

The Sword

by Ernie O’Roark and Betsy Wood

Chapter One

The ride from Albarracín had been an especially hard one for young Martin. The dust and summer heat had been unrelenting for this entire leg of their journey. His simple tunic, soaked in sweat, clung to his body, chafing with every move of the horse. The surrounding hills, mostly brown with only a few scrubby bushes, seemed equally beaten down by the infernal heat. There was not even a breeze to bring relief.

By lifting one hand to shade his eyes and squinting into the glare of the afternoon sun, he could see his lord, Rodrigo, up ahead. As usual, the massive knight sat upright and proud on his warhorse showing no sign of the terrible weariness felt by Martin. Directly behind Rodrigo rode the knight’s tall, seventeen-year-old squire Diego. Although also clearly suffering from the heat, Diego was doing his best to imitate his hero-lord by sitting up straight and pretending he felt no discomfort. Martin had no interest in such pretense. He just closed his eyes and wished for their destination for the night to appear around the next bend.

A short time later, to his complete surprise and relief, his wish came true as the town of Cuenca appeared ahead, perched atop a hill surrounded by steep cliffs. Soon, Rodrigo was surrounded by a small crowd of town dignitaries, and arrangements were made to accommodate his company of soldiers and servants.

“Mouse!” The commanding voice of Diego made Martin wince. There was work to be done and Diego would make sure it was Martin who did the bulk of it. As page to his lord Rodrigo, fourteen-year-old Martin was little more than a servant. The bigger, older, and more experienced Diego outranked him in every way and took advantage of that fact at every opportunity.

“Mouse!” Diego repeated. “See to the horses.”

So few words for so much work, Martin mused as he slid off his horse and nodded toward Diego, acknowledging the order. Gathering up the reins of the three horses, Martin wearily headed for the stables. It was not until after the horses were unsaddled, fed, watered, and groomed that Diego reappeared.

“Where did you put the saddles and gear?” he demanded. Martin gestured toward the tack room where he had neatly arranged the baggage. Frowning, Diego made a show of inspecting the piles. Then from Rodrigo’s saddle he unfastened the strap that held the magnificent sword called Tizona. Reverently he pulled the gleaming blade from its sheath. Turning it to reflect the fading light, he admired the famous weapon. As he gazed at it, his eyes narrowed and he clenched his jaw

in a fierce expression. Then with a mighty swing and thrust, Diego charged out of the tack room and began fighting a ferocious battle with an imaginary adversary.

“I don’t think Lord Rodrigo would appreciate your using his prized sword as a toy,” Martin said simply. As squire, one of Diego’s duties was to care for his lord’s weapons and armor, which was yet another task he usually handed off to Martin. Diego turned and lunged toward Martin, the point of the razor-sharp blade ending up inches from Martin’s chest.

“This is no toy, Mouse!” He brought the tip of the sword up to just under Martin’s chin. “This is Tizona, the sword of El Cid! It is the sword of a great knight as I shall soon be also!”

“Perhaps,” replied Martin calmly. “But you will have to *earn* such a reputation. Remember, the title, ‘El Cid’ – the Lord – was given to Rodrigo by his enemies out of *respect*. He didn’t get it by dispatching imaginary foes ...or pages.”

Diego’s fierce expression disappeared and he lowered the weapon. “True enough,” he said wistfully, “But my time will come.” Holding the sword once more up to the light he said, “I do wonder exactly how many men this sword has slain.”

“Too many, I suspect,” Martin mumbled as he turned his attention back to the horses.

Diego, returning to the tack room, took a few more practice swings with the sword, returned it to its sheath, and then gathered up the sword and several other items to take with him to Rodrigo’s quarters. “You will stay with the horses tonight and guard the rest of the baggage,” he commanded as he left.

What neither boy noticed was that one of Diego’s swings in the tack room had nearly severed a strap on the side of Lord Rodrigo’s saddle.



It was the sound of Zaina’s voice, brightly singing an old Andalusian song, that helped her father Farraj locate the young lady down by the stream that bordered their modest farm. He paused as she came in to view, a bucket of water in each hand, making her way back up the gentle slope toward him.

He started to call out to her but checked himself, not wanting to interrupt her song. Zaina was special. From the time she was born, Farraj somehow knew she would be. Tradition said that he should prefer his children to be boys. But in his heart he knew that he would not trade Zaina for a dozen sons.

Her great talent and joy was music. She could play several instruments and her beautiful voice was astonishingly strong and clear. But beyond her musical gifts, she was simply a wonderful young lady with a generous spirit who enjoyed nothing more than bringing happiness to others. Everyone loved her. And yet soon,

he reflected sadly, he would have to give her up. She had just turned sixteen. Other girls her age were already married. The family he had made arrangements with years before was becoming impatient. Soon the sound of her voice would leave his house and he could hardly bear the thought.

“Wonderful morning, isn’t it, Father?” she called when she spotted him. He didn’t reply for a moment, having forgotten why he had been looking for her. Then it came to him.

“Yes, my songbird, much cooler after last night’s rain. There will be new grass in the hills. I want you to take our sheep up there for the afternoon.”

Zaina beamed her father one of her characteristic broad smiles in reply as she set down the buckets and trotted over to him. Farraj knew that caring for the sheep was one of Zaina’s favorite chores. Their small flock had been her “audience” since she was six.

“I’ll be back in time to help with the evening meal,” she said adjusting the ribbons of her headband. “Tell mother not to do too much before I get there.”

Farraj frowned. “There are other children, Zaina. Let them learn to help your mother.” Then he smiled and brushed an errant strand of her mane of dark, wavy hair out of her eyes. “You go sing to the sheep.”

Zaina nodded. She understood her father’s meaning. Before tears could have a chance to appear, she quickly turned away and hurriedly retrieved her buckets. Soon Zaina and the flock were on their way into the rugged hills in search of a rich meadow.

It was still early afternoon when she and her parade of sheep reached the small bowl-shaped valley. Zaina had correctly guessed that this low spot in the hills would collect enough water to turn green after the rains. The sheep immediately spread out over the meadow and began contentedly munching the rich grass.

Zaina headed for a large rock near the center of the field where she could sit and watch over the flock. She had only gone a few yards when she came upon a path where the grass had been trodden down by a number of horses.

Curious, she followed the path for a little ways. In many places the hoof-prints were very clear in the still-damp ground. Some of the prints were deep – the unmistakable mark of heavy warhorses. Silently, she said a prayer to Allah that the wars that constantly plagued much of Spain would not come to her home and family.

As she finished the prayer, her eye caught a glint of something shiny from within a stand of wildflowers not far from the path. Nervously, she looked all around and listened. The whispering of the breeze and the occasional call of a sheep were the only sounds. As far as she could see, she was alone. Zaina cautiously made her way over to the mysterious object that so brightly reflected the

sun. Gently pushing aside the taller plants, she caught her breath as she suddenly realized what it was. Half out of its ornate leather sheath, the bright steel and decorated hilt of a sword lay seemingly discarded among the flowers.

In disbelief, she again scanned the hills all around. Why would someone so carelessly abandon such a valuable possession? Satisfied that she was indeed alone, Zaina lowered herself to her knees. Grasping the hilt, she slid the sword back into its sheath and then lifted the weapon out of its grassy bed. Standing up, she inspected the hilt more closely. The workmanship and decoration were finer than anything she had ever seen. It was like the work of a skilled jeweler or goldsmith. She drew the sword from its sheath. It was heavy, but it felt well balanced in her hand. Dropping the sheath to the ground, she took the hilt in both hands and swung it across the stand of wildflowers like a scythe. The result both amazed and terrified her. In a great arc, the decapitated heads of flowers lay strewn across the field. She had not even felt resistance. It was like slicing through air.

A shiver ran down Zaina's spine as she surveyed the damage she had done to the lovely flowers. This thing she had discovered was at once beautiful and terrible. She quickly returned the sword to its sheath. What should she do with it now, she wondered.

For a moment she considered returning it to where she had found it. But finally she concluded that her father should be the one to decide what to do. He was the wisest man she knew. Removing her waistcoat, she wrapped the weapon as best she could to disguise it in case she should encounter someone on the way home. She gave the sheep a little while longer to graze and then led them out of the meadow back the way they had come. Along the way, Zaina sang to them a song from long ago – from the time of the Caliphs of Cordoba when al-Andalus was united and there was peace. The song was about gardens – and beautiful flowers.

Chapter Two

The wrath of El Cid descended on the boys like a summer thunderstorm. They had arrived at Huete after dark and Rodrigo had discovered the loss the moment he dismounted. Now he towered over them with a look they had only seen when he was engaged in combat with his enemies. And, thought Martin nervously, most of those enemies were dead. With one massive fist El Cid grabbed Diego by the front of his tunic. "You are responsible for the care of my weapons!" he raged. "How could you lose the most valuable weapon I own?"

Terrified, Diego tried, as usual, to lay the blame on Martin. "I told Martin to load the equipment on the saddles this morning. He must not have..."

“You are *squire!*” Rodrigo interrupted. “*You* are responsible!” With that he sent Diego sprawling to the ground. Glaring at them both, he bellowed, “At first light you will go back and you will find Tizona. I do not care how long it takes. Do not dare to show your faces to me again until you have it!”

As if to add emphasis to their lord’s words, it suddenly started to rain.

Neither boy slept much that night. In the pale, pre-dawn light of early morning they set out, anxious to put some distance between themselves and their angry lord.

Since they were searching as they went, the journey back toward Cuenca proved to be painfully slow. The boys scoured the trail and the land nearby, asked at every village, and interrogated every traveler they met. They even waded through and searched every stream they crossed, thinking the sword might have fallen into the water. Finally they were driven by exhaustion and darkness to camp for the night.



Farraj had just finished feeding the horses when he was surprised to see Zaina ushering their flock of Merinos into the fenced pasture. “*Daughter,*” he called to her. “The sun is still high. Why have you returned so soon?”

Zaina didn’t answer. She hurriedly closed the gate behind the sheep and then ran to her father. Only when she came close did Farraj notice the odd-shaped bundle she was clutching so tightly. For a moment Zaina stood before him catching her breath.

Farraj’s bushy gray brows went up in expectation of an explanation. But Zaina didn’t quite know what to say. “*Here, Father,*” she said as she held out the bundle to him. Farraj took the bundle from her hands and by its shape at once realized what it was. Responding to the look of surprise and concern on her father’s face, Zaina gave him a half-hearted smile. “We should go inside the house and talk of this,” she said simply.

Once inside, Farraj and Zaina were immediately surrounded by Zaina’s three little brothers and two sisters. “*Mother!*” cried the oldest, an eleven-year-old named Rima. “Zaina’s home! She can help cook!”

“Not now,” Farraj said to her sternly. “Go help your mother.” Rima’s lower lip betrayed her disappointment, but she obeyed.

Farraj and Zaina, with the remaining little ones curiously following, moved to the large table in the center of the room. After first carefully unwrapping it from Zaina’s waistcoat, Farraj gently set the sword down on the table. The children immediately erupted in a chorus of amazed and delighted giggling. “Hush, now!”

Farraj admonished them. Turning to Zaina, he added, “Your sister has some explaining to do.”

Zaina took a deep breath and then in a rush told the story of how she had discovered the sword abandoned amid a dense stand of wildflowers. (She left out the part about having used the sword to behead most of them.) When she finished, Farraj shook his head and rubbed at the gray stubble on his chin.

Finally, he picked up the weapon and pulled the blade part way out of its ornate leather sheath. He examined it closely for a minute and then placed it back on the table. “There were no signs of a battle?” he asked. “Weapons might be lost by those killed or wounded in a fight, but I would think something like this would be claimed by the victors.” He paused to look closely at the sword once more. “Perhaps this one was somehow missed?”

“I saw no sign of such a battle, father. There was no blood. There was nothing in that field but a single narrow trail left by horses...and this sword.”

“It is a mystery, then,” he concluded. “Only Allah knows how this sword came to be there. We cannot worry about that further. Now we must decide what we should do with it.”

“Shouldn’t we somehow try to return it to whoever lost it?”

Again, Farraj rubbed his chin in thought. “Yes, if possible. But we must be careful, whatever we do. Simple people like us do not own weapons like this. There are those who would assume us to be thieves – or worse – for just having such a sword in our possession.”

After a long pause, he seemed to make up his mind. “Tomorrow morning, we will gather up what wool we can, go into Cuenca, and pay Samuel a visit. He, and even more so his wife, knows everything that goes on in and around the town, and we know we can trust him.”

The details of their plan were discussed over the evening meal, a dinner that Rima proudly took credit for having helped prepare.

Later, with all of the regular chores complete, the family gathered together at sunset. As usual, they faced Mecca and recited the familiar prayers. Even three-year-old Hamid had learned enough to participate, although he still sometimes wanted to nap on the prayer mat instead. When the prayers were concluded, Zaina added another, asking that her strange discovery not bring harm to her family. There was yet another request she would like to have included, but she had long ago learned to trust the will of Allah and knew that she should submit to whatever he had in store for her.

The last hour before bed was devoted to music. Zaina played her oud and sang again of the famous gardens of old Cordoba. Her father marveled at the beauty of her voice and how effortlessly her fingers flew across the strings of the

oud making it seem to have a life of its own. How he would miss this – and miss her – when she was gone.



By dawn Diego and Martin had resumed their search. Like the day before, their progress was slow and deliberate. They feared too much the possibility of missing the sword, and the consequences their failure might bring, to do otherwise. For Diego especially, his future as a knight hung in the balance. Martin was more worried about how his father would react should Rodrigo dismiss him from his service. And neither boy wanted to even think about what it would be like to have to face the great El Cid again and tell him that they had failed.

It was early afternoon when they finally followed the trail into a green, bowl-shaped valley. In the lead, Martin brought his horse up short at an odd sight. More than a dozen flowers lay strewn across the path in front of them. “Look at this, Diego,” he said pointing.

“They’re flowers, Mouse,” Diego replied sarcastically.

Ignoring Diego’s jibe, Martin dismounted and picked up several of the flowers. “They’re cut, Diego. Cleanly cut – mowed down with something very sharp. And look at how many!”

“You really think the sword was used to cut down those flowers?” Diego asked, now clearly interested.

“I can’t imagine what else could do this. It’s certainly a possibility.”

“If you’re right, then that means someone found the sword here. We must search this field very carefully.”

Diego dismounted, and both boys began looking for signs of the sword or whoever had found it. Martin was searching the lower part of the field when he came upon an area where he could see that the grass had been trampled by many small hoofs. “Diego!” he called. “I think I’ve discovered who found the sword!” Diego came at a run. “What?” he said breathlessly. “I don’t see anything. What have you discovered?”

“A shepherd,” Martin replied. “These little hoof-prints belong to sheep or goats. Someone was grazing a flock up here after the rain. If we find the shepherd, we may find the sword.”

“Then all we have to do is follow these tracks,” Diego said excitedly. “Then we’ll find our thief.”

“Thief?”

“Whoever it was took the sword, didn’t he? It doesn’t belong to him. I’d say that’s the definition of a thief.”

“I’d not be so quick to pass judgment, Diego. If you found Tizona lying in the grass, would you just leave it there?”

Diego didn’t reply. He was already jogging back to where they had left the horses grazing.

The flock’s trail was not hard to follow. It led them to a narrow, well-used road that gradually descended from the hills into a broad valley. Before long a fenced pasture containing a small flock of sheep came into view. A simple thatch-roofed house and barn lay just beyond. Diego urged his horse into a trot at the sight. Martin followed.

As he reached the house, Diego, in his best imitation of Rodrigo’s commanding voice, bellowed, “Hello! Anyone here? Come out!”

Moments later, a tall woman, Martin guessed her to be around forty, emerged from the doorway, a young girl at her side. The woman wore the long, ankle-length tunic and waistcoat commonly worn by peasants. Her long dark hair was mostly hidden beneath a shoulder-length cloth held in place with a patterned headband. The wide-eyed child beside her wore only a simple tunic.

Both of them, Martin noted, although clothed in simple dress, were very clean and neat. This was a Muslim family, he guessed. Martin dismounted. Diego did not, preferring to remain in a superior position looking down on the woman and her child. He was the first to speak. “I must speak with your husband,” he demanded.

“He is not here,” she answered simply.

“Where is he, then?”

“He is not here,” she answered again. “What do you want?” Martin noted a hint of defiance in her voice. Diego was clearly irritated. “Your husband may have taken something that does not belong to him. I must see him immediately.”

“You cannot. He is not here,” she replied. Martin smiled to himself. This lady was going to have the better of Diego. She was as stubborn and unyielding of information as Diego was arrogant. Ignored by both of them, Martin left the two to argue, and wandered over toward the barn. Soon he could hear the sound of children at play.

Rounding the corner of the barn, he discovered two little boys, one a little older than the other. They each had a stick of wood and were happily engaged in a mock swordfight. “Hello, young warriors!” Martin cheerfully called to them in Arabic. The boys stopped their game and looked at Martin curiously. He smiled at them and came closer. “Tell me about your game,” he said. Both boys smiled back at him.

A few minutes later, Martin returned to the front of the house where, as he had expected, Diego was still arguing unsuccessfully with the woman who now had a toddler clinging to her tunic. “The woman won’t tell me *anything!*” he said

as Martin approached. “She’s obviously trying to protect her thief of a husband. We’re going to have to go in and search the house.”

“No, Diego, I don’t think that will be necessary. Her husband is not here and neither is the sword.” Diego frowned. He was not a patient person, and what patience he had was gone. “What are you talking about?” he sputtered.

“Her husband and oldest daughter, whose name is Zaina, by the way, have taken the sword to Cuenca. They left early this morning.”

“How do you know...?”

Martin mounted his horse. “You just have to know who to ask – and how to ask. Let’s get going. The sword is waiting in Cuenca.”

Diego was indignant. “If they took the sword to Cuenca, he must be trying to sell it. I told you he was a thief.”

“My sources tell me they went to Cuenca to try to find the sword’s owner. How many thieves do that?”

As they turned to head back up the road toward Cuenca, Martin waved to the lady who still stood steadfast at her doorway. “Do not worry,” he called to her. “We mean no harm to your family. They will return safe.” She waved back.

Chapter Three

It was mid-morning when Farraj and Zaina finally climbed the steep road that led to Cuenca’s main gate. Over her shoulder, Zaina carried the bundle of fleece that served to hide the sword from curious eyes. Once through the gate, they continued their up-hill climb through the narrow, shaded streets toward the open plaza located at the center of town.

Farraj was in desperate need of a rest by the time they reached the plaza’s fountain. “I used to walk up that hill without a second thought,” he gasped between breaths. “I even remember running it.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. “But that was a very long time ago.”

“Well, this is certainly a good place to rest, Father. Sit on the fountain’s ledge while I get us some water.”

They were still resting by the fountain when the familiar voice of Ibrahim, an old friend of the family, called to Farraj from across the plaza. “Farraj! What a surprise to see you here this morning!”

Farraj and Zaina stood as Ibrahim and his nineteen-year-old son Malik crossed the plaza to greet them. Malik, tall with raven hair and muscular, square cut features, stood in stark contrast to his rather thin, graying father.

“I’ve just come to sell a little wool to Samuel,” Farraj said as the two old friends embraced. Zaina shyly looked at her feet, not wanting to meet Malik’s eyes, which she knew would be fixed on her.

Ibrahim looked surprised. “Only one small bundle? Surely that is not worth the trip.” Farraj lowered his voice. “Actually, I have something more than wool today – something far more valuable and perhaps dangerous.” Ibrahim canted his head to one side and raised a brow. In answer to his questioning look, Farraj continued, “Zaina found a weapon yesterday while grazing the sheep. I’m taking it to Samuel in the hope that he or his wife will know how we can properly deal with it.”

“And this weapon is hidden in the bundle?”

“Yes. And to my eyes it appears to be no ordinary weapon. I suspect it is of great value.”

“Then you were wise to be cautious. Such a thing could bring great trouble. May Allah guide you in your efforts to safely dispose of it.”

Ibrahim led Farraj a little distance away from their children and then gestured toward Malik, who had been listening intently even though his attention appeared to be focused solely on Zaina. “Your daughter grows more lovely each time I see her,” he said. “Malik asks of her often.”

“I’m sure he does, and with good reason,” Farraj replied, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Your son is a fine young man.” Pausing he looked over at Zaina, who was still nervously engaged in looking anywhere but at Malik as they talked. “She just needs a little more time. She is...well...not sure of her heart. We must not force them, you know.”

Ibrahim smiled at his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I know. But you must let her go someday, my friend. She should not go unmarried much longer.”

Farraj just nodded. “Come, Zaina,” he said. “I’ve rested long enough. We must go see Samuel.”

With that, they took leave of Ibrahim and Malik and headed out of the plaza up yet another steep, narrow street toward the home of Samuel the cloth merchant.

Unknown to them, Malik also made his way into the Jewish part of town by another route.

Farraj was a little winded once again by the time they reached Samuel’s door. The familiar smells of wool, linen, and dyes greeted them as father and daughter entered the shop and home of the Jewish merchant.

Joseph, Samuel’s fourteen-year-old son, was the first to greet them.

“Zaina!” he exclaimed, a bright smile lighting up his face. “What a wonderful surprise!” Catching himself, he added with a slight bow to Farraj, “Good morning, sir.”

Farraj could not help but smile at the boy who was now enveloped in a small cloud of lint and bits of wool as he brushed at his hair and tunic in an attempt to neaten his appearance.

“Joseph, I need to speak with your father. Is he here?”

Joseph opened his mouth to reply, but Samuel’s booming voice answered the question for him. Emerging from a back room, he greeted, “Farraj! What brings you here today? I wasn’t expecting to see you again for several weeks.” In contrast to his lanky son, Samuel was a great bull of a man with round features and a voice that knew no volume other than loud.

Farraj frowned. “I need your advice about something. Is your wife here? She might also be able to help.”

“Sarah has gone to market, but she should be back before too long. I’m surprised you didn’t pass her on the way up here.” Noticing his friend’s serious expression, he added, “Let’s go in the back where we won’t be interrupted.”

Samuel led them into a large room lined floor to ceiling with shelves of fabric of every color and description. Zaina thought it was like stepping into a rainbow. She had happy memories of playing in this room with Joseph when they were little. A large table with various cutting and measuring tools dominated the center.

Zaina laid the bundle of fleece on the table and untied the cords that held it together. Samuel and his son both let out a gasp as the bundle came undone and the sword lay revealed in a bed of fleece.

In response to their stunned expressions, Farraj explained, “Zaina found it in a field. And now we’re not sure what to do with it. Have you ever seen anything like this?”

The merchant did not immediately reply. Instead, he began examining the sword closely, starting with the beautifully decorated hilt. He then pulled the sword from its sheath and carefully studied the blade, tapping it several times with a wooden dowel. “The blade is old,” he said at last. “And very well made. Definitely Muslim craftsmanship – maybe even Toledo steel. I would guess it was probably made in Cordoba during the days of the Caliphs.” He gingerly slid the blade back into its sheath.

“Then the sword belongs to a Muslim warrior?” Zaina asked hopefully.

“Not necessarily, I’m afraid. This weapon has been around long enough to have changed hands many times, as a prize of battle or as ransom for its owner.”

He paused and looked first at Zaina and then her father, with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “I’m no expert on such things, but I know enough to tell you that this must be the possession of a great lord of some kind. It is worth a fortune.” Samuel turned his attention back to the sword and added grimly, “And he will want it back...”

As they stood, each of them silently considering the merchant’s assessment of the situation, their thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of someone entering the shop.

A woman's voice called out. "Samuel! Joseph! Where are you?"

Everyone immediately recognized Sarah's voice, which possibly through long years of living with her husband, was nearly as loud as his.

"In here!" Samuel shouted, making Zaina wince.

"Samuel!" She called as she made her way through the shop toward the back room. "We must go find Farraj and his daughter. Something terrible is..."

Her voice trailed off as she rushed into the room and beheld the four of them. Stunned, she stood gaping for a moment.

"What are you babbling about, woman?" Samuel said at last. Sarah, a petite woman with graying hair, quickly recovered her wits. "I've just come from the plaza. There are two Christians there who claim that they are in the service of El Cid!" She then looked directly at Zaina, a genuinely frightened look in her eyes. "And they are asking about Zaina!"

Zaina's eyes went wide. Farraj's muscles tensed.

Samuel's voice went up an octave. "Oh, my God! This must be the sword of El Cid!" he cried. "This is not good. In fact, it is very, very bad. El Cid is not a man to be trifled with. If the stories about him are even half true, men have died at his hands for lesser offenses than the taking of his prized sword."

Farraj grabbed his friend's arm. "And how do they know Zaina's name? How do they know she has the sword?" Thoughts of his family raced through his mind.

Of them all, Zaina's was the calmest voice. "You say that these Christians are in the service of El Cid?"

Sarah nodded. "They are young men, both Castilians. The older of them is big, loud, and demanding. The younger is quieter, and not unlike Joseph."

"But El Cid himself is not with them?"

"No. At least I saw no sign of him."

"Then what do we have to fear? Can we not simply surrender the sword to these boys and be done with it?"

"She's right," said Samuel. "But we must be careful how we do it. El Cid is a powerful man. His reach is long, even if he is not here personally." Looking directly at Zaina he added, "And somehow those young men already know the name of at least one person they can blame if they want to."

For a long moment, Zaina thought about what Samuel had said. Then making up her mind, she announced, "Then I must be the one to explain to them what happened. And I must do it without the sword."

Farraj looked startled at first and shook his head, but then the logic of Zaina's statement sunk in. "Yes," he said to everyone's surprise. "It *should* be Zaina who talks with them. And she must be without the sword. If they see the sword, they could rush to judgment. They would have no reason to listen."

“And besides,” added Joseph, “Who here would be better to talk to two young men?” He gestured toward Zaina. “I mean, after all, who wouldn’t listen to *her*?”

Samuel glared for a moment at his son, but could not sustain the reproach. Breaking into a laugh, he playfully batted at Joseph’s head with the dowel.

“But she cannot go alone,” Farraj stated flatly. “I must go with her. I will let her do the talking, but the Christians must see that she is not alone.”

Samuel glanced briefly at his wife to be sure of her approval. Seeing it in her eyes, he said, “We will go as well. The less alone she is, the better.”

Sarah pointed at the gleaming sword. “Someone will have to stay with that and keep it safe until we get back.” Turning to Joseph, she said, “Cover it back up with the fleece and then mind the shop as usual.”

Samuel nodded his agreement. “We should not be gone too long. Once the Christians have promised to lay no blame on any of us, we will bring them back here and give them the sword. That will be the end of it.”

Wanting to go with them, Joseph started to object. But a quick look from both of his parents silenced him.

Moved by a sense of urgency, it did not take the group long to reach the plaza. Farraj was especially thankful the trip had been downhill. As they emerged from the narrow street into the plaza, they immediately spotted the two young men who were standing by the fountain separately speaking with small groups of townspeople. Farraj smiled to himself. Those poor boys have probably been told a hundred times by now that no one here has ever heard of anyone named Zaina, he thought. These people were his neighbors and friends. They would never tell anything to strangers that might bring harm to a member of their community.

With a determined stride, Zaina bravely led the four of them straight up to the older of the two young men. “I am Zaina,” she announced without hesitation. “I hear you wish to speak with me.” Diego was stunned. For a long moment he forgot himself and grinned at the pretty apparition before him.

Recovering his stern expression he said, “Actually, it is your father I must speak with. He has taken something that does not belong to him. This is a serious...”

“No, actually,” Zaina interrupted. “I am the one who found your sword. And I will return it to you if you will listen to what I have to say.”

Hearing this, Martin came to stand beside Diego. He could not help but smile at the young lady who was obviously not intimidated by Diego’s bluster. “See, it is like I told you,” he said. “She *found* the sword.”

“Yes,” Zaina continued. “I found the sword laying in a stand of tall wildflowers in a field where I was grazing our sheep.”

Martin nodded. “And you used the sword to mow down half of those flowers.”

Zaina smiled, a little embarrassed. “Yes.”

Diego was not satisfied. “Then why did you bring the sword here? Did you not intend to try and sell it? Why else would you bring it to the markets of Cuenca?”

“We brought it to Cuenca to seek the advice of friends,” she replied gesturing to the trio standing behind her. “And in hopes of finding its owner.”

Martin slapped Diego on the back. “Which she did, Diego. Here we are! Was it not logical of her to assume that someone who lost such a prize might come to Cuenca in search of it?”

Diego gave up. “Very well,” he said softening his tone. “If you will just return the sword to us we will be on our way.”

But Zaina was not finished. “And we have your word that there will be no blame assigned for the sword’s loss, nor any action taken against me, my family or our friends,” she said firmly.

Defeated, Diego threw up his hands and laughed. “Yes, yes! I give you my word! Just give us the sword.”

Satisfied, Zaina flashed the boys a bright smile, turned on her heel and said over her shoulder, “Then come with us!” With that she marched back across the plaza, leading her father and his friends toward Samuel’s shop. Diego and Martin hurried to follow.

A short time later, they entered the shop to find Joseph still glumly manning the shop as ordered. “We’ve had only one customer,” he reported sullenly. “I sold a bolt of linen to the tailor’s wife. She was most disappointed that mother was not here.”

“So where is the sword?” Diego asked eagerly.

Samuel led them all into the back room. Moving to the table, he threw back the fleece with a flourish. There was a collective gasp followed by stunned silence.

The sword was gone.

Chapter Four

Everyone looked at Joseph who was still staring at the table in disbelief. Suddenly aware that all eyes were on him, he stammered, “I don’t know! No one came back here. Honest. I didn’t touch it. I didn’t tell anyone or show it to *anyone*! The only person I saw the whole time you were gone was the tailor’s wife.”

The room erupted in expressions of dismay and confusion, everyone talking at once. Diego’s anger was directed at Zaina. “You promised the sword! I hold you responsible. If you know something about this...” He stepped toward Zaina and looked so threatening that everyone else in the room moved to block his path.

“Stop! Calm yourselves!” Samuel’s booming voice commanded, bringing an abrupt end to the uproar. “We’re not going to solve this with yelling and accusations. We have to think. How could this have happened?”

Silence followed for several long minutes. Martin pointed at the single high window above a set of shelves at the back of the room. “What’s out there?” he asked.

“The courtyard,” answered Joseph. “But someone would have to be pretty tall to climb through there.” Martin crossed to the window and examined the shelves below. Some dirt on the linen and a partial footprint on a shelf told the story.

“Whoever it was, this is how he got in,” he said shaking his head.

“But who would know?” wondered Samuel aloud.

“Malik,” whispered Zaina.

Farraj looked like someone had struck him. “What are you saying, girl?”

“You told Ibrahim about the sword. And I know Malik was listening. He was teasing me about causing trouble.”

“But why would he...”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. But who else could have known?”

“And he probably knows *everything*,” Joseph added shaking his head. “If he was standing out in the courtyard while we were discussing the sword he would certainly have had no trouble hearing father.” Samuel winced and then glanced at his son with a look of disapproval.

“My son, in spite of showing no respect for his father, is nonetheless right. Which means we have no time to lose. We must find Malik...and soon.”

Farraj, still visibly shaken, agreed. “Then we must go to Ibrahim’s home right away,” he said sadly. “His son may be there. If not, Ibrahim may be able to tell us where to find him. In either case Ibrahim must be told...”

“That his son is a thief!” Diego finished angrily.

At that, Zaina burst into tears. As her father tried to console her, the others, including Martin, glared at Diego with disdain.

“Let’s go,” ordered Samuel. “Joseph, you stay here and...”

“Father, no!” Joseph blurted. “Please!”

Samuel relented. “Alright then, we’ll close the shop. Now let’s get to Ibrahim’s.”

In spite of their haste, it took a little while for the seven of them to reach the home of Ibrahim and his family, which stood adjacent to the stables near the edge of town. Along the way, the group passed many curious faces and more than a few shouted questions, all of which they ignored.

“Ibrahim’s family are livestock traders,” Samuel explained to Martin as they hurried down a narrow lane. “Horses, mainly. I can assure you, it is an honest,

honorable family. I can't imagine why Malik would do such a thing. His family is among the town's richest. They are in no need of money."

"There is more to this, isn't there – for Zaina and her father."

"Yes. Malik is the man Zaina is expected to marry. We've been anticipating that marriage for several years. Farraj and Ibrahim were friends long before Malik or Zaina were born."

Finally the stables came into view. Just beyond sat a large stone house. Farraj and Zaina led the way. "Ibrahim!" Farraj shouted as he banged on the door. "Ibrahim, we need to speak with you!"

"Over here!" came the answer from the direction of the stables. They turned to see the wiry, graying horse trader emerge from the stable entrance, a pitchfork in his hand. "What is it, Farraj?" he called. "What's the matter?"

Before Farraj could answer, Diego demanded, "Where is your son? He has taken..."

A swift strike from the back of Samuel's hand cut Diego off. To Martin, Samuel growled, "Can you please get him to mind his mouth?" Martin pulled the stunned Diego aside.

"I have no doubt that someday you will make a great knight. But your diplomatic skills leave much to be desired. Please let these good people handle this!" Diego, sullenly nursing a split lip, nodded.

"We should go inside," said Farraj to his old friend.

With formal grace, Ibrahim offered the hospitality of his house to the small crowd of unexpected visitors. His flustered wife hurried off to get some fruit while they arranged themselves, finding seats or standing in the large, richly decorated front room. Martin marveled at the colorful patterned tapestries that covered the walls and the glass vases that graced the mantle of the room's immense fireplace. Malik certainly didn't steal the sword for profit, he concluded.

With a halting voice, Farraj explained to Ibrahim what they believed had happened. Stunned and bewildered by what he heard, Ibrahim struggled to tell them what he knew. "Malik came home all in a rush earlier today. He took his horse from the stable. When I asked him where he was going, he just said that he was going for a ride. I didn't see a sword." Ibrahim held his head in his hands. "Are you sure it was Malik?" he asked. "Why would he take a sword belonging to El Cid? It just doesn't make sense."

"Think, my old friend," urged Farraj. "Has there been anything different about Malik recently? Has he said anything or done anything that might give us a clue as to where he's gone?" Ibrahim rubbed his forehead as he considered the question.

"He has lately taken an interest in the al-Murabitun – the Almoravids," he said at last. "As you know, several of their people have spoken at the mosque."

Malik seems persuaded by their arguments. He's referred to them as the saviors of al-Andalus."

"Saviors?" said Farraj incredulously. "The Almoravids are Berbers – barbarians from Africa."

"Good soldiers, though. According to Malik they've come to defend the Muslim kingdoms from worse barbarians – King Alfonso and his Christian knights. Ever since Alfonso took Toledo, the other kingdoms have lived in fear of his ambitions."

Martin could see that Diego was about to say something, probably regarding being called a barbarian. A quick elbow to the ribs reminded Diego of his agreement to stay out of the discussion, but it also earned Martin a menacing glare.

Ibrahim continued, "Malik agrees with the Almoravids when they say that many of the Muslim kingdoms of Spain have corrupt leaders."

"None of us can argue with that," observed Samuel. "Just look at what happened in Toledo. The people hated al-Qadir even more than they feared Alfonso."

"Unjust taxes can have that effect," Farraj wryly added.

Ibrahim nodded agreement. "But Malik believes that because of this, the Almoravids will overthrow all of the corrupt kings and unite al-Andalus under a single rule once more.

Farraj shrugged. "He may be right. The ruler of Granada has already been deposed and sent into exile in Africa." He paused and rubbed the stubble on his chin. "But what could any of this have to do with Malik and the sword?"

It was Zaina's quiet voice that broke the awkward silence that followed. "Malik has gone to earn favor for his family with the Almoravids," she stated flatly. Immediately, Zaina had everyone's attention. But as she looked at their faces, she could see that they were expecting more of an explanation.

Rising from her seat by the fireplace, she began to pace as she continued. "If I understand them correctly, the Almoravids believe in a more strict observance of Islam. They do not approve of some of our Andalusian traditions. In fact, there are quite a number of things about al-Andalus they see as immoral. Malik believes the Almoravids will win control of Spain and he wants to ensure that Almoravid leaders see this family and this town in a favorable light. He thinks he's doing it for us."

"Doing what?" asked Joseph, still uncomprehending.

"He's gone to present the Almoravid king with the prized possession of his most famous and deadly enemy – the sword of El Cid."

Chapter Five

Everyone scrambled after Diego and Martin as they bolted from the house and headed for the stables. Soon the huge barn was the scene of frantic activity. Diego and Martin were hurriedly retrieving and saddling their horses. Zaina had Ibrahim by the sleeve. Scanning the stalls, she pointed to a tall grey horse with a long, flowing mane.

“May I take her?” she asked breathlessly. Farraj was only a few steps behind.

“Zaina!” he pleaded. “Surely you don’t mean to go with them!” Zaina whirled around to face him.

“If I don’t go with them, they will fail.”

“But Zaina...”

“You think Malik will listen to *them*?” she cried, pointing to the boys. Farraj had no answer to that, but the stricken look on his face brought tears to Zaina’s eyes. “I will be careful, father,” she reassured him.

Joseph touched Farraj’s arm. “Don’t worry. I will see that no harm comes to her.”

Samuel’s booming voice immediately replied to his son’s words. “Oh, no! No, no, no! I forbid it!”

“You don’t even know how to ride,” added Sarah practically.

Joseph turned to his father, a look of determination in his eyes – a look his father had never seen before. “Father, listen! Zaina is going. Would you have her go alone with those boys? They’re Castilians! We hardly know them!”

“I have a good horse for him, Samuel,” Ibrahim offered. “She’s as docile as they come. Children who know next to nothing ride her all the time.”

Samuel turned to Ibrahim. “But that’s not the point. He’s...”

“Your son?” Ibrahim finished. “Malik is my son. He must be saved from his foolishness.”

“We’re all going to have to trust our children,” said Farraj with a sigh. “May Allah watch over them all.”

Zaina, with the help of one of the stable boys, was already saddling the stately mare.

“Your daughter, Farraj, is a good judge of horses,” said Ibrahim. “She is the finest I own. She’ll bring your girl home.”

Meanwhile at the other end of the stables, Diego and Martin were nearly ready to leave. Diego unfastened his sword from his saddle and fastened it around his waist. Martin took notice. “You aren’t thinking of going up against Malik, are you? Don’t forget, he has Tizona. Besides, we certainly don’t want to kill this fellow. Zaina’s supposed to marry him.”

“I’m trained to fight. He’s not. And if I have to kill him to get the sword back, I will.” He turned and put his face close to Martin’s. “And don’t you even think about getting in my way!” he growled.

Once mounted, the four assembled along with their parents and Ibrahim just outside the stables. Ibrahim’s wife hastily handed out skins of water and bags of fruit. Samuel shaded his eyes from the sun as he looked up at Diego. “How do you know where to look? Where will you go?” he asked.

“South,” Diego replied confidently. “The Almoravids are south. With any luck, we’ll pick up his trail. He doesn’t have all that long a lead on us. We’ll catch him.” With that, he gave a sharp command to his horse and was off at a gallop. The other horses followed close behind. Joseph nearly fell off when his mount first broke into a gallop, but he hung on and even managed to wave goodbye before he disappeared down the steep road that led to the town’s main gate.

The four stopped briefly at the crossroads just outside of town. Zaina pointed to the road leading away to their left. “There is only one good road that leads south. It would be the fastest way.” Diego didn’t reply. He wheeled his horse and charged off down the dusty road. The others did their best to follow.

The afternoon sun was unmercifully hot, and it soon proved impossible to keep up the pace Diego had first set. Still, they did not stop until the sun had slipped below the horizon and darkness was closing in. The people of a small village were gracious enough to offer the strange company of young people hospitality for the night. Zaina was given a bed in the home of a miller and his wife. The boys slept in a farmer’s barn with the horses.

At first light they were off again. With the horses rested, Diego once again set a fast pace. It was late morning when they first glimpsed their quarry. As they crested a hill, they could easily see a tell-tail plume of dust raised by a single rider in the plain below. Diego signaled a halt and watched the distant figure for a moment. Turning to Zaina, he asked, “You think it’s him?”

“Could be. Too far to tell for sure. He doesn’t seem to be in any great hurry, though.”

“His horse has been ridden hard. Otherwise we would have caught him yesterday. And he doesn’t know we’re pursuing him.” Without further comment, Diego prodded his horse into a gallop and, followed by the others, raced down the hill.

Malik, meanwhile, continued at an easy pace, seemingly unaware of his pursuers and so in less than an hour they had closed the distance considerably. As they crossed every rise, Zaina could now clearly make out that it was indeed Malik and his big bay horse up ahead. She began to worry about what exactly would happen when they caught up to him – something she had not stopped to consider

until then. She looked over at Diego. He still had the same look of single-minded determination he showed when they started. This did nothing to ease her mind.

Soon the road curved east and Malik left the road to continue his journey south. The open, nearly treeless hills and valleys offered few obstacles to slow them down. The horses seemed to sense a chase, giving them a second wind as the distance rapidly closed. Diego, driving his horse hard, pulled ahead of the group. Finally, as they entered a broad, grassy meadow, Malik spotted his pursuers. But it was too late.

Malik had no sooner prodded his horse into a full gallop than Diego was on him. Drawing up close beside his prey, Diego launched himself at Malik, the impact sending the both of them crashing hard into the meadow. Rolling apart and scrambling to their feet, they stood facing each other separated by only a few yards. Quickly sizing up his opponent, Diego realized that Malik was taller and more powerfully built. But he looked scared and confused.

Drawing his sword, Diego commanded, "Yield!" But Malik didn't answer. Instead, he drew Tizona from its sheath. Undaunted, Diego prepared to do battle.

As he expected, Malik was the first to make a move – a wild swing that Diego easily dodged. This is going to be too easy, he thought. He waited for Malik to try again. When he did, Diego, in a practiced maneuver, blocked the swing with his sword. There was a loud crash of metal against metal. Turning, Diego then thrust toward his opponent's chest. Only nothing happened. It took Diego a moment to realize with horror that he was holding nothing but the handle of his sword. The blade had broken off cleanly at the hilt! Stunned by the impact, Malik had backed off a few feet, but he quickly recovered and now leveled the famous weapon at Diego.

"No, Malik! No!" It was Zaina's unmistakable voice that caused both adversaries to pause and look. With the skirts of her long tunic gathered up to her knees in both hands, she was running headlong across the meadow toward them followed closely by two boys.

"Zaina?" called Malik. "What are you doing here?"

Zaina put herself between Malik and Diego. Facing Malik, she pleaded, "Please, Malik, you cannot do this."

Realizing with a start that the sword was now pointed at Zaina, Malik lowered the weapon.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated. "And who is this...this ruffian?"

"We've come to stop you from making a horrible mistake."

Malik just looked at her, his mouth open in an expression of bewilderment. Zaina turned and took Diego and Martin each by the arm to stand on either side of her. "They work for El Cid, Malik. They know that you are the one who took the sword. They know your family. They know your town. What do you think is going

to happen when El Cid learns from them that you've stolen his prized sword and given it to his enemy?" She paused to let her words sink in. Malik still looked confused and uncertain. Zaina continued, "And they aren't the only ones who know what you've done. My family, your family, and Joseph's family – they all know that you've taken something that is not rightly yours."

"And knowing my mother," Joseph added, "The rest of Cuenca probably knows by now as well."

Her voice quavering with emotion, Zaina continued, "If you do not return the sword now, Malik, you will be considered a thief. And if that is so, I will not have you, Malik. I will not marry a thief!"

Malik dropped the sword and put his hands to his head. "Oh, what have I done?" he moaned sinking to his knees. "What have I done?"

Zaina went over and knelt in the grass next to him. Diego retrieved the sword. Martin and Joseph went off to get the horses.

It was soon decided that the horses had been spent on the chase and that the fertile meadow was the best place to let them rest and graze. Martin and Joseph gathered enough wood for a small fire and they prepared to camp for the night.

Later, as the sun began to set, Malik and Zaina said prayers together. Then the five of them gathered around the fire and shared the fruit that Malik's mother had given them. Malik was still in a pitiful state of remorse.

"Who's to say El Cid won't still take revenge on me and my family for what I've done?" he groaned.

Martin patted him on the shoulder. "All he needs to know, and all he really cares about, is that we found the sword and he has it back. We won't need to bother him with the details."

Diego's brows went up. "Well, I don't know about that..." he began.

Martin interrupted. "Diego, if you feel that Lord Rodrigo must know *everything*, then I will have to tell him the story of how you were defeated in battle by a man with no training and had to be rescued by a *girl!*"

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"Are you going to hold this over me every time you want your own way?"

"No. I promise – only this once – provided you agree to keep your mouth shut about all these people unless it's to say something nice." Diego reluctantly agreed, much to Malik's obvious relief. "I really believed that the sword might bring security to my family," he began. "Instead it almost brought ruin."

"Well, now you have nothing to fear," said Martin. Looking at Zaina sitting next to him, he added, "In fact, I'd say you were a pretty lucky man."

Malik, for the first time since they had met him, grinned.

Diego poked a stick at the fire. “What made you think you needed to win the favor of the Almoravids? They’re Muslims, just like you.”

“That’s just it,” replied Malik. “They’re not just like us.” He paused, thinking of how to explain the complex situation. “The Almoravids are Berbers from Africa. They’ve come to save al-Andalus from the aggression of your king, Alfonso. But they’ve also come to correct what they see are the reasons al-Andalus is weak and unable to defend itself against the Christian kings.”

“Like corrupt leaders, right?” offered Joseph.

“Yes. But there is more.” Malik again paused, searching for the right words. “There is much about Andalusian society of which they do not approve – like the wealth my family has accumulated over generations, and the fine things we own. They have been very critical of our leaders and officials on this very point.”

Joseph persisted warily, “You said the Almoravids did not approve of Andalusian *society*. The people of al-Andalus are not just Muslims. What else exactly do they not approve of?”

Malik looked at each of the faces around the fire. “This,” he said simply. “This is what they believe has made the Muslim kingdoms of Spain weak.” In answer to their blank looks, he explained, “Look at us here around this fire. We have two Muslims, two Christians, and a Jew. And in al-Andalus that is the way it has been for centuries. True, we live in different parts of town, and we pray in different houses of worship. But for the most part we’ve lived side by side, cooperated, and learned from each other for generations. Our shared way of life is rooted in *Spain*. It is *Andalusian* – not just Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Zaina asked.

“According to the Almoravids the weakness of al-Andalus and its leaders is the corruption of Islam and its laws resulting from our close relationships with Christians and Jews. They say we’ve let them contaminate our faith and corrupt our thinking.” Pausing, he looked again at each of their faces in the firelight. “They want to reform Spain and to someday make it into a purely Muslim country.”

“Then what’s to become of the rest of us?” Joseph asked. An awkward silence followed. No one could offer an answer.

Martin finally said, “What you say Malik, has a familiar ring. I’ve heard the same sermon.”

“How so?”

“The head of the Church in Toledo, and indeed of all Christian Spain, is a Frenchman named Bernard. He’s the one who turned the city’s mosque into a cathedral.”

“Not Alfonso?” asked Malik.

“No. As I understand it, when the king took Toledo he promised the Muslims of the city that they could continue to use the Mosque. But Bernard, when

he arrived, did not approve. You see, he believes that the Holy Christian Church of Spain has been corrupted by our often-friendly dealings with Muslims and Jews. He and his fellow French clergy, with the support of the Pope himself, want to reform Spain with an eye toward one day making it a purely Christian land.”

“Then what is to become of the rest of us?” Joseph asked again, this time not expecting an answer.

Zaina reached over and laid her hand on his arm. “Great lords, Christian and Muslim, have fought one another over land and honor for centuries. Now it seems they will fight one another over religion. But the simple people of Al-Andalus like us have always found a way to survive. We will still be Andalusians, even if the kings have forgotten what that means.”

“Sing, Zaina,” said Joseph. “Please.”

So Zaina sang.

Her song was of Al-Andalus long ago, beautiful palaces, splendid gardens, sparkling fountains, and a people united, living in harmony. Astonished by her voice, Diego and Martin looked at one another in disbelief. The end of her song brought an immediate request for more from both of them.

“Too bad she doesn’t have her oud,” said Joseph. “She plays it almost as well as she sings.”

Zaina granted the boys an encore, and then, exhausted, they arranged saddles and blankets near the fire and went to sleep.

It was still at least an hour before dawn when they were all suddenly awoken by the sound of horses followed by a shouted command. “Get up!” ordered the unfamiliar voice. The five immediately scrambled to their feet as at least twenty armed men on horseback surrounded their camp. Diego reached for Tizona, which lay sheathed on the ground at his feet, but Martin stopped him. “Better to not draw attention to it,” he hissed.

The leader of the group dismounted and approached the young people who now stood huddled together beside the remains of their campfire. Even in the dim pre-dawn light, Martin could make out that the leader was a tall man with a trim beard, weathered features, and an elaborate headdress.

“Who are you?” Diego demanded with as much authority as he could muster. From behind him, it was Malik who answered.

“They’re Almoravids, Diego.”

“He is correct. We are al-Murabitun,” the leader announced. “I am Ahmad ibn Darras, commander of these men.” He looked Diego up and down. “You are a Castilian.”

“Yes,” replied Diego defiantly.

The Almoravid commander reached down and picked up Tizona. He held it up to the growing light and drew it from its sheath. "Beautiful!" he breathed. "A weapon of kings!"

To his soldiers, he said loudly, "There must be an interesting story here. How did children come to possess such a treasure?" Turning to the mounted soldier directly behind him, he ordered, "Bring them. Surely Prince Ali will want to hear that story."

Chapter Six

It took three full days for the soldiers and their captives to finally reach the huge Almoravid encampment outside the town of Ubeda. The journey there had been strangely quiet. Diego and Martin were both surprised at the commander's calm manner, which stood in stark contrast to that of their lord, Rodrigo. The soldiers were all well disciplined and followed their leader's orders without question. They said little to their captives, and were especially respectful in their treatment of Zaina.

The commander, Ahmad, wore Tizona securely fastened through the sash around his waist. Diego had spent much of the journey staring at the sword, trying to think of a way to get it back and escape. But by the time they arrived outside Ubeda, he was still without a plan and their situation was beginning to look hopeless. They were being led into the middle of an entire Almoravid army.

Row upon row of low rectangular tents covered the southern slope of the wide valley leading to the hilltop walls of Ubeda. They were greeted by many curious stares as Ahmad led them toward the center of the busy encampment. Finally the commander ordered a halt in a wide clear area surrounded by a group of large tents. Everyone dismounted and waited as Ahmad spoke with an older man who emerged from one of the tents to greet him. Although he could not hear what was said, Martin guessed from gestures and expressions that the commander's unusual set of prisoners was the topic of their lively discussion. The conversation ended and Ahmad approached them.

"You will meet with Prince Ali tomorrow and I will present him with your *gift*. In the meantime you will accept our hospitality."

To one of his soldiers he ordered, "Take the boys to Hasan ibn Tariq. Explain to him the situation. See that they are kept under close guard." Turning to Zaina, he said, "You, young lady, will come with me." Joseph started to object. "Where are you taking her?" he shouted. "What are you..."

"Do not worry about her," Ahmad interrupted. "She is going to be with the women as she should be." To Zaina he added, "Your choice of friends is very strange. But their loyalty is certainly beyond question." He laughed. "I must take good care of you or they will have my head!"

Soldiers took each of the boys by the arm and led them across the open space toward one of the large tents. Martin looked back in time to see Zaina looking at them, a frightened expression on her face, as Ahmad led her away in the opposite direction.

The boys soon found themselves sharing a large carpet in the tent of Hasan ibn Tariq, a tall imposing man with massive features. They could hear the voices of several soldiers who stood guard outside.

Hasan ordered three young servants to bring food. They quickly reappeared with bread, fruit, and a plate of soft sweet wafers. Martin had not realized how hungry he had become. Apparently, the same was true of the other boys as the food was quickly consumed. Like Ahmad, Hasan proved to be a man of few words. When they were finished eating, he gestured to the cushions and blankets stacked in one corner of the tent. "Sleep. Tomorrow you meet Prince Ali. He will decide your fate. You will need your rest."

With that he reached up and untied cords that held heavy tapestries that unrolled to form a partition dividing the tent in half, leaving the boys alone in near darkness. For a while they could hear Hasan on the other side of the partition speaking with someone, but then the voices moved away outside the tent. "What are we going to do?" whispered Joseph.

"Escape, of course," answered Diego.

Martin grabbed Diego's sleeve. "Now, Diego, I know you're keen to prove yourself a hero like Lord Rodrigo, but we're in the middle of an entire Almoravid army!"

"Lord Rodrigo ordered us to find the sword and return it to him. We are honor bound to at least try. We'll wait until it is fully dark and..."

"Shhhh! Listen!" interrupted Malik.

Martin didn't hear anything at first. But then the distant sound of singing reached his ears. High and clear, the voice was unmistakable. "Zaina!" breathed Joseph. Malik shushed him again and they sat silently listening for a while.

"They've given her an oud," Malik whispered.

"You're right," agreed Joseph. "I'm sure that's her playing."

Malik turned to Diego. "We should follow her voice – find her, rescue her."

"We're not after the girl, Malik. We have to get the sword," Diego answered coldly.

Martin elbowed Diego. "And where did you last see the sword, Diego?"

"Ahmad still had it."

"And who was with Ahmad last time you saw him?"

Diego thought about this for a moment. "There's no guarantee that he's still with her. He said she was to be put with the women. But since we don't have any better place to start, I guess we might as well begin there."

“But still, how are we going to get out of here past the guards, not to mention the rest of the army?” Malik asked.

“I know!” volunteered Joseph. The others looked at him doubtfully. Reaching into a pocket of his vest, he fished out a worn piece of leather. He unfolded it and lifted a long shiny needle from its center.

Diego rolled his eyes. “I don’t think that qualifies as a weapon, Joseph.”

Joseph was unfazed. “I’ve grown up in the cloth trade. I know how to work with fabric. I know how things are put together.”

“So how does that...?”

“Tents are made of cloth. Anything that’s been sewn together with a needle can be taken apart with one.”

Soon Joseph was hard at work with his needle unraveling a seam at the back of the tent. It was not long before he had created an opening just wide enough for the boys to squeeze through. Joseph cautiously peeked through the hole. “I don’t see anybody. It’s dark now,” he reported.

“Then let us hurry,” urged Malik. “Before she stops singing.”

Quietly, the four boys crawled through the opening. They crouched for a moment outside the tent listening. Zaina’s voice could still be heard in the distance. It seemed to be coming from somewhere farther up the slope in the direction of the town.

Stealthily, the boys made their way among the tents toward the music. Several times they had to stop and hide for long minutes to avoid being detected by small groups of soldiers patrolling the camp. All of the boys shared the same unspoken hope – that Zaina would continue singing long enough for them to locate her. Finally, they found themselves at the edge of another wide clear area surrounded by especially large tents. From one of them came the sound of Zaina’s angelic voice accompanied by her oud.

Diego led them as they cautiously crawled to the back of the tent. Finding a seam, he gestured to Joseph who moved silently to lie beside him. Taking out his needle, Joseph set to work on the stitching. Shortly, he had a small hole through which he could look. What he saw surprised him. Although the back of someone sitting nearby blocked much of his view of the interior, he could easily make out Zaina and at least eight or nine other young women. They seemed to be having a good time!

“Can you see Ahmad?” Diego hissed in his ear.

“No. No sign of any men. They’re all girls. And I think it’s a party!”

Discouraged, Diego sat considering what to do next. Malik carefully made his way up to Joseph’s side and peered through the opening. “At least we can rescue Zaina,” he whispered to Diego.

“It hardly looks like she needs rescuing! She’s holding a concert!” Diego hissed back.

Malik and Joseph both gave Diego a look that, even in the feeble moonlight, was unmistakable. They were going in with or without him. With a sigh, Diego nodded at Joseph whose nimble fingers immediately went back to work on the seam. Soon the gap was wide enough for someone to get through. “It must be me,” Malik said quietly as Zaina began another song. Diego gave him a nod in reply.

Without further hesitation, Malik plunged through the opening. Zaina’s song was interrupted by shrieks of surprise. But Malik quickly said, “Sing, Zaina!” Immediately she smiled broadly at Malik and picked up where she left off singing even louder and more joyfully than before. While Zaina sang, the other women looked curiously at Malik and began whispering and giggling among themselves. Some began modestly covering their heads with scarves. When Zaina finished a verse of her song, one of the older among the ladies said quietly, “This is him?”

“Yes!” she replied softly. “This is Malik.”

The younger girls dissolved into laughter and more whispered comments.

Feeling a little embarrassed, Malik bowed his head politely to the ladies. “We’ve come to get you. We’re trying to escape. The others are just outside,” he said quickly to Zaina.

Zaina opened her mouth to reply, but was suddenly interrupted by the sound of men’s voices outside the tent, followed immediately by the entrance of several men including Ahmad.

“Well!” he said, brows raised in surprise. “It seems we’re not the only ones drawn like moths to the flame of this girl’s voice!” Turning to one of the soldiers behind him, he ordered, “Find the others. They’re nearby somewhere.” Malik stood frozen, not sure what to do. Zaina nervously bit her lip. The other ladies were doing their best to look serious and proper.

Ahmad scanned the tent and shook his head. Gesturing to the young man standing beside him, he said, “Malik, Zaina, this is Prince Ali ibn Yusuf, the commander of the army whose guests you are.”

Malik and Zaina bowed their heads respectfully. Both were surprised at the prince’s appearance. With the possible exception of the ornate dagger he wore in the sash at his waist, there was little to distinguish him from Ahmad or any of the other men with him.

“I was expecting to meet you tomorrow, Malik,” said the prince simply. “But I see you couldn’t stay away from your young lady. Now that I see her, and having heard her music, I can’t say I blame you.”

A half dozen soldiers entered the tent dragging Diego and the other boys in with them. Ahmad turned to the Prince. “These are her other companions. Two Castilians and a Jew from Cuenca.”

“I will meet with them tomorrow as planned,” the prince replied. “I came to hear music.”

Ahmad commanded the soldiers, “Take them back to Hasan ibn Tariq. Tell him for me that he must be getting old, letting boys slip through his fingers like that. Tell him it must not happen again.” Malik and the other boys were quickly hustled out of the tent and back down the hill. They soon found themselves back on the carpet in Hasan’s tent. Hasan was not happy. “Which of you damaged my tent?” he growled.

“I did,” answered Joseph bravely. Hasan tossed him a roll of coarse thread. “Fix it!” he ordered. “Then sleep!”

Joseph went to work repairing the tent, which proved to be a lot more work than taking it apart had been. The other boys just sat glumly watching him. In the distance they could hear Zaina’s voice, clear and strong, singing traditional songs of al-Andalus.

The next morning shortly after dawn, Hasan woke the boys. “Get up!” he roared. “You have an appointment with the Prince. You cannot be late.” The servant boys quickly set some bread and fruit in front of them. They had barely begun to eat when Ahmad, accompanied by two of his soldiers, arrived at the tent. A few words were exchanged between Hasan and Ahmad. Martin guessed by their tone that they were old friends. Then Ahmad stepped into the tent.

“Bring a piece of fruit and eat it on the way if you like. We have to go now. The prince is a busy man.”

The boys were led back up the slope toward the same group of large tents they had visited the night before. They crossed the open central space to a tent located on the opposite end from the women’s tent. Ahmad gestured for the boys to enter ahead of him. Martin blinked as his eyes adjusted to the relatively dim lighting inside the tent. In front of him was the prince sitting by himself on a carpet with Tizona on display before him. To his left, sitting a little apart were three young women, their heads modestly covered with scarves, and Zaina. On his right sat several older men who Martin took to be advisors of some sort. Ahmad bowed to the prince. The other boys took the cue and did the same. Then Ahmad gestured for the boys to sit on the carpets in the center.

“I have heard your remarkable story,” began the prince. “Your songbird explained it in great detail to my wife,” he said gesturing toward one of the young women. Martin glanced over at Zaina and noticed that the back of her right hand and wrist was beautifully decorated with henna. Zaina’s evening with the women had indeed been something of a party!

The prince looked down at the sword in front of him. “So tell me of your lord, Rodrigo Diaz. What sort of a man is he, beyond what legend says of him?”

“The legends are true,” began Diego proudly. “He is a great warrior who has never lost a battle. He has defeated many powerful enemies including...”

“Yes, I know, I know,” answered the prince waving his hand dismissively. “But what about the *man*?”

Diego seemed taken aback. “He is very courageous...”

“He is also a very proud man,” Martin interrupted. “He is very generous to his friends, but at the same time he can be very cruel to those he sees as enemies. He is quick to anger, and he does not like to be told what to do by others – even his king.” Diego looked offended, but didn’t say anything.

The prince laughed. “Yes, I’ve heard he and Alfonso do not get along. It has been difficult for us to keep track of whether the two of them are reconciled or not. We prefer it when they are at odds with one another.”

“We were on our way to Toledo when we lost the sword,” Martin offered. “Lord Rodrigo was going there to meet with the king. Of course, we know nothing of the outcome.”

“A dangerous man, El Cid,” the prince said to no one in particular. “Independent, cunning, unpredictable – a worthy adversary in the struggle to come.” Turning to Malik he said, “And you took this magnificent weapon intending to present it to me – or perhaps, my father?” Malik, looking miserable, just nodded.

Turning to one of the older men nearby, the Prince said, “What do you make of this, Salim?”

The old man stroked at his graying beard thoughtfully. “It is a splendid sword, my lord – the finest of workmanship. It would be a fitting weapon for you to take into battle.” Then looking over at Malik he added, “But you did not win this sword in battle or take it as ransom for a captured enemy. It was taken – *stolen* – by a young man hoping to win favor with you. There is no honor in this.”

Prince Ali looked over at his wife and smiled. “I agree,” he announced. Turning to Malik, he said, “As much as I would like to have it, I cannot accept such a gift from a thief. Possession of it would make me no better than one. Allah would not be pleased.”

Diego straightened, a hopeful look on his face. Prince Ali looked at him. “You must return this weapon with my compliments to El Cid. Tell him that I very much look forward to taking it from him on the field of battle.”

For a long moment no one said anything. The boys were too stunned to speak. Ahmad finally broke the silence. “My lord, you would release these Castilians without even a ransom of some kind? It might make you appear weak to their lord.”

Prince Ali considered this a moment. “Ahmad, you said that a couple of the horses they rode were exceptional.”

“Yes, my lord. Especially the grey ridden by the young lady. It is a magnificent animal.”

Malik spoke up. “That horse belongs to my family. On behalf of my family, I freely give her to you as ransom for the two Castilians.”

“Done!” said the prince.

The prince then rose, and everyone else immediately stood up as well. Martin guessed that this signaled the end of their meeting. Prince Ali then walked out of the tent into the open area outside. The others followed.

To the boy’s surprise, they found a soldier standing just outside holding the reins of their horses. The prince went over to the grey and patted her on the nose. “Yes, Ahmad, a beautiful animal. I believe I did well with this ransom. You Castilians should be proud that your freedom commanded such a price.” He then walked over to Zaina who was standing with the women and looked into her eyes.

“There is much to love about Spain,” he said. “It is a beautiful country full of wondrous things – beautiful music, fine horses, amazing buildings, wonderful poetry. It is a green, productive land that should be the jewel of a Muslim empire – as it once was.” Turning to the rest of them he continued. “But sadly it has been corrupted. Greedy princes fight among themselves over riches and even ally themselves with Christian kings to get what they want. They have forgotten who they are. If we are not careful, Spain could be lost to the Christians. Allah would not be pleased. And it is all because for too long there have been too many voices in al-Andalus.”

In answer to the boy’s questioning looks, he explained, “You know how in a crowded room with many people talking it is difficult to hear and understand the words of someone with whom you are conversing? Such a situation is distracting. It is difficult to concentrate on what is being said to you. That is what al-Andalus has become. Muslims here are hearing too many differing voices to be able to hear and understand the true voice of Allah and Muhammad his prophet. To be united, the people must be of one mind, one faith.”

Zaina walked over to stand with the boys. With her right hand she took Martin’s hand and with her left she held Joseph’s. “Sometimes,” she said, “the best music is made with a chorus of different voices. That is al-Andalus.”

The prince smiled at her. “Go, get out of here before you corrupt us all! Ahmad and his men will escort you part of the way home.” Turning to Diego he said, “Do not forget my message to your lord. And make no mistake, if we meet in battle, I would not hesitate to kill you.” He then gestured to Salim, who was standing nearby with Tizona. Salim handed the sword to Diego.” Now go,” the prince commanded.

Zaina said her goodbyes to each of the women, who all seemed genuinely sorry to see her go. Then they all mounted their horses, Zaina riding behind Malik on his big bay.



The journey back to Cuenca was uneventful. Zaina, Malik, and Joseph were all joyfully reunited with their much-relieved parents. Farraj invited Diego and Martin to stay overnight at his farm before continuing on toward Toledo. Accepting the invitation, they ended up spending a very pleasant evening with Zaina’s family. Her two little brothers recognized Martin immediately and soon had him engaged in their games.

The meal proved to be a feast, prepared by Farajj’s wife and all of her daughters. Seeing how the close-knit family lived, worked, and prayed together gave Diego and Martin much to think about. Later, Zaina got out her oud and sang for them. It was a concert the boys would remember for the rest of their lives. The next morning after yet another wonderful meal, the boys departed. A short time later they paused at the little bowl-shaped valley where Zaina first discovered Tizona.

“You know,” said Martin as the horses grazed. “There are many good and honorable causes for which a knight might go to war. He must defend his lands and protect his people. If need be, he must defend his honor. In the cause of justice a knight may be called upon to bring those who do evil to account. All of these things our lord Rodrigo has taught us. But he never mentioned fighting for religion – fighting to force a land and its people to accept a single faith. I fear that may be what is to come for Spain – wars over religion. After meeting and getting to know the people we’ve encountered these last days, I don’t think I could fight for such a cause. I’m not so sure now that the life of a knight is what I really want.”

Diego looked at him thoughtfully. “Not long ago I would have said you were crazy. And actually, I still think so. But at least I do understand what you are saying. I can’t remember ever wanting to be anything but a knight. And that remains my goal. But I have to admit the experience has changed me too. It has made me see that those we might face on a battlefield are actual people – people with their own view of what is right – people with families and children – not just faceless enemies. I’ve learned that a knight must consider carefully the cause for which he fights.”

“I wonder if Lord Rodrigo considers so carefully,” Martin said as they resumed their journey and left the little valley behind.

