

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 2

Kanya's Story

My first few visits to Teja's house (a stupendous mansion in an old quarter of the city, surrounded by high walls and tall trees) were brief and strained. Servants brought me excellent soma and delicately-prepared small meals, but Teja never ate, which made me self-conscious about my table manners. I now saw her frequently at parties, and observed that in public she was becoming more adept at the little social games required of everyone in Ivaldin society. She had learned to flirt, to make light conversation with that ironic sophistication so peculiar to Ivaldi and so difficult for those not born to it. But at home she dropped her society manners and seemed lost, vulnerable. Our conversations were stilted and uncomfortable.

Then one day I brought my guitar and spent the afternoon entertaining her with songs and stories of my life at sea. I went all out for her. And she was delighted. Not in the sophisticated manner of the Ivaldin, always jaded and looking for something new, but like a child to whom everything is new and exciting. Reserved though she was, I had never had a more enjoyable audience.

That finally began to dismantle the wall between us. She still did not say much about herself, but once she led me on a tour of the mansion, which she referred to as "Duvalye's house." It was not as large as Chitra's, but it was still very grand for one person with a handful of servants, and stuffed with treasures from far-off lands. Teja shrugged off my compliments.

"It isn't really mine," she said, "except by unhappy accident."

Here, I thought, was my chance. "I've heard a little about that," I ventured. "Would you care to tell me more?"

Teja was silent for some time. "No," she said finally, "not today. It's a very long tale and today it would make me too sad to tell it. I will let you know when I am ready."

I didn't see Teja for several weeks after that, except by chance at parties.

"Have I offended you?" I asked when I could get her to myself for a moment.

"No," she answered, "I am preparing to tell you my tales. I will invite you soon."

The invitation came two days later, carried by one of her household runners. The day after that I went to her home for afternoon soma.

When we were seated, I with a soma pot and cup on a small, inlaid table before me, Teja asked abruptly, “Where do you want to begin?”

“Begin?”

“They tell me you are a curious fellow, so I assume you want to ask questions. Ask. I will answer.”

“Who tells you I am curious?”

“The same people who told you everything they know about me. What do they say, exactly? I have wondered.”

“That you are very mysterious.” She smiled.

“Well, then, here is your chance to clear up the mystery. But I must ask you not to share this with the gossips, or anyone. I prefer to keep my privacy as far as I can. Will you do that for me?”

“That’s what friends are for,” I said loyally.

“Yes, they tell me that’s what friends are for,” Teja said seriously.

“Now, what do you wish to know?”

“We could start at the beginning. Where are you from?”

“I am from Meshvir. But, as your gossips probably told you, I am not Meshvid.”

“They did say that. Where are your parents from, then?”

“My mother was from Ivaldi, but she was not Ivaldin.”

“This sounds more like a conundrum than a tale.”

“I said I would answer your questions; I did not promise that the answers would be simple,” she said with the barest flicker of a smile.

“Your father, then?”

“My father” - she paused dramatically - “is King Badaksha Khan of Meshvir.”

I was appropriately thunderstruck, and for a moment could only sit with my mouth open. Finally I stammered, “No, that certainly isn’t a simple answer.”

Teja laughed again. “It’s a very long tale. Do you really want to hear it all?” I nodded.

“I have all the time in the world,” I vowed.

“A dangerous turn of phrase,” she said obliquely. Then she began:

“My mother was in the harem of Badaksha Khan, king of the Meshvid, but she herself was not Meshvid. She came from Ivaldi, but she was not Ivaldin either. Her people, generations ago, came to Ivaldi from a

tiny island in the northern seas. The major feature of the island was a volcano, which my mother's ancestors worshipped as a goddess incarnate, the Terrible One, whose fiery temper had to be soothed with constant sacrifices. Obviously something went wrong in the rituals, for the volcano erupted, engulfing the island in flame and lava. The few who survived the display of divine displeasure were rescued several days later by a passing ship, which happened to be en route to Ivaldi.

Upon their arrival in Ivaldi, they had the good fortune to find a jati of fishermen who wished to change their hereditary occupation. (This is possible, if the other jatis of the guild agree, and someone can be found to take on the group's allotted work.) The Islanders took over the coastal fishing and were treated as a jati, though at first they did not assimilate well into the guild structure. They were simple tribal folk, confused by the complexities of Ivaldin society. Pale of skin and hair, they also felt conspicuous among the dark people. And they dared not forget their goddess, who, if she could destroy an entire island, could surely pursue her delinquent worshippers wherever they fled.

The Islanders' beliefs and rituals were modified when Kelessi missionaries convinced the Islander's young priestess that their goddess was the same as the Great Mother, the all-loving and all-forgiving One worshipped by the Kelessi. The Islanders began to practice less sanguinary forms of worship, and to make small concessions to the Ivaldin way of life, and a few of them even married Ivaldin. But the Islanders understood in their hearts and memories that there was a terrible aspect to the Mother, a stern parent who could rain down fire on her children if they displeased her, but who could also be a scourge to their enemies if the Islanders served her well.

The third or fourth generation of Islanders was reminded of the Mother's unsteady temperament when fire swept through a crowded compound in which ten Islander families were living. The survivors blamed the catastrophe on the Ivaldin spouses and half-Ivaldin children who had sullied the purity of Islander blood, and corrupted the Islanders with their loose ways. (This was soon after the introduction of the Kelessi method of body control, during the period of the so-called sexual revolution.) They cast out the Ivaldin strangers, and only grudgingly allowed the half-breed children of Islander mothers to stay. These and their offspring married only Islanders (if they married at all), but the taint in their blood was visible in their dark hair and eyes. Some of these impure ones left the tribe with each passing generation, until the Islanders could comfortably expect their children to be as fair-haired and pale-eyed as their ancestors had been.

Though the immediate cause of the Mother's anger was thus removed, the Islanders wondered if the Terrible One also missed the blood rituals she had been accustomed to on the island, and they hastened to

make amends. This sort of thing was frowned upon in Ivaldi, so they could not celebrate the sacrifices with the old pomp, but an unimportant member of an unimportant family would disappear, far from the Islanders' quarter of the City, and his fate would never be discovered. So the Goddess was propitiated, and apparently she was pleased, for the Islanders prospered thereafter.

Several generations after the Islanders' first arrival, when the bloodlines again ran pure and the Mother smiled on her obedient children, a young Islander girl, Narama, fell in love with Naavik, a dark Ivaldin boy. Though he was of good family, no match between them could be considered, for the Islanders knew that the Mother did not approve of them mixing with the dark ones, and the Ivaldin vaguely felt that there was something unsavory about the Islanders, though this may have been simply a reaction to their bigotry. The young lovers met in secret. It would not have been difficult to rendezvous in quarters of the City where neither of them was known.

Then Narama's parents, ignorant of the affair, arranged for her to marry a fair-haired Islander boy. Naavik's parents, who knew, sent him off to sea on a merchant ship, hoping that in time he would forget the girl. The two met, they thought for the last time, and Narama allowed herself to become pregnant. (By this time even the Islanders had accepted the Kelessi body control teachings, realizing its advantages for a population anxious to breed and grow in prosperity.)

"I may never see you again," she said, "But in this child we will be mingled, and in it I will see you every day."

"But your people will also see me - my dark skin and hair - and they will know."

"My grandfather was quite dark, and my brother has brown eyes. Throw-backs happen, so no one will be able to say for certain that this is not the child of my husband. No one but I."

Naavik went to sea, and stayed away much longer than his doting parents had expected, for he could not bear to come back to Ivaldi. Narama married. Three seasons later she bore a daughter, Kanya, whose dark eyes caused some comment, but whose fairness of hair and skin was beyond reproach.

At age five, Kanya was initiated as the Novice of the High Priestess of the Mother Goddess. "High" was a polite epithet, for there was only one priestess at a time, and one novice. Novices were discovered by augury during childhood. The Priestess was very satisfied with the choice, for *Kanya* in the ancient tongue of the Islanders meant "virgin", which the girl would remain throughout her lifelong service to the Goddess.

So Kanya's future was determined. Somewhat shy as an infant, she became a serious child, keenly aware of the divine duty which set her apart from other children. She still attended the Islander school with the others, but she no longer played with them, as most of her time was taken up in studies with the Priestess. There was much lore and ritual to be learned, the daily prayers and the monthly oblations, the charms against illness and loss, the incantations for healthy children and good business. Then there was history, the legends of the Goddess and her creation of the world, her choice of the Islanders as her special servitors, and her harsh reprisals when they failed in their appointed mission. From age six, Kanya observed the annual Great Sacrifice, and from her ninth year began learning the complex ritual of its performance.

When Kanya was fifteen, the High Priestess was an old woman, but still strong and shrewd, for her life's rigors had been of austerity and ritual rather than of childbirth and housekeeping. But the Priestess felt the weight of her years, and was glad in her choice - the Mother's choice - of a clever and dutiful girl to follow in her footsteps, who would be a woman strong enough to lead her people in the proper paths of duty.

So Narama's disgrace came as a profound shock to the Priestess, and it rocked the entire social order of the Islanders.

It happened this way: Narama, once a pale, slender, and pretty girl, had been worn by years of mother- and wife-hood into a tired and melancholy woman. She did not love her husband, though she had borne him four children, all flaxen-haired and blue-eyed. Her gaze turned most often to her dark-eyed, serious, eldest daughter, and she brooded on the love that was and might have been. But she supposed that Naavik had forgotten her, for he had surely come back to Ivaldi years ago, but had never contacted her, even to find out if she were well.

She did not know that Naavik had been equally unable to forget his love, and so he had remained at sea, supposing that she contented herself with motherhood and housekeeping. He felt unable to bear the memories which Ivaldi would force upon him, so he sought farther and stranger lands whose newness might distract him from his memories.

He was sixteen years and many miles from Ivaldi when a letter found him in a dingy waterfront bar on some nameless island. It said that his father had died, and he was urgently needed to take over the family business, as he had long ago promised to do. He came home to Ivaldi, and for several months distracted himself with putting things in order.

On his tours of the family's shops, Naavik lingered at the one near the quarter where the Islanders lived, where he had first met Narama. He

sat on a bench in the sunshine and stared into the street, remembering. When Islander children came to the store to buy things for their mothers, he told them tales of his travels over the seas, so that he could look into their pale faces and remember her. Narama's youngest child, Tomi, a shy six-year-old, eagerly repeated to his mother what he could remember of these wonderful tales. She grew distant and thoughtful as he chattered, seeming not at all interested in ferocious pirates or strange sea monsters. Instead she asked, "What does this seaman look like?"

"Well, he's very dark," said Tomi. Burned black by wind and sun, Naavik was in fact the darkest individual the boy had ever seen.

"But he's nice," he added hastily, so that his mother wouldn't forbid him to speak to the dark man.

Wondering, hoping, but unable to elicit any concrete information from her son, Narama went herself to the store, and learned from a gossipy employee that the man was in fact Naavik, the eldest son of the family, just returned from a long sojourn at sea.

"I suppose he came back to marry and settle down?" she said casually.

"Oh, he seems in no hurry," said the clerk. "He came back because his father died, and it took him more than a year to come even so. He isn't very interested in the shops, in fact when he comes here he just sits dreaming in the sun or telling tales to the kids. The business'll fail under him, I shouldn't wonder."

Narama began doing the marketing herself because, she said, the children weren't getting good prices. And so one day she came to the store, and Tomi, trotting at her heels, squealed with delight because the sailor-man was back, telling tales on the bench on the sidewalk.

He was much changed, and so was she, but they knew each other. Both had been waiting, sixteen years and more, for the meeting which neither had dared dream. Now they gazed at each other hungrily, but gave no other sign. Tomi, surprised by the sudden halt in Narama's usually purposeful stride, tugged at her hand.

"What's wrong, Mamma?" he asked, anxious that she approve of his friend. Narama turned away abruptly and left Tomi to listen to the seaman's tales while she did her shopping. When she was done she thanked him for entertaining her son, and gave him a tangerine, "for you must be thirsty in the sun." He gravely thanked her, and put it into his pocket. They nodded to one another and parted, apparently strangers. But somehow a rendezvous was arranged, and another, and another, and their love blazed as before, though even more secretly.

Narama's second child, ten-year-old Haraln, was a mean-spirited boy who had suffered much by his mother's preference for Kanya. From birth Haraln had clung to his mother, and later he bullied the younger children when they took her attention away from him. Kanya he feared, especially after she became the Novice, but he was quick to unleash his jealous rage upon anyone else who came between him and Narama.

So when Narama began spending time away from home, Haraln smoldered with bitter rage. One day he followed her. Being a quick and wiry boy, he found it easy to tag after her without being seen on the long walk to another quarter of the City, an area strange to him. He saw her meet a man there, whom he instantly knew as the man from the store, though Narama had rarely been to the store recently. Just shy of an adolescent understanding of love, the boy did not quite grasp the situation. But he nurtured a hatred for the seaman, and followed his mother several more times to her meetings with him, always unseen, and tortured by jealousy. He missed whole days of school, which eventually led the teacher to visit his mother.

Narama could not imagine why Haraln was missing school, except that he had always been difficult, so she called him in to explain to her and the teacher. He had been awaiting the opportunity.

"I've been following you, to find out what you were doing with that dark man!" he burst out. Narama was caught off guard, and a storm of emotion passed over her face. The teacher saw too much there, and called a council of the Islander Elders. That night the boy repeated to them all that he had seen. He was frightened now. Poor Haraln had hoped to divert his mother's attention from the dark man to himself. Now her attention was given entirely to the Council, and when she would not tell them anything, they tortured her. This was a revival of ancient techniques, and had to be performed under the instruction of the High Priestess. She did not enjoy inflicting pain, but this question vitally concerned the prestige of the tribe as well as the family, and if the children were tainted, the consequences would be dire.

The truth was eventually forced out, and the council met again to determine its course. The case was far worse than they had imagined: a sixteen-year-old affair that tainted the Novice of the Mother, and surely the Mother would punish the tribe for this gross insult. She must be appeased immediately, and with blood.

The Council, on the advice of the Priestess, decided that all three - Naavik, Narama, and their half-breed daughter - should be sacrificed to the Goddess. The Priestess was worried: how had she made such a terrible mistake in the augury of choosing the Novice? Had the child even then had some dark power to influence the Choice? What powers

might she have now, since the Priestess herself had trained her in the arcane arts? Would the Mother be sufficiently appeased by the triple sacrifice to forgive the error?

Naavik was kidnapped, drugged, and carried to the Islanders' secret Temple of the Terrible Mother outside the walls of Ivaldi. He was bound to the stone altar while Kanya and Narama stood by, tied and gagged. When the knife flashed and Naavik silently died, Narama fainted, and was carried to the altar and laid in his blood. As the Priestess raised the knife again, Kanya screamed, a terrible, unearthly sound, causing the knife to start from the Priestess' nerveless fingers and slice across her own foot as it fell. In the ensuing pandemonium, Kanya threw herself across her mother and lay there, staring wildly at the Islanders with her dark eyes. No one could say how the gag and the ropes had fallen from her, and no one wanted to touch her.

The Priestess, bleeding and limping, moved as far from the altar as she could, crying, "Let them go! Let them go and never come back! The Mother has taken their punishment into her own hands, and it is doom for us to touch them!" The Islanders moved away while Kanya took the stone knife and cut her mother's bonds. She roused Narama from her faint and led her out of the Temple. They walked away from Ivaldi, stumbling as far as they could until they collapsed at the side of the road. Both were stained with Naavik's blood.

A passing caravan of Meshvid merchants picked them that night. By the blood on their clothes, the merchants supposed the two had been involved in some particularly messy incident which they would not care to have revealed to authorities, so they pressed Narama to come with them as a servant, in return for food and shelter. When the merchants forced themselves upon her that night, she fell into a final despair, and in the early hours of the morning hanged herself. At sunrise the merchants found Kanya crouched like an animal over the corpse of her mother.

One of them remarked, with strained jocosity, "Well, the daughter will do just as well for the purpose." But his words died on his lips when she turned a feral gaze upon him. They arranged for Narama's cremation, and took Kanya along on their journey, but somehow none of them ever laid a hand on her. They fed her badly and forced her to perform the worst labors of the camp, but she never complained, never spoke a word. She had retreated into a dark place in her mind, and did not notice much of the world or the discomforts it meted out to her.

After travelling and trading in the south for several morens, the merchants returned to the foothills bordering the Meshvid kingdom. Those hills were Kanya's first clear memory of the journey, where the merchants traded their ox-drawn wagons for sturdy hill ponies, and

Kanya had one of her own to ride. For a beginner she rode surprisingly well, flying ahead of the troop over rocky crags and cliff-edged paths. But the pony missed its companions, and Kanya herself had no other point of reference, so they always returned to the merchants' campfire at nightfall. In this way they reached Stanets, the Meshvid capital. Kanya was still quiet, and growing more beautiful by the day. Her long, fair hair blew in the wind, her cheeks were pink in the cool mountain air, and her dark eyes had a gleam which could be chilling or challenging. She was fifteen, eminently marriageable by Meshvid standards.

So the merchants made sure that King Badaksha Khan saw the girl, and they were not surprised when he indicated that he would like her for a concubine. Badaksha Khan made an agreeable offer for her, and Kanya was thrust into the harem, the king's latest favorite.

Having fallen in such a short time from the respected position of Novice of her tribe's High Priestess to helpless dependence as an orphaned servant of a caravan had left Kanya bewildered. This new turn of events made her bitter at the casual manner in which men dispose of others' lives. The king found her anger a delicious spice in contrast to the dull obedience of most of the harem, and delighted in forcing her even though she made it very clear she loathed him. He was puzzled and frightened one night to find himself impotent, a problem which did not immediately abate even with his more passive and less threatening Meshvid women. Fear of Kanya's magical powers drove Badaksha from her bed forever, which saddened her not at all.

Though the king soon regained his virility, the job had been done. Kanya, once destined to be the virgin priestess of the Islanders, had never been taught the techniques every girl in Ivaldi knows for avoiding pregnancy. Before her sixteenth birthday, she gave birth to me."