

THE QUEST OF FRANKENSTEIN

CHAPTER I

The grass was stomped flat by hundreds, possibly thousands, of booted feet. Deep ruts in the earth were visible everywhere, though the fog made that more of an impression than an actual view for the eyes. An inhuman stench filled the air, gunpowder, rotting flesh, sickness and fear, as if the mists were conjured from some circle of Hell rather than the war-torn lands of France.

The Germans had been on the march, determined to destroy their French enemies under the command of their controversial general, von Moltke the Younger. But the French, along with a corps of their British allies, were not folding and failing at the rate the Prussians strategists had predicted. The result was mass slaughter on both sides and the screams of dying men and horses added to the inhuman horror of the landscape.

Squatting and reloading their rifles, members of the heavily reduced 5th infantry regiment attempted to peer into the gloom. They knew the Colonel was determined to secure the nearby hill no matter how many men died in the attempt. The officer, Colonel Albrecht Gronau, was a tall, erect man who, though the son of a very successful boot manufacturer, held himself with the stylings of a Prussian nobleman. This caused him to wear an unnecessary monocle, speak with overt precision, and demand perfection from his men whatever the cost. He was openly despised, but beloved by the officer class who promoted him far beyond his capabilities.

“The little *lugner* is preparing for another rant,” Sgt. Paul Kropp muttered, taking a swig of water from his canteen.

Lugner, or liar, was the regimental nickname for Gronau after the officer boasted about having connections to the Kaiser by blood. It had been quickly learned that their Colonel was about as noble as a street sweeper, having earned his place in the military academy thanks to his father’s money rather than blood.

“*Ach*, he’s ready to scream like my daughter when I tell her to get back to work,” Olf Leer stated with a head shake.

A baker by profession, he prayed nightly for this war to end so he could get back to his family.

The *lugner* in question was berating his hapless aide, an undersized, mouse-faced boy named Peter Muller. Muller, an apprentice footman in a semi-noble house, was unsuited for military life and was assigned to be a batman to the imperious officer. The whole regiment pitied Muller, all the more so because he went out of his way to help the soldiers by keeping the Colonel’s attention on lesser duties and away from the soldiers.

“Form up!” Gronau snarled, his voice deep and full of scorn.

Striking his gloves against his thighs, Albrecht Gronau stared at his men with open distaste. They were a pack of middle-aged men and boys, little better than half-trained tradesmen! But they were his path to a general’s rank, and he would secure all the objectives given to him by his superiors and would be recognized as a leader among men.

Striding back and forth before the regiment, Gronau spun on them, his face now controlled but full of menace.

“We must take this hill, and we must do it now! General von Moltke requires this position in his move to destroy the Western front, and we will not disappoint that great man! Now, prepare yourself, for the Kaiser, von Moltke and God himself!”

Gronau was surprised that the men did not cheer his final statement. From all the military history he read, everything from Julius Caesar to Clausewitz, had said that men would cheer such sentiments. Still, so long as they were obedient, he had no worries.

“About face!” Paul Kropp ordered, smiling slightly.

The men would fight despite Gronau and his ambitions because that was why they wore their uniforms. If their winning this hill from the French would get rid of the pompous officer, all the better.

And so the march began, into the fog-bound land, the stench of decay even stronger as they moved upwards. But there was another smell filling the air, that of blood and the sickness that comes from violent death. This was a new sensation, making the soldiers uneasy as they marched into the gloom of the battlefield. Their hands tightened on their rifles and a few reached to their belts to insure their bayonets were in place for easy access.

Then the screams began, filling the air and causing more than a few men to slow their marching step and quake with fear. There was something primal within them that caused the men to sense that something terrible was ahead. Another scream rose above the sound of their march, causing most to slow and stop in place, their fear rising with each second that passed.

“Forward! We are the Kaiser’s men and we do not retreat!” Gronau shrieked, pulling his saber out of its sheath and raising the sword above his head.

He knew he looked like a warrior of old, a Viking or a Teutonic Knight come to life to inspire his men to defeat their fear and overcome the enemy.

“Fix bayonets,” Paul Kropp called out, knowing bullets would be next to useless at that moment. The men were full of fear and likely to shoot each other than any of the enemy.

The 5th fell into the routine of weapon drill, fixing bayonets and spreading out so they didn’t risk stabbing each other. This relieved a bit of the terror they felt. They had been drilled mercilessly by Gronau and were able to ready themselves within seconds. Tensed and ready, the remaining members of the regiment waited for the order to charge.

“First rank, charge!” Gronau howled, waving his sword.

He waited and counted to himself, knowing the official time between rank charges was listed as 5 seconds between ranks. At the moment he hit five, he ordered the next rank in and started the count again.

It was then that the screams began again, rising in pitch. Gronau smiled, knowing his men were destroying the hated French, winning him the hill and his future on the General staff. Throwing caution into the wind, he ordered the remaining ranks to charge, joining in and screaming like an ancient warrior.

The mist seemed to grow thicker as the howls of agony rose in volume. Gronau lost his men in seconds, but swung his sword in front of him, prepared to slice anything in his path and show his bloody sword to all with glory. He smiled at the thought of decorations from the Kaiser himself, one day receiving a title like Baron, Count or even, like his idol Bismarck, Prince. It would be glorious!

It was then that the head of Paul Kropp struck him in the chest, sending his sprawling to the ground.

Albrecht Gronau stared in terror at the head of his lead Sergeant, the face twisted in a rictus of agony.

The Prussian Colonel backed away, beginning to blubber as a pair of enormous hands grabbed him by his shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

Gronau looked over his shoulder at the one who lifted him up, prepared to thank the man for his kindness. Instead, he dropped his sword and began to shriek in horror at the face before him—a monstrous visage straight out of his nightmares!

The being that filled Gronau with terror was a giant of a man, at least eight feet tall, with pale, chalky skin more reminiscent of the underbelly of a sea creature. His lips were an unpleasant black and the teeth that peeked out from beneath them appeared razor-sharp. His hair was long and dark, resembling the mane of a lion or the pelt of a bear more than that of a human being. But it was the eyes that were the most frightening aspect of his visage: they were deeply set, yellowish, and seemed to glint with an inhuman malevolence—a demonic intelligence that stared at the screaming soldier with the same regard as most would use to view an insect.

This was Gouroull, the legendary creation of Victor Frankenstein, whose tragic story was believed by the world at large to be mere fiction. But the truth was far more awful than even the secretive whispers told in the deep of night of a man who had created life from the dead. For Frankenstein’s creation was a true fiend with an inhuman intelligence and purpose that only his alien mind could comprehend.

Gronau's fears were well-founded since the Creature was a true predator and all too often his prey was mankind.

Gouroull continued to watch the panicking human with a faint trace of amusement. The scent of blood and fear had attracted him to this hill in the middle of the battlefield, even more sinister than any other location in this land of death and destruction. It was almost as if a beast was tearing apart the soldiers, rending them limb from limb, in this one location. This had intrigued Frankenstein's creation, since the scent in all the other lands the humans were doing battle was quite different.

The death of so many men was intriguing, far more than the sniveling fool whom he had dropped and who was backing away from him. Gouroull knew something... no, someone... was present at this location and was capable of killing humans in an impressive manner. As one of the most dangerous beings on the planet, this interested him and he had to know what was causing these deaths.

The answer came a heartbeat later, emerging from the mists and causing Gronau to bleat with fear. The man striding towards them was just as impressive and terrible in his own way—another beast in human form. He was a head shorter than Gouroull, but the breadth of his shoulders was far wider and gave the impression of inhuman power. His face was overly long and wide; his nose was the size and shape of a spade; and his lips were too wide and thick for his gigantic face. Everything about him was massive and oversized, making him as frightful to see as Frankenstein's creation. He was dressed in a heavy black coat and slouch hat and stared at Gouroull, disregarding the jabbering German soldier.

Gouroull smiled, his teeth gleaming in his pallid face. He recognized the newcomer: he was a legendary killer who had been haunting Europe for some time. Known as the Creeper, or the Brute, he was said to be unkillable. His favorite method of dispatching his victims was to shatter their spines. Until now Gouroull had discounted these rumors as mere gossip, but seeing the Creeper standing before him changed his mind. This was a being like him, a born killer far beyond the rest of humankind. This would be an enjoyable test.

"I know you," the Creeper said, his voice a rumble that sounded more like two rocks clashing. "You are Gouroull."

Gouroull replied, "You are the Creeper."

They nodded; no more needed to be said. They both acknowledged this would be a chance to see who was the greater, the more dangerous predator in the world. They were alike in many ways, both born with inhuman strength capable of destroying anything in their path. Gouroull knew the Creeper was not a product of Victor Frankenstein's mad genius, but his enemy was far from a natural creation. And because of that alone, they would fight to the death.

There were no preliminary motions or circling about each other, looking for openings. Without a sound, both monsters charged forward. In less than a second, they were locked together, hands and arms fully engaged in a struggle for dominance. Two facts became instantly apparent to both creatures. Gouroull was faster, but the Creeper appeared to be a little stronger. Their methods of fighting were also vastly different. Gouroull used his power and invulnerability and sought to use his teeth to tear out his opponent's neck. The Creeper used his strength and seeming ability to never be harmed to crush his enemy's neck and spine.

Locked in mortal combat, neither moved, yet both strained against each other. To an outsider, it would have looked as if they were standing still, merely holding each other's arms and pushing with no effort, but nothing could be further from the truth. Both monsters exerted their demonic powers, with a strength so massive that it could tear apart any man or beast. Neither Gouroull nor the Creeper perspired, nor did their faces hint that this fight was pushing them beyond their limits. Their horrific countenances remained impassive, Gouroull's yellow eyes locked with the Creeper's dull black orbs. Neither of them blinked; they merely continued to struggle without a sound or even a breath of air.

Gouroull knew he had met his equal. The Creeper's flesh was not as unyieldingly hard as the one Victor Frankenstein had made for his creation. Nor was the Creeper as fast or agile as Gouroull, though these differences were only fractionally apart. However, he was more powerful, possessing strength that exceeded even that of Frankenstein's horrific creation!

Slowly, moving with glacial speed, the Creeper's massive arms began enveloping Gouroull. He started to squeeze, his massive strength seeking to shatter the iron-strong spine of his foe. Gouroull felt a wave of pain fill his body; yet, instead of gasping or shrieking in agony, as would anyone else, he slowly fought back. He lowered his head, seeking to bite down on the Creeper's throat and tear his jugular vein.

These were their favored methods of destroying their enemies and it was now a slow race to see which would achieve victory.

Gouroull's teeth were mere inches from the Creeper's throat, while, at the same time, his back began to creak and his spine was seconds away from shattering. Slowly each monster labored, attempting to defeat the other. This would tell them which of them was the greatest, since they appeared to be equals in every other way. The idea that another in this world was as dangerous as they were was unacceptable; there could only be one creature considered the most deadly, and both were determined to hold that title.

Suddenly, the air about them became still, as if they had entered the eye of a hurricane and stood in a rare moment of calm. The silence was broken seconds later when a loud whistling could be heard, coming from every direction at once. But Gouroull and the Creeper ignored it, their battle continuing despite the war around them.

Albrecht Gronau knew the source of the noise and threw himself onto the ground, covering his head and beginning to pray for his life. Between the monsters battling and what was coming, he believed he had truly entered Hell itself!

A moment later, the entire hill shook, as if a giant fist had struck the land, causing the whole area to quake. Then, the explosions began, throwing Gouroull and the Creeper in different directions. The air was filled with the sounds of thunder as the mortars struck the area, making it appear as if the world was coming to an end. Where the shells came from would never be known—French, British, Prussian or Austro-Hungarian, it would never be discovered. But the bombardment threw apart two of the most dangerous beings that had ever existed since life began, tossing them aside with less effort than an elephant would use against a single insect in its path.

The mists thickened with the scent of cordite, burning flesh and scorched earth as the explosions continued relentlessly, destroying everything they struck.

Then the bombardment ended, concluding as fast as it had begun. Gouroull stood up in a lightning motion, large clumps of dirt tossed aside as he sprang upward, and searched for his enemy. The hill, previously a grassy mound that rose above a nearby river, was now a torn ruin, a lifeless hulk. Huge craters, some filled with bodies, were all that could be seen. Formerly a location used by painters and poets for inspiration, it was now a gaping sore, a horror-filled land of death. Life would never return to this place; mankind had stolen it from the land.

Albrecht Gronau stood up, shocked to discover that he was uninjured. The explosions were terrifying and caused him to weep as he prayed; yet, it seemed the Lord had determined he was needed to help the Prussians in the march towards victory. Looking down, he spotted the head of Paul Kropp in a crater and gave the dead soldier a textbook salute.

"Farewell, my comrade. I will remember you when I lead our people to victory!" he shouted, wondering if the Kaiser would elevate him to the nobility now or after he had defeated the French. Possibly it would take some time, but even God seemed determined to protect Colonel Gronau from harm when all around him were doomed. It would not be long before his name was mentioned in the same whispers as the late and legendary Prince Otto von Bismarck.

Turning to leave, Gronau started as the enormous form of Gouroull suddenly became visible to him again despite the fog. Before the Prussian could emit a sound, or even a squeak of fear, Victor Frankenstein's monstrous creation seized him up with one huge hand and lifted him by the neck. With a lightning movement, his razor sharp teeth clamped down on the German's neck, tearing half of the flesh away and killing him in mere seconds.

But the Lord had promised me that I would become the next Bismarck! Albrecht Gronau thought as he died.

Tossing the corpse aside, Gouroull once again scanned the land for the Creeper. But his enemy was gone. He doubted that the massive killer was dead. Like Gouroull himself, they were so easy to kill. For

now, their fight had been halted by the hand of man, but he knew that, in the future, it would resume and only one of them would survive. It would be a glorious day, one of blood and terror.

Gouroull's teeth glinted as he smiled, thinking of that day in the future.