

Chapter 1: The Promise

Jo-Eb stepped out of the forest onto the dusty road. A creek bed with just a trickle of water lay directly before him and beyond that about a hundred yards a fortress of timber was laid out. He stooped and dipped a tattered cloth in the water and wiped behind his neck and across the forehead. The water such as it was, was cold in the crisp autumn morning. He was tired as he had traveled most of the night under the cover of darkness. His wound on the right shoulder was healing nicely but he didn't want to have to cross any more marauders until he had a chance to let it fully heal or at least take a knife to it to cauterize the wound.

He stood there for a minute just looking at the walls and the opening. It wasn't a camp where you would want to just walk directly in without some type of announcement. He spotted two guards at the gate, one a very large ax man with an even larger ax. He just stood there in the middle of the gateway staring straight ahead and right through him as if he wasn't even there. The second was a smaller figure with a bow at the ready and a quiver of arrows strung over her back. It had to be a female; he knew that from the frail figure, either that or a very young boy. The movements gave her away though as she shuffled her feet and scuttled from one side of the gate to the other. Her eyes darted in various directions and the tension was high.

After a moment he slumbered toward the encampment without posing a threatening poster. As he approached the gate the young one raised her bow and followed his every movement. The giant just stood there staring out without blinking. So he decided to pass close to him in a sign of recognition of kinsman ship. The guard didn't move even a muscle and continued his vigil.

As he passed through the gate he spotted the place he wanted the most, the black smith was just to the right and was presently stoking his fire for the day. He walked up to the smithy, drew his sword and laid it on the table. The proprietor scratched his chin pushed back his long black hair and said "My, my, my, what a mess." The tip of the sword was broken, the blade handle was twisted and the rag handle wrapped around the butt was tattered beyond recognition. "That'll cost 3 coins if you got it."

He pulled back his cloak and slipped out a tattered coin bag. He selected three coins and put it on the table. He slipped a slight smile and stated "Got it from a couple of marauders a couple days ago, they won't need it anymore."

"Well welcome to our little corner of the world, such as it is. Jennie has the fire high and probably still has some grub if you're ready." Jo-Eb glanced over his left shoulder and nodded.

He slowly walked over that direction while observing the layout. Two small shacks were close to the gate, a horse stable next to the smiths shop and a larger building toward the back center of the compound. He figured that to be the general store. There was about eight or nine small tents in the far left corner obviously the sleeping area.

A couple of young boys were practicing knife throwing at the circles marked with charcoal on the far wall. The younger one seemed to have a better grasp on control and laughed when the other would miss the target.

As he approached the fire a scrawny looking old man motioned for him to sit. He selected a spot not too close to the fire where he could prop his back against the large stone. "Eat some" the old man commanded. His long grey beard hung slightly across his right shoulder. It looked like he had been using it as a napkin for quite some time.

The old guy smiled, his broken teeth were a prominent feature and he gnawed on a piece of beef bone. Jo-Eb slipped his knife from its sheave on his left hip and severed a huge chunk of beef from the hanging carcass.

He didn't even get the first bite when a commotion broke out at the front gate. It wasn't but just a second and a group of intruders wielding weapons emerged through the opening.

Jo-Eb leaped to his feet and while grabbing a fist of loose dirt in his right hand he drew his knife from his scabbard. With that he took three steps toward the nearest marauder and thrust the dirt in the eyes of his adversary then with a back hand motion right to left slit the large man's throat. He grabbed the ax from the falling predator and smashed it against the left scull of the next one leaving it deeply embedded. He rolled himself forward toward the ground picking up the fallen sword with his right hand and as he completed his 360 degree rotation came up thrusting his knife into the chest of the next adversary. With his newly gained sword he severed the head of the next one. That broke the spirit of the intruders and the remaining few hastily retreated toward the gate.

Jo-Eb glanced at the carnage and observed the ax man was still standing although he had a few obvious wounds in the left forearm. The young bowman lay off to the side with a small knife sticking out of her right shoulder. She didn't stay there long though, she picked herself up, muttered a few expletives, and headed for the make shift infirmary. Jo-Eb retrieved his knife stuck it in the fire to clean it and repositioned his tunic. He picked up his beef slice, slapped the dust off and sat down to eat.

"That'll be one coin for the beef and one for the ale if you're having some." Came the matter of fact statement from his rear right. He didn't blink an eye just pulled the purse and gave the lady the coins. She handed him a cup with some liquid in it and abruptly left to continue her work.

"Get much practice, do ya" the old man snickered. "You did well."

Jo-Eb didn't answer he just sat cross legged and ate his breakfast. His shoulder was still a little stiff and sore from his latest activity but he was used to small discomforts.

"Got a job for ya if you're of a mind" the old man continued. "I've wanted to cross the divide fore winter sets in and I think you'd be just the man for it." Jo-Eb waited a couple of seconds to let it sink in as he observed the old man.

"I travel fast and long each day and I'm not sure you can keep up."

"Besides I'm not really sure which way I'm going yet."

"Don't worry 'bout me young feller, I'll be stepping out when your dragging your feet at the end of a day's travel."

Jo-Eb just shook his head slightly laid it back on the huge stone and closed his eyes. "I'll think on it" he said finally. The sun was warming up now and he felt the urge to rest a while.

He woke abruptly with a sharp pain in his side. As he tried to rise he became aware that he was hog tied and anchored to the stone he had laid his head on.

"What the..." He was cut off by a gruff female voice that seemed slightly familiar yet strangely unfamiliar. As he opened his eyes he could see it was the woman who had served him his ale earlier. Her voice now however wasn't pleasant at all. "What's -"

"Shut up" was the reply. "When I want you to talk, I'll let you know." With that she motioned that he was to sit up as best as he could. She motioned to a guard standing behind her and commented "Don't harm this one; he'll bring a good price at the market." With that she turned and went her way.