

Walk Into Shadow

Chapter 1

The quiet stillness of the meadow was broken by the raspy *dzhee-dee-dee*'s of a blue-capped tit singing on his territory back in the alder thicket. The gentle gurgling of the stream flowing around the alder roots accompanied the birdsong, as bumblebees droned from flower to flower and the rich, sweet smell of lupine blossoms filled the air. A rustle of wings, and the black-and-white form of a magpie dropped from a black spruce at the meadow's edge. The long tailed bird hop-hopped along a path of trampled grass and flowers, as the abused plants slowly returned to their upright positions. Suddenly, the magpie stopped, bill cocked downward, eyeing something in the grass. He paused for a moment before the bill stabbed downwards and a scrap of crumbs disappeared quickly into his greedy mouth.

One minute, the clearing was empty, save for the bird. Then, a tall lanky young man clad in loose buckskins stepped silently into the meadow. He knelt to study the trail. *The Kaleen think they've thrown off the pursuit*, he thought, brushing a lock of his long blonde hair back from his face. He patted the black sword at his hip, *we'll just have to teach them a thing or three*.

He'd been following the trail for a week now, and here, four days past the most far-flung frontier villages, the Kaleen had quit trying to hide their trail. For all their faults and their barbarism, a Kaleen tribesman left no more trail than a snake crawling across bare granite. They could also hide in cover that wouldn't conceal a weasel and move just as silently. And they were just as dangerous.

When the Iskanii people's longships first landed on Niraseen's northern shores over a thousand years ago, they found a land teeming with game and populated with a race of people known as the Kaleen. The Kaleen were savages, and bore slight resemblance to the races of man. Each individual was different, although most tended to be short and stocky, hairless, and with dark skin. They were loosely organized into tribal bands, ruled by the laws of blood and fist, with tribal chieftains jealously watching their rivals and, often as not, warring against one another. Most Iskanii considered the Kaleen to be vermin, and lower than animals, but Gareth was privy to the truth – that the Kaleen were descendants of men, whose bodies had been twisted by powerful energies released eons ago by the great cataclysm that had shattered this land.

From the very beginning, the Iskanii had been fighting the Kaleen. Mostly they had won, pushing the natives back into the barren steppes west of the coastal forests. But bloodshed was a constant prospect on the frontier. This band had burned a village while most of its able-bodied fighters were away on a hunt, killing women, children, and the

craftsmen left behind. It was the fourth raid attributed to this particular band of savages. The first three times, highly skilled trackers had lost their trail, allowing the band to get away with their plunder – food, furs, steel tools, as well as several captive girls and children.

The men of the most recent village to be raided had sent for Gareth Jax. A young man of twenty-six summers, his reputation as a tracker was unequalled, and it was said that he possessed abilities beyond normal men. He was tall and sinewy, standing two inches over six feet, with long legs, slim hips, and broad shoulders. As a tracker, he was unequalled in the north, although now that the band was no longer hiding its trail, even a Tiberian merchant could have followed them. Which, of course, was suspicious in and of itself. But still, all looked peaceful here.

A quick flap of wings, and the magpie landed a few feet away, eyeing him with bright bird intelligence. “Lookin’ for a handout?” he chuckled quietly. “You’ll get no food from me . . . and if you try to follow me around, Tier’ll make a meal of you”. Abruptly, the raspy song of the tit back in the alders came to a halt. Gareth stood, searching the alder brush. The magpie hopped off a few feet, then startled suddenly, flew up, and disappeared into the spruce. Jax looked up, alert, then relaxed. *Tier returning*, he thought.

The pale gray form of the ghost hawk glided in silently over the alders, banked sharply at the edge of the spruce, spread his short wings and long tail, and then extended his long, sharp talons towards the young man’s right shoulder. Jax turned to offer the bird a bit of jerked meat, when, without warning, the small hawk screamed and veered sharply to the right.

Jax’s reflexes took over and he threw himself to the left, feeling a tug at his sleeve as a heavy javelin narrowly missed him. He rolled and came to his feet just as the dark thickly muscled warrior closed with him. *No time for the sword! Hand-to-hand then.* The savage’s charge caught him off balance, and as he fell, he blocked the arm holding the descending bronze hand axe with his left forearm. He rolled onto his back, planted a mocassined foot into the Kaleen’s midsection, and heaved him over and through the air, using his opponent’s momentum to hurl him a good ten feet away. The savage rolled, landing like a cat.

“Umga tha dum!”, his opponent shouted, charging. *Time to die.*

Now Jax had his sword free. He blocked the hand axe on its straight, black blade, but the blow staggered him. *Gods he’s strong!* Though considerably shorter than Jax, the warrior was thicker and heavier-boned. He also had longer arms.

Again, the axe came down. This time, Jax was ready. Instead of blocking with the sword, he stepped inside the warrior’s reach, thrusting the point of his blade under his opponent’s chin. The last ten inches of the sharp, dark blade slid up into the throat, cleaving the back of the palate, and into the base of the brain. The Kaleen shuddered and

fell limp. Jax pulled his sword from his throat and wiped the blade on his enemy's leather jerkin, quickly looking to make sure that this warrior had been alone.

The ghost hawk glided over to him, landing on his shoulder. He looked up, "That was close, Tier. Thanks for the warning." The hawk bobbed his head once, then regarded him with unblinking red eyes. "Yeah, I'd have to say that they know they're being followed. But for some reason they don't seem to care that much." If they had cared, they would've left more than one warrior in ambush. Or maybe they didn't know about the rangers that Gareth had left trailing a half day back?

Jax quickly searched the body. It had thick, long arms, corded with muscle. The skin was a grayish olive color and more or less hairless, including its scalp. It looked pretty much like a man, except for its face. There, the nose was flat and the jaws protruded. Its teeth were yellowed and the canines sharp tusks. Thick, bushy eyebrows shielded what had once been intelligent, cunning eyes. The search revealed nothing of any real value – a copper coin among bear claws and other trinkets of its necklace – although it did seem to have been travelling light. It had only a small pouch of what passed for travel fare amongst his people – a piece of arrowroot and some poorly cured meat. There was also a pouch of sulfur. *Why sulfur?*

Further search of the alder thicket where the savage had lain in ambush didn't reveal any deeper insight. He had apparently doubled back to lay in wait, and had lain there for several hours. That meant that the main band was only a few hours ahead of him, but he already knew that from their tracks in the meadow. Jax stroked his mustache, thinking a moment.

"Tier, its time to bring up the others." The hawk bobbed its head once and took wing, darting into the dense stand of black spruce from which Jax had come.

A few hours later, sixteen hard men and three equally tough women, along with a dozen or so pack horses, entered the small, streamside clearing. They wore leather armor, studded with heavy rings of steel, and carried longbows. Most carried woodsmen's axes, although a few had swords. Their leader, a tall, barrel-chested man with a thick blonde beard looked down at the corpse of the Kaleen, then at Jax.

"Nice work there," he said, gesturing at the body. "What would you have done if there'd been more?"

"Run. Either that or died," he shrugged. "I don't think that more than one would've been able to hide so well as to surprise me though." He gestured to the west, "I sent Tier ahead while I was waiting for you to come up. He's found a their encampment in the hills just beyond the edge of the forest. It will have to be tonight – else they'll link up with a group too large for us to handle."

“How many?” the bearded leader asked, his pale gray eyes glittering, his face still. He knew that Jax would have looked over the camp through the eyes of the hawk.

“About thirty . . .”, that was about twice the number that had raided the village. He paused, “Colm, they have some captives, but I wasn’t able to see if Karina was among them or not.” Colm’s wife had been killed in the raid, and his daughter Karina was all he had left of her. If she was still alive, that is. What chance a girl of only twelve summers had amongst those savages was slim, but Karina came from tough stock.

Colm’s face was dark, his jaw clenched. “She’ll be there. She’s a tough lass.” He reached over his shoulder and pulled his great axe from its sheath on his back, checked the edge on its great, curved steel blade. “This time, those damned savages will pay!”, he growled.

One of the women stepped over and reached out a strong hand to grasp Colm’s shoulder. “Now don’t you be going and doing anything rash, brother, and leave poor Kari without a father.” The family resemblance between them was strong – Sigrid was a tall, strong blonde, with powerful shoulders and arms. Yet no man looking at her would say she wasn’t attractive, in a blunt, freckled sort of way, and for all her powerful physique and six foot frame, she had a woman’s figure. *A lot of woman, if the truth be known*, Jax thought.

Colm bowed his head. “I’ll leave the plannin’ to you and Gareth. Leave the killin’ to me.”

Gareth and Sigrid shared a glance. Both knew that as the pursuit neared an end, so did Colm’s patience. In many ways, Colm was like a great bear, slow to anger, but unstoppable once his ire had been aroused. While the aspected, or people born with animal characteristics, were very rare with the Iskanii – much rarer than in the nations farther south – Colm was very close to being such a person.

“Their camp is at the base of a bluff, sheltered from the northwest wind. If we attack in the afternoon, the sun will be in our eyes. I suggest we wait for darkness,” Gareth proposed.

“Some of the Kaleen’ll likely see better in the dark than we can,” stated one of the men, a grizzled veteran, with a long scar running from the right ear to the corner of the mouth. He stroked the week’s growth of gray stubble on his chin, “That’ll give them yet another edge.” He gestured at the corpse of the warrior Gareth had slain, “Looks like they already know they’re being followed.”

“Sure, they know *I’m* following them. But I doubt that they know by how many. That’s why I held the rest of you back off the trail.” Gareth smiled a thin, cold smile, “They won’t be expecting twenty frontier veterans to be so close, nor to attack so soon. Here’s how we’ll do it.” He squatted, picked up a twig and began to diagram the encampment in the dirt. “We’ll leave the horses – and Tier,” he said, looking at the hawk,

“here. Colm and I will lead a straightforward attack on the camp, driving in towards their main campfire. This should get their attention and hold it. Meanwhile, Sigrid, your group will circle around to here,” he made a circle around the camp to the north, “sneak in and grab up the young girls who are held in a tent against the bluff”, stabbing into the dirt with his stick, “here.”

“What about sentries?”, asked the grizzled veteran, Simond.

“We’ll take them out with arrows as we begin the attack,” Gareth replied. He paused, then looked up, his face grave, “We’ll also need a third group to rescue the older girls. From what I could see, they’ve been used pretty rough. It might help if one of the women were to lead this group, too.”

“I’ll do it,” replied the youngest woman of the party, a quiet, slim redhead named Anya.

Gareth nodded. He had seen Anya at work, and was impressed with her calm demeanor. She was also an excellent archer. “Right now, the women are being held here,” he pointed at a spot on the rough diagram along the bluff opposite from where the children were being held, “but after dark, they will probably be scattered about the camp.” He left unstated the reason why – everyone knew anyway.

“Hopefully, we can catch them early enough. Before they have to suffer any more,” Anya said, quietly.

“Ok, we’ll detail six to go in with Colm and me, and five each with Anya and Sigrid,” Gareth said. “Colm, Sigrid, Anya, pick your groups and let’s get into place.”

Karina Colmona lay huddled in the rough mammoth hide tent with five other children. At twelve, she was the oldest, and the other girls looked to her for strength – each of the others snuggled as tightly to her as they could. The Kaleen had abducted six young girls, ages seven to twelve. They had also captured three older girls, girls in their late teens. Their screams the first few nights had testified to their fates. Now they were bruised, battered, and suffered, for the most part, in silence. However, the younger girls had been treated relatively well – they had been fed, carried more often than not, and had only been struck in order to silence their crying.

It was a few hours past nightfall, yet sleep would not come. Whenever she closed her eyes, Kari kept seeing her mother’s face as the bronze axe descended, wiping the smiles and warmth from those loving eyes, forever. So she stayed awake, and prayed that her father would come for her.

Several muffled thuds followed by loud shouting pulled her from her thoughts. Footsteps pounded past the tent, and then she heard the loud clamor of metal striking metal. One of the little ones woke up.

“Kari, whuz that noise?” she cried quietly.

“Shhh,” placing her finger to the child’s lips, “I’ll go see.” Her heart pounded. *Was it just another band of Kaleen attacking the ones that had captured her? Or had the gods answered her prayers?* She pulled herself from the tangled limbs of the other captives and slipped to the opening of the tent and peered outside.

The never orderly camp was a scene of mayhem. Kaleen reavers battled men! Near the main campfire lay half a dozen corpses, studded with arrows. Dark forms battled along the edges of the firelight. She watched as a tall, lithe man nimbly parried a savage strike from the axe of one raider with his short sword, then quickly turned and stomped the knee of another, breaking the joint. He then turned back to his first opponent, and a quick thrust of his short black blade silenced the Kaleen’s war cry as the point of the sword pierced his throat.

Suddenly, she spied a giant axe-wielding figure come up behind the swordsman. The axe blade flashed out in a wide arc, decapitating the Kaleen whose knee had been smashed as he struggled to rise. She recognized that beard, that face!

“Dada! Dada!” she cried. She stepped out of the tent, waving as she tried to catch his attention. A strong hand clutched her shoulder, and she whirled, hands in front of her face, expecting the fist of a Kaleen warrior to follow. But instead of the snarling, twisted face of one of her captors, she saw instead a mass of blonde hair and freckles.

“Sigrid!”

“Hush, Kari . . . let your da concentrate on the fighting. I’m here to take you out of here.” Behind Sigrid came five other Iskanii rangers. “Van, Hulf, Gonya, Hennig . . . take the other girls. Donegal, cover us with your longbow.”

Sigrid gripped Kari’s shoulder in her left hand, and began to pull her back away from the camp. “Your da will fight better knowing you’ve gotten away.”

Kari glanced back towards camp. Her father and the swordsman were standing together, battling a group of Kaleen. Several more rangers moved up to join them, and it seemed that the tide of the battle was in their favor, when suddenly, a towering, dark form, emerged from the darkness, howling at the small group of men driving the raiders back towards the campfire. The giant moved with deceptive speed, its long legs quickly eating up the distance between him and the knot of men and Kaleen locked in combat near the campfire. In each hand he carried great warhammers made of stone. With one powerful blow, one of the hammers descended, crushing the nearest man into a bloody ruin.

“Dum, Iskani! Dum!” the giant Kaleen cackled with glee, “Umga tha dum!”

Sigrid’s face went white, “Gods of darkness . . . a giant!” Then she turned to Donegal, “Fill that thing full of arrows! Now! Kari, follow the others! Go!” With that last command, she sprinted towards the fight, broadsword in hand.

That the Kaleen sometimes grew to giant size, Jax knew. He’d even killed a few that stood inches over seven feet tall. Yet the sight of the monstrous form approaching took him by surprise. It moved like an avalanche, seemingly as unstoppable as a boulder. *Anth’s teats, He must be close to ten feet tall!*

One of the giant Kaleen’s warhammers fell again. The ranger who was to have been its target dove to the side, and the hammer crushed the Kaleen that he had been battling instead. However, on the ground, the man was defenseless, and a the bronze battle axe of a second warrior decapitated him.

Gareth was helpless to prevent the slaughter. It was all he could do to hold off the renewed fury of the savage that he was facing. The sudden appearance of reinforcements, in the form of the giant, gave strength to the arms of the Kaleen who had been all but defeated moments before. And now the rangers near the campfire were down to four. They were only facing six opponents, but the giant was an army unto himself.

With a shout, Colm buried his axe into his opponent’s forehead, cleaving him down to the breastbone. “Giant, fight me!” he shouted as he wrenched the axe head from the corpse.

“Come and die, puny man!” the giant snarled in Iskani. He smashed at Colm with his left-hand hammer. Colm lept back, slashed at the giant’s hand, taking off two of his fingers. At the same instance, two arrows sprouted in the giant’s back. The giant howled, and swiped at Colm’s head with his other hammer. Colm interposed his axe, blocking the blow, but his axe was knocked flying from his hands.

With the battle between titans raging, the fury of the rest of the fight seemed to die down. Gareth’s opponent stepped back to catch his breath and glanced at the smaller battle. Seeing an opportunity, Gareth took advantage of his opponent’s distraction and slipped the point of his short sword into the armpit, killing him. He looked back to Colm, and saw that he had stepped inside the giant’s reach with his dagger. The giant Kaleen then dropped his great hammer to grapple with the smaller human. Colm’s six foot six inch frame seemed to disappear into the arms of the behemoth. Colm thrust the dagger twice into the giant’s chest, but the blade was too short to do much damage. Gareth moved to help.

Suddenly, Sigrid appeared behind the giant, and with one swipe of her broadsword, hamstringed one of the Kaleen's mighty legs. He fell backwards with a thud, trapping Sigrid beneath his shoulder. The fall broke his grip on Colm, and Colm withdrew his dagger from the giant's chest, rose up and drove it to the hilt into the giant's right eye. He twisted the dagger, driving it deeper. With a shudder, the giant died.

Colm pushed himself up from the body with great gasping breaths. "Gods he was strong!" Each breath came in great heaves. Gareth looked about. The fight had gone out of the remaining Kaleen, and they fled up the bluff behind the camp and into the darkness. Of the original group that had come into the camp with Gareth, only Colm, the gray-haired veteran named Simond, and a short, stocky woman whose name Gareth couldn't remember remained.

Beneath the giant's prostrate form, Sigrid groaned. Colm gestured at the giant, "Gareth, give me a hand with this." Together, they moved to pull the body off Sigrid's prostrate form.

Suddenly, Simond shouted, "Watch out!" pointing at the edge of the firelight.

Silently, three Kaleen had approached. Each held an odd looking metal staff leveled horizontally at the rangers. One, taller than the rest, wearing an antlered headdress of a shaman, and with more human features, snarled a command, "Noctu!"

With a loud roar and a bright flash of light, the strange weapons exploded. Colm was hurled backwards. A cloud sulfurous of gray smoke obscured the three Kaleen as they turned to flee.

Gareth stepped forward and tossed his sword into the air, reversing his grip. He hurled the weapon like a javelin, striking one of the retreating Kaleen between the shoulder blades. The warrior staggered a few more paces and dropped his weapon, his hand grasping futilely at the sword sticking from his back. He collapsed. The other two warriors disappeared into the night.

Gareth stepped over to the prostrate form, placed one foot on his back, and withdrew his sword. The fallen Kaleen groaned, and Gareth stabbed his sword into his neck, severing the carotid artery. Then he turned, and picked up the strange weapon and returned to the group.

Simond had rolled the giant off of Sigrid and was helping her to her feet. Gareth met his gaze, and asked, "... Colm?"

Simond shook his head, "There's nothing to be done. He was dead even as he hit the ground."

Gareth approached Colm's still form. There were two large holes in his chest, each about a half inch in diameter. One had apparently struck him in the heart. Sigrid

limped up beside him, and knelt, cradling her brother's great head in her lap. A tear ran down her cheek. "He didn't even know that Kari was safe . . ." she whispered.

"No, I think he knew. I heard her shout during the fight. I'm sure Colm heard, too," Gareth comforted. He put one hand on her shoulder, and she reached hers up to cover it.

Sigrid looked over at the weapon in Gareth's other hand, "What is that thing? Wizard's work?"

"I'm not sure," he said examining it. "Some of the southern navies use explosive powder and great bronze tubes to hurl stone balls. They call them 'cannon'. I've never heard of one so small, though" The weapon consisted of a steel tube mounted on a wooden stock. "This is steel, though . . . beyond the metal-working skills of Kaleen . . ." He moved back to the body of the last warrior he had slain, searching it. He found a small pouch containing round lead balls, and another pouch containing a coarse black powder that smelled vaguely of sulfur and . . . something else. The powder was vaguely familiar.

He stepped over to the campfire, reached into the pouch and withdrew a pinch of powder. He tossed it into the fire, and it ignited in a flash of flame and white smoke. He looked back at Simond and Sigrid. "The powder is the same as the southerners use in their cannon. It burns fast in the tube and the force of the explosion pushes out one of these lead balls. Still, its beyond the ability of the Kaleen to make." The Kaleen were primitive metalworkers at best, being able to only produce bronze weapons. What steel they had, they stole from the Iskanii.

Simond grunted, "Still sounds like wizardry to me." He turned to the stocky woman whose name Gareth had forgotten. "Ursula, bring up the horses. And see how many of us are left. We need to take our people home."

Gareth's group had suffered the worst casualties during the fighting, with only Gareth, Simond, and Ursula surviving. The second wing of the attack had withdrawn when they had successfully recovered the two surviving women captives, only losing two of their original seven members, both them in a rearguard action against the giant. It was their attack that distracted the giant from the battle near the main campfire, and why he had arrived so late in that fight. Sigrid's group had escaped without a scratch. The group of Iskanii rangers was quiet as they reentered the forest, with seven of their original number draped across the saddles of the packhorses. They would be laid to rest under the shelter of the trees later that day.

Gareth led his horse up to where Sigrid walked. Karina sat astride one of the pack animals, sleeping. "Sigrid, I have to follow those Kaleen that escaped. We need to know

where these weapons came from,” gesturing at the strange ‘cannon’ tied behind his saddle, “and if they have more.”

“I know. We’ll be alright from here. Find the whoresons responsible for giving such infernal devices to savages!” she growled, her voice full of fury. She grew quieter, “I wish I could go with you, but . . .”, looking back at her sleeping niece.

“She’ll be needing you now more than I would out there. Can you deliver this,” he gestured to the weapon, “to Master Bronsel at Okhaven? He’d be the best one to puzzle out its use and where it came from.”

“Bronsel?” with a surprised look on her face, “then you’re of the Order?”

“Yes,” he said simply, “I’ve been a member of the Order of Arwan since I was a boy.” To most outsiders, the Order was nothing more than a somewhat reclusive collection of scholars. If the outsider had even heard of it, that is. However, on the frontier it was known that they played a more active role in protecting the realms of men from barbarism and savagery.

“I’ll pass the word.” She reached out and pulled his face to hers, kissing him gently on the lips. “For luck . . .” she said, pulling away.

He stopped his horse, absently stroking the hawk on his shoulder as he watched her stride on into the dark wood. The touch of her lips lingered on his long after she and the rest of the party had disappeared into the forest.