

## Ivaldi Book 1 Chapter 5

### More Tales from the Font of Knowledge

I never felt comfortable with Chitra's friends from the Great Clans. I always suspected them of laughing at me. I don't take myself over-seriously, but no one likes to feel that he is being made a fool of. So I stuck to my own friends, especially Ozin, who frequently teased me about my "lofty connections," but always kindly, as if to congratulate me on an enviable piece of fortune.

"If I may, though," he said to me once, "I should like to give you a piece of advice."

"Which is?"

"Don't fall in love with her." He paused. "Or is it too late already?"

I thought for a moment. Did I love Chitra? She was unique in my experience. My relationship with her meant far more than the casual encounters of the past: she was the first woman I truly enjoyed out of bed as well as in it, an interesting human being as well as a willing piece of flesh. But love her?

"I respect Chitra," I finally replied. "I enjoy her company both as friend and lover. But I am not in love with her."

Ozin nodded. "You see," he said, "you have to understand her position —"

"As of yet," I interrupted drily, "I understand only a few of her positions. But I'm learning."

Ozin looked blank for a moment, then roared with laughter. "As - as I was saying," he gasped, "you have to understand her, ahem, position as a leading member of a Great Clan. Like any unmarried woman in this day and age, she is free to take her lovers where she pleases. But, when she marries, it will be to a man from another Great Clan — no lesser Ivaldin, and certainly no foreigner. I wanted to be sure you understood that."

"It's all right by me," I shrugged. "I'm in no hurry to marry, her or anyone else and, as I said, I'm not in love with her."

"Good," said Ozin, and that was the end of that topic. I soon forgot that conversation, but later I had reason to recall it.

Ozin lived on the top floor of a building overlooking Red Hibiscus Plaza, in a quarter of the city not quite as shabby as my own. The first time I visited him there, he welcomed

me into what had once been a reception room, but had now become a private museum and library, cluttered with models of ships and houses, statuettes of gods, people, and animals, theatrical weapons and costumes, and, above all, paper. Bound books, scrolls, and loose sheets were jammed into shelves and strewn across tables. Maps hung crookedly on the walls. Light by which to study all these things streamed abundantly through windows in the walls and ceiling, and showed plainly that most of the collection was in need of dusting.

Ozin cleared off a corner of the divan, eyeing it dubiously as if it might collapse at any moment, and urged me to sit down. I sat carefully, nearly putting my foot on a curious object which I picked up and examined while Ozin went to the kitchen for soma. When he returned, I tried awkwardly to clear a space for the thing without spilling fresh, scalding soma into my lap.

“Just drop it on the floor,” he said. “It won’t break.”

“What is it? Some kind of war helm?” It seemed too fantastically decorated, not to mention flimsy, for such a purpose, but it did look like something to be worn on the head.

“You might say it’s been through the wars.” Ozin chuckled, “but actually it’s a mask, the mask of the Meshvid King. We used it in one of my plays, ‘Harem Nights.’ Did you see it?” I regretted I had not.

“But what are the horns for?”

“Ah. You haven’t heard about the Meshvid?”

“Only vaguely. They live up north somewhere in the mountains. Ivaldin opinion seems to be that they are violent, barbaric, and stupid.”

“As generalizations go, that’s correct. But did you know they have horns?”

“Horns?” I said blankly. I was familiar with the near-universal metaphor for the cuckolded man, and was momentarily distracted with the vision of an entire race whose women made a habit of betraying their husbands. But that seemed to describe the sexually-liberated Ivaldin more than the backward Meshvid.

Ozin interrupted my bemused thoughts. “Horns, like mountain sheep,” he said. “Like these.” He groped on a shelf and produced a small bronze statue of a long-haired sheep with a proud pair of spiralling horns. “The Meshvid raise these sheep for wool and meat, and have horns exactly like them. You’ve never heard the story? Well, then...”

## **The Tale of the Meshvid and the Mage**

The Six-Fingered Mage was never fond of the Kelessi; in their polite contempt for other races, they were reminiscent of the villagers in his birthplace, who had feared and shunned him because he was ever so slightly different from themselves. But he had an

honest desire to recompense the Kelessi for his education, and this he found occasion to do when the Meshvid invaded the Great Forest.

The Meshvid had come from beyond the Snowy Mountains some decades before, and had settled in the high foothills just below the snow line. No one knew how they had crossed the Mountains. It was thought to be impossible, and certainly the Meshvid never offered to go back. The heat-loving plains-dwellers had no use for the cold and craggy hills, so the Meshvid lived there undisturbed, and would have had no trouble had they not gone looking for it.

The Meshvid were herders, taking meat, milk, and wool from their big-horned, sure-footed mountain sheep. Hunting and gathering supplied their additional needs. They knew nothing of farming and were slow to learn, preferring to stick to their traditional methods of survival. But still they flourished and multiplied in their new home, and soon had considerably reduced the game in the immediate territory. Searching further afield, they came to the Great Forest which covered the lower foothills and stretched away over the plains to the south. Here was game — fat, plentiful, and strangely unafraid.

The Meshvid hunted there freely for a brief while, and the animals learned to fear them, but they soon came to the notice of the Kelessi, who know all that goes on in the Forest they tend in the name of the Great Mother. The Kelessi, utterly opposed to any kind of killing, confronted the Meshvid and forbade them to hunt in the Great Forest. The Meshvid laughed at these strange, pale people — so calm, so condescending, seemingly so defenseless — and carried on hunting. The Kelessi defended themselves by the only means they would use: magic. The Meshvid were beset by strange sounds and smells, monsters, sudden floods and storms, and swarms of stinging insects. These inexplicable events frightened the Meshvid, and they retreated to the hills. They had come away from the encounters physically unhurt; the wound was to their pride when they learned that they would never have come to harm at the hands of the Kelessi, who were by choice, belief, and breeding reluctant to injure any living being.

This information came from a wandering minstrel who brayed with laughter as he told the Meshvid: “None of that was real, you see. It was all magical illusion. You only *thought* you saw and heard those things. None of them could really have hurt you.”

The Meshvid had never before encountered magic, or had any reason to doubt their senses. They were astonished and disgusted by a people who would not defend themselves by force of arms, but resorted to vile trickery to drive off their enemies. However, they reasoned, a people who would not fight should be easy to conquer.

The Meshvid resolved on war as the sensible and simple way to expunge their humiliation and take the Forest for their own. Led by their king, Anaksha Khan, a large army set out in full battle regalia for the Forest. Spurs jingled, weapons glinted in the sunlight, and a breeze stirred the banners emblazoned with the Black Ram, the insignia both of the royal house and of Grisa, the mountain god of the Meshvid, whose mount was

the Ram. The king wore his battle crown, a helm of black iron set with a proud pair of curling ram's horns.

Against this brave company stood one man, smiling and unarmed. He awaited them at the Forest's edge, leaning casually against a tree with his arms folded on his chest. He was dressed in no remarkable fashion, nor bore any device or token of rank. Anaksha Khan shrugged to himself. These wretched cowards had no notion of how to properly offer surrender, but simply sent out some undistinguished peon to represent them in their pleas for mercy.

At Anaksha's order the army came to a halt, row upon row of warriors mounted on hardy mountain ponies. "So, little man," the king boomed heartily, "Do you come to challenge me to single combat?" Laughter swept the ranks at his Highness' wit. The man also smiled.

"I could hardly offer you such unequal terms," he said. "I have come to defeat your entire army."

Anaksha Khan roared with laughter; the Meshvid could appreciate braggadoccio, even from weaklings. On regaining his breath he asked, "What terms have you been sent to offer us?"

The man answered forthrightly, and again failed to use any honorific salutation. "Our terms are very simple," he said. "You will turn your army around, march right back home, and never return to this Forest." He continued to smile affably, never moving from his relaxed position. Anaksha Khan began to feel that this miserable madman was not paying him the deference due a conquering monarch.

"Insect! Worm!" he shouted, "Your people had better find another emissary — I am through with this one!" Spurring his horse, sword in hand, he charged at the messenger. The man straightened, standing fearless before Anaksha's rush, and made a sweeping movement with his arms, stretching them wide as if to encompass the entire army. Anaksha Khan suddenly noted that the man had six fingers on each hand. Sparks crackled at his twelve fingertips, and there was a smell of lightning. Then several things happened at once. Anaksha's horse stopped in mid-gallop, pitching the king over its neck to the ground with no regard for royal dignity. All the Meshvid army put their hands to their heads and stared at each other in horror, though none had noticed the king's undignified accident. Rather, each was trying to determine what the heavy weight on his head might be, and his eyes grew wide in shock when he saw that each of his neighbors' heads was now decorated with a massive, curling pair of ram's horns. All the horses were shifting nervously, spooked by the noise and light, and sensing their riders' fear. Anaksha Khan struggled to get to his feet and recover his muddled senses. The six-fingered man was again leaning negligently against his tree, looking entirely harmless. Anaksha hesitated while his army fidgeted and muttered, none of them knowing whether to charge or to flee.

Then the Mage spoke: “Meshvid, you need not fear those horns, for they are yours now, and in any case are only a symbol of your real punishment, which is a curse. The curse is this: beastly you have been and beastly you shall remain, ever barbaric and quarrelling among yourselves, and this will keep you too busy to meddle with peace-loving folk for many generations. When your kind is ready to join the ranks of civilized people, you will no longer have horns, and by then you should know better than to attack your neighbors. Go back to your hills, raise your sheep, and fight like rams among yourselves. Never come to the Forest again, for the moment you set foot here you will lose what little sense you have, and become true beasts. Now go!”

He waved his arms at them, and the Meshvid army broke and scattered, men and horses alike eager to be out of the reach of the terrible Mage. They fled to their hills and crags, and all came to pass as the Mage had decreed. The history of the Meshvid became a long series of internal quarrels and battles, struggles for power and property. They developed some heroic literature, a talent for building massive fortresses of stone, and little else.

As the Mage left the scene of the battle, a Kelessi observer climbed down from a tree and said to him, “Master, I am awed by your power, but I do not see how even you can curse an entire people, generation upon generation, for centuries to come. There are limits to the efficacy of any piece of magic.”

The Mage responded: “You Kelessi think you know all there is of the theory of magic. You have never understood that the true effectiveness of a curse is rooted in the minds of the accursed. The only real magic I made there was the horns. The rest will come true because the Meshvid believe it will, and the horns will merely be ever-present reminders of the fate which they believe is theirs.”

“And what about them going mad upon entering the Forest?” asked the Kelessin a little anxiously. The Mage clapped him on the shoulder.

“Well, my friend, if they believe that, it will certainly come to pass. You will not be troubled by the Meshvid for a long time.” And thus he left the Forest protected by the Meshvid’s own fears.

Of course, the Meshvid soon forgot the embarrassing curse, and came to regard the horns as a virile embellishment, so much so that, many generations later, when boys began to be born without horn buds, these unfortunates were considered inferior and unmanly. If born of noble blood, they were given away to lesser families, or killed at birth. But the Meshvid retained a great fear of magic. They were convinced that the Great Forest was swarming with evil magicians, and that for any Meshvid to enter there meant certain madness. So the Kelessi lived in peace for centuries, and the animals roamed undisturbed in the Forest.