

KASHMIRA: THE SNAKE CHARMER'S WIFE

INTRODUCTION

A young boy called Juan Phillipe Delgado lived a life of luxury in a mansion that overlooked the glorious if somewhat imperfect city of Barcelona, but on the streets down below, it was a world of poverty and misery.

His father was a gentleman of the times and a wealthy shipping magnate who saw that his son had the best of everything. Juan knew from an early age that he would eventually take over the family business and often accompanied his father from one seaport to another. In the summer of 1844, they set sail for Japan.

His mother accompanied them to the harbour and held Juan's hand until it was time to board the boat. She was never at ease when her husband took long sea voyages.

It was an overcast day in July of 1844 when the ship set sail from Barcelona harbour. Juan Phillipe stands on the outer deck watching as the city disappears into the distance.

He has no idea that he is leaving his homeland behind or that it would be many years before he saw the face of his mother again.

She knew instinctively that something was wrong, but it was far too late to do anything about it, and all she could do is pray for his safe return.

It is just before sunrise of the third day when the ship encounters a storm at sea. Dark storm clouds loom ominously overhead.

The wind starts to howl and the ship rolls from side to side. Juan Phillipe leaps from his bed and races up on deck, only to see a sight such as he could never have imagined.

A few moments later, the ship is engulfed by twenty-foot waves. The prow rises up into the air and the bridge house is ripped from its moorings. The most gut-wrenching sound of all are the screams of the ill-fated crew as they disappear into the depths of the ocean.

The formidable hand of nature reaches down and sweeps the boy over the side, and when the storm finally subsides, there is nothing left, other than a tangle of broken boards.

By morning light, the beach is scattered with debris from one end to the other. Juan Phillipe was the only survivor of that ill-fated voyage, but if it had not been for a snake charmer called Govinda, he may never have survived at all.

THE GYPSY CAMP

On the night of the storm, dark clouds gather in a deep blue sky, the winds are howling and monstrous breakers are rolling onto the shore. Govinda closes the shutters and takes refuge in the house along with his family.

If it had not been for the generosity of his Master, Govinda would never have been able to afford a tract of land to the south of Galkissa. He had chosen a dramatic site on a headland overlooking a rocky beach and it was here that he built a home for his family.

It is the day of Kashmira's tenth birthday, and a day that he has been dreading. He is up earlier than usual, and with his wife and daughter by his side, they head down to the beach. Normally it would be to check on a few crab pots, but on this morning, the beach is littered with debris from one end to the other.

'What happened Tada?' Kashmira says.

'A ship went down in the storm. Perhaps we should look for survivors.'

At the far end of the beach they find a boy with a gash on the side of his head. Govinda and Suleka knew that they would have to raise someone else's child, a boy who would play a significant role in their daughter's life.

The boy is bedridden for several days and when he finally recovers, he is in a state of shock. Kashmira is entranced by this golden haired boy, but she is all too conscious of the look of loss and despair on his face, so she makes it her mission to look after the handsome young boy with glistening green eyes.

'That's the boy my Master spoke of,' Govinda says. 'But what will we do with him?'

'My brother Raja might know,' Suleka says. 'Perhaps we talk to him.'

They pack up their wagon and head north to a remote beach settlement frequented only by gypsies. And when they arrive at Raja's camp, they are welcomed with open arms.

Raja is a handsome young man in his early thirties with a pale brown complexion and vibrant brown eyes. He wears nothing other than a pair of loose fitting pants, a leather vest, and a chain of gold around his neck.

He has been sitting around a fire with several other men but gets to his feet when he hears the sound of dogs barking. Company is the last thing he expected at this time of the day, but when he sees who it is, he races down to greet them.

‘It’s wonderful to see you again,’ he says. ‘But who is that boy?’

‘We found him on the beach after a shipwreck,’ Govinda says. ‘And I am going to raise him as my son.’

‘Then it would be a good idea to teach him our ways.’

‘Kashmira is doing a good job of that. He follows her around everywhere. And she has even named him Roshan.’

‘And does he answer to that?’

‘He does, strangely enough.’

The sound of laughter, dancing and music filled the air that night. Suleka has not performed in front of an audience for many years, but this is a night of celebration, and Raja wants to see her dance.

‘In that case, you are in for a treat,’ she says. ‘But our act is a family affair now.’

Govinda makes himself comfortable in front of a smoking fire, and with his pipe in hand, he summons a mighty cobra with a soulful melancholy tune.

He throws a handful of sulphur onto the fire and Suleka dressed in the vibrant clothes of a belly dancer. leaps into the flames.

And when it’s all over the music fades away, Govinda returns the cobra to the basket and they get a resounding round of applause. Govinda’s fame has not spread far and wide but he is famous amongst his relatives.

Kashmira rises early the next morning, only to find a very lost and lonely Roshan sitting quietly under a tree. She wanders over to the fire and scoops some seasoned rice into two wooden bowls.

‘Would you like some?’ she says.

Roshan mumbles something under his breath, pecks away at the rice and then puts it to the side.

Kashmira is all too aware of his pain and agony, so she picks up two wooden balls and starts to juggle.

To her surprise, for the first time in a week, she sees a spark of life in his eyes.

‘Stand up and I will teach you how to do this.’

‘Firstly, you have to keep your back straight and keep your eye on the balls,’ she says as she demonstrates.

Roshan watches closely as the balls fly through the air in perfect formation. The dappled sunlight streaming through the forest adds a touch of magic to what he sees.

To a boy whose mind is a blank canvas, this is a wondrous thing to behold. In that moment, Roshan takes a long deep breath and comes back to life.

‘Now you try,’ Kashmira says.

He starts with one ball and then another and it’s not long before he is juggling three balls at once. Everyone including Raja and Govinda stand up and take notice.

‘He’s a fast learner,’ Raja says. ‘That knock on the head didn’t do too much damage. I wonder where he comes from?’

‘I have no idea,’ Govinda says, ‘but I agree, he definitely has talent.’

‘Maybe Ravanna can shed some light on this situation. Let’s take him over and see what she has to say.’

‘Roshan, I would like to introduce you to the local soothsayer,’ Govinda says.

The moment he sees a woman of immense proportions step out of a caravan; Roshan is immediately worried.

‘What do you know about him,’ Ravenna says.

‘Nothing at all. He was shipwrecked on our beach and we don’t even know his name, but Kashmira has decided to call him Roshan.’

‘Leave him with me,’ Ravenna says. ‘I might be able to find out something.’

Govinda and Raja watch closely as she takes Roshan by the hands and looks deep within.

‘That boy is going to marry Kashmira one day,’ Govinda says.

‘How do you know that?’

‘My master told me.’

‘And who is he?’

Govinda relates the story of a most unusual man who appeared in his life many years before, of the strange and wonderful things he could do, and how he trained him to be a snake charmer.

‘I have often wondered about you,’ Raja says. ‘Does Suleka know any of this?’

‘Yes, she does, and she has even met my master.’

‘But there’s more, isn’t there?’

‘My master told me that they have something important to do, but he didn’t say what it was.’

‘I am glad you told me this Govinda.’

‘Why is that?’

‘You never know, I might be able to help. But it looks as if your boy is having trouble. Come on, we had better check this out.’

‘It’s okay Roshan,’ Govinda says as he takes him by the hand. ‘Everything will be alright.’

‘He has been through something that no one would ever want to experience,’ Ravenna says. ‘The boy is in shock; you don’t have to be a fortune-teller to see that. But I had a glimpse of his future. I saw a love that nothing could surpass.’

‘With Kashmira?’ Govinda said.

‘Yes, they have something special to do.’

‘In that case, young man, welcome to your new family.’

Kashmira has been watching closely and races over to see what’s going on.

‘Tada, what did you do to him?’

‘Nothing, my darling, but I would like you to look after Roshan. And I want you to teach him everything you know.’

‘What do you mean Tada?’

‘Roshan has a new family now, and we have to look after him. Can you do that?’

‘Yes, I can Tada.’

She takes him by the hand and says, ‘come with me Roshan. I will look after you.’

‘I would like to meet this master of yours,’ Raja says.

‘And why is that?’

‘He obviously knows something. He places the lives of two orphans into the hands of another orphan.’

‘In that case Raja, I will need all the help I can get.’