

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 7

Reunion

It was about an hour after a cold, foggy dawn that we entered a narrow gorge, on a path just wide enough for us to remain mounted. Tufts of brown grass growing out of sheer rock walls brushed our knees on either side.

We rounded a sharp bend and found our way barred by six men armed with cudgels and rough pikes.

The headman pushed past us to the front of our small cavalcade and addressed the guards.

“These,” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder at us, “want to see Bronno. Say they’ve business with a guest of his.”

The leader of the group scowled up at Teja.

“And who would you be looking for?” he asked.

“We have come to see the prince,” she responded calmly.

“Why would a prince be here, huddling in a shepherd’s hut?” he asked.

“Why else would a shepherd’s hut be guarded by armed men?” she countered.

“Who are you?”

“It would not suit the prince’s best interests for our identities to be known at this time.”

“No hooded strangers enter here,” said the guard, threatening us with his pike.

Teja gestured to me. “Seaborn, the ring.”

I took from around my neck the soft leather bag on a cord which held Teja’s signet ring. She handed it to the guard, saying, “Give this to the prince, if he is here, and tell him that the owner of this item is here with friends. Do not open it,” she stopped the guard in mid-action. “It is for him alone to see.”

Reluctantly, the guard leader told one of his men to take the bag inside. We stood in silence, our horses shifting and champing. Finally the sixth guard returned.

“They’re to go inside.”

Two bends further on, the path opened out to a small bowl of a valley with a stream running through it. Bronno's home stood there, a large building of seasoned old wood, two stories high, steep-roofed against the heavy snows of winter. Entering the huge double doors, we found ourselves in a dirt-floored hall that ran the length of the building. Two flights of wooden stairs rose to left and right of the door, each leading to a gallery from which the upper rooms could be reached. At the far end, opposite the door, was a large fireplace, and a group of people stood silhouetted before it. As my eyes adjusted to the ruddy light, I recognized Ashkvan, Toshiko, and others of the group with whom I had tried to flee Stanets.

I threw back my hood as we approached.

"True Seaborn," said Ashkvan gravely, "I am glad to see that you have escaped Vanaksha's clutches."

"It was not easy, your Highness, but I had help." I nodded at Teja's cloaked and hooded form. "But we should perhaps speak in privacy."

"Very well." Ashkvan led us upstairs, to a room directly above where we'd just been standing, also with a fireplace. Toshiko followed, and I did not care for the fact that his hand never left his sword hilt.

The door closed behind us.

"We are private now," said Ashkvan. "As you know, Seaborn, Toshiko is in my confidence." I nodded, and glanced at Teja. She read my look and drew back her hood, Peter following suit. Ashkvan sucked in his breath.

"Seaborn told me you were alive, but I did not know whether to believe it." He crossed the space between them in two large strides and held her shoulders, his face alive with pleasure. "Teja, how good it is to see you again." He folded her into a hug, and she hugged him back, timidly, as if afraid he might break.

Then the prince looked at Peter, surprised.

"We have met before," he said.

Peter nodded. "Duvalye introduced us. I came with him once to Stanets."

"That was nearly fifteen years ago," said Ashkvan wonderingly. "You seem not to have aged a bit."

Peter shrugged it off. "As you say, it was long ago, and memory plays tricks. I assure you that these recent years have aged me."

"And you, Teja," Ashkvan continued. "You look no older than when you... left us."

“Well, I am still very young,” she laughed. “You yourself are only thirty, my brother.”

“Seaborn told me you escaped Stanets with the help of Duvalye. I did not have time to ask him: where is Duvalye now?”

“He died.”

“Died? But he was not old. How did it happen?”

“It was an accident. I do not wish to talk about it, Ashk.”

“But he did help you to escape? How? Why?”

“He was my lover.”

Ashkvan jerked as if she had struck him.

“I do not wish to know about that,” he murmured. Teja opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. Then she opened it again.

“We loved each other, Ashkvan,” she said with determination, “and he gave me the greatest gift he could, my freedom. Then he died because of me. You can content yourself that, by Meshvid standards, he has paid for his crime.”

Ashkvan stared at the floor. “I would not have wished him punished. He did so much for me, and had much wisdom. What he chose to do with you he must have had good reason to do.”

There was a long silence. Finally Teja said, “It was from Duvalye’s diaries that I learned recently the scope of your troubles with the king and Vanaksha. Why did you never tell me?”

“I could not have talked to you about it. It is not right for a man to discuss such things with a woman. Bad enough that I was discussing court affairs with a foreigner.”

Teja shook her head in exasperation. “Always the perfect Meshvid ram, even without the horns. That noble demeanor of yours used to impress me.”

Ashkvan stared at her.

“Well, I am here to offer you help,” she continued acidly, “if you’re not too proud to take it. You need arms and horses, and your shepherds need training to fight. I can provide these things. I have a fortune.”

“How do you have a fortune?”

“I was Duvalye’s sole heir, and he was a wealthy man in Ivaldi.”

“And why should you use it to help me?”

“Because Duvalye believed, and I agree with him, that you would be a far better king than Vanaksha. He would have wanted to help you. Consider it a legacy from him.”

This seemed to make the idea more palatable to Ashkvan.

“Very well. I thank you, and Duvalye’s spirit, wherever it may be.”

“It resides within you,” said Teja gently. “That’s why I am doing this.” After a pause she added, “I do have a price, however.”

“Which is?”

“I will fight beside you, and kill Tash-ur-Zarul.”

“You hate him that much for having wanted to marry you?”

“More than that. He and a gang of Vanaksha’s friends recently tried to kill me. True and Peter saved me.”

“How did Tash even know you were alive? We had all long since given you up for dead.”

“He was informed by a crazy old man, who fancied himself a demon-killer, that I was alive, and a demon, and responsible for his piebald skin. The old man persuaded Tash that to kill me was the only way to cure the disease. And Tash was happy to do it. Tash also tortured and injured True Seaborn when they captured him . Seaborn is my friend, and I owe him my life.”

Ashkvan nodded slowly. “Very well, you have the right to cry vendetta. But you should leave the killing to me.”

“No. I fight my own battle.”

“Can you?”

“Yes. Duvalye taught me.”

“Demonstrate.”

“I will not. Duvalye also taught me never to play at killing.” They glared at each other.

“This is the price of your aid, then?” Ashkvan finally asked.

“Not really. I will give you the horses and arms, *and* I will fight and kill Tash, no matter what you say. But I would prefer to have your consent so that you may best profit by what I offer.”

Ashkvan shook his head with a reluctant grin. “Teja, you haven’t changed a bit. Never asking, always demanding. And the world goes along with your most outrageous notions.”

“And why should it not?”

Ashkvan tried another tack. “I cannot ask my men to fight alongside a woman. It’s against all tradition and reason, no matter how well you fight.”

“They need not know I am a woman. I will be cloaked and hooded, and they will simply think me another of your foreigners. Anyway, they need not see me at all until battle is joined. I will ride in from nowhere, kill Tash, and ride out again.”

“I hardly think it would be that simple. War is not so clean and neat.”

Teja shrugged. “I will manage.”

Ashkvan sighed. “Very well. I should know, better than most, that no one ever succeeded for long in making you do something you didn’t want to, or stopping you doing something you intended to. Do as you please. Just try not to make things more difficult for me than they are already. Now,” said Ashkvan turning his attention to all of us, “will you have some breakfast?”

“Peter and I are not hungry, said Teja, “but perhaps Seaborn...?” I nodded vigorously. I had had nothing but increasingly stale bread and cheese for five days.

Peter and Teja remained in the private upstairs room while I followed Ashkvan and Toshiko down to the main hall. Two long tables were placed on either side of the fireplace, where women were stirring, heating, lifting, and serving. Ashkvan sat at the end of one long bench, and Toshiko slid in beside him. After a moment’s hesitation, I sat beside Toshiko.

A gray-bearded man sat at the head of the table in a high-backed chair. Ashkvan introduced him to me as Bronno, sheep-lord of this district and our host. Bornno gave me a grave nod, but few words. He and Ashkvan fell to discussing Ashkvan’s certain and possible supporters, a welter of people and place names which meant nothing to me.

I dedicated my attention instead to the steaming brown porridge that was place in front of me. On its own it didn’t taste of much, but when I added butter, sweet syrup, preserved fruit, and a pinch of salt, it became a feast. I was replete after one bowlful, but accepted another out of greed.

Toshiko ate sparingly, adding only a little salt to his porridge. He was even more sparing with words in my direction, though his attention to

Ashkvan and Bronno's conversation also seemed scant. I waited in vain for the apology I thought I was due, and finally, halfway through my second bowl of porridge, I took the initiative myself. There was no way to put it but baldly.

"Why did you shoot my horse, back there on the path from Stanets?"

Toshiko turned towards me, neither slowly nor quickly, but just deliberately enough to let me wonder if I was being insulted.

"I had to stop Vanaksha's men from catching up. Your horse was already injured and you were no longer on it. It was the obvious action."

"But then you just left me there to be captured!"

"Had I stayed to help you, we might both have been captured. My duty was to help Ashkvan to safety."

From his point of view, his logic was irrefutable. But I couldn't let it go. I remembered all too clearly the piercing horror of knowing that he and the others were abandoning me to the enemy.

"So you rode off without a backward glance," I said bitterly. Toshiko said nothing, merely looking at me impassively.

Someday, I thought to myself, someday I'll see that self-control of yours crack

Ashkvan had interrupted his conversation with Bronno to listen to us. He now reached around Toshiko and patted me awkwardly on the back.

"It was not an easy decision," he said to me. "I was dismayed to find you missing when we gathered at Nilo's Point. But, had we gone back for you, we would have lost everything."

I sat, glowering.

"It was a warrior's decision," added Ashkvan with an ironic smile. "I could not have made it, not so quickly, let alone acted on it. Toshiko comes from a race of true warriors."

"And now," said Ashkvan loudly, stepping out from the bench and walking to the center of the hall before the fireplace, "I have an announcement to make."

There was a stir as those in the center row of benches turned to face him. Some began to stand up in respect for their ruler, but Ashkvan waved them to sit again. Men and women of the household stood against the walls expectantly. I glanced up, and saw Teja and Peter standing in the shadows up the gallery.

Ashkvan stood with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking a little on his feet like a child called to recite before its elders. But his words and manner of speaking were worthy of any king.

“You all know that I have long believed the division between nobles and peasants to be false and wrong. Siggí and Agar,” he nodded at two of his noble young friends who had fled with him from Stanets, “have heard me speak to the King’s Council on this subject, and many at court knew that I intended to reform this system as soon as I took the throne. That is why so many were ready to join Vanaksha in opposing me; perhaps I should have been less vocal in my opinions,” he said ruefully. A few of the men smiled.

“All of us here know,” Ashkvan continued, “that there will be a battle for the throne. Wars of succession are nothing new in the history of Meshvir. But we also know that this will be different from all such previous fights. For one thing, the shepherds have never before taken part unless forced to fight by their lords. They had no real interest in the choice between one king or another - their own lives would be no different under either.” He paused for breath.

“When I left Stanets, I came straight to Bronno, with his prior consent; we had known that the time was coming when I would be forced to flee for my life, and must prepare to fight for my crown. Bronno and I had already discussed what this fight would mean.”

“If I win back the throne,” he said slowly, “things will change in Meshvir. The nobles will no longer own the land that the peasants and shepherds grow and pasture on. We will no longer have the right to tax others to support our lazy, useless lives at court. We will no longer be able to take arms against you - you will be armed yourselves, and will have the right to defend yourselves from bandits of any rank.”

There were perhaps sixty men in the hall now, including the twenty from Stanets. All erupted into cheers and cries of “Long live the king!” After a moment Ashkvan held up his hand for silence.

When the tumult calmed he said, “I am promising an end to the barriers between noble and commoner. I now give you a sign of that promise. I have pledged to marry Bronnwen, daughter of Bronno.” More, louder cheers as a girl in an embroidered white dress and long, brown braids was led out by Bronno. She stared at the floor and blushed as Ashkvan took her hand and placed on her finger a signet ring; it looked suspiciously like the one he had just had back from Teja.

Gulana stood in the background, near the kitchen door. Her face was veiled, except the eyes, so I could not see her expression, but she nodded

once, decisively, as Ashkvan bent to kiss the girl on the cheek.

Ashkvan turned the girl gently to face us, though she still kept her gaze fixed on the floor. He held her hand as he said, "I will not marry her now. If the worst should befall, it would not be right to leave her so young a widow. But it will not. With your help, I will win back my throne, and Bronnwen shall be my queen and mother of my heir."

At this the girl blushed even more fiercely. Her own mother led her to Gulana, who embraced her and kissed her cheeks, and spoke to her (I suppose) kindly - in the uproar of praise, congratulations, and assurances of support, the soft voices of the women had no chance of being heard.

I looked up at the gallery, where Peter and Teja were just turning to go back into the room. Teja's glance met mine, and she gave me a sharp nod, very like Gulana's.

I was suddenly very tired, and went upstairs to join Teja and Peter. After they had checked the bandages on my ribs and hand (both healing as well as could be expected), I rolled myself up in thick sheepskins and went blissfully to sleep in a corner. There was a bed in the room, but I didn't know whose it was, and didn't want to trespass. Peter and Teja's murmuring voices were by now a familiar and comforting accompaniment to my dreams.

The entrance of Ashkvan, Bronno, and Toshiko some time later woke me. I pulled a fold of sheepskin over my head, hoping to sleep through the meeting that was evidently being called to order, but Teja came over and nudged me with a foot.

"I know you're awake," she said softly. "You'd best get up; this concerns you, too."

I groaned, rolled over, and got to my feet. They all looked at me expectantly.

"Excuse me a minute," I mumbled. I went downstairs and outside to the communal outhouse (easily located by its odor). Afterwards I splashed my face in the icy stream. It was early afternoon. The fog had cleared, but the sky was still overcast. My head felt equally gray and cloudy. A cup of soma would have been welcome, I thought wistfully, but that amenity of Ivaldin civilization had not yet been taken up by the Meshvid.

The meeting had started without me by the time I got upstairs again. Teja wore her hood pulled low over her eyes so that her face could only be seen from the nose down. It seemed nonetheless obvious to me that she was female - I stared longingly at those full lips - but she continued to refer to herself in the masculine form, which Bronno seemed to accept

unquestioningly. Ashkvan and Toshiko followed her lead.

“It is agreed, then,” Teja was saying, “that Peter will stay here to help train your men in fighting, while Seaborn and I go to Stanets to buy horses and weapons. Is that all right with you, Seaborn?” She turned to me. I nodded. I was afraid to say anything that might reveal too much. I calculated that it would take around fifteen days to reach Ivaldi. Fifteen nights alone with Teja.

With that prospect before me, I was ready to depart immediately. However, it was decided to postpone our departure by a couple of days, to give me time to rest and heal, in spite of my protests that I felt fine. Then the meeting was over. Ashkvan, Bronno, and Toshiko left, taking Peter with them to discuss the fighting techniques of the Meshvid and the Golden People. Teja and I were alone.

She bolted the door, then removed her cloak and hood, and unbound her hair, shaking it out over her shoulders with a sigh of relief.

“What I really need is a bath,” she said, “but that would be too much to ask here. I will have to make do till we leave.” She took a hairbrush from her saddlebag and began stroking it through the shining mass. I walked up behind her.

“May I?” I took the brush from her. Her hair was rippled from days in braids, and not really dirty. I brushed it until it all fell smooth from her crown to her waist. Then I put the brush aside.

I hugged her to me, and she sighed a little, leaning back against me. I reached around to her belt buckle and unfastened it, dropping her belt to the floor with a small clink. Her tunic loosened, and I slid my hands up under it, stroking the smooth skin of her back, sliding around to the front, gently cupping her breasts for a moment.

“Seaborn,” she said softly.

“Hmm?”

“I am willing. But I am also... hungry.”

“I know.” Surprisingly, I really *had* known. “It’s all right.”

“Are you sure this is what you want? You are not just... obliging me?” she asked.

I chuckled into the back of her neck, pressing my erection against her buttocks. “I’m sure. Very sure.”

“You are not afraid?” she insisted.

“No. I want you. All of you. Fangs included.” I nibbled the curve of her ear. “Maybe I’ll bite you back,” I joked softly.

She turned in my arms, lithe as a dolphin, and her mouth closed mine. There was an urgency in her I hadn’t felt the first time, and I don’t think it was entirely due to appetite. She pushed me down on the sheepskins, flinging our clothes around the room as we both hurried out of them. I still had my trousers on by one leg, but neither of us noticed that until afterwards. She kissed, licked, and nipped me all over, almost - but not quite - hard enough to break the skin. She rode me, leaning over my chest so that her nipples grazed mine, twining her fingers in my hair.

I thrust hard to meet her, and as I neared climax she pulled my head back so that my throat was exposed like that of a dog begging for mercy. She showed none. Her teeth sank into me, and I felt my blood spurt into her mouth.

She held her lips to my neck until I stopped trembling, then she kissed me, and I tasted my own blood. She drew her face away from mine so that I could see her stained lips, then she very deliberately licked them.

I gathered her to me with a laugh. “Trying to provoke me?” I asked.

She stretched her length on top of me, head against my shoulder.

“Are you still sure, Seaborn?” she murmured.

“Yes. Always.”

“Never say ‘always.’ It is much longer than you know.”