

Chapter 2: Rattlesnakes, Scorpions, and Gila Monsters

Miguel lead his men north out of the Sonoran Desert. He knew that the journey that lay ahead of them. It was going to be long, hot, dusty, and waterless six days. Provisions were holding out as the men were able to hunt mule deer and javelina along the way. A couple of dozen of fifty pound pigs and a dozen or so mules. Deer would also go a long way in stretching military rations. Water was still the problem. Water is always the problem in the desert, especially for the horses and burros. While Miguel's men could live on a canteen of water a day, the horses required much more. He knew he would have to send a scout ahead to find drinkable water, in a desert where nearly no water existed.

Miguel constantly reminded himself of the golden rule of the desert. Every living thing in the desert, whether plant or animal would either bite, sting, stampede, prick, poke, scratch, lacerate, claw, scrape, wound or injure you in some fashion. All life in the desert was bred to defend itself against invaders whether friend or foe. The first time you forget this rule, you will be quickly and painfully reminded.

Several times along the path, Miguel's trusted horse was spooked by rattlesnakes making this otherwise unpleasant journey more unpleasant. This was the problem with being the leader, Miguel thought. When you lead, you take the greater risks, never knowing when the next sidewinder would be startled or you would hear the unmistakable sound of the desert killer. No matter if it's a Massasauga, Mohave, Prairie, Sidewinder, Speckled, Twin-spotted, or Western Rattlesnake their bite was fast, deliberate, and deadly.

On the second day out, while Miguel was ahead of his men he was crossing a dry river bed north of Tucson, when off to the right, there was a sudden chatter of a Western Rattler. Even though the snake was more than fifteen feet off the trail, Miguel's horse got spooked and reared up flaring his nostrils and screaming a loud whinny! Being an experienced horseman, Miguel knew enough to pull the reins down, pull the horse's chin to his chest. He knew instinctively, this was the only way he could get him to not rear up and fall over backwards.

As expected, his horse reared up and stood high on his powerful hind legs while they both froze in midair for what seemed like eternity, but could have only been mere seconds. Then suddenly, Miguel's horse came down with a thunderous crash on his four solid, muscular, and sweaty legs. In Miguel's mind's eye, he thought to himself he was safe and had Castillo under control. He saw himself continuing to ride north as the rattler headed off into the desert to find another, safer location to sun himself.

That wasn't the case, though! The rattler chattered again and lurched at his horse! Castillo reared up again this time even taller than before. Miguel was so caught off guard, his gloved hands could not react as fast as his mind had pictured the reins being pulled down. Instead, he lost his balance and leaned backwards to the rear of the slick leather saddle. This caused his hands to pull back on the leather reins.

With the reins now being pulled back and up, the horse's bit pulled sharply to the back of his mouth. Castillo had no choice but to bring his head higher and back. They both froze solidly in midair, Castillo on his hind legs and Miguel pushed back into the saddle. He was holding his breath out of sheer fear of what was to happen next. It was though time had slowed down to a near complete stop. Miguel knew that the odds said that this could go either way. Either they both would be safe and the horse would crash back down on his front legs as it did earlier, or the worst possible outcome would occur; they would fall over backwards, to their possible death.

As he hung there in space, Miguel knew what he had feared was about to happen. His horse was at the teetering point of toppling over and falling backwards. He gripped the horse's sides with his stirrups and legs praying that he could ride this fall.

Within an instant, they both came crashing to the ground. The sound of a 15 1/2 hands, 400 kilo horse falling nearly two meters down onto the hard packed sun bleached desert floor sounded like a freight train derailing. What was worse, Miguel had made that fall as well, six feet down flat on his back. He knew instinctively that the worst wasn't over yet!

Hitting the compacted sand first he knew it was coming. When it arrived all 900 lbs. of horse hit Miguel. His horse fell backwards from a full standing position down across his body pinning him to the ground rendering him nearly unconscious, his body numb.

Miguel laid there for what seemed like an eternity, all the time wondering if he was dead or alive. If he were dead he should be seeing angels, yet all he could see was the blinding sun and the cloudless blue sky. If he could see the sun, Miguel decided that he must be alive. First, Miguel tried to move his right arm. He started to panic as horrific thoughts entered his head. He wondered if his arm had survived. Was it broken? Was it gone? His right arm seemed fine. He then tried to move his left arm. The same... Both arms had survived the fall.

Miguel then concentrated on his lower half and tried to move his right leg, but couldn't. He wasn't sure if there was any feeling in it, but was convinced he couldn't move it. Then he tried to move his left leg. The same was true. No pain, only numbness, but even though he could feel his leg through the numbness—it wouldn't move. He would have to get up and see his legs with his own eyes, and that scared him.

Being in the middle of nowhere without doctors or reasonable medical care, even the simplest of broken bones or lacerations could usher in the end of your life. Miguel lay there on the ground imagining what could have happened to his legs. He had to force himself to get up. He couldn't allow fear to get in the way. Miguel used his right arm to raise himself a little at first, then his left arm to raise up a little more. He continued inching himself up to a sitting position, just a little at a time, until he could see the problem. Castillo was laying across his legs at a perpendicular angle, laying completely across both of his legs, obscuring his body from his waist down to his ankles and Castillo was unconscious. Miguel's horse had been knocked out cold from the fall.

Miguel tried to pull his legs out from under the 900 lbs. of dead weight, first trying his right leg, then his left. It was at this point that he noticed that his horse was not only perpendicular to him, he was staring into the belly of this huge horse. His long muscular legs were limp and along both sides of Miguel's head. It dawned on him at the moment that when Castillo came to, he would kick and flail, scared of what had just happened, trying to get to his feet, and back in control. Furthermore, and more importantly, Miguel also knew, that the moment Castillo did regain consciousness the chances were middling to good that he would inadvertently kick Miguel's head and face trying to get to his feet. He knew he was seconds away from death or serious injury. The fall hadn't killed him—but his own highly trained horse would.

Miguel had to think quickly. He would need to pull his legs out from under Castillo's massive weight. It was like having an entire wagon flip over and land across your legs. With all his strength, Miguel pulled his right leg. Nothing happened. He mustered even more strength to pull his right leg once again. This time, his leg slipped out from under Castillo. He then took both of his arms and covered his face and head to protect myself from the inevitable flailing horse's legs.

With one free leg, Miguel began kicking Castillo in the stomach as hard as he could. He hoped somehow, that he could make this behemoth roll over. If Miguel could do that, his horse would be facing the other direction and his massive legs would kick against the air in his panic. Miguel kicked him again and again desperately, until... Finally, he did slowly roll over and face the other way.

Miguel realized he had only fractions of a second before Castillo came to. The horse caught his breath and did panic. All four of his tree limb sized legs shot out in every direction, again and again. Finally, Castillo managed to get to his feet and, once he was standing, he froze and stared down at Miguel. He could instantly tell by Castillo's stare that he was now more afraid of his owner than that rattler that had caused this whole incident. They stared at each other, neither one knowing what to do next. It was at this point that Castillo ran. He ran away hard and ran away fast, leaving Miguel's crushed body in that hot dry riverbed, to an uncertain future.

At that moment, a panic came over Miguel. It wasn't that he was worried about being left in the desert without his horse or even about his own well-being. It was about losing the Peralta Stones. Even though he had been going to those mines since he was a child of twelve, it was impossible to find any of them without those stones, those maps.

With the maps in hand, Miguel had walked past the largest of the mines several times in one day. Mesquite, manzanita, cholla, prickly pear, barrel, saguaro cacti, covered everything. Every square meter of desert floor looks the same as the next. Our mission would surely fail, all because he fell off my horse!

Miguel lay there for a few minutes and assessed what had just happened. He knew the good news was he was alive, at least for now. Nothing seemed broken and he was still breathing. Miguel knew that he would have to get to his feet if he were to survive. He

slowly pulled himself up on one knee then the other. Then onto one foot then the other. It took some time but Miguel was standing.

Then turning slowly to look behind where he lay he saw a perfect impression of his body in the compacted earth. It was his body form from the waist down pressed into the clay. Miguel guessed in a way, that the slight impression may have saved him from further damage.

It wasn't until Miguel tried walking did he realize that his horse was the lucky one. He had been barely able to run away. It was now becoming increasingly more painful for Miguel to stand and soon walking was nearly impossible. Miguel knew his legs weren't broken, but he knew he was hurt. He could feel it in his bones. Miguel needed to see what had happened. With that thought in mind, he unbuttoned his suspenders and dropped his pants. What he saw next amazed him. Miguel was black and blue from his ankles to his groin on both legs. Nothing was broken, but definitely crushed.

Just as he realized how lucky he had been he heard the sound of horseback riders, many of them. It was his men. All four hundred, approaching the dry riverbed. Within a few minutes they all came face-to-face with him. He looked up at them and saw the questioning looks on their faces. As he stood naked in the riverbed with black and blue legs.

Miguel's brother Pedro rode up to Miguel standing there with his horse in tow and asked "Are you alright, brother? I saw your horse running back towards us as if Satin himself were chasing him. Did you see Satin?" It was at this point Pedro could not contain himself any longer and burst out in a loud cry of laughter. Loud enough for most of Miguel's men to hear. With that, they all began laughing at Miguel and that unusual sight. Until, they saw the look on Miguel's face giving them the feeling that they were looking into the face of Satin.

Miguel couldn't contain himself any longer. Even though he was in a lot of pain and standing there bare-ass naked, he had to admit that this had to be a funny sight. Miguel began laughing as well. It was partial relief that he was still alive and not seriously hurt, relief that he had 'ole Castillo back again, but mostly because he knew the Peralta Stones were safe in the cushioned saddlebag.

Several minutes later, several Tequilas happier, and with help from his still laughing brother, Miguel got back on his horse and headed north on the trail in search of water and eventually, large amounts of gold.

Apache Trouble

Over the next several months, the eighteen battalions of men rigorously worked the mines, removing literally tons of rich ore. They took turns as only 2 or 3 men could work in such inhospitable and tight quarters. The shifts continued throughout the day. A team would work the mines; others would then remove the ore. The remaining men processed the ore either in the arrastras, panning, or smelting in the huge “beehive” adobe ovens they maintained. Then, they would break, shift jobs, for several more hours as the rotation continued.

This work schedule helped keep the moral of Miguel’s men high and their health intact. It also kept production very high which was Miguel’s secondary concern surpassed only by his men’s health. Once the gold was refined and purified, it was placed in a makeshift armory and guarded 24 hours a day.



Miguel remembered listening to stories his grandfather told him as a young boy after returning from the mountains of the north with large amounts of gold ore. Miguel senior told the story of locating the mines, how they fought the Apaches, refined the ore, and built the massive beehive smelting ovens three generations before. His grandfather shared his stories with Miguel telling how he and his men carefully chose just the right location. This needed to be near a running stream located at the base of one of the most prolific mine shafts giving accessibility to the other mines. And most importantly, plenty of water and plenty of wet clay mud.

The amount and type of mud was critical to the success of their final refining process. These enormous ovens were built out of adobe clay bricks made from the wet mud.

These bricks would need to withstand the high temperatures of smelting gold ore so they wouldn't crumble.

He remembered how Miguel senior explained the process he and his men used to craft each brick from the wet desert clay. They would place them in the hot summer sun to bake, then remove each brick from their wooden molds. The story continued, how the men would draw out a circle on the flat ground 20 feet in diameter. Then they would place a row of adobe bricks along the circumference of that circle, using the wet adobe mud as mortar to hold the bricks together. Adding row upon row, setting each brick slightly to the inside. This would cause the wall diameter of the oven to become gradually smaller in circumference, until meeting at the top. A beehive shape cone 20 feet in diameter and 15 feet high was then formed. A three foot by two foot opening in the base for access, would be covered later.

The grandfather went on by saying after the adobe had dried, the men would gather mesquite and manzanita branches from miles around and fill the floor of the ovens. Once the oven was full of the dry, dense desert wood, they would light them on fire and let it burn for three days. The fire would continue to burn until the flames were out. This left a foot-thick layer of red hot embers at the bottom of the oven. The men then shoveled the gold ore on top of the embers and sealed the opening.

Several days after the embers had burned out, they would oven cool, the gold was melted out of the ore, and had puddled on the original dirt floor below. This made it easy to be picked up by hand out of the ashes left behind. Miguel thought his grandfather was a genius to have figured out something so simple, so efficient, and made only from the materials of the desert. It made his heart happy to find his grandfather's ovens and filled him with an overwhelming pride for him.

They would make the necessary repairs, fire them up again after all these years, and use them to smelt his own gold ore.

By now, Miguel and his army of 400 men had dug plenty of gold ore to start the smelting process. Taking a work party of 12 men, he rode down to the four ovens to make needed repairs. Behind each man followed a burrow loaded with all the tools necessary to work on the ovens getting them repaired. To Miguel surprise, after all this time, the ovens were in remarkably good shape. Hardly any repairs were necessary. This allowed his men to spend most of their time gathering the necessary dried wood, placing it in the ovens, and getting a good hot fire going in each.

The process of digging the ore, crushing it in the *arastra*, and smelting it in the ovens continued through the first half of winter. After the beginning of the new year... the trouble started.

Early January a messenger from Pedro's battalion quickly rode into camp, it was just after sunup. He was calling for Miguel "Generales! Generales!" he cried riding in. Miguel quickly ran over the obviously excited man and asked "What's wrong! What's all the

shouting about?" The foot soldier looked at Miguel and instantly became intimidated by being in the presence of the general, all he could do is stutter. "What's wrong!" Miguel shouted.

The soldier said "I am sorry for yelling sir, but we have a problem... This morning one of our look out has been murdered." "By the Apaches?" Miguel demanded. "Ah, yes Sir. By the Apaches, Sir." the soldier blurted. "He was shot in the back with two arrows while on duty. The arrows are unmistakably, Apache, Sir" he added. Miguel had an ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was like a gray cloud building over them.

"Ride out to the other encampments and tell the officers I want them to meet here, at this camp, within the hour! Can you do that son? Without getting killed yourself?" Miguel asked, feeling again a darkness falling over him. "Of course, Sir. I mean... Yes, Sir! Right away, Sir!" the soldier answered as he rode off to get the others.

Miguel called his first officer over and asked "Don't we have a soldier that speaks Apache fairly well? Whose battalion is he in?" The officer said "He is in Pedro's battalion. Shall I go and fetch him, Generales?" "Yes, bring him here to me at once!" Miguel ordered.

Miguel knew he had a problem, but wasn't sure how to fix it. He was actually surprised that the Apaches were as little trouble as they have been. It seemed like all of this was changing, starting with today. He thought if he could only meet with the chief to explain they would only need a few more months. Then, they would leave and never return. He knew if he could get the message across to the chief, he would understand, be sympathetic, and all this trouble could come to an end.

Within the hour, Miguel was surrounded by all of his officers especially the one who spoke Apache. He explained what had happened and that they would only need a few more months of mining. Also, he had plan to meet with the Apache Chief. This idea was met with a respectful disagreement by all of Miguel's officers. The men knew the risks and danger he would putting himself in. They also knew the Apaches were not to reasonable men.

Miguel insisted on going, then asked his soldier interpreter to meet with the Apache scout he had communicated with to set up a meeting with his Chief. He then told his officers to post double perimeter guards 24 hours a day, double the armory guards around the storehouse where the gold is kept. Also to keep the horses and burros in the center of the camp, away from the perimeter, hoping to insure them from an Indian attack. He understood without horses and burros, all the gold in the world wouldn't help if they couldn't carry it out of the mountains.

Late afternoon that same day, the Indian liaison rode back into camp. His horse was still running as he jumped having to run alongside. he had to run at the same speed, until the horse was able to slow itself. Keeping the same pace, he ran to the cabin where Miguel was. This was where he reviewed the maps and did the accounting of numbers

of men, horses, burrows, supplies, and tons of gold and ore. Miguel was carefully planning whether he should cut his losses and leave now, or stand up to the Apaches. Being the military man he was and holding the resentment for the Apaches, the decision was no surprise that Miguel decided to stay, mine, and defend his territory.

The soldier knocked on the old dried wooden door frame and asked permission to enter. "Yes! Enter!" Miguel shouted. "What have you learned?" He asked. The soldier told Miguel "The Chief has agreed to meet with you. He said the meeting would take place tomorrow morning at sunrise. You are to be at the Apache Thunder God, then. The chief made it very clear that he wouldn't allow any one besides you, the Generales, and the interpreter." "How can we trust him? How many of his men will be there with only two of us. It's not safe. Does he take us as fools?" Miguel asked the soldier.

"I asked the same question, Sir..." The soldier answered. "He said he would give his word it would be only he and one brave. Equal numbers. And, if we brought any other soldiers or tried to trick him, there would be blood bath." The soldier added. "His WORD?!" Miguel shouted. His word? What good is the word of an Apache?" Miguel shouted with anger raging up in him. He thought for a while and said "Tell your scout we will be there and we will honor the wishes of the Chief. Now be off!" "Yes, Sir" the soldier said and ran from the dark, hot wood cabin.

Miguel knew this was most likely a setup, an ambush, but what choice did he have? Stay and start a war, leave and go home with half of the treasure everyone expected. Then he would lose face or try to negotiate with the Chief even if it could cost him his life. Through a process of elimination, he felt other choice could be made. He would have to stay and negotiate at any cost, even his own life.

Miguel couldn't sleep that night, he kept thinking this could very well be his last night on earth. He kept going over and over in his head what he would tell the Chief. He needed to take command of the conversation. Why not... They did nothing wrong... They weren't bothering the Apaches. And, they had just killed one of his men!" He knew he shouldn't back down or negotiate weakly. All he wanted was a little more time.

Just before morning broke, Miguel was still awake in his cabin. He didn't sleep at all. The sun would be over the horizon within the hour, he knew it was time to ride out. He rose for his straw bed, tapped his boots and pulled them on, and went directly to horse without stopping for his usual cup of coffee. When Miguel mounted his horse, he called out for his liaison. He was already awake and eagerly awaiting the Generales call. The interpreter mounted his horse and rode up alongside of his general.

The two soldiers rode down the trail in pre-dawn darkness until they reached the mountain where the Apache Thunder God stone was perched. With a kick of the stirrups and a loud "YA!", the two men navigated their horse up the steep grade of the hillside reaching the top. Already waiting for them at the top of the ridge were the Apache Chief and his brave. They were sitting high on their appaloosa horses. The Chief was in full

headdress and the warrior was painted for battle. They both held their swords at their sides.

Miguel broke his horses stride and slowed Castillo to a slow walk as they approached the two Apaches. Their bright silhouette shown behind them by the now rising sun. They slowly approached the two warriors making direct eye contact. Miguel starred into the nearly black eyes of the Chief, he returned the gesture by starring into Miguel's eye, never blinking.

Miguel broke the silence and the intense stares by telling his soldier to talk to the Chief. Tell him the following "Chief, I welcome you and thank you for taking this pow wow or meeting. Please use his words, not mine." The soldier nodded and began speaking in a harsh consonant staccato sounding language Miguel couldn't make out at all. Miguel spoke Spanish as his native tongue, some Portuguese, a little Italian, and a smattering of all of the other Mediterranean / Latin based languages of the Catholic Church; however, he didn't speak Apache.

The soldier repeated what Miguel said to the Chief in his native tongue. The Chief listened intently, waited until the soldier had finished then waited a bit longer to see if he had anything else to say. The Chief, still starring into Miguel eyes, started a long string of staccato consonants that seem to go on forever. Miguel and his foot soldier waited until the sounds had stopped. Miguel turned to his soldier and asked "Well?" The soldier turned to Miguel and said "The Chief is very angry. He said his grandfather warned your grandfather. His father warned you father, and he's is warning you. This is the land of the Apache, not the white man." he said. "You do not belong here. You are not welcome here. You disrespect our culture. You disrespect our people. You disrespect our land by cutting into it and removing your yellow stones. You disrespect this sacred land."

Miguel turned back to the still starring Chief and said "I am sorry, but we are here by order of my Crown, my king and queen. My Chief. We are here to gather as many yellow stones as we can, then we will leave forever. All we ask is for two more moons." The soldier nodded, turned to the Chief, and repeated what Miguel has just said verbatim, consonant by consonant. The two waited for the Chief's reply.

The Chief looked down for several moments then turned to his warrior and said something so quietly, neither of Miguel or his man could hear. The Chief paused further, then said a long string of Apache sounds. The interpreter listened carefully. When the Chief was done, the interpreter turned to Miguel and said "The Chief said he would not tolerate any further disrespect. You and your men are not welcomed here. Particularly near our Thunder God. He said he would give you one moon to gather your yellow stones then leave forever."

Miguel looked the chief in the eyes and said "You have my word as a fellow warrior. Further disrespect won't be tolerated and we will not enter this sacred mountain top again. And further, once the one moon is up, we will leave your land forever." The soldier turned to the Chief and told him what his Generales had said. The Chief listened

and replied "There is one other problem. One of your white warriors have been giving my warriors a water that tastes like fire and makes my warriors act like foolish children. The more they drink this devil water the more they want it. This must stop!"

Miguel looked the Chief in the eye and replied "I am sorry for this unfortunate situation. I will personally see that this violation never happens again. Can you tell me more about my warrior who is doing this?" The Chief's face became angrier when he said "Yes. It is your warrior called Ramon."

Miguel's face changed from serious to surprised! He turned to the soldier and said "I am very sorry for this and I will be sure it stops immediately, Chief." The soldier shared that with the Chief and awaited his answer. The Chief looked at Miguel and said "You and you men have one moon. That is all. Leave then and never return. Do not break your word!" Then, expectantly, the Chief and his warrior kicked their horses and immediately rode away down the hillside. The two soldier just looked at each other wondering what just happened and if they could trust the Chief to keep his word.

As Miguel rode back to camp all he could think about was Ramon feeding tequila to the Apaches. What the hell was he thinking! Again, his disrespect has caused the death of another one of his men. He knew he couldn't tolerate this any longer. Miguel turned to his soldier and said "Ride off to my brother Ramon's camp and tell him I need to see him immediately at my cabin. Tell Pedro to come to my camp as well. Now go!" With that, the soldier said "Yes, Sir!" and quickly rode off.

About 20 minutes later, at Miguel's camp, the two brothers rode up to his cabin. Miguel could tell by the look on Ramon's face Pedro had explained the whole situation. Pedro was just shaking his head. The two rode over to the cabin and stepped off their horses. Ramon and Pedro walked over to the door of the cabin where Miguel was standing and the three quietly went inside the cabin, out of the sun and ear-shot of Miguel's men.

In a quiet, disappointed voice Miguel spoke to Ramon "This is the last straw. This is the last time I am going to come to your rescue. When we return to Mexico City, I am filing charges to many to discuss today. I am no longer protecting you from yourself. Ramon..." Miguel said. "Listen to me. We have thirty days to complete our mission thanks to you and your insubordination. Have one of your soldier deliver all your tequila rations to my camp. Immediately! You will lead your men in the true form of a Peralta for the remainder of our time here. Ramon... If you don't, so help me God, I will have you hanged. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" Miguel shouted.

"Yes... Brother, I do." whispered Ramon. "I am serious Ramon! I will NOT tolerate any more of your childish behavior. Your behavior cost us the life of one of our men. This will not happen again! Now... GET OUT OF HERE!" Miguel nearly screamed. Pedro just shook his head and said nothing.

Ramon rode off while Pedro and Miguel sat by the fire with a cup of coffee discussing what might be done to keep Ramon from getting them all killed. They knew it wasn't

going to be easy to keep him in line and behaving like a Peralta and now they had less time to complete their mission. Miguel asked Pedro to increase the length of the men's shifts to make up for lost time. He also asked Pedro to notify the other battalions that they also needed to increase their shifts. Miguel was determined to have this last mission the largest success of his career, while all the while unable to shake this awful feeling he had deep inside.