

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 1

A Wand'ring Minstrel Eye

We decided to return to our original plan, that I would go to Stanets and try to discover what was going on there. Teja and I picked up where we had left off in my Mesh lessons, and after several morens of intensive drilling I could speak the language passably, and understand it better than I spoke it.

“It might be useful not to speak so well at first,” said Teja. “People never realize how much you understand if you don’t speak much. Then they tend to let you hear things they otherwise might not.”

We agreed that it would be better, at first, for me not to side openly with Ashkvan and his cause. A neutral observer was likely to learn more, and could thereby eventually be of more help. Or so we hoped. But she loaned me the signet ring that her brother had given her long ago, the one which had allowed her to escape from Stanets.

“When the time comes, this will serve as proof that I have sent you. Remember, Ashkvan probably believes me dead, eaten by wolves or something, since no one ever found me or my corpse when they searched. Or perhaps Vanaksha and Tash have now told him I was a demon and that they killed me. The idea that I could have escaped was simply inconceivable.”

I did not wear the ring on my finger, naturally, but kept it in a leather pouch on a thong around my neck.

As part of my travelling kit, Teja brought me a Meshvid *shaal*, a long rectangle of gray-brown wool, not the fine stuff worked by the Ivaldin, but a rough material redolent of sheep.

“It’s made from the long upper hairs which protect the sheep from rain and snow,” Teja explained. “What they send to Ivaldi for weaving is the soft, feathery undercoat, which is lighter and warmer. This, however, is waterproof, because of the sheep-oil.” I wrinkled my nose at the smell. “You’ll get used to it,” she laughed. “Now, do you know how to wear this?”

I pulled it clumsily around my back, draping it over my shoulders where it hung sadly limp, like a dead animal.

“No, no,” said Teja. “Like this.” She took it from me and whirled it through the air. Somehow it came to rest draped gracefully around her. I hadn’t followed the operation at all, and shook my head.

“Here,” she said, “I’ll do it for you.” She hung one corner over my right shoulder, then walked around me with the other end, which she finally pulled across my chest and draped over my left shoulder. I raised my arms experimentally. I was well covered front and back, and the shaal clung to me, showing no signs of slipping, yet my arms were free to move.

“Now you look Mesh,” said Teja, “except for the face, of course. But the idea is protection from the weather rather than disguise. You can pull up a fold of the shawl to cover your head as well.”

She went on to explain the route to Stanets, and together we packed up my saddlebags and saddled one of the mountain ponies. I had to leave behind my new log; what was already written in it would be dangerous to me (and to Teja) should anyone in Stanets read it. By the same token, I could not afford to write anything but the sketchiest of notes while I stayed there. I reluctantly decided not even to bring any paper, to avoid the temptation. But I felt as if I were leaving part of myself behind. Thank Goddess for my music!

Teja escorted me to the beginning of the road and wished me a pleasant journey. I checked an impulse to kiss her goodbye, mounted, and rode off. The path, winding in and out as it followed the hillside, soon took a curve that hid her from view.

The journey was not pleasant. It rained most of every day and part of every night, a driving rain at times so heavy that I couldn’t see the path in front of us. The pony and I were wet from the first rainfall (beginning less than an hour after our departure) until the end of the trip, and I could not even get a fire going to make something hot to drink. I ate dried meat and fruit, since I could cook nothing. I had wrapped Duvalye’s guitar in several layers of oiled cloth, but feared that even so the dampness would warp it. With that in mind I pushed the pony and myself as hard as I could, but still it was four long days before I saw Stanets.

On the way I was able to get a closer look at the land of the Meshvid. I could see why no one ever contested with them for the mountains they called home. It was a region the heat-loving Vandali had never wanted, and - it was too grim and forbidding for the luxurious Ivaldin. The Kelessi had their forest, and I had been told that they never left it unless they had to.

Meshvir is a difficult land, even if you like mountains, which I don’t, particularly. Much of the terrain is vertical, bare rock, sometimes thinly cloaked with scrubby tress and mountain weeds. There is water in plenty, but little soil, at least never in the wide swathes needed to make crop-growing profitable. The Meshvid build homes of stone in pocket valleys, and terrace the hillsides to grow just enough fruit and greens to keep their

teeth from falling out.

When they came to this land, centuries ago, the Meshvir brought their livelihood with them: the mountain sheep. These remarkable creatures are nearly as tall at the shoulder as the stumpy Meshvid ponies, and twice as agile. Their sharp black hooves carry them up the cliffs like nothing I've ever seen. They bounce, they soar, and their long coats spread around them like wings, showing their white undercoats as they fly from crag to crag.

The sheep roam freely, ownership marked by tassels of colored yarn in their ears. Each herd is led by a dominant ram, followed and protected by a shepherd and one or several dogs.

The dogs are also big and white, with high-curling tails. I occasionally heard their booming barks echoing among the crags, but face-to-face with a stranger, they were silent. They watched closely as I rode by, but offered no sign either of enmity or friendship. The few shepherds who came within hailing distance were equally withdrawn, and I exchanged no words with them.