

## Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 5

### The Gift of the Moon

That same night I stood on the battlements looking out to the hills, enjoying the peace and darkness after the noise and glare of the festival. A light drizzle was falling, but I welcomed it as a cleansing from the pollution of Tash. Clouds drifted over a glowing patch of sky, parting sometimes to reveal a sickle moon. I climbed up on the wide, wet stone battlement and sat straddling it, swinging one foot over the abyss. Here was freedom, the night and the wind entirely mine, and I lifted my arms to the sky. There was no barrier between myself and the elements but my thin nightshift, and that was soon soaked through as the drizzle changed to rain in earnest. The base of the Black Tower was lost in darkness, and I felt I was clinging to the last solid piece of the world, floating in the empty Void, and that my stone perch would soon also dissolve, leaving me to drift forever in nothingness, alone. The sensation was so piercing that I remember it still. The loneliness frightened me suddenly, and I climbed down, went inside, and got in bed, to read under soft brown blankets, book propped on my knees. Wind gusting through the open door made the lamp flicker, but I liked the smell and rhythm of the rain too much to close it.

The book soon palled; I had read it before. I closed it and bent my head on my knees. When I looked up again, a man was standing in the outer doorway, his black hair blown by the wind, and I thought I had seen his face before. He stood as if he had been there for some time, watching me. I was suddenly acutely conscious that my wet shift was crumpled on the floor, my shoulders and breasts bare to this man's gaze. Yet he was looking at my face - intently, but without the plea or threat always present in Tash's eyes.

I looked at the floor, then, irritated with myself, stared into his eyes and said, "Are you here to threaten my life, or my modesty?"

He answered with a smile, "I am no threat to your life, and you clearly haven't any modesty." I blushed and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

"Well, then, unless it's your habit to go to a great deal of trouble to insult women in their own bedrooms, I can not fathom why you are here." I tried to sound as if having a strange man in my room was an everyday occurrence. In fact, rarely in my life had I even spoken to a man who was not a servant or a blood relation.

"I was curious to learn how you really feel about your imminent marriage. You seemed touchingly shy in the presence of your intended, but I felt you were ready to do him violence. Am I right?" He said this offhandedly, but I lost the control to which I clung so desperately.

“Violence?” I hissed. “Oh, yes, I would kill him if I could. And I will kill myself before I marry him!” Suddenly I was crying. And then I was startled to feel the stranger’s arm around my shoulder, for I had not heard him move from the doorway. I had rarely been touched with affection, or at all, since early childhood when I had begun to shrink from my mother’s clutching caresses. This contact was so warm, so welcome, that I cried still more to realize how much I had missed it. When I finally stopped crying I was huddled within his arms, my head on his shoulder. I drew back to look at his face.

“Who are you?” Name, origin, status: these were interesting questions, but not the critical ones. I wanted to know how and why he had come there, and what was the unaccustomed warmth he had aroused in me. I had not dared feel anything like it in so very long.

“I am a friend, and I think I can help you. I saw you at the Festival - felt your anger, actually, brighter than flames, brighter even than your hair. I suspected you were not the modest maiden you appeared to be. Helpless, perhaps, but by no means resigned. Are you?”

I nodded, then shook my head, uncertain which quality he was inquiring about: modesty, helplessness, or resignation. He chuckled softly.

“But how did you get in here?” I asked.

“Very carefully,” he said drily.

“Could I leave? Soon? Before I have to let him touch me again?” I shivered in disgust. He held me tighter.

“You cannot take my path, but we will find another for you. You may have to endure Tash a little longer, but you will not marry him, nor anyone else against your will.” He said this with a quiet intensity that made it ring true. Then he held me at arm’s length and looked into my eyes, as if he expected to find there someone he knew. When he looked away, I wondered if he was disappointed.

“It is late. I must go,” he said abruptly. I made an uncertain movement, as if to hold him. “I will be back,” he said softly. He put a hand to my lips, forestalling questions. “I don’t know when. Soon.” He kissed me swiftly, and it was so different from Tash’s slobbering assaults that I was left breathless. When I looked towards the doorway again, he had vanished.

Throwing back the blankets, I ran out to the battlements, but did not find him. He had vanished with the rain. The clouds parted, leaving me and the thin moon to stare at each other. I raised my arms in salute, thanking the moon for the gift it had brought me.

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Duvalye returned less than a month later. There was an odd expression on his face, almost of self-disgust, when he strode into my room. The outside door swung behind him in a gust of wind. His hair was ruffled and his clothing disarrayed. I shrank a little from him.

“I should not be here,” he said, “but I could not stay away.” I stared uncomprehendingly. “I want you as I have not wanted a woman in... many years. There is some fate that binds me, tied in red, red hair. How did you grow it so long and bright?” He sat on the bed beside me and stroked my hair, wrapping it around his hands. He pulled gently so that my head tilted back. Then he kissed my throat, and with that single gesture aroused all the desire that I thought Tash had shrivelled in me.”

*Teja broke off her narrative, looking away with a faint, strange smile. Then she continued rapidly:*

“Duvalye came to see me several times after that, and finally I found my opportunity to escape from Stanets. Together we came to Ivaldi, where I lived with him until his death. And now I continue to live here, in his house.”

The story had thinned out abruptly. What was she hiding?

“How did you escape?” I asked. She paused.

“It turned out to be simpler than I’d imagined,” she said slowly. She seemed wary now, less sure of what she was going to say. “I had a signet ring from my brother, and the Crown Prince’s seal is almost identical to the king’s. One night I knocked my maid unconscious with a heavy brass candlestick, put on her clothing, and left the harem through the servants’ entrance. In the stables, I showed the ring to the groom and told him to give me a horse for the king’s business. He didn’t dare question me. So I rode to Duvalye’s house in the hills, and we came away together.”

“Didn’t anyone look for you?”

“The king and most of the court were away on the last hunting trip of the season, and the rains started early that year. By the time they began looking, there was no trace. Or so I assume. At any rate, they never found me.”

“And they never thought to ask Duvalye about your disappearance?”

“He wasn’t there to ask.”

“Which should have led them to suspect something, I would think!”

“No. Even if they suspected him, which they had no reason to do, he was away from the hills often enough that his disappearance at that particular time was not damning. No one but myself had seen him in Stanets since the Feast of the Blue Moon, so for all they knew, he could have left much earlier.”

“*No one* else had seen him? How did he get into your room in the tower, if he didn’t have an accomplice in the castle?”

“I thought that was clear,” she said with a secretive smile. “He didn’t come from within the castle. He came from outside.”

“Oh, I see,” I said sarcastically. “He flew up to your room at the top of the highest tower in Stanets.” It could even have been true; perhaps he was a powerful mage.

“No,” Teja replied, “he climbed.”

This was beyond belief. She had told me the tower was the height of thirty men; no mage would take the trouble. Flying would have been easier. “He climbed,” I repeated, staring at her. She nodded.

“The carvings must be very deep,” I ventured tentatively.

“No. They never were, and with the years they have worn down. They’re no deeper than a finger’s breadth in most places.” Teja was clearly enjoying my confusion. I was determined not to give her the pleasure.

“All right, he climbed,” I said matter-of-factly. “And you escaped dressed as a maidservant, and the two of you came to Ivaldi together. Then what happened?”

“Your gossips must have told you that as well.”

“They say that he died mysteriously, and you were in seclusion for several months, mourning him.”

“I wasn’t in seclusion; I was trying to die.”

There wasn’t much I could say to this. Finally I came out with, “Well, I am grateful to whoever persuaded you to live.” She nodded soberly.

“It was Peter, a... relative of Duvalye’s. Duvalye had told him not to let me die. You see, the bond between us was very strong. Such bonds are not broken without a great deal of pain.”

I nodded understandingly, but I did not really understand. I had lost very few people in my life whom I really cared about, and in those few cases they had not even died; I had left them, by my own choice. Years ago, I dimly recall, I had missed my mother when I left my island. Just now I was still vaguely missing Chitra. But a grief to die for was a matter for song or legend only; I half-consciously dismissed it as too

theatrical. After all, most of Teja's story was probably a fabrication; much of it was too fantastic to be true. Better to ferret out what facts there were.

"Was Duvalye Ivaldin? What did he do for a living?" I asked abruptly.

"He was Ivaldin, but he was the last survivor and inheritor of an ancient family. All this," she waved to indicate the house and its sumptuous furnishings, "is old money. Duvalye did not need to work. He considered himself a scholar and historian."

Strange coincidence; historians were few in Ivaldi. "I have a friend who also studies history. Did Duvalye know Ozin?"

"Only by reputation. Duvalye was reclusive."

"It seems unusual behavior for a recluse, to go to so much trouble to complicate his life with a woman," I said, gently teasing.

"I not only complicated his life," said Teja soberly. "I also caused his death."

With that, her narrative mood ended, and, probe though I might in subsequent visits, it was a long time before she would tell me anything more about Duvalye.