

Chapter 1

Viktor's tumor was born on the day the armistice was signed.

Winter had come, and with it, news that would shake the continent from Jarlsbeck to the Red Coast. The war was over. After three years of bloodshed, boredom, and bad food it was really done.

Viktor was going home.

Maybe he should have stayed vigilant. Maybe he shouldn't have been daydreaming. But Viktor had half a mind to march off now, to leave behind the frozen latrines and lumpy bedrolls. To hell with the army. The second he got back Viktor was going to wolf down a plate of his mama's schnitzel. And he'd finally kiss Karla again. A big wet one. Not to mention drown himself in Herr Fischer's homemade rye beer.

Home! His cheeks hurt from smiling. Maybe Viscount von Holt would chew him out for ditching the rest of the patrol, but with news like this, even the viscount couldn't stop him from telling Schmidt.

Peace.

Viktor could hardly believe it.

He trotted into camp sporting a gap-toothed grin and a woolen great coat over his chainmail. The mountain air was bracing, but the sun was out,

the day still full of promise.

Schmidt stood guard duty by the firepit. He frowned at Viktor's approach, his droopy mustache exaggerating the scowl, but Viktor didn't let it bother him. Not on a day like this.

Schmidt was always frowning. It was nothing new. Viktor liked to joke that Schmidt had once seen his own mother naked and his face had just gotten stuck like that. Everyone had a good laugh at that one. Except Schmidt, naturally.

Their camp perched atop a hill overlooking the snowy forest south of Kandelberg Pass. Empty tents dotted the summit, their owners out on patrol. Viktor unshouldered his blunderbuss and leaned the stubby weapon against a fallen log.

"You're match cord has gone out," said Schmidt.

"Oops, sorry." Viktor fumbled with the tinder box tucked in his belt. He picked up his firearm by its trumpet-shaped barrel. Honestly, Viktor hated the damned thing. Everyone acted like guns were so great, like their invention was going to turn the tide of the war.

But it was obviously too late for that.

He wished the dwarves had never invented the awful things. His blunderbuss was loud and clumsy and he'd burned his fingers on it at least a dozen times. Worse, he had a recurring nightmare about the one occasion he'd managed to kill a Rumavian soldier with the contraption. It featured a bear riding a unicycle and a naked dwarf scolding him for not washing his hands. Viktor didn't like to talk about it.

Those dwarves, he wondered sometimes whether all of their marvelous inventions were a good thing. He'd even heard that they had built a flying machine. What would they think of next? Viktor shook his head.

He set his hand on Schmidt's shoulder. "Maybe you should sit down for this."

But instead of listening to the momentous news, Schmidt held up his hand. "Hold on." He craned his neck to look past Viktor out into the surrounding wilderness. His ever-present scowl deepened.

"Pay attention, Schmidt! You won't believe this."

"I thought I saw something out there."

Viktor bounced on the balls of his feet, feeling like he could jump ten feet in the air. The short sword strapped to his hip flapped against his leg.

"They've signed an armistice!"

“Bullshit.” He finally had Schmidt’s full attention.

“It’s true. We intercepted a courier. A kid with pimples wearing a stupid-looking hat. The war is over.”

“So...we’ve lost.” Schmidt blinked away tears. He sat abruptly, as if he might lose his balance.

“Don’t look at it like that, yah?” It’s not like it was a shock or anything. Everyone knew they were losing. “Schmidt, we’re going home.”

“If the damned *runts* hadn’t pulled out we could have won this thing.”

Viktor swatted Schmidt on the back of the head. “So what if the dwarves went back to Cairn Dunningregor? Don’t *you* want to go home, too? No more freezing our wieners off out here in the middle of nowhere fighting Rumavian conscripts and smelly-ass Death Knights. This is great news.”

“So help me, Viktor, if this is another of your pranks.”

Viktor held up his hand like he was swearing an oath. “I promise, Schmidt, it’s true.”

Before Viktor could react, Schmidt threw his arms around Viktor’s waist and hoisted him off his feet with a grunt.

“Home.” Schmidt released him, beaming as he rubbed the pulled muscle in his back. “When?”

Viktor shrugged. “No orders yet. Can't be too long if the war is over, though.”

“This calls for celebration. I am going to brew some tea!”

“Forget the tea, Schmidt. I know where the viscount keeps his stash.” Viktor did an about-face and marched toward the viscount’s tent.

“Where are you going?”

Viktor rolled his eyes as he ducked under the canvas flap. “Relax, Schmidt.”

“Viktor, don’t you dare.”

Viktor was always surprised at how nice the viscount’s tent was, even out here in the middle of nowhere. There were bearskin rugs strewn across the floor, and a proper bed. The viscount even had a table with a stack of maps draped over it. Viktor detoured to inspect them, harboring a secret hope that they led to buried treasure. But they were only maps of Kandelberg Pass and the surrounding landscape. “Schmidt, you worry too much,” Viktor hollered over his shoulder, dropping to his knees to drag the bottle of brandy out from beneath the bed. “I’ve got a good jump on them.

They won't be here for at least ten minutes. I'm sure the viscount will share when the others get back to camp. We're just getting a little head start."

Viktor emerged from the tent with an elaborate bottle wrapped in silver foil. He popped the cork, threw Schmidt a bob of his eyebrows, and took a swig. Viktor tried to hand the bottle to his friend.

Schmidt stared past him out into the woods.

Viktor turned to look but there was nothing there. "Did you see something?" When Schmidt didn't respond Viktor shoved the bottle into his hand. "He's not going to court-martial you. The war is over."

Schmidt shook his head, almost like he was shaking off an idea he didn't like. He swilled a mouthful, and coughed, handing it back. "Did you ever think you would make it home?" Schmidt asked.

Viktor paused with the bottle almost to his lips. "If you asked my father, I was dead as soon as I touched the Well. But I don't know, I always kind of figured I'd be okay."

Schmidt rubbed his temples as if he were soothing a headache. "Magic. The minute I touched the Well my nerves were shot."

"My grandfather was a tumorling." Viktor slugged the viscount's brandy. "Scales growing like a rash, mad as a broken cuckoo clock, the

whole bit. So I always knew there was a chance I could tap the Dragon Well.” Viktor handed the drink to his friend and stared down at his boots. “The cancer killed him, eventually. When magic goes wrong, it goes really wrong. I guess we’re lucky. We made it through a whole war with none of that shit.”

Schmidt wiped the mouth of the bottle with the hem of his tunic. Viktor ignored the gesture as Schmidt took a sip and passed the booze back. “I’m sorry.” Schmidt was talking about Viktor’s grandfather, of course.

“Yah,” said Viktor. He concentrated for a moment until he sensed the bright pinpoint in his chest that was his connection to the Dragon Well. Calming himself, he sucked in the Breath, drawing a waft of power through. It was the very first manifestation they had taught him in boot camp. *The Breath of Azzax*. A sharp intake of air that brought with it a faint ember of the Dragon Well’s power. Emboldened by the liquor in his belly, he exhaled a little puff of magic into his hands for warmth, tasting a hint of campfire on his own breath.

Schmidt scowled but let it slide with only the slightest shake of his head. Viktor knew it was a bit perverse of him to take a risk like that while he was talking about his tumorling grandfather, but hell, he was cold, and

sometimes thinking about it all made him reckless. Sergeant Hoffmann, though, had been very clear about the rules during his training.

In. Never out.

The Breath was about drawing power from the Well, but every recruit could feel the burning temptation to unleash it. Viktor had taught himself this little trick to keep his fingers from freezing while on sentry duty. “Everyone was so proud when I Channeled the first time. Even my father. But tumorlings are another story. No one wants to end up like that.”

Schmidt shook his head. “Well, I certainly won’t. If the war is over, I’m going home. All this fighting and magic is too much for me. Weaving is a good profession. Good money. My uncle says there’s always a job for me. That’s enough. And...” Schmidt looked a little abashed and changed the subject. “What will you do when we get home?”

Viktor slapped his thigh. He didn’t have to think too hard to rattle off what he wanted. “I’m going to eat ten pounds of Mama’s apple strudel. I’ll get my job back at the Fischers’ restaurant. I’ll go dancing. It’ll be like the war never happened.” Viktor stared off into the trees for a moment. “But what were you going to say, Schmidt? Come on. There’s something else you are looking forward to.”

Schmidt scratched at his beard, hiding a grin. "My cousin, Drucilla. She's a real stitch. I'm always laughing around her."

"Your cousin? That's a bit weird."

Schmidt scowled. "Well, she's my second cousin."

"Still weird."

"What about you?"

Viktor shrugged. "Karla and I used to write each other every week, but something happened. Her letters haven't been getting through."

"Everyone else's have." Schmidt had the audacity to drop his scowl, offering a sad smile in its place.

Was it really that bad?

"Don't be so gloomy." Viktor ground his teeth. He slugged at the bottle again. "I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable—"

From the corner of his eye, Viktor spotted movement in the trees. Schmidt turned to look.

Perched on the gnarled branches of a naked willow, two vultures surveyed the wilderness around them.

Schmidt's hand went instinctively to his sword. Viktor sniffed the air, eyes closed to focus on the smell. Amongst the earthy tang of soil and horse dung, almost hidden by the cold, he caught the faintest whiff of rot on the northerly breeze.

"Death Knights," whispered Schmidt. "This close to camp?"

Viktor ignored Schmidt, eyes darting, ears straining for the enemy's location.

A woodpecker tapped somewhere in the forest. Voices carried on the wind. At first Viktor thought it might be the Death Knights, but then he recognized Heinrich Grossman's shrill laugh. It was the viscount and the rest of their troop returning to camp, having a gay time, blissfully unaware that the war could still be lurking nearby. For a few heartbeats, Viktor and Schmidt froze.

Too often had Viktor witnessed the cold butchery of the Death Knights. His dread rooted him to the snowy earth, and he stood there dumbfounded as fate circled his comrades like carrion birds.

Viktor pictured his brothers-in-arms locked in desperate battle. He imagined their faces: the viscount's haughty smirk, Gunter's devil-may-care grin, even Grossman's pouty lip trembling in fear. He couldn't abandon

them. He couldn't stand here doing nothing. He couldn't let these Rumavians win.

"Not today." Viktor hiccupped. "You rotten bastards." He scrambled over to snatch up his blunderbuss. Charging out of camp, he shouted, his boots churning the muddy ground. "Ambush! Death Knights!"

The sharp report of a blunderbuss drew his attention to the woods north of the camp. A hundred paces or so down the hillside, the timber grew thick enough to hide the action. There was nothing to it but to run, to follow the shouts and the gunshots until he found the fighting. Viktor pelted over the naked snow, plunging into the forest, wishing as he always did that he'd taken a piss before the battle. He fumbled with a paper cartridge from his kit. Biting the end off, he poured the shot and powder into the flared barrel of his gun, cursing as he spilled some of the black grains onto his hand.

A scream echoed through the forest. Ahead, a fiery flash lit the gloomy wood and a loud bang shook snow loose from the trees overhead. Two figures wrestled on the ground, rolling in a desperate struggle.

A Death Knight, green light spilling from its iron helm, straddled a man who thrashed beneath him. It was Gunter, pinned to the frosty earth, his cocky grin nowhere to be seen. In its place, a snarl that reminded Viktor

of the Heidelmann's vicious dog, Fluffy. The Rumavian wore black chainmail trimmed in wolf fur and a forest-green tabard emblazoned with the skull and sickle.

The awful stench of death and gunpowder hit Viktor's nose. He cocked his matchlock and fired. A cloud of smoke billowed forth, but instead of the harsh crack of a proper shot, the firearm emitted an embarrassing toot. In his haste Viktor had forgotten to pack the load and the ball came out with no more force than if Viktor had hurled it at the Death Knight.

Viktor cocked back and swung the weapon, connecting with the Death Knight's helm. The stock splintered and the helmet tumbled from the Rumavian's head, revealing the withered, deathly pale face within. Behind him, Schmidt stopped to prime his weapon but there was no time. Viktor dropped his broken blunderbuss in the snow and drew his sword, swinging at the horrid creature. The blow severed the Death Knight's arm, and the bastard turned to watch it sail through the air with frightening indifference. Still, the distraction was enough for the pinned soldier to buck the knight off him and roll clear.

Viktor seized the moment. With the Breath of Azzax, he drew a wisp of power from the Dragon Well to bolster his backswing, his muscles

tensing with the strength of dragon flesh. He grunted, the jolt of magic searing through his arm as he beheaded the Death Knight. The creature's shriveled head toppled to the muddy ground, the green light within sputtering out.

The man who'd been grappling with the Death Knight pushed himself to his knees, his face covered in bloody pine needles.

"Gunter, are you okay?" Viktor reached down and helped his comrade to his feet.

"But...the war is over," Gunter pleaded.

"Tell *them* that," said Viktor, already dashing into the clearing at the heart of the battle.

A half-dozen Death Knights and a score of Rumavian foot soldiers battled what was left of Viktor's contingent. Ten of his comrades fought side by side, wearing their brown woolen great coats emblazoned with the dragon of Reinveldt. They wielded shortswords, those few who had been issued blunderbusses already having discharged them and cast them aside for weapons more suited to the brawl.

Just behind the action, the Zoller brothers lay on their backs in the snow, thrashing in pain. It looked like some twisted game of snow angels. *Saints*, Viktor told himself, *what an awful thought*.

Another gunshot startled Viktor. He *really* had to pee.

Schmidt and Gunter bumped into him from behind, taking in the carnage.

Gunter stepped forward and leveled his blunderbuss at the scrum. “Let’s crack some skulls, boys.”

It sounded absurd. Forced, certainly, even a little shrill. But just then Viktor was grateful for the bravado. Gunter and Schmidt fired their weapons, downing a pair of Rumavian peasants. Unlike the heavily armored Death Knights, the serfs wore shaggy furs, and carried a hodgepodge of weapons, from scythes to axes to homemade spears. Viktor’s compatriots drew their swords and, screaming mismatched war cries, followed him into the enemy's flank. The first hack of Viktor’s sword cleaved a Rumavian boy nearly in two. He felt the viscount’s brandy creep up his throat as he put his foot on the enemy’s chest to wrench his blade free.

A Death Knight clad in black iron turned to inspect the new arrivals. Viktor glimpsed the wasted face within the helm, its hideous eyes aglow. The ugly bastard tipped its head back and shrieked, its inhuman voice twisting Viktor’s guts like one too many of Grandma Gerda’s cheese curds.

Gunter lunged past Viktor, stabbing forward with his blade, trying to catch the Death Knight with its guard down. His sword slid through a gap in the armpit of the knight's armor and bit deep into its flesh. The Death Knight's eyes flared a sickly green and the rotting stench of the Void Well's magic filled the air. The Death Knight clutched the back of Gunter's head and skewered him with his saber.

"Really?" Gunter sounded more annoyed than anything. For just a tick, Viktor thought maybe the chest wound wasn't as bad as it looked.

Gunter had always been the first to laugh at war's hardships, the first to volunteer for dangerous missions. He was handsome and funny and much smarter than Viktor. And this thing, it had just gutted him and tossed his body aside like an apple core.

One second Gunter was all of those things and the next he was gone.

Could Viktor be snuffed so easily? The thought spurred a sudden itch to spin on his heel and run into the woods. Were it not for the viscount's brandy he might have fled, but the courage in his belly shrugged it off. He stepped forward, his blade sweeping down in an overhead strike which the Death Knight parried. The creature circled him, its toothy grin showing through the split in its helmet.

An all-too-human scream filled the clearing as another of Viktor's comrades died. From the corner of his eye, he saw Conrad Dunn turn his back on the fight and run for it. Viktor wrestled the urge to follow, the urge to pee as well. Somehow, he had never really expected to die. War was funny like that. Just a bullshit bore until the axe fell.

"Steady, men!" The viscount's words might have been brave, but his voice cracked. His great coat was torn, one lapel dangling like a blood-soaked rabbit's ear.

The Death Knight standing before Viktor swung his saber and Viktor bobbed out of the way. Over the knight's shoulder, more figures approached from the ravine. His hope swelled as Viktor imagined reinforcements coming to their rescue. But then he picked out the green dots of the Death Knight's eyes.

So much for Mama's cooking.

With desperation bordering on panic, Viktor opened himself to the Dragon Well, drawing in the Breath of Azzax. It burned in his chest, seething to escape, its strength searing through his flesh. Viktor swung his sword with the Might of Dryxa, with every drop of his own fear. The Death Knight easily blocked, but the Might cracked the Rumavian's sword in half

and Viktor's blade bit through the Death Knight's helm down to its chin, snuffing the foul light in its eyes.

Viktor roared. But even as the power coursed through him, an arrow sailed over his shoulder and Schmidt cried out. Viktor turned to see him stagger, the arrow jutting out the back of his neck. Viktor's moment of triumph withered as he saw the shock in Schmidt's eyes, saw the blood spurt from his wound, saw his friend fall.

"Retreat!" cried the viscount, the normally sophisticated officer looking panicked and disheveled in his blood-drenched coat.

The second Rumavian contingent emerged from the ravine, poised to envelop his already beleaguered comrades. Viktor really was about to die. For a heartbeat, he imagined how Gunter had felt as the sword punched through his chest.

When the last of the Rumavians climbed out of the gully, Viktor spied the scrawny courier they had let go—the one with pimples and a stupid fucking four-cornered hat.

The war was over. This was all for nothing. The viscount had wanted to take the courier prisoner and Viktor had...oh Saints...he had talked him out of it. He was just a boy after all. "Let him go home to his mother,"

Viktor had said. They had let this little bastard go and this was their thanks?

A puff of smoke escaped Viktor's lips.

The last of the Rumavian reinforcements pressed up behind their line, all clustered together in fighting formation. Viktor sucked in a lungful of air that tasted of woodsmoke and sulfur. The Breath of Azzax crackled in his lungs.

In. Never out.

Viktor spewed fire on the enemy. The Breath scalded his lungs and singed his nose hairs, its bright flames hosing the Rumavians, igniting the contingent like it had been doused in oil. The magic felt like lava in his veins, a river of power rushing from the pinpoint in his chest that bound him to the Dragon Well. It was incredible. He felt ten feet tall. Like he was more than a man. More than everyone around him. He felt like he could knock over the forest with a sweep of his arm, melt all the snow from here to Rumavia with the fire in his lungs. He felt that place inside him where the magic seeped from the Well, and for an instant the pinpoint swelled, spasmed, and dragonfire shot through his veins. The power roiled inside him, a chaotic swirl that coalesced in a twitching knot beneath the skin on his left arm. A lump.

Dizzy, he fell, a drunken smile on his face as the burning figures danced before his eyes.

The viscount shouted orders. Steel rang out against steel and fire drank of flesh. Viktor passed out for a moment, awakened by a gunshot. His arm itched like hell. He scratched at it as the last of his flames dwindled and the viscount commanded the men to dispatch the lingering Rumavian soldiers.

Figures loomed over Viktor, their hands checking him for wounds. Viktor flickered in and out of consciousness.

Someone grabbed his arm and rolled him onto his back.

“Holy Saints!” Startled, the viscount scurried back a step. “What is that?”

“Did you touch it?” someone else asked.

“That's not how it works.” The viscount fell silent, regaining his composure. “Bandage that up.” He sounded like he was going to cry.

Viktor wasn't sure what all the fuss was over. They had won. Somehow, they were still alive. Why did they still sound so worried?

“I think I peed,” said Viktor.

Someone took hold of his wrist, tending to the wound on his forearm. In that moment, before unconsciousness claimed him, before the bandage covered it, Viktor glimpsed the dragon scale, the tumor born on the first day of peace.