

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 8

Disappearance

Usually Teja and I breakfasted together on the windowed balcony overlooking the valley. (That is, I breakfasted, and we talked. No matter how early I rose, she had always been up and eaten before me, or else had just risen and wasn't hungry.) So it was strange when she did not appear one morning. I asked Manton about it when he brought in my soma.

"She probably went for a walk early this morning," he said imperturbably. "The master used to spend entire days out walking in the hills."

It was in fact a beautiful day for a walk: sunny and warm, though the first clouds of the impending monsoon were gathering over the plain to the east and south. I was disappointed that she hadn't waited to invite me along. I spent the morning out on the lawn, playing Duvalye's guitar that Teja had given me. It was a fine old instrument, if a bit worn around the soundhole and frets, and had a lovely mellow sound.

I lunched, then dined, without a sign of Teja. It didn't seem like her, though it may have been Duvalye's habit, to disappear all day without a word to anyone. I wondered if I should look in on Peter, but somehow didn't want to. That still, white figure, perfectly rigid in his bed for several morens now, gave me the creeps.

I lay awake late into the night, straining to hear the sound of a door opening and closing. But I heard nothing, and the peaceful silence of the house seemed oppressive.

I bounded out of bed just after dawn the next morning, hoping that Teja would appear at breakfast with some reasonable explanation of where she had been. Even without an explanation, I'd have been happy to see her. But she was not there, and even Manton looked faintly concerned.

"Is there any place nearby - an inn, someone's house - where she might have stayed the night?" I asked hopefully. The fear was beginning to grow in my mind that she had been recognized and captured by someone from Stanets.

"There is a village two hours' ride from here," said Manton. "Perhaps I should go and make an inquiry?" He looked at me hopefully, plainly expecting orders of some sort.

"Um, yes, that sounds wise. Unless you want me to go."

"No, it would be better for me to go, sir. They know me."

"But do they know Teja?"

"No, she did not wish to risk being recognized and reported to the court at Stanets; her hair is always remarked upon. But if they have seen her they will certainly remember."

Mrs. Manton came out of the kitchen to clear the breakfast dishes while Manton rode off to the village. He returned sooner than I expected, at the gallop, his pony completely lathered. I was on the lawn again, playing the guitar to keep my mind off my worry. Manton thundered through the gate, rode practically up to my chair, and flung himself off the trembling pony.

"Oh, sir, sir, it's terrible! They plan to kill her!"

"Who? The villagers? Why?"

"No, some young men came from Stanets in the night and found her with a man of the village. They took her away bound with ropes, saying she was a demon. The villagers don't know where they went."

"They said she was a demon? Because she was making love to a man?"

"The Meshvid have always called her that, because of her hair. They are very superstitious. And they want to kill her."

"And no one knows where they took her?" He shook his head. I stood there, stunned, trying to force my brain to work. What to do? Go to the village and try to track them? And even if I found them, then what? I couldn't hope to fight a gang of Meshvid, even if Teja was still alive to fight for. No, no, don't think about that. Find her first.

"Sir," said Manton, "I think we should wake Master Peter."

"Peter? What good would *he* be?"

"He, er, knows her. There is a bond of kinship between them. He may be able to sense where she is."

That again. But Teja had known when Peter was in trouble. Perhaps the bond worked in the other direction as well.

"Very well, let's wake him."

When we went into the room, he had changed position. Instead of lying on his back, stiff as a board, he was on his side, curled up tight as if to protect his vitals. gingerly I touched him on the shoulder.

"Peter? Peter? Please wake up." A tremor went through him, nothing more. I shook him gently, then hard. "Wake up! We need your help." His body relaxed a little. He turned onto his back, and his eyes opened. They were a cold, cloudy grey. He turned his head and looked at me, then at Manton standing behind my shoulder. There was some

meaning in the look they exchanged, but I could not fathom it. He refocused on me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“True Seaborn, a friend of Teja’s. I helped her to get you out of Ivaldi. When you were...” I faltered.

“Yes,” he said expressionlessly. “Thank you for your help. Why did you wake me?”

“It’s Teja. She was in the village two nights ago, and was captured by a gang of young men from Stanets, who said they meant to kill her.”

He flinched. “I know. I felt it. I thought it was a dream.” He struggled up onto one elbow.

“Do you know where she is?” I asked.

“No. I may be able to find her. But I’m very weak. I will need some time to recover. Manton can bring me nourishment.” He gave another meaning look beyond my shoulder. “Please leave me for now. I will be up as soon as I can and we will make plans.”

It took him most of the day, during which I paced, snarling, through the corridors of the house.

“What’s taking him so long? What if they kill her?” I raged at Manton when he brought my dinner.

“She is not dead. Master Peter knows it. You must be a bit patient; after all, he has been unconscious for nearly a month, and has not eaten in that time.”

At which any normal man would be dead, I thought to myself.

We finally left that evening: me, Peter, and three horses. Peter rode alone this time instead of being carried, and now it was Teja who needed aid. Also, we had traded our Ivaldin “scrubs” for three mountain-bred ponies, shorter and shaggier and apparently much stronger. My pony’s saddlebags were stuffed (by Manton) with food, water, and a bedroll. Peter’s seemed to be empty.

We rode all that night in silence; Peter’s head turned constantly, as if seeking an elusive melody that only he could hear. We rode past dawn; the ponies were stumbling tired and I was nodding over my mount’s neck when Peter finally allowed us to halt in a thicket. He woke me in the late afternoon and we went on, Peter urging the horses harder, apparently sensing that we were near our goal. The sun was just rising the following morning when we found ourselves at the foot of a crumbling stone tower.