

A Chance Beginning

Book One of the Shadow's Fire Trilogy

By Christopher Patterson

Prologue

I was there. I fought at the Battle of Bethuliam so many years ago. I heard the call of the Golden City even in the west, past the cursed forests of Ul'Erel, in the desert wastelands where those exiled fled to so long ago. We took up sword and shield, donned armor, beat drums and blew horns for the call, for the cause, for righteousness, for the world and for the Creator. I fought and killed. I felt bone under my steel. I heard the wailing of my victims. I saw brother fight brother, father fight son, whole families—peoples—extinguished from time. I swam in a river of blood, tasted flesh, inhaled burning skin, vomited curses, and, in the end, bled victory; bled freedom. I fought alongside Justus before the world knew him as King Agempi, the Keeper of the Golden Gates. And I watched Justus Guerus sign a treaty with Rimrûk Aztûk, General of Golgolithul and new Lord High Chancellor.

Standing here, staring at nothing but rolling hills and grasslands, I still wonder if the Creator left it all to chance or if he had his hand in it all. Did the Creator will Gol-Durathna and The Alliance to win the battle that ended the age known as The Darkening? Was either side really better than the other? I suppose that is an unanswerable question. In fact, I mean not to answer it, glad I don't have to answer it. I can stand here, in the grasslands and rolling hills of the west, at peace. After a lifetime of battle and bloodshed, loss and taking life, by the grace of the Creator, I can finally settle and rest, build something with these hands rather than destroy.

My brother—the one of four that survived with me—chose to move on, go back to the wilds beyond Ul'Erel, go back to our people and continue to rebuild there. I think this is where I will stay. No more rebuilding for me; just building, creating, loving, growing. I think it has been too long since anyone from my race has lived this side of the Great Forest. It was my people, after all, that turned the tide for The Alliance. I will teach my sons, their sons, and their sons a life of peace, a life in reverence to the Creator, a life of harmony. But, if ever the call came again, the call for a people to save the world once again, my people would be here, close at hand, ready to fight for good in the name of the Creator. Yes, this is where I stake a claim to last generations.

I look back at my people. My heart sinks. A dozen women. A handful of men. All waiting for my move.

“My brothers and sisters,” I tell them, “this is where we stay. This is where we will make a new life, a better life, a peaceful life.”

They nod in approval. War is hard on them as well. Living in the wilds of the west is even harder.

“How?” one man asks.

“We will use the land,” I answer. “We will farm and grow orchards and raise cattle and sheep and pigs as our ancestors did; and we will pray for the Creator’s will to favor us.”

I look back at this rolling grassland, but what I see, what I see is so much more. I smell the sweet, musky smell of early morning dew. I hear the morning dove coo just as the sun peaks from the east, a simple line of light along the horizon like candlelight shining underneath a door. I see fields of corn and bean and wheat. I see rows of apple and pear and peach orchards. I hear people singing. I see them dancing at harvest festivals and singing songs of the past, songs they

love and yet, know not from where they come. I see a people forgetting about a past filled with violence and war and creating a future of peace.

“Yes, this is where I, Eleodum, will stay.” A smile stretches across my face. Then my mood seems to darken, even after my people walk past me, plot where they will build their homes, pick a plot of land where they will plant their first crop. I feel the air thicken. I see a shadow peaking over my shoulder. “But, if there is ever a need again, a need for a fighter, a leader, a champion, I will be here; my blood will be here.”

Often the deeds of those deemed smaller, either in stature or status, go uncounted by chroniclers of history. Yet, it is these deeds that repeatedly change the course of history. For every hero whose feats minstrels sing, there were fifty men following his lead, giving blood and sweat just as he did; and because they were not the first to return from a long voyage away, or perhaps they did not return at all, their glories are never sung. This is a story about those men who would only be known in the local legends, who would have been forgotten by time save for a small bit of chance. Chance, Fate, Destiny, Dumb Luck; all these and more, and then maybe none of these things, are the reasons a young man can go from a farmer's son, a boy of lowly birth born with dirt on his face, to a great warrior, a kingly knight, a dragon slayer.

Three young farmers, tired of plowing endless fields from sunrise to sunset, gave up all they knew to pursue fame, pursue riches. Their crying mothers at their backs and the unknown ahead of them, they worked in pigsties, slept in the alleys of outskirt cities, traveled with strangers and shed blood unwillingly. They trusted men they should not have trusted, and did not

trust those they should have. These young men who left their way of life for fame and glory would soon learn, as most young men full of grand ideas and just ideals do, the world is not what they thought it to be.

Chapter One

Distant Dreams

Befel threw his rake to the ground. He looked to the east. The sun barely peaked over a horizon of freshly planted fields, divided into neat rows by an oxen-pulled plow.

“It’s not even close to noon and it’s already too hot,” Befel grumbled. He wiped a bead of sweat from his tanned forehead.

“I love the smell of early morning,” Erik said, smacking his hoe against the hard root of a tall, bushy weed. Witch’s Brush his father called it for the shape in which the weed grew, all bushy and stiff and stringy. “It smells like it just rained, doesn’t it? I love the rain. I can’t wait for the monsoons.”

“No,” Befel spat, “it doesn’t smell like rain. It smells like more work, a day full of it.”

“It’s no different than yesterday.” Erik smiled as the thick, brown root began to crack and give way to his iron tool. “Got you, you stubborn plant.”

Erik squatted and grunted, tugging on the tough root. It didn’t move.

“That’s the problem,” Befel said.

“What is?” Erik looked up at his brother. “Am I doing something wrong?”

“No. Seriously, Erik, I don’t know about you sometimes. Don’t you listen? The problem is that we did this yesterday.” Erik just stared at his brother, shrugging his shoulders.

“And we’ll be doing the same thing tomorrow. And then the day after that, and the day after that, and for the rest of the days of our life,” Befel continued.

“Not for the rest of our lives; well, your life at least. This will all be yours someday.”
Sitting on the ground, Erik smiled, hands still wrapped around the weed’s root, feet propped inside the small hole his hoe dug around the weed. He grunted and pulled on the plant again.

“And you think that makes me happy?”

“I don’t know. It’d make me happy.” Erik leaned back and the plant’s root began to give way.

“I need to leave.” Befel brushed an errant strand of sandy colored hair out of his face.

“You had better pick up your rake before mother sees you and gives you a tongue lashing.” Erik held up the knee-high, bushy weed like a conquering hero.

“I don’t care.” Despite his words, Befel looked over his shoulder at the house and snatched his wood-pronged tool off the ground. “I need to leave.”

“And what would you do? Where would you go?”

Befel leaned against the warped handle of his rake and turned his face to the east. The sun sat several hours above the horizon, glaring at Befel like a condescending eye, one that brought with it unbearable heat and burnt skin.

“East,” he muttered. “I’ll go east.”

That night, Erik sat behind his father’s barn, staring at the moon and the stars hanging in a cloudless, crisp sky.

“What are you?” He pointed to each star like bubbles he might pop floating along a gently churned stream. A sudden breeze glided along the still fields. It kicked up loose dirt that

swirled into short-lived tiny tornadoes. Despite the warm ground, Erik shivered, the gentle wind carrying a coolness collected from the dozens of ponds that dotted the farmstead.

The moon stood high this night, looking down on the Eleodum farm. Crickets and night birds sang by the darkness of the world. Courageous rabbits wandered into newly planted fields, the moon like a beacon lantern spying a fugitive hidden in a dark corner. Their daring could be a death sentence if Erik's father caught them—or a wandering fox or coyote for that matter—and still they braved the chance at tasty seeds and young shoots. Erik threw a rock at one, a little grey fellow with a skinny tail and short, fat ears. The skinny, grey-haired creature scurried away. Erik watched it hop to the first row of trees in his father's apple orchard and disappear.

"You're lucky you're not fat and I'm not hungry, or I would've hit you and had you for late night supper," Erik lied. He could never hit anything with a rock, except for himself, testimony of the dying welt just below his hairline—a failed attempt to hit another rabbit with a sling the week before. His cousin, Bryon, would never let him live that down. Erik seemed to have a soft spot for small, furry creatures.

"How can I kill them? They look like one of Beth or Tia's toys," he would tell his brother, his heart aching as Befel and Bryon laughed at the rabbit or squirrel they had just killed, jiggling them about by the ears or tails as if they were, indeed, dolls.

"You say that and then go hunt with father, skinning and gutting whatever he kills right then and there," his brother would respond.

"It's different," Erik would reply.

"How?"

"It just is. They're not small and furry I guess."

Erik heard the crunching of wood and iron hooves on pebble covered ground and the jingling of iron bridle and bit—his father’s wagon and their mule.

“You’re early,” Erik muttered. He rolled over to his hands and knees and peered around the corner of the barn. A lantern hung from the wagon’s post by an iron hook and bobbed back and forth each time the wagon rolled over the bumps and dips of the rough road. His father’s head hung, chin dipped to chest, the long, thin pole of a whip leaning against the footboard. It moved out of view, but Erik heard the crunching of the wheels and the clapping of hooves stop. Erik crawled along the backside of the barn and peered around another corner.

The wagon sat in front of his house, right in front of a small, wooden gate that opened to a slab stone walkway. Red, pink, white and yellow roses that glimmered and shined even in the moonlight bordered the walkway on both sides. His father slumped in the wagon’s seat and sighed so deeply, Erik could hear it from where he crouched.

“You’re not due back for another two days,” Erik mumbled. He stayed just inside the shadow the barn created. How many times had he gotten in trouble for being out by the barn this late?

His father removed his wide-brimmed straw hat and turned it repeatedly in his hands for at least several minutes, inspecting it, poking his index finger through several of the holes that dotted it. Erik smiled, remembering more than one occasion when his mother tried to throw that thing away. Finally, the Farmer Eleodum climbed down and leaned against the side of his wagon, back facing the farmhouse, arms crossed across his chest. Erik heard him whisper, but couldn’t hear what he said. Then, the front door opened. A wash of candle and lantern light flooded the wood porch. Erik’s mother walked into the night, wiping her hands with the white apron she always wore. She walked to her husband and stood in front of him. An old and yet

well cared for shawl of white and red hung around her shoulders to ward off the same breeze that caused Erik to shiver. The middle-aged farmwife nuzzled her forehead into the man's hard chest, finally resting her cheek there. She closed her eyes.

"You're home early, my love," she said, her eyes still closed. His tensed shoulders relaxed a bit at her soft voice. "Was the market good to us?"

After a moment, she looked up at him, head at his chin's level, eyes trained on his, a smile on her face. Erik's father always doted on his mother, often mentioning how not on a single day in her life, not even on her wedding day, did that woman wear any sort of paint on her face like the ladies from Hámon and still, here in the darkness of midnight, her lips glowed a red as bright as her roses.

Erik found it interesting how so many people revered his father, patron of the Eleodum Farmstead. It didn't seem to matter how tall a man was—he and his brother stood eye level with their father and, yet, they felt like he towered over them. People watched him from some seat below as he stood behind a pulpit and spoke truths and wisdom. Farm elders, travelers, broad shouldered youths, even wealthy merchants from Hámon, they all listened intently to Rikard Eleodum when he spoke, and they all seemed to revel in what he said.

"The blooming market." He grumbled and turned his head away. He could never meet her eyes and curse at the same time. "To hell with the bloody, flaming, maggot infested market."

"That bad, my love?" She dropped her apron and rubbed her husband's shoulders.

"The sheep-loving dung beetles in the market," he hissed.

"Husband!" She whispered loudly. "Must you curse so?"

"The nobles of Hámon." He finally met her gaze.

Looking into those blue eyes could be dangerous. Erik knew that all too well. They saw lies. They read minds. It felt they turned him to stone more than once.

“They grow crops half as good as ours. On the backs of little better than slaves, too. They demand the highest price. They leave nothing for us. Those burning, flaming idiots think it’s the seed that gives them crops that aren’t even worth cattle feed. So they demand the first seed; and at lowest price.”

“Shh...You’ll wake the girls.” She soothingly rubbed his chest. “We will make do. We always do. We will send up our prayers every night and the Creator will watch over us.”

“There is talk that Hámon is expanding its lands.” Erik’s father pushed on as if he hadn’t heard his wife. “They mean to take our lands, lands our family has farmed for hundreds of years as free men. They will come take our lands, demand a price we can’t pay to keep them, and then turn around and make us work them anyways, sending our best crop and livestock to some noble who sips spiced wine and walks around in slippers all day. Those bastards!”

“Rikard, please,” Erik’s mother scolded, folding her arms across her chest.

“I am sorry, my love.” He pulled her close. “I only fear that I will not be able to pass this land to Befel, as my father did to me and his to him. I also fear that I will not be able to give Erik a small plot of land that he might work and grow for his own like my brother did. I fear that my daughters will not have strong, faithful men to marry, ones who will protect them and put a roof over their heads and food on their tables and say prayers for them every night.”

“It can’t be true.” His mother closed her eyes. She sighed and pressed herself closer to her husband, wiping a single tear from her eye. Her auburn hair blazed in the moonlight and Rikard kissed that hair. “They can’t mean to take our land.”

“The world is changing, Karita. We can only hope the Creator will have mercy on us.” Rikard stared over the top of his wife’s head, looked in the direction of Erik. The boy slinked even farther back into the shadow. Under the darkness of the barn, he could barely see his own hand. Certainly, his father couldn’t see him. Still, Erik thought he did. “And if they do come, we will fight.”

Erik shook his brother awake. Befel turned over, eyes still closed, blanket pulled tight around his shoulders.

“What?” he groaned, eyes squinted. The dim candlelight that peaked into his room seemed too bright.

“I want to go with you.”

“Where?” Befel mumbled, rubbing his forehead. He plopped his head back down onto his pillow, pulling his blanket nearly all the way over his head.

“East.”

Befel lifted his head, propped himself up on both elbows. “Quiet,” he hushed. “If mother hears that kind of talk, she’ll switch both of us. Go to bed. I was only kidding anyway.”

“No you weren’t. I saw that look in your eyes, the look you get when you set your mind to something. You were serious, and I want to go with you.”

“Why?” Befel asked.

“Just because,” Erik explained. “Because of something I heard father say tonight.”

“Father’s home?”

Erik nodded. "How are you getting east?" he asked.

"Jovek's oldest, Jensen, left last month," Befel explained, his voice hushed. "He traveled to Bull's Run, so I heard. He planned on either buying his way into a merchant's train traveling east across the Plains, or going south to Finlo and buying his way onto a ship so he might sail east."

"A boat?" Erik questioned. "I think I'd rather go across the Plains."

"It doesn't matter how we get there," Befel scolded.

"How will we buy our way into a caravan?" Erik asked.

"I have enough money saved up, I think. Bryon will go with us too. He has money also."

"You talked to our cousin before me," Erik spat in a loud whisper. A hurt look crept across his face.

"I didn't know you wanted to go," Befel retorted unapologetically. "Up until tonight you loved this farm life. Somehow, doing the same thing day in and day out appeals to you."

"I still love this farm."

"Then why do you want to go? Are you just trying to get me in trouble?"

Erik ignored his brother's prodding. "There is money in the east?"

"More than we can imagine," Befel replied. "And an easy life. Not this getting up with the cock at daybreak and working until the stars come out. Within two years, we'll have homes of our own. Clean clothes, servants, beautiful women."

"Enough money to buy a farm; to buy acres of land?"

Befel cocked his eyebrow, tilted his head curiously and nodded. "More than we can imagine," he repeated.

"When do we leave then?" Erik asked.

“We wait,” Befel explained. “We wait until after harvest. Then we leave this life behind.”

Erik opened his eyes with a sudden, quick breath. His nostrils immediately curled as the smell of rotten food, dung, dirt, and stale water hit his nose. He rubbed his face hard, rubbed his eyes and sat up. He leaned against the wall that made up the back rooms and kitchen of *The Red Lady*. Befel and Bryon still slept, curled up under tattered blankets, bent arms used as pillows. The stars sparkled overhead, at least what he could see of them past three and four storied buildings. He poked at them as if he poked bubbles floating in a...he smiled. What a childish thing to think?

“I haven’t had that dream in months.” Erik pulled his knees into his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs.

A heavy, hacking, phlegm-filled cough from farther down the alley echoed off the walls of the alley’s buildings. He hated the others that slept in this alley. His mother always told him *hate* was a strong word, but that’s what he felt. They used all their coin for drink and spat at him when his cousin and brother weren’t around. At night, they looked like shadowy ghosts lumbering from wall to wall, stumbling over trash and other bodies.

Erik didn’t need to look to his feet to see what made the tiny squeaking sound. He kicked and sent a western rat, white rats father called them, flying into a wooden cart. They seemed indestructible and this one, not as big as they could get, bounced back to its feet and hissed at Erik before scurrying away. He preferred the lumberyards to this. The smell of cut wood seemed to remind him of home, even mixed with the smells of unwashed clothing and open waste pits.

He also favored the hot meals and the cot to sleep on to a hard, cobbled alleyway and begging for scraps, but no work meant no work. By heaven, he would take the pigsties of Venton to this. Even when he ate slop with the pigs, he ate better than this.

“How much longer?” he quietly asked himself.

He lay back down, resting his head against a sack of old rags a cook from *The Red Lady* had thrown into the alley. He needed his sleep. Tomorrow might prove to be a big day.