

Ivaldi Book 1 Chapter 3

Overnight Success

(3-1-2nd BG-Year 1)

I was nearing the end of my small stock of coins, and the monthly payment for my room was due, when the gods finally intervened to keep me from starving. Rilla came running one day, saying that a guitarist of the Marun family had sprained his wrist, on the very day they were to play a big party, one of the many given during the five-day holiday celebrating the turn of month. They were willing to try me, though they would not pay me for this engagement. At least there would be free food.

The Ivaldin are gregarious, preferring the loud chatter of many to the intimate conversation of a few. The larger and louder the group, the more they like it, so every Ivaldin, from richest to poorest, loves to host and attend parties. Any occasion, or none at all, provides an excuse for people to gather, talk, laugh, argue, sing, and even dance. For the rich, these are also occasions to show off power and wealth by the sumptuousness of the feast provided and the talent of the entertainers hired. This particular party was such an occasion, and I knew it was my chance to impress not only the musician family with whom I would be playing, but also the wealthy of Ivaldi whom I hoped to have as patrons.

I knew few of the songs, my Ivaldin repertoire still being small, but given the key and a lead-in could strum along well enough. By the end of the evening I understood the style, and had also introduced some of my own collection of songs. The Ivaldin love novelty, so I turned out to be the hit of the party. The guests, gaudily dressed in bright silks, flocked around me like exotic birds, requesting my foreign songs even as they laughed at the barbaric languages and rhythms. They tipped me lavishly, which was most encouraging.

The Maruns agreed to keep me on for future engagements. Clever Rilla worked out a modest retainer in addition to a per-session fee high on the Guild scale — “Now that he’s been seen,” she said, “you won’t be able to keep the other musician clans off him. You’d better make it worth his while to stick with you.”

I had other reasons for staying with the Maruns. One was a lovely, sloe-eyed daughter, Mrinal, beside whom, come to think of it, most of other reasons paled.

Mrinal was a ripe adolescent, the dew of youth still fresh upon the fully-developed body of a woman. That we each found the other attractive was immediately obvious. I have never had much time or opportunity to look at myself in mirrors, but I knew that the bland and sallow face of my youth had been beaten by wind and weather into something more interesting. My eyes, of a bright blue common in my family but unknown among the Ivaldin, look out from a weather-bronzed visage, and the sun-squint creases around them add depth and maturity – or so I like to believe! My hair was pale brown when I was a boy, but now is both darkened with age and lightened by the sun to a streaky tangle

of blond and rust, with patches of near-white in my beard. On the few occasions that I do look, I tell myself that mine is the face of a wayfarer, marked by past experiences, gazing keenly towards new adventures.

For that or whatever reason, women find me attractive, and I was not unused to bold advances. But never had I received them from a seventeen-year-old, in full view of her family! Mrinal seemed to have no notion of subtlety or caution, and I was acutely embarrassed, as well as afraid that I would lose any chance of future engagements with the Maruns — this scene took place at the end of my first party with them. I tried hard to keep Mrinal at arm's length.

“What’s the matter, Seaborn?” she inquired in caressing tones, “Don’t you like me?”

“I, uh, yes, certainly I like you, that is...”

“Well, then, why don’t we discuss it over a cup of soma?” Mrinal latched onto my arm and steered me out, winking at her mother as we left.

In a nearby soma shop, I hunched miserably over my cup, certain that this precocious wench had lost me all chance of future employment. She laid her hand on my arm.

“Are you angry? Did I do something wrong? I thought the attraction was mutual, but if I’m being too pushy...”

“Of course I find you attractive,” I said gruffly, “But... in front of your parents like that! They’ll be angry with me for seducing their daughter, and won’t want to hire me again.”

“Seducing their daughter?” she laughed. “Everyone saw how hard you resisted; that’s why they were laughing. And why should they care if you did seduce me, or I you? It’s none of their business.”

“But their own daughter!”

Mrinal frowned in puzzlement. “I don’t see what you’re so worried about. I assure you they do not mind a bit, and are anxious to hire you again. In fact, I heard Father making arrangements for some parties, on the condition that you would be there.”

It was my turn to be confused. “Well, if you’re sure...”

“Of course I’m sure. And now, if you’re convinced that you don’t have to send me home to be watched over by my family, shall we go somewhere private?”

The only place I knew of was my own room, which at the time contained no furniture other than a mattress, a small table, and a chair. Mrinal’s eyebrows lifted.

“It’s all I can afford,” I said defensively.

“If things go as Father seems to expect, you’ll soon be able to afford better,” she said. “Never mind, the bed is what counts right now.” I fervently agreed.

It took me a little time to overcome my nervousness about her parents. I had had some unpleasant experiences, such as the arrival on intimate scenes of unexpected and intolerant parents of girls who had appeared and acted older than they were. But Mrinal had none of my fears. What she did possess were skills that would have been shocking to those girls I once knew — and even to some of the older women I had known. As things began to warm up, I whispered into her ear, “Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

Mrinal drew back in my arms and gave me an offended stare. “Careful of what? I’m not a beginner!” *That* she certainly wasn’t.

“I mean, careful to, um, withdraw, um, before...” Her eyes grew round with surprise.

“Withdraw? Why ever would you...?” The light dawned. “To protect me from pregnancy? I never realized foreigners could be so old-fashioned!” To my consternation she burst out laughing, and went on laughing much longer than I liked. Finally, gasping, but trying to appear serious, she said, “You needn’t worry. We Ivaldin have a technique to avoid pregnancy, far safer than that one. No one gets pregnant unless they want to.” She seemed completely confident, and I wanted very much to believe her; at any rate, right at that moment, I declined to examine the matter too closely.

I slept heavily after all the events of the night, but Mrinal apparently found my bed uncomfortable, for she rose at dawn (which was only an hour or two later), and with a light kiss left me. I slept late, and it took several cups of strong soma to clear my head when I got up. Then I began to worry. Suppose she had lied? Suppose she hoped to get pregnant and thus trap me into marriage? Perhaps it was a plot devised by her family to take a firm grip on the profits to be made from me. Mrinal was attractive, and a revelation in bed, but I was far from ready to marry her, or anyone. I worked myself up to such a pitch of worry that I had to have answers. A brisk walk later I was at the Cat and Cream, looking for Ozin.

He was at his usual table, in a shady corner overlooking the plaza. He gave me a knowing grin as I sat down opposite.

“You look strangely worried, for a man who was such a hit last night. Even with the ladies, I hear.” (The speed at which gossip travels Ozin-ward should never come as a surprise.)

“Yes, I spent the night with Mrinal, the daughter of the man who hired me. And that’s what’s got me worried.”

“Worried? Did she wear you out already?”

“No, no! But is it true that Ivaldin women don’t get pregnant?”

“Only when they want to.”

“Then it’s true? She wasn’t making it up?”

“Why should she?”

“I was afraid it might be a trap, for her to get pregnant and force me to marry her.”

“What kind of backward country do you come from, that people resort to such stratagems?” Ozin was uncharacteristically exasperated, even disgusted.

“It happens in a lot of other countries, too,” I said defensively. “And I’ve never heard of a woman who could choose when to get pregnant. What did she mean by that?”

Ozin looked thoughtful. “I knew, of course, that other peoples lacked our particular knowledge, but I hadn’t stopped to think of the consequences. How soon we forget.” He stared into space for a few moments before resuming. “Yes, Ivaldin women can choose when and whether to get pregnant.”

I was shocked. “And where did they learn this remarkable trick?”

“From the Kelessi, actually. One of many things we have to thank them for, even if they are stiff-necked, bigoted, religious maniacs. It’s a fairly recent innovation, brought to Ivaldi when my great-grandmother was a girl. Some of the changes are still sinking in.”

“Is it magic?” I asked.

“No, not really. It’s a technique by which women can control their bodies, deciding when they want to be fertile, or not. They tell me it’s not hard, once you’ve mastered the concentration techniques which the Kelessi learn in childhood. The Kelessi discovered the principle, and spent many years refining it until it was simple enough for every girl to learn. Then their missionaries began teaching it in schools in Ivaldi and Vandália.”

“They just marched in and started teaching that?”

“The Kelessi were clever. They started by teaching older women, those already married and mothers, so that they could have their children when they wanted them, and no more than the family could support. Ivaldi was getting overcrowded in those days, and people were beginning to suffer for it. There had been famine. Even today there are still a few reactionaries who claim it’s against the will of their gods, or some such, but most can see the benefits. The population of the city has stabilized, and there’s more breathing room for all.”

“Of course,” he continued, “there have been other effects, more subtle and far-reaching than my grandmother’s generation anticipated. Though perhaps the Kelessi did anticipate those as well.”

“What effects?”

“Sexual liberation for both women and men. Since women no longer need to fear unwanted pregnancies, they have sex as and when — and with whom!—they choose. A woman’s marriage vows used to include absolute fidelity to her husband, a prerogative he protected jealously. How else could he be sure the children were his? Now the usual vow is ‘He and only he shall father my children.’”

“That’s still hard to prove.”

“For us, yes. The Kelessi claim that some of their greatest healers can determine a child’s parentage, but they feel that the identity of the father is not important anyway. Certainly, the great healers have better things to do with their skills.”

“An interesting side effect of sexual liberation,” Ozin went on, “has been the decline of the courtesans. They still exist, but only the highest-ranking are patronized by Ivaldin, and common street prostitutes can hardly find work except among foreign visitors. The skilled courtesans nowadays are as likely to be men whose clients are women, as they are to be women or men-loving men.”

I was much reassured, though a bit startled, by this conversaton, and the next time I was with Mrinal I had no qualms about enjoying her as much as she enjoyed me. In fact, it was a liberating experience, to make love to a woman who was not, in some corner of her mind, thinking about the possibility that she might become pregnant. This was a luxury I had enjoyed only a few times in my life, with women who are already pregnant, or knew themselves unable to conceive.

In the following morens, Mrinal and I enjoyed each other’s company, in bed and out, but we made no protestations of devotion. I came to understand that her attitude, common among young Ivaldin, was that a lover was simply something to enjoy, and marriage was not to be considered until much later in life. Not that Mrinal was immune to jealousy. She enjoyed clinging possessively to my arm as we entered a party to play, making sure that every woman there knew that *she* was the owner of the famous (somewhat) foreign musician.

I played at parties with the Maruns every high holiday (the favored day for parties), and sometimes on other days. Ivaldi’s wealthy (who are numerous) entertain frequently. Ivaldin formal music demands attention, so our kind of songs were considered more appropriate as background to the buzz of conversation. There were always a few appreciative listeners, those who asked for special songs and even sang along with us. I developed something of a name for myself, and some listeners began to know and request my foreign songs.

Women were often interested in me for reasons other than music (men as well, though I tactfully made it clear that I preferred women). But Mrinal was able to preen herself that none of them succeeded in tempting me away from her. Until I met Chitra.