid. But we cannot rely on them. We cannot rely on them even for hope.”

A lightly armored scout burst into the war council and bent a knee before giving his message. "Battle report, my lords. The Fourth Legion is lost. The dead have overrun both Greenfield and River's Glen. Greenfield was evacuated, but they hit River's Glen out of nowhere. I don't think many people got out."

General Elise shook her head. "The Fourth was down a division, and we could barely keep it supplied. I imagine the refugees from Greenfield will put a lot of pressure on the Eastern Tower; we should preemptively divert some supplies there if we can spare them. A damn shame about River's Glen, but it wasn't strategically important."

Brenalt leaned forward on the table, his head cradled in his hands.

"No. But it was my home."

Brenalt hobbled to the top of a ridge and looked out at what had once been golden fields of wheat and rye. Now, it was a teeming mass of the dead, utterly despoiled. He could no longer ride a horse, not that he had a horse to ride—his leg had been crushed in battle a few months before. The army was no more. He could recognize some of the armor and insignia still being worn by the freshly risen in the army below—all that remained of a once-great fighting force.

Brenalt had no command, no warriors to assist him. He had been leading a small band of laborers and farmers to safety as holding after holding fell. As far as he knew, he, and the several dozen people with him, were the last humans alive.

Down the valley below, he saw a gaunt man wrapped in silks, escorted by dozens of skeletal servants. Even at this distance, Brenalt could feel his power. The necromancer was real, after all. Brenalt wondered if he had come to the front lines now, just to see the last vestiges of humanity crushed. A final moment of gloating over the last pieces of his victory as they fell into place.

Brenalt's despair turned to rage. He looked to the heavens and screamed.

"It was all for nothing! I gave you everything! I have buried everything I have ever loved, and for eight years, I have fought every single day! I have spread word of your *light* and your *love*, and that false hope led thousands to their deaths! Deaths that brought no rest! Now, at last, I will die with the last of my people. I will die fighting. I will die honoring my promise to you. Does it make you laugh? To hold out glimpses of hope to us sad little mortals? To watch us dance? Watch us suffer? Well, I don't care anymore. This will be the last sunrise for my people. I don't intend to watch it set."

He looked back over his shoulder to the handful of refugees that had followed him to the ridge. Their heads were all bowed in prayer.

Brenalt's rage faded, and a sad smile crept to his face. Whether it was out of mockery, respect, or desperation, he bowed his head with them.

He raised his staff toward the enemy, girding himself for one last charge.

The wind changed.