

## Chapter 34 Breastplate of Righteousness

With much excitement, we approach the welcome waters and prepare to camp. Martin and his knights move to make last-minute preparations for the river crossing, and the pilgrims are thankful for the rest. I must remember to ask Rene to show me her unusual musical instrument .It won't be difficult; she is staying in our camp instead of with her uncle. Martin has become fond of the young armorer.

“Why must he remain here?” Farid throws another log onto the fire and spits viciously into the flames.

Staring at my friend I realize jealousy is a cruel master. He is silent now, but his glance reveals his emotions. He is not happy for the attention Martin pays to Rene. I watch as she finishes the last of a carving by the light of the campfire-a delicate small horse. So this is the object Arturo told us of. It's easy for me to pretend she's a boy, with the rough garment and clipped hair of a squire. Her small, muscular arms never betray her.

“Rene prefers our company to his uncle. Can you blame him?”

Farid glances at the determined face and the nimble fingers bringing the small figure to life. Still he does not smile.

“If he must stay, then. Still, I don't want to be around those fists,” he murmurs.

Soon the fire's bright flames reveal the instrument I noticed earlier, and my curiosity returns. “Rene,” I ask, pointing to the wooden bow and unusual strings, “it's a dulcimer? It looks different in this light.”

She stops her work for a moment to turn and look across at the object. An interesting smile crosses her lips.

“It used to be. My uncle has several, and I took this one for myself.”

“But I thought you hated to play.”

“Oh, I don't play it.”

Farid is listening to our conversation in spite of himself. He moves closer, and we exchange puzzled glances. “But what do you do with it?” he asks.

Rene reaches to grasp the instrument. By the increasing light from the campfire, I see something odd within the shining wood.

Rene turns it around, and I gasp. “It’s a crossbow!”

She laughs and rests the weapon on her lap. “Well, it’s almost a crossbow. I’ve been taking pieces from other dulcimers and fashioning them to make a crossbow. My father made many crossbows in the past. He taught me where to find the best wood and the strongest strings. Is it not a beautiful weapon?”

Farid’s jaw drops. He replies in surprise. “Yes, it is bella.”

Rene answers, “I plan to use this when we meet the Moors. My uncle can try to serenade them to death, but he won’t succeed. This crossbow will.”

“And will we meet them soon?” I am eager to discuss the dangers.

“My uncle is doubtful, but his only concern is to make the bishop happy.”

I cannot agree. “Martin is sure they will come for plunder. A rich pilgrim trades in rare carpets, and another is offering his gold along with his prayers for the health of his wife. We’ve many wealthy pilgrims among us. And three in our party brought along expensive spices.” Then I remember Arturo’s remark. “Even the duke himself is offering an expensive tribute.”

“But we are well protected by Martin and the duke’s men, aren’t we?” Farid asks.

“Thank the Blessed Virgin we need not be concerned. But what we need to worry about is food.” Now my stomach groans and the air is suddenly dense with the smell of coriander.

“Come on, it’s time for us to find out where the wonderful smell is coming from,” I call to the group as I start toward the evening campfires.

Our meal this evening is spare. Foraging for food on this landscape is tiresome, but a few hares were unlucky tonight. Our stew of hare and leeks is heavy with coriander. Farid offers a bowl to Rene. She smiles and takes it from his hand.

“You dislike me, don’t you?” she asks as she takes her knife from her belt and digs into the bowl. “It is no matter. Many hate me, for I am different from them.”

Truly, Rene is unlike any creature I’ve ever met. I fear Farid agrees. He slurps his stew noisily and watches Rene out of the corner of his eye as she lifts each bite to her mouth. She continues after wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“Benjamin was my only friend. But he is gone,” she says between bites. “He and my uncle played their together, but Benjamin was a magician with the strings. His music could bring heaven to earth with its sound. He learned to play from his father and told me many stories of his family.” Rene finishes her stew and places the empty bowl on the rocky ledge around the fire pit.

“How long had you known Benjamin?” I ask.

“I do not wish to speak of it tonight,” she replies. “It makes me sad.” Yawning, she rolls up in her pilgrim blanket and turns away from the fire and our hard questions.

Farid stares at the still figure and murmurs. “He is not as strange as he thinks.”

Early the next morning we hear the shrill cry of blackbirds in the distance. Martin throws back the tent flap and calls over the racket.

“Squire,” Martin calls, “I need you to help me with the armor. Bring the stool and hurry.”

It has been many weeks since I’ve assisted my master with his armor. This ceremony overwhelms me with pride—a solemn ceremony to honor my master and the name of de Arce. But this morning my mind returns to the evening around the glow of the campfire and another Rodrigo. The night of the storyteller and the magical armor.

“Someday, you will defeat every knight coming before you, as Rodrigo Ponce de Leon did,” Farid began. “Are you not proud to share his name, the name of the most famous knight in Aragon?” My friend stared bravely into my face that fateful night and I recalled the flickering firelight.

Now as I reach into the chest for Martin's shield, I remember my answer. "Yes, I take pride in the name. But the name 'de Arce' brings me even more pride. The name of a family who values courage and knowledge above everything else is the name I wish to honor."

"Now," Martin breaks my reverie. "We must remember the blessing. The blessing of the armor is a holy ceremony, Rodrigo." And it's now my responsibility to say the words.

Each piece of armor taken from the wagon polished, and every family coat of arms sparkled on shields of rainbow hues. In every tent stands a squire speaking words as each greave, gauntlet, and breastplate is set into place on his master's body. Now it's my turn.

"Having put on the breastplate of righteousness, gird your waist with truth," I chant, "To stay each dart of our enemy." A sharp metallic click breaks the silence as the buckle snaps into place under his raised arm.

"And having shod your feet with the preparation of peace," my voice whispers as I bend to attach his spurs.

"Now take this shield of faith and protection with which you will quench the fiery darts of our enemies." Handing Martin his shield, my fingers slide along the letters of the 'de Arce' family crest and my blood races.

Finally, I climb onto the stool with his father's helm to lift the helmet over Martin's bowed head. "This helmet of salvation and sword of the spirit, which is the word of God." I finish and place his sword in his outstretched hand.

"A fine job," Martin says. "You've trained for this day and your duties as my squire are almost fulfilled. Where is the extra armor in case I need it?"

"My lord, it is in the armor wagon. We also maintain your extra mount, although Rene is riding her today," I reply. "I will get the mare to you if there is need for her. I won't forget your extra shield."

"It is a pity we will not be riding together so they will be close at hand as is the usual situation," he replies flipping his sword from one hand to the other. "I am still uncomfortable with the new orders from the bishop, but there is nothing I can do for now."

He moves across the tent and sits on a camp chair, then motions for me to attend him. "Will you help me take this helm off? It's too hot. I will keep it on my saddle until needed."

I move to lift the helmet from his damp hair and wipe the curls from his face. He looks at me with a deep sadness in his eyes. "And it's my fervent prayer you will not fight if this battle is to take place."

"But I am ready, my lord. You've trained me well," I nod pulling my sword from the scabbard then reply. "And your brother's sword won't fail me."

"And a worthy weapon it is," he exclaims proudly.

As his last sentence is uttered, the curtain moves, and the duke enters with his squire and Arturo and Farid. His armor flashes brilliantly as it catches the light.

"We are ready for the bishop to bless our troops, Martin. It is time, my friend. When we ford the river this day, God's protection will attend us."

I am to ride with the duke and Arturo at the head, and Martin, as Bishop Osorio demanded, will guard the rear with his troops. Many of the knights do not believe there will be any action before we enter the mountain pass. The duke is not taking chances with so many unarmed pilgrims.

"We're prepared," I whisper under my breath thinking even if no Moors appear at least we will not be caught by surprise.

Farid smiles nervously. "Do you have your sword?"

I nod. "What better weapon than one which waged many battles in the hands of the Bishop of the Canary Islands? It's truly a holy weapon. Martin said it has sent many Moors to meet Mohammed in one stroke."

He reaches into a large sack I had not noticed before and pulls out a sword. "And I have this one," he says. "It's from the armor wagon. It belonged to Rodrigo Ponce de Leon- his magical sword."

How can I question my friend? A magical sword to protect. A holy lance to vanquish. A warrior uses whatever is in his power, be it magical or holy. We take our places with the duke's troops and kneel in prayer. The

bishop's words float above our heads and wash over us as the holy man raises his hand in the sign of the cross. Pilgrims make the sign of the cross as they kneel and listen to the holy prayer. Then countless voices murmur as they offer their own prayers to God for protection.

As the prayer ends, squires rush to attend their masters. With frantic squeaks and rattles of armor, the duke's men mount their animals. I turn to the rear and notice the knight who gave me his old boots standing next to Martin, his magnificent black charger stamping impatiently. The odd shape of his helmet is a surprise, and I stare at the carved silver falcon crouching on the peak.

"Look at his helmet." I point in Martin's direction as we both mount our animals. "What is the name of the knight who wears it?"

He squints into the sun. "He is Juan Bustamante from Anduxar. The falcon flies on his coat of arms. His family is famous as silversmiths."

As I listen for a signal, I hear the unmistakable squeak of chain mail metal rings. A raised gauntlet signals readiness. The red cross of Santiago flashes on countless chests like a field of bright poppies. Lions, bears, and dragons tremble on countless shields with the motion of prancing hooves. I stand up in my stirrups to take it in. God be praised, what a glorious sight.

But where is Rene? She had been working on the crossbow when I last saw her in camp. Now the mare and the young armorer are nowhere in sight.

"Have you seen Rene? We cannot get separated."

"Rene is with his uncle," Farid replies. "He looked angry not to be with our party and he was armed with his crossbow."

Before I can collect myself fully, the duke gives the command, and we move out to ford the muddy waters of the Guadaxenil River. Pilgrims accompanied by a holy bishop attended by a company of knights, crossing enemy territory to visit a holy shrine.

Surely, God will be on our side.