CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 31: Fencing

The letter to Stellara was three sentences long.

Katarina had drafted it in twelve minutes and spent two hours editing it down from a page and a half, because the first version had too much justification and not enough confidence, and people like Stellara Brevaine could smell insecurity the way sharks smelled blood.

The reply came in two days: dinner at the Brevaine estate, Saturday evening, formal.

"Formal means I have to wear something nice, doesn't it," Katarina said.

"Formal means you have to wear something expensive," Seris corrected, already pulling dresses from the wardrobe.

She held up a deep violet dress with a neckline that would show half of Katarina's chest and most of her back.

"This one."

"That's not a dress, that's a suggestion of a dress."

"Exactly." Seris draped it against Katarina's shoulders and stepped back to admire the result with the critical eye of a woman who considered getting dressed a martial art. "Stellara respects competence. She'll listen to your words. But she'll remember how you looked saying them."

[She's not wrong. Vivienne Ross closed three deals in a charcoal Arm*ni suit that cost four thousand dollars. Presentation is leverage.]

She wore the dress.

The Brevaine estate was forty miles up the coast and it made the Montecardi property look like a garden shed.

Katarina had been here twice before for partnership meetings, but it hit different when you arrived at the front gate in the evening with the whole place lit up. The main house was three stories of pale stone with a courtyard wide enough to stage a military parade

and vineyards behind the property that stretched to the horizon in rows so straight they looked surveyed by a mathematician.

[Our estate is rated C-plus. This is an A-plus. Possibly an S. I don't even know if S exists in the rating system but if it does, this is it.] She narrowed her eyes. [This is what I'm working towards.]

A steward led them through the main hall to a dining room that seated thirty.

Tonight it was set for four. Stellara, her trade advisor, Katarina, and Vessa, whom Katarina had brought because Vessa's instincts for people were better than any Ledger profile and because Katarina liked having someone in the room who was unambiguously on her side.

Stellara was already seated.

She stood when they entered. She was tall and composed, dark green skin against a cream-colored gown that draped off one shoulder and showed the full line of her collarbone down to the top of her chest. Her silver horns were polished and her yellow eyes found Katarina immediately, warm and pleased and already calculating.

"Signora Montecardi. You look wonderful." Her gaze dropped to the dress for exactly half a second. "Please, sit."

[She noticed the dress. Good.]

The food was incredible. Four courses, each one better than the last. Stellara talked about the district, about trade, about the festival, which she praised in specific and genuine terms that told Katarina she'd actually paid attention to the details.

She was gracious and complimentary. She asked about Brynn's security work on the Greypass with real interest and about Seris's health with what sounded like real concern.

And none of it was free.

Katarina had sat across tables from people like Stellara her entire previous life. Executives who'd smile at you over an appetizer and restructure your department over the main course. The warmth was real. Stellara genuinely enjoyed Katarina's company. It was also strategic, and would evaporate the instant the partnership stopped being profitable.

[She is not my friend. She is my business partner. Those are different things and I need to remember the difference or she'll eat me alive.]

"The Consortium Summit should be interesting this year," Stellara said between courses. "There are rumors the northern delegations are pushing for revised tariff standards."

"Revised how?"

"Upward. The Aevari want to price human goods out of the northern markets. The humans want reciprocal access. Same argument they've been having for fifty years, but the numbers are shifting."

"And the Valdari position?"

Stellara smiled.

"Depends on who you ask. The old houses want stability. The younger ones want expansion." She took a sip of wine. "Where do you fall, Signora?"

[She's probing. She wants to know my long-term play without asking for it directly.]

"I'm interested in what benefits Montecardi."

"Of course. But Montecardi's interests are growing. A year ago, that meant the southeastern district. Now you're looking at Pavona." Stellara tilted her head. "Where does it stop?"

[It doesn't.]

"It stops where the returns stop being worth the risk."

Stellara held her gaze for a beat and then smoothly changed the subject, because she'd gotten exactly the information she wanted. Katarina wasn't sure what she'd given away, which was annoying, because she was usually the one reading the room.

Dessert arrived. Vessa ate two servings of it while Katarina pushed hers around with a fork and waited for the real conversation to start.

"About the endorsement," Katarina said.

"Ah." Stellara set down her glass. "Yes. The Compasso Accademia. An excellent choice. You'd do well there."

"I appreciate that. I'm hoping you'd be willing to write a letter of endorsement on behalf of House Brevaine."

"I would."

[That was too easy.]

"However."

[There it is.]

Stellara folded her hands on the table.

"I recently acquired rights to a warehouse district in Coppara. Small port town, two days south. Good location, underutilized infrastructure. The acquisition was clean. The local merchants, however, are less than thrilled about an outside house controlling their storage capacity."

"They're stonewalling you."

"Aggressively. They've formed an informal coalition. They're refusing to sign lease agreements, routing goods through private storage to avoid my facilities, and they've sent two petitions to the district authority claiming I'm monopolizing essential infrastructure." Stellara said all of this without a trace of frustration. "I need them to cooperate. Voluntarily."

"And you want me to make that happen."

"I want you to negotiate them into compliance."

Katarina looked at her.

"You have a full trade staff. Why me?"

"Because if I do it, they'll resent me. They already do. An outside Signora strong-arming local merchants into leasing warehouses they don't want to lease. The coalition holds, the resentment grows, and I spend the next three years fighting passive resistance." She paused. "If you do it, they'll think they chose it."

[She wants me to be the friendly face on her hostile acquisition. Except she's right. If I reframe the deal so the locals see benefit instead of coercion, the compliance sticks. It's not manipulation. It's alignment of incentives.] She looked away. [It's also definitely manipulation.]

"The endorsement letter," Katarina said. "Written, sealed, and delivered to my estate before I leave for Coppara. Non-conditional."

Stellara raised an eyebrow.

"Before?"

"Before. The letter isn't payment for the job, Stellara. It's your professional assessment of my qualifications, which you already have enough information to write. Coppara is a separate favor between partners."

The room went quiet for a second. Stellara's trade advisor, who had been silent the entire meal, looked up from her ledger.

Stellara studied Katarina for a long moment and then smiled, just barely.

"You really are quite good at this."

"Thank you. Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal."

They shook hands over dessert.

The carriage ride home was dark and quiet. The coastal road wound through hills and the wheels rattled over packed earth.

Vessa had kicked off her shoes and was leaning against Katarina's shoulder with her legs across the seat. Her dress had ridden up to mid-thigh and she hadn't bothered fixing it, because Vessa didn't bother with things like that, which Katarina appreciated for reasons that were not entirely romantic.

"She's using you," Vessa said.

"Skillfully, though."

"Does that make it better?"

"It makes it interesting." Katarina watched the hills through the window. "She could have just said no. Or asked for something I couldn't give. Instead she found the exact task that benefits her and teaches me at the same time. She wants me to succeed at Pavona. A Compasso-credentialed partner is worth more than an unaccredited one."

"So she's investing in you."

"She's investing in the partnership. I just happen to be the asset."

Vessa was quiet for a moment. Then she shifted, swung one leg over Katarina's lap, and settled there facing her in the dark carriage.

"I don't like her," Vessa said, from significantly closer than before.

"You'd be a fool to."

Vessa kissed her. It was slow and deliberate and tasted like the honey dessert she'd had two servings of. Her weight settled into Katarina's lap, warm and grounding, and Katarina's hands found her thighs where the dress had ridden up and there was nothing underneath it.

"Coppara first," Katarina said against her mouth. "Then Pavona."

"Mm. After."

"After what?"

Vessa rolled her hips.

"After."

[After. Yes. Good. Coppara can wait.]

Coppara waited.

Chapter 32: Ground Level

Katarina had lived in Vellasera for seventeen years and she did not know where the tea house was.

That realization came at roughly ten in the morning, standing at the harbor market with no agenda for the first time she could remember, watching a woman haggle over the price of squid with an intensity that would have been appropriate for a hostage negotiation.

She hadn't come here for any reason. No meetings, no vendor assessments, no quarterly check-ins. She'd woken up, looked at her planning notes for Coppara, and thought: I'm about to negotiate a port town into compliance and I've never spent an unstructured afternoon in my own port town.

So she'd put the notes down and walked out the front door.

The harbor market was loud in a way that Katarina usually filtered out. Vendors called prices over each other, carts clattered between stalls, and somewhere behind the fish stands a group of kids were playing a game that involved throwing rocks at a tin can and screaming every time someone missed.

Katarina walked through the middle of it at half her normal pace, which felt physically uncomfortable, like her legs were waiting for her brain to assign them a destination.

[I don't know how to walk slowly. I'm seventeen years old in my second life and I don't know how to take a walk.]

A woman carrying a basket of pomegranates on one hip bumped past her, topless, tan skin and a stomach you could wash clothes on, and didn't even glance back. Two stalls down, a fishmonger was leaning over her counter to make change for a customer and her tits were basically resting on the fish display and nobody cared.

Nobody ever cared.

[Vivienne Ross would have had a stroke. Katarina Montecardi, meanwhile, is handling it with grace and dignity.]

She was staring. She felt her dick stir and immediately ceased staring.

[Grace and dignity!!!]

She stopped at a dye stall near the fountain. The woman behind the counter was old, properly old, with deep brown skin and horns that had gone grey at the tips and hands stained permanently in shades of indigo and saffron.

"Signora! Buying today?"

"Just looking." Katarina picked up a swatch of deep purple fabric. "This is good work."

"Should be. I've been doing it for fifty years." The woman leaned forward on her stool. "You look like your mother, you know. Seris. Same eyes."

"You know my mother?"

"Taught her how to braid, didn't I? She showed up here twenty-odd years ago with hair down to her waist and no idea what to do with it. Sat right there on that step and I showed her a three-strand plait and she did it perfect on the first try, because your mother's good at everything she touches." The woman grinned. "She still does the same braid. Never changed it."

[Seventeen years and I didn't know where my mother learned to braid her hair.]

Katarina thanked her and moved on.

The fishermen's dock was at the south end of the harbor. Katarina had been there exactly twice, both times to review tariff documentation with the dock master. She'd never noticed the lottery.

"Been running forty years," the dock master told her. She was leaning against a post she'd clearly been leaning against for most of those forty years. "Best slots go to whoever draws the short rope on the first of the month. Keeps it fair. Doesn't matter if you've got a big boat or a little one, everyone gets the same chance."

"Who set it up?"

"My grandmother. She got tired of the big boats pushing the little boats out, so she started the draw and told everyone that's how it was going to be. Nobody argued because nobody argues with my grandmother."

"She sounds smart."

"She was terrifying. Different thing."

[A self-regulating allocation system maintained by social pressure rather than enforcement. Forty years, no administration costs, no oversight, and I had no idea it existed because I never walked down here without an agenda.]

The textile quarter was three streets behind the market.

Katarina had approved supply contracts for the weavers there but she'd never watched them work. The looms clattered in a rhythm that sounded almost musical, and the women operating them talked over the noise with the volume and speed of people who'd been having the same conversations in the same room for years.

One of them recognized Katarina and waved.

"Signora! Come see the new pattern!"

Katarina went and saw the new pattern. It was a geometric design in blue and gold that the weaver had been developing for three months, and she talked about thread counts and tension ratios with a technical fluency that reminded Katarina of Ottavia talking about salt, except this woman was actually good at her job. Expertise that lived in the hands and the voice and had never been written down anywhere.

[None of this is in my data. The Ledger tracks revenue and output and contract terms. It doesn't track the woman who taught my mother to braid or the lottery that's been keeping the dock fair for forty years or the weaver who spent three months perfecting a pattern because she wanted to.]

The tea house was down an alley between the textile quarter and the old chandler's shop. There was no sign. The doorway was a bead curtain and the interior was four tables and a counter and a woman who made tea without asking what you wanted because she already knew.

"How did I not know this was here?" Katarina said.

Vessa slid into the chair across from her and grinned.

"Because you've never turned down that alley. You always cut through the market when you go between the textile quarter and the harbor because it's eleven seconds faster."

[... She's right. I timed it once. I timed my walking routes through my own town for efficiency.]

The tea was good. Two women at the next table were arguing about whose daughter was a better singer. Katarina sat and listened and didn't take notes.

"Wow," Vessa said. "Look at you."

"What?"

"You're finally doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Living here."

Katarina looked at her tea, then at the room, then at Vessa, who was smiling like she'd been waiting for this particular afternoon for a very long time.

"I suppose I am." Katarina said. "You know what Vellasera needs?"

"Oh no."

"Plumbing."

"You were doing so well!"

"No, listen. I walked past the drains on the harbor road. They empty into the bay, Vessa. When it rains, raw sewage goes directly into the water that people swim in. That's—"

"You went on a walk to relax and came back with a civil engineering project."

"I came back with an IDEA for a civil engineering project. The project comes later."

Vessa squeezed her hand, leaned back in her chair, and laughed.

"You are the weirdest person I have ever met."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"I'm choosing to take it as one."

That night, Katarina sat at her desk and did not open the Ledger.

She pulled out a fresh stack of paper and started sketching. The toilet design was there, refined and ready for production, but it was only the beginning. She'd known that for months. She'd just been waiting until she understood what she actually wanted to build.

Sewage lines first. Clay pipe networks running beneath the main streets, connecting to a central drainage channel that followed the canyon's natural grade down to a treatment point south of the port. Gravity-fed. No pumps, no moving parts, no cultivation energy required for the basic flow.

Water purification was next. Vessa's formation work was the key. A standard preservation array, modified to target biological contaminants instead of spoilage, installed at the intake point of the town's main well. Clean water, continuously filtered, using the same formation principles that kept food fresh on month-long trade routes.

Public bathhouses. Three of them, spaced across the town, fed by the purified water system. A town that celebrated desire and abundance should probably have places where people could bathe in clean water instead of the bay.

She sketched for hours.

Pipe diameters, junction points, formation array placements, cost estimates based on materials she already had contracts for. A phased rollout plan that started with the estate and expanded to the port quarter and then the residential districts.

[This is bigger than the Accademia. This is bigger than the Summit. Nobody on this continent knows what a sewer system is. Nobody knows what water purification can do at scale. Nobody has six hundred years of engineering history sitting in their head waiting to be adapted.]

She looked at the sketches spread across her desk. Seventeen pages. A sanitation infrastructure proposal for a town of two thousand, expandable to any settlement with elevation and water access.

[The Accademia credential gets me in the door. The trade routes pay the bills. But this is what I'm actually building. This is the thing that lasts.]

Chapter 33: Infrastructure*

"I want to build a sewer system."

Brynn’s spoon stopped halfway to her mouth. Seris set down her wine glass, which at breakfast was filled with juice, technically, though Katarina had her suspicions.

"A what?" Brynn said.

"A sewage and water purification network for Vellasera. Underground pipes, gravity-fed drainage, formation-powered water filtration, and public bathhouses connected to a clean supply."

Katarina laid the proposal on the breakfast table between the toast and the fruit bowl. Seventeen pages of diagrams, cost projections, and phased rollout plans, arranged in order (because she wasn’t an animal).

Brynn looked at the first page, then the second, then back at the first. Katarina knew that face. It was the one Brynn wore when she needed a running start to catch up to whatever Katarina had just said.

"So... fancy toilets. For the whole town?"

"It’s significantly more than fancy toilets, Mother."

"But there are toilets."

"... There are toilets."

Brynn nodded slowly, like she’d found the part she could hold onto and was going to grip it with both hands.

Seris pulled the cost projection page toward her and read it properly, line by line, and Katarina watched her mother’s eyes move across the numbers with careful attention. A decade ago, those numbers would have gotten a wine stain on them. Now Seris actually read them.

"The materials are reasonable," Seris said. "You’ve got existing contracts for the clay. The resin compound is Dalla’s supplier?"

"Modified version. She can produce it at scale."

"Labor?"

"Local. I’d hire from Vellasera. The pipe laying", Brynn muttered, "hehe, pipe laying", but Katarina just kept going, "is manual work, no cultivation required. Twenty workers for the main trunk line, another ten for the residential branches."

"And the formation arrays for the water purification?"

[Good on you, Mom. Asking the right questions. One gold star for Seris Montecardi!]

"That's where it gets interesting. The purification arrays need a formation specialist who understands preservation work well enough to modify the standard parameters. Instead of targeting food spoilage, the arrays target biological contaminants in water. Same principle, different application."

"And you have someone in mind."

"I have someone in mind."

Vessa lit up like a bonfire.

"You want me to design the purification arrays?"

"Yeah. Take a look. What do you think?"

"Hm, this is..." Vessa grabbed the technical drawings from the desk and spread them across the floor, dropping to her knees to get closer.

"Can you build it?"

She nodded.

"I can prototype it by next week. The array itself isn't complicated. It's elegant, actually. The hard part is scaling it. A single-point filter works fine for a well, but if you want continuous purification across a pipe network, I need relay arrays at junction points to maintain the field strength over distance."

"How many junctions?"

Vessa pulled the town map out of the pile and started marking points with a charcoal pencil.

"If the main trunk line follows the canyon grade... here, here, and here. Three relay points for the port quarter. Two more for the residential district if you extend it in phase two."

"Cost per relay?"

"Materials? Maybe four silver per array. My time is free."

"Your time is not free. I'm paying you."

"Kat, I'm your girlfriend."

Kat narrowed her eyes.

She walked up and took Vessa’s chin with her hand, making her look all the way up from where she sat. Smiling, she said:

"And I’m your Signora, and Signoras pay their contractors because that’s how you build infrastructure that outlasts relationships." She paused. "Not that ours is going anywhere. But the principle matters."

Vessa looked at her, half amused and half embarrassed.

"Fine. Pay me."

They spent the afternoon on the floor of Katarina’s study surrounded by diagrams.

The town map was in the center with pipe routes sketched in red charcoal, formation array schematics to the left, cost projections to the right. Vessa was close enough that their shoulders touched over the drawings, and Katarina was increasingly aware of the cedar oil in her hair and the warmth coming off her skin.

Vessa’s hair kept falling into Katarina’s face. Every time Katarina pushed it back Vessa would lean in a little closer on purpose (damn brat), and the diagrams were getting harder to focus on.

"This junction here needs a wider bore," Katarina said, pointing at the map. "The flow rate from the upper canyon is going to be—"

Vessa’s tongue traced the edge of her ear.

"H-Hey! We’re working," Katarina said, and her voice did not come out as firm as she’d intended.

"Mhm." Vessa’s mouth moved down to her neck. "Keep talking about flow rates. It’s doing it for me."

"That’s... that can’t possibly be true."

"You have no idea what does it for me, Signora."

[I actually do, because I’ve been keeping a mental catalog for four years, and engineering terminology is not on the list. But her mouth is on my neck and her hand is on my thigh and I’m losing this argument.]

She lost the argument.

Vessa pushed her onto her back on top of the Vellasera town map.

Katarina grabbed her hips, pulled her down, and they kissed hard, Vessa's hands already pulling at Katarina's shirt while Katarina fumbled with the tie on Vessa's trousers.

Vessa got Katarina's cock out and stroked it and Katarina was embarrassingly hard already, had been for the last twenty minutes if she was being honest, because watching Vessa talk about formation resonance frequencies while leaning over a blueprint did things to her that she was not prepared to examine.

"Inside me," Vessa said against her mouth, and Katarina didn't need to be told twice.

She pulled Vessa's trousers down to her thighs and Vessa straddled her and sank down onto her cock and the noise she made would have been audible in the hallway if anyone had been listening.

Katarina grabbed her hips and thrust up into her and Vessa braced herself on Katarina's chest and rode her, and underneath Katarina's back was a pipe schematic and to her left was a formation array diagram and the corner of the cost projection was crumpling under her shoulder and she didn't care about any of it because Vessa's pussy was tight and hot and wet around her cock and Vessa's tits were bouncing with every roll of her hips and this was, objectively, the best work session Katarina had ever had.

They came together, which didn't happen often, Vessa grinding down hard and clenching around her while Katarina buried herself deep and spilled inside her, and for about thirty seconds the only sound in the study was heavy breathing and the distant clatter of Ottavia banging pots in the kitchen.

Katarina lay on the floor. Vessa lay on top of her. The Vellasera town map was ruined.

"I'm going to need to redraw that," Katarina said.

"Worth it."

"Completely worth it." She stared at the ceiling and her brain, which had been wonderfully offline for the past several minutes, clicked back on. "If this works, Vessa, it's not just toilets."

"Mm?"

"Clean water..." She breathed in and out, "means better formation stability across the entire supply chain. Better storage, less spoilage, lower costs on every trade route we operate. Follow that chain far enough and it touches every contract in the district."

Vessa propped herself up on Katarina's chest and looked down at her.

"You don’t need to connect sewage to trade margins while I’m still on top of you."

"Everything is connected to trade margins."

"You’re insane."

"And if I can demonstrate this at the Accademia, a working sanitation system with formation-integrated water purification, that’s not just a portfolio piece. That’s a thesis. Nobody on this continent has done infrastructure-scale formation deployment before."

She grinned.

"The Compasso portfolio writes itself."

[Two birds, one pipe system.]

Chapter 34: Dirt

The crew was eight women from Vellasera, hired at fair daily rates with a lunch stipend that Katarina had budgeted for and Ottavia had taken personal control of, which meant the lunches were too salty but nobody complained because free food was free food.

Anyway, they started digging on a Monday.

The test trench ran three hundred feet along the lower edge of the Montecardi property, following the natural grade toward the canyon drainage point.

Clay soil, mostly, with a gravel layer about two feet down that was going to make pipe bedding easier than Katarina had projected. She revised the timeline in her head and saved half a day.

Brynn, naturally, had volunteered.

Well, "volunteered" was being generous. No, Brynn had heard the words "digging crew" at breakfast and had been in the yard with a shovel before Katarina finished her tea. She was currently three feet deep in the trench, moving dirt so fast the hired crew looked like they were working in slow motion, and she was having the time of her life.

"TWENTY-SIX!" Brynn yelled, hurling another shovelful onto the growing pile.

"What’s twenty-six?" one of the crew asked.

"Shovelfuls per minute! That’s a new record! I was only doing twenty-three yesterday!"

"Mother, nobody is counting your shovelfuls."

"I’M counting my shovelfuls!"

[She is genuinely happier right now than most days. I guess in a way, this is peak Brynn: covered in dirt, competing with herself, surrounded by people she can yell "victory" at.]

Katarina stood at the edge of the trench with her arms crossed, overseeing, which was the word she used instead of "watching Brynn dig while pretending to be useful." In fairness, she was also training!

Brynn’s compromise. If Katarina was going to stand around supervising instead of digging, she was going to practice elemental manipulation while she did it.

So Katarina pulled qi through her earth path and moved soil. Small amounts, directed pushes that cleared loose dirt from the trench floor and packed it against the walls for stability.

It was slow, imprecise, and about a tenth as effective as Brynn with a shovel, but it was genuine cultivation practice applied to a real task, and Katarina’s brain liked it better than hitting dummies because the dirt actually went somewhere useful.

"Better!" Brynn called from the trench, not looking up. "Your compaction is still uneven but the directional control is improving!"

"Thank you."

"TWENTY-SEVEN!"

By midday, the test trench was done.

Three hundred feet of clean channel, graded properly, ready for pipe sections. Katarina walked the length of it, checked the depth at six points, and found it consistent to within an inch. That was mostly Brynn’s doing, but Katarina was going to take partial credit anyway.

She was reviewing the pipe installation schedule with Renata when Enza came jogging up from the estate road.

"Signora, there’s someone at the gate. An elder from the village. She’s, ah..." Enza paused. "She’s upset."

Giatta Morese was roughly seventy years old, had the posture of a woman who’d spent her life refusing to bend for anyone, and was currently standing at the Montecardi gate looking ready to bite through stone. She had clearly been ignored for a while and was done with it.

"You’re digging near the ridge."

"Good afternoon, Signora Morese. We’re installing a—"

"You’re digging. Near the ridge. The vineyard ridge."

[Okay. She’s not here for a technical briefing, is she?]

Katarina’s first instinct, the Vivienne Ross instinct, the one sharpened by thirty-two years of corporate rationalism, said: this woman is upset about dirt. Dirt does not have feelings. Explain the project, address the concern, move on.

Her second instinct, the one she’d been growing for the past few weeks, the one that had sat in a tea house and listened to people talk about things that didn’t show up on balance sheets, said: she walked here from the village to say this to your face. That means it matters.

"Come inside," Katarina said. "I’ll put tea on."

Giatta looked at her for a long moment, recalibrating. She’d come ready for a fight. Tea was not a fight.

"Fine."

They sat in the study. Katarina poured tea and waited, because Giatta had things to say and the fastest way to hear them was to shut up.

"The vineyard ridge is blessed ground," Giatta said. "The harvest spirit has lived in that soil since before my grandmother’s grandmothers. Every good wine season we’ve had, every year the vines come in strong, that’s the spirit’s doing. You dig into that ridge and you disturb it, and the wine turns, and then what? You’ve got your pipes and we’ve got bad vintages for a decade."

Yeah, Kat’s CEO brain was screaming "THAT’S NOT HOW SOIL WORKS", but her brain also didn’t know about the dock lottery or the dye woman who taught her mom how to braid, so, reluctantly, Katarina told her CEO brain to sit this one out.

"Tell me about the spirit," Katarina said.

Giatta narrowed her eyes, checking for mockery. She didn’t find any, because Katarina wasn’t mocking her. She was asking.

The story was old. Generations old. The harvest spirit lived in the ridge soil, blessed the vines, and would leave if you dug too deep or moved too much earth. The blessings would

go with it. Every family in Vellasera knew the story. The vineyard workers left offerings at the ridge base during planting season, small things like a cup of wine, a ribbon, a coin.

"Has anyone ever dug into the ridge?" Katarina asked.

"Once. Forty years ago. Vanna Ferini tried to extend her root cellar into the ridge base. She hit something hard about four feet down, her shovel sparked, and her arm went numb for a week."

[Her shovel sparked... Wait, her shovel SPARKED?]

"Sparked how?"

"Blue light. Like lightning but small. Vanna said it felt like the ground bit her."

Katarina set her tea down very carefully.

[Ah, that's not a harvest spirit. That's a formation array. There's a buried formation array in the vineyard ridge that nobody remembers planting, and it's been active long enough to pass into local folklore as a blessing spirit.]

Katarina considered it for a moment.

She could tell the woman. "Hey, Santa isn't real." She absolutely could.

Or...

"Signora Morese, I'm going to reroute the pipe network away from the ridge entirely. The trench line will curve south below the lower terrace instead."

Giatta blinked.

"You will?"

"I will. The ridge soil matters to this community and I'm not going to dig through it." She paused. "But I'd like to survey the area, if you'll allow it. Carefully. No digging. I just want to understand what's in the ground."

"Why?"

"Because I think there might be something very old and very valuable buried in that ridge, and whatever it is, it's been protecting your vines. I'd like to make sure it keeps doing that."

Giatta studied her for a long time. Then she drank her tea.

"Survey it. But if I see a shovel near that ridge, Signora, I'm coming back, and I won't be drinking tea."

"Understood."

Giatta left. Katarina sat in the study and pulled up the Ledger.

[Ancient formation array, vineyard ridge, approximate depth four feet. What can you tell me?]

Buried formation detected (unverified).

Type: Unknown. Likely agricultural enhancement or soil conditioning.

Age: Estimated 100-300 years based on folklore timeline.

Status: Active (sustained ambient output consistent with "blessing" reports).

Risk assessment: Disruption could destabilize local terroir. Reroute recommended.

[Already done.]

She closed the Ledger and added a line to her project notes: Survey for buried formations BEFORE digging next time. She underlined it twice.

The reroute cost an extra day of labor and twelve additional silver marks. It added a curve to the pipe network that made the schematic slightly less elegant, and Katarina's engineering brain itched every time she looked at it.

But, it was worth it.

Seris was on the terrace when Katarina came out for evening air, wine glass in hand, watching the sun drop behind the vineyard ridge. She was quiet. And Seris only ever got quiet when she was either trying to look cool, or thinking about things Katarina didn't talk about.

"I saw you with Giatta."

Katarina sighed.

"She had a legitimate concern," Kat replied. "She had a superstition based on a buried formation array that's been conditioning the vineyard soil for at least a century. The concern was legitimate. The framing was just... cultural."

Seris swirled her wine.

"You know, five years ago, my daughter would have shown that woman a spreadsheet and told her the harvest spirit wasn't real."

Katarina smirked.

"Five years ago, your daughter would have been right. Sounds like a smart lady."

"She absolutely would have been correct. That's a different thing." Seris took a sip. "Still, you made her feel heard, piccola. You invited her to tea, you listened, and then you changed your plans. I'm happy you tried doing things differently this time."

"... I wanted to show her a spreadsheet," Katarina admitted. "Very badly."

Seris cackled.

Chapter 35: Clean Water

The water that went into the array was brown. The water that came out was clear.

Katarina held the glass up to the light and looked through it. No sediment, no cloudiness, no smell. She'd pulled this water from the drainage canal behind the vineyard, which was roughly the color and consistency of swamp runoff, and Vessa's formation array had stripped it clean in under ten seconds.

"It works," Katarina said.

"It works!" Vessa was on her knees next to the array, hands still glowing faintly with residual qi, grinning so wide her face looked like it might split. "Kat, look at the throughput. I estimated six liters per minute and it's doing almost nine. The resonance frequency I picked is more efficient than I thought."

Katarina drank the water.

"Kat!"

"What? We're purifying this stuff. Someone has to test it and what better way than that?"

"You could have let me check the mineral retention levels first!"

Katarina shrugged, though in the back of her mind, she did agree. Still, seeing Vessa thrown off for once was more than enough reason to mess with her.

Setting that aside, however, she focused on the taste lingering on her tongue.

"It tastes fine," she declared triumphantly. Actually, it tasted better than fine. It tasted like nothing, which was what clean water was supposed to taste like. Katarina had been drinking well water with a faint mineral tang for seventeen years without realizing there was an alternative.

[Nine liters per minute from a single array point. Five relay junctions across the town network means forty-five liters per minute continuous purification. That's enough for Vellasera's entire daily consumption with capacity to spare. We're making miracles out here.]

"You're doing math in your head," Vessa said.

"I'm always doing math in my head. That's hardly novel."

"I know. Your left eye twitches when you do it."

"It does not."

"It absolutely does. You've been doing it since we were twelve."

[She has to be wrong. My eye does not twitch.]

"Anyway," Katarina said, setting the glass down, "I need to start compiling the portfolio for Compasso. The purification system is the centerpiece, but the admissions board wants breadth. Multiple achievements across different domains."

"What could you be missing? I mean, you've got the trade routes, the Brevaine partnership, the festival, and now this." Vessa ticked them off on her fingers. "That's four major accomplishments in four years. Five if you count the toilet."

"The toilet is part of the sanitation system. It doesn't count as a mercantile achievement. Even if it is extraordinary."

"It should. It's a really good system."

Katarina smirked.

"I appreciate your support for my toilet."

Vessa leaned back against the workbench.

"Eh, I think you're worrying too much. You'll get in, Kat." She sighed contentedly, like nothing could possibly go wrong anytime soon. "You negotiated a partnership with the most powerful house in the district when you were thirteen. You invented plumbing. If the Compasso doesn't take you, they're idiots."

Katarina smiled, but she didn’t let those words get to her.

[She’s biased. She’s my friend and I appreciate her for it, but the Compasso admissions board doesn’t care that my very biased friend thinks I’m brilliant. They care about documented results, institutional endorsements, and cultivation proficiency, the last of which is still my weakest category by a significant margin.]

"I need to be sure," Katarina said. "One more major achievement before I submit. Something that demonstrates strategic capability outside my home district."

"Coppara?"

"Coppara."

The public hot spring at the base of the port town was carved into the coastal rock, fed by the same thermal vents that supplied the Montecardi estate’s outdoor spring but about ten times the size.

Open air, open water, open everything. Thirty or forty Valdari in the water at any given time, most of them naked.

"Are you comfortable, darling?" Seris asked.

"Very," Katarina replied.

Right now, Katarina was shoulder-deep with her back against Seris, and her head resting comfortably between Seris’s giant boobs.

Seris was sitting on the ledge behind her with her legs in the water. Katarina had settled against her chest, because after all this work, she figured she deserved it. Seris’s body was warm, the water was cold, and Seris’s boobs were extremely comfortable resting on her shoulders.

There was no deeper analysis required.

[Judge me all you want. I don’t care. Vivienne Ross would be horrified. Katarina Montecardi is cozy.]

Seris’s fingers worked through Katarina’s wet hair, untangling it absently.

"So, these plumbing designs of yours," Seris said. "Where does an idea like that even come from? I’ve never heard of anything like it."

[Because nobody on this continent has indoor plumbing and I’m working from six centuries of Earth engineering knowledge that I can’t explain without revealing that I’m a reincarnated CEO from another dimension.]

"I’ve been studying fluid dynamics," Katarina said, with a big, smug, smirk on her face. It was technically true in the sense that she had studied fluid dynamics... On Earth. In college. Twenty years ago in a body that no longer existed.

"Fluid dynamics?"

"The movement of liquids through enclosed systems. If you understand how water behaves under gravity and pressure, you can direct it anywhere you want using nothing but elevation changes and sealed channels. No qi required for the basic flow."

"And you just... figured this out? By studying fluids?"

"Mhm. I’m rather observant, don’t you know?"

[Screw it. I reincarnated with my past memories, may as well have some fun with it, no?]

"Mhm." Seris didn’t sound convinced, but she also didn’t push, because Seris had been not-pushing about Katarina’s impossible knowledge base for roughly thirteen years and she wasn’t about to start doing that now. "What else is rattling around in that head of yours?"

"The depths of my intellect would shock even the wisest of sages, I assure you."

Egotistical rambling aside, the plumbing was just the start.

Katarina had notebooks full of ideas she hadn’t shown anyone yet. Concrete, or something close to it, using volcanicite powder and aggregate. A standardized weights and measures system that would make cross-district trade accounting significantly less of a nightmare. Crop rotation patterns that could double vineyard yield over a five-year cycle. A basic printing press, if she could find the right materials for movable type.

Six hundred years of human innovation, sitting in her photographic memory, waiting to be adapted to a world that had qi and formation arrays but had never seen an industrial revolution.

"I have some thoughts about construction materials," Katarina said. "And agricultural scheduling. And standardized measurement. And..." She trailed off. "I have a lot of ideas, Mother."

"Oh, I don’t doubt it." Seris kissed the top of her wet hair. "I just wish I knew where they came from."

[That answer would absolutely shock you.]

Up ahead of them, in the same spring, Brynn had gotten into a conversation with a broad-shouldered woman with dark blue skin that had, at some point in the last few minutes, transitioned from talking to not-talking.

And, before Katarina could even realize what was about to happen, Brynn had the woman pressed against the far edge of the pool and was fucking her with that easy, rolling rhythm she brought to everything, enthusiastic and uncomplicated. The woman had her arms around Brynn's neck with her head tilted back, making noises that carried across the water.

"Wow," Katarina noted. Even the sight of Brynn drilling someone up ahead could not and would not kill her vibe. If anything, it would-

"She likes the quiet ones," Seris noted as well, also watching as her wife fucked a stranger. "She considers them a personal challenge of sorts."

"Does she?" Katarina watched for about two seconds, then forcibly looked back at the sky. "Anyway," she continued, "the sanitation system should be operational within a month. Phase one covers the estate and the port quarter. Phase two extends to the residential district, but that depends on the district authority approving the public works proposal."

"Have you submitted it?"

"Next week. I want Dalla to review the cost projections first."

"Ooh, smart." Seris's fingers kept working through her hair. Up ahead, Brynn's companion was getting louder. "And Coppara? When are you going?"

"Soon. I need to settle the pipe crew's schedule and make sure Vessa's relay arrays are installed before I leave. A week, maybe."

"Take Brynn. She'll want to come."

"I was going to. She's good at making people feel safe, which is useful when I'm about to negotiate them into doing what I want."

Seris laughed.

"Careful. Your mother could just as easily make them feel very unsafe with her size and all."

"Even better. That's a flexible, strategic asset."

Brynn finished, loudly. The blue woman laughed, splashed water at her, Brynn splashed back, and suddenly half the pool was involved in a splash war that Katarina wanted no part of.

She sank back against Seris's chest and closed her eyes.

[Coppara. Stellara's warehouse problem. The last piece before the consortium in Pavona.]

Chapter 36: Coppara

The carriage ride south took two days, which was two days of Brynn talking about her new personal best for shovelfuls per minute, Vessa reading a book on advanced formation theory, and Katarina staring out the window running scenarios for a negotiation she didn't have enough information to plan yet.

Coppara announced itself to the party with the smell of fish and tar about a mile before the buildings came into view.

It was a working port. That was obvious the moment the carriage went over the hill. No terraced vineyards, no canyon views, no charming harbor road with vendors selling fruit. Coppara was docks, warehouses, fishing boats, and the kind of architecture that happened when people built for function and never got around to aesthetics. The buildings were squat, salt-weathered, and packed tight against the waterfront like they were trying to shoulder each other into the sea.

[This is not a town that cares about presentation. This is a town that works... Why do I feel so called out?]

Vivienne Ross would have recognized it instantly. Every industry had a Coppara. The operational hub that did the actual labor while the prettier offices took the credit. You didn't try to charm a place like this. You showed up, proved you understood the work, and didn't waste anyone's time.

They found lodging at a dockside inn that was clean enough and cheap enough. Katarina left Dalla to settle the rooms and went straight to the dockmaster's office.

Rizzi was built like a barrel that someone had given legs and opinions to.

Short, wide, with hands the size of dinner plates and a face weathered by salt air. She was sitting behind a desk covered in shipping manifests when Katarina walked in, and she looked up, already bored.

"Signora Montecardi. Heard you were coming."

"Dockmaster Rizzi. Thank you for seeing me."

"Didn't have much choice. Brevaine's people made it clear you'd be stopping by." She leaned back in her chair. "So. You're here about the warehouses."

"I'm here to talk."

"Talk." She said it like the word tasted stale. "The Brevaine woman bought our storage district out from under us six months ago and now she's sent a girl up the coast to convince us we should be happy about it. That's about the shape of it?"

[Okay... So this is the level we're playing at?]

"I'm not here to convince you of anything. I'm here to understand the situation."

"The situation is simple. Outside money bought local infrastructure. We don't like it. We're not going to lease storage space from a woman who doesn't live here, doesn't fish here, doesn't know the tide schedule, and has never unloaded a cargo net in her life. End of situation."

The other merchants in the room, four of them, all dockworkers or warehouse operators by the look of their hands, nodded along. Rizzi's word was the consensus and the consensus was no.

"I hear you," Katarina said.

"Good. Have a safe trip home."

[She dismissed me. Just like that. Polite enough to not be rude, firm enough to be final. She's done this before. Stellara probably sent two or three negotiators before me and Rizzi shut them all down the same way.]

Katarina didn't push. She thanked her for her time, shook her hand, and walked out.

Vessa was waiting outside. Brynn was leaning against the building next to her, arms crossed, looking relaxed. She wasn't relaxed. She just wanted everyone nearby to think she was so they'd be extra surprised when she stopped.

"How'd it go?"

"About how I expected."

"That bad?" Brynn asked.

"That informative."

Brynn looked at the dockmaster’s office, then back at Katarina.

"Want me to go in there?"

"And do what?"

"I don’t know. Be large. Flex. Make concerned faces."

Katarina couldn’t hold back a smirk.

"That is not the plan, Mother."

"It could be a plan. I’m very good at concerned faces."

"Nobody doubts that. Come with me. We’re going for a walk."

Katarina spent the rest of the day walking Coppara’s waterfront, with Brynn trailing behind her like a bodyguard. She started at the docks and worked south.

The loading infrastructure was old as hell. Crane arms that should have been replaced a decade ago, pulley systems running on frayed rope, cargo platforms with boards that flexed under weight.

Sure, it was functional, but everything was held together by habit and stubbornness rather than maintenance.

The warehouses were worse.

Oh, Stellara’s acquisition made sense the moment Katarina saw them. Stone walls with crumbling mortar, roofing that leaked in at least three visible spots, and no preservation formations whatsoever, which meant every perishable good stored here was racing against time from the moment it came off the boat.

[They’re losing product to spoilage. No formation arrays, no climate control, no sealed storage. In summer heat, anything organic has maybe three days in these buildings before it starts to turn.]

She walked the harbor layout next.

Boats came in, unloaded at whatever berth was open, goods moved to the nearest warehouse by hand or cart. No routing system, no scheduling, no priority lanes. Everything was first-come, first-served, which was fair in the way that the Vellasera dock lottery was fair, except the lottery was organized and this was just chaos that everyone had agreed to tolerate.

Brynn, to her credit, kept quiet during most of this, though she did stop to help a dockworker lift a crate that had gotten wedged between two pylons, which turned into Brynn lifting the crate with one hand while the dockworker stared at her arm and asked if she was "available".

[Always got your priorities in order, huh, Brynn?]

Katarina took notes while Brynn made friends, logging capacity estimates, traffic patterns, and structural assessments. The Ledger helped with numbers but the texture came from watching.

A crew of six women unloading a fishing boat, calling to each other in shorthand. A warehouse operator checking crates by smell, lifting lids and sniffing, because she didn't have formation arrays to tell her what was fresh and what wasn't.

[... Well, credit to them, these people are good at what they do. Their infrastructure is failing them, not the other way around.]

Back at the inn, Vessa sat across from her on the narrow bed while Katarina spread her notes out on the quilt.

"So what's the plan?"

"I need to figure out what Rizzi actually wants, because it's not what she says she wants."

"She said she wants Brevaine to go away."

"She said she doesn't want an outsider controlling local infrastructure. That's different. The first one is about Stellara. The second one is about control." Katarina tapped her notes. "She's not angry about the warehouses being owned by someone else. She's angry about losing say over how they're run. If Stellara had bought the district and then asked the locals to manage it, Rizzi would have signed a lease on day one."

"Huh..." Katarina could visibly see Vessa following along. "So give her management."

"I can't give her management. It's Stellara's asset. But I can give her something that feels like management." Katarina sighed, mentally preparing herself. "I'm gonna have to be here for a while, though."

"Okay." Vessa closed the gap between them on the bed, took Katarina's face in both hands, and kissed her thoroughly enough that Katarina's notes were crumpled under her knee by the end of it. "Then you have plenty of time to think of all this later. Right?"

Katarina swallowed.

"... Right."

Dinner was at a harborside stall wedged between two warehouse walls.

There were no menus. A woman with burn-scarred hands and a stained apron handed them plates of spiced fish wrapped in charred leaves, and Katarina took one bite and stopped moving.

[What the hell is this?]

It was incredible.

The fish was firm and flaky, the spice blend was hot, sweet, and smoky, and the charred leaves gave it a bitter edge that cut through the richness. The whole thing was better than anything Ottavia had ever produced, which Katarina would never say out loud because Ottavia would salt her food out of spite for the rest of her life.

"This is amazing," Vessa said through a full mouth.

Brynn had already finished hers and was reaching for a second plate.

"Coppara’s got one thing going for it. The fish here could make you cry."

"It’s making me reconsider our entire supply chain."

Brynn looked at her.

"It’s fish, Kat."

"It’s a culinary asset that nobody outside this town has ever tasted. Fresh catch, local spice trade, cooking traditions with no distribution network. This place has a food identity and they’re not marketing it at all."

Brynn ate her second plate and didn’t argue, because arguing with Katarina about business was like arguing with the weather.

[Coppara’s food is an asset. File it for later, after the warehouse problem is solved. The version of this relationship that goes beyond a single negotiation.]

She finished her fish, ordered a second plate, and let the harbor noise wash over her while her brain worked in the background.

[It’s only day one. Have patience.]

Chapter 37: The Cranes

And thus, it was time for Katarina to visit the warehouse district.

It was six buildings on the eastern edge of the port, stone-walled, slate-roofed, and almost completely empty.

Katarina walked through them with a Brevaine-appointed caretaker who unlocked doors and said nothing, because there was nothing to say. The warehouses were sound. Stellara had purchased well-built infrastructure with good bones: high ceilings, proper drainage, loading bays designed for heavy cargo, etc.

The fourth warehouse still had chalk marks on the floor where someone had mapped out storage zones before the boycott killed the plan. On paper, these buildings were exactly what a growing port town needed.

In practice, they were collecting dust.

"How many active leases?" Katarina asked.

"Two," the caretaker said. "A grain trader from up the coast and a sailmaker who needed some overflow space. Everyone else is storing locally." She said it like she'd been saying it for months.

[No, everyone else is boycotting.]

She'd known that already, but walking the empty buildings made it real. Six warehouses, combined capacity for roughly a third of Coppara's total cargo throughput, sitting idle because the merchants would rather cram goods into basements than give Stellara the satisfaction of a lease signature.

The question was where they were putting everything.

Katarina spent the next two hours finding out.

She walked the backstreets behind the harbor road and found the answer in small pieces. A fishmonger with crates stacked three deep in her back room, blocking the rear exit. A textile merchant storing bolts of fabric in a neighbor's basement in exchange for a cut of the dock fees. Two beached fishing boats near the south jetty that had been gutted and converted into dry storage, their hulls packed with sealed barrels of oil and salt.

It was a distributed storage network built entirely on personal relationships and handshake agreements. Inefficient, fragile, and completely invisible to anyone who wasn't looking for it.

[Goodness... They've built an entire shadow logistics system to avoid using Stellara's warehouses. None of it is formal, none of it is insured, and one bad storm would wipe out half their inventory.]

Stellara had bought the buildings. The merchants had simply routed around her.

[That's why negotiators keep failing. This isn't about storage quality. They'd rather lose product in a leaky basement than hand control of their infrastructure to an outsider.]

She wasn't going to convince them the warehouses were good. They knew the warehouses were good. She needed to give them a reason, some reason, to choose the warehouses that had nothing to do with Stellara.

Which meant she needed to stop thinking about warehouses entirely and start thinking about what Coppara actually needed.

Katarina found Rizzi at the harbor master's station, reviewing tide charts with a younger woman who was probably her apprentice based on the matching clipboard and the slightly terrified expression.

"Dockmaster. Got a minute?"

Rizzi gave her the same look she'd given her yesterday, patient but thinning.

"Signora."

"I have a question. It's not about the warehouses, though."

That got a flicker of interest. Barely visible, but Katarina caught it because catching flickers of interest was what she did.

"Shoot."

"If you could fix one thing about this port, what would it be?"

Rizzi stared at her.

"... What?"

"One thing," Katarina repeated. "Anything. Infrastructure, operations, policy. If I could wave a hand and make one problem go away, what's the problem?"

Rizzi set her clipboard down. She looked out at the harbor, at the boats rocking in their berths, the cargo platforms, the cranes lining the main dock like a row of arthritic fingers.

"The cranes."

"Tell me."

She sighed, which let Katarina know she was in for a long story.

"They're older than I am. The main hoist on crane three seized up twice last month. Every time a crane goes down, the whole port backs up. Boats can't unload, cargo sits on the water, fishermen miss their market windows." Rizzi's voice was flat, reciting facts she'd recited too many times. "I've been filing repair requests with the district authority for six years. They send a specialist, she patches whatever's broken, and it holds for three months before something else fails. The frames are corroded. The pulleys are worn smooth. The whole system needs replacing."

"What would that cost?"

Rizzi leaned back in her chair. Then, she laughed.

"More than your entire house is worth, girl. New crane frames, new pulley assemblies, new cable rigging for six units? You're looking at four hundred silver marks. Minimum. Coppara doesn't have that. The district authority doesn't care enough to spend it. And Brevaine bought warehouses, not the port. The cranes aren't her problem."

"What if they were my problem?"

Rizzi looked at her properly for the first time since Katarina had arrived in Coppara. She looked past the age, past the title, past the Stellara connection.

"You're serious?"

"I'm asking a question. That's all."

Rizzi held her gaze for a long moment and then picked up her clipboard and went back to her tide charts.

"Fix the cranes and I'll talk to you about whatever you want. But nobody's fixing the cranes."

[We'll see about that.]

She walked back to the inn with her hands in her pockets and her brain already running cost scenarios.

The inn room was small. Brynn was doing one-armed push-ups in the corner, shirtless, because Brynn didn’t believe in shirts when she was exercising, which meant the floor shook rhythmically every two seconds and Katarina had a distractingly clear view of her mother’s back muscles rolling under red skin.

"Four hundred silver for full replacement," Katarina said, spreading her notes across the bed. Vessa sat cross-legged beside her.

"We don’t have four hundred silver to spare," Vessa said. "Not without pulling from the Greypass operating fund, and you specifically said that fund was untouchable."

"It is untouchable. I’m not replacing the cranes. I’m reinforcing the existing frames."

Vessa looked up.

"The frames are corroded, not broken. The structural bones are still there. If I use Artisan path techniques to reinforce the iron, stabilize the joints, and reforge the stress points, I can restore them to working condition without replacing a single major component."

Vessa blinked. Then she grabbed the spare sheet and started scribbling.

[This is what the Artisan path is for. Not enchanting practice dummies mid-drill. Actual infrastructure work. Taking something broken and making it hold.]

"What about the pulleys and rigging?" Vessa asked.

"Those I replace traditionally. New cable, new pulley wheels, new hoist mechanisms. Materials and labor, not cultivation. I’m estimating sixty silver for the mechanical components across all six cranes."

"And your time?"

"My time is free."

"Kat, you literally lectured me about paying contractors two weeks ago."

"That was different. This is strategic investment, not contract work. I’m not fixing cranes for Coppara. I’m buying Rizzi’s trust."

Vessa ran the numbers: sixty silver for materials, another twenty for labor from local metalworkers, total outlay roughly eighty silver marks.

"Eighty silver to fix a port’s entire crane system," Vessa said. "A fifth of what Rizzi quoted for full replacement."

"Because full replacement is the only option she could see. Reinforcement wasn't on the table because nobody in Coppara has an Artisan path cultivator. Nobody in most towns does. It's one of the least common affinities, and the least glamorous application, and it's exactly the kind of work that people forget cultivation can do."

Brynn switched arms without breaking rhythm.

"So you're going to fix their cranes with qi and then ask them to lease the warehouses?"

"I'm going to fix their cranes because their cranes need fixing. What happens after that is a conversation."

"That's the same thing, dumpling."

"It's really not."

Brynn looked at Vessa for backup. Vessa held up both hands.

"I'm not getting in the middle of this."

[It's a little bit the same thing. But the difference matters. If I fix the cranes with conditions attached, I'm Stellara with a hammer. If I fix the cranes because they need fixing and then have a conversation, I'm a Signora who solved a problem nobody else would touch.]

She had sixty silver in materials, an Artisan affinity, and a port full of merchants who'd been ignored by everyone with the power to help them.

[Tomorrow. Crane three first. The one that seized twice last month. Fix the worst one and let the results speak.]

Brynn finished her push-ups and stood up, shaking her arms out. Sweat ran down her stomach and she didn't bother wiping it.

"You need a spotter for the qi work?"

"I need someone to hold the frame steady while I reinforce the joints. You're the strongest person I know."

Brynn grinned.

"That's because I am the strongest person you know."

"I'm gonna tell Seris you said that."

"H-Hey!!! I was kidding! I was kidding!!!"

Vessa closed her notebook, looked at Brynn, looked at Katarina, and yawned.

"I'm going to bed. You two can keep planning." She stretched. Her shirt rode up. She caught Katarina looking. "Or you can come to bed."

[... I suppose planning can wait.]

Katarina went to bed.

Chapter 38: Iron and Compromise

Katarina found Rizzi at the harbor master's station the next morning. Same clipboard, same chair, same look of general boredom.

"I have a proposal," Katarina said.

She sighed.

"I figured."

What she absolutely did not expect to hear next, however, was:

"I'll fix the cranes. All six. Montecardi resources, my own party's cultivation work, my expense. No cost to Coppara, no strings from Brevaine."

Rizzi's clipboard lowered about an inch.

"In exchange," Katarina continued, "the merchants agree to a six-month trial of the Brevaine warehouses, at reduced rates. Forty percent below standard lease pricing."

"And who manages the warehouses during the trial?"

"A local operator. Your pick."

Rizzi's clipboard lowered the rest of the way. She set it on the desk, folded her hands on top of it, and studied Katarina like a card player who'd just been shown a hand she didn't expect.

"What's your angle?"

"No angle. No catch. I was sent here to get the warehouses leased. How I do it is my business."

Rizzi's eyes narrowed.

"And your business is giving us everything we asked for while still delivering what she wants?"

"My business is finding the deal where nobody loses. You get your cranes fixed and a local operator running the storage district. Brevaine gets her investment generating revenue. The merchants get reduced rates and warehouse space that doesn't leak. In six months, if it's still working, you renegotiate permanent terms. If it's not, the trial ends and you go back to storing fish in beached boats."

Rizzi sat there with her weathered hands folded and her dark eyes steady.

Katarina could feel the internal calculation happening. This was a woman who'd been running a port for decades and she was not going to be rushed by anyone, least of all a girl from up the coast who'd been in town for three days.

"... Forty percent reduction?" She asked.

"For the trial period. Six months. Permanent terms negotiated after."

"And I pick the operator?"

"Within reason. Someone competent. I'll need to approve the choice, but I won't override you without cause."

"The cranes first. Before any lease is signed."

"I'll start today."

Rizzi studied her for a long time. Long enough that the silence stopped being tactical and became awed, and Katarina held still and let her look, because some people needed to see you clearly before they could trust you.

"You're not what I expected from a new Signora," Rizzi said.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Take it however you want." She picked up her clipboard. "Crane three first. It's the worst."

Crane three was a fifteen-foot iron frame bolted to a stone platform at the edge of the main dock. The arm extended out over the water with a pulley assembly at the tip, a cable drum at the base, and approximately forty years of corrosion eating through every joint.

[Good grief...]

Katarina stood in front of it and pulled up the Ledger.

[Structural assessment.]

Crane 3 — Coppara Main Dock:

Frame integrity: 41% (critical corrosion at base joints and arm pivot).

Pulley assembly: Non-functional (bearing seized).

Cable drum: Functional (limited).

Estimated load capacity: 30% of rated maximum.

Risk of catastrophic failure: Moderate.

[Forty-one percent integrity. They've been lifting cargo with a crane running at less than half strength.]

"How bad?" Brynn asked. She was grinning. Brynn always grinned when someone told her there was heavy lifting to do. Other people only grinned like that when they heard there was cake.

"Bad. The base joints are the priority. If those fail under load, the whole arm comes down."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Hold the frame steady while I work. I'll be channeling qi into the iron to reinforce the molecular structure."

"The what now?"

"... The metal's going to heat up and expand. If the frame shifts during reinforcement, the qi pattern breaks and I have to start over."

Brynn cracked her knuckles.

"I can hold a crane."

[Yes, you can, mom. That's why I brought you.]

Soon, a whole crowd had gathered: dock workers, fishermen, a few of the coalition merchants.

They kept their distance but they were watching, because a seventeen-year-old Signora had just promised to fix the thing that had been failing them for years and they wanted to see if she could.

Katarina put her hands on the base joint.

She'd done Artisan work before: practice dummies, pipe sections, minor structural repairs. Small jobs. This was different.

The crane frame was massive. The corrosion ran deep, structural degradation that had weakened the iron at the crystal level. To reinforce it properly she had to push qi through the entire joint assembly, identify every compromised point, and rebuild the molecular bonds one layer at a time.

She started at the base. Qi flowed through her palms into the iron and the metal resisted, because corroded iron didn't want to be fixed. It wanted to keep falling apart.

[Stubborn thing, aren't you? Well... takes one to know one, I guess.]

Katarina had to push harder. The heat came fast. The metal under her hands went from cold to warm to hot enough that sweat started beading on her forearms.

"Holding," Brynn said. She had both hands on the frame, feet braced against the platform, not even straining. Her qi glowed faint gold around her arms, stabilizing the structure from the outside while Katarina worked from within.

The base joint tightened.

Katarina felt the iron respond, felt the corroded layers burn away, and new bonds form in their place. The metal darkened from rust-orange to clean grey, and the joint that had been creaking under load for years went solid and still.

[One down. Five more joints on this crane alone.]

She moved to the next.

Each one took more out of her than the last. By the fourth joint her hands were shaking, her qi reserves were dropping faster than she'd projected, and the sweat was running down her back.

The arm pivot was the hardest. The corrosion there was worse because the pivot bore the most stress, and Katarina had to hold the reinforcement pattern for nearly three minutes straight while Brynn kept the arm from shifting. Three minutes didn't sound like much. It was an eternity when your qi was draining, your muscles were screaming, and the iron under your hands was hot enough to blister.

She finished. The pattern locked. The pivot joint went from corroded ruin to solid iron and Katarina pulled her hands away and staggered back two steps.

[That is the hardest I have ever pushed my cultivation. My qi reserves are at maybe fifteen percent and I still have the pulley assembly to deal with.]

"The pulleys are mechanical," she said, breathing hard. "New bearings, new cable. That's tomorrow's job. The frame is done."

She looked at crane three. It stood straight and solid on its platform, joints dark with fresh iron, the arm extending over the water without the faint tremor it had been carrying for years.

Rizzi was standing at the edge of the crowd. She walked up to the crane, put her hand on the base joint, and pushed. The frame didn't move.

She looked at Katarina, nodded once, and walked back to her office.

[That's a yes. That's a Rizzi yes!]

Brynn picked her up. Lifted her clean off the ground in a bear hug that compressed her ribcage and made her feet dangle, and Katarina's exhausted body protested every second of it while the dock workers watched.

"That was INCREDIBLE, dumpling! Did you see the pivot joint? The way the metal changed color? That was BEAUTIFUL!"

"Mother. Down. Please."

"I'm so PROUD of you!"

"I know. Down."

Brynn set her down and Katarina wobbled. Vessa appeared at her side and caught her arm.

"You pushed too hard," Vessa said.

Katarina managed to give a little smile.

"On the contrary, I pushed just hard enough."

Vessa rolled her eyes.

The carriage ride home was quiet.

Brynn drove while Katarina lay across the bench seat with her head in Vessa’s lap. Her hands were wrapped in cool, damp cloths that Vessa had soaked in well water and laced with a faint preservation array to keep the chill. It felt incredible. Katarina would have told her so, but she was somewhere between awake and asleep and her mouth wasn’t cooperating.

Vessa’s fingers moved through her hair slowly, the same way Seris did it, and Katarina was too tired to decide how she felt about that comparison.

"Six-month trial, reduced rates, local operator," Vessa said quietly, more to herself than to Katarina. She had a writing board balanced on the armrest and was drafting the letter to Stellara one-handed. "Crane repairs completed, remaining units scheduled over the following weeks using contracted metalworkers. Terms to be formalized upon Brevaine’s written approval."

"Add the operator clause," Katarina mumbled into Vessa’s thigh. "Rizzi picks, I confirm. In writing. So Stellara can’t install her own person later."

"Already in."

"And the endorsement letter reminder."

"Already in." Vessa’s fingers paused in her hair. "You know you did something today, right? Not just business. Those dock workers are going to remember the girl who fixed their crane. Rizzi’s going to remember it. That’s worth more than a lease."

[I know. But I can’t think about that right now because Vessa’s lap is very comfortable, her hand is in my hair, and my brain is finally, mercifully, quiet.]

"Mm," Katarina said.

"Eloquent."

"Mm."

Chapter 39: The Toilet Lady

The first three days back in Vellasera were supposed to be quiet.

Katarina had planned them that way. Rest, review the Coppara letter drafts, let her qi reserves rebuild after the crane work, and maybe sleep past dawn for once in either of her lives.

The neighbors had other plans.

It started with the baker on the corner, who stopped her on the second morning and asked what the Montecardi were building with all those pipes. Then the harbor master's wife, who'd heard about the clean water test from Dalla, who'd told Ottavia, who'd told everyone within shouting distance. Apparently, much like her salt addiction, Ottavia's information network had no off switch.

By the third day, Katarina had fielded nine questions about the sanitation system from people she'd never spoken to before, all of them some version of "is it true you made dirty water clean?"

[I should have controlled the messaging. Instead, Ottavia told her cousin, who told the fishmonger, who told the entire harbor market, and now everyone thinks I'm some kind of water witch.]

She was sitting in her study reviewing the Coppara terms when Enza knocked.

"Signora, Giatta Morese is at the gate. She's, ah... she's not upset this time."

[That's almost terrifying in itself.]

Giatta sat in the same chair she'd sat in last time, drank tea from the same cup, and delivered an entirely different kind of demand.

"The lower quarter wells have been silty for three years. Used to be clean, but something shifted in the rock table and now the water comes up grey. People boil it, but boiling doesn't fix the taste, and the children won't drink it."

"You want me to extend the purification system?"

"I want you to give those people clean water." Giatta set her teacup down hard enough to rattle the saucer. She'd clearly been thinking about this request for a while. "You did it for the estate. You can do it for the lower quarter."

[She's right. The array design scales. The relay system was built for expansion.]

So, Katarina smiled.

"I'll need to survey the area first. Check the well depth, the soil composition, and the existing water lines. If the silting is from a shifted rock table, I need to know whether the contamination is at the aquifer level or the well shaft."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

Giatta nodded. She finished her tea, stood up, and paused at the door.

"My granddaughter lives down there. She's six. She won't drink the water, so she drinks tea all day, and a six-year-old full of tea is a nightmare for everyone involved."

"I'll fix it, Signora Morese."

"I know you will. That's why I came here instead of the district office."

The lower quarter was a twenty-minute walk from the harbor road, downhill, past the textile quarter, through a stretch of older streets where the cobblestones gave way to packed-up dirt.

The houses here were smaller, older, and built from a darker stone that didn't hold up as well against the salt air. Laundry hung between windows. A few of the roofs were patched with mismatched tile.

It wasn't falling apart, but it had the general vibe of a neighborhood that had been asking for attention for a long time and had stopped expecting to get it.

People noticed her. A Signora in the lower quarter was unusual enough to draw stares, and the stares weren't hostile but they weren't friendly either. They were the stares of people who'd learned that authority figures came down here to announce things, not to help with things. They were just waiting to find out which kind of visit this was.

But, no, Katarina had nothing to announce. Not yet. Instead, she knelt by the main well, pulled up a bucket, and looked at it. The water was grey, with sediment that swirled when she tilted the bucket.

She took a soil sample from the well base, another from the drainage channel along the main road, and a third from a secondary well two streets over.

[The silting pattern is consistent. It's the feed, not the well shaft. A purification array at the well would handle the symptoms, but the real fix means routing the intake below the silt layer.]

She pulled out her sketch pad and started mapping pipe routes. The lower quarter's layout was tight, streets narrower than the port quarter, less room for underground work. She'd need to run the main line along the drainage channel and branch it to both wells.

"What are you doing?"

Katarina looked up.

A group of kids had materialized around her the way kids did, silently and in numbers. There were five of them, ages ranging from about six to maybe ten, and they were staring at her sketch pad with undisguised curiosity.

"I'm mapping the water lines."

"Why?"

"Because the water here is dirty and I'm going to fix it."

"How?"

"With pipes and a purification formation."

"What's a purification formation?"

"It's a thing that makes dirty water clean."

"Can we watch?"

"When we start building, sure."

The scrawny one at the front of the group had chipped horns, a smear of dirt on her cheek, and eyes that dared you to say something about either.

"Are you the toilet lady?"

Vessa, who was standing six feet behind Katarina holding the soil sample jars, made a noise like she'd been punched.

Katarina looked at the girl. The girl looked at Katarina. Five sets of eyes waited for the answer.

"Yes," Katarina said, with absolute dignity. "I am the toilet lady."

The girl considered this.

"Cool."

They followed her for the rest of the afternoon.

All five of them, trailing behind like ducklings, asking questions about every single thing she did.

What’s that tool for?

Why are you digging there?

Is it true you can make water come out of walls?

Can you make a toilet that flushes by itself?

What’s flushing?

Katarina answered every question because they were good questions, better than half the questions she got at trade meetings, and because the scrawny one with the chipped horns had the raw intellectual energy of someone who was going to be either a genius or a menace when she grew up. Probably both.

Vessa walked beside her, carrying sample jars and trying very hard not to laugh every time one of the kids called Katarina "toilet lady," which was every three minutes, because children are relentless and they had found a name they liked.

The kids peeled off one by one as they reached their streets, waving goodbye, until only the scrawny ringleader was left. She followed them all the way to the edge of the lower quarter before stopping.

"Are you really going to fix the water?"

"I really am."

"My mom says people who make promises don’t keep them."

"Your mom sounds smart. But I’m not making a promise. I’m telling you what’s going to happen."

The girl squinted at her for a second, decided that was acceptable, and ran off.

Vessa bumped her shoulder.

"The toilet lady has fans."

"Shut up."

"Toilet lady, toilet lady, toilet lady."

"I will leave you here."

"No you won’t." Vessa took her hand. "You like me too much."

Back at the estate, after dark, after dinner, after Brynn's evening training session that Katarina attended with about sixty percent effort and zero percent guilt.

Brynn had tried to teach her a new earth-reinforcement technique that involved punching a boulder. Katarina reinforced the boulder instead. Brynn stared at it for ten seconds, visibly torn between pride and frustration, before saying "that's not what I meant but it's actually really good."

The study floor was covered in expansion plans: pipe routes for the lower quarter, array specifications for two new purification points, cost projections for a Phase Two proposal that would bring clean water to every neighborhood in Vellasera.

Vessa was curled up next to her, formation diagram on her lap, charcoal pencil still in her hand, eyes closed. She'd fallen asleep mid-sketch.

There was a grey smudge on her cheek where she'd rested her face on the diagram. Her lips were parted. She was snoring lightly, which she would deny later.

[Come to think of it, she's been working as hard as I have. Harder, in some ways. The formation work is hers. The purification design is hers. I had the idea, but she built the thing that makes it real.]

Katarina pulled the pencil gently from Vessa's fingers and set it on the desk. She brushed the charcoal smudge off Vessa's cheek with her thumb. Vessa turned her face into Katarina's palm without waking up.

Katarina considered waking her, carrying her to bed, and working for another hour while Vessa slept.

Instead, she decided maybe this was a sign it was time to call it a day.

She lay down on the floor next to her, pulled a blanket off the bed and placed it over them, and closed her eyes.

[The toilet lady. Fantastic. That's going on my grave.]

She was smirking when she fell asleep.

Chapter 40: Dinner at the Taloris

Vessa's moms had invited Kat's family over for dinner.

And so Katarina was walking alongside her own moms with a bottle of wine in her arms because Seris said showing up empty-handed to a dinner invitation was "the kind of thing that starts wars, piccola."

Camille opened the door before they even knocked.

"There she is! There's my future daughter-in-law!"

Camille Talori was what happened when God looked at Seris and said "what if she was shorter and her tits were bigger?"

She barely came up to Katarina's chin, and her chest was so aggressively large that Katarina had spent years training herself not to stare. Today she was wearing a wrap top that was fighting a futile war. Camille grabbed Katarina by the face with both hands, kissed both her cheeks, then pulled her into a hug that buried Kat's face directly into her cleavage.

[Oh wow. That's nice.]

"Camille, let her breathe," Greta called from inside.

"She's fine! She likes it!"

[I do like it. That's part of the problem.]

Camille released her and immediately latched onto Seris, and the two of them started talking over each other at a volume that suggested pre-gaming was an existing concept in this world. Brynn ducked through the doorway and, with her priorities always set right, went straight for the kitchen.

Greta was at the table. She'd lost weight since the lung qi condition, and it showed in her face and her wrists, but she was already looking better than she had a few months ago, with color back in her cheeks and steady hands. She stood when Katarina came in and kissed her on the cheek.

"Sit. Tell me everything about that water project of yours. Camille won't stop talking about it but she has the technical understanding of a brick."

"I heard that!" Camille yelled from the other room.

"You were meant to, amore."

Katarina sat. She started explaining the purification array design and within thirty seconds realized Greta was actually listening, actually following, and asking questions that were better than anything the district trade office had managed.

"So the relay system scales indefinitely?"

"In theory. The limiting factor is the formation specialist, not the design. Each new node needs to be calibrated to the local water table, and right now that specialist is Vessa."

Greta's eyes softened at Vessa's mention. Cute.

"She's good at it?"

"She's the best I've yet."

"... Well, you are biased."

"I'm technically not lying."

[I do wonder what kinds of cultivators I'll find outside Valdari lands, though.]

Greta watched her for a moment. Then she nodded once, satisfied, and changed the subject.

"And the academy? Camille says you've applied to Compasso."

"I've applied. That's all."

"That's not all, and you know it." Greta leaned back in her chair. "You've been building a portfolio since you were thirteen, Katarina. You just didn't call it that."

[She's not wrong.]

"Still gotta do the cultivation demonstration, as well," Katarina acknowledged.

"You'll be fine."

Camille came back with a fresh bottle of wine and refilled Greta's glass, then Katarina's, then poured one for herself that was basically a bowl. She dropped into the chair next to Greta and threw an arm around her shoulders.

"So! The academy! Pavona! When do you leave?"

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"Like I told Greta, I haven't been accepted yet."

Camille waved that off.

"Oh, please. You'll get in."

"You don’t know that."

"I know you," Camille said. "You got this whole town clean water. You rebuilt your family’s trade routes from nothing. You fixed Coppara’s cranes with your bare hands." She took a long drink. "If they don’t let you in, they’re idiots."

"That’s very kind, Signora Talori."

"You’ve been trying to knock my daughter up for years now, call me Camille."

"Good grief." Katarina blushed hard.

The Talori house was usually comfortable, and it had taken Katarina years to stop subconsciously finding that suspicious. After all, back in her old life, comfort was a trap. Here, it just meant a properly salted dinner.

[No offense, Ottavia.]

Vessa appeared from the kitchen carrying a platter that was definitely too heavy for her. She was refusing help though, determined to see this mission through.

"I’ve got it, mama, I’ve got it, I said I’ve got it, MOVE."

Brynn was right behind her carrying double the platters and not struggling at all.

Finally, dinner came and dinner was loud.

Camille and Seris were on their third bottle and had started telling stories about each other that Katarina hoped were exaggerated. Brynn ate like she was being timed. Greta kept steering the conversation back to the sanitation project every time it drifted, and each time she did she’d look at Vessa like she couldn’t quite believe her daughter was the one everyone kept talking about. Vessa pretended not to be proud but she was about as good at hiding her pride as Katarina was at hiding her superiority complex.

As for Katarina herself, yep, she was comfortable. She was full, warm, and a little buzzed now. It was shaping up to be the kind of evening where her brain turned off the spreadsheets and just let things happen.

Then Camille got up to change the music crystal on the shelf. Right, there was a tiny rock on the shelf that apparently recorded sounds and played them back to you when you put a bit of qi in them. She swapped it for something slower, with a low drumbeat and a string melody that wound through the room.

Brynn’s head came up. She’d been mid-bite, sauce on her chin, completely content with her plate. But the music hit her and her whole posture changed. She set her fork down, wiped her mouth, and looked at Greta.

"Dance with me."

Greta raised an eyebrow.

"You're not gonna accidentally break my arm or something?"

"I can be gentle when I want. Ask Seris."

"She's not lying," Seris grinned into her glass and Katarina made a dramatic gagging sound.

Greta looked at the hand. She looked at Camille. Camille shrugged and topped off her wine. Greta sighed, took Brynn's hand, and let herself be pulled up.

The kitchen was too small for dancing, but Brynn didn't care. She put one hand on Greta's waist and held Greta's hand in the other and they moved in the two feet of space between the table and the counter, bumping into chairs and not caring. Brynn was a full head taller than Greta and built like a siege weapon, and she was leading Greta through steps as gently as she promised.

Greta was stiff for about four seconds. Then Brynn spun her, gently, and Greta laughed, and the stiffness left, and suddenly they actually looked good together. Brynn pulled her in closer and Greta let her head tip against Brynn's collarbone. They were smiling at each other from about three inches apart.

[Oh no.]

Camille was watching them from her chair, wine glass against her lips. She caught Seris's eye and they shared a look that Katarina recognized, because she'd seen Seris give that exact look to Brynn about a thousand times.

[Oh no no no no.]

The music shifted to something with more bass. Vessa got up.

"Mama, you're hogging her," Vessa suddenly said. She said that to Brynn, by the way, not Greta. "My turn!"

[Oh, thank god.] Katarina was still reeling from the fact that her future marriage with Vessa was apparently so locked down that Vessa just referred to Brynn as her mom and no one even batted an eye, but at the same time, relief flooded her system. [Good, my mom will not be making out with Vessa's mom. Good.]

Greta let Vessa pull her in, and then they were dancing too, Vessa leading her mom through the cramped kitchen.

Then the song built to a swell, and Vessa dipped Greta, and Greta came back up laughing, and Vessa kissed her.

On the mouth.

With full tongue.

Katarina's wine glass stopped halfway to her lips.

[...]

Her brain stopped working.

It lasted about ten seconds. Greta pulled back with a smile and swatted Vessa's arm. "Show-off." Vessa grinned and spun her again.

Nobody reacted. Camille was beaming. Seris was pouring more wine. Brynn was trying to cut back in. Apparently, this was just a thing that happened here.

Vessa caught her eye from across the kitchen, smiled, and winked.

[... I'm going to faint.]

She didn't leave. She stayed and drank her wine and watched Brynn finally cut back in to dance with Greta while Vessa danced with Camille. The kitchen was way too crowded for four people dancing but they did it anyway, loud and messy, while Katarina sat at the table with Seris and watched all of it.

Seris rested her head on Katarina's shoulder.

"This is nice, no?"

"Yeah." Katarina's voice came out hoarse. "Mhm."

[Aside from the part where I'm about to have an aneurysm.]

The walk home was warm.

The late summer air hit Kat's face head-on. The canyon smelled like salt and sand.

Brynn was ahead of them with Camille under one arm and Greta under the other, all three of them laughing. Then Camille grabbed Brynn's face and kissed her, deep, and Brynn kissed back with both hands on Camille's waist, and Greta watched for about two seconds before leaning up and getting in on it.

Katarina was thoroughly unimpressed at this point.

She'd seen some shit in the past few hours she'd never unsee.

Seris walked beside Katarina, very amused at all this.

"Ahh, your mother's popular as ever."

"I can see that."

"It's nice, no? Sharing warmth."

[SHARING WARMTH. Yeah, okay, sure. Let's call it that and not 'my mom is tongue-deep in both of my girlfriend's parents at the same time.']

"It's very Valdari, I will say that," Katarina conceded.

Seris laughed.

Vessa fell into step on Katarina's other side and bumped her hip.

"You're acting weird."

"No, I'm not."

Vessa pouted at her.

Katarina sighed.

She turned toward Vessa, took her face, and kissed her.

Just for a second or two.

"I'm good," Katarina said. "That was just, uh... Enough celebration for me for the next decade."

Vessa blinked.

Then, with Kat still holding her face, she grinned.

"Do that again."

Kat let go and rolled her eyes.

Then, Vessa took her hand and laced their fingers together. Up ahead, Brynn had picked Camille up entirely, one arm under her thighs, while Greta pressed against Brynn's side with her hand on Brynn's stomach, fingers tracing down. Seris gave a low whistle.

[I am never going to get used to this place.]