

SAFE PASSAGE • 1

SEBASTIAN SAW THE ORANGE MUZZLE flashes before he actually heard the shots. Bullets whizzed by his ear as he leaped from the saddle and ran for cover. The shots were coming from a thick stand of pines alongside a rise in the road ahead. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Gonzalo was right behind him, running toward the trees in a zigzag pattern.

Sebastian and Gonzalo had chosen to return from Vienna to Metz in Lorraine by an overland route. It would have been easier to go by riverboat most of the way, but speed was all-important. Doña Angelica, Sebastian's mother, was in trouble, and a delay of even several days could be critical. Their route took them through the wooded mountains of the Black Forest in Baden-Württemberg in southwestern Germany, after which it would be just a short run to Strasbourg and on to Metz. But now, on a deserted stretch of road far from any town, they had been ambushed.

The two men crouched in the shadows of the wooded roadside, watching the pines from which the shots had been fired. There were no signs of movement, no more muzzle flashes, no more shots. Gonzalo primed a pair of pistols and jammed them into his belt. Meanwhile, the horses remained on the road where they had been abandoned, rolling their eyes and stamping on the ground.

“I’m going to get the horses, Gonzalo,” said Sebastian. “Look how skittish they are. If we leave them there, they might just bolt and run all the way back to Villingen, and then what are we going to do? Walk to Strasbourg?”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Gonzalo. “But stay low to the ground, grab just one horse and use it as a shield as you bring it here. Let’s hope the other horse follows you.”

Sebastian crouched at the edge of the trees like a runner preparing for a race. He cast one final glance toward the stand of pines, and then he sprinted toward the horses. Instantly, a new volley of shots erupted. Sebastian dove to the ground and covered his head with his arms. A dozen paces ahead he could see the horses rear up in terror. The horses turned back in the direction from which they had come. They galloped at break-neck speed down the road and then disappeared into the cover of the woods in which Sebastian and Gonzalo were hiding.

Sebastian jumped to his feet and raced back toward the woods, expecting a new volley of shots at any moment, but none came. He reached the safety of the woods gasping for breath. His face was covered in a cold sweat. Gonzalo was leaning against a tree, a pistol in each hand.

“It looks like we lost our horses,” said Gonzalo. He did not look particularly distraught. “We’ll figure something out. At least, you didn’t get hit.”

“I don’t think we lost the horses, Gonzalo,” said Sebastian. “I saw them run into the woods, a short way down the road. They’re on this side of the road, so I think we can reach them without exposing ourselves to any more musket fire. We’ll just stay in the woods.”

“All right. Let’s go, but be careful. What’s the plan?”

“First, we have to get the horses and secure them so they don’t run away. Otherwise, we’ll be stranded here in the middle of the Black Forest. Then we backtrack through the woods until we reach those pines up ahead. If we are very careful, we

can come around behind the shooters and trap them. Who do you think they are?”

“I don’t know, Don Sebastian. They may be ordinary highwaymen out to rob us, although this is not how highwaymen operate. They might be assassins sent by the same people who betrayed you to the authorities in Vienna. It may even be a case of mistaken identity.”

“Not very likely, Gonzalo. Let’s go.”

Gonzalo shoved his pistols back into his waistband, and the two men plunged into the woods in search of the horses. They fought their way through underbrush and climbed over dead and rotting tree trunks that had fallen onto the forest floor. They strained their ears for the sounds of the horses, but all they heard were the sounds of birds chattering in the trees and the howl of wolves in the distance.

Presently, they came to a small brook. Off to the right, they could just get a glimpse of the road, but straight ahead they saw only the tangle of shadows and vegetation. They exchanged glances and pushed ahead.

Soon, they found the first signs of the horses. Small branches were freshly broken, and here and there, they could make out hoofprints in the soft mulch of the forest floor. The horses seemed to be headed deeper into the woods. They would not go far. Once their panic dissipated, they would stop and wander about in bewilderment.

Suddenly, they heard the frightened whinny of a horse. The men broke into a run along the trail left by the horses. Gonzalo pulled one of his pistols and held it at the ready in case it was a snake that had frightened the horse. In less than a minute, they saw the horses. But it was not a snake that had frightened them. It was a man dressed completely in black.

The man was untying Sebastian’s saddlebags from his saddle. He slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and ran into the woods in the direction of the road.

“Stop!” shouted Gonzalo. “Stop or I’ll shoot.”

The fleeing bandit paid Gonzalo’s warning no heed. He ran as quickly as the thick underbrush would allow, and the two men gave chase.

Carrying the saddlebags on his shoulders, the bandit was at a disadvantage. The bags were unwieldy and they often got tangled in the branches, causing the bandit to lose precious moments as his two pursuers gained steadily on him. In desperation, he reached down to a sheath strapped onto his leg and pulled out a dagger. Then he spun around and hurled the dagger at Gonzalo. The dagger whooshed through the air and imbedded itself into a tree trunk not far from where Gonzalo’s head had been a moment before.

Meanwhile, Gonzalo had instinctively dropped to his knees to avoid the missile and fired one of his pistols at the bandit. The bandit’s sharp cry of pain signaled that he had been hit, but he continued his flight, leaving behind a trail of blood.

Gonzalo and Sebastian did not delude themselves into thinking that their quarry was no longer dangerous. A wounded quarry is sometimes the most dangerous of all.

“Let’s split up,” said Gonzalo. “I’ll follow the trail of blood, and you circle around to the right to catch him if he tries to reach the road before I get to him.”

“Good idea.”

Sebastian grabbed a stout fallen branch, which he could use as a cudgel or to smash through tangled underbrush. After he disappeared into the woods, Gonzalo set off in pursuit of the wounded bandit. The trail of blood led in a wide arc turning toward the right, in the general direction of the road. Gonzalo walked slowly and carefully, checking constantly to see if the trail turned into the shadowy woods where the pursued might be lying in ambush for the pursuer.

After a few minutes of tracking, he saw the bandit lying face down near a fallen oak in a small clearing. The stolen

saddlebags lay on the ground a few paces from where the bandit lay. There was a ragged hole in the bandit's lower back, and a puddle of blood was pooling on the ground beside him. The man appeared to be dead.

Gonzalo thrust his unfired pistol into his belt and approached the body warily. As he reached out to grab the bandit and turn him over, the bandit rolled over on his own power, and his right hand came up with a pistol pointed directly at Gonzalo's face. Gonzalo reeled back and turned his shoulder, bracing himself for the impact of the bullet. But before the bandit could fire the pistol, it was flung into the air when Sebastian's cudgel struck him on the wrist from below. The bandit fell back to the ground clutching his wrist and groaning in agony.

Sebastian stepped out into the clearing.

"Gonzalo," he said in a tone of mock disappointment, "after all those hunting trips to Asturias, I thought you were an experienced tracker. Since when do you let your quarry catch you by surprise?"

"All right, all right. You saved my life. I owe you."

"No, you don't." Sebastian looked down at the bandit writhing on the ground. "I think we should have a word with this fellow."

"Absolutely," said Gonzalo.

He took a flask of water from his belt and crouched down beside the wounded bandit.

"Would like a drink of water?" said Gonzalo.

The bandit nodded. Gonzalo undid the opening of the flask and poured a little water into the bandit's mouth.

"What's your name?" asked Gonzalo.

The bandit turned his head away and refused to speak.

"Listen, my friend, said Gonzalo. "There's no point in keeping secrets any more. You're on your way to a better world. Why not make your last moments on this beauti-

ful earth pleasant and friendly? Would you like another drink?"

The bandit nodded again, and Gonzalo gave him another small drink.

"So let's try again," said Gonzalo. "My name is Gonzalo Sanchez. What's yours?"

"Gunther. Gunther Schultz."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Gunther. It's a pity we have to meet under such circumstances. So how many of you are there, you know, you and your friends up in the pines?"

The bandit coughed, and a trickle of blood ran down his chin.

"How many, Gunther?" said Gonzalo. "It was a nasty thing that you and your friends were trying to do. After all, what did we do to you or anyone else for that matter? Tell us what we need to know, and you can leave this world with a clear conscience, Gunther. So how many?"

"Three."

"You and two others?"

"Y-yes ... w-water."

Gonzalo gave him another drink.

"Why did you try to steal those saddlebags?"

The bandit coughed and spit up some more blood.

"Gunther, my friend," said Gonzalo, "why the saddlebags?"

"Karl ... he told me ... cold ... feel ... cold."

"Who's Karl? Is that your leader?"

"Leader ... yes ... cold."

"What is Karl's last name, Gunther?"

"Karl ... Karl ... cold."

The bandit shivered once, and then he lay still. Gonzalo put his finger to the bandit's neck. There was no pulse.

"He's gone," he said.

“We’ll have to bury him,” said Sebastian. “We can’t very well leave a body to rot in the forest. He may be a criminal, but he is still a human being, made in the image of the Lord. And then we’ll have to check out those pines to see if his friends are still waiting in ambush.”

“They’re gone for now, I’m pretty sure of it. But we’ll still have to be extra careful the rest of the way. They may lay a trap for us anywhere on the road. It’s a pity that old Gunther didn’t tell us much before he departed for a better world.”

“Well, he did tell us something,” said Sebastian. “He told us that there are two more of them and that one of them is named Karl.”

Gonzalo grimaced. “Not much to go on.”

“I wonder why he wanted my saddlebags.”

“What’s in those saddlebags, Don Sebastian?”

“Not much. Do you think they waylaid us for my saddlebags?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. If they heard there was something of value in it.”

“It would have to be something of great value,” said Sebastian, “to have three bandits lay an ambush and shoot at us.”

“So what’s in the saddlebags?”

Sebastian shrugged. “Some clothing. My *tefillin*. A siddur, you know, a Jewish prayer book. Not much else. Nothing of any real value to a bandit.”

“Let’s take a look,” said Gonzalo.

They emptied the saddlebags and spread its contents on the ground.

“What’s this?” said Gonzalo as he pulled an envelope out of a folded shirt. The heavy paper of the envelope was richly grained. It was not sealed.

“It’s our safe passage. The one King Jan Sobieski sent to me before we left Vienna. I mentioned it to you.”

“You did, but I’ve never seen it. What does it say?”

Sebastian pulled a single sheet of paper from the envelope and unfolded it. The royal seal of Poland was stamped at the top of the sheet.

“Here, I’ll read it to you,” said Sebastian. “It goes as follows, ‘This safe passage, issued on the authority of the Holy Father in Rome, as represented by Cardinal Pentucci, the papal legate, and on the authority of the Crown of Poland, as represented by us, is for the protection of Don Sebastian Dominguez, all members of his family and all his attendants and agents. He and they are to be given safe passage and extended every courtesy and consideration at all times. He and they are under our protection, and we take full responsibility for their safety and welfare. This safe passage also bears testimony to their having received full pardon and amnesty for any and all ecclesiastical and secular charges that have been levied against them in all the domains of Christendom. Signed, Jan Sobieski, King of Poland.’ That’s the whole thing.”

“There’s not much a bandit could do with that piece of paper,” said Gonzalo, “unless he changed his name to Sebastian Dominguez.”

“I suppose not. But that paper is extremely valuable to us. What if they tried to steal the letter because they didn’t want us to have it?”

Gonzalo scratched his chin. “So you think this whole ambush was just to distract us so that they could steal the letter? Who would want to do such a thing?”

“The same someone who betrayed me to the authorities in Vienna as a fugitive from the Inquisition. Someone wants to harm me, and I don’t know who it is. He failed in Vienna, thanks to Rabbi Strasbourg’s intervention with the King of Poland, so now he is trying to steal my safe passage and strip me of my protection.”

“But why steal the safe passage?” said Gonzalo. “Why not just shoot us both to death? They could have done it.”

“Maybe this mysterious someone just wants to harm me. Maybe he doesn’t want to go so far as to kill me dead.”

“You think he doesn’t want to kill you, this mysterious someone? Don Sebastian, if the King of Poland hadn’t come to your rescue at the last moment in Vienna, you would have been on your way back to Madrid for a rendezvous with a stake and a pile of burning firewood. The way I see it, that is serious killing.”

Sebastian shook his head. “You’re asking a good question, Gonzalo. I don’t know the answer.”