

THE FIRST SCARS

Soulbrand Trilogy Book One

Prologue Excerpt

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Prologue

Alexei

His home burned. Thatch crisped into tendrils of ash, baring the old timbers of the roof as sparks cavorted and expired in the moonlight. He stood close, the heat pushing at him, a driving, insistent force that dried his eyes and awakened the deep, animal fear of fire.

But Alexei would not step back.

The ransacked village square behind him was silent, there was nothing but the roaring flames ahead. Until the roof groaned, and then shrieked as old timbers split and crashed down. Embers blasted through the ruin of the front door, whipping his long coat behind him. He flung up an arm, shielding his face. In his fist was a palm-sized stone disc.

The villagers had known the Unification would reach them. Eventually. Known, but refused to believe, preferring to hide, far from war, far from troubles.

And I wasn't here.

He stepped back from the home his father had built. Pain in his hand. He forced his fingers to loosen on the talisman. The rampant bear engraved on the stone danced in the firelight. His father had made that too.

The villagers were gone, forced inside his childhood home, at least two dozen men, women, and children herded like cattle, crammed together. And then the roof had been fired. It was how the Druidic Unification made its examples. The next village would be more compliant.

One of the walls collapsed, fumes billowing up into the night. Alexei turned away. He thought he should place his face in his hands, drop to his knees. He thought of permitting weakness as he stared at the other low houses with their sloping rooftops against the backdrop of the forested hills beyond.

Then he saw it – a filament of smoke rising above the trees, staining the stars. A campfire.

Stifling air caught in his throat. The Druids were still here. They might have kept a few alive. For now. His father, too old to fight, too tired to run, was just the kind of soul they'd keep.

Alexei lurched forward, teeth bared, raising his talisman to draw the night spell on the stone, but the wind caught something pale at his feet. A letter, trampled in the mud.

He hesitated, then stooped. His own handwriting greeted him. A letter he had written to his father, maybe a decade ago. The paper was crinkled, coming apart at the creases where it had been folded and unfolded, over and over. How many times had his father read it?

He slid the letter inside his dark linen travelling coat, then willed himself to calmness – the tranquility of water, the silence of the grave. Alexei raised the talisman in his left hand. The bear jerked and twitched in the light. He brought the tip of his right index finger to the stone, ready to draw. But his finger shook.

He swore and clenched his fist. *Grieve later!* He snapped his eyes shut, fought for calm. *Tranquility. Water. Silence. Grave.*

He opened his eyes. His hand was steady.

He drew the night spell in three quick strokes of intersecting, undulating lines. His body, slight but tall, blurred so he looked like tarnished night. If he were a master, a true Deathborne, he would be one with the darkness. But this would do.

He took off across the village, every footprint leaving a patch of deadened, shriveled grass, and darted between a pair of houses – Ivanna's hut on the right, Vasili and Svitlana's long cabin on the left. He didn't stop to inspect their desolation; he didn't pause at the sight of the dark stains on Vasili's threshold.

Instead, he slunk into the trees beyond Ivanna's hut and up the slope. He was no woodsman, having spent his life in one city or another – learning Death Magic - but the night spell amplified his meagre skill. He slipped from shadow to shadow, behind trunks and crumbling pillars of stone that predated the village itself.

An echo of laughter from upslope. Druids.
I'm coming, father.

Lev

‘My son is going to cut your heart from your chest.’ The words stuck in Lev’s gullet as he choked them out. ‘You won’t even see him coming.’

The Archdruid glanced at him, his white robes with gold trim, bloodstained, lit by a complex arrangement of candles jammed into the dirt. The flat gaze slid past Lev to old Ivanna beside him. Then, with a wet, sucking sound, the Archdruid pulled his black sword from the corpse on the old altar.

The broad, ancient tree stump had new sprouts growing in the splits of the bark, now steeped in fresh blood. In the depths of his thoughts, Lev noted that someone should have taken care of that by now, with the Svoboda Festival being so soon.

The Archdruid yanked the body to the dirt. The shackles around the ankles were a match for Lev’s and rattled like dry bones as one dead arm flopped, hand thumping on Lev’s foot. The fingers were relaxed, nothing left to hold. The calluses had disappeared in the last few years as arthritis slipped over Milen, not that something as paltry as old age had kept him from making trouble. But there was no mischief in his blank stare, his bare torso darkened with blood.

‘We won’t even see him coming?’ a second Druid asked. ‘Your son is a practitioner of Death Magic?’

She stood some ten paces behind the Archdruid, her face hidden in the depths of her hood above plainer robes, still in white. She wore a belt two hands wide, made of thick leather, dyed the color of ice, and covered in loops and strings. None of which, for the moment, were loaded with the potions and grenades that drove the Druidic Unification.

Lev glared at her. She must have thought that he, Milen, and Ivanna weren’t worth the trouble of arming herself, leaving her weapons back at their camp. He spat to the side, away from the altar.

‘And we are to assume,’ the woman pressed, ‘that your son learned his craft in Bakhpol, explaining why he was not in the village during the attack? But that he was due to return for this festival of yours?’

Lev summoned a smile, hoped it looked threatening.

The Archdruid waved his companion to silence. 'Death has no hold on me.' Like her, his Carmorgan accent was drab. He swiped the sword, splattering Milen's gore on the altar. 'Who is next?'

'I am.' Lev moved in front of Ivanna, his steps reduced to shuffles by his shackles. Lev was in his sixth decade, but Ivanna had been bent and wizened back when he was Alexei's age. He would rather have burned with the others than watch the end of her long life. 'Take me, Druid.'

The Archdruid gaze was a fist around Lev's heart. And it squeezed, threatening his breath. The Archdruid held an inviting hand toward the altar.

It would be here, then, where he would find Oblivion. The surrounding hills sloped down to this deep valley, the poisonous river long gone, the Beasts that had lapped from it banished by the Deathborne, by people like his son. A ring of stone columns, most crumbled to ruin, marked the edge of the clearing. After the banishment of the Beasts, the ancestors had cleared this space, leaving one stump, an altar for celebrating the progress from a painful yesterday to a painless tomorrow.

Exhaustion cut into Lev's bones then, like a wind that bites through layers of cloth. No, today's pain was just different. Yesterday, it was the stink of Beasts, now it was the white of Druidic robes.

A hand settled on Lev's shoulder from behind, thin, frail. 'Out of the way, boy.'

'Spirits shade me.' He cursed, turned, shackles dragging. 'Ivanna, no. Please?'

Rheumy eyes glared up at him from nests of wrinkles. 'Lev,' she croaked, 'your boy isn't coming. And if he does, he's only one man.' She smiled, patted his arm. 'Although, did you know, once, I was wrong about something? The weather, I think.' Lev matched her smile. She poked him in the chest, forcing him aside, and Lev could only watch as the Archdruid helped her onto the altar.

A painless tomorrow? Lev spat again.

Deathborne

Alexei stumbled to a halt. A lookout knelt in the nook between a fallen tree and one of the pillars. They were squinting through the dappled moonlight of the forest at Alexei's feet, and at the expanding ring of grass and moss that died as Alexei maintained the night spell. The sound, at the edge of hearing, was like water in a searing pan.

By reflex, Alexei drew a teardrop onto the talisman's smooth surface, but just before adding the jagged outline, he faltered. That would bring the whole camp down on him. Knife still held in his drawing hand, he instead sketched a circle, then started on the one inside, the one contained by the other. Nothing happened. He'd overlapped the circles.

Shit.

The lookout stood and nocked an arrow.

Alexei started to draw again, but his finger slipped off the talisman before he finished the first circle.

'Show yourself!' The lookout pulled the bow taut, aiming at the space to Alexei's left.

Alexei held his breath, drew one last time. *Tranquility, water, silence, grave.* A circle, free, unencumbered, but then another embracing it, a terminus, surrounding, swallowing.

The sentry's eyes rolled in his head and the bow loosed, the arrow whistling over Alexei's shoulder into the dark. The lookout slumped to the dirt, asleep.

Air left Alexei in a woosh, and he swayed before glancing upslope. Weak light from campfires gilded the trees – the Druidic camp. Laughter. They hadn't heard anything.

He knelt and pressed his blade into the skin of the man's neck. No reaction. He couldn't be sure in the dark, but the lad looked no older than eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a plain, dark tunic and high leather boots.

Alexei backhanded him with his talisman hand. The boy's eyes flared open.

'Do not move.'

His stare tracked from the knife to Alexei's face.

'Do you understand me?' Alexei asked in Central, the trader tongue most widely spoken beyond the Carmorgan passes.

He swallowed. ‘Aye.’

‘Who did you take from my village? Describe them.’

The boy blinked. ‘I – I don’t know! Three! We took three.’

Alexei pressed the blade into the soft skin under the chin, drawing a moan. ‘Describe them’

‘I don’t know, I didn’t really see! Two ancients and one slightly younger.’

Milen, Ivanna. And his father. Red anger crept into the edges of Alexei’s vision as he pictured a letter lying crumpled in the dirt.

‘Are they still alive?’

‘Are you going to kill me?’

‘No.’

‘I ... I don’t know.’

‘Where did you take them? To the camp?’

‘No, the Archdruid – he took them into the next valley.’

The altar. A place for laughing, dancing in the moonlight, sharing fare and mead, making sacrifices to the Waking God of Fire. It was why he had returned, for Svoboda. His father would have pushed him to eat some venison, even though he knew death practitioners didn’t eat meat. Alexei would have taken it anyway but gave it to the first child that asked – likely Vlad. Milen’s grandson, a wide, grinning mouth, beetle-like eyes that were always moving, forever darting.

The man under the knife squirmed. Alexei grunted. This lad’s eyes darted too. But where Vlad’s had been keen and not a little conniving, the lookout’s were wide. Close to panic. Alexei could imagine the questions flitting around in that skull, likely all a piece: ‘Why is this happening to me?’

Alexei considered putting him back to sleep – it would take hours for the spell to fade. But as that thought crystallized in his mind, he seized it, broke it apart, drowned the pieces in the tranquility of water and watched them sink to the silence of the grave.

A whimper from beneath the knife. Alexei saw the precise increment in time when knowledge dawned in that young man’s mind and despair stretched the mouth in a silent howl.

Alexei slashed the blade through the jugular and stepped over spasming legs. Then, knife still dripping, Alexei tore up the slope, angling away from the Druid camp, thighs rising and falling until his muscles burned and his breath ripped at his lungs. Here on the higher trails, the woods were young, made of beech and oak, the underbrush

choking, forcing him to battle snagging thorns as much as the slope. But he didn't have the time to avoid noise now, nor the air to swear at every catch of barb and branch.

Finally, he burst onto the path to the altar and charged up the trail toward the crest, moonlight painting the hard-packed earth a dull silver. When he emerged on the peak, he lurched to a halt, gulping down air.

The path that descended before him was a switchback through the forest to the clearing in the pit of the valley.

Pinpricks of orange light, candles, describing a deer skull constellation. And two Druids. White robes reflecting the silver moon above, and the red firelight below. One of them loomed over the sacrificial altar, something dark in his hands.

Alexei's body seized, eyes locking on that white form. The Druid was holding his arms out, praying, until, with interminable slowness, the hands came together, the long, dark object held between them.

The Druid drove the sword down, there was a weak flash of light, and someone flailed on the altar.

Alexei's fist gripped his talisman until he thought the stone would snap. Then there was a motion beside the altar - a figure hugged themselves and turned away. From up here, that figure was small to Alexei.

But a son recognizes his father.

Alexei started running.

Father

'Here,' she said, voice cracked with exhaustion.

Lev took the bundle in a whisper of cloth. It was lighter than he'd expected, and his hand shook as he shifted material away from the face to look at his newborn son. The smell of medicine and blood, the echoes of pain still in his ears, the metal taste from his clenched teeth – in that moment all of it just ... shifted.

Lev had thought he understood what it took to live – to build, to shape hearth and home. But now all of that hurtled past like so much dross as he realized, looking down on his son's sleeping face, tiny lips puckered around small breaths, how he would measure himself as a man from now on.

'You're sure?' Anasia asked.

He blinked, dragged his eyes from his boy, looked on his wife's tired, ashen face.

'About what?'

'Naming him after my father.'

'Yes.' He shifted the baby's weight and tucked the blanket under the chin, his hand bigger than his son's head, like a great clumsy ox holding thin-spun gold. 'Yes, love. Alexei is a good name.'

A fragile cry, and Anasia held out her arms. Lev handed the babe over and watched his wife and son together, a sweet ache in his throat.

Lev stumbled as the Archdruid yanked on his arm, dragging him to the altar.

'I can walk!' he snarled, pulling free, glaring at the cold eyes. The Archdruid shrugged and took position at the head of the altar, feet spread wide – the same pose as when he'd waited to kill Milen and Ivanna.

Lev set a hand on the altar, still warm from Ivanna's lifeblood, and placed the other against his chest, over the pocket where Alexei's most recent letter rested, the paper already worn through from being read over and over. He did so well, in the city, his boy.

Lev stood straighter. 'Let's get this over with.'

Son

The hooded Druid had their back to him as Alexei sprinted into the clearing on silent feet. A second Druid was ahead, in front of the altar. Alexei leapt on the first, talisman hand wrapping around their mouth, hard stone mashing lips against teeth. The night spell enshrouded them as his backstab drove between ribs. The Druid stiffened. He dumped the corpse to the ground.

Ahead, the other Druid's hands came together above the altar, black blade pointing down. Alexei surged forward.

Then, without warning, the night spell ripped from him.

He stumbled to a halt as the spell expanded, a sphere of black that snuffed out the candles. Alexei gaped overhead. A dome was centered above him, stretching across the clearing into the woods. It was almost

invisible in the night, a shell of crystal and coruscating moonlight. Where it touched the earth, blackened patches of grass extended.

How? The greatest Deathborne couldn't extend a perfect night spell that far.

The Druid spun. His front was dark in the moonlight. And behind him ... Relief crested in Alexei's chest. His father stared back.

'What did you do?' The Druid demanded. But he didn't mean the dome - his eyes were locked on the corpse a few paces behind Alexei.

Alexei nodded toward the slumped forms beside the altar. Mitro and Ivanna. 'What you deserved.'

The Druid's lips peeled back, then he spun, sword arching.

'No!'

But his father threw himself to the aside. The blade bit into wood. Snarling, the Druid tore the sword free and whirled.

Alexei ran a thumb across his talisman, tracing the familiar outline of the bear's head. The Druid didn't have any grenades. Only the sword. The advantage was Alexei's. But unease plucked at him. The Druid had to know all this. So why was he smiling?

The Druid bolted forward.

Alexei back-peddled. Sketching the teardrop and its spiked crown. Then he threw fire. The circle of grass that died underfoot spread impossibly far, covering most of the clearing, outpacing the fireball as it careened toward the Archdruid. Alexei stared. It was greater than any he had seen before - a mass of roiling red, wreathed in unfamiliar silver.

The spell reached the Druid. He swung the sword in a final, futile gesture.

The blade connected. The fireball looped over the Druid's shoulder to explode against, and destroy, an old pillar.

Alexei stared. *Not just a Druid, then. The Archdruid.* The one that had killed every challenger, the one that had molded the Druidic Order into his personal army.

The Archdruid's teeth gleamed in his soot-stained face.

Alexei licked dry lips. 'They say you can't be killed.'

'They say a lot of things.'

'Death is my domain, Druid, not yours.'

'We shall see.'

Movement in his periphery. His father stood on the far side of the altar, grasping the stump, his chest heaving. Alexei met his eyes.

I don't have to kill the Archdruid, he realized, just put him down long enough to get father out of here.

The Archdruid sprang forward.

Alexei drew the two concentric circles. The Archdruid stumbled, hand rising to his temple. Alexei darted in and lashed out with his knife, aiming for the heart. The Archdruid threw himself aside, twisting the blade from Alexei's grasp.

He watched as the Archdruid yanked the knife from his midriff free and tossed it away, like a woodsman discarding a splinter.

Alexei wilted. He only knew three spells. He could get closer before throwing the fireball, not give the bastard the time to react. But then he'd be caught in the blast.

His father watched on, manacled wrists held to his chest.

Then a calm settled on Alexei. *I came here for you.*

A slow frown pulled his father's features.

The Archdruid ran at him. This time, Alexei held his ground. He would not step back. He drew the teardrop and crown, and aimed just behind the Druid.

To save you, father.

The explosion flung him back, a spark in a wildfire. He crunched into something – a pillar – then dropped to the dirt.

Light-headed, half-blinded, and with his ears ringing, Alexei rolled to hands and knees. The world spun, twisting his gut. He leaned onto his haunches, blinked at the spots in his vision. The soil in front of him was covered in dead insects and shriveled worms, all drained of life by the fire spell.

Tiny bodies, everywhere.

But ... I am not strong enough to have done this. What is happening?

He raised his head. Smoke hazed the clearing, but ten paces away, amid the shallow, blackened crater, the Druid's sword was stuck in the ground. Leather frayed from the hilt, falling away in smoldering strips.

On the far side, lay the Druid.

Alexei stumbled forward, talisman in hand. The Druid was dead, his chest nothing more than a bone-cradled cavern.

Alexei spat on the seared face, then moved for the altar, noticing that even the shoots that rose from it were drained and desiccated.

His father stood from behind the altar, face stained, gaping.

Alexei rushed to him, grasped his arms. 'Are you hurt?'

‘Shades and spirits ...’ his father rubbed his temples. ‘I knew you’d come. I knew -’

Alexei, ears still ringing, followed his father’s gaze. Milen and Ivanna. He frowned. They were shriveled, like the shoots on the dead stump, like the invertebrates in the dirt.

The ringing in Alexei’s ears dropped in pitch then, becoming a low drone. He scowled – his ears weren’t ringing; they were immersed in sound.

‘Do you hear that?’

‘Alexei.’ His father gestured around, at the dome, at the slumped bundle of white cloth that had been the first of the two Druids he’d killed. ‘Did you do all this?’

Alexei’s scowl deepened. To drain life from a corpse - to drain slight-life itself - only the strongest Deathborne could achieve that. *But to use slight-life on this scale?*

‘Son?’

‘No, father.’ He lifted hands to his ears. ‘Do you hear that blasted noise?’

Coughing behind him. Alexei twisted.

The Archdruid sat up.

Oblivion

Organs churned in the Archdruid’s chest cavity as the ribs strived to meet each other, sternum forming its shield over the beating heart. Lev yelled and stumbled; Alexei steadied him even as a scream clawed at his throat. Tissues flowed across the Druid’s chest, knitting together.

The Druid stood, pristine, unbroken skin swelling on his chest as he sighed. Then he stepped over to this sword and tugged it free of the earth, the skin on his hand hissing when it touched the hot metal. He gave Alexei a tired smile.

The droning sound fell in pitch again, like the hum of the forest itself. The Druid frowned at that, sparing a glance for the dome before turning to Alexei. ‘You did well.’ He swiped his sword through the air. But Alexei could only stare. *Death is our domain!*

‘Get back, Father,’ Alexei snapped, moving to the side.

The Archdruid rushed him.

Alexei drew fire on the talisman.

A sudden surge of raw enervation seized him. He moaned as energy burst along his nerves, and a red-and-silver inferno launched from his hand. Power pierced him, swelling and erupting. A voice inside demanded he question this power, but it was lost in the blaze. So too were the Archdruid’s screams.

When Alexei let the fires fade, the lull of magic brought a lump to his throat. The Archdruid was on his knees, his ribcage and skull blackened. The droning sound increased, echoing inside the dome like a bell. There was screaming from somewhere, screaming in a familiar voice.

Alexei began to turn toward those cries, but stopped – the Druid’s bones were whitening, organs writhing.

Alexei opened himself. The surge shook him, caressed his soul, stabbed across his abdomen and chest. He drew a quivering finger across the talisman.

Fire shook the earth. Flame churning through the Druid to smash into the dome far behind, then recoil around its edges. The Druid’s hand still clung to his sword.

Alexei stared at that sword. *Bastard!* He let the power inside raze him. The flames ricocheted off the dome, striving around its surface. Too late, he saw they were coming for him. But in that instant, he knew, simply, that he could redirect them. He became the eye of the storm. The Druid caught in the vortex.

Impossibly, above the roar of his power, the humming noise rose, a crushing, throbbing, pulse.

The Archdruid toppled forward. But his hand still held to the sword.

The sound burgeoned – it would crescendo now.

But not before I burn that bastard’s fingers from his hilt!

Alexei screamed, demanded more fire, but in that instant, the air shattered in a blast of pressure. the bones of his skull creaking. He fell, hands over his ears as the power was torn away.

The dome and fire winked out.

Alexei stood. A charred form lay beside the Druid’s sword. He sagged. The silence was like nothing lived for miles around but him. But that couldn’t be.

He turned. The altar stump was a wisping heap. Milen and Ivanna were gone, replaced with mounds of ash. On the other side lay a third body, half his face and torso burned away.

That body. It was ... awful. Too awful to have been wrought by him. A choking sound from behind. He thought he should look back. But he couldn't drag his eyes from the corpse.

Wrought by me? But it is so awful. Alexei found himself on his knees.

Something was in his hand, he realized. He looked down. A stone disc. The sight warmed him, but he couldn't name the object. *I feel ... warm inside.* Fire. He remembered fire. Suddenly, he wanted nothing to do with this item. He let it slip to the charred dirt.

'What are you?'

The voice was familiar. Alexei looked back. There was a man. Naked, except for singed strips of white cloth. In his hand was a black bastard sword. He frowned at Alexei with confusion, and, Alexei thought, with respect born of fear.

The man raised that sword and started forward, but stopped, his gaze moving past Alexei.

A new voice: 'You have cheated me.'

A man in a simple grey robe, his face hidden by long, straight hair, stood beside the wreckage of a tree stump, staring down at a body. The corpse was burned. *Awful.*

'Who are you?' the swordsman demanded.

The other turned from his inspection of the dead, and Alexei flinched at the eyes – silver, flashing irises in a plain, serious face. He strode past Alexei, gaze fixed on the swordsman.

The swordsman is a Druid, I think.

'You usurp Her gift ...' the stranger said, his voice deep and ponderous. 'If indeed it was given at all.'

The Druid licked his lips. 'I am not accustomed to repeating myself,' he growled. 'Who are you?'

The man halted. 'One most intimate with repetition.' He hung his head for a moment, but then pulled the hair from his face. 'Here, Druid,' he said, his voice mournful. 'Take your Oblivion.'

He gestured, and the Druid staggered, a hand rising to his chest. Alexei gasped as cracks snapped across the Druid's face and torso. The man dropped to one knee, a hand still grasping the sword, a silent scream on his lips. Patches of skin began to slough off in wisping clouds of ash, the tissue beneath still alive, blood pouring forth, fibrous muscle

spasming, until that too turned to dust. The fingers grasping the sword crumbled, powder cascading down the blade, and the Druid slumped onto his face, sending up a grey haze.

Ash blew onto Alexei's face. It was cool.

There was a flicker of motion in the trees, a person in white running away, up the steep slope. No, two?

Yes. Run. I think should too. But I don't think I will.

The man in grey faced Alexei, eyes roving him before sliding to the burned corpse again. The face twisted. 'Unprecedented.'

'I think he was my father,' Alexei mumbled.

The eyes shifted, and Alexei huddled under their glare.

'You have proven useful. Would you continue as my implement?'

Alexei didn't answer, and searing pain carved into his chest.

'Yes, you will suffice.'

Part 1: In His Name

Spirits are the lifeblood of our world. You will know that Beasts consume spirits to achieve strength and vitality, but you may be less aware - or less willing to accept – that our Order did the same at its height. Moreover, every religion I have encountered affords spirits a significant role, even in the Fatherland. They have a saying there: ‘spirits guide me home.’ This appears sensible - pagan or not, where better for those denied Oblivion to haunt? However, hard-earned experience suggests that home is the one place a spirit may never go.

The Shackled Crucible: A History, Lived
By Archdruid Morgan Ceir
672, Icar’s Age