

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 7

A House in the Hills

Towards evening of the third day, Teja had the barge crew drop us at a nameless place that she knew. No village distinguished it; only a rickety wooden dock extending into the water, at the end of a thin dirt track winding down from the hills. We watched the boat out of sight, then loaded Peter onto a horse and trotted away.

After another night and day of riding, we arrived finally at Duvalye's retreat, an ancient stone house tucked away in the foothills of the Meshvid kingdom. If Teja felt any qualms at returning to Meshvir, she did not show them.

The place had been looked after by an old couple, servants of Duvalye, who seemed unsurprised at our sudden appearance. They were clearly pleased to see Teja, welcoming her as the mistress of the house.

Peter remained unconscious, and though Teja often sat for hours on a chair next to his bed, she made no attempt to rouse him. At other times we explored the house together. It had many cupboards and shelves, most of them closed and locked, but Teja had brought Duvalye's keys from Ivaldi. She told me that Duvalye had kept his most secret books here, many of them histories he had collected or written himself of events few living remembered. There were other volumes still more ancient, some written in languages neither of us could recognize.

Teja unapologetically selected for me the books I could read. "These are not mine to give," she said, "and I must be careful. When I myself understand the significance of the others, I will give them to you."

So I began reading the ancient myths and legends of Ivaldi and Vandália, including geography, natural history, and the origin of the Ivaldin race. Teja gave me a leatherbound book of blank pages in which to take notes and keep up my log. "It was Duvalye's," she said. "He certainly would approve of your use of it."

Teja began reading Duvalye's most recent diaries, concentrating on his observations of the Meshvid court. He had been very methodical, with separate volumes labelled for each region or subject he studied and observed. When she finished the latest volume in the collection, she seemed disturbed. I asked why, and was surprised that she handed me the book immediately.

*Excerpted from Duvalye's Notebooks:
A Brief Social History of the Meshvid*

After the tribes came over the mountains, Meshvid society settled into feudalism. The shepherds and their flocks, mainstay of the Meshvid economy, were controlled and protected by a cadre of lords evolved from tribal chieftains. In the centuries of strife following the ignominious retreat from the Kelessi Forest, lords and soldiers were needed to defend the herds from the depredations of other lords and their followers. With the final conquests and unification of the clans under the House of Khan, the nobility were forcibly moved to Stanets where the kings could keep an eye on them, and most of their provincial forts and castles were destroyed. The serfs flourished without them, and in the new era of peace the shepherds were able to enlarge their flocks and widen their pastures.

The Meshvid began sending raw wool to Ivaldi, where the Ivaldin turned it into beautiful cloth. Though their own climate rarely required the warmth of the fine Meshvid wool, the Ivaldin started a prosperous trade with colder countries across the seas, even sending some finished goods back to the Meshvid, who were not as skilled at dying and weaving. The trade benefitted the Meshvid; as demand increased for their light, soft wool, they were able to trade it for more than the basic food required to sustain them. They have begun to enjoy a standard of living hitherto undreamt.

Their prosperity is hindered, however, by the court. Nobles breed as readily as sheep, particularly now that they have no wars to keep their numbers down. For generations they have grown fat on the taxes levied on their hereditary lands, though they keep up their martial traditions in case the peasants should object. Commoners who become too wealthy or ambitious are raided, their homes burned, sheep killed, and daughters raped. The court always blames these attacks on brigands and sends out a host of armed nobles swearing vengeance, but no robbers are ever caught. Because the commoners are forbidden weapons or training in arms, they cannot defend themselves.

Still, the commoners are slowly acquiring the power that comes with wealth, and Crown Prince Ashkvan is among the first to realize that reform will be necessary if the court and kingdom are to survive. He travels often in the provinces, talking with the local sheep-lords, listening carefully to their complaints and suggestions. The more thoughtful among his opponents and supporters realize that his growing popularity with the peasants could be a decisive factor in a succession struggle.

The reflective qualities Ashkvan inherited from his mother, which I have done my best to encourage, are not best calculated to please his father. He is utterly the opposite of his loutish brother Vanaksha, and Meshvir's choice of its next king will be a turning point in its history.

Though the succession has been regular and peaceful for several generations, succession struggles are a familiar theme in Meshvid history, and some of the Meshvid nobles are spoiling for a fight, any fight, after long years of peace. However, this battle for the crown, if it comes to that, would be different from those of the past. Even the dullest of the courtiers vaguely perceives that the two princes represent a much greater contrast than traditional masculinity versus lack of the same. Ashkvan is of a new breed of Meshvid, different from his forefathers in ways that his lack of horns merely symbolizes. I have taught him new ideas about the just and sensible way to run a kingdom; the openness to those ideas and desire to put them into action are entirely his own. He has already argued with his father on several points, and the Meshvid lords have good reason to fear that his succession would bring unwelcome changes to their traditional ways and attitudes.

Vanaksha is a great comfort to the reactionaries. Brash, proud, and a bit thick, he is every inch the ideal Meshvid. His favored method of raising state revenues, as he once told his father in council, would be highway robbery. Were the Meshvid not traditionally afraid of the sea, he might also have advocated piracy. Outsiders observers of the Meshvid political scene (I am not the only one, though Badaksha seems unaware of any of us, and we do not openly acknowledge each other) are troubled by the possibility of Vanaksha coming to power. He is too stupid to remain on the throne for long; some of the more intelligent and greedy nobles already plot to depose him. But he would likely cause a lot of trouble before he fell. He might even be foolish enough to challenge the Kelessi, who have grown more powerful, more devious, and more fanatical than they were in ancient days.

Ashkvan has his supporters in court, though they are fewer than his brother's. A few elder nobles are not much interested in his new ideas, but fear slipping back into the pattern that so long tormented Meshvir - bloody succession struggles, years of anarchy. Badaksha has had an easy reign, but the older lords remember their fathers' tales of the long fight to secure his father on the throne. The Khans have held Stanets for generations, but it has rarely been easy for them.

Most of Ashkvan's supporters are a new generation of Meshvid, a small coterie of young men who see and welcome the changes he would bring. What they most applaud, and their opponents most fear, is the Crown Prince's interest in commoners.

Badaksha Khan gives overt support to neither faction. Still young and strong (he is fifty this year), he has no intention of giving up his throne until he makes up his own mind about the succession, and is in no hurry to make that decision. Though by law and custom the throne should go to the eldest son of Gulana, his first wife, Badaksha could

always have Ashkvan assassinated. But he bides his time. Though he despises what he sees as weakness in Ashkvan, he does not seem to think much of Vanaksha's wit, either. I suppose he is waiting for either son to display qualities as yet unsuspected which might sway him to a decision.

Duvalye's notes broke off seven years earlier, when he took Teja to Ivaldi. He had not returned to the mountains before his death. Though he had told Teja how he came to be involved with Meshvir and her brother, they had not talked much about it after they moved to Ivaldi. She had wished to forget most aspects of her life there, and I suppose Duvalye was not eager to cause her worry about Ashkvan, the only person in Stanets she cared for. They both knew without discussing it that she could never see Ashkvan again; the Meshvid court must be left to assume that Teja had somehow died in her escape. So time had slipped by, and Teja had no more recent details on affairs of state in Stanets. Badaksha Khan and Ashkvan were both still alive; news of their deaths would certainly have reached Ivaldi. But beyond these gross facts lay a host of unknown - and critical - details.

If Duvalye had continued to gather information and make notes, they were back at the house in Ivaldi, out of reach for the moment. Teja was concerned for her brother, and anxious to learn what she could. But it would be very dangerous for her to be seen in Stanets. I proposed that I should go as a travelling minstrel, and learn what I could at the court. Teja gratefully agreed, and began to teach me to speak Mesh. But our plans were interrupted by Teja's abrupt disappearance.