

## Chapter 35 The Lost Rear Guard

As we pass along the river Guadaxenil, the air is crisp, and Ezekiel and Ultreya exchange greetings once more. The destriers prance and rage around us as if they are already fighting a fierce battle of their own. The clang of armor and scrape of metal excites them. Only the metal of a feed bucket can excite our mules.

Approaching the wide expanse of water an image from a painting in the monastery unfolds before me. I stare ahead at a row of enormous water cypress trees hugging the shoreline. Now I recognize one of them. It's the tree painted by Father Pedro, the giant tree with the gnarled cage-like roots. The sight of the exposed roots and blackened bark send shivers through me. Is this another sign our journey is cursed or only the sight of the familiar image painted with Father Pedro's own hand giving me pause? How am I to know?

The blackbirds filling the tree branches watch the procession warily from their lofty perches but do not chatter as before. The sound of clanging metal and snorting animals makes my blood race.

“Rene may not enjoy playing, but its sound calms the animals.”

Farid and Ultreya trot beside me and my friend replies. “That thing will never make a musical sound again, but it'll make a deadly weapon. Rene even carved bolts for it.”

“I wouldn't wish to be a Moor and meet Rene.” He draws the sword from the rough bag strapped to his saddle and brandishes it above his head.

“Nor I.” As I glimpse my master, I see clouds of dust and a few weary pilgrims plodding along far behind our main group. Fluttering in the breeze above their heads is the banner of Bishop Osorio, with its brilliant colors of gold, red, and silver. No horsemen are in sight.

The river sweeps around small rock formations then twists and turns back on itself as we follow along its rocky shoreline. Small trees and strange bushes crowd the shore. In the spiky plants growing near

the edge of the river, creatures dip their long, narrow beaks into the water and then magically dive below the surface to reappear upstream. Are they birds or fish, I wonder? As our party approaches, many of them take to the air with a plaintive cry.

We have left the parched desert and our flasks overflow with water for men and beasts alike, yet our senses remain on constant alert. We are no longer in Aragon but a magical landscape of strange trees and waterfowl. Farid must sense it, too, for he turns in my direction. "This place seems magical. The light is different."

"Yes, see how it reflects on each piece of armor and throws it back in rainbow colors," I reply. The fragrance of the crimson flowers has a calming effect on the fierce destriers, and their huffing breath softens. I turn in the saddle to see a line of chain mail knights appear out of the dust- sparkling silver ghosts.

Our party meanders along the banks of the river, searching for a safe place to cross. Ezekiel's steady pace slows and then dips to the left where I notice an impression, a deep track in the soft earth. Stepping carefully he continues in the strange new track and Ultreya is only a few paces behind. I don't see Rene right away then she appears beside her bossy uncle, a frown on her face. At least she has her new crossbow to keep her happy.

As I consider crossbows, bolts, and swords, I glance at the brown leather saddlebags holding our weapons and whisper a prayer of thanks to St. Adrian. He will protect our knights and soldiers for he was brave in death himself.

Other dwarf trees appear along the winding river road and children leap up to take their fruit. Then the amazing scent from eucalyptus trees in the distance sweeps over me, an intoxicating veil. Its perfume has the same effect on our animals and their prancing slows to a gentle gait as we move toward a shallow crossing. We were right to be prepared but my minds troubled over the deepening track. It has grown wider and two horses can now travel abreast along the path. Yet, by all counts we will make this river crossing safely and also to the pass and our journey's end.

Then a wild, tortured scream. Farid calls in my direction, and frightened screeches reach my ears. I whip around in the saddle and stare at the road bending around the hills behind us. No pilgrims, no horses, no knights—a road empty of life except for the cries in the distance.

I shout ahead at the troops cantering up the road. “My master’s party has fallen behind. Stop we must go back.”

Soon everyone hears the anguished cries in the distance and Farid beside me calls, “God save us.”

As I wrestle with the reins to turn Outremer, another sound—the frightening blast from the horn signaling an attack crashes over me. Chargers and knights near me wheel to race back to our rear guard, and I am confronted by countless armored bodies rising like steel mountains before me. The duke’s knights know immediately what has happened and jerk their animals from the front lines to continue to the rear and race to my master’s rescue.

We dodge streams of men and animals on foot as they race forward to escape. Screams in the distance grow louder. We stare at each other in disbelief. Ezekiel and Ultreya wheel, caught up in the excitement. Together we gather the reins, turn, and rush to follow the party.

“Please let us get there before it’s too late.” I dig my heels into Ezekiel’s sweating sides. Farid has his sword, and its bright metal flashes over his dusty head. I reach for the holy sword of a warrior bishop and a jolt as the weight of the Toledo steel blade fills my hand.

“This hour may you send many Moors to meet Mohammad,” I whisper to the blade. “And may our holy St. James help me protect my master. And may I be brave on the field of battle.” These and other prayers escape my lips as the wind whips past my face. I stare at the crowded road, alive with knights racing to the rear and pilgrims streaming past me in the opposite direction.

Yet what I focus on as I round the curve is nothing I have prepared for. On the ground, unarmed pilgrims turn and dodge, staring terrified at the turbaned heads of their enemies. Startling in the Moors’ dark hands are fierce, curved scimitars, slashing through the air. These are quick, slender people, as are their animals. Their dark faces are grim, warlike.

But more than the terrible battle surrounding the pilgrims is the horrifying scene of fallen animals. As Farid races past me slashing out with his sword a bright spray of blood splashes the white hair of his mule and a dark arm drops to the ground beneath his animal's hooves. He lashes out again at the attacking Moors, and his battle cry rings in my ears. It's not a voice I recognize—but even my own will be different after this day, I know.

Suddenly, a terrified bray, and I stare in shock as Ultreya drops to his forelegs in the sand. With a mighty jerk, he pulls on the reins, and the mule stumbles back to his feet and charges forward with blood streaming from his neck. A flash of dark skin and a hand reach for my reins. My sword slices downward and the horse and rider turn in dizzying circles while the rider tries to control his mount with one hand. Dark blood spatters in a zigzag pattern and the rider veers off toward a large tree.

To keep sight of my party I charge ahead and gasp as my mule's body skitters sideways. I glance below me. There in the sand crouches a small boy in brown pilgrim garments. His arm covers his head. Ezekiel steps wildly around his small figure. I reach forward and fasten my hand around his belt. He is light as a veil. The boy huddles across the saddle, as I gallop to a small rise in the landscape where other pilgrims have fled. I release him to the muddy earth, and a woman runs to cradle him in her arms. Ezekiel swivels and heads back into the fray with an intensity I have never seen.

The immense destriers are no match for the fiery, swift Moorish horses as they wheel and scream in a panic. Only the armor covering their thick bodies and their special training protects them from the advances of the relentless enemy. I marvel at Arturo's magnificent black destrier as he strikes out at a brown gelding. Rising on his back legs, his front hooves connect with the forehead of the unfortunate animal. It stops and stands still for a moment, then slumps sideways in a heap, its rider's leg pinned under the horse's lifeless body.

Over my right shoulder, I see Ultreya stumble again and watch as a thick spray of blood shoots into the air above his white head. Ezekiel leaps forward and kicks out at a small gray stallion whose rider has just pulled his scimitar from his belt. The swift stallion rears, but the strong mule strikes him in the shoulder. He stumbles sideways, dumping his rider in the dust.

Over the writhing figures on the battlefield, my eyes search in vain for a friend with a crossbow. Where's Rene? Not with my master or her uncle or the rear guard. What has happened to our armorer? I must join the duke and Arturo. We have to get to Martin and the rear guard as it forms a circle around the bishop's wagon. Galloping forward, I am faced with arcing, flashing lances and swords surrounded by deadly scimitars. Red, gold and silver flags struggle in the wind, and splashes of blood appear on the bright cloth. At last I see Martin and Outremer. My chest throbs at the sight of the magnificent horse and rider cutting a swath through the circle of Moors. The agonizing cries of men and horses and the thunder of crashing armor explode in the air.

An arrow cuts through the cloth of my tunic and slides across the skin of my shoulder, its feathered tip striking the bishop's wagon with a thud. Farid brings Ultreya to my right side and slashes out with a bloody sword. His face is grim, and clenched white teeth spring out through chapped lips. His mule steps backward and crashes into the broken wagon wheel, then stumbles into Ezekiel. With a firm hand, I reach out. It is all I can do to keep him from falling into the ring of stamping hooves below, where knights and Moors have met a deadly fate.

"Watch out!" he screams. I duck in time to avoid the first slash of the Moors scimitar. The second one glances off my left arm an inch below my shield, and a shower of blood spatters his cheek. I fumble with my sword and watch as he lunges at the gigantic Moor. I will never forget the face of our enemy.

"No," I yell trying to stop him. His face twists in rage as he leaps onto the Moor's back. He wraps his hands around the man's thick neck. The evil laugh of our enemy resounds in my head. I stare as the giant wrenches my friend's hand from his neck and holds his struggling body at arm's length.

His knife is not curved like the others, yet I know The man grins with blackened teeth. He raises the knife.

"T-h-h-hunk!" It is the eerie sound of an arrow sinking into its target—yet it is not an arrow. I stare as the man drops Farid and looks to the short bolt sticking out of his chest. He smiles oddly, then raises his eyes above our heads. At last I turn, too, and stare openmouthed.

Standing on top of the bishop's wagon with crossbow in hand is Rene. When I turn back, the Moors lips are smiling but his eyes remain curious and still. I rush forward and bring the force of Ezekiel's great weight into his small stallion. He staggers back, and the wounded rider topples into the dust. He lies motionless on the ground below his animal, and Farid is once again astride Ultreya. Bolts directed to our left thud and several horsemen fall. Rene leaps from the wagon onto the mare's back to join us.

The duke and his company continue their onslaught to my right. His determined face shakes away blood from a blade stroke to his forehead. He is gripping the reins of his charger with a dark metal glove instead of the jeweled one that once astonished me. It's his battle glove, reserved for this cause alone. His war cry is fierce.

He calls my name. "Rodrigo, over there!" He points and I watch horrified as a circle of pilgrims breaks from the group and runs toward the river crossing. They never make it to the bank. The little boy and his mother are not among them, thank God.