

THE CRIMSON CORRIDOR • 1

IT WAS DARK IN THE CORRIDOR, so dark that Sebastian Dominguez could not see where it began and where it ended. He tapped on the walls to guide himself forward, placing one foot gingerly before the other.

The walls narrowed as he groped through the darkness. As the space pressed in around him, Sebastian felt panic rise in his throat. He stopped and drew a deep breath to calm himself; then he moved forward again. The air in the corridor became warm, dank, and stale, and the ground turned to a soft muddiness that squished under the soles of his shoes. Sebastian had the sensation that tiny feet were scampering across his shoes, but he could not be sure if they were real or imagined. His heart pounded against his ribs, and a shiver ran up his spine and across his shoulders.

A flash of eerie crimson light suddenly illuminated the corridor, and Sebastian saw that it stretched ahead in a straight line as far as the eye could see until the sheer distance narrowed it to a single glowing pinpoint. He turned to look behind him and saw that the corridor stretched in a straight line without end in that direction as well. He looked around for the source of the spectral light that enfolded him, but he could not find it. There were no lamps or torches anywhere, just the smooth and bare walls of the unending corridor. Where was he? What was he doing here? Where was this cor-

ridor leading him? He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, listening intently for the slightest sound that might give him a clue to his whereabouts.

That was when he heard it. It began as a tiny sound, an almost inaudible disturbance of the air. As he listened, it grew rapidly until it assaulted him with such intensity that he had to cover his ears with his hands. But the sound was unstoppable. Sebastian pulled his jacket over his head and wrapped his arms around his ears, but it was futile. It was one long continuous shrieking note that pushed through his hands and ears and penetrated the inner recesses of his brain. Sebastian recognized the sound. It was a human scream, a cry of pain.

“Who are you?” Sebastian shouted into the crimson glow. “What do you want from me? Come out and show yourself. Who are you?”

The scream faded slowly away until perfect silence returned to the corridor. Then the crimson light faded away as well. The walls and ceiling of the corridor dissolved. The sun shone gently in a bright blue sky, and a mild breeze ruffled his sleeves and caressed his face.

Sebastian found himself on a flagstone path in a lush garden. The grass was a dark green, and all around were luxurious beds of flowers in just about every color imaginable. Slender pines and stone benches lined the path at intervals, the pungent scent of pine tar blending with the delicate floral fragrances. From either side of him, the dainty sounds of birdsong emanated from thick stands of elms and sycamores. Beyond the trees, shadowy interiors boded menace and danger, but in the garden there was only serene beauty.

The garden also stretched out into the distance, ahead and behind, seemingly without end, but the pathway was not a straight line. It meandered through the garden and eventually disappeared around a curve.

Sebastian was as puzzled by the garden as he had been by the crimson corridor, but he did not find it disturbing. He sat down on a bench, closed his eyes, and turned his face to the warm rays of the sun. His eyelids grew heavy as a pleasant lassitude came over him.

“Do you think it’s so easy, Senhor Dominguez?” said a quivery voice.

Sebastian opened his eyes and sat up straight. A very short old woman stood on the path. Her face was so deeply furrowed with age wrinkles that her obsidian eyes almost disappeared into the folds of her cheeks. A long livid scar ran down her left cheek from her eye to the edge of her mouth. The old woman was dressed entirely in severe black except for a white cap on her head and a white apron. She held a heavy walking stick in both of her hands and leaned on it so that she seemed even shorter than she really was.

“I beg your pardon, senhora,” said Sebastian. He stood up. “I must have dozed off, because I didn’t hear you approach. Would you like to sit down on the bench?”

“I’ve sat enough in my life,” said the old woman.

“Then can I help you in some other way?”

“You can answer my question.”

“I beg your pardon again, senhora. I am not sure I heard your question.”

“I asked you if you thought it was so easy,” said the old woman.

“I don’t understand. What is so easy?”

“To close your eyes and pretend you don’t hear.”

“I beg your pardon, senhora,” said Sebastian. “I hear you, and I hear the birds singing. Nothing else.”

The old woman lifted a gnarled hand from her walking stick and shook a crooked finger at him. “Listen closely, young man. Open your ears, and listen closely.”

Sebastian closed his eyes and strained to hear.

“Yes, senhora,” he said. “I hear something. I believe I can hear the whisper of the wind in the branches of the trees.”

The old woman pounded her cane on the flagstones and shook her head.

“You’re not listening, young man,” she said testily. “Listen harder.”

“But I don’t know what you want me to hear.”

“Listen harder!”

Then Sebastian heard it. It was the same keening wail he had heard earlier in the crimson corridor. It was coming from the deep woods behind the garden, and as he listened, it grew louder and stronger until it drowned out the sounds of the birds and washed away the brilliant colors of the garden in a tidal wave of pain.

Sebastian pressed his hands over his ears and contorted his body against the onslaught of sound, but nothing helped. It was as if his brain was being pierced.

And then it was gone, and stillness returned to the garden. Once again, he could hear the singing of the birds and the whisper of the wind.

The old woman was still in exactly the same place where she had been all along. She was staring at him intently.

“So you heard it,” she said. “It’s there. You cannot shut your ears to it.”

“I heard it, senhora,” said Sebastian. “I heard it. What does it mean?”

The old woman banged her cane on the flagstones again. “What does it mean? You can ask me such a question? You know what it means. You know perfectly well.”

“I don’t, senhora. Tell me what it means.”

“You know what it means, young man.”

“Who are you, senhora? What are you doing here? What am I doing here?”

The old woman threw back her head and let loose with a

long cackling laugh. She laughed and laughed until her entire body shook and the sounds reverberated from every corner of the garden.

This is a dream, thought Sebastian. It's just a bad dream, a nightmare. I've had enough of this. I want this dream to end. It's time to wake up.

He looked up and saw that the old woman was fading away. Her black garments turned to ever lightening shades of gray, and her furrowed face became so translucent that he could see the outlines of the trees emerging behind her obsidian eyes. As she faded into mist, her laughter faded as well until both the old woman and her laughter disappeared together in a single instant.

As soon as the old woman vanished, the garden dissolved as well, and Sebastian found himself in a hillside meadow. He knew that meadow well. It was in the hills above Madrid, not far from the Dominguez estate. He had ridden across it many times with his father when he was a young boy.

Is this where my dream has taken me? he wondered. Back to my childhood home? Well, it certainly brings back pleasant memories. This is a much better dream than the one I was in before.

As Sebastian strolled across the grassy meadow, he was drawn into his surroundings, and the dream became a reality in his mind. Once again, he was a young prince without a care in the world. Except for the awesome secret his father had just revealed to him and his siblings — that his was a family of secret Jews. The thought was frightening, but at the same time, it was deliciously thrilling. It was an adventure fraught with drama and danger, an adventure more exotic and exciting than anything he had ever experienced.

In the distance, he heard the thunder of hooves. A large body of horsemen was approaching, and they were coming fast. Should he be concerned? Did they pose a danger to him?

He did not know. Better to be careful until he could identify the riders. He slipped into the cover of a large willow tree beside a narrow river and sat down on the ground.

A moment later, the branches parted, and a man joined him.

“Sebastian, is it you?” said the man.

Sebastian sprang to his feet. “Father! Is it really you?”

Don Pedro and Sebastian embraced for a few long moments, then they sat down together and leaned against the trunk of the tree.

Sebastian studied his father’s face in the dim light that filtered through the willow’s drooping branches.

“You look older, Father,” he said. “Your hair has turned gray and —”

Don Pedro put his finger to his lips and signaled for silence. “The evil ones are approaching,” he whispered.

The sound of hooves grew louder and louder, and as they watched through the branches, riders suddenly materialized on the meadow. The riders wore the colorful uniforms of the Spanish cavalry, but their faces were completely covered by black masks. Their mounts were all large, gray, and translucent, like clouds in the form of horses. They rode across the meadow, and then they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. The sound of their hoofbeats lingered over the grass, and then stillness returned to the meadow.

“I think it’s safe to come out now, Father,” said Sebastian. “Whoever or whatever those creatures were, they’re gone.”

“No, let’s stay right where we are,” said Don Pedro. “We can talk here without any worries.”

“What’s happening, Father? Who were those riders? Are they searching for you? Are you in danger?”

“I’m not concerned for myself. They can’t touch me any more. I’m concerned about my family. I’m concerned about you. I want you to have the life you deserve, the kind of life I could have lived if I had torn myself away from Spain a little

earlier. I want you to live as an inspired Jew, Sebastian. That is my goal and my desire. I sacrificed for it.”

“I understand, Father.”

“These days, I know very little about what goes on with my family. Where do you live now, my son?”

“We live in Amsterdam.”

“How is your mother, my dear and valiant wife?”

“She is doing well.”

“And Carolina?”

“She is married and living in Hamburg. She has a little boy.”

“Really? How wonderful!”

“Tell me about her husband and her son.”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “Her husband is a fine young man from an excellent family. His name is Uriel Pereira. Their little boy is named Akiva. In your honor.”

“I am pleased. Pleased and honored. Akiva is indeed my name. I’ve left Pedro far behind. And what is your Hebrew name, Sebastian?”

“My name is Shimon.”

“Also a good name.”

“I’m going to America, Father.”

“Oh, really? Why do you want to go to America? It’s a wild, uncivilized country. Why can’t you stay in Amsterdam?”

“I’ve made some mistakes, Father. I’ve brought dishonor on myself and the family.”

“So you are running away, Sebastian?”

“No, it is only for a while. I intend to come back when I can make restitution for all the financial losses I’ve caused.”

“So you’re going to America to make your fortune.”

Sebastian shrugged. “I suppose.”

“Why can’t you make your fortune in Europe?”

“Because I cannot face the people here until I am ready to restore my honor and the honor of my family name.”

“I see. Yes, I understand. It is a matter of honor.”

“Yes.”

“Then you must do as you see fit. Do you know anyone in America?”

“No.”

“Are you ready to be all alone?”

“I am. I mean, I was. But Amos Strasbourg says he’s coming with me.”

“Who is Amos Strasbourg? Is he related to Rabbi Shlomo Strasbourg?”

“He is a cousin to Rabbi Strasbourg.”

“And he is your friend?”

“Yes, we are good friends. He has been there for me when I needed help, but sometimes, I feel that I don’t really know him. He can fall into long silences and dark moods, and when these things happen, I feel as if he is very far away from me, almost as if he were on the other side of the ocean. I know that he suffered a tragedy. His wife died in childbirth. But he never talks about it. I’ve tried to broach the subject a few times, but he just ignores my hints. He never talks about himself, but he is generous and loyal, a really good friend.”

“Why is he going with you to America? Is he having trouble in Amsterdam?”

“You know something, Father, I am very grateful to him for coming with me, but I don’t really understand why he is doing it.”

“There must —” Don Pedro stopped in mid-sentence and stared at his son.

Sebastian had suddenly gone rigid. His shoulders were hunched, and his hands were pressed to his ears.

“What the matter, Sebastian? Why are you sitting like that?”

Sebastian did not reply. He only closed his eyes more tightly.

“Sebastian! What’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t stand it,” Sebastian replied through clenched teeth.

“You can’t stand what?”

“The scream.”

“What scream?” said Don Pedro.

“Don’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“The scream.”

“What scream?”

“The scream, Father. That awful scream. It’s so loud. How is it possible that you don’t hear it?”

“What kind of a scream is it, Sebastian?”

“It’s a human scream.”

“Is it a scream of fear?”

“No, it’s not fear.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s pain, that’s what it is. It’s a scream of pain. Do you hear it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“But it’s so loud. It’s everywhere, all around us. How can you not hear it?”

Don Pedro looked closely at his son. “I don’t hear anything, Sebastian. But if you hear it, you have to do something about it.”

“What should I do?”

“I can’t tell you what to do. The scream is coming from inside your head. It’s something you can sense even though you don’t actually hear it.”

“So what should I do?”

“You’re a good man. You’ll know what to do when the time comes.”

Don Pedro stood up and parted the branches of the willow. He looked around and then stepped out into the open.

Sebastian shook his head as if to clear it and stepped out as well.

“Do you still hear the scream, my son?” said Don Pedro.

“A little bit, but it’s getting fainter. Where are you going, Father?”

“I have to go. I have to return to my place.”

“But why can’t you stay a little while longer?” said Sebastian. The sound of the scream was completely gone. “I’ve missed you. Can’t we just stay here for a while and talk?”

“I’m sorry,” said Don Pedro. “It’s time for me to go. Be well, my son.”

This is my dream, thought Sebastian. What happens is up to me, and if I want my father to stay, I can make him stay longer.

He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated for a few moments. But when he opened his eyes, Don Pedro was gone, and he found himself back in the flower garden. The old woman in black was leaning on her walking stick and watching him intently.

“So you’re back, Senhor Dominguez,” she said. “What did your father say?”

“About what?”

“About the scream.”

“He told me to do something about it.”

The old woman nodded grimly and shook her gnarled finger at him.

“Listen to your father, young man,” she said. “When you hear the scream, do something about it.”

Sebastian opened his mouth to ask her a question, but before he could say anything, she faded slowly away. Then the trees and the flowers and the entire garden faded away, and he found himself back in the endless crimson corridor. He looked around for a door, a window, or any other means of egress, but the corridor stretched out endlessly in both directions.

And then he heard it again. The scream was back. At first, it was just the faintest of whimpers, but within moments, it reached a deafening crescendo that assaulted him like a tidal wave of sound.

Sebastian's eyes flew open, and he sat up in bed, his face bathed in a cold sweat. His bedroom was dark and silent, but the echoes of the scream still reverberated in his ears.