CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 11: Handshake

"Ambition," Katarina said, "is the single most important force in any civilization."

The wind off the southern ocean whipped her hair sideways. She stood at the cliff's edge with her hands behind her back and her chin tilted up.

"Every trade route, every great house that ever rose to prominence did so because someone wanted more than what they had. Not need. Want. Need is survival. Ambition is what turns survival into civilization. The Valdari didn't build port cities because they needed shelter from the rain. They built them because someone looked at a coastline and thought, 'I could own that.'"

She paused for effect.

"Understand?" She looked back at her audience.

Behind her, Vessa was sitting on a rock, kicking her legs and eating a dried fig.

"You're weird," Vessa said.

[... Some right-hand woman you are.]

She'd been doing that for the entire speech, which was rude, but also entirely predictable, because Vessa Talori had attached herself to Katarina's life with the tenacity of a barnacle and approximately the same level of reverence.

It had been a few weeks since they'd met.

Katarina had tried ignoring her. She'd tried being cold. She'd tried being boring on purpose, which was genuinely difficult for someone with a photographic memory and opinions about everything.

Nothing worked.

So Katarina had accepted the arrangement. Vessa was now her associate. After all, every CEO needed someone who followed them around and agreed with their schizophrenic ramblings.

The fact that Vessa agreed with almost nothing and spent most of their time together asking questions Katarina didn't want to answer was a personnel issue she'd address later.

"Come on," Katarina said. "Let's go waddle in the ravine."

The ravine cut inland from the cliffs, a narrow channel of red rock with scrub growing out of the walls and a thin stream at the bottom. Katarina had been cataloguing the local geography in her head.

"Ooooh, what is that?" Vessa said, pointing at something clinging to the rock face about ten feet up. It had six legs, a shell the color of rust, and what appeared to be two sets of eyes arranged vertically on its head.

"I don't know."

"It's looking at me."

"It has four eyes. It has to look at something."

Vessa threw a pebble near it. Not at it, just near it. The thing didn't move. It sat on the rock with the calm certainty of a creature that had never once been bothered by anything and wasn't about to start now.

They walked along the stream. Katarina decided to try explaining market theory.

"So the basic principle is supply and demand. When supply exceeds demand, prices drop. When demand exceeds supply, prices rise. The goal of any merchant house is to control enough of the supply to influence the price without triggering a demand collapse."

"Uh huh."

"The Brevaine house, for example, controls about forty percent of the regional wine distribution. That gives them pricing power, but it also makes them vulnerable to supply disruption, because if their vineyards have a bad season, they can't meet their contracts and the penalty clauses—"

Vessa kicked water at her.

It hit Katarina's shins and soaked through her shoes, cold as mountain runoff.

She stopped talking.

"Sorry," Vessa said, grinning. "You started talking like a textbook. I could tell you weren't actually talking to me anymore, you were just talking."

"You insolent..."

Katarina kicked water back. Harder. It caught Vessa across the front of her shirt and she yelped, and then it was over.

The diplomatic channel collapsed. Both nations sprinted at each other. The war started.

Vessa lunged and Katarina dodged and within thirty seconds they were both standing in the stream, soaked to the waist, splashing each other with the furious dedication of two nine-year-olds who had decided this was a life-or-death struggle.

They were still damp when they walked back to the estate, and Katarina was still picking river weed out of her collar when she saw the carriage.

It was parked in the courtyard, and it wasn't local. The construction was different: lighter frame, lacquered wood instead of raw timber, with a team of horses rather than the draft animals the Valdari used. Human make.

[We have a visitor.]

She found them in Seris's study.

The man sitting across from Seris was human, mid-forties, with a neatly trimmed beard, and clothes that were expensive without being loud about it.

Good fabric, clean lines, the kind of outfit that said "I have money" to people who knew what money looked like and said nothing to people who didn't. He was sitting with one ankle crossed over his knee and a smile that Katarina recognized on sight.

It was the smile of a person who was used to being the smartest one in the room.

[I know that smile. I wore it for ten years.]

"Ah," the man said, glancing at Katarina as she walked in. His eyes flicked to her wet clothes and river-weedy collar and his smile didn't change, which told her more about him than anything he'd said so far. A man who doesn't react to the unexpected is a man who plans for it. "And this must be the young Montecardi."

"Katarina," Seris said. "This is Signore Cabrian. Marseo Cabrian. He's a merchant from the central kingdoms."

"A pleasure," Cabrian said, and inclined his head.

Katarina gave him a small nod and sat down next to Seris.

"I like learning about the family business," she said, which was the excuse she always used, and Seris let her, because Seris had gotten used to Katarina being in the room during meetings the way you get used to a piece of furniture that turned out to be load-bearing.

Brynn was in the corner, arms folded. She'd already sized Cabrian up and decided he was fine, because Brynn decided everyone was fine until they gave her a reason to punch them.

"I like him," Brynn whispered to Katarina as she sat down. "Good handshake."

[Brynn, this man could sell you a bridge and you'd thank him for the view.]

"As I was saying, Signora," Cabrian continued, turning back to Seris, "the Cabrian Trading Company has been expanding into the southern markets over the past two years. We see real potential in the Valdari coastal region, and we're looking to establish long-term partnerships with houses that share our outlook."

[Generic pitch. "Real potential." "Shared outlook." He's selling a feeling, not a product. That means the product is the trap.]

"We're prepared to offer a five-year supply contract. Guaranteed goods, below-market pricing, stable delivery schedules. Everything your house needs to grow without the risk of market volatility."

Seris leaned forward. Katarina could see the interest in her eyes. Stable supply at below-market prices was exactly what the Montecardi needed right now. They'd spent the last four years patching holes, and a five-year contract would give them the kind of predictability that made long-term planning possible.

[Don't bite. Not yet. Let me see the paper.]

"I've brought a preliminary draft," Cabrian said, and produced a leather folder from his bag. The good kind of leather.

He placed it on the desk. Seris opened it and started reading. Katarina leaned over and read along, which Cabrian glanced at with faint amusement, the way adults do when children pretend to read things they couldn't possibly understand.

[Keep underestimating me. Please.]

The first page was boilerplate. Terms, durations, delivery specifications, all standard. Katarina scanned it, filed it, and turned the page in her head while Seris was still on the second paragraph.

The second page had the pricing. Below market, as promised, fifteen percent below, which was generous. Too generous. Nobody offered fifteen percent below market on a five-year deal unless they were planning to make it back somewhere else.

The third page had the renewal terms.

There it was.

[Oh, you son of a bitch.]

The renewal clause gave the Cabrian Trading Company first right of refusal on all Montecardi supply contracts at the end of the five-year term. If the Montecardi wanted to switch suppliers, they'd have to pay a termination fee equal to three years of contract value.

Three years of contract value. On a five-year deal with below-market pricing that the Montecardi would build their entire supply chain around.

[This isn't a partnership. This is a leveraged buyout.]

She'd seen this exact structure in her old life.

A larger company offers a smaller one an incredible deal, too good to pass up. The smaller company takes it, restructures around it, becomes dependent on it. And then, when the contract comes up for renewal, the larger company raises the prices to whatever they want, because the termination fee makes leaving impossible and the smaller company has already dismantled their alternative supply lines.

Lock in, squeeze, acquire.

Cabrian was still smiling. Seris was still reading page two, and Brynn was still in the corner, completely at ease.

[The question is... Who sent you?]

Chapter 12: Connections

Katarina waited two days before she started pulling.

Not because she needed time to think. She'd known what Cabrian's contract was the second she'd read page three. She waited because a nine-year-old girl who reacted to a business meeting with immediate, surgical investigation would raise questions that Katarina did not want to answer.

So she waited. She ate dinner. She did her breathing exercises with Brynn. She went to school. She came home. And on the second evening, when Seris had the ledgers open on the study table and a glass of wine in her hand, Katarina sat across from her and started.

"Mama, what's the Cabrian Trading Company?"

Seris glanced up.

"Signore Cabrian's firm. You met him the other day."

"Yeah, but what do they actually do? Like, where are they from?"

"The central kingdoms. Tessavere, I think. They handle bulk goods, grain, textiles, that sort of thing." Seris turned a page in the ledger. "Why?"

"Just curious." Katarina swung her legs under the chair. "Do other families work with them?"

"I'm sure they do. He mentioned a few partnerships in the region."

"Which ones?"

Seris looked at her for a beat longer than usual. Then she smiled and went back to the ledger.

"You're very interested in them, huh?"

"I like knowing things."

"The Parenna family, I believe. And the Duccetti. He mentioned both."

[Parenna and Duccetti. Got it.]

She filed the names and moved on before the questions got heavy enough for Seris to stop answering them.

The trade registry was kept in a locked cabinet in the district clerk's office in Vellasera. Katarina was absolutely not supposed to have access to it.

She got in anyway, because the clerk was Ottavia's cousin and Ottavia owed Katarina a favor after Katarina had "accidentally" reorganized the pantry inventory last month and saved her three hours of work.

"She just wants to look at the books for a school project," Ottavia had told her cousin. "She's nine. What's she going to do, commit fraud?"

The cousin had shrugged and let her in.

The registry was organized by house, which made it easy. Katarina pulled the Parenna file first.

Five-year supply contract with the Cabrian Trading Company. Below-market pricing. First right of refusal on renewal.

Termination fee: three years of contract value.

She pulled the Duccetti file.

Five-year supply contract with the Cabrian Trading Company. Below-market pricing. First right of refusal on renewal.

Termination fee: three years of contract value.

They were identical, word for word.

[There it is.]

She checked the dates.

Parenna signed theirs four years ago. Duccetti signed two years after that. Both houses had been mid-tier, struggling with the same problems the Montecardi had: declining revenue, thin margins, no leverage to negotiate better terms on the open market.

Both had taken the deal because it looked like salvation.

[Two down. We were supposed to be three.]

She closed the files, thanked the clerk, and walked out into the sun with her hands in her pockets and the full picture assembling itself behind her eyes.

"Vessa."

"Hm?"

They were sitting on the stone wall behind the school, legs dangling, sharing a bag of salted nuts that Vessa had produced from somewhere. Vessa always had food. It was one of her more reliable qualities as a business associate.

"Your moms' shop is on the harbor road, right? They hear a lot of trade talk?"

"All day, every day! Mom says the harbor is just a gossip network with boats."

"What do people say about the Parenna family?"

Vessa crunched a nut.

"That they're stuck. They used to source their own goods from up the coast, but a couple years ago they signed some big contract with a human trader and now they can't buy from anyone else. My mom says old lady Parenna looks like she hasn't slept in a year!"

"What about the Duccetti?"

"Same thing, kind of. They used to be at the market every week. Haven't seen them in months." Vessa looked at her sideways. "Why?"

"Research."

"You say that a lot."

"One must remain informed as it pertains to all matters involving money, Vessa."

Vessa shrugged.

[Eh, as far as spies go, I will certainly have to recruit better sources in the future than "my nine-year-old classmate", but for now, she will do.]

Katarina ate a nut and looked at the harbor. Fishing boats rocked in the shallows and a cargo vessel was unloading crates at the main pier.

[So. Parenna is trapped. Duccetti is trapped. Both locked into contracts they can't afford to leave. Both had their independent supply lines dismantled by the time the below-market pricing made them dependent. And now Cabrian shows up at our door with the same deal, same structure, same smile.]

The Ledger flickered awake.

Marseo Cabrian:

Cabrian Trading Company (subsidiary).

Parent entity: Unknown.

Contract pattern: Dependency creation via below-market pricing and prohibitive termination clauses.

Confirmed targets: Parenna (locked), Duccetti (locked), Montecardi (pending).

Assessment: Competent. Patient. Capital reserves inconsistent with mid-tier merchant profile.

[Capital reserves inconsistent. Yeah, that's what I thought.]

A mid-tier human trader from the central kingdoms didn't have the money to offer fifteen percent below market on three separate five-year contracts. The margins didn't work. Somebody was bankrolling him. Somebody with deep pockets and a strategic interest in locking down Valdari coastal supply chains one desperate family at a time.

[You're a front man, Cabrian. But for who?]

The Ledger didn't answer that one. It only knew what Katarina knew, and right now, she didn't have enough to name the parent entity. Just the shape of it.

It was clearly a large organization, a patient one, and one that understood exactly how to squeeze a merchant house without ever raising a fist.

She'd find it. Not today, but she'd find it.

The market festival hit Vellasera two weeks later and the entire port town lost its mind.

Every stall in the harbor district was open and twice as loud as usual. There were banners hanging from buildings, music coming from three different directions that didn't agree on tempo, and the smell of roasted meat and spiced wine hit Katarina from a street away.

Brynn had Katarina on her shoulders. This was embarrassing but also the only way to see anything, because nine years old still meant eye-level with everyone's waist, and that meant Katarina spent most crowded events staring directly at ass.

A lot of ass. The Valdari were not shy about showing off their bodies, after all.

[I've somewhat gotten used to the nudity, but it's almost worse when they do put clothes on. Like how it's better to imply you'll fire someone than to outright say you will.]

Seris had gone ahead to buy vegetables. Vessa was with them. Apparently, her parents had asked if she could tag along and Kat's parents said yes. She didn't mind too much.

The problem was everything else.

As she said earlier, the nudity was something she'd gotten used to. The physical affection was a different story.

Katarina had known, intellectually, that her people were not shy about physical affection. She'd grown up watching Seris drape herself over Brynn at every opportunity. Every time Seris and Brynn had sex they made damn sure the whole house knew.

But nine was different from four. Nine came with the first faint hum of hormones on the horizon, and hormones turned "intellectually aware" into "very physically present."

There was a couple by the wine stall. One of them had the other pressed against the counter and they were kissing like they'd forgotten other people existed. The woman against the counter had her tunic half-open and her partner's thigh was between her legs and... well, the wine merchant was just casually pouring glasses around them.

[Good god...]

A woman walked past in a wrap that covered exactly one tit and left the other one out on purpose, like it needed some air. She was holding hands with another woman whose skirt was slit so high Katarina could see the curve of her hip all the way up to the waistband.

[Okay.]

Another couple was chatting by an alley. The taller one had her hand openly down the back of the shorter one's pants.

[OKAY.]

These were just bodies. She'd seen bodies before. She was a reincarnated adult woman with decades of life experience and complete emotional maturity and she was absolutely not affected by any of this.

Her face was red. But that was the sun.

[It's the sun. Definitely the sun. Moving on.]

"BRYNN!"

The voice hit like a cannon blast. A woman shorter than Brynn by a full head and built like she could flip a cart shoved through the crowd and hugged- no, she grabbed Brynn's ass with both hands.

Both hands, full grip, in public, like she was checking the firmness of produce at a market stall.

"Gods, Brynn, look at these tits," the woman said, pulling back to stare at Brynn's chest. "They've gotten bigger. What has that wife of yours been feeding you?"

"GIULA!" Brynn grinned back at her. She swung Katarina off her shoulders, set her on the ground gently, and bear-hugged the woman hard enough to lift her off her feet.

Then, Giula kissed Brynn on the mouth. A real kiss, with tongue and enthusiasm and Brynn's hand on the back of her head, and when they separated, Giula was laughing and Brynn was laughing and Katarina was standing between them with her brain trying to reboot.

[Who... Wha...? She just grabbed my mother's ass and kissed her and my mother LIKED IT?!]

The casual infidelity had Kat's mind refusing to turn back on again.

"And who's this little thing?" Giula looked down at Katarina with bright orange eyes and a grin full of sharp teeth. "No way. This is the baby? The one you threw in the air?"

"Six feet straight up," Brynn said with pride.

"She's got your wife's face. Lucky kid."

Katarina opened her mouth to say something composed and mature and instead produced a noise that wasn't a word.

"Kat, this is Giula! We ran the frontier together for years! She's the one I told you about who arm-wrestled a—"

"Seris!"

Giula spotted Seris coming through the crowd with a bag of vegetables in each hand.

Immediately, Katarina began wondering how she was gonna deal with the fallout. Obviously, Seris had to have seen that make-out session a moment ago. Obviously, Giula was about to get decked at the very least.

[I didn't think I'd be the daughter of a divorced couple. Certainly a subpar outcome but, it's okay, I can deal with this.]

... Except, Giula crossed the distance in three strides, cupped Seris's face, and kissed her full on the mouth.

Seris kissed her back. She leaned into it, one hand still holding a bag of onions, and when Giula pulled away, Seris was smiling.

[What the fuck is wrong with these people?]

"You look good, Giula."

"You look edible, as always." Giula looked Seris up and down without a shred of subtlety. "When are you two going to invite me over for dinner? And I mean *with dessert*."

Brynn laughed. Seris laughed. Giula's hand was on Seris's hip now and Seris hadn't moved it.

Katarina was going to faint.

Vessa appeared at her elbow and held out a piece of candied fruit.

"You okay?"

"No."

Katarina took the candy and bit into it.

[I lived thirty-two years on Earth in the closet. I couldn't even hold a woman's hand in public. These people grab each other's asses as a GREETING.]

Brynn had her arm around Giula now, introducing her to Vessa. Seris caught Katarina's eye from across the group and gave her a small, knowing smile.

She looked around the festival. Now that she was paying attention, she saw it everywhere. Groups of three walking arm in arm. A woman sitting in one partner's lap while another partner fed her grapes.

[Different world. Different rules. Got it. It's okay. I understand. I... Jesus fuck...]

Her face stayed red for the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter 13: Poison Pills

"I think we should take it."

Seris said it over dinner like she was commenting on the weather. Wine in one hand, fork in the other, the casual tone of a woman who had already made up her mind.

Cabrian had come back three days ago for a follow-up meeting. Katarina hadn't been in the room for that one, which meant Seris had deliberately scheduled it while Katarina was at school, which meant Seris had become somewhat uncomfortable with Kat's interjections, lately.

[Noted. Be more careful.]

But not right now. Right now, she needed to be loud.

"The Cabrian contract?" Katarina asked.

"Mhm. Five years of stable supply at fifteen percent below market. It gives us room to reinvest."

"What happens when the contract renews?"

Seris glanced at her. "We renegotiate."

"What if he raises prices?"

"Then we find another supplier."

"Which supplier?"

Seris's fork paused halfway to her mouth. Kat pressed further.

"He's already locked out the Parenna and the Duccetti," Katarina said. She kept her voice flat. Just a kid stating facts she happened to know. "They signed the same contract. Didn't they? Neither of them can source independently anymore because they dismantled their old supply lines to accommodate his delivery schedule. If he raises their prices at renewal, they can't leave, because the termination fee is three years of contract value."

The table went quiet.

[... Did I go too hard?]

Brynn looked at Seris. Seris looked at Katarina. Katarina picked up a piece of bread and took a bite.

"Where did you hear that?" Seris asked.

"Around."

"Around?"

"Vessa's family runs a dry goods shop on the harbor. People talk."

That was partially true. People did talk. Katarina had also broken into a trade registry, but Seris didn't need to know that.

Seris set her fork down.

"The terms are generous, Katarina."

[Whatever, I've already shown most of my power level.]

"Generous terms are how you build a cage, I read in a book. You line the bars with gold so the bird flies in on its own."

Brynn made a noise that was half laugh, half cough. Seris shot her a look.

"She’s got a point," Brynn said, hands up.

"She’s nine."

"She’s nine and she’s got a point," Brynn smirked.

Seris picked her wine up and took a long sip. There was a crease between her eyebrows that hadn’t been there before.

"I’ll look at it again," she said.

She didn’t say Katarina was right. She didn’t dismiss it, either, and that was all that mattered.

[Progress.]

Brynn hit the training post hard enough to crack it and then looked disappointed that it hadn’t exploded.

"Again! Left foot forward!"

Katarina shifted her weight and threw a punch. It connected with Brynn’s open palm and made a sound like a playing card hitting a table.

"Good form," Brynn said. "But you’re thinking too much."

"I’m placing my shots."

"You’re reading my shoulders to predict where I’m going to move my hands and then aiming for the gap. I can see you doing it."

[... Was I that obvious?]

"STOP THINKING ABOUT IT AND HIT ME!"

Katarina hit her. Harder this time, without the calculations, and her fist connected with Brynn’s palm with an actual sound. Brynn’s hand didn’t move, because Brynn’s hand was attached to Brynn and Brynn was built like a fortress, but her yellow eyes went wide.

"THERE! That’s what happens when you stop being clever and just commit!"

[I will never stop being clever. It’s one of my few redeeming qualities.]

They went another twenty minutes. Kicks, blocks, and basic grappling that mostly consisted of Katarina trying to escape Brynn’s grip. It was like wrestling a warm, encouraging boulder. Every time Katarina found a gap, Brynn closed it, and every time Brynn closed it, she said "good try!" like Katarina had done something impressive instead of failing completely.

By the end, Katarina’s arms were shaking and Brynn wasn’t even breathing hard.

They sat on the edge of the training yard and Brynn tossed her a water skin.

"You fight like a little general, you know that? Always looking for the angle. Reminds me of Giula, actually." Brynn took a drink. "Most of us on the frontier just hit things until the things stopped moving. Giula and Marga were the ones who thought first and hit second. You’d have fit right in with those two."

[I would not have fit in. I would have restructured your mercenary company’s billing practices and then gone home.]

"What kind of jobs did you take?"

"... The bad ones, the ones nobody else wanted." Brynn said it easily, like old news. "Caravan escort through bandit territory. Monster clearance. Once, we guarded a mining operation for three months while the company tried to figure out why their workers kept disappearing."

"Did you figure it out?"

"Yeah. The foreman was selling them to slavers across the border and pocketing the head count wages." Brynn’s grin dropped. "Marga broke his jaw. I broke other stuff."

[Okay, so there’s the line. Cross it and Brynn stops being friendly. Got it.]

"There was another job," Brynn said. "Client hired us for caravan protection. Rich guy, silks and spices, a whole wagon train heading through a mountain pass. Paid up front, which should’ve been our first clue, because nobody pays up front unless they don’t expect you to come back for the second half."

"What happened?"

"Bandits hit us on the second night. Except they knew exactly where we’d be, exactly how many of us there were, and exactly which wagon had the most valuable cargo. Because the

client told them. He was planning to rob his own shipment, blame the bandits, and collect on the insurance. Can you believe that?"

"How'd you figure it out?"

"Marga noticed the bandits had the client's route map. Same ink, same handwriting. She showed me and I went and had a physical conversation with the client."

[Naturally.]

"Point is," Brynn said, "people who offer you something for nothing are the ones you need protection from. If the deal looks too good, it's because you're the product, not the customer."

She said it offhand, like common sense. She didn't connect it to Cabrian.

[But you just described his entire playbook, mother. Word for word.]

"What happened after that? With the caravan client's people?"

"Oh, we had to lay low for a while. Marga and I hid out in a bathhouse for three days. And by lay low, I mean—"

She stopped.

Katarina looked at her with wide, innocent eyes.

[Ah, you fell into that trap again. Teasing, initiated!]

"You mean what, mother?"

Brynn's red skin went a shade darker across her cheeks.

"I mean we... we were hiding. In the bathhouse. Because it was a good hiding spot."

"For three days?"

"It was a very thorough hiding strategy."

"What were you doing for three days in a bathhouse?"

"BATHING, Katarina. We were bathing. Extensively. Moving on!"

[Every single time.]

Katarina let the silence sit for a few seconds, then shifted gears.

"Mother, you know the Parenna family, right? And the Duccetti?"

"Sure. Not well, but I've met them at district gatherings. Why?"

"Could you ask them about the supply contract they signed with Cabrian? Just whether they're happy with it. Whether the deal worked out the way they expected."

Brynn studied her for a moment. Katarina could tell she was chewing on it.

"Sure, dumpling. I can ask around." She paused. "This is about Cabrian's contract, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Brynn nodded. She didn't ask why, or how Katarina knew to ask, or any of the dozen questions a normal parent would ask a nine-year-old who was investigating a merchant's business dealings. She just accepted it, the way she accepted everything about Katarina, without needing to understand it first.

Brynn ruffled her hair.

"You're something else, you know that?"

[You have no idea.]

Chapter 14: The Kill

Breakfast was eggs, bread with oil, and a plate of sliced fruit.

Katarina waited until Seris was on her second cup of tea. Timing mattered. First cup was autopilot. Second cup was when Seris actually started thinking.

"Mama, didn't the Parenna family used to sell wine independently?"

Seris looked up from the trade circular she'd been skimming.

"They did, yes. Years ago."

"How come they only use one distributor now?"

Easy. It was the kind of question a curious kid would ask. The kind that had a very simple, very ugly answer if you followed it far enough, but on the surface was just a child piecing together things she'd overheard.

Brynn had come through. She'd visited the Parenna estate three days ago under the pretense of buying wine, because Brynn could walk into anyone's home and leave as a friend, and she'd come back with exactly what Katarina needed. The Parenna matriarch was miserable. Their costs had gone up thirty percent since their second year under Cabrian's contract. They couldn't leave. They couldn't source independently.

They were bleeding.

Katarina had taken that information, wrapped it in a nine-year-old's curiosity, and placed it on the breakfast table like a grenade with a daisy painted on it.

Seris set down her tea.

"I don't know, piccola. I imagine they found a deal that worked for them."

"But Brynn said old lady Parenna looked sad when she talked about it. And Vessa's mom says nobody sees the Duccetti at the harbor market anymore."

Seris didn't answer right away. Her purple eyes drifted to the window.

"Eat your eggs, Katarina."

[Come ooon. You're smart enough. Follow the thread.]

Katarina ate her eggs and didn't push further.

That night, Seris was in her study until past midnight.

Katarina knew this because she woke up at one in the morning to use the bathroom and saw the light under the study door. She pressed her ear to the wood and heard pages turning, fast and purposeful, the sound of someone looking for a specific answer to a specific question.

She went back to bed.

[YEEEES! She's checking. She's actually checking!]

The next morning, Seris was already at the breakfast table when Katarina came down, no tea, no trade circular, just her hands folded on the table and a stillness to her that Katarina had never seen before from her.

Brynn wore her moods on her face. When Brynn got mad, the air got heavier and her voice dropped an octave. Seris was the opposite. The angrier she got, the quieter she became.

But this wasn’t anger. This was the look of a woman who’d nearly walked into a trap and was now retracing every step that had led her to the edge.

"Good morning, mama."

"Good morning, piccola."

Seris smiled at her. It was a real smile, but her eyes were sharper than yesterday.

Cabrian arrived at two in the afternoon, because Seris had sent a messenger that morning inviting him to finalize the contract.

Katarina wasn’t invited to the meeting. She positioned herself in the hallway outside the study instead, close enough to hear through the door that Seris had left slightly ajar. Seris always left the study door ajar when she was entertaining guests. It was a ventilation habit. Today it was a gift.

There was the sound of the heavy glass bottle from the top shelf, the one Seris only used for occasions that mattered. She’d brought out the good wine.

"Signore Cabrian, thank you for coming back. I know we’ve taken more time than you expected."

"Not at all, Signora. Good decisions deserve careful consideration."

[Smooth. He’s good.]

"They do." There was a pause and the sound of wine being poured. "Which is why the Montecardi will not be signing your contract."

Silence. Katarina counted to four before Cabrian spoke.

"I see. May I ask why?"

"You may. The terms aren’t favorable."

"The terms are fifteen percent below market, Signora. I’m not sure how much more favorable—"

"The terms aren’t favorable," Seris repeated, "because they’re designed not to be. Not in year one. In year five, when my house has restructured around your supply chain and dismantled our independent sourcing, and you raise the price to whatever you like because the termination fee makes leaving impossible."

Another silence, longer this time.

"That’s a very... specific interpretation."

"It’s the Parenna interpretation. And the Duccetti interpretation. Both of whom signed the same contract with the same terms and are now paying thirty percent above market with no way out."

Katarina pressed her back against the wall and bit down on a grin.

[Get him! Put him in the dirt!]

When Cabrian spoke again, the charm was still there but the warmth was gone.

"Signora Montecardi, I respect your caution. But let’s be honest about the situation. Your house is not in a position to be selective. Your revenue has been declining for years. Your trade routes are nonexistent. The district assessor gave you a provisional extension, not a clean bill of health. You need this contract more than I need your signature."

Katarina heard Seris set down her glass, gently and precisely.

"Signore Cabrian." Seris’s voice hadn’t changed in volume or speed. If anything, it had gotten softer. "You came to my home. You sat at my table. You drank my wine. And now you’re telling me what I can and cannot afford."

A beat.

"I think you’ve forgotten who you’re speaking to."

She said it the way you’d correct a minor misunderstanding, polite and almost warm. And then the air in the hallway got heavy. The actual air, pressing down on Katarina’s shoulders and chest like the gravity had just changed its mind about how much things should weigh.

Then it passed.

Katarina’s hands were shaking.

[What the hell was that?]

She heard Cabrian’s chair scrape back.

"I appreciate your time, Signora." His voice was even, professional, and faster than before. "If you change your mind, the offer stands."

"It won’t. But thank you for the visit."

She heard footsteps and then the study door opened fully and Cabrian walked out. He saw Katarina in the hallway and his eyes passed over her the way they had the first time, a child, irrelevant. He adjusted his coat and walked toward the front entrance.

Katarina watched him go, then looked into the study.

Seris was sitting at her desk with her wine glass in her hand and her legs crossed. She looked relaxed, like nothing had happened, but her knuckles around the glass stem were white.

"Mama?"

Seris blinked. Then she smiled down at Katarina like she was the only good thing in the room.

"Yes, piccola?"

"What was that about?"

Seris reached down and patted her head.

"Nothing important. The deal's concluded."

She took a sip of wine and turned back to her desk. Katarina stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her mother's profile against the afternoon light coming through the window.

[I still don't know who you really are.]

She turned and walked back down the hallway.

Chapter 15: Ten

Vellasera didn't need an excuse to throw a party, but it appreciated having one.

Katarina's tenth birthday had turned the port town's central square into a small festival. There were lanterns hung between the buildings on strings, food stalls dragged out of storage, and someone had set up a music stage near the fountain where three women were playing stringed instruments with more enthusiasm than skill.

Valdari celebrated every birthday, but the tenth was different. Katarina had gathered enough cultural context over the years to understand why. Ten was when a child stopped being a child in the eyes of the community. Now, she was still not an adult, not yet, but she was no longer a cute decoration.

Ten was when cultivation potential was formally assessed. Ten was when the family learned what their kid was made of.

Brynn had been vibrating about it for a week.

"I bet she’s a physical cultivator," Brynn had told Seris over dinner three nights ago. "Look at her breathing control. Look at her stance work. She’s got the foundation."

"She’s got your optimism," Seris had replied.

"That’s not a no!"

Katarina, for her part, was less interested in her martial potential than she probably should have been. She knew cultivation mattered in this world. Different sects would hear about this and be interested and all that.

She knew it was the difference between being a person and being a person people listened to. But her CEO brain still filed it under "useful tool" rather than "core identity," the way a CFO might view the company gym. Good to have. Not the point.

Still. She was a little curious.

The assessment array was set up in the square, a circular formation about ten feet across carved into a stone platform. The carved lines were filled with a pale mineral that Katarina didn’t recognize. Seris had arranged the whole thing, which meant it was either very expensive or a favor being called in, and Seris hadn’t mentioned the cost, which meant Katarina shouldn’t ask.

"You just stand in the center," Seris told her, one hand on Katarina’s shoulder. "The array reads your spiritual root and shows your affinity. It doesn’t hurt."

"What if I don’t have an affinity?"

Seris smiled.

"Everyone has something, piccola."

"Okay... What if mine is boring?"

"Then we’ll love you anyway... and Brynn will cry about it for a week."

[Fair.]

A small crowd had gathered. Neighbors, shopkeepers, a few kids from school who were eating candy and watching with the mild interest of children who hadn’t had their own assessment yet.

Vessa was in the front row with her arms crossed, looking like she was about to watch a sporting event.

Katarina stepped onto the platform. The stone was cool under her bare feet. She walked to the center of the array and stood there, hands at her sides.

"Ready?" Seris asked.

"Ready."

Seris placed her palm on the edge of the array and pushed qi into it.

Katarina felt the energy move through the carved lines, a low hum that started at the perimeter and spiraled inward. The mineral in the grooves began to glow.

The array read her. She could feel it, a warm pressure that started at her feet and climbed through her body until it found her chest and settled there, right behind her sternum, in a place she hadn't known existed. It wasn't painful. It was like being looked at from the inside.

Then it answered.

The glow turned blinding. White-gold light erupted from every carved line at once, so bright Katarina saw it through her closed eyelids, so bright that the people standing closest stumbled backward with their hands up. The hum became a sound she felt in her teeth.

Four colors. She saw them even with her eyes shut. Red, blue, green, and violet, braided together, distinct and simultaneous, each one blazing with equal intensity.

It lasted three seconds. Then the array dimmed and Katarina was standing in the center of a platform that was still smoking faintly at the edges.

She opened her eyes.

The crowd was silent. Brynn had both hands over her mouth. Vessa was staring at Katarina with her mouth open and a half-eaten candy forgotten in her hand.

Katarina looked down at the array. The carved lines had gone dark. A few of them had cracked from the output.

[Huh. Okay.]

Brynn exploded first. She vaulted the low wall around the platform, grabbed Katarina, and swung her into the air with a whoop that scattered birds from the nearest rooftop.

"FOUR PATHS! ALL FOUR! DID YOU SEE THAT?! SERIS, DID YOU SEE?!"

"I SAW!" Seris was already around the other side of the platform, her composure gone, her hands on her cheeks, looking at Katarina like she'd just produced a miracle. "Four affinities! Katarina, do you understand what that means?!"

[It means I have a diversified portfolio. Can I get down now?]

"FOUR!!!" Brynn was spinning her, actually spinning her in public.

"Brynn, put her down, you're going to—"

"SHE'S A GENIUS, SERIS! OUR BABY IS A GENIUS!"

"She IS a genius, now put her DOWN before you—"

Brynn did not put her down. Brynn lifted her higher and the crowd, which had been stunned silent five seconds ago, erupted. People were talking over each other, pointing at the cracked array, and Brynn was parading Katarina around on her shoulders like she'd just won a war.

Seris gave up trying to impose order and started crying instead. Not the subtle kind. The open, unashamed, mascara-would-be-ruined-if-mascara-existed kind, while simultaneously trying to explain to a bewildered neighbor what four-path affinity meant and why it was important and why her daughter was the most extraordinary child ever born.

[My mothers have lost their minds. Both of them. Completely and simultaneously. Over a cultivation result. Which I am going to use primarily for negotiation tactics.]

The Ledger flickered at the edge of her awareness.

All-Path Affinity confirmed.

Last recorded instance: Ithara (approx. 600 years ago).

[Six hundred years. Huh.]

She filed it away. It was important, probably. She'd research Ithara later, figure out what the political implications were, maybe draft a risk assessment. Right now Brynn was carrying her through the crowd like a trophy and Seris was ugly-crying into a neighbor's shoulder and Katarina was trying very hard to maintain the dignity of a woman who had once addressed the United Nations General Assembly.

She was failing.

Vessa shoved through the crowd and grabbed Katarina's dangling foot, since that was the only part of her she could reach.

"What the hell was that?!"

"Cultivation assessment."

"You broke the ARRAY!"

"I think it was already old."

"Kat, it was SMOKING."

"That does happen with older formations."

"YOU'RE NOT EVEN EXCITED!"

[I'm excited about what it means for enchantment-path applications in supply chain preservation. Does that count?]

"I'm excited," Katarina said, with all the enthusiasm of a woman confirming a dental appointment.

Vessa stared at her, then looked at Brynn, who was still whooping, then at Seris, who was still crying, then back at Katarina, who was dangling from her mother's shoulders with the expression of someone watching a mildly funny bit.

[Same, honestly.]

The walk home was quiet.

Vessa had gone back with her mothers an hour ago after hugging Katarina so hard it compressed her ribcage. The festival was winding down behind them, lantern light fading into the warm dark of a southern evening.

Katarina walked between her parents on the road up to the estate. Brynn was on her left, swaying gently, because Brynn had celebrated her daughter's assessment results by drinking with everyone who would drink with her, which was everyone.

Seris was on her right, sober, her hand resting on Katarina's head.

"Four paths," Brynn murmured for probably the thirtieth time that evening. "My little dumpling. Four whole paths."

"You've mentioned that."

"I'm going to mention it every day for the rest of my life."

"Please don't."

"Four paths, Seris. Four!"

"I heard you the first twenty-nine times, amore."

Brynn grinned and looped an arm around Katarina's shoulders, pulling her into a sideways hug that nearly knocked her off the road.

"So," Brynn said, with the studied casualness of a woman who had never been casual about anything in her life. "That Vessa girl."

"What about her?"

"She's cute."

"She's my friend, mother."

"Mhm. Your friend who hugged you for thirty seconds and turned pink."

"She turns pink at everything. She's pink-skinned."

"Pinker than usual."

"Mother."

"Have you kissed her yet?"

"I am TEN! I am ten years old! Today! Right now! You were there for the birthday!"

Brynn cackled. The sound echoed off the canyon walls and probably woke up half the port town. Seris was laughing too, quietly, her hand still warm on Katarina's head.

"Leave her alone, Brynn."

"I'm just asking!"

"She's ten."

"I had my first kiss at ten!"

[This absolute den of degenerates...]

Katarina’s face was burning but she was smiling, and she hated that she was smiling, because it meant the baby hormones excuse was fully expired and she had to admit that she was happy.

Just happy. Walking up a dark road between two people who loved her loudly and without condition.

The stars were out. The canyon walls rose on either side of them and somewhere below a dog barked and the last of the festival music drifted up on the warm air.

Brynn started humming, off-key, naturally.

"That’s terrible," Seris said.

Brynn hummed louder.

For a moment, Katarina’s mind went back to what Seris just said a while ago.

[Pfft. Kissing... I never kissed anyone in my previous life and yet I still made it to the top of society. What’s so special about that? You know what? I’m gonna do the same here, out of spite. I won’t kiss ANYONE.]

Chapter 16: Growing Pains

{Three Years Later}

Vessa tasted like the candied figs she’d been eating all afternoon, which was distracting, because Katarina was trying to focus on the mechanics of kissing and the sweetness on Vessa’s lips kept pulling her attention sideways.

They were on Katarina’s bed. Vessa was sitting with her back against the headboard and Katarina was in her lap, which had happened naturally about five minutes ago when a kiss on the cheek turned into a kiss on the mouth and that turned into Katarina’s hands on Vessa’s shoulders and her brain going blank.

[Okay. Tilt left. No, her left. There we go.]

Vessa’s hand was on the back of Katarina’s neck, warm fingers threaded through her hair, and Katarina was discovering in real time that years of theoretical knowledge about desire did absolutely nothing to prepare you for the reality of a pretty girl’s tongue in your mouth.

Vessa’s other hand was resting on Katarina’s hip, right where her shirt had ridden up, and the feeling of Vessa’s fingers on bare skin was making it very hard to think about anything else.

Vessa pulled back an inch. Her dark eyes were half-closed and her pink skin had gone a shade darker across her cheeks and down her neck.

"Stop thinking so much," Vessa said.

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. You're totally analyzing this!"

"I am not analyzing—"

The door opened.

"Katarina, piccola, have you seen the—"

Seris stopped in the doorway.

Katarina stopped breathing.

There was a moment, a single crystalline second where all three of them were frozen:

Katarina straddling Vessa's lap, Vessa with her hand still in Katarina's hair, and Seris in the doorway holding a rolled-up trade circular with an expression transitioning from mild curiosity to absolute delight.

"Oh," Seris said.

[No.]

Seris smiled. It was the widest, most dangerous smile Katarina had ever seen on her face.

"Well."

"Mother, GET OUT."

"I didn't say anything!"

"You're SMILING!"

"I'm happy for you! This is a happy smile!"

"OUT!"

Seris giggled and backed out of the room with both hands raised, still beaming, and pulled the door shut behind her. Katarina could hear her laughing all the way down the hallway,

and then she heard Seris yell "BRYNN! BRYNN, COME HERE, YOU OWE ME FIVE SILVER!" and Katarina's soul left her body.

[They had a BET?!]

Vessa buried her face in Katarina's shoulder and her whole body was shaking with either laughter or mortification or both.

All while Katarina was pretty sure she was about to begin her third life in just a moment.

Three years had changed things.

The Montecardi house was recovering.

Not thriving yet, there was a long way to go in that regard, but the bleeding had stopped and the patient was sitting up in bed and asking for water.

Revenue was up for the third consecutive quarter. The vineyard was producing at near capacity after two years of soil rehabilitation that Katarina had orchestrated through a series of increasingly transparent "innocent suggestions." The port tariff arrangement was stable. They'd added one active trade route, a modest coastal line running textiles south to a cluster of fishing villages that couldn't get decent cloth through their usual channels.

The Ledger's Holdings dashboard had improved from a wall of D's to a cautiously optimistic spread of C's and a single, shining B, which was the vineyard distribution contract that Katarina had restructured herself through Seris, who still thought most of the good ideas were hers.

Was it enough? No. Not nearly enough. But the trajectory was right.

Cultivation had progressed too.

Katarina was mid-Foundation across all four paths, which was unremarkable on paper but deeply strange in practice, because nobody advanced evenly across four affinities. Most cultivators poured everything into one path and let the others atrophy. Katarina's qi distributed itself across all four with a stubbornness that her tutors found baffling and Brynn found hilarious.

There was the Path of Elements, which was exactly what it sounds like. Fire, water, earth, and wind, and the usage of all of the above as projectiles at people who you don't want to continue living.

There was the Path of Grace. Healing, purification, all that jazz.

Then, the Path of the Artisan. Placing cultivation energy into objects. Weapon forging, ward creation, formation crafting, artifact development. The kind of magic that made day-to-day life tolerable for someone like Kat, coming to this world from Earth.

But the Path of Whispers was her favorite. Illusions, perception magic.

She'd developed a technique over the past year that she hadn't told anyone about. It let her read surface-level intentions during conversation. The direction someone was leaning before they leaned. A flicker of resistance before they said no. A pulse of greed before they named their price. It was subtle and unreliable and it gave her an edge in every negotiation she'd sat in on for the past six months.

[Every CEO dreams of reading the room. I can literally read the room.]

And then there was Vessa.

They'd started kissing four months ago. It had happened the way most things happened with Vessa: suddenly, without warning, and with Vessa acting like it was the most natural thing in the world while Katarina's brain tried to reboot.

Her body was changing, too. Thirteen among the Valdari meant the beginning of real puberty, which for a futanari demon apparently meant everything was happening at once and in directions that Katarina's previous life had not prepared her for.

She was taller, leaner, and increasingly aware of how Vessa looked when she bent over, or stretched, or pushed her hair back from her face, or did literally anything while Katarina was trying to concentrate.

They were on the cliff that afternoon, the same one where Katarina had delivered her speech about ambition years ago. Vessa was sitting with her legs dangling over the edge, eating, because Vessa was always eating.

"The preservation arrays are getting more complex," Vessa said, kicking her heels against the rock face. "My tutor says I'm ready to start on multi-chamber formations next month. Those are the ones they use on cargo ships to keep different goods at different temperatures in the same hold."

"That's useful."

"Right? If I can get certified, I could contract with the merchant houses directly. Your house included."

"You'd give me a discount."

"I'd give you market rate and a fruit basket."

"How generous."

Vessa grinned and bumped her shoulder against Katarina's. The wind off the ocean was warm and the water below was the same ridiculous blue that still looked fake after ten years of looking at it.

"So I've been thinking about the coastal textile route," Katarina said.

"Oh no."

"The margins are thin because we're running a single-product line. If we bundled the textiles with preserved goods, the per-unit shipping cost drops and we can justify a second weekly run, which means—"

Vessa kissed her, firm and warm and tasting like dried apricot.

Katarina's train of thought derailed, caught fire, and rolled into a canyon.

When Vessa pulled back, she was smiling.

Then Katarina kissed her and she did not think about logistics optimization for a while.

The visitor arrived at dusk.

Katarina saw the carriage from the study window, a sleek thing pulled by two animals that moved with a fluid gait, bred for speed rather than endurance. She didn't recognize the house markings.

She found Seris at the front entrance. The woman who stepped out of the carriage was tall, taller than Seris, with dark red hair that fell past her shoulders and a face that made you look twice. She walked like she owned whatever ground was under her feet.

[Who is this?]

The woman saw Seris and crossed the distance without hesitation. She took Seris's face in both hands and kissed her on the mouth. It was slow and deep and Seris kissed her back with a familiarity that made Katarina's stomach flip.

[Okay. That's... okay.]

Puberty had come with other revelations. Like, for example, she'd gone from knowing that Seris was the hottest woman in the world on a factual "did you know" trivia kind of level to actually FEELING like Seris was the hottest woman in the world.

Even now, she wasn't looking at the stranger, she was looking at how Seris kissed and thinking [yeah I can see why Brynn married her. I'd marry her too.]

The woman pulled back, turned to Brynn, who was standing in the doorway with her arms folded and a grin on her face, grabbed Brynn by the front of her shirt, and kissed her too.

Brynn's hand went to the back of the woman's head and she deepened it, and Katarina decided she'd seen enough and looked at the sky instead.

Kat sighed. At this point, like the nudity, the open-minded perspective on relationship structures had settled in Katarina's mind.

They went inside with wine. Katarina was nearby, doing what she always did: being in the room and existing cleverly.

Then the woman said something that made Katarina's ears sharpen.

"You look good, Sable. Domestic life suits you."

Seris's wine glass paused halfway to her mouth.

"Don't call me that here."

The woman's eyebrow rose.

"Still? After all this time?"

"Yes. After all this time."

[Sable. That's not her name. Why does this woman have a different name for my mother?]

The woman glanced at Katarina. Her gaze lingered, half amused and half appraising.

"She has your eyes," the woman said to Seris.

"She does." Seris grinned and Kat had to look away.

The visit lasted two hours. Between the flirting and the wine and the way the woman kept touching Brynn's arm when she laughed, Katarina caught fragments. References to "the old days." A name Katarina didn't recognize, spoken with reverence. A question about "the others" that Seris deflected with a thin smile.

After the woman left, Seris sat in her chair for a long time without drinking. Brynn put a hand on her shoulder and Seris covered it with her own and they stayed like that, quiet. Katarina watched from the hallway and didn't interrupt.

She was still thinking about what Seris was hiding when the second carriage arrived.

This one was different. Heavier, better appointed. The house crest on the door was gold on black, and Katarina recognized it from the trade registries she'd been memorizing since she was four.

House Brevaine.

The woman who stepped out was the Valdari equivalent of mid-forties, with silver-streaked hair and a straight back that made her look taller than she probably was. Stellara Brevaine. Signora of House Brevaine. The woman who controlled forty percent of the regional wine distribution and had been waiting for the Montecardi to collapse so she could absorb their port tariff rights.

She was here, in person, at their estate.

Chapter 17: The Spider's Visit

Stellara Brevaine was currently sitting in Seris's study.

She had the posture of a woman who expected all furniture to have been made with her in mind. Her legs were crossed, her wine glass held at the stem with two fingers, and her smile hadn't wavered since she'd walked through the front door.

"I heard about the unpleasant business with Signore Cabrian," Stellara said, tilting her glass gently. "These central kingdom traders can be so aggressive. I wanted to check in personally and see how you and Brynn were managing."

She said "personally" like it was a gift. Like the Signora of House Brevaine showing up at your estate was itself a form of generosity.

[Yeah, right. You wouldn't visit a lesser house unless you wanted something from it or wanted it to know you were watching.]

Katarina was betting on both.

And yet, Seris received her with her usual polished warmth. Tea was served. The good wine that Stellara had brought, a vintage from the Brevaine private reserve, was opened and praised. The conversation was civil, measured, and full of careful nothing.

But, to Kat's eyes, it was clearly two women sizing each other up and pretending they weren't.

Brynn was in the corner, sitting with her arms folded. Yeah, she couldn't be bothered wiht this. She'd shaken Stellara's hand at the door and said, "Nice carriage." Stellara had

smiled and said, "Thank you, I'll tell the builder," and that was the extent of Brynn's contribution so far.

Katarina was on the small couch by the window with a book open on her lap that she wasn't reading.

"The southeastern district has been volatile," Stellara continued. "Human traders pushing further into Valdari markets every year. Houses like ours need to look out for each other."

[Houses like ours. She said that with a straight face. Her house does ten times our revenue.]

"I couldn't agree more," Seris said. "The Montecardi have always valued good relations with House Brevaine."

"And we've always admired the Montecardi spirit. Your family has a proud history." Stellara sipped her wine. "I was telling my people just the other day how impressed I've been with your recovery. Five years ago, well, we were all a little worried. But you've turned things around remarkably."

[You weren't worried. You were waiting. You had your people watching us for the exact moment we went under so you could swoop in on the port tariff rights.]

Katarina turned a page she hadn't read.

Suddenly, the businesswoman's eyes landed on her.

"I didn't know you'd had a daughter, Seris. How lovely."

The smile she gave Katarina was warm and genuine, but Katarina did not trust a single part of it.

"Katarina," Seris said. "Say hello to Signora Brevaine."

Katarina looked up from her book with the polite, slightly shy expression of a thirteen-year-old who was definitely not running a threat assessment.

"Hello, Signora. It's nice to meet you."

"What a well-mannered girl. And those eyes." Stellara looked at Seris. "She has your coloring."

"She has Brynn's stubbornness," Seris said lightly.

"That's true," Brynn said from the corner. "She won't quit."

[Mother, please. Just sit there. Look strong and pretty and don’t—]

"She argued with the vineyard foreman for an hour last week about irrigation spacing," Brynn added, grinning. "She’s thirteen."

Stellara’s eyebrow rose a fraction.

"Is that so?"

[MOTHER! AAAAAAAH!]

"Brynn," Seris said, still smiling, "would you get our guest some more of those olives?"

"Sure." Brynn stood, clapped Stellara on the shoulder like they were old drinking buddies, and walked out.

Stellara watched her go with a small, thoughtful smile that Katarina didn’t like at all.

[She just told the head of House Brevaine that I argue about irrigation spacing. She just told the woman who’s been watching our house for years that their thirteen-year-old daughter is involved in operations.]

Seris’s smile hadn’t changed. But Katarina noticed her fingers tighten around her wine glass for just a moment.

[Damage control later. Eyes forward.]

Stellara’s laugh, when it came a few minutes later at one of Seris’s deflections, was beautiful, practiced, and exactly the right duration.

[You’re very good at this. I want to see your books.]

The visit lasted forty-five minutes. Stellara said all the right things about cooperation and mutual benefit and the importance of strong regional houses. She complimented the estate, asked about the vineyards, and mentioned twice that House Brevaine was always open to partnership discussions, should the Montecardi ever find themselves in need of support.

When she left, her carriage pulled away quietly. She’d gotten exactly what she’d come for, which was a look at them up close.

Seris closed the front door and stood there for a moment.

"She’s very fancy," Brynn said.

"She’s very dangerous," Seris replied.

"Oh come on. She was nice! She liked the olives."

"Brynn, she didn’t come here for the olives."

"The olives were really good, though."

Seris pinched the bridge of her nose. Katarina nearly did the same.

[Finally, my beautiful, airheaded birth mother is leveling up in terms of reading people. I never doubted her!]

Vessa’s head was on Katarina’s shoulder.

They were behind the school, their spot on the stone wall, and Katarina was running her hand up and down Vessa’s side while she talked. She was supposed to be thinking about Stellara Brevaine. She was mostly thinking about how warm Vessa’s waist was under her shirt.

"Ahem, uh... Stellara Brevaine controls the regional wine distribution. She’s been expanding for years, buying up smaller operations, locking in exclusive contracts. The Parenna and Duccetti were both in her territory before Cabrian showed up."

"And you think she sent him?"

"I can’t prove it yet." Katarina’s fingers traced along Vessa’s ribs. She was doing it absently, except it wasn’t absent at all and she was very aware of each rib and the soft skin over them and the way Vessa’s breathing changed when her fingers moved higher. "But the timing is too clean. Cabrian arrives, locks two families into dependency contracts using capital that doesn’t match his company’s profile, and then Stellara shows up at our door the week after we reject the same deal? She’s not checking in on us, she’s checking on her investment."

"That’s scary."

"That’s business."

Vessa tilted her head up to look at her. Their faces were very close.

"You say that like it’s the same thing."

"At a high level, it tends to be."

[I am theorizing about a hostile acquisition while tracing my girlfriend’s ribs. Vivienne Ross would never. Katarina Montecardi apparently does. Wait, are we dating? I don’t know. I still don’t know the rules of courtship around here.]

In any case, she couldn’t prove the Brevaine-Cabrian connection. The Ledger couldn’t fill in what she didn’t have evidence for, and she didn’t have a paper trail linking Cabrian’s funding to Brevaine. But the shape was there, and Katarina had spent two lifetimes learning to trust the shape of things before the proof arrived.

"I need to head home early," she said.

"The auction catalog?"

"Yeah."

Vessa smirked and kissed her jaw.

"You’re going to stare at papers for three hours and forget to eat."

"I don’t do that."

"You did it last week. I brought you dinner and you’d written margin calculations on your own hand."

"T-That was once."

"It was twice. You also did it on your arm."

Katarina stood up, pouting.

"I’ll eat."

"Liar."

Soon, the auction catalog was spread across her desk, a collection of lots from a bankruptcy liquidation. A merchant house called Venturi had gone under six months ago and everything had to go.

Katarina had gotten the catalog through Dalla, who had gotten it from the district clerk, who owed Ottavia’s cousin a favor. Katarina’s intelligence network was powered primarily by one cook’s extended family. She’d work on that.

Most of the lots were what you’d expect from a dead merchant house. Fancy furniture, decorative arrays, a wine collection, warehouse leases in towns Katarina didn’t care about. Flashy stuff that would attract bidders who liked the idea of owning pieces of someone else’s failure.

She flipped past all of it.

Lot 47 was a trade route license.

The license covered a corridor running from two inland towns, Selvarra and Coppiano, down through the Greypass to the coast. It connected agricultural producers directly to port access, which meant whoever held the license controlled a supply line from farm to ship with no middleman.

Nobody was bidding on it. The catalog listed it at a reserve price so low it was practically an insult.

[Why?]

The Ledger answered.

Greypass Trade Corridor:

Status: Inactive (3+ years).

Reason: Route passes through contested territory. Bandit activity. Two previous license holders abandoned operations.

Revenue potential (if secured): Significant. No competing routes.

[Everyone sees a dead route. I see a supply corridor that nobody else wants, which means nobody will bid against me, which means I can buy it for almost nothing.]

The route was dangerous. That was why it was cheap. But dangerous was a solvable problem. You didn't need to eliminate the danger. You just needed to make the route profitable enough to justify the cost of protecting it.

She pulled out her notes and started running numbers: cargo volume from Selvarra and Coppiano, estimated shipping costs, security escort pricing, port handling fees.

If the route could be secured, it would connect the Montecardi to an inland supply network that currently had no coastal outlet. Every producer in those two towns was shipping overland to the central markets at ruinous cost. Give them a cheaper route to the coast and they'd line up to fill her wagons.

[This is the piece. This is the corridor that turns a single coastal textile route into a real network.]

She looked at the reserve price, wrote it down, and circled it.

[Happy birthday to me. A little late, but I'll take it.]

Chapter 18: The Board

The fishmonger’s name was Renza and she had opinions about everything.

"Brevaine? Oh, she’s been busy." Renza gutted a fish with a single pull and tossed the innards into a bucket without looking. "Bought out the Corvo warehouse lease last month. The big one on the north pier. And before that, she picked up the Faldini distribution rights. You know, the grain contracts?"

"I didn’t know that," Katarina said, which was true as of thirty seconds ago.

"Nobody does. She’s quiet about it. Doesn’t announce anything, doesn’t make a fuss. Just shows up, signs papers, and suddenly she owns another piece of the harbor." Renza pointed her knife at Katarina. "Your mothers should be paying attention."

Katarina bowed respectfully.

"I’ll let them know."

And she moved on.

After that, the baker told her about two supplier contracts that had changed hands in the last six months, both now routed through Brevaine-controlled intermediaries. The woman who ran the rope shop near the dry docks mentioned that her lease had been bought by a holding company she’d never heard of, and when she’d looked into it, the holding company was registered to an address in the Brevaine district office.

An old woman who repaired nets on the south pier didn’t know anything about contracts, but she knew that three independent warehouses had been quietly acquired over the past year and that the new owners all used the same carriage service. Brevaine’s.

Katarina sat on a crate by the harbor and let the picture assemble itself as she looked at the southern ocean.

[These people don’t understand. She’s not buying businesses. She’s buying infrastructure.]

Warehouse leases, distribution rights, supplier contracts, intermediary networks. The boring, invisible architecture that made trade possible in the first place.

Nobody noticed because none of it was flashy. And back on Earth, nobody would have to worry about this too much because there were laws in place to protect against this exact scenario.

After all, if you controlled all of the infrastructure in a given location, you effectively ruled that location. That’s what the whole "banana republic" fiasco was all about.

[While everyone here only cares about how hard you can punch and how well you can... you know, Brevaine is taking everything right from underneath them.]

Stellara wasn't acquiring rival houses or making dramatic moves. She was buying the roads and the bridges and the pipes, and when she owned enough of them, every house in the district would be paying rent to move their goods whether they knew it or not.

[Pure evil. I mean, to be fair, this is exactly what I would do. But still!]

Still, the auction catalog sat in Katarina's bag. She pulled it out and flipped through the lots again with fresh eyes.

The Venturi estate liquidation wasn't just a bankruptcy sale. It was the last batch of independent assets in the southeastern district. Warehouse leases, route licenses, distribution contracts, all of it unattached and up for grabs. And Stellara Brevaine was going to walk in and sweep every lot that mattered because nobody else in the district had the capital to outbid her.

Katarina closed the catalog.

[The auction isn't a shopping trip. It's the last chance for anyone in this district to own a piece of the infrastructure before Brevaine locks it all down.]

She stood up, put the catalog back in her bag, and walked home with her hands in her pockets and the math already running.

Vessa showed up that evening with a bag over her shoulder, a fig in her mouth, and a question.

"Do you think I'll look good in the dress my mom got me for the festival?"

Kat had no clue what festival she was talking about but there was no point in asking which one. There was always a festival of some sort happening around here.

"I'm sure it's fine," she said, without looking up from her work.

A pillow hit the back of her head with enough force to scatter two pages off the desk.

Katarina turned around. Vessa was standing by the bed with her arms crossed.

"It's not fine. It's blue. With embroidery. My mom spent two weeks on the embroidery."

"Then I'm sure it's lovely."

"You didn’t even look at me when you said that."

"I’m looking at you now."

"Too late. The moment is dead. You killed it."

A second pillow hit the back of her head.

[I probably deserve that.]

"Vessa."

"What."

"I’m sorry. Show me the dress tomorrow and I’ll give you a real answer."

Vessa considered this. Then she unfolded her arms, walked to the desk, and looked at the catalog over Katarina’s shoulder.

"This is the auction stuff?"

"Yeah."

"You’ve been staring at it for three days."

"It’s important."

"Is it more important than my dress?"

"... Different categories. Incomparable."

"That’s a yes."

"It’s a diplomatic non-answer and you should respect it."

Vessa kissed her cheek, dropped her bag by the bed, and kicked off her shoes. She flopped onto the mattress and pulled the blanket over herself. She had a preferred pillow at this point and she went straight for it.

"I’m staying. Don’t stay up too late."

"I won’t."

"Liarrrrr."

Within twenty minutes, Vessa was asleep. She slept the way she did everything, completely and without reservation, curled on her side with one arm tucked under the pillow and her dark hair fanned across the sheets.

Katarina looked at her for a moment. Then she turned back to the catalog.

Lot 47 was the Greypass trade route license. Three years inactive, bandit territory, two previous holders who'd given up, and a reserve price so low it was practically free.

Stellara wouldn't bid on it. The risk profile didn't match her strategy. She was buying safe, proven infrastructure, not speculative routes through contested territory.

She'd look at Lot 47, see the history of failure, and move on to the warehouse leases and distribution contracts that she could integrate into her network immediately.

That was Katarina's opening. She would ask Seris to buy her that trade route as a gift. She could get the route license for the reserve price, maybe less, and she'd have the one asset in the catalog that Stellara didn't want.

... But would that be enough?

If Stellara swept everything else, the Montecardi's recovery stalled anyway. It didn't matter if Katarina had a trade route license if every warehouse, every distributor, and every supply contract in the district was Brevaine-controlled. She'd own a road with nowhere to load and nowhere to unload.

[Ideally, I wouldn't just buy the route. I would need to stop her from sweeping the rest.]

She didn't have the capital to outbid Stellara. The Montecardi treasury was healthier than it had been in years, but "healthier than catastrophic" and "able to compete with the largest house in the district at auction" were two very different things.

[We can't outbid her.]

She looked at the numbers. She looked at the lot descriptions. She looked at the names of the other houses in the district, the ones she'd been tracking for years, the ones who were all in the same position as the Montecardi: too small to compete alone, too proud to ask for help, and too stubborn to notice that the ground was being bought out from under them.

[Fine. Then, I'm going to have to make this one trade route so essential, so pivotal to our economy, that Brevaine won't stop drooling over it. Now... How to do that?]

Chapter 19: Lot 47

The auction hall was a converted warehouse near the north pier, cleared out and fitted with rows of chairs facing a raised platform where the auctioneer, a stout woman with a voice that could strip paint, was organizing her lots.

Katarina sat next to Seris in the third row and counted heads.

Forty-two goddamn bidders. Most of them were small house representatives or independent merchants hoping to grab something useful at a discount. A few she recognized from the trade registries. Most she didn't.

Stellara Brevaine was in the back row, left side, in a chair she'd somehow made look like a throne. She wasn't holding a bidding paddle. But, funny enough, she didn't need one.

Because she had proxies. A lot of 'em.

Katarina spotted the first one within twenty minutes. A woman in the seventh row who bid on Lot 3, a warehouse lease on the eastern pier, with the mechanical precision of someone following instructions. She didn't hesitate, didn't flinch at the counter-bids, and raised her paddle exactly twice before the other bidder dropped out.

The second proxy was a human, older, sitting near the middle. He took Lot 8, a set of supplier agreements for bulk grain, with the same pattern: calm entry, steady escalation, no overshoot.

The third was harder to spot. She was young, sitting two rows behind Katarina, and she didn't bid on anything for the first hour. Then Lot 14 came up, a distribution contract covering three towns inland, and she raised her paddle once, at precisely the right moment, and won it at a price that told Katarina she'd known in advance what the reserve was.

There were three proxies in three different parts of the room, bidding on different categories so no single person looked like they were sweeping the floor. If you weren't watching for it, you'd think it was three unrelated buyers with different interests.

[But you all stopped bidding below the same ceiling, your entry timing follows the same pattern, and none of you have touched a lot that isn't infrastructure. You're running the same playbook. Honestly, I'd be charmed if it wasn't for the fact that it's my town you're buying up.]

She tracked them lot by lot. Warehouse contracts went to proxy one, supplier agreements to proxy two, distribution rights to proxy three. Boring stuff. Essential stuff. Assets that nobody else in this room understood were worth more than everything else combined.

Lot 22 was a set of cultivation pills. Twelve doses, mid-grade, good for a modest qi boost that lasted about six hours. A cluster of young cultivators near the front started bidding immediately and the price climbed fast.

Two gold. Three. Four. Five.

[Those pills generate less qi than a good night’s sleep. You’d get more benefit from an afternoon nap and a decent meal.]

Six gold.

[SIX GOLD PER DOSE! CRIMINAL! That’s enough to fund a trade route survey and these idiots are spending it on supplements!]

She gripped her own knees and breathed through her nose until the lot closed at six and a half gold per dose, purchased by a girl who looked extremely proud of herself. Seris glanced at her sideways.

"Are you alright?"

"F-Fine. Just watching."

The lots rolled on. Stellara’s proxies picked up two more warehouse leases, a port handling agreement, and a carriage service contract. The small house bidders won scraps. A wine collection here, decorative furniture there, things that looked like victories but weren’t.

Then Lot 47.

"Trade route license," the auctioneer announced. "Greypass corridor, Selvarra and Coppiano to the southern coast. Inactive three years. Reserve price: eight silver marks."

Eight silver. For a trade route license.

Katarina had paid more for dinner!

The auctioneer looked around the room. Nobody moved.

"Eight silver marks. Do I have eight silver?"

Katarina raised her paddle.

A few heads turned, mostly out of curiosity. A thirteen-year-old bidding at a trade auction was unusual enough to draw glances. But the lot itself drew nothing. No counter-bids, no interest. The proxies didn’t flinch because the Greypass was a known dead route and dead routes didn’t fit the strategy.

"Eight silver to the young lady in row three. Going once. Going twice."

The gavel came down.

"Sold."

Katarina set her paddle in her lap and kept her face neutral, which took effort, because inside she was doing a victory lap around a stadium that existed only in her head.

[Lot 47. Mine. Eight silver marks for a trade route that connects two inland producer towns directly to the coast. Everyone in this room just watched me buy the most strategically valuable asset in the catalog and nobody even noticed.]

Seris leaned over.

"A trade route through the Greypass? Why?"

"Because Selvarra and Coppiano have no coastal outlet. Every producer in those towns ships overland to the central markets at three times the cost. If I can secure the route, they'll pay to use ours because it's still cheaper than their alternative. And nobody else in the district holds a competing corridor."

Seris stared at her for a moment.

"You... You just bought a monopoly for eight silver marks."

[Oh? I didn't think this world was familiar with the concept of a monopoly.]

"I bought a potential monopoly. It's not worth anything until I figure out how to make it safe."

[But you can bet your damn mortgage I'll find a way.]

Seris leaned back in her chair. She didn't say anything else, but she looked at Katarina the way she'd been looking at her more and more often lately, like she was still catching up to who, or what, her daughter actually was.

The post-auction gathering spilled out into the courtyard behind the hall. Wine, food, and the particular energy of people who'd just spent tons of money and wanted to feel good about it.

Katarina should have been working the room. Stellara had swept most of the infrastructure lots and the district's small houses were going to feel the squeeze within six months. She needed to start conversations, plant seeds, begin building the coalition she'd outlined the night before.

But, well... Vessa found her first.

Vessa was wearing the dress. The blue one with the embroidery that her mother had spent two weeks on. The one Katarina had said "I’m sure it’s fine" about without looking up from her auction notes.

She was looking now.

[Hormones... Please... Have mercy...]

The neckline sat low enough to show collarbones and the top of a chest that had not been there six months ago. Vessa’s dark hair was loose around her shoulders instead of pulled back, and she was smiling the way she smiled when she knew she looked good and wanted Katarina to know she knew.

[I take it back. It’s not fine. It’s a weapon of war and I was not briefed.]

"So?" Vessa said. "The dress."

Katarina gave her one more look up and down and condensed all her thoughts to:

"You look great."

Her face, unfortunately, was not cooperating. She could feel the heat climbing up her neck and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Vessa’s smile got wider. She’d noticed.

"Better than ’fine’?"

"I said I was sorry about that."

"You did. I haven’t forgiven you yet."

[This bratty little...]

They were in the middle of figuring out whether Katarina was going to survive the rest of this conversation when a voice appeared at her shoulder.

"That was a curious purchase, little Montecardi."

Katarina turned. Stellara Brevaine was standing three feet away with a wine glass in her hand and the same smile she’d worn in their study two weeks ago.

"A dangerous route that nobody wants. I wonder what you see in it."

She said it sweetly. The way you’d ask a child about a drawing, gentle and patient, inviting a naive answer.

Katarina’s brain, still half-occupied with Vessa’s neckline, had to execute the fastest pivot of her two lifetimes. She felt the flush on her face and couldn’t kill it in time, so she owned it, let it read as a thirteen-year-old caught off guard by a powerful adult, which was half true.

"I guess I have a soft spot for overlooked things," Katarina said.

Stellara’s smile stayed. Her eyes didn’t change, which meant the smile had never been real, which Katarina had already known.

"How charming," Stellara said. She held Katarina’s gaze for one beat longer than necessary, then turned and walked back into the crowd.

Vessa stepped closer. She’d watched the whole exchange and her smile was gone.

"Kat, who was that?"

[The most dangerous woman in Vellasera. And I just told her to her face that I know something she doesn’t.]

"Stellara Brevaine," Katarina said.

"What did she want?"

"To see if I’d tell her why I bought the route."

"Did you?"

"No. But I told her I bought it on purpose, which is almost as bad."

Vessa looked at the spot where Stellara had disappeared into the crowd, then back at Katarina.

"So, what are you gonna do with this trade route?"

Katarina picked up a glass of juice from a passing tray and took a sip.

"First, I need to figure out the Greypass." She looked at Vessa. "And I need you to stop wearing that dress if you want me to think clearly for the rest of the evening."

"Take it off me then."

Katarina damn near fainted.

Chapter 20: Chokepoint

Katarina woke up with two problems.

Problem one: Stellara Brevaine now controlled most of the independent trade infrastructure in the southeastern district. Warehouse leases, supplier contracts, distribution rights, carriage services. The woman had swept the auction like she was grocery shopping and the rest of the district was about to discover that the cost of doing business had just gone up.

Problem two: Vessa's boobs kept getting bigger.

This was not a strategic concern. This was a biological reality that Katarina's hormonal body had decided was extremely relevant to its interests, and no amount of corporate discipline could override the part of her brain that kept replaying the neckline of that blue dress.

She sat at her desk, pulled the Greypass route documents toward her, and started outlining a security assessment framework.

Twenty minutes later, she looked down at the page and found that she'd doodled the neckline of Vessa's dress in the margin. Not the route, not terrain features, but a neckline with collarbones and the beginning of a curve that she'd been shading and everything.

She stared at it.

Then she pulled the page off the desk, walked to the candle on the shelf, and burned it.

[I am in a complicated economic situation and I am DOODLING. This is rock bottom. This is the absolute floor! Vivienne Ross once restructured an entire logistics division during a hostile takeover attempt and I am drawing CLEAVAGE on a route survey!!!!!]

She sat back down, took a breath, and forced her brain into the lane it was supposed to be in.

The Greypass trade corridor. Inactive three years. Previous license holders abandoned it because of monster-heavy terrain, bandit activity, and the complete absence of security infrastructure along the route. No patrols, no waypoints, no safe harbors. Just fifty miles of bad road through worse territory connecting Selvarra and Coppiano to the coast.

Nobody valued it because nobody could use it.

But that was the point. Stellara's entire strategy was about controlling existing infrastructure. Safe routes, proven warehouses, established supply chains. She didn't gamble on broken things. She bought working systems and integrated them into her network.

The Greypass wasn’t a working system. It was a ruin. And ruins were cheap precisely because fixing them required something that Stellara’s conservative, acquisition-based strategy couldn’t provide:

The willingness to take a risk on something that might not work.

[This isn’t a consolation prize. It’s a chokepoint.]

If the Greypass could be cleared and made operational, it was the only corridor into Selvarra and Coppiano that didn’t run through Stellara’s network. Every producer in those towns who wanted coastal access would have two options: pay whatever Stellara charged to move goods through her infrastructure, or use Katarina’s route.

The route didn’t need to be better than Stellara’s network. It just needed to exist. One alternative was enough to break a monopoly’s pricing power.

[I just need muscle.]

She looked at the terrain notes. Monster activity concentrated in the middle stretch where the canyon narrowed. Bandit presence, opportunistic, based around the abandoned waypoints. Nothing organized, nothing that suggested a permanent military force. Just enough danger to make the route unprofitable for anyone who couldn’t afford protection.

Katarina couldn’t afford protection. Not the professional kind, not the standing-security-force kind.

But she knew someone who used to do this for a living.

She found Brynn in the training yard, hitting things.

"Mother."

"Dumpling!" Brynn turned around with a grin and sweat running down her exceptionally toned arms. "You’re up early. Want to spar?"

Katarina put on her serious face and touched her fingertips together.

"I want to talk business."

Brynn’s grin didn’t falter, but her eyes sharpened. Katarina had learned to read Brynn’s grins the way other people read reports. This one said "I’m listening."

So, Katarina laid it out.

The route. The terrain. The monster activity and the bandits. The abandoned waypoints that could be restored as staging posts. The fifty miles of bad road that, if cleared and secured, would give the Montecardi house a trade corridor that no one else in the district could compete with.

"I need the route cleared," Katarina said. "Monsters pushed back, bandits driven out, waypoints established. Not permanently garrisoned. Just cleared well enough that a merchant caravan with basic security can make the trip without getting eaten."

Brynn's yellow eyes were bright. Her whole body had shifted forward, weight on the balls of her feet.

"You want me to call Marga."

"I want you to call everyone."

The grin that split Brynn's face was the biggest Katarina had ever seen. She looked like a military vet who'd just been told the war was back on.

"Give me an hour," Brynn said, and practically sprinted toward the communication stones.

Katarina watched her go. Brynn's shoulders were back and her steps were longer and there was an energy to her that Katarina hadn't seen before.

[She's been wasted here. And I didn't see it until now.]

Brynn paused at the door and looked back.

"You want to come watch? I'm going to wake up some people who owe me favors."

"Eh, why not?"

She didn't make it to the communication stones.

"Katarina."

Seris was leaning against the doorframe of the main hall. She'd been there for a while, apparently. Long enough to have heard most of it.

She walked over and sat down on the bench next to Katarina, close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

The morning air was still cool and Seris was warm and she smelled like jasmine, which was the soap she used, and Katarina had known this for years and it had never once been relevant information until puberty had arrived and made everything relevant.

"Tell me what you're planning," Seris said. Her voice was quieter than most people expected when she dropped the charm and the performance. Steadier.

Again, like with Brynn, unafraid of showing her power level, Katarina told her. The Greypass. The chokepoint strategy.

The fact that Stellara's infrastructure sweep left exactly one gap in the district, and Katarina was sitting on it. How the route, if operational, would give every inland producer an alternative to Stellara's network and break her pricing power before it fully set in.

Seris listened without interrupting. Her purple eyes stayed on Katarina's face the entire time, and when Katarina finished, there was a silence that lasted long enough for Katarina to hear the birds outside and the distant sound of Brynn yelling at a communication stone.

Seris reached over and tucked a strand of black hair behind Katarina's ear. Her fingers were warm and they lingered, tracing the line of Katarina's jaw before pulling away, and Katarina's brain short-circuited for about half a second.

"You're terrifying sometimes, you know that?"

Katarina's brows shot up.

She said it softly, the way you'd note that the ocean was deep or the sky was high. Her purple eyes were warm and steady. She kissed Katarina's forehead and Katarina shrugged.

"I have to be, if we're gonna make it to the top."

Seris smiled at that.

"Well, good luck, piccola."

Then she stood up and walked away, and good god, her hips were something else when they moved like that. All wide and slow and deliberate, and Katarina watched because her willpower had clocked out approximately ten seconds ago.

[... I am so weak to this woman.]

Her ears stayed red for the next hour.

[Anyway, bandits, monsters, muscle. Let's get to it.]