

The scout gave a brief statement to Captain Hays. Hays then ordered us to ride at double time, informing us that Vicente's force was not far away and that they were riding out to meet us head-on. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. We rode another mile or so before Vicente's army of bandits appeared on the horizon. They were approaching us quickly. Hays ordered us to speed up, and the distance between our forces quickly began to close. Just as we were nearing shooting range, Hays ordered us into a different formation. Our force divided into three sections, and each section spread out, forcing our enemy to aim rather than fire blindly into a mass of men. Joe, Javi, and I were on the right flank.

I leaned down on Renegado's neck and whispered into his ear. "I know you're nervous, Renegado. This is my first battle, too. Do not be afraid. We will make it through this alive. We will not die here today. We will not die here today."

Renegado let out a deep breath and shook his head as if working himself up for the battle. His pace quickened. He was ready — and so was I. I pulled my rifle out of the scabbard and cocked it.

The first shots exploded from the bandits. Hays immediately gave the command to fire. I fired in unison with the Rangers and saw many bandits fall as I rode out of the cloud of smoke. We fired at will, as did the bandits. Sticking my rifle in its saddle scabbard, I took out my Colt pistol and began to fire. Once I fired my five bullets, I took out my second pistol and emptied it into the bandits as we charged forward. We were now close enough to see the whites of one another's eyes. While the Rangers around me reloaded their pistols in preparation for the collision between our two forces, I drew my saber. I bellowed a ferocious battle roar as I stared at my target not ten yards away. He was aiming his pistol

at me, but there was not an ounce of fear in my body. Had there been any before, I had just screamed it out of me. My target fired, and I felt the bullet blow my hair. I swung my sword across my body, right through the ribcage of my target.

The forces of Rangers and bandits collided in a chaotic array of gunshots and hand-to-hand combat. Some men fought with knives, and some swung their empty rifles into the skulls of their enemy. The officers fought with their sabers, as did I. My skill with the saber was unmatched by any on the battlefield, and from the looks in my enemies' eyes, I could tell that they had not encountered a man nearly as handy with a sword as I. Battles such as this on the frontier were fought with guns and knives. My mode of hand-to-hand combat, especially in the style in which I used it, was foreign to them, thus making it impossible to defend against.

The battle was a blur to me, as I swung, stabbed, and chopped with my sword while I rode through the mass of bandits. It was a blur, yet, I had never felt more alert in my life. It seemed that I knew exactly what was going on around me. I could tell when I was about to be attacked before I even saw my attacker. This awareness was intoxicating in the most sobering way, but it quickly passed. After only a few minutes, the bandits retreated with less than half the number with which they had engaged us. As I looked over the mass of Rangers still standing strong, I saw that our numbers had not diminished. Looking down at the dead bodies that littered the battlefield, I saw that they were all bandits.

Hays and about forty of his Rangers regrouped and began chasing after the retreating bandits. The rest of us assessed the damage and tended to our wounded comrades. By the end of our assessment, we found that only three Rangers had been killed and six wounded, and their wounds would not be fatal if they received proper care. Vicente Montes had not been among the bandits left

dead on the battlefield. He had led the retreat to salvage what men he still had left.

I petted Renegado's neck and told him what a great job he had done. He was breathing hard, and so was I. His white coat was stained with the blood of our enemies, and he looked like a menacing creature, standing proud and stoic amongst the slain bodies. I looked at my blood-covered saber. I took out my handkerchief, wiped the blade clean, and put the saber in its sheath.