

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 5

Taking the High Road

We left the next dawn, twenty of us, including Gulana the Heir-Mother and her maid Tashan, both veiled and swathed in heavy robes. The Crown Prince naturally did not waste time explaining anything to the startled guards and grooms; he ordered horses, and they were brought. We all mounted in solemn silence, and rode to the great gate of Stanets. At Ashkvan's barked order it was immediately opened, and we rode out two by two. My horse was one of the best of the royal stables, a little more steed than I felt capable of handling. So I was pleased with myself that I managed to keep him strictly parallel with the mount of my riding partner, one of the young nobles, at the center of the column.

After twenty minutes' ride we had descended into a small, flat valley below and west of Stanets. A tremor passed through the column, and I looked around to determine the cause. Above us on the Royal Road there was a thunder of hooves - a large group of men, coming after us at full gallop.

"So much for subtlety," sighed my companion, loosing his sword in its sheath.

But, to my surprise and relief, we did not turn to fight. Ashkvan cried an order, and suddenly we, too, were galloping, up the narrowing valley. I couldn't see any possible exit, but my horse followed the others, and I hung on grimly, my guitar bouncing against my back.

Hanging on wasn't good enough, however, and without firm guidance my horse soon dropped to the rear of the column. I was the last to start up the narrow path, just wide enough for one horse and rider, that wound steeply up the side of a mountain. The pace slowed to a canter, for the path was rocky as well as narrow. As we rode higher, I made the mistake of looking to my left, over the edge, into a rocky abyss that got deeper by the moment. The drop wasn't absolutely sheer, but as close as never mind. I gasped and clutched the saddle with both hands, praying to every god I had ever heard of.

I soon had another worry. The sound of hooves from behind began to make itself heard over the sound of hooves from ahead - and I was the last in the file, the man most likely to be captured. If I were lucky. I risked a glance back, and several curves behind saw the first of our pursuers pelting up the path. That huge pair of horns could only belong to Ghorlan, Vanaksha's lieutenant. I kicked my horse frantically, shouting to the man ahead of me: "They're catching up!"

The rider turned his head, and I saw that it was Toshiko. He merely nodded and faced forward again, but I saw him reach for his bow.

I was just wondering whether to risk another look back when I heard a ghastly scream, and the earth fell out from under me. I felt myself flying through the air, and I wondered what was happening even as I wondered how I had time to wonder. Then I hit the edge of the path, and slid over. I heard myself yell hoarsely, a sound somehow more frightening than the shrill shrieks of women. I scrambled at the rocks on the path, but they came away in my grasp. One foot found some meager purchase, and my left hand latched onto one corner of a large stone that seemed solid. With a desperate heave I got my right elbow up on the edge and was halfway to safety. Then I paused, confused. My horse was a few yards up the trail, bleeding from a dart in his haunch. Everything had happened so quickly that he was still moving, but hadn't got far. As I watched, Toshiko turned smoothly in his saddle, nocked an arrow, and shot my horse through the heart. The poor animal collapsed onto the path without a sound. Toshiko rode on, never giving me or the horse a backward look.

I hung at the edge of the precipice, unable to believe that Toshiko had deliberately shot my horse and left me to be captured. Did he think, after all, that I was false and had betrayed Ashkvan to his enemies? I had no further time to ponder, for those enemies were upon me. Ghorlan came thundering up, reining in abruptly just before me. In one hand he held a small crossbow, no longer loaded. He glanced at me, then at my horse, whose dead bulk completely blocked the path. He cursed. His men halted one by one behind him, the line stretching behind the next curve so that I could not count their numbers. Considerably more than our twenty, at any rate.

Ghorlan dismounted so carelessly that I thought he would step off the edge, but he didn't. "Get up here and help me move this carcass," he bawled to the others. For a moment I thought he was referring to me, but then I realized that he wanted to clear the path of the dead horse.

Several men dismounted and sidled past their horses to join him. Each one looked curiously down at me as he passed, but none made any move to help me. I continued to hang, half on and half off the path, and Ghorlan's horse stamped its feet nervously near my face.

Ghorlan and the men took several heaves to push my dead horse off the path. It bounced and slid down the steep slope; I couldn't bear to watch it to the end. I was inspired to try to pull the rest of me onto the relative safety of the path as Ghorlan's horse walked a few steps forward. But as I hauled and scrambled, concentrating on my anchoring rock, a pair of shiny black boots materialized near my face.

“Having a bad day?” leered Tash-ur-Zarul.

I squinted up at him. “You could say that,” I replied.

“That’s what happens to losers. You picked the wrong party, singer.” He raised an elegant boot and stomped it down hard on my left hand - the one clutching the rock.

I yelled and let go; it felt as if every bone in my hand was crushed, and small pieces of grit ground into my palm. I hung precariously, my right elbow still on the edge of the path, and Tash lifted a foot to push me off.

“Wait,” said Ghorlan sharply. “He may be useful.” He stooped down and grabbed me under the armpits, hauling me effortlessly up and holding me there in front of him. The strap holding my guitar to my back scraped rock, stretched, and parted. I heard the guitar bounce and crash down the hillside, twanging sadly. I could only hope not to follow it.

“Where are they going?” he demanded.

I shook my head. “They didn’t tell me.” Ghorlan cracked me across the face with one hand; the other still held me firmly, or I would have fallen off the path again as my head whipped back. My ears rang and I tasted blood.

“Where are they going?” he asked again.

“I tell you I don’t know,” I mumbled through my cut lip. “They probably didn’t trust me enough to tell me.”

“Is that why they left you behind?”

Tight in his grip, I couldn’t shrug. “I guess so,” I said.

“We’re wasting time on him,” snapped Tash. “Ashkvan and his toadies are escaping.”

“We’ll have to let them,” said Ghorlan. “By now they’ll have reached Nilo’s Point and set up an ambush. From there they can cut us down one by one as we ride through. We’ll wait until they move on, and then find out where they went.”

“And this one?” Tash jerked his thumb at me.

“Take him back to Stanets. He might make a hostage.” Ghorlan eyed me dubiously.

One of the men stood at my side with a sword drawn while the whole column somehow got itself turned around on the narrow path. Then they tied my arms behind my back and my legs together, and slung me face-

down over a saddle while Ghorlan rode the crupper behind me. I was grateful that it was him, for only his firm grip on my belt kept me from bouncing off the horse as we cantered back down to Stanets. My head hung down by the horse's right flank, from whence I had a giddy view over the edge of the path and down, down, down. I closed my eyes tight, and knew that in that moment I loved Ghorlan's brawny arms more than I'd ever loved those of any woman.

I should pause here to explain how it is that a sailor such as myself, having spent half my lifetime in the rigging of tall ships, could be deathly afraid of heights. The answer is: I don't know. But I have never climbed a mast or a mountain without a sick fear in the pit of my stomach, and the absolute conviction that I was going to fall. This was part of the reason for my meteoric career as a seaman: officers rarely have to work in the rigging, so I had wanted to become an officer as quickly as possible.

I was probably very green in the face by the time they bundled me off the horse in the main courtyard at Stanets. Someone untied my legs so I could walk. Tash, who evidently enjoyed others' discomfort, came to jeer at me.

"What's the matter, minstrel? Not feeling well?"

This was worse than an understatement. My left hand, still tied behind my back, felt like fire and seemed swollen to twice its normal size. A rib stabbed sharply with every breath, and I was panting to keep from fainting. Tash peered into my face.

"There's something more going on here than mere pain," he said interestedly. "You're afraid. But afraid of what? That we're going to kill you?"

I stared back at him, trying to calm my expression to one of placid unconcern. But the nasty little sadist was on the scent, and would not stop till he had discovered how to torment me more effectively.

"No," he said thoughtfully, "you know we're not going to kill you, at least not right away, because Ghorlan said not to. So what could be causing this blind, unreasoning panic?" He continued to watch me, and I grew worried when an evil grin broke over his face.

"I want to try a little experiment with you," he said. Pulling me along by my upper arm, he took me to Ghorlan, who was barking orders, surrounded by a great bustle of men and horses.

"If you don't mind, Ghorlan, I'll take charge of the singer. I may be able to get some useful information out of him." Ghorlan shot a look at Tash from under his shaggy brows, then nodded slowly.

“Very well. But keep him alive, and don’t damage him any more. The king was fond of him.”

“The king... was?” I croaked.

Ghorlan nodded again. “He shouted himself into a fit when he heard that Ashkvan was fleeing. His dying wish was that Vanaksha should take the crown, since Ashkvan had renounced it,” he said blandly.

I opened my mouth to protest, then thought better of it.

“Take him away,” said Ghorlan to Tash.

“I know just the place for you,” said Tash conversationally. He signalled two burly guards to accompany us, and steered me by the elbow into the main doorway of the castle. “My late fiancée used to live there. It’s a marvellous piece of architecture called the Black Tower.”

We walked through the winding corridors of Stanets until we came to a part of the castle unfamiliar to me. Tash led the way through a stout wooden door, into the bottom of a round tower. It was a huge, empty stone well leading into a dark sky, vaguely lighted at intervals by slits in the walls. A staircase spiraled up the inside wall. I looked to see how far it climbed, and wished I hadn’t. It went on forever, without landing or pause, and there was no railing on the stair. Tash watched my face with keen pleasure.

“What’s the matter? Scared of heights? Up you go now.” He was behind me, prodding me in the back with the tip of his dagger. The guard holding the end of the rope tied to my wrists was slow on the uptake, and when I stumbled forward, he held back, jerking cruelly on my tormented hand. I yelped, but Tash kept pricking with the knife, and up I went, with the guards clomping after. I went stair by stair, looking only at the gray stone beneath my feet, trying to ignore the sensation of absolute nothingness on my left. Tash poked the knife into my right side, and as I leaned away from it I came closer to the abyss, till I could not ignore the increasing depth of that plunge. I sweated and trembled, but clamped my lips to keep my teeth from chattering.

We were about halfway up when Tash suddenly shoved me, so that I fell out, off the edge of the stairs. There was an instant of sick terror, then more pain as I was caught by the rope on my wrists and my arms whipped back. I screamed, and I could not have said if the sound was sharpened more by fright or agony. Then a guard’s hand was on my belt and he hauled me back onto the steps. Tash shrieked with laughter as I crouched on the stone, sobbing.

I scarcely remember the rest of the climb. I don't want to. I know Tash kept me walking near the edge of the stairs, and I seem to recall my own voice whimpering and pleading with him, and his jeering. If he had really intended to question me, he had forgotten all about it, so greatly was he enjoying himself. When we finally reached the top the guards opened a door, untied the rope binding my hands, and shoved me in the direction of a bed. I lay on it curled up in a ball like a frightened child, and they slammed the door behind them as they left.