

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 1

Red-Headed Stranger

It was a very elegant party, painfully reminiscent of the one at which I'd met Chitra. Fortunately, she wasn't present. As I re-entered the hall after a break, I half-consciously searched for her, but my eyes fastened on another. So did all others, and no wonder. She had deep red hair, which shone like fire among the intricate, coal-black coiffures of the Ivaldin crowd. Red hair is not uncommon where I come from, but even there I had rarely seen such a deep, hot-iron red. And never in Ivaldi.

Red-heads in my country tend to have milky-white skin and clear blue eyes. But this woman's skin had a warmer tone, and when she turned towards me, I saw that her eyes were startlingly dark, almost black. She was beautiful in an indescribable way - something quite different from being merely indescribably beautiful - and though she appeared young, she had a poise that would have graced a much older woman. Men and women turned to her as to the sun. Yet her manner was ambivalent. She smiled impartially on them all, but gave no encouragement, and gradually, disappointed, they returned to their gossiping and drinking. She drifted restlessly about the hall, out to the garden and back. She scanned the crowd, but seemed to be looking for no one in particular.

Finally, appearing to have made up her mind, she singled out a handsome young man. I watched the smoothness of the maneuver in awe. She touched his arm, and it was as if lightning had struck him. Where before she had been radiant, now she was irresistible. He was obviously smitten. Yet the other guests did not seem to notice, except two or three who watched with secret, knowing smiles. Were they former lovers?

Heads close together, the redhead and her chosen man reached agreement to depart separately and meet elsewhere. Or so I surmised, for the young man made hasty farewells to his hosts and dashed out, with an all-too-obvious parting smile at her.

She, however, seemed disinterested as soon as he was out of sight. She sat in a window alcove, gazing out, and did not spare the crowd another glance. Strumming minstrelly, I approached her.

"An elegant performance, madame," I said. She looked at me, saying nothing, her fine red eyebrows arched inquiringly.

"I have long known women to be predators," I continued, "but seldom have I seen it so dramatically played out." I deepened my voice, eyes fixed on my audience of one. "The hunter circles the herd, appraising carefully. This fat doe? That helpless fawn? Ah, here is the young

buck in his prime, worthy prey indeed.” I struck a dramatic chord. “Circle again, then in for the kill. A glance, a touch, he is lost. The hapless prey lumbers willingly off to the sacrifice, and the hunter retires triumphant.” I finished with a sweeping bow.

She should have laughed. That was the expected, city-sophisticated reaction, even from one as obviously foreign as she. Yet I wasn’t surprised that she did not. Her gaze was too intent, and her reserve was not that of aloofness.

“Is the hunter to blame if the prey falls too easily?” Her voice was a husky contralto, but there was no seduction in her tone.

“Well, if only for the sake of the other hunters, you could at least make it look a bit difficult.” This was mere banter, but she stiffened and narrowed her eyes at me.

“To which hunters are you referring, exactly?” she asked sharply.

I stumbled over my tongue. “Well, ah, to other women, I suppose. It was only a metaphor, after all.” Or so I had thought. I didn’t know whether to smile disarmingly or beg forgiveness. I think I managed a hideously ingratiating grin. I felt, under her eyes, like a dog cringing away from a blow while frantically wagging its tail. Fortunately for my self-esteem, she relaxed a little, though her expression was still guarded.

“Oh, yes, other women.” She dismissed them. To whom, then, had she thought that I referred? “Let them catch their own men, or take my leavings. I do not keep them long.” The words were slick city arrogance, but the tone was near despair. What was this woman?

“And what do you do that uses them up so quickly?” I ventured.

She dropped her gaze to the rug. “Oh, what women usually do with men.”

“In your predatory fashion,” I added.

She shrugged. “We are all predators.”

I shifted tone, though I had not intended to. “And what does a man have to do,” I asked hoarsely, “To attract your attention, however fleetingly?” Startled, she looked up at me.

“Pray that you never do,” she said. She stood abruptly and walked away.

She left the party immediately, presumably to meet her new lover, and I did not see her again for some time. But I asked about her, and got confusing answers. She seemed to be what she had appeared at the party: a bored, too-wealthy young foreigner, casually taking and discarding lovers as such people do. The Ivaldin are easy-going in

such matters, and are accustomed to foreigners from less forgiving cultures running wild in the City. Nor are they averse to taking advantage of naive strangers.

Yet no one really knew this woman. She had arrived in the City several years before as the mistress of Duvalye, a wealthy recluse who had recently died. She claimed Meshvid origins, though she did not look Meshvid, and her name, Teja, was of ambiguous derivation. The Ivaldin pronounced it with a hard j, but she herself pronounced it as the Meshvid would: *Tezha*.

Duvalye had had no living relatives, so Teja was his sole inheritor. She had mourned him deeply, it was said, and for some months after his death had remained in seclusion. Only recently re-emerged into Ivaldin society, she was still reticent, verging on eccentric. The only thing everyone was sure of was that she was so skilled in the arts of love she could drive a person insane with pleasure. Her discarded lovers still sighed for her months afterward, but she never looked at them again, nor did they dare importune her. She changed partners often, though none were anxious to leave her.

I played as many parties as I could, with the Maruns and others, hoping to catch another glimpse of her. It was a change, anyway, from the painful, involuntary search for Chitra. *She* was all too easily found lately, as many parties were given in honor of her impending marriage. The perverse wits of Ivaldi seemed to consider it a piquant joke to specially invite *me* to play at these fetes.

It was several weeks later that I saw Teja again, though not on the arm of her previous lover. He had arrived earlier, and I now watched closely as they exchanged warm but reserved greetings. When I saw her begin circling the crowd, I jumped down from the musicians' platform, determined this time to catch her first.

She smiled at me, as she did at everyone.

"Oh, no," I said, as lightly as I could manage, "You don't get away from me so easily."

"What do you mean?" she asked casually, but she laid her hand on my arm, subtly steering me away from the crowd as she spoke.

"I told you before that I wanted to know how it felt to be the chosen prey of such an expert huntress."

"And I told *you*," she said sharply, "to hope that you never are." We reached an empty terrace.

"Is it so terrible? Your recent conquest looks none the worse."

"That is because he scarcely remembers."

“The others remember. Each says you’re the best he ever had.” She looked annoyed.

“I assure you, they do not remember everything.”

“And I assure *you*,” I said fervently, “that I would not forget a moment.”

“They all forget, because they must. I do not allow them to remember.” She was completely serious. I was completely confused, but kept my tone light, hoping to catch a few more clues by which to decipher her.

“They must forget because it’s so terrible?”

“No, because it is so wonderful that they would never leave me alone!” She laughed to show she was joking, but I was not sure.

“And how do you make them forget such ecstasy?”

“Ah, I cannot tell you all my secrets. I can only say that true ecstasy is more difficult to recall than pain.” She was now more successful in maintaining the socially correct self-mocking tone. I followed suit.

“Well, perhaps we could have a trial of whether I can experience your ecstasies, yet resist your inducements to forget.”

“I think not.” She was growing restless, her body tensed for flight. I was desperate.

“Well, then, how about a cup of soma? Dinner? Anything!”

She laughed, but regarded me warily. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Nothing. Everything. If I cannot be your lover, to be your friend.” It surprised me that I meant this. And she saw that I did.

“It is far more difficult to be a friend than a lover,” she said.

“But perhaps I would then be allowed to remember the pleasure of your company.”

“Yes, perhaps you would.” She thought a moment. “Very well. Come to my house tomorrow afternoon, and we will commence a friendship.” On that odd phrase, she gave me a little bow and turned away.

“I will not forget,” I whispered to her back. I’m sure she heard me.

And thus commenced my friendship with Teja. I confess I still hoped, at first, to coax my way into her fabled bed, even at the risk of forgetting whatever it was that happened there. But she grew irritated with my continual flirtatious remarks and sly references to her lovers (whom she made no effort to hide from me), and eventually I found

that I valued her friendship too much to jeopardize it. I gave up, reluctantly, my attempts at seduction, and tried not to find it perverse that as a result she grew to trust me more.