

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 6

My Darkest Hour

I lay shivering in the darkness for some uncountable time, until I had recovered enough to begin wondering if my hand had really swollen as large as it felt. I finally gathered the courage to move the fingers, cautiously, and since I could feel no grinding of bones, I decided nothing was broken there. More likely a rib; something stabbed into my side with every breath. At least my cut lip had stopped bleeding.

The bed I lay on was narrow and not particularly soft. I realized that there was a blanket on it, which when I pulled it up proved to be of a scraggy wool, worn thin by use. Dusty, too. I sneezed violently several times as I wrapped it around me, and broke open my lip again, not to mention the lancing pain in my side. I huddled into myself for warmth, still tasting the metallic saltiness of my own blood.

I dozed, and when I woke again saw cracks of light outlining a rectangle in the darkness. Fumbling my way across, I found the bolt of the outer door and opened it. A bitter wind streamed in with the gray light of an overcast winter's day. I saw that I was in a semi-circular room, perhaps four paces in diameter, with two rough wooden doors at opposite sides. The one I had just opened led to the parapet at the top of the tower. I stepped out cautiously, squinting. The walkway around the top of the tower was two paces wide, protected by a wall too low for comfort. The sun was setting in an orange flare behind the black peaks to my left. To my right I could see some of the courtyards and buildings of Stanets, black and gray bulks pricked with yellow where fires were lit for the evening. I could not see any activity in the dusk, and the rising wind swept away any sound. The wind bit with the child of winter. I went back inside.

Near the inner door, built into the wall, was a large wardrobe. Opening it, I was grateful to find several thicker, softer blankets. I lay down again, wrapped in all of them, and slept through the night.

The next morning someone must have remembered me, for the inner door opened at an early hour, and a frightened servant brought breakfast on a tray. She refused to speak a word, only shaking her head violently in response to my questions. At least she consented to take away the chamber pot, returning with a clean one, as well as water for washing. I was too cold to wash, however, which turned out to be a blessing, for no more water or food was forthcoming, that day or the next. Was this an active policy of torment, or had I simply been forgotten? I went to sleep at dusk, since there was still no light in the room. There was a fireplace in one corner, but I saw no wood, nor any way to light a fire.

By the following night I was too hungry and too bored to fall asleep easily. I lay staring at the darkness. I tried leaving the outer door open to see by starlight, but winter had definitively arrived, to judge by the keen wind that blew precisely from the north, the direction the door faced. I shut it again, bolted it, and groped my way back to bed.

I had finally drifted into uneasy dreams when a tremendous crash woke me, followed by a blast of wind. I sprang awake with a hoarse yell and cowered against the wall. A figure was silhouetted in starlight. The door banged again in the wind.

“Seaborn?”

It was Teja. I was too stunned to answer.

“Seaborn, it’s me,” she said.

“I know,” I whispered. She entered, a cloak billowing around her like wings, and pushed the door shut behind her.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. Her hand went to my scabbed lip. “This is healing. Anywhere else?”

“My ribs. My hand.” I held it out to her like a child seeking reassurance.

She took my hand gently - hers were very cold - then released it.

“We need some light. And heat. I’m bone frozen. Is there a torch lit on the stairs?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked.” I didn’t want to think about those stairs.

“I’ll check.” She opened the inner door carefully, and I saw that there was a faint golden light from below. Teja went out, and when she returned had a torch in one hand and several chunks of firewood beneath the other arm.

“Nothing much has changed,” she observed cheerfully. “Firewood’s still stored behind the door, though it looks as if no one has lived here since I left.” Moving quietly and efficiently, she got a fire blazing. Then she closed and bolted the outer door again.

“Now, let me see your wounds.”

I got out of bed with a blanket still wrapped around me and sat on the floor near the fire. Teja took my hand and looked at it carefully, moving the fingers this way and that.

“Nothing broken there, I think. How did it happen?”

“Tash stepped on me.”

Teja looked startled, then grim, her mask of cheerfulness dropped.

“I keep finding more reasons why that man should not live,” she said evenly. “What else did they do to you?”

I reluctantly peeled off the blanket and the rags of my shirt, and showed her the greeny-black bruise that spread over my right side. Teja probed gently, but I gasped when she hit the spot.

“That might be broken,” she said. “They kicked you?”

“No, actually, I did that myself, falling off my horse.”

Teja looked amused. “Couldn’t stay on a horse to save your life, could you?”

She ripped what was left of my shirt into strips, and wrapped them around and around me, tight. Surprisingly, this helped.

“Anything else?” she finally asked.

“No, thank you. You’re an excellent doctor. Now what the hell are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “I knew you were in trouble. I had to come.”

“You knew? How?”

She hesitated. “Seaborn, your blood is in me. However it happened, the bond exists, and it is powerful. I will always know where you are, and when you need me.”

I had a vivid memory of that Ivaldin woman, Dakini, saying: ‘You know how insistent a bond can be, even before Exchange.’ What she had wrongly assumed then was true now.

“Well,” I said grudgingly, “I suppose it’s proving useful.”

“Peter is here as well,” she added, “in the woods a few miles off, with horses.”

“We three seem to be taking turns rescuing each other,” I murmured.

She nodded. “We all owe each other our lives now.” I winced a little at that. Teja was my friend, but I wasn’t sure I liked being beholden to Peter in this way.

Teja motioned me back to the bed and seated herself beside me. “Now tell me what has been happening.”

I told her everything that had happened since I left Hillhouse. When I had

finished, she stared at the fire a while in silence. Finally she said, "Seaborn, let me make love to you." This was a startling non sequitur.

"Why, are you hungry?" I blurted.

"I am not starving. I need not take your blood."

"Then why?"

"For you."

I almost laughed. "After all the times I've tried to seduce you, why now? You are a perverse wench."

She shrugged. "For all you have done for me, it is little enough in return. At the moment, with a winter storm coming on, it's about all I can do to distract you from your troubles. I cannot even bring you food. Well?"

"Well... all right," I said, pretending reluctance. I don't know what prompted me to add: "You can even, um, bite me if you want."

She grinned. "After all your horrors over a little blood to save my life? Now who's perverse?" Then her face became serious and she got to her feet.

She stood for a moment, looking down at me. She was dressed entirely in black, even to a hood which covered her hair, so that her body melted into the night. Her hands and face appeared to float in the darkness. Then she began to undress. I had seen Teja undress once before, but she had been in a hurry then. This was slow, deliberate. Limb by limb, she was born out of the shadows as she peeled off her black clothes and her skin caught the firelight. I was mesmerized by the play of red fire-glow and black shadow on her sinewy curves. Lastly, when all of her clothes lay in a heap on the floor, she reached behind her head and unbound her hair. It flowed over her shoulders, down her back, a liquid red like molten metal. She shook her head, and it blazed in the firelight. Then she came to me.

What use to describe actions, techniques, the movement of flesh on flesh? There is a limit to the number of ways in which two people - or three, or five, or ten - can join their bodies to give each other pleasure. The Ivaldin have catalogued all the possibilities, and I think I've experienced all those I care to. The real interest lies in the combinations of personalities and emotions, rhythms and textures. I now learned, finally, what made Teja unique as a lover.

Yet it is difficult to describe. I suppose it was her sensitivity: she seemed to know every changing whim of my desire before I knew it myself, and she was able to draw out every nuance of pleasure with never a wrong or wasted motion - I never even noticed my hurt ribs or hand. She was the

perfect lover we all dream of, and as she hung above me, I knew why her other lovers had worshipped her like a goddess.

I dozed for some time afterwards, and when I woke was glad to find her still curled in the crook of my arm. She had her back turned to me as she gazed into the dying fire.

“Well, now you know,” she said.

“Yes, I can see why your lovers hated to leave you. But you said you made them forget.”

“Only this.” She turned in my arms to face me, and touched a place on my neck. When she brought her fingers away there was blood on them, gleaming black in the firelight. I winced.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“No, no, I told you you could. It’s just a little... startling. I didn’t even feel it.”

She smiled slyly. “You were quite distracted.”

The storm raged the rest of that night, with snow, wind, and even lightning hurling themselves against Stanets. I shivered, not from cold, but out of the conviction that I could feel the tower swaying in the wind. Teja held me until it finally died down, near dawn. Then she rose and dressed hastily.

“I must get away before sunup,” she said, “or I might be seen climbing down. I’ll come back as soon as I can, and try to bring some food. It never occurred to me,” she said ruefully, “that they would not feed you.”

I nodded. Strangely enough, I no longer felt very hungry.

The next night I was sitting by the fire, morosely chewing on a piece of stale bread. There was a sharp rap on the inner door. I unbolted it, hoping it was the maid bringing food. But it was Teja who stepped in.

“How did you get in from that direction?” I demanded.

“The same way I intend to get you out - a clever combination of stealth and violence. Are you up to it?”

I rose stiffly to my feet, dropping the blanket.

“I can try,” I said doubtfully. “I guess they’ll only kill me if we’re caught. It would help to have something to wear, though.”

“I have thought of that.” Teja unrolled a bundle of clothing, evidently taken from a guard.

“As a disguise, this won’t fool anybody,” I said. “I don’t have horns.”

“It’s not meant to. But you need clothing to stay warm, and this was available. Put this on top.”

‘This’ was a large robe of the type worn by the harem’s female servants. Teja then produced a long cloth which she would several times around my head. The loose end she draped to cover my face from the nose down, hiding my beard and moustache.

“Good enough for a dark night,” she said. “If anyone actually sees us, walk slowly, taking small steps, so they don’t see your boots under the skirt.”

We walked down the tower stairs. I shrank as close as I could to the wall, watching the stone carvings as I passed them, and I could not stop my hands clenching convulsively on any piece of sculpture deep enough to offer a fingerhold. I could feel the well in the center of the tower like a huge beast breathing behind my back, beckoning me to my doom. Teja noticed my discomfort, and dropped back a pace to walk beside me, her hand lightly on my arm, her body between me and death. It helped.

When we reached the bottom I saw where my clothing had come from. A guard and a stout maidservant lay in the alcove, stripped to their underwear. Their color wasn’t good, but I could see that they were still breathing. Teja was also wearing a maid’s robe and turban, but I did not see a second stripped maid in the vicinity.

“Stealth and violence?” I asked softly of Teja. She nodded, smiling slightly.

Teja led me by the hand through dark passages.

“Don’t they ever light torches in these corridors?” I whispered in her ear.

“I doused them,” she answered briefly.

“Step carefully here,” she said some time later. “I left a maid on the floor.” My toes bumped something soft, and I lifted my leg high to step over. I tried to hear whether she was still breathing, but couldn’t tell.

At length we reached a massive door, barred with iron. I could not see it, but heard the dull clang as Teja slipped the iron bolt, and the door sounded heavy as it creaked open. I shivered in the winter air as Teja pulled me outside, then pushed the door gently shut again.

“This is the harem garden,” she whispered. “There’s a door in the outer wall.”

I could see a little now by starlight, and when we reached the outer door I saw that it, too, was closed with two iron bars. Teja slid these aside and examined the lock set into the door.

“Stand back,” she said. She took a run-up and crashed into the door with both feet, striking squarely on the lock. She bounced back and landed on her hip with a soft grunt. But the lock sprang its cover and spat innards over the grass. With some minor fiddling Teja was able to pull its bolt out of the stone door frame, and push the door open. We were free, and so far I apparently hadn’t been missed.

“But you didn’t get in that way,” I said to Teja.

“No, I didn’t. Save your breath for walking right now, however. We’ve got a few miles to go. Here, eat this.” She pressed a sticky lump into my hand. I sniffed and licked it cautiously; it proved to be guur, a brown sugar candy. I ate it ravenously, and felt a temporary burst of energy and warmth as I walked. This was wearing out, however, by the time we reached a clearing in the woods where Peter waited with three ponies. He hugged me, more affectionately than I liked, but said only, “It is good to see you.”

I was more interested in the food he had brought for me: bread, cheese, and dried meat, water and wine. I guped several draughts of wine, then tore into the cheese, stopping only to mount one of the ponies. I left the reins looped around the pommel of the saddle - my pony would follow the others, and I was too hungry to care if it didn’t.

“Where are we going?” Peter asked Teja as she led us off on a track through the trees.

“I did some spying in Stanets; they think that Ashkvan is at the hold of a sheep-lord named Bronno, about five days from here. It’s only a day due north of the Field of Kings.”

I had never heard of this place, but it seemed to be significant, from Peter’s answering grunt.

“He intends to fight, then,” he said.

“He does. In the spring. Traditional time, traditional place. He’s a traditional Khan. But he has no army.”

“Duvalye thought the peasants and sheep-lords would support him.”

“It’s likely. But they have no weapons. For centuries, the penalty for any peasant caught with a weapon has been the loss of a hand. Few of them

even have horses. Most of the nobles - mounted, armed, and trained in fighting - are siding with Vanaksha.”

“I was once a warrior,” said Peter.

“I know,” said Teja. There was a pregnant pause. “I have my own reasons for wanting to help Ashkvan,” she continued, “but you have none so compelling. So I hesitated to ask.”

“Compelling or not, I have reasons,” said Peter. He seemed disposed to leave it at that, but half a sack of wine on an empty stomach had made me reckless.

“Such as?” I asked rudely.

“Oh, revenge, on Teja’s behalf and yours,” he said with equanimity. “And because Duvalye is not here to help as he would have liked. And, after all,” he concluded with a bleak laugh, “I cannot return to Ivaldi anytime soon.”

We rode the rest of the night, and hid deep in the woods during the day - by now this seemed routine. I slept all day, but woke frequently, trying to get comfortable on the hard ground, shifting small stones and branches so that they would not dig into my sore rib. Peter and Teja never slept, as far as I saw. Every time I woke they were sitting up, murmuring together. I felt strangely protected.

The trip took longer than five days, perhaps because we travelled at night - Peter and Teja could see, but the ponies had to pick their way over uneven footing in what was, to them, blind dark.

On the sixth night we reached a village. It was not the first one we had seen en route, but it was the first Teja chose to stop at instead of circling around.

“We must be getting near,” she said. “Time to start asking directions.”

The village was no more than a handful of rough stone huts roofed with slate. Most of the huts’ narrow window slits were sealed from the cold with oiled sheepskins; the headman’s hut was distinguishable by its wooden shutters.

Teja dismounted and rapped on the headman’s wooden door.

“Who’s there?” said a voice immediately from within; he had evidently heard us coming.

“A traveller in need of directions,” said Teja, pitching her voice low and using the masculine forms in referring to herself. That, plus the hood over

her head and the darkness, might allow her to pass for a young man.

“Directions to where?” asked the voice.

“Come out here and speak to my face,” growled Teja. “It is inhospitable to hide your face from one asking your help.” Hospitality is as strong a custom in Meshvir as in Ivaldi; the headman could not refuse without seriously affronting us. Still, with the ‘bandit’ raids of recent years and current political uncertainties, I wondered how often caution had won out over manners. There was silence from behind the door as the headman, too, seemed to be weighing these factors.

“Why do you insist on him coming out?” I whispered to Teja. “You’ve made him nervous.”

“If I can see his face, I can tell whether he lies to me,” she whispered back testily.

“How many are you?” came the headman’s voice.

“Oh, name of the goddess!” Teja exploded. “We are only three, and we will not harm you. If we were bandits we would already have smashed in your flimsy door and dragged out you and your wife and raped your daughters. Now come out here at once before we decide to do it!”

This hardly seemed reassuring, but the logic penetrated. The door opened and the headman came out, followed by two young men, presumably his sons. All carried thick, knobby staves shod with iron, which worried me. But we had the advantage of being mounted, and they looked more defensive than aggressive.

“As you can see, I have no daughters,” said the headman sulkily.

“We would not harm them if you had,” said Teja. “Thank you for showing your face.” She dismounted and bowed. I wasn’t sure whether Peter and I were expected to do the same, but I felt safer mounted, and I knew that Teja could be back on her pony and away in an eyeblink.

But the three men relaxed; Teja on her own two feet was shorter than they by half a head, and did not look as threatening as she had sounded. The headman tucked his cudgel under his arm and returned Teja’s bow.

“Where are you bound, strangers?” he asked.

“We seek the hold of sheep-lord Bronno.”

The headman looked suspicious again. “Why?”

“I don’t see that that is any business of yours,” Teja said stiffly.

“Bronno is my lord, and I protect him. I want to know why a young

nobleman from the court and two foreigners come riding at night seeking him.”

Teja paused, then said slowly, “We have business with a guest of his, who, you may believe, will be glad to see us.”

The headman thought it over. “We will guide you,” he said finally.

“Do you have horses?”

“No, but on these paths we can walk as quickly as horses dare travel. Give us a few minutes to prepare.” The three vanished into the hut. Teja remounted.

“Why are you allowing this?” I asked.

“We have no choice,” she shrugged. “We would never find the place on our own, and they will not simply give us directions because we could be spies planning an attack. By accompanying us they guarantee our good intentions.”

“How do they know we won’t kill them as soon as we’re in sight of the place?”

“Either they are confident because they know the terrain, or they expect to meet friends along the way. Or both.”

The headman and his sons re-emerged. Their feet and calves, formerly bare, were wrapped in sheepskins tied with cords, and they wore thick sheepskin vests. Their staves now did duty as walking-sticks.

The headman gestured towards a small path leading out of the village to the northwest. Teja led, I followed, then Peter, and the three men on foot brought up the rear. I saw doors opening and faces peering out cautiously as we left; from the headman’s house the weathered face of his wife watched us go, expressionless. I could not tell whether she was concerned for the safety of her men.

We travelled the rest of the night on that path. The waning moon rose soon after we left the village, giving enough light to allow us to pick up the pace slightly, but the headman and his sons had no difficulty keeping up with our ponies. We all tramped without speaking, the vast mountain silence broken only by the crunch of hooves on stone. The men behind us made nearly no sound in their sheepskin boots.