

Ivaldi Book 1 Chapter 2

The Font of Knowledge

When I couldn't find work, which was usually, I passed my time idling in the parks and plazas; at least the shade under the trees was cooler than my room. I could no longer pay Carilla, but she often stayed near me anyway. Tourists and business travellers were few in the hot season, and she said she might as well kill time with me as with anyone else.

Unlike most Ivaldin, Carilla couldn't depend on her family. Her mother had died so long ago that Carilla scarcely remembered her, and her father, once a City Guide, and therefore a member of the Guild of Rickshaw-Pullers and Haulers, had become addicted to shishma, a powerful wine. He had been disowned by his clan and Guild, and now scraped a living by various lowly and shady activities. It was his Guide's license that Carilla carried, and he depended on the wages she brought home.

Carilla and I had plenty of time for conversation that season, which suited me, as I thirsted to add to my knowledge of Ivaldi and the lands beyond. At first Carilla found all my questions amusing. "You're like a child," she laughed: "What's this? Why's that? You can't learn it all in a month!" But she was only a child herself, and once I had learned (as I thought) all the basics, I began asking questions she couldn't answer. After one query too many, she said impatiently, "I'll take you to Ozin. He knows everything, and will be only too happy to tell it to you." So she took me to the Cat and Cream Soma House, Ozin's usual haunt, to meet him.

Ozin is a writer, an unusual occupation for an Ivaldin. There is a jati of Tale-Tellers who recite from memory the long epic poems of myth and history by which the Ivaldin define themselves, but the mechanical printing of books is new here (the Ivaldin learned it from the Golden People), and Ozin is one of a handful who make a living at it. He owns a small print shop, where he prints and sells books (written by others as well as his own) on subjects ranging from religion to gardening. His most popular item, however, is a sheet of so-called "news" that he prints daily. He sells hundreds of copies (as many as can be printed in one night for distribution in the morning), and these are passed from hand to hand, particularly at the soma shops. The sheet talks of everything Ozin can find to put in it, from battles in far-off lands to the peccadilloes of Ivaldi's own Great Clans. Ozin sits at the center of Ivaldi's extensive web of gossip, and much of what he hears goes into the news sheet. He would be feared if he were not so loved and respected; though often malicious, he never exaggerates or lies.

Thanks to his various enterprises, Ozin is able to support himself comfortably and to ignore the duties of his ironsmithing clan. It was difficult for me to picture his rotund form clanging at a smith's forge, but I've seen his press by night, with Ozin alternately crouched at a table, scribbling, or standing over the press, swearing at his assistants, and sweating in the intense Ivaldin heat. Then it is hard to tell whether the black smears on his face and arms are ink or coal, and easy to imagine the formidable blacksmith he might have been.

Aside from the news sheet, Ozin writes adventures and romances, some of which he adapts and produces for the stage with great success. But I was fascinated to learn that his life's work, as yet incomplete, is a history of the so-called Four Lands (Ivaldi, Meshvir, Vandália, and Keless). Most Ivaldin are not much interested in history; Ozin was delighted to find a fellow-enthusiast. With the usual complacent Ivaldin pride in his city, he never found it strange that I should be so interested in a country not my own. But perhaps it isn't strange; compared with that of my own country, the history of Ivaldi is so rich and exotic, how could I not find it fascinating?

We spent the whole of that day in the Cat and Cream, the first of many similar sessions. I don't know how many cups of soma I drank, but late that night, when I returned home, my nerves were so jangled with the stuff that I sat up later still to scribble down one of the tales Ozin had told me:

The Six-Fingered Mage

His birth, childhood, training, and early career

The Six-Fingered mage was conceived in Vandália on the first full moon of spring. This day has particular significance in the Vandáli country, for it is the Great Festival, Vasant-utsav, the six-day revel in which the Blue God himself is said to take part. At the culmination of the celebration, on the night of the full moon, every soul in Vandália is intoxicated (the effect of one or many particular substances, or simply of the prevailing atmosphere of divine madness), and all timidity and modesty are flung to the winds. It is ancient wisdom, therefore, that children conceived on this night are considered to be the offspring of Murari, the beloved blue god of the Vandáli. It is believed that he joins in the debauch, sometimes in human guise, sometimes in his own form, and disports with the dusky Vandáli maidens.

Perhaps there is some truth to the idea of divine influence on the children of Vasant-utsav, for they tend to be bright, beautiful, and perfect in every detail. The Mage was not so fortunate. He came to light with six fingers on each hand, much to the consternation of his mother's people, who had eagerly awaited this embodiment of Murari's blessings on their village. They feared that a demon had some how strayed into their revels, and debated what should

be done with the errant mother and her demon-spawn. The elders decided to allow her and the child to live on the outskirts of the village; they were not so cruel as to cast out the unfortunate woman to starve. But they shunned her. Mother and child lived alone and lonely, and the mother wove cloth for sale to travelling merchants.

The child grew, and proved to be intelligent. “A demon’s child would be,” the villagers said sagely. The first lesson he learned, and never forgot, was that a matter so minor as six fingers on each hand had set him apart forever, despised and feared by his own kin. The other children of the village threw stones at him and called him names, until he ran away into the tall bamboo groves to find solace in the green silence and friendship with the animals who lived there. Later he developed an unpredictable temper, and learned to fight back with sharp words and hard fists. But still he preferred the company of the wild things, with whom he could dare to be gentle.

When the boy was sixteen, in a fit of rage he cursed the village headman and beat him nearly senseless. This finally proved his demonic nature as far as the villagers were concerned, so he and his mother were exiled from the village. They went to Ivaldi, where the mother was able to find work as a weaver, and she eventually found a husband who suffered no Vandàli superstitions about her deformed child.

The boy did not begrudge his mother her long-overdue happiness, but neither did he feel welcome in his stepfather’s house. His moody tempers made him no easy housemate, and he missed the freedom of the bamboo forests. He moved into a room in a busy, squalid section of the old city, and supported himself by whatever lowly work he could beg from the Guilds.

One day, sitting idle in a public park, he saw a magician performing small illusions to amuse a gathered crowd. When the show was over, the boy asked him how he had done these things. The magician shrugged. “Magic cannot be explained, my boy. It must be learned.”

“Then teach me,” the boy said. They struck a bargain, that the boy would travel with the magician and tend to his horses and baggage, in return for food, shelter, and apprenticeship.

This wandering performer was a barely mediocre magician. He had neither the natural aptitude nor the devotion to study which characterize the great mages. But even he, after a few days of clumsy instruction, realized that the boy had too great a potential to be wasted on sidewalk magic. Surprised and humbled, he contacted the city’s Kelessi representatives, and told them about his astounding apprentice. Having extracted the promise of a suitable reward, he fetched the boy, who readily agreed to formal magical training at Osatan in the Great Forest, for it is there that great mages are made.

Thus the boy was set on the path to becoming the Mage. Once again he felt himself an outsider, for at eighteen he was much older than any of the beginning students. He caught up quickly, however, completing the twelve-year basic course in five years, and in the advanced courses he outstripped first his peers, then his teachers. By the age of thirty he had mastered the most difficult of magics, the transmutation of living flesh. His teachers urged him to study healing, the supreme magic which benefits all living things, but the six-fingered man, now a mage, refused. There were many healers in the world then, and he preferred to study forms of magic not yet imagined. The Kelessi were worried by this implied arrogance. Individual egotism was foreign to their natures. But they let him go into the world, and in their final report noted merely that he was “unstable and undisciplined, but in no way dangerous to the harmony of Creation.”

Had the examiners known his mind and the full extent of his powers, they might rather have recommended his “peaceable removal” from the harmony of Creation. It had happened before, so it was rumored, that students the Kelessi considered dangerous had disappeared before they had the chance to unleash their magical powers upon the world. But the Mage was careful to hide his true mind, and he left the Forest unhindered. The Kelessi, masters of the lore and theory of magic, never understood where the Mage got his extraordinary and never-duplicated powers. Magic was traditionally practiced with the aid of gestures and words, so they supposed that his six fingers enabled him to make gestures that had never been made before. But later on in his life the Mage ceased to use any visible or audible aids, and his powers continued to increase. The Kelessi elders wondered about pacts with gods or demons, but investigations of the Mage’s past were fruitless, and he offered no information. The time when they might have controlled or destroyed him had passed, and the Kelessi could only hope for his continued good humor and affectionate regard for all living things.

The Mage was uninterested in the Kelessi’s fears or opinions. He was thoroughly engaged in expanding his knowledge of transmutational magic. The transmutation of living flesh (jeev badal) was a skill practiced by only a few mages, all of them healers. It meant the alteration of a living form, done so as to cause no harm to it. This could be for as small a purpose as changing the hue of a flower, or as great a purpose as saving a life. But the effect was confined to the individual being — flower or animal or man — upon whom the change was wrought. The Six-Fingered Mage’s discoveries elevated him from mere magehood to near-divinity, for he learned to make transmutations which affected not only the immediate subject but also its offspring, generation upon generation. He changed not only the substance of life but its very essence, and thus he approached godhood.

Or so the Kelessi would have feared, had they known the nature of his experiments. But he did not reveal his work directly to anyone, nor was he

inclined to thinking himself divine. Rather, the Mage regarded himself as a craftsman of living things, endowed with the ability to make life a little more beautiful, a little more interesting. And this he did, joyfully. Many tales are told of his creations. All of them are incredible, but most are true. He created Ivaldin cats — intelligent, strong, standing tall as a man’s thigh, these cats are so useful and loyal that they quite replaced the dog as “man’s best friend,” and since that time dogs have rarely been seen in Ivaldi — a boon to the sidewalks of the city. Flowers grew brighter, crops hardier, many animals more beautiful and useful under his influence

At this time the Mage had a house in Ivaldi, where he was well-liked and eagerly welcomed at the few social events he could be persuaded to attend. But he was always more interested in his work than in the people who admired it, and spent most of his time at a small stone house he had had built in the foothills between the Great Forest and the mountains of the Meshvid. This was convenient when he wished to go to Osatan to consult the teachers at the magic schools (rarely) or some book from the arcane collection in their library (more frequently). But it was far enough from the Forest that the Kelessi were discouraged from visiting him, and the Meshvid, after their historic encounter with the Mage, steered scrupulously clear of him.

He passed many years in this way, happy with his work and his creations, and not at all interested in his fame, though it spread from Ivaldi to the lands beyond the sea, and brought him invitations to visit many countries, courts, and nobles.

Ozin and I spent countless other sessions like that first, talking late into the night, sometimes in the heat and bustle of the print shop, sometimes at the Cat and Cream, with Carilla curled up on a bench nearby. From Ozin I learned many things about Ivaldi and the lands beyond, from ancient history to modern gossip. I must confess that much of the lore, legend, and history in this volume came first from him, though I was later privileged to have access to documents even rarer and stranger than those in his collection.