CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 21: The Other Half

Marga arrived on the second day with a pack slung over one shoulder and a scar running from her left ear to her collarbone that she wore like jewelry.

Brynn saw her coming up the estate road and let out a whoop that damn near rattled the windows, and then Brynn was laughing, and then Marga was laughing, and it was all very jolly, and Katarina stood on the steps and watched her mother become a completely different person in the span of ten seconds.

The others came in ones and twos over the next three days. A woman named Dagna who was missing two fingers on her left hand and didn't seem to notice, and a pair of twins called Pia and Lotte who finished each other's sentences and shared a single expression of cheerful menace. Then there was Torrens, who carried a spear taller than Brynn and hadn't said a word to anyone since arriving.

Katarina respected that enormously.

Because the others... oh, they were loud. Also, they were scarred. And they drank Ottavia's cooking wine on the first night because nobody had told them it was cooking wine and they didn't care when they found out.

Three of them arm-wrestled on the dining table until Seris walked in and gave them a look that turned them all into good little school kids.

[Heh. These professional killers are that afraid of Seris?]

In any case, Brynn was transformed.

She stood in the courtyard with a map pinned to a board and her crew around her, pointing at terrain features and assigning sectors like she'd done it a hundred times before and had missed it every single day since she'd stopped. Her voice was different, deeper and clipped, no wasted words. She drew sight lines and kill zones and fallback positions, and her crew listened, and when she said "we move at dawn," like they were heading into the war-torn trenches, nobody questioned it.

Katarina watched from the balcony and internally adjusted several assumptions about her mother.

[Brynn Montecardi. Former merc. Current muscular housewife who flexes when pretty girls look at her. I have been drastically undervaluing this asset.]

While Brynn handled the muscle, Katarina worked the other half.

The Duccetti representative was a woman named Costanza who sat across from Katarina in the estate's meeting room and radiated skepticism from every pore.

"... You're thirteen," Costanza said.

"I am."

"And you're offering us an alternative trade corridor."

"I am."

"Through the Greypass."

"Once it's cleared, yes."

"The Greypass that nobody has successfully operated in three years."

"Which is why nobody else is offering you this."

Costanza looked at Seris, who was sitting off to the side in the role she'd settled into over the past year: present, authoritative, and increasingly willing to let Katarina talk. Seris gave a small nod that said "she speaks for us."

That was her job, after all. Kat still couldn't quite get the respect she deserved due to her being tiny and cute (albeit less so than when she was flopping on her face some years ago). So, she needed Seris here to give her words validity.

"The terms are simple," Katarina said. "Route your goods through our corridor. Fair rates, no exclusivity clauses, no termination fees. You can leave whenever you want. We make money because the volume makes the route profitable, not because we've trapped you into staying."

"And what about our contract with Cabrian?"

"Your Cabrian contract covers supply, not distribution. He controls what you buy. He doesn't control how you ship it. Route your outbound goods through the Greypass and you've cut your distribution costs by enough to offset whatever he's charging you on the supply side."

Costanza stared at her for a long moment. Then she looked at Seris again.

"She's thirteen," Costanza repeated.

"She is," Seris confirmed, and took a sip of tea.

The Parenna representative was easier. Signora Parenna's niece, a woman named Giulietta, showed up looking like she hadn't slept well in four years.

"Whatever you need," Giulietta said. "When can we start?"

"As soon as the route is clear. Weeks, not months."

Giulietta nodded and just like that, she signed the preliminary agreement.

Then Katarina did something that Stellara Brevaine, for all her patience and strategic brilliance, had not anticipated.

She reached outside the district.

The human merchants she contacted were small operations from the central kingdoms, traders Seris had met on her travels who'd been priced out of the established coastal routes by Valdari houses that charged foreign merchants premium rates for port access.

They were hungry, they were scrappy, and they'd never been invited to the table before.

So, Katarina invited them. Tariff-free passage through the inland corridor! No premiums, no foreign-trader surcharges. The same rates she offered the Valdari houses.

It wouldn't make her much money. The volume was too small and the margins too thin. But that wasn't the point.

The point was the message.

A Valdari merchant house, actively courting outside trade partners, offering them equal terms on a route that bypassed every piece of infrastructure Stellara controlled. It told Stellara exactly one thing:

The asset you didn't buy is the one that's going to cost you.

[I have something valuable that you can't purchase anymore, Signora Brevaine. And I'm giving access to everyone you've been squeezing.]

Katarina went to watch the clearance operation on the fourth day.

Brynn had insisted she stay back. Katarina had agreed and then followed anyway, keeping to the ridge above the Greypass with a clear sightline to the canyon floor.

Seris would have killed her if she knew. Brynn would have carried her home on her shoulder. Neither of them was here, so Katarina sat on a rock and watched.

The monsters in the Greypass were called goreclaws, and they were, by any reasonable standard, horrifying. Six-legged, armored, low to the ground, with mandibles that could shear through timber. There were about two dozen of these nightmares waiting patiently in the narrows where the canyon squeezed tight enough that a wagon could barely pass. Like they'd been placed there by game devs or something.

Marga went in first.

She was fast. The spear in her hands blurred and a goreclaw twice her size got folded sideways with a sound like wet timber splitting. Before it hit the ground she was already past it, driving the spear into the next one, and the one after that, each kill clean, precise, and completely unhurried.

Brynn hit the center of the pack like a boulder dropped from orbit. She didn't use a weapon. She didn't need one. Her fists glowed with qi and the first goreclaw she punched left a crater in the canyon wall behind it.

[Whoa.]

The twins worked the flanks, pushing stragglers toward Torrens, who stood at the far end of the narrows with her spear braced and put down everything that came within reach without changing expression.

It was over in approximately four minutes.

Twenty-three goreclaws in four minutes and not a scratch on any of them.

Brynn stood in the middle of the canyon floor with goreclaw blood up to her elbows and chunks of something Katarina didn't want to identify in her white hair. Her chest was heaving and her skin was flushed dark red with exertion. She was grinning, wide and feral, with her fists still glowing faintly at her sides. Marga climbed onto a dead goreclaw and raised her spear and the whole crew started whooping, and Brynn threw her head back and laughed, and the sound bounced off the canyon walls and came back three times.

She looked like a war goddess who'd taken up gardening as a brief hobby and had just remembered what she actually was.

[... Well, damn.] Katarina smiled. [Glad she's having fun.]

Katarina sat on her rock and looked at her mother, really looked at her, and for the first time got a glimpse as to why Seris married this woman.

[She burns breakfast twice a week. She got her horns stuck in a doorframe last month. And she just killed six armored monsters with her bare hands in under a minute. I need to fundamentally re-evaluate... several things.]

She couldn’t sleep that night.

The estate was quiet except for the mercs’ campfire in the courtyard. Katarina could hear them from her window, low laughter and the clink of bottles and someone telling a story that kept getting interrupted by Marga calling them a liar.

So she went downstairs and found Seris on the terrace.

Seris was in a chair with her legs curled under her and a glass of wine resting on the arm. She was watching the campfire below and she didn’t look up when Katarina sat down next to her.

They sat in silence for a while. The fire crackled. Dagna said something and the whole group erupted, and Brynn’s laugh carried up through the dark.

"Why didn’t you go with them?" Katarina asked.

"Hm?"

"To the Greypass. You could have. You’re stronger than anyone down there."

Seris took a sip of wine. The pause was longer than it needed to be.

"That would awaken an itch I don’t need back in my life."

She said it lightly, the way she said everything she meant the most. Katarina waited. She’d learned that Seris talked more in silences than in conversations.

"I used to be very good at breaking things, piccola," Seris smirked at Katarina, before turning her eyes back to the fire. "And the problem with being good at breaking things is that you start looking for things to break. I don’t want to break anymore. I want to build."

She didn’t elaborate. She didn’t say what she’d broken or who she’d been when she was breaking it.

[Sable. The visitor. "The others." There’s a whole person underneath my mother that I haven’t met yet.]

"Brynn looked happy out there," Katarina said instead.

Seris smiled.

"She did, didn't she? She's been waiting for this. Good to get her out in the field every now and then."

[Like she's a horse or something?]

The campfire popped and sent sparks up into the dark. Below, Brynn was demonstrating something with her fists while Marga heckled her.

Katarina leaned against Seris's arm and they sat there together and watched the fire until Katarina passed out.

Chapter 22: Equal Terms*

The Chapter of Katarina's life where she watched Brynn fuck one of the mercs started at six in the morning on a Tuesday.

She'd made the mistake of going looking for her mother to ask about the waypoint construction schedule. The supply closet near the training yard was closed, which was unusual because it was never closed.

And Katarina opened it.

[Oh my god.]

Brynn had Dagna bent over a crate with her trousers around her ankles and was driving her cock into her ass hard enough that the crate was sliding across the stone floor an inch at a time.

The rest of the crew was in there too, cheering, like Brynn was winning a fight rather than fucking Dagna senseless. Dagna's scarred hands were flat on the wood, her head was down, and she was moaning loud enough that Katarina could have heard it from the courtyard if she'd been paying attention. Brynn's massive hands gripped Dagna's hips hard enough to dimple the skin and every thrust came with a wet slap that echoed off the closet walls. Sweat ran down Brynn's stomach and her cock glistened and Dagna was pushing back into each stroke like she was trying to take more of it.

Some thoughts popped up in Kat's mind one by one.

1:

[Brynn is so big... Doesn't it hurt when it's that big?]

2:

[So that's how I popped up huh.]

And 3:

[I'm beginning to see what made Seris want to settle down.]

Thus, swallowing, Katarina closed the door very quietly.

She stood in the hallway for about five seconds. Her face was hot and her pulse was going crazy.

[Will I ever be able to unsee that?] A part of her answered with [I don't think I want to] and she promptly slapped herself.

She took a breath.

[The waypoint schedule can wait.]

She walked away. Her ears were red. She was going to think about what she'd just seen at several inappropriate moments over the next week and there was nothing she could do about it.

The first caravans ran the inland corridor three weeks after Brynn's crew finished the clearance.

The route was rough. The road surface was uneven, the waypoints were bare-bones shelters with basic supply caches, and the security overhead was higher than any coastal route because the Greypass still had things living in it that occasionally needed to stop living. And Marga had stayed on as route security lead, which meant anything that wandered too close to a caravan stopped wandering permanently.

All in all, it worked.

The Parenna shifted a third of their outbound trade within the first week. Goods that had been crawling overland to the central markets at crippling cost were now moving through the Greypass to the coast in a fraction of the time. The Duccetti followed two weeks later, cautious at first, then faster once they saw the Parenna's shipping costs drop.

Katarina had structured the tariff agreements the way she'd structured everything in her previous life: precisely. Specifically, she made sure the Montecardi took a percentage of every transaction that passed through the corridor. Not high enough to be exploitative, but also not low enough to be charity.

Just enough to make the route self-sustaining and profitable, with a margin that grew as volume increased.

The human merchants came next. Small operations, two and three wagons at a time, drawn by tariff-free access to inland Valdari goods that had previously been locked behind Stellara's markups. A textile buyer from Tessavere, a spice trader from the river kingdoms, and a woman who dealt in medicinal herbs and couldn't believe a Valdari house was letting her through without a surcharge.

Slowly, the trickle became a stream.

The Ledger updated in real time. Katarina watched the Holdings dashboard every evening and for the first time since she'd discovered it in Seris's study at age three, the numbers did something new.

They trended sharply upward.

Revenue: C+.

Trade Routes: 2 active.

Reputation: C.

Then, a week later:

Revenue: B-.

Trade Routes: 2 active (inland corridor volume exceeding projections).

Reputation: C+.

[This is what compound growth looks like in a fantasy world. Volume drives revenue, revenue funds infrastructure, infrastructure drives volume. And I have the only alternative route in the district.]

She sat at her desk and watched the numbers climb and felt like she was watching a machine she'd built starting to accelerate under its own power.

[We're not just surviving anymore. We're growing.]

Soon, the invitation came, exactly as Katarina predicted.

The teahouse was neutral ground, a quiet place on the ridge above Vellasera where merchant houses met when they wanted to talk without being seen talking. Low tables, paper screens, and tea that cost more than Katarina's entire wardrobe.

Stellara was already seated when they arrived. She looked exactly the same as she had at the estate, composed and unhurried, but her eyes were sharper.

She knew she'd been outmaneuvered and she was trying to figure out how.

Seris sat across from her. Katarina sat next to Seris, in the seat that everyone in the district now understood was hers, even if nobody could explain why a thirteen-year-old had a seat at a trade negotiation.

Tea was poured. Pleasantries were exchanged. Stellara complimented the tea. Seris complimented Stellara's earrings. Everyone smiled and nobody meant it, which was how these things worked.

Then Stellara looked at Katarina. At Katarina, not at Seris.

"That was a good play," Stellara said. "The inland corridor. I undervalued the Greypass because I assumed the security costs would eat the margins. You solved the security problem with labor you didn't have to pay market rate for, and then you opened the route to human merchants, which nobody would have done."

She said it with genuine admiration. That was the dangerous part. Katarina knew damn well that people like Stellara Brevaine did not compliment people she didn't consider threats.

So, she didn't respond. She remained silent, crossed her arms, and waited for the pitch.

"I'd like to buy the inland route," Stellara said. "Outright. Full acquisition. I'd like to buy it for..."

And the number she gave made Seris's eyebrows reach for the sky.

Katarina was still shaky on just how much was "a lot" in this world, but judging by Seris's reaction, she knew the number was significant. It was probably more money than the Montecardi had seen in a decade. Enough to clear their remaining debt, fund the estate repairs, and still have capital left over.

Right, you'd have to be a fool to decline. Anyone in Katarina's position would-

"No."

There was a pause.

Stellara’s expression didn’t change. Seris’s expression did. Seris looked at Katarina like she’d grown a second head.

"Was the amount too low?" Stellara asked, head tilted.

Katarina shook her head.

"I don’t want money," Katarina said. "I take that money and then what? You own the inland route, you own the coastal infrastructure, you own the district. And I’ve sold my only leverage for a pile of silver marks that you’ll earn back in two years from the monopoly pricing you’ll set once there’s no alternative."

For the first time in the conversation, Stellara reacted. It was subtle, so much so that Seris probably didn’t see it, but Katarina did. Stellara’s right brow twitched.

In their world, that may as well have been a gasp or a scowl.

"That’s a very... pessimistic interpretation of my intent."

"It’s the same interpretation you’d have in my position."

Stellara tilted her head the other way. The faintest flicker of amusement crossed her face.

"What do you want, then?"

"A partnership." Katarina folded her hands on the table, putting on a smile. "The Montecardi inland corridor and Stellara’s coastal network become an integrated system. Two halves of the same trade infrastructure, independently operated. Neither house can squeeze the other. Pricing is set by joint committee. You control the coast. We control the inland corridor. Vellasera’s merchants get access to both without being held hostage by either."

The teahouse was very quiet.

Stellara looked at her for a long time. Not with the warm condescension she’d used at the estate. With a flat, evaluative stare. She was doing math.

"You’re asking me to share my district, that I’ve spent years carefully taking control of, with a house that was nearly bankrupt three years ago?"

Katarina didn’t even blink.

"I’m asking you to share it with the house that built the only alternative to your monopoly in under a month. You can say no. I’ll keep growing anyway. The Parenna and Duccetti are already routing through us. The human merchants are coming faster every week. In six months, my corridor handles enough volume to fund its own expansion."

"And if the route were to get more dangerous?"

[Ah, there’s the threat. That took longer than I expected, honestly.]

Katarina arched a single brow high.

"If the route gets any more dangerous than it already is, I have more than enough firepower to keep it safe."

She didn’t specify whose firepower. She didn’t need to.

Seris, hearing her cue, smiled. It was the smile she’d given Cabrian. The air in the teahouse got heavier for just a moment, and Stellara’s teacup rattled once against its saucer.

Stellara looked at that smile for a long time.

The silence stretched. Tea cooled. Somewhere outside, a bird called.

"Joint committee," Stellara said, more quietly. "I want veto rights on pricing changes above fifteen percent."

"Ten percent. And the veto is mutual."

"Twelve. Final."

"Done."

They looked at each other across the table. Stellara extended her hand. Katarina took it.

The handshake was firm and Stellara’s eyes stayed on Katarina’s face the entire time.

"You’re going to be a problem, little Montecardi," Stellara said.

"I’m going to be a lot of things, Signora Brevaine."

They finished their tea. Stellara left first. Seris and Katarina sat in the quiet teahouse and listened to the carriage pull away.

"Well," Seris said. "That was... Something."

Katarina picked up her cup and took a sip. Her hands were steady. Her heartbeat was not.

She smiled, feeling a satisfaction she hadn’t had in... More than thirteen years. She hadn’t felt like this since she was a young adult in her previous life.

"That," Katarina replied, unable to stop smiling, "was a duel, in the economic world. And I won."

Seris walked over, put her chair next to Kat’s, and put her arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

"I’d rather punch things, to be honest." They both chuckled.

And they sat there together while the tea went cold.

This kind of victory was sweeter than that tea could ever be.

Chapter 23: Vol. 1 - Epilogue

Following Katarina’s absolute domination of the economic battlefield, the Montecardi estate hadn’t been this loud in years.

Possibly decades. Possibly ever, if you factored in Marga’s voice, which carried like cannon fire and was currently describing some sort of story that did not sound as fun as she was making it out to be.

"—so the bridge is ON FIRE, right, fully engulfed, and the priestess is standing on the other side completely naked because her robes caught a spark and she panicked and threw them off, and Brynn, absolute genius that she is, says ’I’ll catch you’ and the priestess JUMPS—"

"She jumped!" Brynn confirmed from across the yard, three drinks deep and grinning like a woman who’d won something she didn’t know she’d been competing for.

"—and Brynn catches her, and the bridge collapses behind them, and then the priestess looks at Brynn and says ’you can put me down now’ and Brynn says ’I’d rather not’ and—"

"I was being CHIVALROUS!"

"You were being horny, Brynn! There’s a difference!"

The yard erupted. Pia and Lotte were howling. Dagna had wine coming out of her nose. Torrens, who still hadn’t spoken, was shaking with silent laughter in the corner, which was the most emotion Katarina had ever seen from her.

[Nope, that’s all far too adventurous for my taste. I’d rather sit down with a nice little ledger and a nice cup of coffee and look at numbers all day.]

The Parenna and Duccetti representatives were at a table near the wall. Giulietta was three glasses of wine deep, and even Costanza had shaken Katarina’s hand at the door and

held it a beat longer than protocol required, probably out of admiration. Hopefully out of admiration.

Vessa was with Brynn's crew, sitting cross-legged on the ground, listening to Marga with the wide-eyed fascination of a girl who'd grown up in a dry goods shop and had never met people who set bridges on fire for a living.

Seris moved through the crowd carrying wine and making conversation. One thing about her, she was a very good conversationalist. Every time she talked to someone, she made them feel like the most important thing in the room.

[It's like she's always had the traits of a good businesswoman and just didn't have someone to... give her direction, let's say.]

Katarina stood on the terrace and watched all of it.

The estate was lit up. Lanterns on the balcony rails, a fire pit in the yard, candles on every table.

She opened the Ledger.

It popped up with gilded calligraphy blooming at the edge of her vision, and for the first time, it didn't feel like a tool answering a question. It felt like it was showing her something.

House Montecardi — Current Holdings:

Montecardi Estate — C+

Vellasera Port — C+

Vineyards — B

Iron Mine — C

Greypass Inland Corridor — B+ (operational, revenue-generating)

Brevaine-Montecardi Trade Partnership — Active

Active Trade Routes: 2

Commercial Alliances: 3 (Parenna, Duccetti, Brevaine)

Revenue: B

Reputation: B-

She read through it slowly.

Three years ago, this dashboard had been a wall of D’s and had a single, particularly infuriating line that said "Active trade routes: 0." Three years ago, the runway was eighteen months and the gardener didn’t care enough to garden and the revenue summary page had a wine stain on it.

Now they controlled half the district. A four-year-old with a photographic memory had started asking questions at dinner and hadn’t stopped, and this was where it led.

More than that, Sovereign Qi had now pooled in her spirit root.

She felt it, warm and dense, settling into the core of her cultivation base with a weight that was different from anything she’d generated through meditation or training. This wasn’t the thin trickle of daily practice. This was the Ledger rewarding systemic achievement, and the system she’d built was an entire regional economy restructured to outlast her.

[It’s a little bit unfair, to be honest. I make good deals, and I get rewarded by way of my body becoming stronger.] She smirked. [I wouldn’t have it any other way.]

The qi kept coming.

More than she’d ever felt at once, filling channels she hadn’t known were empty, and for a moment the night air tasted electric. The lantern light seemed sharper.

She should probably meditate. Sit down, close her eyes, circulate the qi properly, consolidate the gains. A breakthrough’s worth of energy was pouring into her and the smart thing, the strategic thing, was to use it before it dissipated.

But then she heard Vessa laughing from across the area.

It came from across the yard, bright and sudden, at something Brynn had said, and Brynn was laughing too, and then Marga was laughing, and the whole group was a mess of noise and warmth and firelight.

Katarina closed the Ledger.

The gilded text faded. The qi kept pooling.

She’d deal with it later because right now Vessa was laughing and she wanted to know what was so funny.

She walked back inside, down the stairs, and across the yard.

Brynn saw her coming and threw an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into the circle, and Marga was already mid-sentence in a new story that involved a goat and a border checkpoint, and that combination alone was terrifying.

The fire popped. Pia said something to Lotte and they both cackled. Giulietta from the Parenna family was, against all odds, arm-wrestling Dagna, and losing badly, and not caring. Seris drifted past with a wine bottle and kissed the top of Katarina's head without breaking stride.

Katarina exhaled deeply and closed her eyes.

[Vivienne Ross died alone on a Saturday night in a corner office on the sixty-second floor. Nobody probably found her until Monday.]

She looked around. At the mercs and the merchants and the families and the fire.

[I spent thirty-two years grinding to reach the top of society, and the instant I did, I died. And now, I'm going to do it all over again. My second empire begins here.]

Chapter 24: Signora*

{Four Years Later}

Katarina had both hands on Vessa's hips, fingers digging into soft pink skin, and she was fucking her so hard the headboard was leaving a dent in the wall.

Vessa was face-down on the pillow with her ass in the air. Every thrust pushed a moan out of her that got louder and more ragged and less concerned with the fact that Ottavia was probably in the kitchen two floors down, annoyed at hearing all this. Katarina's cock slid in and out of Vessa's ass, slick and tight, the sound of skin hitting skin filling the room. Katarina's brain had been offline for about five minutes and she did not miss it.

She came so hard her vision went white.

Her hips stuttered through the last few thrusts while Vessa pressed deeper into the pillow and whimpered. Katarina's cock pulsed inside her, filling her. Vessa's back arched, her pink fingers twisting in the sheets, and she pushed back into it like she wanted every last drop.

[God. God. Fuck.]

Katarina pulled out and collapsed backward onto the bed, chest heaving, sweat on her stomach. The morning sun was warm on her skin. She could feel her heartbeat in her ears. Her cock was still twitching against her thigh, wet and spent.

She was seventeen years old now, and the hormones were going to kill her.

At thirteen, it had been manageable. Distracting, sure. Her cock got hard at inconvenient times and she spent a few months being furious about it, but she could compartmentalize. She'd had thirty years of practice compartmentalizing things. Desire, loneliness, the persistent urge to kiss everyone around her. Standard stuff. She could box it up and shelve it and get back to work.

At seventeen, the box was on fire and the shelf had collapsed.

Now, finally, she understood that maturing was not quite the same for valdari as it was for humans. Mainly because her body had apparently decided that four years of polite restraint was enough and had flipped every switch at once.

She couldn't think straight until she'd cum at least twice, which was humiliating for a woman who used to run board meetings on four hours of sleep and cold coffee. She was horny before breakfast. She was horny after breakfast.

And her lower half didn't discriminate either, she really did want to mating press anyone around her.

Case in point, Marga would show up, Vessa would walk past her in a sundress, or Seris would wear something with "cleavage" (if it could even be called that) so wide her areolas showed, or Brynn would show up covered in sweat and half-naked, and Katarina's brain would simply leave and she'd turn into a sex zombie.

And that's why she was currently railing her girlfriend like her life depended on it.

[... My dick hurts.]

Vessa shifted on the bed. Katarina felt the mattress move and opened one eye.

Vessa was straddling her.

Her dark hair was a mess, her pink skin was flushed darker across her chest, and her tits were right there, full and round and shiny with sweat. She was smiling down at Katarina like she hadn't even gotten started yet.

Right, Vessa was in the same spot, but instead of wanting to stick her dick in everything in sight like Kat, it's like she looked at everything around her and went: "could I put that inside me?"

And for now, that was Katarina.

"Again."

[I’m gonna fucking die here.]

She didn’t die. She came three more times before Vessa finally permitted her to leave the bed, which was a personal record that Katarina was simultaneously proud of and alarmed by. At some point the Valdari body had limits. Vessa did not believe in them.

The walk into Vellasera was ten minutes from the estate and Katarina needed every single one of them to get her legs working properly again.

The port town was alive with the late morning crowd, vendors calling out prices, carts rattling over cobblestone, valdari kids chasing each other between stalls. Katarina walked through it with her hands behind her back, a habit she’d inherited from Vivienne Ross and never managed to drop, trying to regenerate her dignity. Her professionalism.

"Good morning, Signora!"

That was the baker on the corner. She waved with a flour-covered hand and Katarina nodded back.

Signora. That was still new.

Seris had made it official six months ago. A small ceremony at the estate, a few witnesses from the district authority, and a document with enough seals on it to wallpaper a bathroom.

Katarina Montecardi, Signora of House Montecardi, age seventeen. The youngest house head in the southeastern district by about twelve years!

Seris had cried. Brynn had cried louder. Katarina had read the document twice, checked it for errors, found one (a misspelled date), corrected it in front of the notary, and then just said a quick and simple: "let’s get started".

That title changed things. People said hello to her now. Not the polite, distant hello you give a stranger’s kid, but the hello you give someone who controls your port tariff rates. It was a specific kind of friendliness that Katarina recognized from her old life. The kind that came with an invisible price tag.

She was still getting used to it.

"Piccola!"

Seris was at the fruit stall near the harbor road, holding a melon against her melons and squinting at it like it owed her money.

Her black hair was loose and her dress showed half her tits, which was just Seris being Seris. Nobody on the street batted an eye because this was Valdari country and modesty was a foreign concept.

"That's not how you check if a melon is ripe," Katarina said.

[Though I'd like to check if her melon is ripe- what? Shut the fuck up, Kat. What does that even mean?]

"I'm not checking. I'm intimidating it." Seris put the melon back and fell into step beside her. "You look well-rested."

"I slept fine."

Seris raised a brow high, smirking.

"Is that what we're calling it?"

[She knows. She absolutely knows. The walls in that house are not thick enough for what Vessa and I did this morning.]

Katarina didn't take the bait (though her cheeks did get a bit darker). They walked together through the market. People waved, vendors called out to Seris by name. A few people called out Katarina.

"The Midsummer Market Festival is in six weeks," Seris said, turning down the harbor road. "As Signora, you're organizing it this year."

"I'm what?"

"Organizing it. It's tradition! The head of the host house handles the festival. Vendor stalls, food, performances, a big opening ceremony." Seris waved a hand. "Your grandmother used to do it. Well, your great-grandmother. On Brynn's side. Well, someone did it. The point is, it's yours now."

[I restructured the regional trade economy and now she wants me to plan a party.]

"Fine. How many people attend?"

"Oh, the whole district comes. A few thousand, probably. It's the biggest event of the summer."

[A few thousand attendees, six weeks of lead time, and she dropped this on me during casual conversation between a fruit stall and the harbor road. Wonderful.]

"I'll handle it."

Seris kissed the top of her head, which she could still do because Katarina had inherited Seris's height instead of Brynn's, a betrayal she had not forgiven genetics for.

She had kinda been looking forward to being intimidatingly tall. Instead, if the way her clothes strained a little harder every day was any indication, she was clearly taking more from Seris's side of the equation.

[... I pray my breasts will at least be modestly big and not as... ginormous as hers. Though I suppose it would help with negotiations. Maybe.]

"You'll be wonderful, piccola."

"Stop calling me that. I run this house."

"Ah, yes, you need to be respectable and professional... When you're not plowing your friend into the mattress."

[Low blow, Seris. Low blow.]

She didn't actually mind. But her reputation had a reputation to maintain.

The estate was quiet when she got back. Brynn was in the training yard beating a practice dummy into splinters and Ottavia's too-salty lunch was already filling up the hallway.

Katarina went to her study. As in, Seris's study, which was now hers.

Katarina sat down at the desk and the Ledger opened automatically, gilded calligraphy blooming at the edge of her vision. It had started doing that a few years ago, like it could tell when she was ready to work.

[Status.]

THE SOVEREIGN LEDGER

Signora: Katarina Montecardi

Age: 17

Sovereign Qi: 96/???

[Attributes]

Analysis: 10/10

Negotiation: 9/10

Leadership: 9/10

Intimidation: 6/10

Charm: 7/10

Physical Ability: 4/10

[Cultivation]

Rank: Late Foundation (all four paths)

Path of Elements — Late Foundation

Path of Grace — Late Foundation

Path of the Artisan — Late Foundation

Path of Whispers — Late Foundation

She lingered on the numbers. The age penalties were finally gone. Intimidation and Charm had both climbed since the Signora title, which made sense. People took you more seriously when you had legal authority over their port fees.

Though...

[... My charm is higher than my intimidation and I HATE what that says about my future. I really am gonna turn into a titty-monster.]

Physical Ability was still a four. Brynn's personal tragedy. Katarina had explained, repeatedly, that she didn't need to punch things because she had people who punched things for her, and Brynn had responded by looking so heartbroken that Katarina agreed to keep training twice a week out of pure guilt.

[House status.]

[House Montecardi]

License: Active (Full standing)

Revenue: B+

Trade Routes: 3 active

Alliances: 5

Reputation: B

Three trade routes. Five alliances. Revenue up a full grade, and the Greypass Corridor in particular had been upgraded to an A with expanded capacity. The vineyards were the standout performer at A-minus, thanks entirely to Silvana, who loved grapes more than she loved people and was Katarina's ideal employee for exactly that reason.

Four years ago, the estate ran on loyalty and inertia. Fourteen staff, three of them dead weight. Now it was nineteen, every position filled by someone Katarina had picked, every one of them reviewed quarterly, because some habits from Vivienne Ross's life were worth keeping. Nadia in bookkeeping hadn't made an error in two years. Renata in trade coordination thought in logistics the way Brynn thought in punches. Lyn kept the preservation arrays running on every route.

She closed the status screen and leaned back.

[So. The festival.]

Through the wall, she could hear Vessa breathing softly in the bedroom. She was still asleep, still naked in Katarina's bed with the sheets kicked off because Vessa ran hot and refused to sleep covered, which meant that every time Katarina walked back into that room she was confronted with all of Vessa laid out on full display. Tits, ass, cock, those long legs tangled up in nothing at all.

[No, stop it. The festival.]

Right, the festival.

[Six weeks. Vendor logistics, security, entertainment, supply chain, sanitation, an opening ceremony that I apparently have to lead because that's what Signoras do.]

She picked up her pen.

[Where do we start?]

Chapter 25: Culture Shock

The crate Dalla brought to Katarina's study weighed about thirty pounds and contained what appeared to be every piece of paper the Montecardi family had ever touched regarding festivals, filed using a system best described as "gravity."

"This is everything we have, Signora."

"Dalla, this is a box of loose paper."

"Yes, Signora. Everything we have."

[Oh my.]

Katarina stared into the crate. There were receipts crammed against budgets crammed against what looked like a grocery list from nine years ago. One page had a sketch of a bonfire on it. Another was just the word "LANTERNS" written in large letters with no additional context.

[Okay... I restructured the regional trade economy using Seris's old books as a starting point and somehow this is worse.]

But, this was exactly the kind of job she'd signed up for. So, she rolled up her sleeves, flexed her biceps, and started sorting.

Thirty minutes later she had four piles: financial records, planning notes, things that were definitely personal letters filed in the wrong place, and a pile she'd mentally labeled "what is this" that was growing faster than the other three combined.

The financial records told a story, at least. The last Montecardi-hosted festival had cost roughly two hundred silver marks, which was a number that would have made four-year-old Katarina faint. Current Katarina could absorb it, but not happily.

The planning notes were worse. They assumed knowledge she didn't have.

"Standard processional order" with no explanation of what the processional order was.

"Traditional bonfire protocol" with no description of the protocol.

"Evening program as usual" with no record of what "as usual" meant.

[I don't know any of this.]

She'd been Signora for six months. She'd been running House Montecardi's finances for years now. She could recite the tariff schedule from memory.

But, at seventeen years of age here, she had no idea what her own people did at a harvest festival.

Vivienne Ross had been the same way. Knew every floor of Liang & Howard, every revenue stream, every department head's quarterly target. Never once ate lunch in the break room. Hardly knew what new movies were coming out.

[I’ve been living like a hermit to get my family’s finances in order. Now, I have a task in front of me that requires cultural knowledge and I’m useless. I need help.]

Vessa was at the Montecardi estate more often than she was at her own house these days, which everyone had accepted as a basic fact of life. Like weather or Ottavia’s salt addiction.

Katarina found her in the kitchen eating a bowl of Ottavia’s stew and apparently enjoying it, which said more about Vessa’s palate than it did about the food, and walked up to her.

"I need you to come with me."

"Sex?"

"W-What!? No! No. No... Maybe later."

"Oh, okay. Why?"

"I want you to come with me to ask my mother about the festival."

Vessa’s face lit up.

"Oh! The Midsummer Market? My moms used to take me every year when I was little. It’s so much fun, Kat. There’s the bonfire and the sigil ceremony and..."

"Great. You can translate."

"Translate what? It’s your festival."

"Well, I never attended."

"What!?" It was Vessa’s turn to be shocked.

"I was busy!" Katarina pouted. "Anyway, yeah, I need your help."

Vessa looked at her for a second and then smiled. She always looked at Katarina like that when Katarina accidentally revealed how little she knew about normal life.

"Come on, Signora. Let’s go get you culturally educated."

They found Seris in the garden. She was reading, which for Seris meant she was holding a book open and staring at the vineyards while the book served as a prop for her aesthetic.

"Mother, I need to ask you about the festival."

Seris looked up from the book she wasn't reading and her whole face changed. Her purple eyes went wide, she sat up straight, and she looked like someone had just told her it was her birthday and also that all her enemies had died painful deaths.

"You want to know about the festival?"

"I want to know about the festival."

She perked up.

"My beautiful, brilliant daughter, who has never once in seventeen years asked me a single question about Valdari tradition, wants to know about the festival?"

"I've asked you things!"

"You asked me how the tariff exemption system evolved from the old tributary model. That is not culture, piccola."

[Fair point.]

Seris set the book down, took both of Katarina's hands, and physically sat her on the bench. Vessa sat cross-legged on the grass and looked thrilled about the whole thing.

"The Midsummer Market Festival," Seris began, and her voice dropped into a warm storytelling cadence, "is the most important cultural event in any Valdari district. It celebrates the harvest, but more than that, it celebrates abundance. What we've built, what we have, and what we're willing to share."

Normal so far. Katarina could work with "harvest celebration."

"Every house with standing in the district presents their sigil at the bonfire. It's a processional. The host house goes last, and the Signora lights the fire. It's an honor and a declaration. You're saying 'this is my house, this is my fire, and I am strong enough to hold both.'"

Also normal. Ceremonial, symbolic, a bit dramatic. She could plan around that.

"And I suppose there's a speech," Katarina said.

"A toast," Seris corrected. "Each Signora gives one. And it's competitive, piccola. The toasts are supposed to be impressive. Witty, bold, maybe a little threatening if you're feeling spicy. The crowd judges."

[Public speaking competition. I gave quarterly earnings presentations to rooms full of hostile board members for a decade. I can handle a toast.]

"After the toasts, the feast runs all night. Every house contributes dishes. Wine, obviously, barrels of it, and music and dancing until dawn." Seris's smile went soft. "I danced with your mother at a festival, you know. She stepped on my feet eleven times."

"That's unfortunate," Katarina said.

"It was cute."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive."

Vessa laughed. Seris continued, and her tone shifted.

"Now. The festival opens into the Night Market, and that's where things get very fun."

Katarina blinked.

Now, she was worried. Because "fun" for this community tended to lean in a certain direction.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning clothing becomes optional, the dancing becomes intimate, and the wine stalls start selling the strong stuff!" Seris glanced at Vessa, who was nodding along like this was expected. "It's a celebration of desire, piccola. Of abundance in all its forms. People pair off, or group up, and the Night Market provides atmosphere. Private pavilions, music, very elegant body paint."

Katarina's brain, which had been in planning mode, stalled. She imagined Seris with her naked body painted and had to shake her head to force those thoughts out of her mind.

"Body paint?" She asked weakly.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Vessa said. She leaned forward and her eyes were bright. "There are artists who specialize in it. You pick colors that mean things. Gold for prosperity, red for passion, blue for devotion. And they paint sigils and designs all over your body and then you dance and the paint smudges onto whoever you're dancing with, so by the end of the night everyone is covered in each other's colors."

Katarina thought about Vessa covered in paint next. Specifically, she thought about Vessa covered in red paint and nothing else, pressed against her, paint smearing across both their stomachs and tits while they moved together, and for a moment the garden went very warm.

"You’re thinking about it," Vessa said.

"I am not."

"You’re blushing."

"I don’t blush. I have a skin condition."

Vessa grinned. Seris looked very amused.

She continued.

"The host house provides the pavilions, the paint, the music, all of it," Seris said. "It’s traditional. It’s been part of the festival for centuries. Nobody has to participate, but it’s expected that the Signora facilitates it."

[So I’m organizing a harvest fair that turns into a city-wide orgy. With a budget, a timeline, and zero experience with Valdari cultural norms.]

"Is that everything?" Katarina asked.

Seris’s expression shifted. The warmth was still there, but her smile had thinned.

"There’s one more thing. The last time the Montecardi hosted the festival properly was nineteen years ago. Before you were born." She paused. "And some of the other houses have been talking."

"Talking about what?"

"That the Montecardi have lost their fire."

Seris said it calmly. She always said things calmly. But her hands were folded a little too tightly in her lap, and Katarina had spent enough years reading rooms to know what that meant. This wasn’t logistics to Seris. This was her family name being used as a punchline, and she’d been hearing it for years.

[So it’s not just a party. It’s a statement. It’s me standing in front of every house in the district and telling them the Montecardi are back and we’re not going anywhere.]

She looked at the vineyards stretching past the garden, green and alive and rated A-minus because Silvana loved grapes more than she loved people.

[Well, fuck. I’m actually going to have to make this spectacular.]

"Okay," she said. "I’ve got this."

Chapter 26: Product Launch

Katarina had seventeen vendor contracts spread across her desk, a seating chart for three hundred that she'd redrawn four times, and a supply chain diagram for wine that looked like a conspiracy theorist's wall.

Three types of wine. The festival required three types. Seris had explained the difference between them with the passion of a sommelier and the clarity of a drunk poet.

Katarina had retained exactly none of it.

There was a red one for the feast, a sweet one for the toasts, and a strong one for the Night Market that Seris described as "the kind that makes decisions for you." Katarina had written that one down as "danger wine" in her notes and moved on.

The feast logistics alone were enough to make her miss quarterly earnings reports. Four hundred guests across twelve vendor stalls, with dietary requirements she was still learning because apparently some Valdari had qi-based food sensitivities that didn't exist on Earth. One woman was allergic to food prepared near active fire formations. Another couldn't eat anything preserved with standard arrays. Katarina had a spreadsheet for it and the spreadsheet was growing legs.

She needed tables, chairs, serving ware, a stage for the musicians, fuel for the bonfire, sigil banners for every attending house, and a ceremonial torch that she had to commission from a specific artisan in the next town over because tradition demanded it and tradition did not care about her timeline.

[No worries... This is a product launch. I launched Liang & Howard's Southeast Asian distribution network in eight weeks with a team of six, so I can handle more wine and a bonfire.]

It was not the same thing.

Still, the planning felt good. It was familiar, the spreadsheets and timelines and dependency chains, the quiet satisfaction of watching chaos organize itself into a grid. Running the house's day-to-day was maintenance. This was building from scratch, and her brain lit up for it.

Which brought her to the real project.

Katarina pulled a separate folder from the bottom drawer. This one she'd been working on for two years, quietly, in the margins of her regular work. Sketches, calculations, material lists, and a technical drawing that had gone through sixteen revisions.

Her secret project was...

Indoor plumbing.

Specifically, a gravity-fed waste disposal system using the canyon's natural elevation drop, clay pipe sections sealed with a resin compound that workers could produce with a modified preservation formation, and a ceramic basin with a water reservoir that refilled from a rooftop collection tank and that, after a convoluted series of processes, dumped said waste into the ocean.

In other words...

She had designed a toilet.

Two years of quiet, obsessive work, and she had designed a toilet, and she was prouder of it than anything else she'd done in either lifetime.

[I have been waiting for this since I was five years old. I've built credibility, authority, and a reputation for competence, and I did ALL OF IT so that when I finally showed people these designs, they'd take me seriously!]

The Ledger flickered at the edge of her vision.

Innovation potential: High.

Market demand: Unmeasured (product category does not exist).

Recommended approach: Prototype, demonstrate, scale.

[Hehe, yes. That's the plan.]

The festival was the perfect venue to promote this idea, too. Thousands of people, dozens of houses. She could install a working prototype at the estate as a proof of concept. Let the visiting Signoras use it. Let them experience the difference between a ceramic basin with running water and a wooden box over a hole.

The product would sell itself.

She pulled the supply chain diagram closer and cross-referenced the clay suppliers she already had contracts with, checked her local list of workers' availability for formation work, and started calculating unit costs for a small production run.

The candle burned down. She replaced it. The new one burned down too.

[If I can get three working units installed before the festival, one in the main house, one in the guest quarters, and one near the feast hall, every Signora in the district will want one by morning.]

The door opened.

"Katarina."

Brynn was standing in the doorway. The hallway behind her was dark, which meant it was late, which meant Katarina had lost track of time again.

"What time is it?"

"Past two."

[Oh.]

Brynn walked in, looked at the desk, and sighed. It was the sigh of a woman who had been through this exact scenario enough times to have stopped finding it charming about six months ago.

"Okay, up."

"B-But I’m almost done with the..."

Brynn picked her up.

Just scooped her out of the chair with both arms like Katarina weighed nothing, which, to Brynn, she probably didn’t. Katarina’s legs dangled and a vendor contract slid off her lap and drifted to the floor.

"Mother. Put me down."

"No."

"I am the Signora of this house."

"Yes, yes, and the Signora is going to bed."

[I run two trade routes and a port and I’m being carried like a sack of grain. This is my life.]

Brynn carried her down the hallway. Katarina hung there with as much dignity as a person could maintain while being transported horizontally by their mother.

"Festivals are supposed to be FUN, Katarina. You’re planning this thing like it’s a siege. You need to sleep, you need to eat more, and you need to stop doing that thing where you forget you have a body."

"I don’t forget I have a body."

"You replaced a candle at midnight and didn't notice. That means you were sitting in the dark. In the DARK, Katarina."

[... Alright, she has a point.]

Brynn deposited her in bed, pulled the blanket up, and stood over her with her arms crossed. She was backlit by the hallway and looked about eight feet tall. Katarina could see every muscle in her arms from the low angle. Her brain noted, clinically, that Brynn was objectively an incredibly attractive woman, and then shut up because it was two in the morning and she was going to sleep.

The musician troupe was based out of a tavern on the south end of the harbor road.

Katarina went down the next morning to negotiate rates and availability, because she was not paying festival prices for a four-piece ensemble when she could lock in a contract three weeks early and save twelve percent.

She was crossing the market square when someone stepped into her path.

"Well. You must be the Montecardi girl."

The woman was tall. Brynn's height, maybe taller, with blue skin the color of deep water and silver hair cropped short above her ears. Her build was lean and long and she stood with her weight on one hip, relaxed, like she'd decided the world was a chair and she was going to sit in it sideways.

Her shirt was half unlaced and Katarina could see the inner swell of her tits and the flat plane of her stomach and the line of muscle that ran down from her hip into her waistband.

There was a merchant house sigil on her belt that Katarina didn't recognize, which was unusual, because Katarina recognized every sigil in the district.

"I'm the Montecardi Signora," Katarina corrected. "And you are?"

"Pernella Duscari." She extended a hand. Her grip was firm and her palm was cool. "Wine merchant. Passing through on my way up the coast and I heard the Montecardi are throwing a festival. First one in, what, twenty years?"

"Nineteen."

"Close enough." Pernella grinned. "I've got three casks of Calore red and two of Ambra gold sitting in a warehouse with no buyer. Yours for forty silver."

Katarina’s mental calculator fired up instantly.

Calore red was the feast wine, twenty-two a cask retail. Three casks was sixty-six at market rate. Ambra gold was the toast wine, fifteen a cask. Total retail value was ninety-six silver. She was being offered it for forty.

[That’s a fifty-eight percent discount. Nobody offers a fifty-eight percent discount unless the product is bad, the seller is desperate, or there’s a hook I’m not seeing.]

"That’s quite generous," Katarina said.

"I’m a generous woman."

"And why is that?"

Pernella laughed. Katarina noticed that she had a nice mouth, full lips, and the laugh showed her sharp canines.

[I wonder how her mouth would feel around my- STOP IT! YOU’RE BUSINESSING RIGHT NOW!]

"Because I’m overstocked and it’s cheaper to sell at a loss here than haul five casks up the coast in summer heat. The Ambra gold doesn’t travel well. I’d rather take forty silver and a favor from the Montecardi Signora than watch good wine turn to vinegar."

[A favor. There it is.]

"What kind of favor?"

"Nothing specific. Just the kind where if I’m passing through again and I need a berth at your port or an introduction to one of your partners, I can mention your name and people listen." Pernella tilted her head. "You’ve got a reputation, Signora. Young, sharp, rebuilt a house from the ground up. I’d rather be in your good graces than not."

It was a smart pitch. Katarina recognized it because she’d made pitches like it herself. Low commitment, high goodwill, designed to create a relationship rather than close a transaction.

"I’ll think about it."

"Take your time." Pernella looked Katarina over, slowly and openly. Valdari didn’t hide it when they liked what they saw, and Pernella was not hiding it. "I’m at the Gull’s Rest for the week. Come find me if you want to talk wine. Or anything else."

[She’s flirting with me. That is open, unambiguous flirting in the middle of the market square.]

Katarina knew, intellectually, that this was fine. Valdari didn't do monogamy the way Earth did. She and Vessa had never once discussed exclusivity because exclusivity wasn't a Valdari concept. Vessa would probably ask Pernella's name and then ask if she was hot, because that was the kind of girlfriend Vessa was.

But while Katarina Montecardi had mostly taken over, Vivienne Ross's ghost was still lingering in there, thirty-two years of closeted repression whispering that wanting someone new meant betraying someone old, and Katarina's ears went pink before she could stop them.

"I might," she said.

Pernella's grin widened. She gave a little wave and walked off, and Katarina stood there watching the way her hips moved for about three seconds longer than was strictly professional.

Vessa was at the kitchen table when Katarina got home, eating a bowl of Ottavia's stew and reading a book on formation arrays.

"How'd the supply run go?"

"Fine. I got a wine offer. Three casks of Calore red and two of Ambra gold for forty silver from a merchant named Pernella Duscari."

"That's really cheap." Vessa looked up. "Is she pretty?"

[How does she DO that?]

"That's not relevant to the wine deal."

"So she IS pretty." Vessa grinned.

Katarina rolled her eyes. Then, she pulled the technical drawing from the folder she'd been carrying and spread it on the table. The ceramic basin, the water reservoir, the pipe system.

Her masterpiece, her legacy, the thing that would change this world forever.

Vessa stared at it.

"... I'm supposed to shit in that?"

"It's a sanitation system! It's hygienic, it's efficient, it uses gravity and formation-sealed pipes to..."

"It looks like a fancy bucket with water in it."

"It is NOT a fancy bucket! It’s indoor plumbing! It will revolutionize waste management across the entire continent!"

"Kat, I love you, but I’m looking at a drawing of a chair with a hole in it."

"You are looking at the FUTURE!"

"Okay, okay! What’s on page two?"

"The pipe diagram."

"Is the pipe diagram going to make me less concerned about shitting in a chair?"

"Jesus, woman, YES!"

"Who’s Jesus?"

Katarina opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

"Forget it. Just look at page two."

Chapter 27: Fire Season*

The woman in the mirror was a stranger.

Katarina turned sideways and looked again, just to confirm, and yep, that was still her.

Her black hair pinned up with silver clasps, her purple eyes lined with something Seris had called festival kohl. And the dress.

The dress was transparent silk.

Not sheer-if-you-squint transparent. Not tastefully translucent transparent. The fabric was the color of dark wine and it was see-through. Her tits were completely visible. Her stomach was visible. The lines of her hips were visible. There was a sash at the waist that provided structural integrity and absolutely nothing else, and below that the silk split at her left thigh and went all the way to the floor. If she shifted her weight even slightly, the split opened.

It was, by a margin so wide it could be measured from space, the sluttiest thing she had ever worn in either lifetime.

[Vivienne Ross wore pantsuits with the top button done and would rather have died than wear this in public. Well, she did die, in a pantsuit, so maybe that wasn't the winning strategy.]

The scariest part, however, was...

Katarina liked it.

She had to fight off a smile, but she couldn't fight off the thought:

[Damn, I look hot.]

Arms wrapped around her from behind and she nearly gasped.

Seris rested her chin on Katarina's shoulder and looked at their reflection together. Seris was wearing a dress that was somehow even worse, deep purple with a neckline that plunged past her navel and showed the full inner curve of both tits. She looked stunning.

"You're going to be fine, piccola."

Katarina chuckled awkwardly.

"I look like I'm about to seduce someone."

"That's the spirit!"

"That was not the spirit I was going for."

"Ah, you'll get used to it."

And then she spanked her.

"Ah! H-Hey!" Katarina blushed. Seris just winked and left so Katarina could finish getting ready.

[The nerve of that woman.]

The bonfire was enormous.

Katarina had approved the fuel order herself. She'd negotiated the sigil frame, reviewed the processional timing, checked the wind direction for smoke dispersal. Every piece of this moment had been planned down to the minute.

None of that had prepared her for what it felt like.

She walked the processional last. Every other house had already presented their sigil and given their toast, and now three hundred faces were watching the Montecardi Signora walk toward the pyre with a ceremonial torch in her hand and a transparent dress and seventeen years of not quite belonging to this world.

Not yet anyway.

She gave the toast. She'd rehearsed it, but when the moment came she dropped half the rehearsed lines and said what she actually meant, which was:

"The Montecardi have been quiet for nineteen years. That ends today. From this day forward, you're going to hear about me so much you'll get tired of it."

It came out sharper and shorter than she'd planned. The crowd went silent for a beat, and then someone in the back whooped, and then everyone did.

She touched the torch to the pyre.

The Montecardi sigil caught fire, gold and crimson blazing against the night sky. The heat hit her face and the crowd roared and for about five seconds Katarina felt like a Signora instead of a reincarnated businesswoman who'd been up since four worrying about chair placement.

She looked for Seris in the crowd and found her near the front. Seris was ugly-crying, the kind she'd cried when Katarina took her first steps, and Brynn had one arm around her and was also crying.

[These two dorks.] She shook her head, smirking.

The festival itself was gorgeous.

Lanterns hung in strings between the terraced vineyards. Music drifted up from the harbor where a six-piece ensemble was earning every copper of the rate Katarina had negotiated down from their original ask. The bonfire threw orange light across the yard and the Montecardi sigil burned bright for the first time in nineteen years.

And yet, every time she looked at something beautiful she saw the line item.

The lanterns were twelve silver. The feast tables were eight. The musicians were twenty-two after the discount. The wine was forty, thanks to Pernella's deal, which had turned out to be legitimate after Katarina had Nadia verify the cask seals and quality.

Total cost so far: two hundred and fourteen silver marks. Under budget by sixteen.

[I should enjoy this. People are enjoying this. I organized this entire thing and people are having a good time and I should stop running a cost audit in my head.]

She couldn’t stop running a cost audit in her head. Vivienne Ross had done the same thing at Liang & Howard galas. Stood in a corner calculating catering costs while everyone else danced.

[At least this time I’m wearing a better dress. Or a worse dress. Depends on your definition, I suppose.]

She circulated. That was the Signora’s job tonight. Move through the crowd, talk to everyone, be seen. Katarina did it the way she’d done corporate networking, which was to say efficiently, with purpose, and with a mental timer running on every conversation.

The local merchants wanted to talk about next season’s contracts. Katarina gave them enough to feel valued and not enough to commit to anything. Stellara’s representative, a sharp woman named Giada, complimented the bonfire and asked pointed questions about the Greypass expansion that Katarina deflected with a smile.

There were visitors from outside the district too.

A delegation near the east pavilion had drawn attention all evening. They were human. They wore dark robes with a lotus emblem stitched in black thread on the collar.

"Black Lotus Sect," Renata murmured at Katarina’s shoulder as she passed. "Cultivation sect from the central kingdoms. Big. Influential. They don’t usually come this far south."

[Interesting.]

The Ledger flickered.

Black Lotus Sect: Major human cultivation order.

Sphere of influence: Central and eastern kingdoms.

Reputation: Disciplined, insular, politically connected.

Relevance to Montecardi: Currently unknown.

[Currently unknown. My favorite category. Basically means "could become a problem later".]

She’d introduce herself tomorrow. Tonight was about being seen, not about chasing new threads.

She found Pernella at the wine pavilion, which was predictable, because Pernella was a wine merchant and the wine pavilion had wine.

"Signora." Pernella raised a cup. Her silver hair was loose tonight, and she was wearing a shirt that was mostly theoretical, open to the navel, and Katarina could see her tits and the flat muscles of her stomach and the blue skin that went all the way down. "Hell of a party."

"Thank you. Your wine is a hit."

"My wine is always a hit. Sit down, have a drink. You've been working the crowd for two hours and you look like you need to stop being the boss for five minutes."

[I don't stop being the boss. That's not how this works.]

She sat down anyway.

The wine was the strong stuff. The danger wine from her planning notes. It was warm going down and it hit her bloodstream fast, and by the second cup the line items in her head had gone pleasantly fuzzy.

Pernella was easy to talk to. That was dangerous. She asked questions without pushing, made fun of Katarina without being mean about it, and carried herself like someone who'd been to a lot of places and hadn't been intimidated by any of them.

"You're staring at my mouth," Pernella said.

"I'm not."

"You are. It's fine. I've been told I happen to have a great mouth."

[What does that even- oh.]

Katarina glanced across the festival grounds. Vessa was near the bonfire with a group of people and there was a girl with green skin and a dancer's build who had her hand on Vessa's arm, and Vessa was laughing and leaning into it.

Valdari festivals. Desire as celebration. The Night Market was in full swing around them, the music slower now, the lanterns dimmer, the laughter softer and closer.

[... Right. That's what this is all about, at the end of the day, isn't it?]

"There are alcoves," Pernella noted, suddenly. "Behind the vine terrace. Private. That's what they're for."

"I know what they're for."

"So?"

She asked. Just like that.

Katarina looked at her. Blue skin, silver hair, that lazy grin. A stranger with no strings attached to anything in her carefully organized life.

"So," Katarina said, and finished her wine.

The alcove was small, curtained with heavy fabric, and the low cushioned platform inside existed for exactly one purpose.

Pernella had Katarina’s dress off in about ten seconds, which was impressive given how many clasps were involved. She kissed Katarina hard, one hand in her hair and the other on her hip, and Katarina kissed her back. The second person Katarina kissed in this world.

She tasted wine and salt and for the first time in weeks, all thoughts vacated her mind.

They fell onto the platform together. Pernella’s body was warm under Katarina’s hands, lean and smooth, and when Katarina’s fingers wrapped around her cock Pernella was already hard.

"You’re eager," Katarina said.

"Have you seen yourself tonight? I’ve been hard since the toast."

Pernella pushed Katarina onto her back and climbed on top of her. She took Katarina’s cock in one hand and lined it up and sank down, and Katarina’s hips jerked up and her breath punched out of her because Pernella’s pussy was hot and tight and wet and she took all of Katarina in one slow drop.

"Fuck," Katarina said.

Pernella grinned down at her.

"You’re welcome."

She started moving, slowly at first, rolling her hips in long deliberate strokes, taking Katarina’s cock all the way to the base each time and then rising until just the tip was inside her before dropping back down. Katarina could feel every inch of it and the wet friction was making her stupid.

Pernella picked up the pace. She braced her hands on Katarina’s stomach and rode her properly, her tits bouncing with each thrust, her pussy gripping Katarina’s cock on every upstroke. Katarina grabbed her hips and pulled her down harder and Pernella’s breath caught and her rhythm faltered.

[Noted. She likes that.]

Pernella's cock was hard and dripping between them. Katarina wrapped a hand around it and stroked in time with each thrust. Pernella's composure cracked. Her hips stuttered, she swore under her breath, and she leaned forward. The new angle drove Katarina deeper and they were both close now, breathing hard, Pernella's thighs shaking around Katarina's hips.

Pernella came first, spilling over Katarina's stomach with a low moan, her pussy clenching tight, and that pushed Katarina over the edge. She grabbed Pernella's hips and held her down and came inside her, hard, the orgasm rolling through her long enough that she lost track of where she was for a few seconds.

They lay there afterward, breathing hard, sticky, the sounds of the festival filtering through the curtain.

[Vivienne Ross would have had a panic attack. Sex with a stranger at a public festival in a transparent dress. The closeted CEO from the sixty-second floor would not have survived it.]

Katarina stared at the fabric ceiling and felt the wine buzz and the sex buzz and the warm night air on her skin, and she laughed. An actual laugh, from her chest, at the sheer distance between who she used to be and who she was now.

Pernella propped herself up on one elbow.

"Had a good time?"

"Great time. Thank you for the wine."

"You're welcome. And for the record, your festival was excellent."

She found Vessa by the bonfire an hour later. The green-skinned dancer was gone. Vessa had a cup of wine in one hand and festival paint on her left shoulder, gold and red swirled together, and she looked happy and flushed and she took one look at Katarina and grinned.

"You hooked up with the wine lady, didn't you."

Katarina didn't deny it.

"Was she good?"

"The wine or the sex?"

"Both."

"... Acceptable."

Vessa laughed and handed her the wine, and they stood together by the fire.

Chapter 28: The Invitation

Katarina woke up with a headache that could have killed a horse.

Her mouth tasted like the inside of a wine barrel and her eyes didn't want to open. There was a throbbing pressure behind her left temple that pulsed every time her heart beat, which was rude, because her heart had been doing its job just fine for seventeen years without causing her pain.

[I have never had a hangover. Vivienne Ross stopped at two glasses. Katarina Montecardi apparently has different priorities.]

Vessa was already awake, sitting up in bed, stretching her arms over her head. She looked completely unbothered, because apparently her body processed alcohol differently.

The stretch pulled the sheet down to her waist, and Katarina got a full view of pink skin, bare tits, and the faint bite mark she'd left on Vessa's collarbone last night. Vessa caught her staring and grinned.

"Morning."

"Shh."

"You look terrible."

"Shh."

Vessa giggled, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead. The motion pressed her chest against Katarina's arm, warm and soft and very distracting for someone whose brain was currently trying to escape through her left eye socket.

[I will never drink again. I am entering this into the permanent record.]

She forced herself upright and immediately regretted it. The room tilted. She closed her eyes, breathed through her nose, and waited for the world to stop being hostile.

[Ledger. Festival results.]

The gilded text appeared, mercifully dim, like the Ledger could tell she was fragile.

Midsummer Market Festival — Post-Event Assessment:

Total cost: 214 silver marks.

Total vendor fee revenue: 89 silver marks.

Port traffic increase (festival week): +34%.

Net economic impact: Positive.

New trade inquiries: 3 (House Pellini, House Orata, House Vanducci). Status: Informal. Require follow-up.

Reputation impact: +1 tier pending confirmation.

[Three new inquiries. Houses that haven't talked to us in years. And a reputation bump.]

The festival had done exactly what she'd designed it to do, which was remind the district that the Montecardi existed and that their fire wasn't just a bonfire.

[Now. The toilets!]

Festival Innovation Showcase — Sanitation Prototype:

Attendee interest: Moderate.

Follow-up inquiries: 2 (merchant-class, domestic application).

Tentative orders: 1.

Public reception: Curious. Skeptical. Amused.

[One order! Somebody ordered a toilet!]

She pulled the technical drawings from the bedside table and grinned at the schematic of the ceramic basin and the pipe diagram. One order was a proof of concept. A proof of concept was a production run. A production run was a supply chain. A supply chain was an industry.

"Why are you smiling at those drawings of yours?"

Brynn was in the doorway. Her training wrap was loose around her shoulders and she had a cup of something steaming in one hand.

"Toilet, mother. It's a sanitation system."

"Ah, yes, the box you shit in."

"It’s a box you shit in INDOORS with RUNNING WATER and it’s going to change this continent, Mother."

Brynn looked at the drawing, then at Katarina, then at the drawing again.

"Well, I’m proud of your shit-box regardless."

[It’s so much more than a shit-box!]

Breakfast was Ottavia’s eggs, which were too salty, with toast, which was fine, and a fruit compote that Vessa ate most of while Katarina nursed a cup of tea and tried to convince her stomach that food was not the enemy.

Vessa had thrown on one of Katarina’s tunics. It was too big for her, to the point where it looked like she was wearing Katarina’s hoodie.

[... That is adorable.]

"The Black Lotus people," Seris said, halfway through her second plate. "Did you talk to them?"

"Briefly. They were polite. Didn’t say much."

"Mhm. They were asking questions, though. About the Greypass."

Katarina’s tea paused halfway to her mouth.

"What kind of questions?"

"Capacity. Volume. Whether we take human merchants." Seris speared a piece of fruit. "Giula from the port authority said they spent twenty minutes looking at the route maps in the trade hall."

[A major cultivation sect from the central kingdoms is interested in our inland trade corridor. That’s either an opportunity or a problem.]

She filed it. The Ledger pulsed gently at the edge of her awareness, confirming it had logged the data point.

"I’ll look into it."

"I’m sure you will, piccola." Seris smiled and refilled her wine glass, because Seris didn’t get hangovers. Whether that was a Valdari thing or a Matriarch thing, Katarina had stopped trying to figure out years ago.

The training yard was warm.

Brynn was in her element, standing with her feet shoulder-width apart and her qi radiating off her skin in a faint golden shimmer, explaining body cultivation with the enthusiasm of a woman who genuinely believed that everyone would love punching things if they just tried harder.

"The trick is to cycle the qi through your meridians in a loop, not a line. A line pushes power to one point. A loop distributes it. That’s why I can take a hit from a goreclaw and keep moving. My whole body absorbs it, not just the point of contact."

"Fascinating," Katarina said, and meant it about thirty percent.

"Try it. Pull your qi in through your core and push it out through your limbs, but bring it back. Full circle."

Katarina tried. She pulled qi into her core, pushed it outward, felt it reach her arms and legs, and then it dissipated. Like water poured into sand.

"You’re leaking," Brynn said.

"I’m aware."

"You’re not committing to the loop. You’re sending the qi out and then getting distracted."

[I’m drafting follow-up letters in my mind and calculating bulk pipe costs from the Orata kilns. So yes, I’m a bit distracted.]

"Again."

She tried again. The qi went out. The qi did not come back.

Brynn sighed fondly.

"You know, I was terrible at this too. When your mother and I first met, I couldn’t reinforce a fist to save my life." Brynn paused. "I had other skills, though."

"Please stop."

"I’m just saying. I could compensate in other ways."

"PLEASE stop."

Brynn grinned.

"We'll keep working on it."

"We will," Katarina agreed, knowing full well that she probably would continue to half-ass body cultivation until the day she died.

After all, she had a mother who could kill six armored goreclaws with her bare hands and a girlfriend who could maintain a preservation formation for forty-eight hours straight. Katarina's job was to make sure they all got paid.

Inside, Vessa had taken over the dining table with Dalla, the two of them sorting through receipts and expense reports. Her brain for figures wasn't as fast as Katarina's, but it was meticulous, and she caught things Katarina sometimes blew past in her rush to see the big picture.

Katarina leaned in the doorway and watched her work for a moment.

Vessa had her dark hair pinned up with a stick and her neck was bare, the bite mark from last night on full display. Katarina's brain went somewhere very unhelpful.

[Later. We have three trade inquiries to draft responses for.]

From the kitchen, Ottavia's voice came through the wall.

"—ate through my ENTIRE salt reserve! My entire reserve! Do you know how long that took me to build up?! Two months! Two months of careful rationing and they ate it in ONE NIGHT! Animals! All of them!"

"Ottavia, you put too much salt in everything anyway," Dalla called back.

"I put the CORRECT amount of salt! It's not my fault the rest of you have dead tongues!"

There was a knock at the front door. Enza answered it and came back with a letter on a silver tray, which was capital-F Formal territory.

"For you, Signora. Courier waited for a receipt."

Katarina took the letter. The seal was heavy wax, deep burgundy, stamped with an emblem she'd seen in Seris's old books but never in person. Two serpents coiled around a merchant's scale, with a crown above.

The Valdari Merchant Consortium.

She broke the seal and read.

The letter was short. The Consortium formally acknowledged the revival of House Montecardi's trade operations and the successful hosting of the Midsummer Market Festival. It noted the house's improved standings, its active trade routes, and its partnership with House Brevaine. And it extended an invitation for the Signora of House Montecardi to register for the annual Consortium Summit, to be held in eight weeks.

In Pavona. The Valdari capital.

Katarina read the letter twice. Her photographic memory got it the first time, but her brain needed a second pass to believe it.

She looked up. Seris was watching her from across the table with an expression that was carefully, deliberately neutral. That neutrality said more than any smile could have.

"The Consortium Summit," Katarina said.

"Mhm."

"In Pavona."

"Mhm."

Brynn leaned over Katarina's shoulder and squinted at the letter.

"Is that good?"

"It's the annual gathering of every major merchant house in the Valdari Dominion," Katarina said. "The people who set trade policy for the entire southern coast. They're inviting me to the table."

"So it's good."

"It's very good, Mother."

Brynn beamed and clapped her on the back hard enough to rattle her teeth.

Seris swirled her wine. Her purple eyes stayed on Katarina for a beat, careful and watchful, and Katarina filed that away for later.

"Pavona is a big city, piccola. Lots of powerful people. Lots of old money."

"I know."

"You'll need new clothes."

[Oh, that's what she's worried about.]

But Katarina let it go for now. She looked at the letter one more time, at the serpents and the scale and the crown, and then she set it on the table and picked up her tea.

[The Valdari Merchant Consortium. The top floor. And they just sent an elevator.]

She took a sip. It had gone cold. She drank it anyway.

Chapter 29: Credentials

Katarina spent three days researching the Consortium and by the end of it she had filled eleven pages of notes, worn a groove in the study floor from pacing, and developed a specific, burning need to attend an academy she hadn't known existed seventy-two hours ago.

The Ledger was her primary source, but its information on Pavona was broad: structural data, economic indicators, institutional rankings. Good for framework, bad for texture.

For texture, she needed Seris.

"Tell me about Pavona," Katarina said, like the main character in a videogame, on the second evening, sitting across from her mother in the garden while the sun dropped behind the canyon rim.

Seris's wine glass paused halfway to her mouth. Her purple eyes went distant for a moment, and then she smiled and it passed.

"I lived there. Before I met your mother. Before a lot of things."

"What was it like?"

Seris took a sip and leaned back in her chair.

"Well, let's see... It's built into the cliffs above Sapphire Bay. The whole city cascades down the rock face in tiers, with the oldest houses at the top and the port at the bottom. The Consortium Hall sits at the highest point, above even the great houses." She waved her glass. "That's deliberate, of course. Commerce rules in Pavona. Not cultivation rank, not military power. The families that sit on the Consortium council are the ones who move the most goods, control the most routes, and negotiate the best terms. Everything else is secondary."

[Sounds like my kind of city.]

"And the academy?"

Seris's expression softened.

"The Compasso Accademia is the finest merchant academy on the continent. It's not just Valdari. It was founded by Valdari, and they make up the majority, but humans attend. Elves. Even some Aevari have, historically." Her fingers tightened on the wine glass. "Our relationship with the Aevari is complicated. But the Accademia has always been neutral ground. Education transcends politics. You know, in theory."

Katarina had heard about the Aevari plenty. Aurelia had covered the basics with her usual gravel-voiced bluntness, and there were Aevari merchants who passed through the southeastern ports occasionally.

If the valdari could be considered this worlds' demons, then the aevari were its angels. White wings, no horns, radiant eyes.

But Seris talked about them differently than one would talk about an angel. Like someone who'd stood across from them and hadn't enjoyed it.

[More to unpack there. Later, though. Business first!]

"What does graduation from the Compasso mean?"

"Everything." Seris wasn't exaggerating. Katarina could hear it in her voice. "A Compasso credential tells the world you've been vetted by the highest commercial authority on the continent. It opens doors that money alone can't. Trade partnerships, banking access, cultivation resource networks, political introductions. A Compasso graduate from a minor house commands more respect than an unaccredited Signora from a major one."

Katarina understood the instant she heard that.

[That's what I need.]

She could see the gap in her position clearly.

House Montecardi had recovered. Revenue was up, reputation was climbing, the trade routes were generating real income. But all of that was local. Within the southeastern district, the Montecardi name meant something again. Outside of it? She was a seventeen-year-old Signora from a coastal town that most people had written off a decade ago. Nobody at the Consortium table was going to take her seriously on regional results alone.

But a Compasso credential changed the math entirely.

[I don't need the education. I could teach half the courses. What I need is the stamp.]

She pulled up the Ledger.

[Admission requirements for the Compasso Accademia.]

The gilded text bloomed.

Compasso Accademia — Admission Requirements:

Portfolio of verifiable trade accomplishments (minimum 3 years of documented commercial activity at house level or equivalent).

Letter of endorsement from an established Consortium member house.

Demonstration of cultivation proficiency (minimum Mid-Foundation across at least one path, assessed by Accademia proctors).

[Portfolio: easy. Four years of documented results, three trade routes, five alliances, and a partnership with Brevaine.]

[Endorsement letter: harder. Stellara is a Consortium member. But, she respects me. I believe she'd write one if I asked, and she'd do it honestly, which matters more than doing it warmly.]

[Cultivation proficiency...]

She stared at that third requirement.

Mid-Foundation across at least one path. She was Late Foundation across all four, which exceeded the minimum by a comfortable margin. On paper, this should have been the easiest box to check.

On paper.

In practice, Katarina had been treating cultivation the way Vivienne Ross treated the company gym membership. She had it. She paid for it. She went occasionally so it didn't feel like a complete waste. But her heart wasn't in it, and everyone knew it.

Especially Brynn, who had been trying to get Katarina to take physical cultivation seriously for thirteen years with approximately zero success.

The problem wasn't her rank. The problem was that a demonstration meant performing in front of people who did this professionally, and Katarina's cultivation technique was, to put it charitably, all talent. She could channel qi. She could circulate it. But she'd never fought anyone, never built a formation under pressure, never done anything impressive enough to make a proctor nod instead of wince.

[I’ve been skating by on raw affinity and the fact that nobody’s tested me. That works in Vellasera. It will not work in Pavona.]

She groaned out loud in the study, loud enough that it carried through the open window.

Brynn’s head appeared at the window approximately four seconds later.

"What’s wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You groaned. You only groan when something’s wrong or when Vessa’s over."

"Mother."

"What? I have ears. These walls are thin."

Katarina groaned again.

"The Accademia requires..."

"Yes?"

"... A cultivation demonstration for admission."

Brynn’s yellow eyes went wide and her whole face split open with a grin so big Katarina could count her teeth.

"I TOLD you! I TOLD you cultivation matters! I have been telling you since you were FOUR, Katarina! Four years old! ’Mama, I don’t need to punch things!’ Well GUESS WHAT, dumpling! Now you need to punch things!"

"I-I don’t need to punch things. I need to... demonstrate proficiency."

"That’s punching things with extra steps!"

[It is absolutely not punching things with extra steps.]

"Will you help me train?"

Brynn’s grin got even wider, which was impressive given that it already took up most of her face.

"I have been waiting for you to ask me that for thirteen years."

"Please don’t cry."

"I’m not crying."

She was absolutely crying. One fat tear was already rolling down her red cheek and she was pretending it was sweat, which was unconvincing because her lip was also trembling and she kept blinking too fast.

"Same time tomorrow morning," Brynn said, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "We’re starting with the basics. Full program."

"Fine."

"I love you, dumpling."

"I love you too."

Brynn disappeared from the window. Katarina could hear her walking across the yard, and then, faintly, Brynn telling Seris the news, followed by a muffled cheer.

She went looking for Vessa after closing up the study.

Vessa was in the bath, neck-deep in the hot spring with her eyes closed and her dark hair fanning out in the water behind her.

Katarina pulled her tunic over her head and climbed in. The water was perfect and the heat sank into muscles she hadn’t realized were so tight. She waded across and Vessa opened one eye.

"How’s the Pavona research going?"

"I need to attend the Compasso Accademia."

"Oh, the big fancy school?"

"The big fancy school."

Vessa opened both eyes.

"You’ll get in."

[Vote of confidence, huh? Just like that?]

Vessa kissed her. Wet and warm and tasting faintly of the plum wine she’d been drinking earlier. Her hand found Katarina’s waist under the water and pulled her closer, and every thought Katarina had about the Compasso Accademia left the building.

"We can talk about it more tomorrow," Vessa said against her mouth. "Right now I've been in this bath for an hour waiting for you to finish working."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Kat. I am naked, in a bath, at ten at night. What exactly did you think I was doing?"

[Fair point.]

Katarina stopped talking.

Afterward, Vessa was sprawled across Katarina's bed with her hair still damp, one leg thrown over Katarina's.

[Black Lotus Sect. Full profile,] she directed the Ledger.

Black Lotus Sect:

Affiliation: Human cultivation order, central kingdoms.

Rank: Mid-tier (rising).

Focus: Elemental cultivation (fire and earth specialization).

Commercial activity: Growing. Recent expansion into commodity trading, specifically cultivation materials and formation components.

Political alignment: Neutral, pragmatic.

Notes: Increasing presence in southern trade districts suggests commercial ambitions beyond their traditional territory. Sect leadership is consolidating resources.

[Mid-tier cultivation sect pivoting into commerce. They were at my festival and they were looking at my trade route and they're expanding south. Not a threat yet. Worth watching.]

Vessa poked her in the ribs.

"Plan tomorrow. Sleep now."

She closed her eyes.

Chapter 30: Wanting

Brynn's training regimen was a work of art. Three phases, precisely structured, with progressions mapped out week by week in handwriting so careful it was obvious she'd spent hours on it.

Morning: body cultivation. Qi circulation drills, physical conditioning, meridian reinforcement. Two hours.

Afternoon: elemental drills. Cycling through all four paths with emphasis on combat-applicable techniques. Three hours.

Evening: meditation. Deep qi consolidation, spiritual awareness, breath work. One hour.

Katarina lasted exactly one day on Brynn's schedule before she rewrote it.

"What is this?"

Brynn was holding Katarina's revised schedule. Her yellow eyes moved across the page with the expression of someone reading their own autopsy report.

"I optimized it."

"You cut my morning session in half."

"Your morning session had forty minutes of warm-up exercises that don't contribute to measurable qi throughput. I moved the useful drills to the front, compressed the conditioning block, and freed up an hour for Artisan path work, which the Accademia actually tests."

"The warm-ups are important, Katarina! They prepare your body for—"

"They prepare my body for standing in a yard doing arm circles. I can prepare my body by doing the actual exercises."

Brynn looked at the schedule, then at Katarina, then at the schedule again.

"You're doing my warm-ups."

"I'm doing ten minutes of your warm-ups."

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

"TWENTY, Katarina!"

"Fine. Twenty. But I'm cutting the cool-down."

The training itself went better than expected. Mostly.

Brynn started her on elemental cycling, which meant pulling qi through each of the four paths in sequence and maintaining a stable output. Katarina's All-Path affinity made the cycling easy. Too easy, apparently, because Brynn kept adding complexity and Katarina kept absorbing it and Brynn kept looking like she couldn't decide whether to be proud or annoyed.

The problem came during the combat drills.

Brynn had set up three practice dummies in the yard. Standard training equipment, wooden frames with padded striking surfaces. Katarina was supposed to use elemental qi to strike them in sequence, demonstrating control, power, and transition speed between paths.

She struck the first dummy with a pulse of fire qi and the padding scorched.

She struck the second with earth qi. The base cracked. Brynn nodded.

She turned to the third dummy and her Artisan instincts kicked in before she could stop them. Instead of striking it, she channeled qi into the wooden frame and reinforced the internal structure, then adjusted the joint angles so the dummy's arms shifted into a guard position.

She'd modified the practice dummy mid-drill without thinking about it.

Brynn stared at the dummy, which was now standing in a defensive stance it had not been designed to hold.

"Did you just... enchant my training dummy?"

"I improved its structural integrity and repositioned its limbs for a more realistic guard simulation."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT THE DRILL IS FOR!"

"But it's a better dummy now."

"You're supposed to be STRUGGLING, Katarina! The point of the drill is to push your limits, not to... not to RENOVATE the equipment!"

[In fairness, the dummy's guard position is much more useful for practicing targeted strikes.]

Brynn did not see it that way. She took the modified dummy, looked at it for a long moment, and then set it aside, brought out a fourth dummy, and told Katarina to hit it without "doing anything weird to it."

Katarina hit it. She did not do anything weird to it. But she thought about doing something weird to it the entire time.

By the end of the afternoon, Brynn was grudgingly impressed and loudly frustrated, which was her default when it came to Katarina's cultivation. Her daughter had the raw talent to be extraordinary and the personality to make it as irritating as possible.

"Same time tomorrow," Brynn said, cracking her knuckles. "And if you enchant another dummy I'm making you run laps."

"Laps aren't in the optimized schedule."

"KATARINA!"

The outdoor spring was at the base of the canyon, a different spot from the bath inside the estate. It was rougher, wilder, open to the sky. Katarina came out here when she needed her brain to shut up, which was rare, because her brain considered shutting up a personal failure.

She was shoulder-deep in the water with her eyes closed when she heard footsteps on the stone.

Seris slipped in without a word. The water shifted around them and they sat in silence for a while.

Katarina kept her eyes closed, but she was aware of Seris next to her. She was always aware of Seris. Her mother had the kind of body that didn't stop being noticeable just because you'd seen it a thousand times. The Valdari had not been designed with subtlety in mind.

"Why Pavona?" Seris asked.

Katarina opened her eyes. Seris had her head tilted back against the rock, looking up at the sky.

"You know why. The Consortium Summit is the biggest stage in Valdari commerce. The Accademia credential opens doors we can't reach from here. Our reputation is climbing but it's still regional, and if I want to build trade relationships beyond the southeastern district—"

"You sound like you're pitching an investor."

Katarina stopped.

"That's the smart answer," Seris said. "And it's a good one. I'm not saying it's wrong." She turned her head. "But I've watched you work since you were four years old, piccola. You've always had the smart answer. I'm asking why you want it. Not why it's useful."

Katarina looked at her hands under the water.

Vivienne Ross had never once said "I want this" without immediately following it with a business case. Every ambition dressed up as strategy. Every desire reframed as necessity. She died under a fluorescent light that nobody turned off.

She didn't say any of that.

Seris leaned over and pulled her into a hug, which got Katarina out of her thoughts.

"It was a trick question. You don't have to justify wanting something, darling. That's the whole point of being Valdari."

She said it simply, like it was obvious, and Katarina felt it land somewhere deep and didn't flinch away from it for once.

[... Is that so?]

They sat in the hot spring until the first stars came through above the canyon rim. Seris refilled her wine from a bottle she'd apparently brought with her, because Seris never went anywhere without wine, and they shared it in silence while the sky went dark.

[I want to go to Pavona. I want the credential. I want to walk into that Summit and have every Signora in the room know my name.]

She took a sip of wine.