

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 2

The Hall of the Mountain King

Stanets, when I finally saw it, was a huge city-castle with miles of high stone walls richly fringed with towers. Some towers were short and squat, some tall and slender, some of them close enough together to be connected by narrow wooden bridges. The Black Tower dominated them all. It rose the height of thirty men above the main body of the castle. I saw it from far off as I approached, appearing and disappearing as my horse followed the road around the hillsides, but growing ever larger and more menacing. Sometimes its top was lost in the clouds when they dipped low to drop rain on me. I kept an eye on the tower as I drew nearer, and felt it was keeping an eye on me.

When I rounded the last curve of hillside (the tower had been out of sight for a blessed half-hour) I found myself at the foot of the Royal Road with the grey bulk of Stanets looming above me. The road was smooth and straight-edged, paved with clean white stones that glared in sudden sunshine, making a long, gradual slope up to the main gate. Not wanting to appear intimidated to anyone who might be watching, I urged the horse to a canter. Seeing his journey's end, he went willingly, hooves clattering on the slick stone.

The portal was open but guarded, and I could see a massive iron gate ready to drop from above to trap or exclude unwelcome visitors. As I drew closer, slowing the horse to a walk, I got my first look at the Meshvid.

They really did have horns. Somehow I hadn't believed it. Teja had not made much of the fact in her descriptions of Stanets and her life there. To her it was a commonplace, not worth emphasis. So I had let it slip through my imagination, and hadn't really constructed for myself a clear picture of men with horns. But here they were before me, and the reality was impossible to ignore. The two guards at the gate stared at me staring at them. From above their temples rose thick, heavy horns which curled back and then several times around, ending in little points. On one guard they pointed forward, on the other back. The points were sheathed in sharp iron tips.

"What do you want?" barked the backward-pointing guard. He had a hand on his sword hilt as if he meant to use it.

"I am a travelling minstrel," I said cheerily (sounding cheery after four days of riding in the rain was perhaps the greatest feat of acting I have ever accomplished). "I hope to entertain the noble court of King Badaksha Khan."

“You’ve picked a strange season to be travelling, minstrel,” he remarked shrewdly. “Most people are smart enough to stay in out of the rain.”

“Which makes it a perfect season for a minstrel to make money,” I answered readily. “All those people trapped inside must be hungry for entertainment.”

“They might be,” he said grudgingly. “Go in to the second courtyard and ask for Keshher the Chamberlain.” And he waved me in.

My first and most enduring impression of the interior of Stanets was of stairs. From the first courtyard a slope of wide, shallow steps led up to a second; the guards motioned me up, horse and all. In the second courtyard I was told to dismount, and someone took my horse away. They dumped the saddlebags at my feet.

I stood uneasily while Keshher was summoned. He finally arrived, a thin, long-faced man, the weight of whose horns seemed too heavy for his neck. The horns were tipped in silver with sapphires set into the ends. I explained again my reason for coming.

“Well,” he said doubtfully, “I suppose his Majesty might welcome some entertainment. Do you know any songs in Mesh?”

“A few.” (Which Teja had taught me.) “I can easily learn more.”

“For tonight, your foreign songs will have to do,” Keshher said disdainfully. “Be prepared to perform after dinner in the Great Hall. In the meantime, you can use one of the guest rooms.” He instructed a servant (whose horns were tipped in brass) to show me the way and carry my luggage.

We entered the main body of the castle, built of huge blocks of gray stone. It was cool and gloomy inside, and smelled faintly of mildew. Then there were more stairs. The young servant (his horns had only one curl) led me up, down, and sideways through a maze of halls and staircases, finally arriving at a small room with a window overlooking an interior yard. I tried to speak to him on the way, but he was shy, or perhaps didn’t understand me. When we reached the room he silently laid and lit a fire on the hearth. I sighed gratefully as I shed my wet cloak and shirt. When I unfastened my trousers the young man turned violently away, blushing. Whoops. Evidently Meshvid standards of modesty were different from Ivaldin.

“Would you like a hot bath?” he asked, still staring fixedly into a corner of the room.

“Yes, thank you.”

He went out, and eventually returned with another young man, carrying a tin tub half-full of steaming water. After several more trips with tin pails they filled it, and left me to my bath. Luxury. Nothing like an Ivaldin bath, of course, but after four days of riding in the rain, any hot water was welcome. My feet seemed to be permanently wrinkled from wet socks and boots, and there were raw places inside my knees where the saddle had rubbed my wet trousers into my skin. I scrubbed and soaked until the water turned tepid, then dried myself on a large sheet of soft wool. I spread my wet clothes on a wooden rack near the fire (the room was equipped for the season), then unwrapped the guitar. It seemed to have made the trip well enough. I tuned it, then put it aside and stretched out in an armchair before the fire to toast myself dry.

I was awakened by a loud, booming gong. It was dark out, and rain fell past the window in sheets. I had a fearful hunch that the gong meant dinner, and I was about to be late for it.

By the time I finally found the Great Hall I was later still, out of breath and dishevelled. The rows of men at table looked up at me speculatively as I rushed in. Keshher, from his post on the royal dais, gave me a cold stare that lasted the considerable length of my walk from door to table. I bowed deeply to the king; he was impossible to mistake, for he sat at the center of the dais and his heavy horns were tipped and banded in gold set with gems. He looked older than I had expected, his beard and moustache completely white, though his shaggy eyebrows were still iron-grey. He gazed at me keenly from beneath them. His eyes were a cold blue, matching the pale sapphires which decorated his horns.

“So you’re the travelling minstrel,” he rumbled.

“It is my humble hope to entertain your majesty with a few simple songs and tales,” I replied.

“Good, good. We’ll make introductions later. But don’t get too flowery on me. And sit down and eat first. Keshher, show him where.”

Keshher, nose still disdainfully elevated, led me to a seat at the lower tables.

My neighbors to each side and across the table plied me with questions, and I was nearly too busy exercising my imperfect Mesh to give proper attention to the food.

Teja had not said anything about what the Meshvid ate; such concerns were remote from her life nowadays. I found that, even in the Great Hall of the King, the Meshvid did not eat as well as the average Ivaldin. But, after four days of dried fruit, I wasn’t complaining. The food was simple, many of the dishes based on mutton or sheep’s-milk cheeses, but in its

way it was good. The Meshvid ate with knives and fingers, using sheets of flat, spongy bread to pick up messier items and mop up the gravies. Large mugs of beer were filled and re-filled throughout the meal, so everyone was quite merry by the time we finished up the last pieces of sharp cheese and slices of fruit.

“Minstrel, stand forth!” bellowed the king. I hastily wiped my hands on the tablecloth and picked up my guitar from the corner where I had stowed it. I walked slowly up the center of the hall, stalling for time as I re-checked the tuning of the guitar. The voices quieted on all sides as I arrived in front of the king’s table.

I bowed and said, loudly enough for all to hear: “I am True Seaborn, born on a far-off northern island, a traveller and sailor for many years. I came but recently to these shores, and, hearing of the court of Stanets, wished to come and pay my respects, and see the wonders of your fair city.”

“Don’t lay it on too thick,” drawled Badaksha Khan, leaning back comfortably in his chair. “Get on with the music. Do you know any songs in Mesh?”

“Yes, your majesty, but I prefer to start with something different, a sea-song from Denska, land of long ships and fair women. Or,” - I added with a sly smile, “of fair ships and long women.” And I launched into “Skinbold’s Rime,” a Densk war-epic that could make your hair stand on end even if you didn’t understand a word.

There was attentive silence throughout the song, and when I finished the Hall erupted into applause, shouts, and whistles.

“Excellent, excellent, my boy,” cried the king. “Come and have a drink.” And he offered me wine from his own beaten-gold cup. I knew this for a great honor, and drank humbly to his health. Then I sang “The Banners of the King,” an ancient paean to the House of Khan, and every man in the hall rose to his feet and roared it with me.

The concert lasted until I had no voice, and had joined in so many toasts that I could barely stay on my feet. Even Keshher, escorting me to my room, admitted to being pleased. I mumbled my gratitude to him, placed my guitar carefully on the sofa, and fell into bed.

My place in the court was assured for as long as I cared to stay. I played every night in the Great Hall, and wandered freely throughout the city during the day. I took a liking to Badaksha Khan, and he to me. He was a rowdy soul, and often kept me by him into the wee hours, drinking and singing every obscene song I knew. A memory indelibly engraved in my

mind is of the white-bearded old hell-raiser, thumping his tankard on the table and roaring out “Bang Bang Lulu.” I had made up new verses in Mesh, but he insisted on singing, in an atrocious accent, the original words in Densk; though he didn’t know that language, the meaning was easy enough to decipher.

I also got to know the princes and young nobles. Bad aksha had a number of sons, but I never knew exactly how many because of the Meshvid habit of referring to all male relatives of the male line of one’s own generation as ‘brother,’ and all of the olders ones as ‘uncle.’ Kinship on the mother’s side is considered unimportant, so all maternal relatives are called ‘cousin.’

Ashkvan struck me as a very serious young man. This quality of his in fact made it difficult for me to approach him; he seemed irritated by the “frivolity” of my calling. I seemed to have succeeded only too well in making myself appear harmless and completely unininterested in Meshvid politices.

On the other hand, I saw rather too much of Vanaksha and his cronies, who hung around the king as much as they could. Vanaksha was a lout who roared appreciatively at every obscene allusion he heard or imagined in my lyrics, and his followers were quick to echo him. Ordinarily I might have enjoyed such a responsive audience, but this one grated on my nerves. They appeared to wear on Badaksha as well; at times he shouted them out of his presence.

My least favorite of that group was Tash-ur-Zarul, though I might have disliked him less had I known less of his history. He was a thin, weaselly fellow with a drooping moustache overhung by a drooping, crooked nose. His looks could not have been particularly appealing even before Teja broke that nose, nor were they improved by his odd skin disease. His dark skin was mottled with patches of pink, about the shade of my own skin where I am not tanned by the sun. This color would have looked healthy on anyone born pale, but on Tash the effect was leprotic. I wondered if the spread of the pink patches had halted since the demon-killing, but obviously I couldn’t ask him.