

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 3

Harem Childhood

Teja continued:

“My mother’s position in the king’s harem was unusual. As the magic-wielding foreigner who had cursed Badaksha Khan with impotence, she was feared, respected, and by a few admired. She had a certain status in the harem, and to those women status is everything.

The harem is a closed, claustrophobic world of constant plots and maneuvers for favor and power. The highest position attainable is that of Queen Mother, mother of the king. At the time there was none, Badaksha Khan’s mother being dead. So the Heir-Mother took the top position. She was Gulana, mother of Crown Prince Ashkvan. Wyrana, mother of Second Heir Vanaksha, was the second-status woman of the harem, but had ambitions to be Queen Mother. The struggle between the two ladies was fierce, though subtle.

My mother played the status game, but not by the usual rules; she could not and would not build her influence through the king’s favor to herself or her child. Instead, she fostered her reputation as a sorceress, employing invocations to the Terrible Mother to ensure safe childbirth and healthy babies for the women. She did not really believe in these charms - she no longer placed much faith in the good will of a capricious Goddess who had robbed her of her mother, her home, her position, and her pride. Nonetheless, she was delighted to teach the women the lore of the Mother Goddess. Grisa, the mountain god whom the Meshvid had worshipped since before they crossed the snows, reflected only too well the combative, domineering attitude of Meshvid men; my mother took every opportunity to subvert his influence among the women.

She did have faith in the vengeful nature of the Mother, and believed that She would repay Badaksha Khan and all the others who had wronged Her chosen Novice. She used to put me to bed a night with a sort of chant, saying: “You are the gift of the Mother, and through you She will have justice. You will be the shining sword against my enemies, and your red hair is the bright blood that will cover the blade. Teja you are, my sharp one, my swift one, and you will be the instrument of the Mother’s retribution.”

I did not understand any of it until much later, but I grew up believing that I was somehow chosen for a great and terrible destiny. Mother would recite the evils that had been done her, and cry out, “Who, oh who, will mend these injustices? Who will set the Novice in her rightful place again at the feet of the Mother, and cast down her

enemies who have raised themselves up on the blood of the innocent? Who, O Mother, is the instrument of Your Divine will?"

And she taught me to respond, "I am the sword against your enemies, and I will cast them down in their own blood, and redress the wrongs that the innocent have suffered. I am the tool in your hands, and through me you will have justice!" Then I would usually burst into tears, terrified by the import of words I scarcely understood.

The harem women were at first awed by these performances, but as years of Mother's harping on divine retribution produced no tangible results, they began to regard her as self-serving, and, finally, mad. By my tenth year Mother was indeed deranged, and spent her days in dialogues with the Mother Goddess about the tortures her enemies must even now be suffering. These periods of relative quiet alternated with bouts of hysterical laughter, which the other women found so alarming that they requested her removal to separate quarters. Gulana and Wyrana, the rulers of the harem, soon found a perfect place for mad Kanya and her daughter.

The Black Tower is a tall, slender spire set on the northern wall of the Great Palace of Stanets. In less settled times it must have been a watch tower, but perhaps it also had some now-forgotten ritual significance, for it is completely carved, inside and out, with fantastic figures of beasts, men, and gods, marching in long spirals up the curving walls. The spiral stairs, instead of being built around a solid core of stone, are built out from the wall, around a well of air that plunges down the full height of the tower - there is no rail to this stair. At the top of the tower is its only room, the guard-room, around which runs a sort of balcony encircled by a low wall, hip-high to a grown man for easy viewing in all directions. The room is roughly finished, though its roof is solid enough to prevent leaks even during the monsoon rains.

Years ago, as the harem grew and the need for defense lessened in the peaceful times following the Khans' final conquest of Meshvir, the harem had encroached upon former soldiers' quarters, engulfing the access to the tower stair, though the women had no use for the tower itself. Few of them cared for a long climb whose only reward was a dusty room with a nerve-shattering view. So it was convenient to put Mother up there, where her cackling would be quite inaudible. I shared the room with her, though some nights her moaning and screeching was so horrid that I preferred to sleep in an alcove at the foot of the tower with the snoring maidservant, who was stationed there to respond to our shouts down the stairwell for service, but often affected not to hear.

As Mother's madness worsened, it grew harder for me to stay in the tower with her. But I wasn't wanted in the harem, where the women

and their pubescent daughters giggled and plotted about the princelings the girls hoped to marry. Marriages were arranged by parents, the matches usually decided by rank. I was not considered marriageable, being tainted with my mother's mad and magic blood. Nor was I interested in marriage, a fact which the harem women considered proof of my own madness. Those who did not despise me, pitied me - which was worse.

One day, weeping with rage or sorrow, I ran out the gate of the harem garden onto the open hillside. There was a gentle, grassy slope where the royal children - or at least the boys - were allowed to play. The girls at age eight were shut up within walls. Even the boys didn't have much time for play after they reached age five, when they began military training with the Master-at-Arms. I was too old to be out on the hillside, but the harem guard saw me leave, and didn't try to stop me. He was a eunuch from some land across the seas, fat, with a pasty complexion and pale hair. He had told me once that he had had a sister with hair like mine, so I suppose he felt some affection for me. And he was well aware that my rank was so low that protecting my reputation was not a great concern. For that or whatever reason, he let me go.

Not that I could go far. On the practice field to the east, some distance off, I could see the boys playing some horseback game, raising great clouds of dust. To the north and west were the steep cliffs that protected Stanets, hundreds of feet high. I felt foolish, having dashed so determinedly out of the gate, to find myself alone on the hillside with no idea what to do next.

Eventually I noticed, some way up the cliff face to the north, a small cave-like opening in the rock. It would do as a goal; I set myself to climb to it. It took time, and some scrapes and bruises, but I finally got there. I sat for a while, contemplating Stanets. I was about level with the lower towers, but my own Black Tower was still higher. When it began to grow dusk I climbed down and went back. The eunuch said nothing then, and the next day I went out again, climbing to some temporary freedom, away from the buzz of the harem. It did not occur to me to try to escape completely from Stanets. I would not have wished to leave my mother behind, and in any case I had no idea where I might go.

I was high up the mountainside one day, curled in a niche in the rocks crying over some harem insult, when a gang of young princes found me. Seeing a girl in any context would have startled them; all the boys were removed from the seraglio at age five, and thereafter lived in dormitories, disciplined and instructed by the master-at-arms. They rarely visited their mothers, and women did not touch their lives until they married. To these pup princelings, girls were objects of curiosity, unseeable and unknowable mysteries. And this girl, wild-eyed, red-

haired, perched very comfortably on a jut of cliff that had cost them some effort to reach, was a creature completely beyond their experience or imaginations. But my hair was proverbial throughout Stanets, and they identified me immediately: Mad Kanya's fire-haired daughter. Then the opinions of the group divided sharply. The majority felt that I should be returned to the harem at once, and made to stay there. But a few agreed with Crown Prince Ashkvan that I was harmless and unhappy, and should be allowed what solace the lonely rocks could bring me.

This debate was carried on over my head, with much waving and shouting, but no one asked what I felt. They had learned from their fathers that the feelings of women, like their intellects, were of no account. Eventually the matter was settled by Ashkvan's seniority, much to the annoyance of his second brother, Vanaksha. The sixteen-year-old Crown Prince beamed upon his half-sister, and offered his hand to help me down the cliffside. I stared at him wildly for a moment and then, to his complete consternation, ducked under his outstretched arm and bounded away down the mountainside, as sure-footed as a mountain sheep, and as quickly out of sight.

My brother Ashkvan is in some things very much a Meshvid, and probably he had never given much thought to any of his sisters. But he is not wholly lacking in sensitivity, and it was with genuine concern that he came to the harem the next day to inquire after me. As Crown Prince, he had free access to the seraglio and to the all-important power within its walls, his mother. It was to her that he went first to learn about the witch's daughter. Gulana was perturbed by her son's interest in me, the child of the harem pariah, but it was from herself, after all, that Ashkvan got his kind heart, and she could not help softening at his account of my misery. So she sent for me, a summons I had been half-expecting. I thought punishment was sure to follow. But Ashkvan was there and, to my great surprise, they merely wanted to talk to me.

I did not know Gulana well. Mother was never a member of any of the harem cliques, least of all those of Gulana and Wyrana, the top two hens in the coop. Mother kept herself aloof from them all, and perforce so did I.

What I did know were the public facts and private gossip that circulated through the court and harem. Ashkvan, the first-born of Gulana, Badaksha's first wife, was by law the heir to the throne. But he was already in difficulty, long before he could expect to take that throne, because, although the eldest, he was not Badaksha Khan's favorite son.

You know already that Meshvid men have horns, like sheep? It's supposed to be a sign of virility. Well, Ashkvan has none. It was a terrible blow to Badaksha's pride that his first son was born without horn-buds. Probably that accounts, at least in part, for his dislike of Gulana, and for his harem being larger than had recently been common, even for kings. He had to keep siring children, to prove his manhood. Luckily for him, all his subsequent sons have had horns, so he could blame Ashkvan's deficiency on Gulana.

The second heir, son of Badaksha's second wife, Wyrana, is Vanaksha, a full-horned, thick-headed lout. An able warrior, of course, but not good for much else. Spoiled rotten by his mother, who schemes to have him take the throne instead of (or from) Ashkvan. Badaksha indulges him disgustingly, and hints that, custom and law notwithstanding, he would prefer to have Vanaksha rule after him. Meshvid custom is very strict about succession; there have been many bloody struggles over kingdoms and fiefdoms, and most Meshvid are anxious to avoid repeating that part of their history.

Gulana, of course, advocates lawful succession. Gossip had it that she had been strong-willed even as a girl, and that the king had always feared her temper. She was a lioness in defense of her only child, Ashkvan (after the great humiliation of Ashkvan's lack, Badaksha would not risk any further attentions to her which might result in more deformed children).

Perhaps her lack of other children also meant that she had maternal impulses still unslaked. Whatever the reason, she was kind to me, and I welcomed her warmth, and Ashkvan's. They took an interest in me - and it was the first time anyone had cared. There was nothing to be done about Mother, of course. No Meshvid healer would even go near her. But Gulana and Ashkvan were determined at least to give me some respite from her madness.

With Gulana's permission, I began going out with Ashk and his small circle of friends, learning to ride, and leading them up the perilous routes to the clifftops. The old biddies of the harem, the half-sisters of Badaksha Khan and former concubines of his father who made it their business to enforce rigid adherence to Meshvid tradition, could not sanction this breakage of law and custom, but Gulana, ruling in the stead of the dead Queen Mother, argued that a child with so few hopes in life should be allowed some compensation, at least temporarily. Her power and prestige in the harem were high at the time, for she had recently acted as midwife at the difficult labor of Badaksha Khan's latest favorite, a girl too young to be bearing. Gulana had saved the lives of mother and child (a boy), and earned Badaksha's gratitude. Relations between them had been strained for years, but now there was an interlude of peace. Wyrana, no doubt, was livid. She was well

known to be useless in the birthing room, and had wailed like a banshee through the births of her own four sons. Meshvid women, like Meshvid men, consider it a sign of weakness to show pain.

Ashk and I also spent quieter times together, and he taught me to read and write. In a few short months I was able to read, ponder, and discuss with him the most difficult books in his collection - admittedly, his collection wasn't extensive. I learned quickly because I had little else to do, and because I adored my brother and wanted to please him. Ashkvan himself had an unusual tutor, and since no one else in Stanets seemed to appreciate the things he was learning, he was happy to teach them to me.

Ashkvan told me about his teacher, Duvalye, a foreigner who had lived for some years on a small estate in the lower hills, four days' journey from the capital. He had come to the notice of the court ten years before, when Badaksha Khan had been wounded in one of the mock brawls which Meshvid nobles stage to amuse themselves, now that they lacked real wars to keep them busy. The wound had turned septic, and Meshvid traditional medicines had failed. Badaksha's life was despaired of, for of course he would not allow a Kelessi healer near him, when someone recalled hearing of a foreigner living nearby who had had medical training overseas, and had effected several near-miraculous cures without the use of magic. Duvalye was summoned, and he did heal the wound and save the king's life. In extravagant gratitude, and shrewd recognition of the man's usefulness, Badaksha invited him to be his court physician, but Duvalye politely refused. He agreed to come when sorely needed, but begged to continue living his chosen life of solitary study on his remote estate. Nonetheless, Badaksha insisted on inviting him to the parties and feasts frequently held at Stanets, and those invitations that Duvalye could not avoid, he accepted. He was present at the confirmation of Ashkvan as Crown Prince when the boy turned eight, and had passed the perilous stage at which children all too frequently died of one thing or another. Ashkvan was the heir apparent, and Duvalye took an interest in him.

With Badaksha's blessing, Duvalye began supplementing the boy's palace education with reading and discussions far beyond the rudimentary history, geography, and figuring which comprised the book-learning of young Meshvid nobles. Ashkvan's natural inclination to ponder his world and its ways were encouraged by Duvalye's strange method of asking and answering questions, rather than reciting and calling for rote replies. If Badaksha Khan had known what his son and heir was learning, he might have put a stop to it. Ashkvan was absorbing ideas which no Meshvid had entertained before, ideas intended to radically alter Meshvid society and history when he came to the throne. But neither Badaksha nor any member of his court was

interested in discussing philosophy with the boy, a fact on which Duvalye had counted.

As Ashkvan grew older, however, Duvalye came less often, which puzzled and hurt the prince. Duvalye wished to fade from the scene long before Ashkvan took the throne, so that the prince's new ideas would not be attributed, as at least in part they should be, to a meddling foreigner.

Ashk eagerly discussed with me the questions of government and justice posed to him by Duvalye and the books he supplied. These were very abstract problems for me, but a welcome distraction from Mother, who was growing more feeble and withdrawn. She seemed never to sleep, but spent her nights as she spent her days, calling down vengeance upon her tormentors (real and imagined), or cursing the Goddess who gave her no justice. She could scarcely be persuaded to eat or clean herself, and I was grateful for the escape Ashkvan provided.

It was during a bone-jarring monsoon thunderstorm that Mother's madness at last destroyed her. She had not left the tower room for nearly a year, for she feared the carved figures writhing on the inner wall of the tower, and would cry that they were coming up the stairs to devour her. When the storm broke, she at first welcomed it as a sign of the Mother Goddess's divine wrath, and cackled shrilly back at the lightning. But as she stood looking out from the window, it seemed to her that the lightning flashes revealed the stone creatures, climbing up the inside of the tower and crawling towards her through the door. In terror she climbed onto the parapet, shrieking, "The demons! The stone demons!" She flung herself over the edge with a wail of despair that echoed oddly through the firing slits into the well of the tower, then was abruptly cut off. I was at that moment climbing the inner stairs to visit her, and her cry flew past me like the accusation of a ghost.

The harem was much shaken by Mother's death, so the cremation was done with as little ceremony as would suffice to soothe the restless spirit, and the incident quickly hushed up. With characteristic sensitivity, Ashk had never asked much about Mother, and he said nothing now.

Several of the royal cousins were not so thoughtful. When I was next out riding they asked morbid questions, and Ashkvan's hissed commands to "Shut up, you fools!" were ineffective. Their smirking comments goaded me to fury.

"After all," said Tash-ur-Zarul, a skinny and insolent second cousin, "We ought to keep a close watch on the Crown Prince's companions,

lest they prove a danger to him. Madness often passes from mother to daughter.”

Without even thinking, I gathered my feet under me in the saddle and sprang at him. The impact carried him off his own horse to the hard ground, knocking the wind out of him. This gave me the opportunity to land a fist squarely on his thin, aquiline nose, entirely spoiling its aristocratic shape. Straddling him in the dirt, I tried to hit him again, but Ashkvan and others hauled me away. When he could stand, Tash charged at me, bellowing with humiliation, but he was forcibly escorted back to the castle to be bandaged. All the way he yelled imprecations and threats against “the witch’s brat,” while I sobbed on Ashkvan’s tunic.

That momentary release turned out not to be worth the price I paid for it. The incident could not be hushed up, especially as Tash complained - loudly, unmanfully, and to anyone who would listen - that the sorceress had used magic to defeat him. The harem elders agreed it was high time I was confined; at fifteen I was old enough to be married, though it was unlikely I ever would. Nonetheless, my behavior was a scandal that would reflect badly upon the entire harem. My outdoor activities ended, and my meetings with Ashkvan to read and talk were curtailed by the Crown Prince’s increasing absorption in learning to run a kingdom.

Although I had heard the court gossip about the questions of Ashkvan’s succession, he never spoke to me of his troubles, nor did I ever discuss him with anyone, though the gossip circuit soon realized that I had become his favorite sibling, and there were those of various factions anxious to use me for or against Ashkvan. Wyrana sometimes went out of her way to inflict small miseries upon me, but never anything too terrible. She, like all the others, constantly calculated shifts and balances of power. If Ashkvan eventually took the throne, and I was still his favorite sister, I would wield a great deal of power in the harem, and might then take revenge. Who knew, I might even marry, so much would my status be improved. But all these speculations hinged upon Ashkvan and whether he survived to wear the crown.

I was not thinking of the future; so far as I could imagine, it would not be much different from the present, and that was bad enough. I hated being kept indoors, and I could expect to be shut in for the rest of my life. I felt closest to freedom on the battlements of the Black Tower, where I now lived alone. The maidservants, convinced the place was haunted by Kanya’s unhappy spirit, could not be forced to sleep there with me. I preferred it that way; it was the only place I had any privacy. At night I would stand nude on the parapet, enjoying the keen wind against my skin, wishing that I, too, could drop from that height,

but with wings to catch and lift me, high above the palace, to fly to the distant ocean I had read of and sometimes thought I could see.