CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 41: Bold Choices

Katarina was on her back on the couch with cost projections in one hand and Vessa between her legs.

Okay, not like that. Vessa had climbed on top of her about two minutes ago and was currently trying to pry the papers out of Katarina's grip while Katarina held them above her head like a woman defending the last lifeboat on a sinking ship.

"Kat."

"No."

"Kaaaat."

"Absolutely not."

Vessa pinned Katarina's free hand against the cushion and leaned down until their noses were touching.

"One kiss! Then you can go back to your boring numbers."

"Are you kidding? You kiss your mother with that mouth."

Katarina used her core strength to twist sideways and nearly dumped Vessa off the couch. Vessa clung to her like a cat refusing to leave a warm lap. They wrestled for about three seconds before Katarina got an arm free and held the papers at full extension behind her head.

"These projections are due tomorrow!"

"Your projections can wait twenty minutes!"

They paused.

"... You think very highly of yourself if you think twenty minutes is enough," Kat said.

Vessa went red.

"Okay, thirty."

"Still flattering yourself."

"KAT."

Katarina held back a smirk.

[She’s too funny.]

There was a knock at the door. They both froze.

Enza opened it, looked up at them, looked at Vessa straddling Katarina on the couch with one hand pinned and papers scattered everywhere, and pressed her lips together very hard.

"Letter for you, Signora." She held it up. "Brevaine seal."

Katarina’s whole body went still.

Enza looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Should I come back, or..."

"Give me the damn letter, Enza."

Enza crossed the room, handed it over, gave Vessa a look, and left. Vessa sat up but didn’t get off Katarina’s lap, which meant Katarina read the letter with her girlfriend sitting on her thighs.

"What’s it say?"

"I don’t know."

"What’s it say!?"

"Still don’t know."

The letter was written on Stellara’s personal stationery, which was nicer than anything the Montecardi estate owned.

Signora Montecardi,

I have reviewed the terms you negotiated in Coppara. The warehouse utilization arrangement is acceptable, as is the appointment of a local operator. Rizzi’s involvement is noted.

I will say that the outcome differs from my initial expectations. I had anticipated compliance, not compromise. You chose to invest Montecardi resources into repairing infrastructure that belongs to neither of us, in exchange for a trial period on terms more favorable to the merchants than to my house. This is creative. Whether it is wise remains to be seen.

Has the Compasso Accademia gotten back to you yet? The Compasso is a bold choice for a house your size. Careful, or your future classmates will crush you beneath their heels.

Regards,Stellara Brevaine

Katarina read it twice. Then she smiled.

"That woman is such a bitch," Vessa said, reading over her shoulder.

"She’s annoyed."

"She’s threatening you! ’Crush you beneath their heels?’ Who says that?"

"She’s not threatening me. She got what she wanted. The warehouses are being used. Her investment pays off. She’s just irritated that I did it my way instead of hers." Katarina folded the letter and set it on the arm of the couch. "She wanted me to bully them into compliance so they’d resent me and come running to her when the trial period ended. I gave them a deal they actually like, which means they’ll want to keep it, which means Stellara’s stuck with the terms I set."

"So why are you smiling about her calling you small?"

"Because she wrote ’your future classmates,’ Vessa. She’s assuming I’ll get in."

Vessa opened her mouth. Closed it.

"... Oh."

"If Stellara Brevaine thinks I’m getting into the Compasso, then there’s a good chance I’m getting into the Compasso. People like us don’t waste ink on things we don’t believe."

Vessa stared at her for a second, then grabbed her face and kissed her. Katarina let her, this time.

[Fine. FINE. I suppose the projections can wait twenty minutes.]

They took forty.

Vessa, to her credit, helped pick up the scattered cost projections afterward. She sorted them by date without being asked, because Vessa couldn't look at disorganized papers without fixing them. It was one of the things Katarina loved about her and would never say out loud because Vessa would be insufferable about it.

"You had a crease in page three," Vessa said, handing the stack back.

"I wonder how that happened."

"Yeah, could've been anything."

Afterward, Katarina tucked the endorsement letter into her portfolio folder alongside the Coppara crane repair documentation, the Greypass corridor financials, the sanitation project specs, and trade revenue charts showing five consecutive quarters of growth.

It was a good portfolio.

She sent it with the morning post and spent the rest of the day trying not to think about it, which lasted about eleven minutes before she pulled up the Ledger and asked it to calculate her admission probability.

Insufficient data. Qualitative factors dominate.

[You're useless.]

The Ledger didn't respond to that.

The sanitation project, at least, didn't require waiting. It required digging.

Two more households in the upper quarter had requested connections to the pipe network. Established families who'd seen the clean water results and decided they wanted in. Katarina was charging installation fees now, enough to cover materials and labor with a margin that made the whole project self-sustaining.

[What does a Compasso application reviewer think when they see a self-sustaining infrastructure project built from scratch by a seventeen-year-old? They think yes. That's what they think. I mean, hopefully.]

She was reviewing the installation schedule at breakfast when Brynn sat down across from her with a plate piled high enough to feed three people.

"So," Brynn said through a mouthful of eggs. "Does this mean you're giving up on being a merchant to become- what was it again? A plumber?"

Katarina threw a blueprint at her head.

Brynn caught it one-handed, laughed so hard she nearly choked, and spent the next five minutes trying to convince Katarina that "Montecardi Plumbing" had a nice ring to it.

"I'm serious! You could have a little sign. A wrench and a toilet."

"Mother."

"Maybe a little water droplet with a face on it."

"I am going to revoke your breakfast privileges."

"You can't revoke breakfast, Katarina. Breakfast is a right."

Seris walked in, took one look at them, poured herself wine instead of tea, and sat down without asking.

"She wants to put my face on a water droplet," Katarina said.

"That sounds adorable," Seris said.

"You're both fired."

"You can't fire your mothers, piccola."

"Watch me."

Brynn reached across and stole a piece of bread off Katarina's plate. Katarina let her.

"Speaking of water," Seris said, swirling her wine. "Giatta came by yesterday while you were in the lower quarter. She wants to know if you can extend the line to the school."

"Huh. Well, the school's on bedrock. I'd need Vessa to modify the relay array for a different substrate."

"So that's a yes?"

"That's a 'I'll talk to Vessa.' Which is a yes. But I want her to think I deliberated."

Seris smiled. Brynn, who had finished her own plate and was eyeing Katarina's eggs, said, "You know, when I was your age, I was punching things for a living. You're out here building plumbing empires. I don't know if I should be proud or offended."

"Stick with proud, mother. Stick with proud."

"I'm going with both." Brynn stole the eggs.

That evening, Katarina leaned on the estate balcony railing and looked at the road north.

She'd taken that road to Coppara and back. She'd taken it to Stellara's estate. Short trips, a day or two, always close to home.

Pavona was weeks away. A city full of merchant heirs who'd been groomed for the Compasso since birth, backed by tutors, connections, centuries of family reputation.

Katarina had a sanitation project, a rebuilt trade route, and a mother who wanted to put a smiley face on a water droplet.

Down in Vellasera, the harbor lights were on and the tavern district was getting loud. Her town. She'd fixed its water, rebuilt its trade. She knew every street, half the people on them. The other half knew her as the toilet lady.

[The toilet lady applies to the most prestigious merchant academy on the continent. Sounds about right.]

The balcony door opened behind her. Seris came out with two glasses of wine and handed one over without asking.

"You've been staring at that road for ten minutes."

"I've been thinking."

"About Pavona?"

"About whether I'm ready."

Seris leaned on the railing next to her and took a sip.

"You rebuilt this house from nothing, piccola. You were ready two years ago."

"As always, you're biased."

"Completely." Seris bumped her shoulder. "You're still ready."

Katarina drank her wine. It was good. Ottavia had probably picked it, which meant Seris had asked Ottavia to pick it, which meant Seris had planned this whole balcony ambush in advance.

[Sneaky woman.]

She tapped the railing twice, pushed off, and went inside.

[Ugh. I hate waiting. But I’ve done harder things than wait.]

Chapter 42: The Fun Part

Brynn had been patient for thirteen years.

Katarina wanted that on the record. Thirteen years of her daughter treating cultivation like a chore, like something to squeeze in between trade negotiations and pipe schematics, and Brynn had bitten her tongue and smiled and maybe only cried about it to Seris twice. Three times. A reasonable number of times.

But the Compasso required a cultivation proficiency demonstration, and that meant Brynn’s patience, and Katarina’s excuses, had officially expired.

"Up."

"It’s dawn."

"UP."

Katarina was dragged out of bed at an hour that shouldn’t exist, fed half a bowl of porridge that Brynn wouldn’t let her finish because "digestion slows your qi flow, Katarina," and marched into the training yard while the sun was still deciding whether it wanted to show up.

"Elements first. Show me fire."

Katarina held out her hand. A small flame popped up above her palm, about the size of a candle.

Brynn stared at it.

"Bigger."

Katarina fed more qi into it. The flame doubled, then tripled, until it was a roaring column of orange fire shooting three feet into the air from her outstretched hand. The heat washed over her face and she could feel her qi reserves draining, but it looked impressive, which was the point.

"THERE we go!" Brynn clapped once, hard enough to echo off the canyon walls. "Hold it! Hold it for ten seconds!"

[Okay... Can’t be that hard.]

So, Katarina held it.

Her arm shook. The fire wavered and spat. At second eight she lost control of the base and it flared sideways, nearly catching Brynn's hair, and Brynn didn't even flinch. She just grinned wider.

Ten seconds. Done.

"Good! Water next!"

Katarina blinked.

"Can I rest for—"

"WATER!"

By mid-morning, Katarina had cycled through all four elements, each one more draining than the last.

But they were far from done.

"Good. Now body cultivation."

"Now?"

"You think the Compasso proctors let you rest between demonstrations?" Brynn crossed her arms. "Pick up the boulder."

Ah. The boulder.

The boulder was in the corner of the training yard. It came up to Katarina's waist and probably weighed as much as a loaded trade wagon. She'd seen Brynn lift it once, casually, like it was a basket of laundry, and had filed that memory under "things to never think about too hard."

"That boulder?"

"That boulder."

"Mother... I am a merchant."

"You're a merchant who's about to pick up a damn boulder. Move."

[Fine.]

She channeled qi into her legs, her core, her arms, her spine. The reinforcement technique Brynn had been teaching her for years layered energy into muscle and bone, turning her body into something sturdier than it had any right to be. She could feel the power humming under her skin, dense and warm.

She walked to the boulder. She set her hands against it. She pushed qi into her palms until her fingers bit into the stone.

Then she lifted.

Her knees screamed. Her back screamed louder. The boulder shifted, tilted, and then left the ground entirely, balanced on Katarina's back and shoulders as she straightened her legs one agonizing inch at a time.

"WALK!" Brynn yelled.

[WALK!? YOU WALK! YOU WALK WITH THIS ON YOUR BACK, YOU LUNATIC!]

She walked. One step. Two. Her feet cracked the packed dirt of the training yard. Her qi reserves were plummeting and every muscle in her body was shaking hard enough that she was genuinely concerned about structural failure.

Three steps. Four. Five. She made it across the yard, dropped the boulder with a crash that shook the estate walls, and stood there swaying with her vision going white at the edges.

"Beautiful! Again!"

Kat's whole world stopped.

"AGAIN?!"

"Other direction this time!"

She carried the boulder back.

Then Brynn made her do wind sprints reinforced with elemental bursts, which meant running as fast as she could while channeling wind qi into her legs and then stopping on a mark by slamming earth qi into her feet.

She overshot the mark twice and hit the fence once.

Then it was time for Artisan work under combat stress.

Brynn’s idea of combat stress was throwing things at Katarina while she tried to inscribe a formation array onto a practice dummy. Rocks, mostly. One stick. At one point, an apple, which Katarina caught and ate out of spite while finishing the array one-handed. Brynn looked personally offended by how good that was.

Then Grace cultivation. Healing, purification, shielding. Brynn tested the shields by punching them, because what better metric for success could there be? And when the third shield held for a full two seconds before cracking, she whooped loud enough to scare the birds off the canyon ridge.

Then Whispers. This was the one Katarina was best at, and Brynn knew it, so she pushed harder here than anywhere else.

"Make me see something that isn’t there."

[Oh, I’ll give you something to look at.]

Katarina made Brynn see two of herself.

Brynn looked between them, squinted, and punched the fake one. Her fist went through it and the illusion shattered.

"Too translucent. I could tell. Again."

She did it again. And again. Each time a little more solid, a little more real, until Brynn had to touch both of them to figure out which was the illusion. By the end, she was grinning so hard her face looked like it might split.

"That’s my girl."

"Great. Wonderful... I’m going to go die now."

"You’re not going to die."

"I am going to die. Right here. In this yard. Bury me under the boulder."

Katarina’s legs gave out and she went down onto the grass flat on her back, arms spread, staring at the sky.

Every part of her body hurt in a different and creative way. Her qi reserves were so low the Ledger had stopped showing numbers and was just displaying a sad little bar at the bottom of her vision.

Brynn sat down next to her. She wasn’t even sweating. She’d spent the entire morning throwing rocks, punching shields, yelling instructions, and she looked like she’d just come back from a light walk. Her arms were crossed behind her head and the muscles in her

shoulders and stomach were just there, doing absolutely nothing except existing and being ridiculous.

[My mothers are so unfairly attractive. Both of them. It’s actually offensive. I just carried a boulder across a field and I look like a drowned cat, and Brynn’s sitting there looking like a sculpture somebody carved out of a fantasy about warriors.]

She looked away before she thought about it any harder.

They sat there for a while. The canyon wind was cool on Katarina’s overheated skin and the grass smelled like dust and wildflowers.

"You’re stronger than you think, you know," Brynn said.

"I just carried a boulder across a field. I’m aware."

"That’s not what I mean." Brynn leaned back on her hands. "You treat cultivation like homework. Like something you have to pass. But you’re good at it, Katarina. Really good. You’ve got range that most cultivators would kill for."

"I know. I just don’t care about it the way you do."

"I know you don’t. And that’s fine." Brynn shrugged. "But I want to know something. Out of everything we did today, all four paths, the fire, the boulders, the arrays... what did you actually enjoy?"

Katarina thought about it. The fire had been satisfying, sure, on a gut level. The boulder she never wanted to think about again. The Grace work was useful but boring. The Artisan inscriptions she liked, but only for their practical applications.

And then there were the illusions.

She lifted one hand off the grass. A thin thread of qi wound between her fingers, pale and barely visible, and the air in front of Brynn shimmered.

A snake appeared in the grass between them, small and dark and coiled tight. It looked very real.

Brynn launched off the ground so fast she left an imprint in the dirt.

"WHAT THE—"

The snake dissolved into nothing. Katarina lay there on the grass, grinning up at the sky.

"That one," she said. "That’s my favorite."

Brynn stood there with her hand on her chest, eyes wide, breathing hard, staring at the patch of grass where the snake had been. She looked at Katarina. Katarina smiled pleasantly.

"...You’re a menace."

"I learned from the best."

Brynn sat back down, still checking the grass around her, and shook her head.

"Whispers. Of course. My daughter, the most gifted cultivator in a generation, and her favorite thing is making fake snakes."

"The fake snake made you, a Manifestation-rank cultivator, jump six feet in the air. That’s power, mother."

Brynn opened her mouth to argue, couldn’t find the argument, and closed it again.

Katarina went back to staring at the sky.

[The Compasso proctors want a proficiency demonstration. They want to see what I can do across all four paths. Fire, boulders, healing, formations, I can do all of it... But the thing I’m best at is making people see what I want them to see. So, yeah, I think they’re going to like me.]

Chapter 43: More Progress

Katarina was halfway through her morning tea and a drainage survey when Ottavia appeared in the study doorway, drying her hands on a rag and looking like she’d drawn the short straw to do whatever she was about to do.

"Signora, there’s a woman at the gate."

"Who?"

"Fiorda. The water hauler from the lower quarter." Ottavia leaned against the frame and crossed her arms. "She looks like she wants to kill you. Specifically you. She used your name and everything."

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"Wonderful. Tell Enza to let her in."

"I already did. Enza took one look at her face and came to get me instead." Ottavia paused. "I came to get you because I don’t get paid enough to prepare your funeral."

"That’s an odd way of asking for a raise."

Ottavia shrugged. Then, she tossed the rag over her shoulder and disappeared back down the hallway... muttering something about salt reserves.

[Incredible. May everyone in life have the luck to one day meet someone who looks at them the way Ottavia looks at salt.]

She got up.

[Anyway, let’s see if I’m getting my head taken off today.]

Fiorda was a broad woman with green skin and calloused hands. She gave off more orc energy than valdari. And, she was at the gate looking like she’d walked here specifically to yell at someone.

"You’re putting me out of work."

She said it at a pitch that probably carried to the harbor.

Katarina set her tea down.

"Come inside."

"I don’t want to come inside. I want you to explain why you’re running pipes into the lower quarter when I’ve been delivering clean water down there for nine years." She jabbed a finger toward the port. "Nine years, Signora."

[Because the water you deliver comes from the upper wells, costs three times what it should, and half your customers can’t afford it, so their kids drink grey silt water instead. That’s why.]

She didn’t say that.

Instead, she smiled and, once again, said:

"Come inside, Fiorda. We’ll talk."

Fiorda stood there for a few seconds, jaw working, clearly wanting to keep yelling. But Katarina didn’t move from the doorway and didn’t raise her voice, and eventually Fiorda stepped through the gate, shoulders stiff.

Katarina led her through the main hall. Fiorda’s eyes moved over the estate as they walked, taking in the repaired stonework, the new fixtures, the shelves that were actually

organized now. Katarina could see her doing the math, comparing this to the crumbling Montecardi estate that everyone in Vellasera remembered from five years ago.

[Yes, things are different now. That's rather the point.]

They sat in the study. Katarina poured her tea. Fiorda didn't touch it.

"Nine years," Fiorda said. "Nine years I've been hauling water down those streets. Two trips a day, every day. My back is ruined. My cart needs new wheels every six months. I know every house, every family, every kid who needs their water boiled twice because their stomach can't handle the mineral content."

She leaned forward.

"And now you're going to run a pipe down there and make all of that worth nothing."

[Obviously. Cars weren't kind to the horse industry. That's how progress works.]

The thought was clean and cold. Pure Vivienne Ross. Fiorda's business was a workaround for a problem Katarina was solving at the source. The workaround would become redundant. That was the math.

But Katarina had walked the lower quarter. She'd knelt by those wells. She'd talked to the people who lived there.

"You're right," Katarina said. "The pipes will replace the delivery service. There's no version of this where they don't."

Fiorda's face tightened.

"But," Katarina continued before the woman could open her mouth, "I need someone to maintain the system once it's installed. Someone who knows the lower quarter's layout, knows which houses have old foundations that might shift the pipe joints, knows where the drainage runs and where the ground freezes in winter." Katarina took a sip of her tea. "You know all of that."

Fiorda didn't say anything for a moment.

"What?"

"I'm offering you a contract. Maintenance operator for the lower quarter pipe network. Monthly retainer, materials covered, authority to flag issues directly to me." Katarina set her cup down. "The delivery service goes away. Your income doesn't."

Fiorda looked at the tea she hadn't touched. She picked it up, took a sip, and put it back down.

"How much?"

"Twelve silver marks a year."

"I make sixteen now."

"You make sixteen on a good year. You made eleven last year because three of your regular customers switched to boiling rain runoff when they couldn't afford your rates."

Fiorda went still.

"I've seen the household spending records," Katarina added.

[What's her actual cost of operations?]

The Ledger flickered at the edge of her vision.

Estimated operating costs: 8-9 silver marks/year (cart maintenance, well access fees, spoilage).

Net income at stated rate: 7-8 marks.

Net income at actual rate (last year): 2-3 marks.

[She's barely breaking even. She knows it, too. That's why she's here. She's angry about losing the only thing she has.]

"Twelve is fair," Katarina said. "Especially since it's less work, it's steady, and it doesn't destroy your back."

Fiorda's hands were flat on the table. Her fingers pressed into the wood.

"Fourteen."

[... No. You're not.]

Katarina looked at her. She let the silence hold for exactly long enough that Fiorda shifted in her chair.

"Twelve," Katarina said again. "With a review at six months. If the system expands and your workload increases, we could renegotiate."

"Thirteen. I've got a daughter starting school next—"

"Fiorda."

The word landed flat and heavy in the room. Katarina didn't lean forward. She didn't raise her voice. She just said the name and let it sit there, and Fiorda stopped talking.

"I'm not negotiating. I'm telling you what the contract is. Twelve marks, materials covered, six-month review. You can take it, or you can spend the next year watching your delivery route dry up one household at a time as the pipes go in. Either way, the pipes are going in. I'm already being far kinder to you than I need to be."

The study was very quiet.

Fiorda looked at Katarina for a long time. Katarina looked back. She didn't blink. She didn't soften. She let Fiorda see exactly what she was looking at, which was someone who was not asking.

"...Twelve marks."

"With a six-month review."

Fiorda exhaled.

"Fine."

"Good. Dalla will draw up the paperwork. You start when the first phase is operational, which should be about three weeks." She paused. "And Fiorda? For the daughter starting school. If she needs formation tutoring, Vessa Talori runs a workshop on the third day of each week. It's free."

Fiorda blinked. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then just nodded.

"Thank you, Signora."

She left. Enza closed the door behind her.

Katarina sat at her desk and stared at nothing for a while.

The tea was getting cold. She didn't drink it.

In another life, there would have been no contract. Vivienne Ross would have looked at Fiorda's delivery service, identified it as an inefficiency, and removed it. If Fiorda had shown up at the office, security would have escorted her out. The water hauler would have gone home with nothing and Vivienne would have finished her coffee and moved on to the next line item.

[... Maybe I should have just told her to screw off.] She sighed. [Seris would be angry at me, though.]

Then she pulled the next stack of paperwork toward her and got back to work.

Three more drainage surveys to review before dinner. The lower quarter phase one was on track. The school extension Giatta wanted was feasible if Vessa could modify the relay array for bedrock substrate, and Katarina was fairly sure she could.

She worked through the afternoon. The light shifted across her desk. At some point Enza brought fresh tea without being asked. Katarina stared at the cup for a second. Enza had been timing her tea. Enza, the woman who used to move chairs for a living, was now anticipating her Signora's cup schedule. Katarina made a mental note to give her a raise.

Brynn poked her head in about an hour before sunset.

"Ottavia wants you to know that the woman you met with left looking like she'd seen God. Oh, and that dinner is in twenty minutes." Brynn leaned against the doorframe. "I'm paraphrasing. There was more swearing."

"I offered her a fair contract."

"I'm sure you did. Seris is cooking tonight, by the way. She made something that isn't too salty for once, so come eat before Ottavia finds out and fixes that."

"Seris cooked? Voluntarily?"

"She's proud of you. She won't say it, so she's saying it with food." Brynn shrugged. "You know how she is."

[That's how they both work, actually. Brynn says it with words and tears. Seris says it with food and wine and showing up on balconies.]

Katarina almost smiled.

"Twenty minutes."

"That's my girl!"

Brynn left. Katarina looked at the paperwork, then at the door, then back at the paperwork. She closed the folder.

[You know what? No. Dinner first. Drainage surveys after... With any luck, I'll get there before Ottavia.]

Chapter 44: The Assessment

The assessor arrived on a Tuesday, which honestly felt kind of wrong.

Important things should happen on important-sounding days, was Kat's firm opinion. Tuesdays were for filing paperwork and regretting the decisions you made on Monday.

In any case, Lissara stepped out of the hired carriage, looked at the Montecardi estate, and did not appear impressed. She was human, tall, with dark hair pulled back tight, and she looked like she had never once laughed at a joke. She wore a grey Compasso uniform with no ornamentation and carried a leather folio and a single pen.

"Signora Montecardi."

"Assessor Lissara. Welcome to Vellasera."

"Thank you. Where will the demonstration be held?"

No small talk, no tea.

Katarina liked her immediately.

"The estate courtyard."

"Fine. Lead the way."

Brynn was waiting in the courtyard. She had been waiting since dawn. She had rearranged the practice equipment three times, swept the stones twice, and asked Katarina if she needed last-minute tips four times. Katarina had said no four times. Brynn had given the tips anyway.

Now she was standing at the courtyard's edge with her arms crossed and her jaw set, staring at Lissara like the woman was a hostile combatant instead of an academic with a pen.

Seris stood next to her, wine glass in hand at ten in the morning. Vessa was sitting on the courtyard wall with her legs dangling.

"The format is straightforward," Lissara said, opening her folio. "The applicant declares their cultivated paths and demonstrates proficiency in each. Most applicants declare one path. Occasionally two." She looked up. "Which paths are you declaring, Signora?"

"All four."

Lissara's pen stopped.

Her expression didn't change. But the pen stopped moving for a full two seconds before it started again.

[There it is. That's the reaction I wanted.]

"All four," Lissara repeated.

"Elements, Artisan, Grace, and Whispers. Yes."

"... Alright." Lissara wrote something down. "Begin when you're ready. Elements first, if you please."

Katarina stepped into the center of the courtyard and took a breath.

[Okay. This is a performance review. I've done a thousand of these. The only difference is that instead of a slideshow, I'm throwing fire.]

She started with fire. She ran the combat sequence Brynn had drilled into her and finished with a controlled burst from her open palm. About four feet of reach, steady, contained.

It wasn't powerful. A real combat cultivator would have filled the courtyard. But the flames started when Katarina told them to and stopped when she was done. Control over power. She'd take that trade every time.

[What's she writing? Is that a lot of writing or a little? Is more writing good? I can't tell. Her handwriting is tiny.]

She transitioned to water without pausing. She created moisture, compressed it into a suspended sphere, held it for five seconds, and then released it as a fine mist that settled across the flagstones. Earth next, reinforcing a section of the courtyard wall until hairline cracks sealed shut. And wind was last, a focused gust that swept the mist off the stones in a clean line.

Lissara wrote throughout without nodding or reacting.

[She's impossible to read. I've sat across from senators and I could read them better than this. This woman is a wall.]

"Artisan path."

Katarina took a clay tablet from the supply table.

She knelt, placed it flat on the ground, and began inscribing a preservation formation. The same type she and Vessa had been building for the sanitation system, scaled down to fit a six-inch tablet. Her fingers moved steadily, laying down the array lines one at a time without hesitation or correction.

She activated it. The tablet hummed with a low, stable resonance. A good job, in Katarina's opinion.

Lissara's eyebrow moved about two millimeters upward. She wrote something.

[Two millimeters! Was that approval? Was that surprise? Was that an involuntary muscle spasm? I CANNOT TELL.]

"Grace path."

If she had to be honest, this was her weakest. She picked up the bowl of silty water that Brynn had prepared, a sample from the lower quarter wells.

She held her hands over the bowl and channeled Grace qi into it. The silt settled, the grey faded, the water clarified until it was clean enough to drink.

A functional little ability. Helpful if, eh, Katarina ever got stuck in the wilderness or something (low chance of that though). Nothing spectacular, and Katarina knew it.

Lissara noted it without comment.

[Yeah, that one wasn't winning any prizes. Moving on.]

"Whispers."

[Here we go. This is the one that matters.]

Katarina sat down. She crossed her legs, rested her hands on her knees, and closed her eyes.

She needed full focus for this one. Grace was her wakest path. Whispers was her strongest.

The courtyard went quiet. Even Brynn stopped fidgeting.

Katarina entered that quiet space in her head where reality was something you could edit instead of something that happened to you. Her imagination. She pulled qi into her channels and pushed outward.

The illusion started with the estate. She had a clear objective in mind, a clear idea for whhat she wanted to present:

The Montecardi estate as she saw it in ten years.

Walkways repaired with clean-cut stone, pavilions restored with fresh paint, and new buildings she hadn't built yet: a warehouse by the port road, a formation workshop with wide windows, a bathhouse with steam rising from its roof.

And slowly, all of it began to appear around her.

Then Vellasera spread out beyond the estate walls! The harbor expanded with two new docks extending into the bay. The lower quarter with clean water fountains at every intersection and the pipe network glowing faintly with formation energy beneath the streets. Trade caravans on the roads and ships in the harbor flying the Montecardi sigil. The Greypass corridor alive with traffic.

People near and far hollered and stopped. No one knew what was happening. It filled the courtyard, and it filled the nearby streets. All of it. Every plan she'd ever put to paper, made visible and solid enough to walk through.

Seris gasped. Vessa's hands flew to her mouth. Brynn took a step forward with her eyes wide.

[... If you want to conquer something, anything, there is a crucial thing you need to have. Vision.] She inhaled and exhaled. [This is my vision.]

Her qi reserves were dropping fast and her temples pounded and she could feel the edges trying to fray. She locked them down. She held the illusion steady for five seconds, ten, fifteen, and it took everything she had but she did not let it shake.

Lissara stepped into it. She walked through the restored estate, past the new warehouse, along the expanded harbor. She looked at the formation workshop. She looked at the trade ships. She stood in the middle of Katarina's future for a long moment.

The illusion faded. Katarina opened her eyes. Her head was splitting, her qi reserves were nearly empty, and her hands were trembling in her lap.

Lissara walked back to her folio and wrote for a while. Then she closed the folio, tucked her pen into the binding, and looked at Katarina.

"Thank you for your time, Signora. The Accademia will be in contact."

She left without another word. The carriage pulled away.

The courtyard was quiet for about three seconds. Then Brynn grabbed Katarina by the shoulders.

"How did it go? What did she write? Did she like the fire? She didn't say anything about the fire. Was the fire good enough? What about the illusion? She walked into the illusion, Katarina, is that good? Is that bad?"

"Mother. I don't know."

"You DON'T KNOW?!"

"She has the emotional range of a brick wall. I've negotiated with Stellara Brevaine and I still couldn't get a read on this woman."

Brynn looked at Seris for help. Seris sipped her wine.

"She walked into it, amore. Assessors don't walk into demonstrations they're planning to fail."

"How do you know that?"

"I went to school, Brynn."

"You went to school years ago!"

"Eh, assessment protocol hasn't changed that much... Surely." Seris swirled her wine. "Trust me."

Brynn processed this. Her face went from panicked to cautiously hopeful to fully beaming in about four seconds.

"She walked into it! She WALKED INTO IT! That's good!"

"We don't know that for certain—"

"THAT'S GOOD!"

Katarina's legs were still shaky and her head felt like it had been packed with hot sand, but the knot in her chest was loosening. Seris was right. You didn't step inside an illusion and stand there looking at someone's ten-year plan if you thought it was garbage.

[I think I did it.]

She stood up and rolled her shoulders. Vessa was still sitting on the wall with her hands over her mouth and her eyes wet.

"You showed her everything," Vessa said.

"Yeah." Katarina walked over to her. "I did."

Then she grabbed Vessa around the waist, hoisted her off the wall, and slung her over one shoulder.

"KAT!"

Katarina kept going.

"I need to vent some stress."

"Vent some— oh." Vessa went from startled to grinning in half a second. She looked at Seris and Brynn from over Katarina's shoulder and waved.

"Bye~"

Seris raised her wine glass. Brynn gave a thumbs-up.

Chapter 45: Letters

Katarina reorganized her desk on Monday.

Then, se reorganized it again on Tuesday, this time by category instead of date, which was objectively better and kept her busy for almost forty minutes.

On Wednesday she audited the pantry. She counted the salt reserves twice and was halfway through a third count when Ottavia came in, took one look at her, and pointed at the door.

"Out."

"I-I'm just—"

"OUT."

Katarina left the pantry.

She tried to read the history assignments Aurelia had given her last month, made it three pages in, and realized she'd read the same paragraph four times without absorbing a word.

The problem was that there was nothing to do. For once, her own efficiency was working against her.

She'd sent the Compasso application, handled Coppara, and the sanitation project was running on schedule without her, which was exactly what a good manager should want and was driving her absolutely insane.

[I built something that functions independently. That's the goal. That's always been the goal. So why do I want to go reorganize the pantry again?]

She checked the Ledger four times. It had nothing new to tell her. She asked it to calculate potential Compasso curriculum structures and it returned "Speculative. Insufficient data." She asked it again an hour later. Same answer. She asked a third time out of spite.

Speculative. Insufficient data.

[You said that already.]

The Ledger didn’t care.

She tried asking it something useful.

[What’s the average acceptance rate for All-Path applicants?]

No historical precedent for All-Path applicants within available data.

[Of course not. I’m the first one in years. There IS no data. I’m the data.]

That didn’t make her feel better.

She reorganized the desk again. By date this time. She’d been right the first time.

Vessa found her pacing the study around noon.

"Okay, we’re leaving."

"I’m fine."

"You alphabetized the spice rack, Kat. Ottavia’s been swearing about it for twenty minutes." Vessa grabbed her hand and pulled. "You need sun and food... and to stop touching things that belong to other people."

"The spice rack was objectively disorganized."

"And now Ottavia can’t find the cumin. Come on, let’s go."

Katarina let herself be dragged out. She wasn’t proud of it.

[I am the Signora of House Montecardi and I am being led out of my own estate by the hand like a child who’s been inside too long.]

Vellasera was warm and loud. Everyone had somewhere to be, which made Katarina feel slightly better and slightly worse.

Vessa bought them fried squid from the harbor stall, the one run by the old woman who always gave Vessa an extra piece. They ate on the seawall with their legs hanging over the water.

"I’ve been working on something," Vessa said, licking oil off her fingers. "Temperature-regulating arrays. For wine transport."

"How?"

"Same principle as the purification relays, but instead of filtering contaminants, the array maintains a stable temperature range inside the container. Cold wine stays cold. Warm wine stays warm. No more spoilage from heat on the southern routes."

"What’s the energy draw?"

"That’s the problem. Right now it’s too high for anything bigger than a single cask. I need to figure out how to make the array self-sustaining, maybe tie it into ambient qi absorption, but the conversion rate is terrible at small scales." She popped the last piece of squid into her mouth. "I think I need a better substrate material. The clay tablets work for purification but they can’t hold a temperature differential without cracking."

"Have you tried stone? Granite has better thermal stability."

"Granite’s too dense. I’d need tools I don’t have." She shrugged. "I’ll figure it out."

Katarina watched her for a second. Vessa lit up when she talked about formation work. Same way Katarina lit up about trade logistics, except Vessa waved her hands around more.

[She’s brilliant. She doesn’t even know how brilliant she is.]

"What?" Vessa said, catching her staring.

"... You’ve got squid oil on your chin."

"Eh!?"

Vessa wiped it off with the back of her hand, missed entirely, and kept talking about substrate density. Katarina reached over and wiped it for her.

They walked through the textile market. Vessa tried on a scarf she didn’t need, Katarina told her it looked good, and Vessa bought it. She wore it out of the stall even though it was too warm for a scarf.

On the way to the tea house, the scrawny kid from the lower quarter spotted them. The one who’d called Katarina the toilet lady. She ran up and tugged on Katarina’s sleeve.

"Signora! The water at our house is clear now! My mama says I don’t have to boil it anymore!"

"That’s good. You shouldn’t have had to boil it in the first place."

The kid beamed at her like she’d handed her a bag of gold, then sprinted off. Vessa watched her go.

"The toilet lady does good work."

Katarina closed her eyes.

"I will pay you actual money to never call me that in public."

"How much?"

"Not enough to make this conversation worth having."

Vessa grinned and took her arm.

They ended up at the tea house, the one tucked into the alley that only locals knew about. The tea was too bitter, too hot, and exactly right.

"You’re quiet," Vessa said.

Katarina shrugged. She stared at her tea for a second.

"I keep thinking about what Pavona’s going to be like. The people there. Whether they’ll take me seriously."

"You made Stellara Brevaine take you seriously."

"Stellara’s one person. Pavona is a city full of people who’ve been preparing for this their entire lives. They had tutors. I had a wine-stained ledger and a gardener who didn’t garden." Katarina snorted. She wrapped her hands around the cup. "Also... I’m going to be weeks away from here for the first time."

Vessa blew on her tea. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she just smiled and bumped Katarina’s shoulder with hers.

"You’ll be fine."

[Well, she’s holding something back. That’s not like you, Vessa.]

Katarina filed it and didn’t push. She’d learned, over the years, that Vessa shared things when Vessa wanted to and not a second before. Kat wasn’t about to start pushing her now.

The letters arrived that evening.

A district courier showed up looking exhausted, her satchel stuffed with sealed envelopes for half the families in Vellasera. Academy season. Every school on the continent sent their responses at the same time.

Katarina took hers from Enza at the study door. The envelope was heavy, cream-colored, stamped with the Compasso seal in dark blue wax.

[Open it.]

She broke the seal.

Signora Katarina Montecardi,

The Compasso Accademia is pleased to inform you that your application for admission has been accepted.

She read it three times. The words kept rearranging themselves in her head and she needed them to hold still.

[I got in.]

She put the letter down on her desk, lined up with the edge, perfectly straight.

[I got in. The Compasso Accademia. The most prestigious merchant academy on the continent.]

She sat there for a moment. Then she stood up, walked to the door, opened it, and said, very calmly:

"I got in."

Brynn’s scream could probably be heard in Coppara.

What followed was ten minutes of Brynn lifting her off the ground, Seris kissing her whole face over and over again, Ottavia yelling congratulations from the kitchen while clanging pots together for some reason, and Enza standing in the hallway clapping politely. Brynn cried so hard she couldn’t talk. Seris cried but pretended she wasn’t, which was obvious to everyone because her mascara was running and she kept saying "I’m fine" while sniffling. Brynn picked up Seris too, one in each arm, and held them both while laughing and sobbing at the same time.

"My baby got into the Compasso!" Brynn choked out between sobs. "MY BABY!"

"Mama, please—"

"THE COMPASSO, SERIS! OUR DAUGHTER!"

"Yes, amore, I know, I'm standing right here with mascara on my face—"

"I'M SO PROUD OF HER I COULD DIE!"

"If you die I'm not raising her alone. She reorganized the pantry this morning, I can't handle that by myself."

Brynn put them both down, grabbed Katarina's face with both hands, and kissed her forehead so hard it echoed. Then she marched into the kitchen.

"Ottavia! We're having a feast!"

"With what food, Brynn? The food I planned for the week? You want me to cook all of it tonight?"

"I'll go buy more!"

"The market closed two hours ago!"

"Then I'll go OPEN it!"

Seris intercepted her at the door.

"Tomorrow, amore. We'll celebrate tomorrow."

"But our daughter got into the COMPASSO—"

"Tomorrow."

Brynn looked like someone had told her the sun wasn't coming up, but she conceded. She settled for picking Katarina up one more time, holding her against her chest, and whispering "I'm so proud of you, dumpling" into her hair.

[How embarrassing, mother,] she thought as she smiled.

When the chaos died down, Katarina went looking for Vessa.

She'd been suspiciously absent during the celebration. Katarina had noticed, filed it, and waited for the screaming to stop before investigating.

She found her on the balcony, sitting on the railing with a letter of her own in her hands. The envelope was smaller than Katarina's, darker paper, with a seal Katarina didn't recognize.

"Hey," Katarina said. "You missed the celebration. Brynn tried to reopen the market."

Vessa looked up. She was smiling, but it was... different. She held up the letter.

"I got accepted too."

"I figured. You-"

"To the Galliari Institute," Vessa finished.

Katarina blinked.

"...What?"

Chapter 46: The Ravine

The following day, they talked about it again.

Again. And again. And yet it didn't feel real.

"So... Yeah. It's called the Galliari Institute," Vessa said. "Their formation sciences program is the oldest on the continent. Small cohort. Like, maybe thirty students a year."

Katarina blinked.

"Yeah, that... sounds perfect for you."

She meant it, despite how shaken she sounded.

Vessa tilted her head with a smirk.

"You want to tell me what you actually think, or do you want to keep being weird about it?"

"I'm not being weird about it. I think it's great. I think you'll thrive there." Katarina paused. "I think their dormitory heating formations are substandard, but that's a separate issue."

"You already looked it up."

"I... may have glanced at it."

[I read their entire public records archive at three in the morning. Surely, that counts as a glance?]

Vessa squinted at her. Katarina smiled.

She spent the rest of that conversation being very supportive. She asked Vessa about the program. She nodded at the answers. She said "wow" and "that's interesting" at appropriate intervals. She was the absolute model of emotional maturity.

And she hated every second of it.

That night she stayed up until two in the morning reading everything she could find about the Galliari Institute. Faculty bios, facility reports, funding structure, dormitory heating system. She had strong opinions about the heating system.

The next day she was still being supportive. She told Vessa she was proud of her, which was true. She told Vessa the Galliari sounded amazing, which was also true but hurt to admit.

She lasted two days before she cracked.

"The Galliari Institute was founded a hundred and sixty years ago by a woman named Rossana Galliari, who was, by all accounts, a mediocre formation theorist with excellent real estate instincts," Katarina said, pacing Seris's study. "The faculty has twelve full-time instructors, three of whom haven't published original research in over a decade. Their substrate lab was renovated nine years ago but the equipment list hasn't been updated since, which means they're either running outdated tools or they're not reporting their acquisitions, and I don't know which is worse."

Seris was sitting in her chair with her wine, watching Katarina pace.

"Their alumni placement rate is strong, I'll give them that. Eighty-two percent of graduates find work within two years. But that number includes apprenticeships, which barely count, and it doesn't account for the fact that their most successful graduates transferred to other institutions before completing their final year."

"Katarina."

"Their dormitory reviews are mixed. Three complaints about the heating formations in the last five years. Three! That's a pattern, Mother."

"Katarina."

"Their library catalogue hasn't been updated in six years. Six! What kind of academic institution doesn't update its library catalogue? And their endowment is almost entirely dependent on two donor families, which means if either one pulls funding, the whole—"

"Baby."

Katarina stopped pacing.

Seris took a sip of wine.

"Talk to me about what's actually bothering you."

"I just told you what's bothering me. T-T-The heating formations, the endowment structure, the—"

"Katarina."

"...Fine."

"You're panicking because your girlfriend is going to a different school and you can't control it, so you're trying to find a reason why the school isn't good enough." Seris swirled her glass. "Because if the school isn't good enough, then Vessa shouldn't go. And if Vessa shouldn't go, she'll come to the Compasso with you instead. And then everything stays the same."

The study was very quiet.

"...The heating complaints are real."

"I'm sure they are, piccola." Seris patted the arm of the chair next to her. "Come and sit. Stop pacing. You're wearing a groove in my floor."

"Your floor is stone."

"You'd find a way." Seris waited until Katarina sat down. "You know what I did when Brynn told me she wanted to move to this canyon?"

"What?"

"I said yes and then I spent three weeks researching every canyon within a hundred miles to see if there was a better one I could steer her toward." Seris smiled. "There wasn't. This was the best one. I just needed to be the one who figured that out."

[... She is annoyingly like me.]

"The Galliari is a good school, Kat. Vessa chose well. And you'll survive being a short spirit ride apart."

"I know."

"You'll survive it dramatically and with many complaints, but you'll survive it."

Later that evening, Katarina had Vessa pinned against the desk in her study and was kissing her neck while Vessa's back crumpled the cost projections, which was going to be annoying later but was not currently a priority.

Vessa's fingers were in Katarina's hair, her breath coming fast. Everything was going very well until Katarina's mouth paused against Vessa's collarbone.

"... You know, their substrate lab hasn't been updated in nine years."

"Oh my GOD, Kat."

"Nine years, Vessa. You're going to show up and they're going to hand you a chisel and a rock."

"You have me on a desk right now," Vessa said as she cackled. "You have me on a desk, your hand is up my shirt, and you want to talk about substrate labs!?"

"The Compasso has a formation workshop. A good one. I checked. You could—"

Vessa grabbed her face with both hands, pulled her down, and kissed her hard enough to make the argument die mid-sentence. When Vessa pulled back, her eyes were bright and her grin was devastating.

"Stop talking."

"...Temporarily."

"Good." Vessa wrapped her legs around Katarina's waist and pulled her back down.

Somehow, they ended up back at that old ravine.

Right. When they were younger, Vessa used to drag Katarina out here to look for interesting stones, and Katarina would monologue at her like an anime villain.

Today, they sat on a huge boulder, legs dangling over the drop. The water below was turquoise and the wind coming up off it was cool and salty.

"I know you're worried," Vessa said.

"I conducted a thorough institutional analysis. That's different."

"You found their heating complaints, Kat."

"Those are public record."

Vessa bumped her knee against Katarina's.

"It's the best place for what I want to do. Their inscription methodology is completely different from what I've been teaching myself. They work with living substrates. Bone, shell, treated wood. Materials that hold qi differently than stone or clay." She turned to look at Katarina. "If I can learn that, the formation work we've been doing gets ten times more versatile. You know that."

"I do."

"The temperature arrays I've been stuck on? The substrate cracking problem? Living materials flex instead of cracking. That's the whole answer, Kat. I've been fighting against clay for two years and the solution is to stop using clay."

Katarina looked at the water.

"I know," she said. "I went through all four years of their curriculum looking for a reason to tell you not to go, and I couldn't find one."

"That must have been devastating for you."

"It was somewhat upsetting, yes."

Vessa laughed. Katarina didn't quite do that, but she nearly smiled.

[The problem isn't the school. The school is good. The problem is that for all these years, you've been ten minutes away.]

"Kat." Vessa's voice was gentle. "I looked up the distance before I applied. The Galliari campus is forty minutes from the Compasso on Spirit Rail."

Katarina looked at her.

"You looked it up before you applied?"

"Of course! I wasn't going to go somewhere I couldn't get to you."

[Oh.]

That landed harder than Katarina expected.

"Thirty if I run to the rail fast enough," Vessa added with cute little running motions.

They sat with that for a second. The water did its thing below them.

"How long is the Galliari program?" Katarina asked.

"One year. Intensive. They pack the whole curriculum into twelve months." Vessa shrugged. "It's going to be brutal, but I'd rather go hard for a year than spread it out over three like you."

At that, Katarina's eyes narrowed.

"One year?"

"One year. Then I'm done. I come home, or I set up shop in Pavona, or I go wherever you need me." She bumped Katarina's shoulder. "The Compasso is three years, right?"

"Standard track, yes."

"So I'll be done two years before you. I could come bother you at school for your last two years. Maybe I could appraise all your new girlfriends too."

Katarina looked at the water.

[One year for her. Three for me. She finishes and comes back, and I'm still there for two more years.]

Vessa was quiet for a moment. Then she leaned into Katarina's shoulder.

"Forty minutes, Kat. That's nothing."

"I know."

"We've survived worse."

"Yeah."

Katarina put her arm around Vessa's shoulders. The wind picked up and Vessa's hair blew into her face and she didn't move.

They'd sat on this boulder a hundred times. They'd sit here again when they came home for breaks. The rock wasn't going anywhere. Neither was the water, or the goat path back to the estate. That wouldn't change.

Other things would.

[One year for her. Three for me.]

She pulled Vessa closer.

[Three years is the standard track.]

The ravine was quiet. The water was blue. Vessa was warm against her side.

[I've never done anything the standard way in either lifetime. Why start now?]

Chapter 47: Vol. 2 - Epilogue

The weeks vanished so fast.

Katarina couldn't account for where they went. One day she was sitting on the ravine with Vessa talking about forty-minute walks and spirit rails, and the next she was standing in the Talori shop watching Vessa fold a tunic into a travel bag, wondering where the time went.

[...]

For the first time in so long, her mind was silent.

She picked up a shirt from the pile and folded it. Vessa took it, scoffed, refolded it differently, and put it in the bag. Katarina picked up the next one and folded it the same wrong way because she didn't know how Vessa liked her shirts folded, which felt like something she should have known by now. She felt like she should know everything about Vessa by now.

"You fold like a merchant."

"This is how you fold shirts."

"That's how you fold contracts. Shirts, babe, are allowed to be soft." She tucked the edges in. "See? Soft."

Katarina rolled her eyes.

Neither of them said much after that.

Camille came through every few minutes with something new. A jar of dried fruit. A packet of tea. A pair of socks that Vessa definitely already had but that Camille shoved into the bag anyway.

"Mama, I have socks."

"You don’t have these socks. These are the warm ones."

"It’s summer."

"It won’t be summer forever, Vessa."

Greta was in the other room going through a supply checklist.

"Inscription tools?"

"Packed."

"Charcoal sticks?"

"Yes, Mama."

"The good ones or the cheap ones?"

"The good ones."

"Both. Take both. And the fine-point set, the one your mother bought you last winter."

"Mama, I can’t fit—"

"Take both, Vessa."

Vessa caught Katarina’s eye and shook her head. Katarina almost smiled.

Slowly, the bag got heavier. More snacks from Camille, more supplies from Greta. Vessa protested and lost every argument and eventually stopped protesting, which was the smartest tactical decision anyone in the Talori household had made all day.

By the time they were done, the bag almost weighed more than Vessa did, and Camille was eyeing it like she was considering adding another layer.

"Mama. If you put one more thing in that bag I’m leaving it here and going naked."

"... Don’t tempt me. I’ll add a coat."

The spirit rail station was at the top of the canyon road, a twenty-minute walk uphill.

A small platform with a stone bench and a formation array embedded in the rail track that hummed constantly. According to Seris, Vellasera wasn't big enough for a proper station building. Just the platform, a posted schedule, and a ticket booth that was only staffed three days a week.

They walked up together. Katarina and Vessa in front, Seris and Brynn behind them, Camille and Greta behind them. Nobody was talking much.

Brynn was carrying Vessa's bag because Vessa had refused to let Katarina carry it and Brynn had simply taken it from both of them without asking. She had it slung over one shoulder like it weighed nothing, which it probably didn't to her. She hadn't said a word since they left the house.

The morning was clear. Katarina could see the whole bay from the canyon road. The harbor, the port, the lower quarter rooftops. Her town.

[This is fine. It's only one year.] She thought. [She'll be done in a year and, me? I'm going to finish this damn three-year program as quickly as I can.]

They reached the platform. The rail was due in fifteen minutes.

Vessa set her bag down and looked around. Katarina reached into her jacket.

"Here. Before I forget."

She held out a small clay tablet, about the size of her palm. The surface was covered in fine inscription work, tight and precise, the lines glowing faintly with residual qi.

Vessa took it. She didn't say anything for a second. Her thumb ran over the inscription lines, feeling the grooves.

"Kat." Her voice was quiet. "You made this?"

Katarina shrugged.

"I have to use my talents every now and then, don't I?"

"This is a paired communication stone." Vessa looked up, and her eyes were already doing that thing where they got too bright. "The resonance calibration on these takes weeks."

"Took me four." Katarina pulled the matching tablet from her other pocket and held it up. "If you, uh... channel qi into it and speak. I'll hear you on mine."

"You actually tested it?"

"Brynn took hers to the end of the Greypass corridor and yelled into it for twenty minutes. I heard every word." Katarina paused. "Most of it was about my punching form. Some of it was just her screaming to see if I could hear her screaming. I could."

Vessa looked at the tablet for a long moment. Then she closed her fingers around it and held it against her chest.

"Thank you."

"Ah, It's just a—"

Vessa kissed her.

Firm and quick, one hand on the back of Katarina's neck, the communication stone pressed between them. She pulled back with bright eyes, smiling.

Vessa turned to her parents. Camille grabbed her immediately and squeezed hard enough that Vessa wheezed. Greta waited her turn, then held Vessa's face in both hands, kissed her forehead, and said something quiet that Katarina couldn't hear.

Then Brynn came up. Brynn picked Vessa up off the ground entirely, which made Vessa yelp, and held her there for a few seconds before setting her back down.

"You listen to me." Brynn's voice was rough. She put both hands on Vessa's shoulders. "You walk in there on your first day and you show them what Vellasera's got. You hear me!?"

Vessa giggled.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good." Brynn ruffled her hair hard enough to undo half of it. "And eat properly. You're way too skinny."

"I'm not skinny, I'm lean."

"You're skinny. Eat."

Seris kissed both her cheeks and pressed a small bottle of wine into her hands.

"For your first night. Don't share it with anyone who doesn't deserve it."

The rail hummed a little bit louder all of a sudden.

Down the track, the carriage was coming, a long wooden car on enchanted rails, moving fast and smooth. It slowed as it approached the platform.

Vessa picked up her bag. She looked at Katarina for a long second, like she was memorizing her face, and Katarina looked back and tried very hard to keep hers steady.

"Tonight," Vessa said. "First thing. I'll tell you everything."

"You'll tell me about the campus and the labs and I'll pretend I haven't already read about all of it."

"Deal."

Vessa turned toward the carriage. The doors opened.

She took a step.

She was about to leave. About to head off to some annoyingly high-quality school while Katarina went her own way.

In that moment, only just then, it became real.

So much so that Katarina's body moved before her brain caught up. She crossed the platform in three strides and grabbed Vessa from behind, arms around her waist, face pressed into her shoulder. The bag dropped.

They were both surprised.

[What am I doing?]

Then, she felt it.

It was new. She'd never felt it before, in this life or the last. The feeling of her eyes starting to water up.

[Wait, no. Don't do that you shameless...]

Her eyes didn't listen. Suddenly, Katarina Montecardi was sobbing.

The full catastrophe. Ugly, heaving, face-hot, whole-body shaking, right there on a train platform in front of six people and a conductor who was awkwardly watching the situation.

The conductor looked at Seris. Seris held up a finger. One moment.

Vessa laughed. She was crying too now. She turned around in Katarina's arms and held her back just as hard.

"I'm forty minutes away."

"That’s forty more than you have been up until now."

[This is the most humiliating thing that has ever happened to me in either lifetime and I cannot stop.]

"Kaaaat." Vessa pulled back with a blush and a grin. "I have to get on the rail."

Katarina nodded. She didn’t let go.

"The conductor is staring at us."

"Let her stare."

Vessa laughed again. She put her forehead against Katarina’s.

"I love you, Kat."

Katarina closed her eyes. She stayed there for a second, forehead to forehead, breathing. The platform and the conductor and the carriage and the entire world reduced down to this one point of contact.

"I love you too."

[Seventeen years of careful reputation management, destroyed by one goodbye. Incredible.]

Finally, Katarina let go.

Vessa laughed, kissed her one more time, picked up her bag, and stepped onto the carriage.

The doors closed. The rail hummed louder. The carriage pulled away, and Katarina watched it go until it was a dot on the track and then nothing.

The platform was quiet.

Brynn put an arm around her. Seris put a hand on her back. Somewhere behind them, Camille was crying into Greta’s chest, which made Katarina feel slightly better about her own performance.

She wiped her face with both hands and took a breath.

"Nobody in this town is going to hear about this."

"Piccola," Seris said gently. "Ottavia is going to know before we get home."

"How?"

"She always knows."

Katarina looked at the empty track. The canyon wind blew through.

It already felt so fucking quiet.

Chapter 48: The Compasso

Brynn was crying before Katarina even picked up her bag.

"Mother, the rail doesn’t leave for another twenty minutes."

"I know!" Brynn grabbed her and crushed her into a hug so tight Katarina felt her spine pop. It was like a free trip to the chiropractor. "I just need to get the first round out now so I’m not a mess at the platform!"

"You are a mess at the platform. You’re a mess right now. We are at the platform."

Brynn sobbed harder.

[What a way to die. Smothered by tits and muscles before I even make it to school.]

"Okay," Katarina wheezed. "Mother. I need those ribs."

Brynn let go but kept both hands on Katarina’s shoulders, holding her at arm’s length and staring at her like she was trying to memorize her face.

"You remember what I taught you about stance?"

"I remember."

"Left foot forward, weight on the back leg, and if anybody tries anything, you go for the throat."

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"Please, mother. I’m attending a trade academy. For merchants. Nobody is going to try anything."

"You don’t know that! Rich kids are mean!"

[Well, she’s not wrong about that, actually.]

Seris stood a few feet back with her arms crossed and her chin up, looking completely composed. Her eyes were red, though. She'd been blinking a lot this morning and she hadn't touched her wine at breakfast, which was how Katarina knew she was genuinely upset. Seris treated wine the way other people treated water, after all.

"She'll be fine, amore," Seris said. To Brynn or to herself. Probably both.

"I KNOW she'll be fine! She's the smartest person alive! I'm not crying because I'm worried, I'm crying because my baby is LEAVING!"

[Your baby is seventeen and runs your household's finances. But sure, "baby".]

"And eat properly!" Brynn added, pointing at her. "Three meals. Real meals. Not whatever you do when you're working where you forget food exists for nine hours."

"I-I eat."

"You eat when Ottavia puts a plate in front of you and stands there until you finish. That's not eating, that's being fed. Like a baby bird."

For all her skill in debating, Katarina didn't have a rebuttal for that one.

Seris stepped in and took Katarina's face in both hands. Her palms were cool, her purple eyes were wet, and she held Katarina there for a long, embarrassing moment. Then she kissed her on both cheeks.

"Make them all feel stupid, piccola."

"That's the plan."

"And write to us."

"I will."

Seris smiled. Katarina thought, very briefly, that if Seris actually started crying she would miss the rail on purpose.

Thankfully, she didn't. Seris held it together all the way to the platform. Brynn did not. Brynn blew her nose into her sleeve, saluted, and then started crying again.

Katarina rolled her eyes, grinned at the two of them, and waved goodbye from the rail car window until Vellasera was just a smear of red rock and blue water behind her.

Then the grin faded, and she sat in her seat for a while without doing anything at all.

[... Just like that, huh?]

She pulled out Ottavia's packed lunch and ate it early. Too salty, obviously.

Perfect.

The Spirit Rail was fast.

Katarina had read about the engineering, the qi-infused tracks and the formation arrays that reduced friction to almost nothing, but reading about it and sitting in a seat while the entire world blurred past were two very different things. The canyon country she'd grown up in gave way to golden plains within the first hour. Then rolling hills dotted with farmsteads. Then, around midday, actual forest, thick and green. Vellasera didn't have trees like this.

There were other passengers in her car. A pair of human merchants arguing about grain futures. Katarina eavesdropped for ten minutes. They were both wrong.

A Valdari woman with green skin was dozing against the window across the aisle, her tunic open enough that Katarina could see the full swell of her tits rising and falling with each breath. Katarina looked at that for exactly three seconds, then looked at the ceiling, then looked at it again.

There was also an elf sitting a few rows up. Katarina had never seen one up close. She was tall and narrow, completely buried in whatever she was reading. Katarina could've set the seat next to her on fire and she wouldn't have noticed. Her skin was pale gold and her features were sharp, like she'd been carved rather than born. Pretty, objectively speaking, but in an oddly unreal way. Like a vase you weren't supposed to touch.

She closed her eyes, letting herself relax for a bit.

When it came into view, Pavona hit her like a wall.

The rail pulled into a station built into the side of a cliff, and when Katarina stepped out onto the platform, the city unfolded below her in terraced layers of white stone and colored tile, dropping down toward a bay so blue it made Vellasera's water look muddy.

There were bridges connecting the tiers, some wide enough for carriages and some just narrow walkways strung between buildings. Everything was built tall and close together.

And there were people everywhere. Well-dressed people. High collars, structured shoulders, and fabrics that probably cost more than Katarina's entire wardrobe. Humans, elves, and even Valdari with actual clothes on.

A few of the Valdari were still very much Valdari, though. One woman walked past Katarina in a dress that was technically an outfit but her tits were just out. Full

presentation. She walked with complete confidence, like the dress was doing exactly what she'd paid for it to do.

Katarina wiped her drool away.

She followed the directions from her acceptance letter through three tiers of the city, up a long set of stairs that wound around the side of a hill, and arrived at the Compasso Accademia.

Oh, the building was enormous. Three connected wings of pale stone wrapped around a central courtyard with a fountain in the middle.

The main entrance had the school's crest carved above it, a compass wrapped in a thorny rose, over an open ledger.

Katarina walked up to the admissions desk and gave her name.

The woman behind the desk checked her list and said:

"Montecardi. Third floor, east wing. Room 314."

Third floor east wing turned out to be the top floor of the oldest part of the building, at the end of a hallway where the ceiling was lower and the stone was darker and there was exactly one window that faced a wall.

Room 314 was small. Two very narrow beds, a desk, a wardrobe that didn't close all the way, and a draft coming from somewhere Katarina couldn't identify.

[They gave the minor house Signora the broom closet. Naturally.]

It was so petty it was charming, in a way.

She set her bag down on the bed and sat next to it.

Vivienne Ross had started her own career in a cubicle that smelled like mold and someone else's lunch. She'd survived worse than a drafty room. And she'd turned that cubicle into a corner office on the sixty-second floor.

[Room 314 it is. Let's see what I can do with you.]

Before she could settle in, though, the door opened.

Katarina turned.

The girl standing in the hallway was an elf. Short for her kind, which still put her a few inches taller than Katarina, with auburn hair braided over one shoulder and amber eyes.

"Um. Hi." She held a hand up awkwardly. "I'm Pirra."

"Hello," Katarina replied back, holding back the urge to ask "so, why are you here?"

Pirra pointed at the other bed.

"That's, um. That's mine."

Katarina blinked.

"Oh."

"So I guess we're..."

"Roommates."

"Yes. That." She stepped inside carefully, like the room might change its mind about letting her in. "I got here about an hour ago but I went to look around and then I came back and you were here, so. Hi."

"Katarina." She glanced at Pirra's bag on the other bed. It was neatly packed. Organized. That was a good sign. "They really crammed us in here, huh?"

"Yeah... I think it's where they put people who aren't... you know."

"Important?"

"I was going to say 'connected,' but yes."

[Ah, she's more clever than she looks.]

"Well, the draft is free of charge, so there's that."

Pirra laughed. It came out startled, like she hadn't expected to.

"The window faces a wall, but technically it's a window."

"How luxurious."

"We're very blessed." Pirra giggled timidly and fidgeted with her braid.

Already, Katarina felt a seed of respect growing for this girl. She was clearly a shy mess, and yet here she was, trying to crack jokes and banter with her a bit.

[She’s trying. Talking to people clearly isn’t her strong suit, but she’s trying. If you can’t respect that, what can you respect?]

"I should probably tell you," the elf continued, "everyone already knows who you are."

"What?"

Now, that was something Katarina hadn’t expected.

"T-T-The Valdari with the All-Path affinity..." A bit of Pirra’s resolve cracked upon hearing Katarina’s reaction, but she pushed through. "People have been talking since the enrollment list went up."

[Wonderful. A reputation before I’ve even unpacked. My list of enemies and allies may have been filled out already without my knowing.]

"All good things, I hope."

Pirra opened her mouth, closed it, and then said, "Mostly," which was honest enough that Katarina decided she liked her more now.

"That’s encouraging."

"There’s a girl two floors down who called you a ’provincial novelty.’ I think she’s from one of the big Pavona houses."

"Fantastic. I’ll send her a gift basket."

Pirra stared at her for a second, trying to figure out if she was joking. Katarina gave nothing away.

"Are you heading to orientation?" Katarina asked.

"Oh! Yes. I was going to go now, actually. Do you want to walk together? I mean, you don’t have to. I just figured since we’re sharing the broom closet we might as well..."

Katarina stood up before she could finish. She gestured to the door.

"Lead the way."

They walked together.

Pirra was from a city called Verezza in the elven territories. Her family ran a mid-sized textile operation that was, much like Pirra herself, respectable but not powerful, and

she'd gotten into the Compasso on exam scores alone. No legacy, no connections, no safety net. She talked about it openly, without any self-pity. Just laying out the facts.

The orientation hall was a tiered lecture room that could seat about two hundred, and it was almost full. Katarina and Pirra found seats near the middle.

The student body was mixed.

Valdari, humans, elves, even a few races she couldn't immediately identify. Most of them looked older than her, early twenties at least, and most of them had money. You could always tell. They sat like the seats had been built for them specifically.

[Half of you are going to be working for me in ten years. The other half are going to wish you were.]

And then there was the aevari.

Katarina's natural enemy, if the history books were to be believed. She was sitting alone in the back corner of the top tier, away from everyone else. She had silver hair, pale skin that glowed faintly, and white wings folded tight against her back. Her face was completely blank and nobody was sitting within three seats of her in any direction.

[An angel and a demon attending the same school, huh?]

Katarina filed that away. An aevari voluntarily attending a school in Valdari territory, albeit a cosmopolitan one but still, alone, with no visible allies and a three-seat buffer zone around her. She was either here for a very good reason or running from a very bad situation. Either way, interesting.

Before Katarina could think more about it, a woman walked to the front of the hall and the room went quiet.

She was Valdari, middle-aged, with dark red skin and grey hair cropped close. She wore a high-collared coat with the Compasso crest on the breast and she stood at the lectern like she owned it and everything else in the building.

"Good morning. I'm Guild Mistress Renata Fossaverde. You may call me Guild Mistress, Mistress Fossaverde, or ma'am. You may not call me Renata. You are here because you showed aptitude. Aptitude is not competence. Competence is not mastery. You will learn the difference in due time."

From there, she laid out the curriculum.

Trade law. Negotiation theory. Supply chain management. Cultivation applications in commerce. Formation logistics. Cross-cultural trade protocols. Two years of material designed to break people.

Katarina listened and sorted. Most of it was material she already understood from her previous life, translated into this world's framework. Trade law would have new wrinkles. Negotiation theory she could teach if she wanted to. The cultivation-commerce integration courses were the real prize. Those were new, and those were what she'd come here for.

Fossaverde continued.

"Your first year will culminate in the Dimostrazione." She said the word like it deserved its own paragraph. "You will develop a commercial venture. A real one. You will present it to a panel of established merchants, guild leaders, and Consortium representatives. They will evaluate your proposal on viability, originality, and execution. The top performers will receive funding offers, mentorship placements, and, in exceptional cases, direct sponsorships."

She looked out over the hall.

"The bottom performers will be politely asked to reconsider whether this is the right institution for them."

The room was very quiet. Pirra had gone pale next to her.

"That's... intense," Pirra whispered.

"It's a pitch competition," Katarina whispered back. "They want us to build a real business and present it to real investors."

Katarina leaned back in her seat.

She already had the pitch. She'd been building it for years, one pipe and one formation array at a time, in a little port town that most of the people in this room had never heard of. A sanitation system that used basic water-channeling formations to move waste out of homes and into treatment basins. Cheap to build, cheaper to maintain, and applicable to every city, town, and village on the continent.

[Toilets, baby. Indoor plumbing. The invention that saved more lives on Earth than every medicine combined. And nobody on Caldera has thought of it yet.]

She looked around the room at two hundred students who were probably going to pitch luxury goods, rare cultivation materials, or some clever new trade route.

[You're all going to lose to toilets and you don't even know it.]

She smiled.

[But... What else could I bring to the world?]

Chapter 49: Pecking Order

The first week taught Katarina exactly how much she didn’t matter here.

Back in Vellasera, she was the Signora. People said hello to her on the street. Merchants came to her with proposals. Stellara sent her veiled threats dressed up as compliments. People moved when she walked into a room.

She had weight there.

At the Compasso, she was a seventeen-year-old from a port town nobody had heard of.

"So, House Montecardi," said a girl named Fiametta during the first group exercise in Trade Law. She was Valdari, Pavona-born, with cheekbones sharp enough to cut stone. Six generations of people who married well will do that. "That’s in... where, exactly?"

"Vellasera. Southeastern coast."

"Oh! The fishing village?"

She said it without malice. That was the worst part.

She wasn’t being cruel. She wasn’t trying to be dismissive (Kat knew what that sounded like). Vellasera was genuinely, sincerely, just a fishing village to her. A dot on a map she’d glanced at once during a geography lesson and immediately forgotten.

"We also have vineyards," Katarina said with a little polite smile.

"How lovely!" Fiametta smiled and, presumably, someone more interesting caught her eye.

[I restructured the regional trade economy by the time I was thirteen. But sure. Fishing village. That’s what we are.]

The hierarchy at the Compasso made itself obvious within the first two days, actually.

The old Pavona families sat at the top. Their kids moved through the halls like they’d grown up here. They knew which professors would bend the rules, which study rooms had the best light, and which dining hall table was unofficially reserved for which house.

Below them were the human merchant heirs. These ones were interesting, at least. They didn’t have the Pavona polish, but they had something the old families sometimes lacked: actual commercial instincts. Their parents ran real operations across the central kingdoms and they’d grown up watching trade happen at scale. A few of them were sharp. Most of them were just loudly wrong, though.

Two of them, in particular, were impossible to ignore.

Katarina knew their names from the class rosters, but she hadn't gotten close enough to match faces to names without looking like she was trying to get close, which she refused to do on principle. But they were in at least three of her classes and every time they walked in, the room shifted. Conversations got louder. People sat up straighter.

[Noted. Learn who those two are.]

Then there was everyone else. Minor house kids, scholarship students, a handful of foreigners. Pirra. Katarina. The aevari, sitting alone, always sitting alone, radiating a very clear signal that roughly translated to "don't you dare."

And at the bottom of it all, picked last for the first group exercise, standing in the Trade Law classroom while Fiametta assembled her team of people she already knew: Katarina Montecardi, Signora of a fishing village... with vineyards!

[Vivienne Ross got picked last for a group project once. In business school. She ended up running the company that bought her professor's consulting firm.]

She didn't sulk. She joined her assigned group, did the work, and said nothing memorable. The first week was for watching, after all.

There was, however, a lingering frustration. The plan had been to move fast. Really fast.

After all, Katarina had already decided she'd compress the Compasso's three-year program into one. One year of absorbing everything this place had to teach her about formation logistics and cultivation-commerce integration, and then back to Vellasera, back to Brynn, back to Seris, and back to Vessa.

But you couldn't speed-run a social hierarchy (at least, not in the upwards direction). And right now the social hierarchy had her pinned at the bottom, which meant every professor was going to see "Montecardi" on her papers and think "who?"

[Fine. I've started from zero before. I'll start from zero again.]

Ethics of Commerce was taught by a human woman named Professor Dantello.

She was compact, direct, and had a voice that could cut through a room full of talking students without getting any louder. She also had the single most annoying teaching method Katarina had ever encountered, and Katarina had sat through two lifetimes' worth of bad presentations.

"Pair assignments. Non-negotiable. I pick the pairs."

She read down the list.

"Montecardi and Caelestis."

Across the room, the aevari looked up, and their eyes met. It lasted about two seconds.

The aevari's expression stayed blank, but there was a flicker behind those pale blue eyes. Katarina guessed that she felt like she had just been handed a liability and was already calculating how to minimize the damage. She seemed like that type of person.

[Wonderful. She's thrilled.]

"Caelestis", by the way, turned out to be her surname. Her given name was Evangelina. She just showed up to the library before the next class and sat down across from Katarina.

No hello. No introduction. She just opened the assignment brief and said, "I'll take sections one through three. You take four and five."

Katarina looked at the breakdown. Sections one through three were the analytical core. Four and five were the summary and citations.

[She just gave me the busywork. Ugh.]

"I'm fine with one and two," Katarina said. "You can have three through five."

"That's not what I said."

"I know."

They looked at each other. Eva's face gave away absolutely nothing away aside from a permanent, mild annoyance. Katarina had negotiated with Stellara Brevaine, who could smile at you while dismantling your entire life, and even Stellara occasionally blinked. Eva didn't blink. She just sat there, perfectly still, like a painting that... happened to be annoyed with you.

Finally, she sighed.

"Why do you want one and two?"

"They're the analytical sections. I'm far better at analysis than I am at citations."

"Everyone's better at analysis than citations. That's why I assigned them to myself."

[Did she just say she's better at analysis than me?]

"Besides, I picked the more difficult sections. You should be thanking me."

Katarina almost laughed. She didn’t, but it was close.

She could have pushed. She knew how to push. She’d spent thirty-two years pushing people in rooms exactly like this one and winning.

But she didn’t know Eva yet. She didn’t know what she wanted, what she was afraid of, or why she was at a Valdari trade school sitting in a three-seat quarantine zone. Pushing blindly was bad strategy.

So Katarina decided this was a "pick your battles" kind of moment, smiled, said "Sure," and let her have it.

For now.

Eva finished her half in twenty minutes. She slid the pages across the table, stood up, and left without saying goodbye.

[Well, that was... something.]

Katarina did her sections. They were fine. She made them better than fine out of spite, but she didn’t go out of her way to show Eva up.

Not yet, anyway.

She found Pirra in the courtyard after, eating a pastry that was bigger than her hand and looking more relaxed than she had all week.

"How’d the Ethics pairing go?" Pirra asked.

"I got the aevari."

Pirra winced.

"Oof."

"She’s... efficient."

"That’s a very diplomatic way of putting it. I heard she hasn’t said more than ten words to anyone since orientation."

"Ah, well, she said at least fifteen to me. I feel special."

Pirra snorted.

"Was she at least nice about it?"

"She told me I should be thanking her for giving me the easy sections."

"... Was she joking?"

"Oh, I don't think this girl's said a 'joke' in her entire life."

Pirra looked like she wanted to say something sympathetic but couldn't figure out how to phrase it, so she just took another bite of her pastry and they started walking toward the east wing.

Katarina was mid-sentence when she saw her.

There was a girl lounging on a stone bench near the common hall entrance with one leg up and one leg dangling off the side. She had pale skin, dark hair pulled into a messy bun, and two pointed cat ears poking out of the top of her head. A long tail with a tuft of dark fur at the tip was draped lazily over the back of the bench.

No fur on the rest of her, though. Just the ears, the tail, and a body the Compasso uniform was losing a war against. Her skirt had ridden up to the point where Katarina could see most of her thighs, and her shirt was unbuttoned enough to show the tops of her tits pressing together. She was reading something and not paying attention to anyone, which made it worse. She just looked like that by default.

Katarina's foot caught on a big rock.

She stumbled, caught herself, and nearly walked into some human boy who had to dodge her.

"Sorry," Katarina said. She was still looking at the bench.

[... Damn, she's fine.]

"You good?" Pirra asked.

"I'm great."

She could practically hear Vessa laughing at her from two hundred miles away.

She straightened up and kept walking.

"Trade Infrastructure is next," Pirra said, checking her schedule.

"Good," Katarina said.

Now that was a class she was looking forward to.

Chapter 50: Cold Storage

Trade Infrastructure was taught by a Valdari woman named Professora Pelegatta, whose lecture hall was packed by the time Katarina got there.

That was a good sign. Back at Vellasera, the only classes that packed out were the ones where Brynn was demonstrating, in excruciating detail, how to break a kneecap.

Here, in an auditorium three hundred miles from home, people had actually shown up to talk about cargo. At nine in the morning. On purpose.

Clearly, it meant the professor knew what she was doing.

She found a seat near the back and took stock. Most of the room was clearly from Pavona, which she'd expected. A cluster of human merchant heirs down the middle, which she'd also expected. A handful of other Valdari scattered across the rows, which had been a pleasant surprise in her first week and was now just a number she noted. No sign of the silver-haired aevari, though.

Pelegatta put the problem on the board. Six-month caravan route, perishable goods, thirty percent spoilage rate. Cut the losses. Go.

Hands went up immediately.

"Bigger preservation arrays at each waystation," said someone near the front. Pelegatta nodded and wrote it down.

"Faster carriage lines," said another. "Cut transit time by a third."

Also written down.

A Pavona girl two rows ahead raised her hand very confidently and said, "Contract with a reputable sect for certified cold storage relays. The Jadebloom Pavilion offers..."

Pelegatta cut her off with a wave.

"Not interested in sect contracts today. Give me something that doesn't require paying another house for the privilege."

The Pavona girl flushed and sat down.

Katarina waited. She was sitting with her arms folded and her boredom on full display, which she knew was probably rude, but she also knew that professors pretending not to

notice the bored student were actually watching the bored student very closely. It was the oldest trick in the lecture hall. Vivienne Ross had used a version of it on VPs for years.

"Signora Montecardi."

[I knew it.] She resisted the urge to grin.

"Yes, Professora?"

"You've had your arms folded for the last four minutes. Either you have an opinion or you're cold. I'd like to know which."

A few people laughed. Katarina had not been cold.

"I have an opinion."

"Would you like to share it with the class, or would you like me to keep pretending I haven't noticed?"

[Oh, she's fun.]

"Sharing sounds better."

"It usually does. Come down here."

Katarina stood up, walked down to the board, and picked up a piece of chalk.

She had been thinking about this since the first week. Not the homework problem, mind you. The actual problem.

Every merchant house on Caldera lost money to spoilage. Preservation formations worked, sure, but they needed regular qi upkeep. Basically, it was like casting a spell on something to make it cold, and then having to continue reapplying that spell periodically to keep it cold.

Cold storage sects existed, which provided that exact service, but they charged a premium. What this world needed was simple:

Air conditioning.

And Kat had ideas.

Katarina drew a rectangle on the board.

"A container. Standardized dimensions, so they stack on any wagon or ship. Walls are double-layered. Inner layer contains a preservation array. Outer layer is an insulation

array. The two feed off each other. The preservation array pulls ambient heat out, the insulation array dumps it through a one-way vent."

She drew the arrays as rough circles with lines between them.

"It would have to be completely self-sustaining. Arrays continually moving qi with no endpoints. No need to pay for people to reapply the arrays. Then, you just pack it, you ship it, you open it at the destination."

The room was very quiet.

She turned around. Pelegatta had stopped writing. Her pen was still touching the paper but she wasn't moving it. She stared at the board for a long second. Then at Katarina. Then back at the board.

Two of the human girls, the ones who always walked into rooms and changed the temperature, were looking at each other. Katarina caught names on their notebooks this time. Cosima. Naveena.

Cosima's eyebrow was up. Naveena's mouth was slightly open.

[Didn't see that coming, did you?]

"I'm not saying I could build one today," Katarina added. "I'm just sketching the idea."

"Signora Montecardi," Pelegatta said, "where did you learn to design formations this efficiently?"

"I made it up."

"When."

"This morning. On the walk over."

A student in the front row was turned all the way around in her seat to stare at Katarina, which was rude, but, in fairness, Katarina probably would have done the same.

"... Sit down, Signora."

Katarina sat.

Pelegatta moved on to the next hand. Someone was proposing enchanted oxen. It was, frankly, not as exciting.

After class, Katarina was packing her bag when Pelegatta cleared her throat.

"A word."

Katarina stayed put. The last of the students filed out. Cosima glanced back at her on the way. Naveena did not.

"You're on my roster as a twelve-month candidate," Pelegatta said. She didn't sound impressed about it. "Three-year program in one year. I don't see that often."

"I imagine you don't."

"The students who request it are usually wrong about how fast they can move."

"Noted."

"Are you wrong about it?"

"No."

Pelegatta put her pen down. She looked at Katarina for a long second, and Katarina got the impression of being weighed.

"Why?"

Katarina had a dozen answers ready. My girlfriend is at Galteri. My house still needs me. I'm bored already.

She picked the one that was none of those.

"I'm a naturally efficient person."

"That's a boring answer, Signora."

"It's an honest one."

Pelegatta gave a small, unreadable hum.

"Signora indeed."

Then she turned back to her papers, which meant Katarina was dismissed.

Katarina left.

She had a container to build. Now that she'd sketched it out, she was eager to see if she could actually do it.

The formation workshop was in the west wing, two floors down, behind a door with a brass plate that said VANTA and nothing else.

Katarina knocked.

The door opened about eighteen inches. A woman looked up at her from roughly waist height. She was a dwarf with grey hair cut very short and forearms as thick as Katarina's thighs. She was scowling like she'd just been woken up from a nap.

"What."

"Good afternoon, Professora. I was hoping to get access to the workshop for an independent project."

"Name."

"Katarina Montecardi."

"Year."

"First."

The scowl deepened.

"Show me."

Katarina held up her sketch. She'd redrawn it after Pelegatta's class into something cleaner than the chalkboard version. The container, the double-layered arrays, the vent system.

Vanta looked at it.

"Who drafted this?"

"I did."

"When."

[Okay, she and Pelegatta have the same rhythm.]

"This morning."

"Hm." Vanta looked up at her without moving her head, which was an impressive feat of neck geometry. "Independent projects require a formal proposal with technical specifications. And a faculty endorsement."

"Understood. I can have the specs drafted by..."

The dward made used her qi and pushed Kat out with wind.

Then the door shut.

[... Alright. Endorsement it is, then.]

Pelegatta was where Katarina had left her, still grading. She didn't look up when Katarina walked back in.

"Professora Pelegatta."

"Back so soon."

"I'd like your endorsement for workshop access. I'm going to build the container."

Now Pelegatta looked up.

"No."

"May I ask why?"

"I don't endorse first-semesters."

"I'm not a first-semester. I'm a twelve-month candidate."

"We've already covered that. Twelve-month candidate is not a rank, Signora. It's an ambition."

[... Ouch.]

"And ambitions don't get workshop access," Pelegatta said. "Finished projects do. The distance between those two things is where most of your classmates are going to live for the next three years."

"What would it take to close the distance?"

Pelegatta set her pen down and sighed. She had obviously answered this question many times before, and she was not going to enjoy answering it now.

"I have been teaching at the Compasso for thirty years. In those thirty years, I have watched bright young women draw me pictures of machines that don't exist, and I have watched most of them fail to build a single one. A sketch is not a project. A good idea is not a project. I endorse students who bring me something I have not seen in thirty years of being in this building."

"And what would that look like?"

"If I could describe it, Signora, I would have seen it already."

[Fair point.]

"Understood."

"Is it."

"I think so, yes."

Pelegatta picked her pen back up.

"Then close the door on your way out."

Katarina nodded, thanked her, and walked out.

The corridor was empty. She walked slow, hands in her uniform pockets, already working the problem.

Vanta wanted an endorsement. Pelegatta wanted a miracle in exchange for said endorsement.

The container was a good idea, but Pelegatta had seen good ideas. She'd seen thirty years of good ideas, and apparently none of them had impressed her enough to put her name on.

[Okay. So what haven't you seen, Professora?]

The Ledger flickered.

Projects endorsed by Prof. Pelegatta (lifetime): 47.

Projects completed: 41.

Projects commercialized at scale: 0.

[Zero?]

Correct. Academic prototypes. None scaled beyond demonstration.

[So she’s never endorsed anything that actually became a good product.]

Suddenly, Katarina was beginning to understand.

Simply put, this woman had her heart broken too many times by ideas that seemed neat but just didn’t sell.

Katarina’s pace picked up. Her boots echoed down the empty hall.

Her brain was already running the numbers, happy to have a real problem to chew on. The tightness in her chest from the last week and a half, the homesickness, the Vessa-shaped ache, all of it quieted down. This was what her head was built for.

She didn’t need to build a better container. No, she needed to build a container with a market behind it before she ever set foot in the workshop.

A buyer. A contract. A route. Proof that when the prototype came off the bench it was already going somewhere, already making someone money, already too inevitable to ignore.

Pelegatta had seen thirty years of students who could make things.

She had never, however, endorsed a student who could sell them.

[... Oh, Professora. You have no idea who just walked into your office.]