

Chapter 1

The baby's wail pierced the sky, and the woman screamed in the final moments of childbirth. The thick forest canopy did little to muffle the newborn's first cries outside its mother's womb. As the woman lay dying from the effort that brought her child into the world, an arrow skewered a reaper through the throat. A volley followed, maiming and killing more of the beasts. Seconds later, the ground Balidin tread upon erupted into a chaotic mess as the initial battalion of soldiers charged ahead. Battle cries of men and reapers joined the screams of the baby and the dying woman.

Thirty paces ahead, Balidin faintly heard the child cry over the din of battle. Most of his men had attacked the camp from the south as a diversion. Balidin had rallied the remaining men and launched an attack from the north. Success today would be determined by whether the infant lived or died. It didn't matter how many of his men survived, or even if any saw another sunrise. *All of us will be remembered as heroes once we kill the abomination.*

Reapers attacked Balidin from every direction. All reapers looked humanoid, but coarse patchwork fur irregularly covered their frequently scarred skin. Horns sprouted from their temples, like rams, bulls, or bucks. They stood on hooved feet and tore flesh with crooked, sharp fangs from their elongated snouts. Until now, Balidin had only fought white and green reapers, but he'd heard rumors of other reapers that controlled platoons of the lesser green and white reapers. The yellow eyes of the creatures struck fear into the hearts of lesser men. Cracks covered their stolen, broken armor. The reapers wielded morning stars, axes, and swords as they carved a path of bodies through the pikemen. Balidin and his men readied themselves. His two-handed blade parried and methodically cut an arc through the enemy's ranks. Blood tarnished his fine cloak. The royal emblem of his armor turned a sickly red. Usually, the violation brought the wrath of his father.

King Sunspeed had ordered his eldest son to join the army and raise his reputation with the commoners. The gesture would allow the king to conscript peasant boys into the dwindling reserves without the risk of rebellion. After all, if he sent his son into harm's way, how could the serfs refuse to send their children to war?

The king never intended for Balidin to see actual combat during the Border Wars. The One Above All Creation had other plans. Five summers later, the Border Wars dragged on, and Balidin found himself in the heart of the reaper's territory.

Balidin resolved to himself that the infant would never see its first summer. Killing a newborn may damn his soul, but if Balidin died here, he would not suffer from the memory.

Out of the corner of his eye, Balidin noticed human figures emerge behind the reapers' ranks. Even if he had seen the corrupt magic weavers sooner, Balidin could not have stopped them from slaughtering his men at this distance.

The ground erupted in flames under the soldiers to his right. Ancient trees swatted his allies with gnarled branches to his left. The earth swallowed his comrades like a sentient quicksand. Dozens of Balidin's men perished around him. The rest of his men rallied to their prince, ready to pierce the line of reapers to reach the infant.

Balidin glanced behind him before slaying another white reaper. His forces had dwindled. The sheer number and ferocity of the enemy were too significant to repel, much less penetrate. They washed over his soldiers like a tidal wave crashing against rocks.

A red reaper stood over the corpse of Balidin's lieutenant. Balidin had never seen a red reaper, but he knew the rumors of their ferocity and strength. The red reaper growled at the green and white reapers surrounding him, ordering them to cover his flanks as he took the center of the field. The reaper easily stood over seven feet tall. He carried a mammoth double-edged battleaxe. Most men would've required two hands to hold it, much less wield it, but the beast hefted the weapon in his right hand with relative ease. The reaper snarled a curse at Balidin in its native tongue and stepped forward. His axe dripped with the blood of Balidin's men.

Balidin moved to the right and swung his blade below the reaper's knees. The reaper avoided the attack and backhanded Balidin on the left side of his neck. The blow made Balidin stagger. His peripheral vision faded momentarily.

One of Balidin's men attacked the reaper with his sword and cut the reaper's arm below the wrist. The reaper dropped the axe with a painful howl.

With a guttural growl and extraordinary speed, the reaper grabbed the soldier's head with both hands and twisted. A dull crack sounded, even over the crash of combat. The soldier fell to the ground; his empty eyes stared blankly. The reaper turned his attention back to Balidin, ready to finish what he started.

Still recovering from vertigo, Balidin dodged the rush of the reaper, more on sound than sight. Nonetheless, his prodigious opponent inflicted a glancing blow to Balidin's left side again. Willpower allowed him to stay conscious for a few more seconds. Balidin felt the reaper's big hands grab his shoulder and belt and lift him into the air.

I'm going to die. Balidin took one final look at the copse of trees, where the child was still crying. Men and reapers swarmed the altar. The child stopped crying. Balidin clenched his eyes shut and waited for the end to come. Silently, he cursed himself. He would die without knowledge of the child's fate. Balidin flew through the air and hit something large and hard with bone-crunching force.

The world turned black.

* * *

Blood covered everything. Every inch of his body ached. *I'm still alive... The One Above All Creation has seen fit to keep me alive.* Balidin tried to lift his head and nearly passed out again. *Perhaps not for much longer.* Blood flowed freely from a long gash on his forehead, which stung his right eye. His breath came in short, painful bursts, and his arm bent at an impossible angle. The pain overwhelmed him. He took several moments to focus his thoughts.

Balidin scanned as much of the area and the carnage as possible. Night had given way to day. The sun descended across the horizon. It would be night again soon. *How long was I unconscious?*

The red reaper who defeated him lay several paces away; numerous arrows pierced his back. Lacerations and abrasions covered it from head to toe. The reaper moved weakly and barely breathed in a puddle of its blood. *That could be me soon.* Luck might allow Balidin to live through the next few hours, but he did not put stock in miracles.

Corpses were everywhere. Slowly, Balidin turned onto his side and noted the boulder the reaper had thrown him at. Dried blood saturated one side of the rock. He wasn't sure how much belonged to him, his slain comrades, or the dead reapers around him.

The child! Is it done? Balidin looked to the mound of earth within the tree copse several dozen yards away. Balidin used his good arm and dragged himself to the rock altar where the woman had given birth. The effort took many painful minutes. Balidin almost passed out several times. He didn't feel confident he would wake if he lost consciousness again.

When he finally reached the altar, a beautiful woman with jet-black hair lay atop the smooth surface. Blood covered her body, particularly around her legs, where the afterbirth still lay. The woman's large green eyes stared silently at the cloudless sky.

The baby was nowhere in sight.

A small mound of rocks covered something near the woman's feet. Blood pooled at the base of the stones. An eerie silence filled the grove.

Through his agony, Balidin managed to turn over several loose rocks at the bottom of the altar with his one good arm. He wished he was incapable. What he witnessed would surely haunt him for the rest of his days, if he managed to live beyond the imminent sunset. The memory etched itself into his mind as if carving words into stone.

A dagger protruded from a male infant's chest. Its fingers loosely wrapped around the blade as if he had attempted to remove it before death.

Balidin put a large rock over the child. The atrocity didn't deserve a burial, but Balidin could not deny its innocence. Despite his belief in the mission, he felt a pang of sorrow and regret. *There is no turning back.* Balidin decided to lie down and die in peace.

A twig snapped several yards behind him. Balidin lay back on the ground, absolutely still, until he could determine if friend or foe approached. He could barely silence his ragged breathing.

A man walked to the altar of stones and examined the pile of rocks. He did not turn over the rock Balidin placed upon the baby. Balidin cracked open his functional eye and tried to focus through the raging pain.

Behind his head, the stranger had tied his flowing blonde hair loosely. He wore high riding boots and walked with an air of confidence. His broad shoulders did not hinder his effortless grace and sure step. The bottom of his white robe was stained with dirt, filth, and blood.

Something felt amiss, but Balidin could not determine precisely what it was. *Who is he? Why is he here? How did he get through the Blasted Lands without an escort?*

The man lifted the rock without expression and examined the infant's corpse. Balidin could not see precisely what the man did, but he shifted the child left and right before replacing the rock on top of the makeshift burial.

Balidin knew he could not make it without help, and the man might be his last chance. *Anything is better than dying here.*

"Hail, stranger!" Balidin gurgled as loudly as he could in a hoarse voice.

The man turned around and revealed his ice-blue eyes, set beneath a high forehead. His unnaturally smooth, silky skin showed no blemishes, wounds, or signs that he had seen combat recently or in the distant past. He appeared well past his prime, but somehow maintained an ageless quality. His perfectly trimmed eyebrows furrowed as he focused on Balidin. Concern and curiosity filled his eyes. *Curiosity?*

Something bothered Balidin... something did not feel right about the stranger's demeanor. Balidin decided that living outweighed the importance of solving the mystery of this man. *Anything is preferable to death.*

"What have we here?" the man asked curiously. "A talking corpse, perhaps?"

Balidin smiled, despite the pain, but was unable to respond in a meaningful way.

The stranger examined Balidin's head with his tiny, delicate fingers, caressing his forehead. "You have a concussion, a collapsed lung, and a few broken bones. Let me help."

Healing warmth spread throughout Balidin's body, and much of the pain dissipated. Balidin could feel the bone in his broken arm knit together. Breathing became manageable, and the dizziness receded. However, most of his minor lacerations and bruises remained.

Balidin and the stranger removed the layers of armor Balidin wore and set them aside. The pain in Balidin's head faded, but bruises still covered his chest and back. *Why*

didn't he fully heal me? He's a cleric. Balidin's instincts screamed at him and begged him to flee. He ignored his intuition.

The mysterious man gave Balidin a waterskin from the folds of his robe. "What happened to the child during the battle?"

Without thought, Balidin answered, "I don't know. I found him dead when I awoke." Balidin's voice came off hoarse, and his words were delivered with some difficulty.

"What's the last thing you saw?" the man asked urgently. "What did you witness?"

Balidin's inner voice shrieked at him not to answer. *I must be wrong. He saved me from certain death.* "What difference does it make? We won! The Seed of Astaroth is gone. Our world is safe."

Balidin took another deep drink from the waterskin and nearly choked. The stranger's hand wrapped around Balidin's throat and lifted him off the ground. With a strength no ordinary human could possess, he pinned Balidin to a nearby tree with one arm as his legs dangled below him. "I've no patience for pleasantries, young one. You will tell me what I want to know. What did you see?"

The stranger's face closed to within inches of Balidin's panicked expression. His visage transformed from that of a warm healer to an angry, unrecognizable man. His face bubbled, sagged, and melted before it reformed. Hair grew across the once smooth skin of his chin and cheeks. His eyes changed from wide and bright to small and beady. Their color also changed from ice-blue to midnight-black. The man grew larger, more prominent, and more masculine. The unnatural stranger's arms and legs became as wide as tree trunks.

Balidin tried to breathe and choked out, "What are you?"

The supernatural entity scrutinized Balidin and noted the fear behind his eyes. "Why do the young answer a question with a question?"

The creature held Balidin's throat with one hand and hit him with a closed fist to the stomach with the other. The powerful blow made Balidin taste bile.

"My name is..." Balidin could not choke out a complete response. He gagged on his stomach fluids, rapidly rising through his throat.

The changeling looked at him closely. Warm, fetid breath exhaled inches away from Balidin's cheek. "I know who you are, Prince of Basla. You aren't listening. I asked you why the young answer a question with a question." The stranger hit Balidin's stomach again. Intense pain racked his stomach. Ample bile tasted more potent than before. "No matter. If you truly saw nothing, we will know soon enough... we have as much time as we need."

"Who are you?"

"I'm an artist extraordinaire," the man snapped. "Today, you will know me as Valko Vasseur."

Balidin started to speak again, but Valko punched Balidin's chest so hard that all the air left his lungs. Valko released his grip.

Balidin crumpled to the ground. His stomach heaved for breath. His chest pressed against the cold, unyielding ground beneath him.

Valko pulled a dagger from the folds of his cloak and kneeled on the small of Balidin's back. The changeling pinned Balidin's right arm to the ground and drove the knife through the back of his hand. The blade embedded several inches into the ground.

Balidin screamed in pain. He tried to pull the dagger out with his free hand, but Valko would not release the hilt.

"My apologies, young one," Valko patronized. "I didn't mean to put that there." Valko swatted away Balidin's free hand from the hilt of the dagger. In one smooth motion, Valko pulled the blade free from Balidin's hand. "I meant to put it here." Valko drove the knife through the back of Balidin's wrist. This time, the blade lodged even further into the ground.

Balidin screamed even louder as blood gushed from his wounds. He tried vainly to grab the dagger and remove it, but Valko held the blade's handle steady.

"I hope you appreciate art. A good subject is critical when creating a masterpiece." Valko removed a long, curved dagger from the folds of his cloak. "Art requires precision, dedication, and, most importantly... suffering. In this case, your suffering."

Balidin looked up at the horizon and saw the sun descend below the trees one final time before he died.