

## Ivaldi Book 1 Chapter 7

### Chitra Has an Engagement

During our time together, Chitra and I passed our days much as we had before we met, she in the endless work of managing a business empire, I in playing, wandering, observing, writing. Much of my observation now was of the Yadav household, which gave me a new perspective on Ivaldi and its upper classes.

The house was very large, but so was the family. Chitra's parents — and most of her siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins — lived there, each couple having their own suite of rooms, often with attached rooms or suites for their children. In addition there were dozens of the gray-robed servants, all under the firm rule of Chitra's Aunt Madya.

I shared Chitra's bedroom, and also had a small study of my own with a balcony overlooking the gardens. The family and servants treated me as a guest, and no one seemed to think it odd that I stayed on. I noticed that some of the younger, unmarried relatives also had "friends" in from time to time, though none stayed as long as I did. I also noticed that none of us were invited to the weekly family councils.

Chitra treated me as a friend, making no onerous emotional demands on me, and though she gave generously of her body and her wealth, she revealed little of her feelings. She would talk amusingly, in general terms, about her business of the day, and relay the latest malicious gossip about her peers in the Great Clans. (She knew I was a friend of Ozin, and sometimes specifically asked me to relay to him tidbits damaging to her rivals.) She treated me as an equal, as far as she could, but there was always a distance. I told myself I was lucky that this beautiful, wealthy, sensual woman was willing to share with me everything she had, without the sticky strings of "love."

Nevertheless it hurt, surprisingly keenly, when her marriage was announced. To be fair, she did inform me before it became common knowledge — the day before.

I had spent that day with friends, and she, as I thought, at her usual business. I had only been back long enough to wash and change my clothes when Chitra flung into the room and dropped onto the bed with a dramatic sigh.

"There," she said, "At last it's done, and they can all quit yapping at me." She lay back, kicking off her slippers.

"What is?" I sat beside her and looked down into her face, stroking her hair.

"My betrothal. We signed the agreement today, and everyone is finally satisfied."

It took me a moment to realize that 'we' did not include me. "You didn't tell me you were getting married," I said stupidly.

“The negotiations were rather delicate. Almost no one knows yet, but it’s being announced tomorrow.” She was completely matter-of-fact.

“Who are you marrying?”

“Lionello Valakin. You’ve met him, remember? He was at Donato’s party, in purple silk.” I did vaguely remember the man. I could not recall Chitra paying him any special attention.

“Do you love him, then?” I asked, a little roughly. She looked at me as if I had said something vulgar.

“Love has nothing to do with it. Oh, I like him well enough. We’ve known each other since infancy. But this is a business arrangement. The difficult part was agreeing on which clan our children will belong to.”

“Children?”

“That is the point, isn’t it? My family has been after me for years, worried I’d get past child-bearing age without doing my bit of family duty. They should all be quite content now.” She paused briefly, then turned her full attention to me. “And now,” she said, stroking my thigh, “having attended to duty, I think I am entitled to some pleasure. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Despite Chitra’s skill, I found it hard to concentrate on the position of the Split Bamboo, but I performed my duty. Afterwards, lying sweaty on her silken sheets, I stared at the ceiling and forced myself to say, “It’s over between us then, I suppose.”

Chitra raised herself on one elbow to look down at me. “You don’t understand at all, do you?” she said wonderingly. “Our relationship has nothing to do with my marriage. Oh, we’ll be discreet, for the sake of the traditionalists in the family, but my future husband doesn’t care. So long as the children are his, you and I can carry on as we please. Marriage is primarily a joining of two clans. No sensible person expects it to fulfill every need in her life.”

“Then, so as long as I fulfill a need for you, I stay?” I asked bitterly.

“And as long as I do for you,” she replied. We lay in silence for some time.

I left early the next morning to visit Ozin, meeting him at his home before he had left for the Cat and Cream. We strolled across the plaza to the soma shop and sat in silence, he still yawning and droopy-eyed, until the first cups arrived.

“Here’s a piece of hot gossip for you,” I said finally, “Chitra’s getting married. To Lionello Valakin.”

He looked at me sharply from under his shaggy eyebrows. “That’s news indeed. I was wondering when she’d finally succumb to family pressure.”

“It hadn’t occurred to *me*.”

“Ah, that’s why you’re here at this ungodly hour.”

“If this has been a topic of common speculation, why did I never hear of it? If I hadn’t been at her house last night, I might have been the last to know.”

“They did keep it very secret; I admit even *I* had no suspicion. Both clans are to be congratulated for uncharacteristic discretion. But then, it’s not surprising when Chitra and Lionello are involved. They’re well matched in closed-mouthedness. Their children will never cry, but will only indulge in the faintest disapproving chin-tremors.” He chuckled.

“But, for Goddess’ sake, I’ve shared her bed for months! Doesn’t this concern me even a little?”

“By your lights, maybe. By Chitra’s, no. You must understand that the Great Clans are a different breed from the rest of us. They are interested in two things — money and power — to the near exclusion of all else. For them, marriage is a matter of making the most advantageous alliance, politically and financially. Chitra’s dalliance with you doesn’t enter into her determination of her best advantage.”

“Dalliance?”

“Did you imagine it was more? Or that, if it were, that would have changed anything? Chitra may be the supplest serpent who ever threw her coils around a man in bed, but she’s no romantic. She likes her pleasures, same as you do, and the fact you’ve lasted this long must mean that you please her more than most. But no more than that.”

I had no reply. He let me squirm for a bit, then finally relented.

“I know, it’s hard on your pride. Chitra isn’t callous, just completely insensitive to others’ points of view. Unless there’s a business deal on the line. She knows how to behave, but she’s never been with a foreigner before, and she probably didn’t realize you wouldn’t understand the way her kind does things.”

“So what do I do now?” I asked finally.

He shrugged. “It’s up to you. A wedding involving the Great Clans takes at least half a year to organize, and things could go on just as they have for most of that time. Afterwards, you’d have to be a little discreet. And of course stay out of the way when she starts having children.”

“I don’t know if I could just go on with it. It seems strange to make love to a woman who’s about to marry someone else.”

“Then break it off. The experience would be novel for Chitra.” His eyes had a mischievous twinkle. It wasn’t often he got to meddle in the affairs of the Great.

“What do you mean?”

“In the past, it’s always been she who finished things, though always with the greatest tact, of course. Having a man quit her before she was ready would be new.”

I think it was that remark which resolved me to do it. A petty revenge, but I wanted to salvage something of my pride, to feel that I had some control over the situation.

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I had neglected to ask Ozin what was the “tactful” way to break off an affair. I simply did not show up at Chitra’s house for several days, and when her rickshaw came to pick me up, I sent the men away without explanation.

She sent a note: “Please come and see me.” Chitra was careful what she committed to paper.

I was not. “I don’t care to continue our dalliance,” I wrote, relishing the word. “You have behaved with the utmost propriety; nevertheless, my ways are different than yours, and I can no longer be comfortable in your bed. I will always remember you fondly” — even the bittersweetness of that final night — “and hope you will think of me as well.”

I was surprised at her return note: “If you will not come to my house, meet me at Truillo the wine merchant’s in one hour. Please be discreet.” Out of curiosity, I went. I doubted Chitra had ever been reduced to such stratagems.

Truillo gave me a cup of wine and chatted genially about the vintage, then urged me to come through and see his cellars. I suppose this performance was for the benefit of several customers who loitered about the place. Once through the back curtain, however, we went not downstairs but up, to a small, private room overlooking an inner courtyard. Chitra had arrived before me and was sitting on a bed, swathed in a plain robe and veiled to the eyes like a courtesan. She pulled the cloth away from her face and regarded me sadly.

“I know you are foreign,” she said, “But must you behave so... petulantly? We enjoy each other. I had not thought to end that so soon.”

“I cannot help it. I have some pride, and among my people this would be an unconscionable situation. I cannot bed another man’s betrothed.”

“It matters nothing to him or to me. Why should it concern you?”

“I cannot say, but it does.”

She gave me a long, measuring look. Then she pulled the veil from her head and opened her robe, lying back on the bed and raising her arms towards me. “One last time, then, before we part? To remember me by?”

I turned my eyes away with an effort. “We had our last time. I need no more memories. I must go.”

I did not look back until I heard her feet hit the floor. By then she was fully dressed again and her face clear of any emotion. But I heard traces of anger in her voice.

“Very well then. That is that. Do me the courtesy to behave politely if we meet in public, as we undoubtedly shall at some parties you happen to perform at. I am respecting your customs; I hope you will respect mine.”

“You have my word.” I bowed and left, commenting to Truillo on my way out, “Very interesting cellars. I shall be back to sample some of those rare vintages.”

I had thought that being the one to break it off would lessen my pain. It did not. The first time I happened to see Chitra, at a party, she greeted me with some display of warmth, demonstrating to the world that we were still friends, or at least friendly acquaintances. I stumbled on my reply, discomfited by the presence of Lionello, her future husband, who was her escort that evening. He, too, was polite, as if the fact that I had been the lover of his betrothed was no matter at all.

I was sad and distracted the rest of the evening. If I had not loved her, nor she me, what difference could it make? Still, I was lonely, and Chitra’s lush body was hard to forget. It was somewhat to my credit that I did not turn to Mrinal for comfort. I would not have found it there anyway; she had watched my exchange with Chitra closely, and barely concealed her gloating.

I turned down the next few jobs the Maruns offered, playing for upper-crust parties. Vico was troubled.

“You’d do better to come, look through her, pretend you don’t care. Some excuses can be made for foreigners, but if you are seen to be avoiding her you’ll be laughed at.”

“Let them laugh. I just can’t see her right now. I’ll come back soon. Just tell everyone I’m sick or something.”

He went away, and for the next morens I played only for small merchants, or walked the streets at civic celebrations, strumming and singing for whatever handouts I could get — by now the Musicians’ Guild was prepared to tolerate my activities, since I paid my Guild tithes like everyone else (only higher), and was as close as a foreigner could come to being a regular Guild member.

The money I had saved by living and eating at Chitra’s house would have let me continue this way for months, but it was not so long before I felt I could stand to see her again, if I happened to. I told Vico I’d play at his next big party.