

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 6

Flight from Ivaldi

I was at Teja's house one day, had been there for several hours, talking of nothing and everything. As I was making some seemingly important point about a topic now long forgotten, Teja, usually charmingly attentive to everything I said, suddenly became distracted. She stood and went to the window.

"Something wrong?" I asked. She shook her head and opened the curtain to look out into the dazzling afternoon sun. She closed her eyes against the light for a moment, and when she reopened them, seemed to be looking not out the window, but inward, to some private scene.

"What is it? Are you ill?" I demanded.

"Hush!" She swivelled to glare at me, then her eyes closed again. Anguish swept over her face, and she gave a choking cry, hands spread defensively before her to ward off - what? She stood perfectly still for a moment, head bowed, hands covering her face. Then she was in motion, striding to open the door, shouting down the corridor: "Nicco! Savi!"

Her two household runners arrived in seconds, long-legged and wiry, alert and eager to serve. Damron, the houseman, was only moments behind.

Teja snapped out orders: "Both of you, go to Master Peter's house, and find out where he is. Ask quietly, among the servants. If any strangers are there, do not let them hear you. But do it quickly. Then, Savi, return to me with the news. Nicco, if he is not at home, go on to find him. Say there is an urgent message and he must come. He may be dazed and incoherent, possibly very ill, but you must bring him. Again, try not to let anyone know where you are bringing him; leave my name out if you can. Clear?" She looked at them expectantly. Both nodded rapidly, poised to bolt. Teja nodded in return. "Good. Thank you. Now go." They fled.

Teja turned to Damron. "Something terrible has happened to Janno; I am not sure what, but I fear the worst. Peter and I may need to leave immediately. Send Brulli to have horses ready at the West Gate."

"And your luggage, madame?" Damron inquired imperturbably.

"None. I'll wear riding clothes, lay some out for Peter as well. Pack swords for each of us. Put them in a box for transport out of the city." Damron bowed and left, hurrying without seeming to. Teja had apparently forgotten me, and again stared out the window.

“What has happened? Where are you going?” I asked. She did not startle, so she could not have been as far off as she seemed. But she looked at me measuringly for a moment before replying.

“My friend Peter is in great danger and may need to leave the City. You had best leave now. There may be trouble.”

“Which is ample reason not to go! What sort of friend do you imagine me to be?” I prided myself on my loyalty, and was nettled that she trusted me so little.

“I imagine you to be a very dear friend, whom I want to protect from danger which is none of your making. This could get very ugly, and I do not want you hurt.”

“What is ‘this,’ and why can’t I help? I will not leave until you at least tell me what is happening.”

Teja shrugged impatiently. “I do not know yet myself exactly what has happened. I fear that my friend Janno is in grave danger, and I am waiting to find out why. Although I have a strong suspicion that I know already.” She turned again to look out the window.

We sat in silence for some minutes, a period which probably seemed longer than it was. Then I heard the front gate slam open at the same moment that Teja jerked to attention. Feet pounded in the corridor and Savi hurtled into the room, chest heaving, but not too winded to speak.

“We went to Master Peter’s house as you commanded, mistress,” gasped the runner. “It was swarming with people, mostly relatives of Janno’s, all screaming and wailing, and the police were on the way. We slipped in the side door and Marusko the cook told us that Peter was in the Old Market, on business, when Janno’s family came swarming into the house, armed. They broke into the old tomb at the back of the garden, and - something came out of it. Something hideous that shrivelled and burned in the sunlight, and died cursing them by name. They’re saying that Peter is an evil magician who witched Janno and turned him into a monster.”

I looked at Teja for her reaction to this incredible story, but she merely nodded, as if she had known it already. “And Nicco?” she asked.

“He went on to the Old Market to find Master Peter, as you ordered. I hope he found him before Janno’s people did.”

“I hope so too,” said Teja soberly. “Thank you, Savi, you have done well. Rest yourself, but be ready. I may need you again.” The runner left.

“But what in the names of all the gods is going on?” I asked.

“I must prepare to leave. I haven’t time to explain, but I will tell you as much as I can while I am dressing. Come upstairs.” I followed her willingly, trying not to be distracted by the prospect of seeing Teja undress.

She seemed oblivious to my presence, and Damron’s, as she flung off her house robe and donned the tunic and trousers he handed her, talking all the while.

“Peter is kin to me through Duvalye. I think I have mentioned his name to you before? Something has happened to his lover, Janno, and Peter will be in great danger because of it. I must get him out of the City.”

“But you knew he was in trouble even before Savi told you. Was there some coded message I didn’t hear?” There had been a vegetable seller shrieking his wares outside the gate. Had Teja heard something in his cries besides ‘Fresh lettuce, 50 pinniks the bunch’?

“Suffice to say that I have means of knowing,” she said flatly, buckling a heavy leather belt around her waist, then bending to draw on tall, soft boots.

“But how will you get him out? Won’t his enemies be following him? And is he in fact responsible for some crime?”

“He is not, but it will certainly look bad to... those who don’t know him.” Teja had finished dressing; I followed her back to the salon to await Peter’s arrival, or news of him.

A few minutes later a striking Ivaldin woman, whom I vaguely recognized from some parties I had attended, was ushered in by Damron.

“Lady Dakini,” he murmured. Her black eyes were snapping, whether with rage or excitement I could not tell.

“I suppose you know your elder brother is in *trouble*,” she said meaningly, with a brows-lifted glance at me.

“You may speak freely in front of Seaborn, Lady.” Teja had drawn herself up stiffly, and was very formal.

“True Seaborn?” She was momentarily diverted. “Chitra Yadav’s former lover?” She had recognized me the moment she saw me, I’d wager. “And bonded with you now,” she said to Teja. “How interesting.” She smirked. Bonded?

Teja’s brows twitched together. “About Peter?” she said.

Dakini became brisk. “He was in the Old Market when it happened. He collapsed, of course.” She looked faintly scornful. “My Nincho was nearby and heard the commotion, and brought him away. He said

that, as an old friend of the family, he knew Peter was occasionally struck down by these fits, etcetera. What do you want me to do with him? Bring him here?"

"No, we must leave the city, and I have horses waiting at the West Gate. Your house is closer. It would be better to send him directly from there."

"He won't be fit to ride a horse," Dakini said.

"I'll sit behind him."

"That would slow you down. No horse can carry two of you for long. And he's unconscious - you won't have a hand free to lead a spare mount."

Teja looked worried. "That's true," she said. "These Ivaldin scrubs aren't as strong as the mountain ponies I'm used to."

"I'll come with you, and lead a spare horse," I said, jumping into the situation with both feet. Teja opened her mouth to protest, but Dakini interrupted.

"It's natural that he wants to accompany you, Teja," she said smoothly. "You know how insistent a bond can be, even before exchange." This statement made no sense to me, but evidently it meant something to Teja. She looked thunderous, but did not disavow our supposed bond, whatever that meant. The more puzzled I grew, the more determined I was to follow her, and plumb the depths of this new mystery.

"Come, then," she said to me. "We leave immediately." Turning to Dakini, she added, "Send Peter to the West Gate in a closed litter. Try to arrange some diversion if you can, since Nincho may have been observed taking him to your house. Tell your carriers we will wait for them a few miles down the West Road. And thank you for your help." This was obviously a curt dismissal, but Dakini betrayed no resentment.

"Till we meet again," she said sweetly, and left. Teja glared after her for a moment with an uncharacteristically open show of dislike. Then she rounded on me.

"Since you insist on accompanying me, we had better dispose of your belongings. We may be away a long while," she said brusquely. She seemed more annoyed than grateful for my company, and I dared not risk her grudging acceptance with a request to pick things up from my lodgings. Instead I wrote a note to my landlord stating that I would be away indefinitely, and authorizing Damron to collect my small property and bring it to Teja's house. I felt a pang at leaving behind

my guitar, and an even greater lurch at abandoning my log. Wherever we were bound, I hoped I would find paper.

Teja and I left the house and walked quickly to a plaza a few streets away, where an undistinguished and indistinguishable covered public rickshaw was waiting to take us to the West Gate. Once seated in the rickshaw, she dropped the curtains for privacy while she bound up her hair in a turban. She gave me a crooked smile. "This hair is really a curse, you know. It makes me too damned recognizable."

The West Gate teemed with activity, inside and out. Since no carriage-animals are allowed in the city, all goods brought to Ivaldi by animal transport must be unloaded and transferred to man-pulled carts at the gate. Ozin had told me that this law was put into effect centuries before, after an extremely unpleasant strike by the Guilds of Rickshaw Pullers and Sanitationists. The former had felt their livelihood threatened by the increasing use of draft animals, the latter argued that the City's sewage systems and cleaning teams could not keep up with the animals' wastes. Both groups' stopping work for a week was persuasive.

Since that time, a few city residents kept their beasts in rented stables just outside the Gate, and a small forest with scenic paths was carefully maintained for their riding pleasure. But in this day and age very few Ivaldin knew or cared much about horses, and for serious travel they preferred boats wherever possible. It was a prejudice I heartily shared.

Whether for appearances or because he genuinely liked them, or perhaps for emergencies like this one, Duvalye had kept horses at the West Gate. Thanks to Brulli, three were saddled and waiting for us. We mounted and rode off down the West Road, trying to look as if we were riding for pleasure, though the third horse, riderless, must have seemed odd. "Well, perhaps he needs exercise," I thought.

The uncomfortable fact of the matter, which I had not dared to tell Teja, was that I had never been on a horse. I had certainly seen them, and had the general idea that they were made to go by kicking, and steered by the reins. Fortunately, Teja rode ahead, leading the spare horse, and my own mount seemed content to follow the other two.

After a half-hour or so we came to a grassy knoll, partly shielded from the road by trees, where Teja stopped her horse and dismounted. I followed suit, and found that my knees felt rubbery. By force of will, I got them to bend more or less as I chose, and sat down in the grass without too obvious an effort. Teja crouched with a pair of reins looped over each arm, nibbling a piece of grass as she gazed down the road. She completely failed to look relaxed, anxiously scanning every

approaching shape. It was a busy day on the West Road, but everything coming from Ivaldi turned out to be a bullock cart.

Finally a cloud of dust rounded the bend half a mile back, and within the cloud appeared a palanquin carried by six sweating men. Teja waved them over, and they deposited the litter within the clump of trees, where it could not easily be seen from the road. Teja opened the curtains.

Peter, standing, would have been a tall fellow, blonde and probably handsome. At the moment he was completely limp and looked ghastly, his fair skin a pasty grey.

“What’s the matter with him? Is it really a fit?” I asked.

“His lover is dead,” Teja said shortly. “This is grief.” I shut up.

Teja tried to wake him, to no avail. The carriers lifted him gently out and deposited him on the grass. Teja turned to their leader.

“Did your mistress arrange some sort of diversion, to throw off pursuit?”

The man smiled a little grimly. “No, but we have something else in mind. This litter can be completely disassembled and stuffed into sacks to look like ordinary travelling bundles. You take him from here, and we’ll go on a bit as if we still had him. A few miles on we’ll cut into the trees, pack up, and go home slowly and separately.”

Teja nodded approval, and paid each of them handsomely from her belt pouch. “You have served us well. Thank you all. You had best be moving on now.” The men bowed to her, took up the litter, and went on down the road. With the curtains closed, there was no telling whether or not the palanquin contained anyone.

“Do we go on now?” I asked. Teja shook her head.

“It will be dark soon, which will help us. We might as well wait.” She sat down on the grass, next to Peter, arranging a folded cloak under his head.

“Can the horses see in the dark?” I asked nervously.

“No, but I can see well enough for all of us.”

Teja looked so grim that I sat quiet for a while. But finally my curiosity got the better of me.

“Is this what happened to you when Duvalye died?” I asked.

“I was even worse,” she replied. Her face was turned away, and her tone difficult to interpret. I pressed on doggedly.

“I don’t understand why he is in such danger from the death of his lover. Is he suspected of killing him?”

“Yes, Janno’s family will hold Peter responsible for his death. That is the very least of what they will think. And, as you can see, he is in no condition to defend himself.”

We lapsed again into silence. We sat until full dark, then made preparations to leave. Peter, still unconscious, was a heavy, awkward load. I held him upright while Teja mounted, then pushed while she pulled him up in front of her; she seemed to be far stronger than I was. The horse didn’t care for Peter’s legs flopping around its neck, and, prancing nervously, it stomped on my foot. Teja and I swore in unison, then laughed.

“If this weren’t so desperate, it would be a comedy,” she said.

Finally we got Peter seated astride the saddle, Teja clasping him firmly around the waist with one arm while her other hand held the reins. Peter’s head lolled back over her shoulder in a convincing imitation of a dead man. In spite of the deepening twilight, Teja must have seen my pessimistic expression.

“Not a reassuring sight for travellers on the road at night, eh?” She pushed his head forward so that he leaned over the horse’s neck. “Get me a cloak from the saddlebag, will you?” With a hood shielding his face, Peter didn’t look quite so dead; perhaps he could pass for merely dead drunk.

I mounted my own horse, and took up the reins from Teja to lead the third. As we set off at an easy walk, I congratulated myself that riding a horse wasn’t so difficult after all. Then Teja must have kicked her horse, for it speeded up. Suddenly I was jolting up and down, one-two, one-two, slamming painfully into the saddle at every beat. I had to grab the saddle horn to keep from falling off completely. I was holding my own horse’s reins in the same hand, but that didn’t seem to matter since it was following Teja. Which was a good thing - I couldn’t see the road under its hooves. Then Teja must have done something else to her horse, for it spurted ahead and mine, too, changed its pace to a smooth triple beat, a little faster and much more comfortable than the previous. But I still wasn’t steady, and felt even more in danger of falling. I wanted to hold on with both hands, but needed one to hold the rein of the third horse. I soon lost my grip on that rein, but it slipped up over my arm, where it remained securely looped while I clutched the saddle tightly with both hands, convinced that, if I fell off, Teja would be so angry she would ride on and leave me to be trampled by the bullock carts in the morning.

We went on that way forever – sometimes fast and smooth and frightening, sometimes slower and jolty and painful. I felt scarcely conscious myself when Teja at last called a halt, sometime deep in the moonless night.

“We’ve got to change horses,” she said. “This one is done in.” I nodded dumbly. “Well, dismount,” she said sharply. “I need your help.”

I tried to remember how to do it. Slowly, stiffly, I raised myself in the stirrups and drew my right leg over the horse’s rump. Now, kick left foot out of the stirrup and slide down, holding the saddle with both hands. Or at least that was the theory. What happened was, as my right leg came over, my left knee gave way, and I clutched the saddle desperately as I slithered to the ground, fortunately managing to free my left foot from the stirrup as I went. When my feet touched the ground I continued sinking; my knees absolutely refused to stay straight.

“Whatever are you doing?” asked Teja incredulously.

“Dismounting,” I replied, with as much dignity as I could muster while squatting on my haunches in the dirt. I thought about standing up, but knew it was hopeless for the moment.

“Are you all right?” Teja asked. I was gratified that she sounded slightly worried. In the darkness I couldn’t see her face, but perhaps that was for the better.

“I’ll be fine. It’s just that my knees aren’t working at the moment.”

I deduced from sounds and shadows that Teja managed to dismount while still holding Peter up in the saddle. I was groggily astonished that she then managed to slide him off the horse without dropping him.

“What kind of woman are you?” I muttered.

She ignored me, dragging Peter off to the side of the road. She returned and led the horses off as well, tethering them deep in a thicket. Finally she came back for me.

“Can you stand now?” she asked. I tried to rise from my crouch, but my legs cramped so sharply that I cried out. Teja pulled me to my feet and got her shoulders under my arm, forcing me to walk with her until the spasms passed. Then she deposited me at the side of the road next to Peter.

“You’ve never ridden a horse before,” she said accusingly.

“The riding part was going pretty well,” I moaned. “It’s getting off that’s hard.”

Someone had thoughtfully packed a flask of wine along with other provisions in my saddlebag. Teja brought it to me, and half its contents, plus exhaustion, eased me off to sleep in spite of my aches.

We stayed in hiding in the woods all day. I forced myself to my feet a couple of times to empty my bowels and bladder; having Teja drag me

into the bushes would have been just too humiliating. As it was, I felt all too keenly her gaze of mingled irritation and amusement.

We rode all of the next night. The following dawn I managed to dismount without folding, and by the third night's ride the soreness had confined itself to two points at the base of my buttocks where my hip bones ground into the saddle. I won't say I learned to enjoy riding, but I did learn to ride.

Peter, on the other hand, made no progress at all; he remained limply unconscious through all our rides, enduring our awkwardly bundling him on and off the horses without even a twitch. If he hadn't remained so floppily flexible, I would have assumed him to be dead. When I asked Teja about it she said, "He may stay like this for weeks. It's the only way he can recover."

"Won't he starve?" She shook her head. I never saw her give him even water, but he continued to look about the same, though that was ghastly enough.

We had left Ivaldi on a west-southwest heading. The river went (or came from) due west, but since it was the most obvious escape route from the city, Teja had avoided it to throw off pursuit. We now looped back to meet the river at Prayag, a town sited where the rivers Vandi and Tapti came together to form the Greater Vandi. We carried our cataleptic comrade into an inn, explaining that he was a victim of a strange sleeping sickness carried by flies, which he had contracted in Vandàlia. We intended taking him to the Kelessi healers, and now that we had finally reached the river we wished to proceed by boat.

Boats plied the river daily, always stopping at Prayag to pick up passengers and goods coming from the south. It was not difficult to buy places for ourselves and our horses on a wide, flat barge. We stowed Peter under a low, thatched shelter, tied the horses to the rail, and perched on some bags of grain to watch the water go by. We passed three days on that boat, during which I desperately missed my guitar and my log. Teja was uncommunicative, apparently lost in worry for Peter.