

Ivaldi Book 3 Chapter 4

The Deathbed of a King

I was genuinely sorry when Badaksha Khan took his final illness, a cold contracted after he fell in an icy mountain lake while hunting duck. It soon worsened to pneumonia, which only the Kelessi might have cured. Nonetheless, the old king was tough, and took his time dying. The court was in a ferment, and the king several times came near to shouting himself to death in trying to clear his room of condoling courtiers. Then, as his condition deteriorated, they came less often, hastening instead to show their allegiance to Ashkvan or Vanaksha - mostly the latter.

Badaksha sent for me often, and his temper was such that no one thought it odd one day when he commanded all but me to leave the room. He gestured me near until I was leaning over him to hear his thready whisper:

“Play,” he said, “play while I talk to you. I don’t want any of *them*” (he cast a contemptuous glance at the door) “to hear what I have to say.”

I strummed gently on my guitar, just loudly enough to cover his voice.

“You must warn Ashkvan. He is in danger, and his mother too; Vanaksha plans to kill them both as soon as I am dead. Maybe even before, if I don’t die quickly enough for his convenience.”

I was so startled that I stopped playing, and made some vague protest about his sons’ loyalty.

“Keep playing!” snapped the king. “Vanaksha is a fool!” he continued in a heated whisper. “He actually came and boasted to me of this little project, as if I would sanction it, or was too feeble to do anything to stop it. An old wolf dying in his den is a wolf nonetheless; and a king is still a king while he lives. I will not have my kingdom bandied about by a pack of idiots. Vanaksha has proved once for all that he is neither wise nor respectful of tradition, nor even of his father. He would not last a month, and then the kingdom so carefully built by the House of Khan would crumble. I shall not allow that. Ashkvan must take the throne, and hold it as law and custom decree.”

“And what of the fact that he has no horns?” I interjected cautiously.

Badaksha looked peevish and plucked at his blankets. “Well, he isn’t the first, not even among the Khans. It was said that my own father sired a hornless boy, but the baby was killed and buried quickly so that no one would know. He would have been my own full brother, from my mother Roxana. She took ill of grief and shame, and died when I was young. But Ashkvan was my first-born; there were too many witnesses. And Gulana

was stronger-willed than I. She believed that Ashkvan was born to fulfill the prophecy.”

I thought the old man was rambling in delirium. Surely otherwise he would never have mentioned the curse of the Six-Fingered Mage; the tale was forbidden in Meshvir. But he looked at me slyly from under his shaggy white brows.

“You are surprised that I know of the prophecy? You are a minstrel; surely you know the tale.”

“Indeed I do, but I was warned that it is not a tale to tell here in Stanets.”

“Nevertheless, we hear it. Who knows, it may even be true. Gulana believes her precious boy was born to be king over a new breed of Meshvid. I wish him the joy of it, ruling a lot of insipid pansies. Still, if I must be the last king of the old people and the old ways, I prefer that to leaving my kingdom in the hands of a fool who will see it destroyed.”

I wondered privately if Badaksha had not come too late to this decision. Already the majority of the nobles were maneuvering to be close to Vanaksha, and if he had gone so far as to boast of plans to kill Ashkvan and Gulana, a reprimand from a dying old man would carry little weight. Which I supposed was the reason Badaksha enlisted my help.

“You must warn Ashkvan,” the king repeated, a little anxiously. “But be careful. If you are seen to be of his party, it could go badly for you when I die.” Exactly the point that was worrying me. Going directly from the king’s chamber to Ashkvan’s would raise suspicions (surely both were being watched); but neither could the matter be put off, if Vanaksha was in a such hurry to dispatch his rival.

“I will do it,” I said soothingly to Badaksha. “Rest now and let me sing for you.” I sang a few cheerfully obscene ballads to make him smile, and when I saw that he was tired, took my leave.

I was at a loss to know how to approach Ashkvan without giving myself away to Vanaksha’s supporters, who were surely watching closely everyone who approached the Crown Prince. The moment I tried to speak privately with him my supposed neutrality would be lost, and, having seen me closeted alone with Badaksha, the watchers might well suspect the content of my message. The problem was that my support of Ashkvan was so secret that even *he* didn’t suspect it, and I had no means to give him coded messages. Was there some sort of song I could sing? I thought frantically. The only tale that came to mind of brother killing brother was an ancient myth from the Northern Islands, which as far as I knew had never been set to music.

And Ashkvan knew well enough that Vanaksha meant to kill him. The only surprise - if it was one - would be that Vanaksha might feel sure enough of his own position to kill his brother before the old king died.

I finally decided that there wasn't time for subtlety; a direct approach was my only chance. I went to Ashkvan's chambers to give him the message his father had entrusted to me.

Ashkvan was alone with Toshiko when I arrived. The servant who had announced me withdrew and closed the door. The Crown Prince looked at me expectantly.

"Can I help you?" he asked, sounding rather like a shop clerk.

"Begging your pardon," I gave a half-bow to Toshiko, "it is a matter of utmost privacy."

"If it concerns me, you may speak in front of Toshiko. He has my full confidence." Toshiko bowed low at the compliment.

I took a breath to steady my nerves, and began: "Well, to put it baldly and quickly, as the situation merits, your father has sent me to warn you that your brother intends to kill you the moment the king is dead, if not sooner. And also the lady your mother."

Ashkvan nodded gravely. "I am not surprised," he said. Then, as if to spare my feelings, he hastily added, "Nonetheless, I am grateful to you for bearing the message, at some risk to yourself." He gave me a narrow look. "It is interesting," he continued, "that my father has suddenly decided in my favor. Court gossip has it that he would be content to have me out of the way, leaving the field clear for Vanaksha." I realized what he was thinking.

"I know that you have no reason to trust me," I said. "As far as you know, I could be bringing you a false message from Vanaksha, to cause you to act hastily. You do not know who I am or why I came; until now I have deliberately remained neutral, trying only to gather information. The time has come to reveal who sent me here." To my ears this was sounding more pompous by the moment; there was something about Ashkvan that inspired a person to ridiculously courtly language. But he continued to gaze at me steadily, with one brow slightly lifted as if in mild surprise. Born to be a king, no doubt about it.

"I came to Stanets at the behest of your sister, Teja," I said.

Well, *that* got a reaction. Ashkvan recoiled in shock. "Teja is dead," he snapped.

"No," I shook my head, "she escaped from Stanets, and from the threat of

having to marry Tash. Your former tutor, Duvalye, helped her. She has been living in Ivaldi all this time.”

“This is a very strange tale you bring me. Can you prove it?” Ashkvan asked sharply.

“Yes.” I pulled out the signet ring from the pouch around my neck, and handed it to him. Ashkvan recognized it.

“Teja,” he said meditatively, rolling the ring between his fingers. “There was a time when she was my only friend in the court, and I hers. I hope she found a happier life in Ivaldi.”

“Somewhat,” I hedged. “But recently she learned of... events here, and she wanted more information about your situation, in case she might be able to help. Obviously she could not come herself, for fear of being recognized, so she asked me to come and... well, spy for her. I have been on your side since before I arrived, but I wanted to appear neutral, which would give me a better chance to gather information on Vanaksha and his gang.”

“And have you?” Toshiko intervened.

“No,” I shook my head ruefully. “I’m afraid I’m not much of a spy. And lately the role of king’s minstrel has kept me very busy.”

“Yes,” said Ashkvan, “you have made my father’s last days happier. I am glad of that.”

“Now, however, I am openly committed to your party,” I said. “The moment I entered this chamber I was a marked man. You know they’re watching your every move.”

“I know. And, although we’ve kept our voices low, it’s possible that they know what has been said here. I almost wish you had not mentioned *her*. In any case, we will have to move quickly. If you have anything you want to bring with you, pack it now. Tonight my few supporters must gather, and tomorrow, to save our lives, we flee.”

I happened to look at Toshiko as Ashkvan was speaking, and saw an expression of anguish flicker across that normally impassable face. Ashkvan saw it as well, and turned a questioning glance on the Golden man.

“I must speak to my parents,” Toshiko muttered hoarsely, and he fairly ran for the door, almost forgetting to bow to the prince as he left. Ashkvan handed the signet ring back to me.

“Better that you keep this,” he said, “so that you can return it to her, in case I do not see her.” I replaced it in the pouch and hid it under my shirt.

Ashkvan dismissed me with a gesture, and I went to my room to pack my travel bags.