

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 3

The Embassy from the Golden Land

The wet season ended, and the rains had scarcely dried on the hillsides when an embassy arrived from the Land of the Golden People. It was a small group, consisting of the Ambassador, his wife and son, and a handful of silent servants. When they formally presented themselves at dinner that night, Ambassador Maeda and his family were all dressed alike, in heavy silk robes embroidered with gold. They bowed in unison, hands clasped in front of them, and the Ambassador made an elaborate, if halting, speech in heavily-accented Mesh. The gist was that the Golden People had long desired trade with the Mesh, and the Ambassador had come to learn about and admire their fine country as a preliminary to establishing same.

He presented his wife, who did not speak beyond a few murmured words in her own language, and his son, who in polite and passable Mesh said that he had heard much of the fighting skills of the valiant Mesh, and hoped to learn from them. There was some snickering at this from the lower tables, where brawny Meshvid warriors had been commenting on the youth's slender build and (to their eyes) effeminate robes.

The snickering stopped a few days later when Toshiko, the Ambassador's son, gave an exhibition of his skills with the curved sword of the Golden People. One after another, he disarmed the Meshvid warriors who had volunteered to "show him what real men can do." Some, notably Crown Prince Ashkvan, took defeat with a laugh and were eager to learn Toshiko's exotic fighting techniques. Others had less sense of humor, and contemptuously refused to join in the lessons that were soon arranged.

Myself no fighting man, I have never been much interested in a warrior's skills or weapons. But much later, when I had cause to reflect on it, I wondered if the full measure of Toshiko's skill might not have been demonstrated in his being able to choreograph the fights so that the most humiliating defeats were inflicted on Vanaksha and his cronies, while Ashkvan and his friends were able to save enough face to leave the arena laughing. At any rate, the young Meshvid who attended Toshiko's lessons in swordsmanship were all of Ashkvan's coterie, and Vanaksha's supporters stayed well away.

A friendship was seen to develop between Ashkvan and Toshiko. They spent most of their time together, and only part of that time was spent in arms. Ashkvan even began to learn the difficult, tonal language of the Golden People. I sometimes came across them in the gardens, when I went to enjoy the spring sun, and heard Ashkvan's baritone rumble rise and fall in the cadenced warble of the Golden Land, counterpointed by Toshiko's

light, sweet tenor.

The Ambassador and his wife remained enigmas to the court. Maeda spent days tramping about in the hills with a small retinue of his own servants and Meshvid guides, who reported that he was keenly interested in birds, trees, and rocks.

Lady Maeda, fittingly enough, spent most of her time in the harem, becoming a close companion of Wyrana, Vanaksha's mother. Lady Maeda never learned to speak much Mesh, but this suited Wyrana, who preferred to dominate any conversation she took part in, but rarely got the chance when Gulana was present.