

Ivaldi Book 1 Chapter 4

Bard in a Gilded Cage

It was the end of the hot season, a wretched time to attend a party, let alone provide the entertainment. But, perversely, it was one of the busiest times of year for entertainers, as everyone sought to distract himself and his friends from the heat.

So we played, our sweaty hands slipping on the strings, and like everyone else we prayed for rain to end our misery. Day by day, the citizens and residents of Ivaldi watched the clouds build up on the eastern horizon, out to sea — black, heavy clouds, pregnant with rain. But they sat, mocking us, where the sea met the sky, and there wasn't a breath of wind to blow them nearer. My room, receiving the heat of the afternoon sun from two sides and the roof, was like an oven at night. So, imitating my neighbors, I moved my string bed (a new acquisition) to the flat roof of the building and slept in the open to catch the small breezes that blew at night. We lay side by side, murmuring conversation until it finally grew cool enough to drop off to sleep, or until we grew so tired that even the heat could no longer keep us awake.

The calendar passed 9-9 2nd Bara Garam, and the fact that there were no more dates to give to the days only emphasized the infinity of our suffering. The clouds moved a little nearer. I went to the harbor to see if they would look any closer from there. One last ship was making its way to the city, probably an Ivaldin merchantman scudding home before the monsoon storms broke.

In the next few days the clouds grew till they covered the eastern sky, piling on top of one another, swelling and beginning to rumble. We all turned our faces to the heavens, begging for relief. The wind rose and dust blew everywhere — hair, eyes, and noses were filled with it, and even the food we ate was sticky with brown dust.

Then the rains came. Late in the afternoon, the clouds swallowed the last slanting golden ray of sun, and let loose the deluge. We danced and shouted in the streets, soaked to the skin in moments. The fine, thin summer robes the Ivaldin wore were moulded to their gyrating bodies, and people kissed the rain in each others' mouths. It was the new year, and the rains brought new life.

The next day I was due to play at a big party with the Maruns, a party which had been planned to take place on the second day of the new year, whenever it might come. The party was given by Zelian Surianello, a scion of one of the Great Clans, and one of the guests of honor was Chitra Yadav, business head of Great Clan Yadav.

I never knew exactly how it happened that I left the party with Chitra that night, only dimly aware of Mrinal's furious glares. We rode in Chitra's carriage, pulled by four men in uniform short robes. Her long fingers stroked my thighs and her full lips nibbled my

ear all the way back to her home on the Avenue, while rain drummed on the canvas curtains that shielded us from public view.

I gaped like a bumpkin at Chitra's mansion; it was entirely faced with marble, every surface intricately carved, latticed, or inlaid with colored stones. If there were any plain walls inside, they were well hidden by glowing tapestries. She mentioned in passing that her family had got its start as silk weavers, and that some of the hangings were centuries old.

The massive front door was opened by a man in a plain, grey silk robe, and I saw several others similarly dressed, moving quietly about the halls; I assumed that they were servants. No one else seemed to be awake. We walked swiftly through long passages and high-ceilinged rooms to the back of the palace, where, on the top floor overlooking a vast garden, Chitra had her own suite of rooms.

Chitra disappeared into a dressing room, and I stood in the entrance of her bedroom, almost afraid to move or touch anything. The marble floors were softened by a scattering of multi-colored carpets, and plump silk cushions lay in heaps around a small basin carved into the floor in the center of the room. As I watched, a tiny fountain spurted up from the basin's center, though its tinkling could scarcely be heard over the roar of the rain. An enormous bed occupied an alcove with latticed marble screens on three sides and silken curtains stirring in the damp breeze. Through an archway I could see a large balcony, and beyond it the darkness of the garden. Fresh, delicious scents of damp greenery and earth blew through the room.

Chitra returned, wearing a flowing robe of sheer white silk tissue - so sheer as to make it readily apparent that the mistress was every bit as well-appointed as her house. She wound her arms around my neck, her fingers twining in my hair, and then flung one leg around my hips as she balanced on the toes of her other foot. I soon learned that, while Mrinal was eager and daring, qualities that to my untutored sensibilities had resembled skill, compared with Chitra she was but an apprentice in the Ivaldin Arts of Love.

As Ozin had explained to me once (when Carilla was not present), "The Arts of Love" was a treatise written centuries before and used ever since as the standard for accomplishment in the bedroom. Ozin himself had recently printed it, and sold hundreds of copies in a day. The Ivaldin are nothing if not methodical, and this book carefully itemized, categorized, and explained every aspect of lovemaking. I later read, with some difficulty, a copy Ozin loaned me. The language was antique, which made the whole work even more amusing as it pompously described every motion to be carried out and even the different "sounds of passion" to accompany each step. I suppose that an accomplished practitioner could gain much pleasure from scrupulously following these methods, but to a beginner the instructions made it all appear frighteningly complex.

Beyond the basic acts of love ("basic" is far from "simple" — there were 64, or 128 depending how you counted, different positions described for one man and one woman,

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and I gave up counting the permutations possible with combinations of three, four, and more people), the book described how rooms and beds should be set up for seduction, how one should pursue and win a reluctant lover, how to create quarrels in order to make them up again, and on and on.

Ozin said that there had been a time, before the sexual revolution, when the highest rank of courtesans were expected to know and practice all these things exactly according to the book. Then, as the Guild of Courtesans diminished, their training became less rigorous, and the Arts were taken up by anyone interested. For a time there was a fashion for being an “Artist in Love,” but now it was taken far less seriously. Chitra, however, meticulous in sex as in everything else, had in adolescence applied herself conscientiously to learn the book by heart, and by now probably outshone some of those courtesans of the past. She used to laugh at my lack of subtlety in the Arts, but she seemed to enjoy tutoring her ‘barbarian’ lover, and I flattered myself that I was an apt student.

Chitra lived like a queen, but she worked harder than most monarchs. She was the business head of a large and wealthy family, controlling and directing their interests in many trades and in several countries. Though the Yadavs had originally been weavers, like all of Ivaldi’s most powerful clans they had diversified, enlarging their wealth and prestige through shrewd and varied dealings. These Great Clans represented the culmination of Ivaldi’s history as a trading port, and their names were respected across the seas. Chitra herself was well known to merchants in all the major cities on the trade routes, and she had even travelled, an activity most Ivaldin despise. But her descriptions of those exotic places, some of which I had visited myself, focused on the commodities to be bought or sold and the people she had dealt with, rather than the sights, sounds, and smells which fascinated *me*.

Except for the questions I asked, however, I did not see much of Chitra’s business side of during our first few days together. The new year permitted her a few days’ holiday, which we spent, truth be known, largely in bed. Messages were left discreetly on a low table outside the door, and when I was in the bath or toilet I often heard a low murmur of voices in the outer room. It amused me to imagine her flunkies awaiting the whims of my bowels to consult with the mistress.

I was so absorbed in the charms of Chitra and her home that I nearly forgot another engagement I had to play with the Maruns a few days later. But Vico Marun apparently knew very well where I was, for he sent a messenger to remind me that afternoon. Chitra had been invited to the same party, and though she had not originally intended to go, now decided that she would. I was a little embarrassed to arrive in her splendid rickshaw, swathed in a silk robe she had given me. It wasn’t as heavily embroidered or gaudily patterned as hers, thank the gods, but the material was obviously very fine. I saw

knowing smiles as I escorted Chitra in, and caught a deadly glare from Mrinal. But no one said anything, and I took my place with the family and played as usual.

Chitra was careful neither to show me particular attention nor to neglect me entirely. But, despite her subtlety, I had the discomfoting feeling that everyone there knew exactly what was going on, and was somehow amused.

I went home with her again that night, though I insisted on a stop at my room in case anyone had inquired there for me. Chitra waited in the rickshaw as I raced up the stairs. I was surprised to find Carilla at the window, looking down into the street.

“Have you been looking for me?” I asked. “I’m sorry. I haven’t been home in three days.” Rilla stared at me with a mixture of amusement and resentment.

“No, I wasn’t looking for you. I’d have known where to find you. So I figured you wouldn’t mind if I slept here. Dad’s been... rough lately.”

“You’d have known where to find me? What, does everyone know what I’ve been doing?” I was annoyed.

“Not exactly *what* you’ve been doing, though we can guess. Certainly everyone knows *where* you’ve been doing it. And with whom.”

“So I’m a subject of common gossip?” I asked stiffly.

“No,” she said deflatingly, “Chitra Yadav is.”

“Well, I wish everyone would mind their own damn business.”

“They never have before; why should they now?” she shot back. Then, in a more conciliatory tone, “I wouldn’t worry about it. The fact that you’re a foreigner and an entertainer makes it somewhat more interesting, but everyone watches what the Great Clans do, and talks about it. It’ll die down in a few days. Actually, you’ve done very well for yourself, and should be congratulated.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the tone of that, but Chitra was waiting below and I didn’t have time for discussion. I gathered up a few clothes.

“Stay as long as you like,” I told Rilla. “I’ll see you later.”

“Much later,” she murmured as I bolted down the stairs.

The pattern of my life altered. Although I still kept my room in Elephant Square, I lived at Chitra’s house, and went from there to engagements or to see friends, often in her rickshaws — she said that it embarrassed her for me to be seen leaving her home on foot or in a public conveyance. Sometimes she took me to parties with her, if I was not already invited to perform — and I seemed to be getting far more engagements lately, both by myself and with the Maruns. However, I felt much on display in either case, and

sometimes the scrutiny was not friendly. Still, I eventually grew accustomed to it, and even amused. At least I could say that I was definitely making a name for myself in Ivaldi.