CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 51: Artigiana

The tea stall in the south courtyard was the closest thing the Compasso had to neutral ground. Every clique came through it, nobody owned a table, and the tea was mediocre enough that it wasn't worth fighting over.

After so many years of Ottavia's cooking? Kat barely noticed the taste.

"So she shut the door on you," Pirra said.

"Indeed she did. With wind qi, in my face. The woman didn't even stand up to do it."

"Wait, she qi'd you?"

"She did, in fact, qi me."

Pirra pressed her lips together. She was, clearly, trying not to laugh and losing badly.

It was cute.

"Sorry, it's just, I've never heard of Vanta qi'ing anyone. I would have thought that would be reserved for third-years who try to sneak in after hours."

"Well, I'm honored, then."

"Kat, you've been here a week."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"And you're trying to build a self-regulating insulated cargo container, for a woman who, and I'm quoting you now, has not seen anything impressive in thirty years."

"When you put it like that, it sounds worse."

"Kat, when you put it like anything, it sounds worse."

"Well, now that's just rude."

"Everyone in this academy is rude, Kat, that's the whole point of Compasso. You're not supposed to fight the rude. You're supposed to survive it until you graduate."

"Well, where’s the fun in that?"

"The fun is in graduating, obviously!"

Katarina shrugged and took a sip.

Suddenly, a chair scraped back. Pirra looked in its direction and Katarina turned.

The catgirl from the common hall bench was sliding into the seat next to her, uninvited and completely at ease.

"Hi, there~"

"... Hi."

"You’re Katarina, yes? Montecardi, Vellasera. Triple the minimum class credits, twelve-month track, and apparently you just tried to break into the formation workshop on day five."

"... That’s quite a lot of information you’re privy to."

"I’m Tavia Rinossa. I pay attention, and I also eavesdrop, for context." Tavia leaned forward, her elbows on the table, and her uniform’s neckline dipped quite a bit. "So, you’ve been the talk of the academy. Did you know that?"

"Really now? I had no idea."

"Mhm. The old families think you’re showing off, the humans think you’re insane, and the professors have a little pool going on whether you’ll make it past midterms."

"And what’s your position?"

"I’m finding it in real time."

[... Huh.]

Katarina couldn’t help but smile. She’d spent a week being the fishing village girl, and apparently, half the academy had been taking notes on her.

"Anyway, I like what I’ve heard. I’ll see you around."

"Oh, will you?"

"Probably in the common hall, possibly in the library, occasionally in your line of sight."

Then Tavia got up and left.

Pirra waited three seconds before she leaned across the table, looked pointedly at where the tail had been, and whisper-yelled:

"She was flirting with you!"

"Oh, was she really?"

"Kat, that was not flirting, that was a public proposition, with her tail, on your neck, in front of your friend."

Kat smiled.

"So, we've graduated from 'roommates' to 'friends' already?"

At that, Pirra blushed hard.

"D-D-Don't change the subject!"

"I'm not changing the subject, I'm gathering intel."

The Ethics presentation was that afternoon.

Eva was already at the front of the classroom when Katarina walked in, arranging her notes in a very precise stack on the lectern, and she didn't bother looking up.

"Are your sections complete?"

"Hi, Eva, I'm great, thanks so much for asking."

"Are. Your. Sections. Complete?"

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"Yes, they are."

"And cited?"

"Meticulously."

"In the format I sent you."

"Eva, honestly..."

Evangeline finally looked up, one pale blue eye visible over the top of her lecture cards.

"What?"

"I did the work and I did it well. There's no need for the interrogation."

Eva stared at her for a long second, long enough that Katarina almost thought she was going to get a response, maybe even a real one. Then Eva just went back to her notes.

[Great chat, truly.]

The presentation went well, though. Eva delivered her sections in the same flat tone she used for everything, and Katarina delivered hers with enough personality to remind the room there were actual living beings involved.

Dantello nodded along. When they finished, she said:

"Excellent. Top marks."

Katarina turned to say something to Eva, but Eva had already picked up her notes and started walking, and she was halfway to the door by the time Katarina's mouth finished opening.

"... Okay, then."

[Would it kill you to say good job? Or look at me? Literally anything?]

The door closed behind her.

[... Fine. Be like that.]

Katarina gathered her own notes, slowly. In her old life, nobody had ever been able to afford to snub Vivienne Ross, and yet Eva, apparently, had made her calculation on day one and concluded that Katarina Montecardi could do nothing for her.

It was a little insulting, but also, frankly, kind of interesting. People who were that indifferent usually had a reason, and reasons were leverage in disguise.

[We'll see, Eva.]

The communication stone lit up just after nightfall.

Katarina was sitting cross-legged on her bed with her back against the wall when Vessa's voice came through.

"Hey, you."

"Hey."

"So how’s the Signora doing in the big city?"

"Oh, excellent. I got shut out of the workshop, snubbed by my pairing partner, and then, to top it off, a catgirl propositioned me over bad tea."

"Wait, all of that happened today?"

"In that exact order."

"Was she cute?"

"Vess, I was exaggerating."

"Ah, that’s unfortunate."

Then, Vessa made a soft sound. It was a little breathy, and Katarina’s ear pricked up a quarter-inch.

"Vessa."

"Mhm?"

"Are... you okay over there?"

"I’m fantastic, honestly."

"You sound like you’re exercising."

"Something like that, yeah."

Katarina looked down at the stone for a moment, like she was looking at a questionable text message.

"Vess. What are you doing right now?"

"Oh, you know. Getting my dick sucked."

Katarina burst out laughing.

"Sure you are, Vess."

"I am, I swear."

"Vessa, I have known you for eight years, and you have never once been smooth enough to pull a line like that and mean it."

"Well, bold of you to assume I got smooth. Maybe I just got bold. Hey, Riella, say hi to Kat."

[... Wait, what?]

A new voice came through the stone, warm and amused.

"Hiii."

[OH.] Katarina looked down at her stone again. [OH MY GOD.]

"... Hello... Riella?"

"Is this the girlfriend?"

"Mhm!" Katarina could picture Vessa nodding.

"Vess, uhm... Is this your roommate or something?"

"What? No, no. That's Virana, she's busy."

"Busy? Busy with what?"

"Eating Riella out. Say hi, Virana!"

[... What?]

There was a pause. Then, from somewhere further back in the room, a distinctly preoccupied voice:

"Hi, Kat!"

[Oh, god.]

Vessa sighed, happy and a little dreamy. Somewhere in the background, Riella made a noise that was clearly in reply to something Virana had just done.

"So, anyway, my love. What are you up to over there?"

Katarina's eyes drifted to the side of her bed. Three open books on formation theory, a notepad full of her own sketches, and a half-eaten apple she'd forgotten about two hours ago.

"I've been working on an angle for Pelegatta. A place called Artigiana, in the commercial quarter. Pay-per-hour workshop, no faculty permission needed. I build the prototype there, on my own dime, and I walk into her office with it already working and already sold. Then she doesn't get to say no."

Vessa was quiet for a moment.

"That's actually really smart, Kat."

Her voice hitched, just a little, on "smart." Katarina chose not to hear it.

"God, I miss you. Hey, quick question."

"Yes, Vessa?"

"Have you gotten laid yet?"

"... In the seven days I've been at the continent's most prestigious merchant academy, Vessa, no, I have not taken any time out of my crushing curriculum to get laid."

"Kaaat."

"What?"

"That is the longest 'no' I have ever heard in my life."

"It's the truth."

"It's booooring!" Vessa cackled. "Go have fun! You know, you're never gonna get another taste of academy life after this. Make the most of it."

"I am making the most of it."

[I'm compressing three years into one so I can be there when you're getting your dick sucked instead of just listening to it. That is absolutely making the most of it.]

She smirked and looked at the books by her side. Her loyal companions in this one-year war.

"Well... I suppose I should get back to my research. I'm hanging up. I love you, and I hope Virana drinks a glass of water, goodbye."

"Love you too. Good luck with the workshop!"

"Bye, Kat!" came Riella's voice, still very close to the stone.

A beat later, more distant, a muffled "Bye, Kat!" from Virana.

[Jesus.]

The stone went dark.

Katarina sat very still for a second.

[... Whoa.]

She flopped backward onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, which had nothing to offer and seemed, honestly, a little stunned itself.

[That girl is going to be the death of me.]

She lay there a minute longer. It was, honestly, nice to feel something other than homesickness for a change, even if what she was currently feeling was mostly residual embarrassment on behalf of everyone in Vessa's bedroom.

Then she sat up, pulled her notes back across the blanket, and opened the ledger she kept by her pillow.

Artigiana, she wrote at the top. Rates. Hours. Materials list. Pelegatta is going to lose her mind.

[Alright. Let's get to work, then.]

Chapter 52: Bench Space

It was so loud.

All Katarina could hear were hammers, grinding, and shouted insults. There was a faint smell of sweat in the air combined with metal and as she walked the most attention she got was a quick glance before the dwarf went back to their work. No one else looked at her.

She walked past them and kept going.

The shared workshop Katarina had read about was three doors down. A sign above the entrance said BETTOLA in big, painted letters. Under it, smaller: BENCH SPACE. BY THE HOUR, DAY, OR WEEK.

Bettola herself was at a desk near the door.

She was a Valdari woman with one horn (the other had been broken off clean), and she had forearms like bridge cables. She was writing something down, and she didn't bother looking up when Katarina walked in.

"Rate sheet's on the wall. Read it first. Don't waste my time."

[... Alright then.]

Katarina read it.

The rate was steep. Daily bench access cost almost twice the amount Katarina had been hoping. Also, materials storage was extra, tool use was extra, and there was even a line item for "cleanup, if required" that was priced like it was intended to be an insult.

[She strikes me as the type of woman who fires twelve people a day. And yet, this place is full of workers. Don't know what to make of that.]

Katarina walked up to the desk.

"I'd like to rent a bench. One month, paid upfront."

Bettola finally looked up.

Her face shifted. She hadn't expected that, and now, she was quietly reassessing the person in front of her.

"A month? Paid upfront?"

"That's what I said, yes."

She paused.

"You're a student, aren't you?"

"Indeed, I am. Compasso, first year."

"Hm. Most first-years start with a day. Maybe a week, if they're committed."

"Well, I've got work to do."

"Hmph."

She held out a hand. Katarina counted out the coin and handed it over. Bettola took it, weighed it in her palm, nodded once, and wrote Katarina's name into her ledger. She didn't even count it.

"Bench six. Touch bench seven and you're out. Touch any of the anchored tools without asking, and you're out. Bleed on the floor without cleaning it, and you're out."

"Bench six, don't touch, don't bleed. Understood."

"Hm. Go on, then."

She went back to her writing.

Katarina smiled and went to bench six.

The first prototype didn't work.

Katarina hadn't expected it to, honestly. You didn't invent air conditioning in an afternoon, and you especially didn't invent it with scrap materials, a rough sketch, and a seventeen-year-old body that still needed three meals a day to keep focus.

But she'd hoped she'd magically get it done in one day. Just a little.

Still, she'd come up with something, at least.

The container was a box about the size of a hatbox, double-walled, with two arrays layered between the inner and outer shell. The idea was pretty straightforward, at least in concept: the inner array would pull heat out of the cavity, the outer array would vent it into the ambient air, and the two of them together would keep the inside of the box cold indefinitely as long as the qi cycle stayed balanced.

In concept.

In practice, the temperature held for forty minutes.

Then it started climbing.

By the four-hour mark, the array had bled out completely and the water was back to ambient.

Katarina opened the box, pulled the array plates out, and laid them flat on the bench to cool.

[Okay. Let's figure out what happened.]

The Ledger flickered.

Inner array: qi discharge rate exceeded absorption rate by factor of 3.4.

Outer array: insulation effective. Heat vent cycle functional but undersized.

Primary failure: qi loop not self-sustaining. Arrays draw from external ambient at insufficient rate to maintain cycle.

[So the vent works, but the arrays don’t feed each other well enough. I need a better bridge between them.]

She wrote it down.

Then she wrote down the next five failure modes she could think of.

If you were going to fail at a thing, you should at least fail on paper before you failed on the bench and wasted another bowl of warm water. Vivienne Ross had learned that in her second year as a junior analyst, right after she’d torched a quarter of her desk budget on a project she could have killed on a napkin.

It was one of maybe three things from her old life Katarina still used every single day.

The lamplighters made their first pass.

She kept working. The workers who’d been lobbing insults at each other like they were playing badminton with cuss words had apparently reconciled. Somebody, somewhere, was cooking something with garlic.

The lamplighters made their second pass.

Boots came up behind her.

"What are you doing?"

Bettola was standing at the end of the bench with her arms crossed.

Katarina held up the container.

"I’m making a self-regulating insulated cargo box. Two arrays, one inside, one outside. The inner one pulls heat, the outer one vents it. In theory, they feed each other and the whole thing runs cold indefinitely."

Bettola tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

"Is it working?"

"Uh, no. It’s holding cold for about forty minutes, then giving up. The arrays aren’t bridging properly."

Bettola sighed, like the world suddenly made sense again after Katarina threatened to break her entire reality.

"Of course they aren’t. Wishful thinking, that."

"I’ll figure it out."

Bettola looked at the container. She didn’t say anything for a while, which, coming from her, was either the highest praise available or an unusually slow verdict of failure. Katarina wasn’t entirely sure which.

"Hm."

Then she grunted, turned, and walked away.

Katarina watched her go.

It was past midnight by the time she got back to the Compasso.

Her neck hurt. Her hands smelled like formation chalk and the soap she’d scrubbed them with, which had done approximately nothing.

[Note to self: put "better soap" next up on the list of things I’m bringing into this world.]

Pirra was asleep on her side, facing the wall, with her blanket half-off and an open textbook on her stomach. She’d clearly meant to wait up and lost that battle around the second-to-last Chapter.

Katarina looked at her for a second. Then she looked at the three textbooks on her own desk, at her notes, at the diagram she’d sketched on the spirit rail that morning. There was still work to be done.

There was always still work to be done.

[Yeah. I’m going to bed.]

She changed. She turned out the lamp. She lay there in the dark for about ninety seconds, just thinking about the vent.

Then she fell asleep.

The Compasso dining hall at breakfast was the social version of rush hour. Katarina had gotten quite good at timing her entry for the middle of the window, late enough that the scramble was over, early enough that the food wasn't picked over.

She was halfway through a bowl of porridge when a tray set down across from her.

"Hi!"

Katarina looked up.

A girl she'd never spoken to before was already seated, already smiling, already leaning her elbows on the table in a way that was, frankly, doing a lot of work for her. She was Valdari, pale pink horns, dark hair in loose waves, and she had tits that the uniform was clearly begging to let out.

"I'm Ludovina Marchisio. You can call me Ludo, though."

"Katarina... But I'm guessing you knew that already."

"Oh, I definitely did." She shifted her seat closer. "So, I'm throwing a party this weekend. My house keeps an apartment here in Pavona, my parents are away for the season. You wanna come?"

"I appreciate the invitation, Ludo, but, honestly, my weekend is..."

"Busy. Yes, I've heard. Triple the class credits, et cetera, et cetera." She leaned in further. The neckline of her blouse was, at this point, already winning its war. Now it was demanding a formal surrender. "You haven't made too many friends yet, have you?"

Katarina raised a brow.

"Not particularly, no."

"I figured. What better opportunity than this?" She asked. "Think about it, you can do some networking, you can meet everyone who matters and you can learn who you want to avoid."

"And you're just inviting me out of the kindness of your heart?"

Ludo smirked.

"You're a hot topic. A hot topic comes to my party, that makes my party a hot topic."

[... That does check out.]

The girl got even closer.

"Pleeease? I promise, it'll be sick. The food, the ladies, the music, everything!"

Then, she pouted. Actually pouted. Lower lip out and everything.

Vessa's voice floated up from the back of Katarina's head, breezy and entirely unhelpful: Go have fun. You're never gonna get another taste of academy life.

[Shut up.]

You're not gonna get laid doing formation work at midnight, Kat.

[I hate that you're right.]

"Fine, Ludo. You win. What time?" Katarina asked.

Ludo's entire face lit up.

"Eighth bell. I'll send someone to walk you over. Wear something nice."

She stood up, grabbed her tray, and was gone before Katarina could change her mind.

Katarina watched her go.

[Well. I guess I'm going to a party, now.]

Chapter 53: Eighth Bell*

The eighth bell hit just as Katarina and Pirra reached the top of the villa's steps.

Pirra had been quiet the whole walk up, and now she was tugging at her sleeves like she could somehow pull them down over her knuckles and disappear into them.

"Kat."

"Yes?"

"I wasn't invited to this. Ludo doesn't know my last name. I'm pretty sure she doesn't know my first name either."

"Pirra. I know. I'm still bringing you."

"That's not how this works here, though."

"Well. Either you come in with me, or I go home."

Katarina wasn't entirely unaccustomed to networking with randoms, but she'd much rather have a friend there than not.

Pirra groaned and followed.

Katarina, for her part, had committed to a bit. Vellasera girls knew how to dress for an event, and the Pavona girls who'd been snubbing her for two weeks were going to find that out the hard way.

The dress she wore was dark purple and short, with a neckline that dove well past any sensible stopping point and a back cut so low that the very top of her ass was out for the whole night to see. She'd lined her eyes, spent an extra twenty minutes on her hair, and shown up feeling a little ridiculous and deeply, deeply committed.

[Seris would lose it if she saw me in this. Well, if I'm going to be a hot topic, I might as well look the part.]

The terrace was lit by lanterns with a view of the bay Ludo's family had clearly paid a lot for. The crowd was sixty young heirs, already sorted into the little constellations Katarina had been watching form at the Compasso for two weeks.

Pirra leaned in.

"Okay, so. That's Cosima and Naveena. Those two are the Valtieri twins, whose grandmother controls the silk imports, so everyone hates them but nobody says it out loud. And that's Mattia Priori. Her mother runs half the spirit rail contracts in the southern province."

"You seem to know everyone."

"I know my mother's gossip about everyone. It's different. You, uh, can tell because I'm standing in the corner instead of talking to them."

Katarina snorted and took a glass from a passing tray. She approached the nearest cluster. Three Pavona girls, and she gave a little smile.

"Good evening."

All three of them looked at her with the expression Brynn had once given a suspicious-looking pastry. Was this food? Was this a trap? Was this something worse?

"Oh. The Montecardi girl." The one in green said it like she was confirming an item on a list. "The twelve-month thing, is that real?"

"It’s real."

"Huh. Well. Good luck with that."

The cluster turned, almost in unison, and reformed slightly to her left, with their backs now angled just enough that re-entering would be a project.

The next cluster was the same. The one after that pretended not to see her approach and peeled off in formation. By the time a fourth cluster was asking her about the weather, Katarina was very seriously considering leaving.

[I’m going to lose my mind. What is it with these people?]

"Kat!"

It was Ludo.

She materialized out of the crowd with her arms already open, and she got her hands on Katarina like she’d been tracking her across the terrace for twenty minutes.

"You made it. And, uh... Damn, you clean up nice." She noted, looking Katarina up and down. She tilted her head toward Katarina’s glass. "So, is that glass number two, three...?"

"... It might be."

"Oh, you haven’t drunk at all. Come on, drink up! You think you’re gonna enjoy talking with these uptight pricks without a bit of alcohol in ya?"

[That’s a compelling argument.]

For a moment, a certain someone’s words passed through her mind.

"Go have fun. You’re never gonna get another taste of academy life."

[... Yeah, yeah, Vessa. Okay.] She held back a smile.

And, she drank.

"Attagirl!"

The party got better after that.

The second drink went down easier than the first, and the third one went down with Pirra's arm hooked through hers as they giggled at nothing.

And people started talking to her. The moment the Pavona kids decided she was maybe kind of normal, the whole wariness thing cracked open and a dozen of them wanted to know what Vellasera was like.

"Is it true it's a fishing village?"

"We also have vineyards, thank you."

"Wait, Mattia, come over here. She says they have vineyards."

Ludo kept finding her too.

Every time Katarina turned around, there Ludo was at her elbow, with a new drink or a new person to meet or a new excuse to touch her shoulder, her wrist, the small of her back. Every touch landed a little lower or a little longer than the one before.

By the third drink, the musicians had shifted to something with a little bit more pulse to it, and Ludo had her hand on Katarina's hip on the dance floor, and then on her waist, and then lower, and then firmly on her ass, and Katarina decided not to say anything about it.

"So, having fun?" Ludo asked, her lips near Katarina's ear, her hand not stopping.

"If I wasn't, I'd be breaking that greedy little arm of yours right now." Katarina stepped forward and threw an arm around Ludo.

[Fine. You'll do.]

Ludo grinned.

The next thing Katarina was actually aware of, she was on Ludo's lap in a chair at the edge of the terrace, Ludo's hand under her dress, her own fingers buried in Ludo's hair. Some part of her brain was asking, very politely, when exactly she'd decided to sit down.

Ludo's mouth was at her collarbone. Katarina could feel something very hard pressing up through Ludo's trousers.

She bit her lip.

[... God, I am horny.]

"I assume you have a room upstairs?"

"I have several," Ludo replied.

"Good. I'd like to make use of one now."

Ludo stood up with Katarina still in her arms and carried her toward the stairs.

The bedroom door slammed shut.

Ludo got Katarina's dress off in about four seconds. Katarina got Ludo's shirt open with slightly less grace. Ludo's trousers hit the floor and her cock sprang free, thick and already leaking, and Katarina's mouth actually watered.

[Okay. This is happening.]

"On the bed," Ludo commanded.

Katarina crawled onto it. She looked back and found Ludo salivating in much the same way Kat had been.

"Ludo."

"Gimme a second, I'm processing."

"Process faster."

Ludo climbed up behind her. Slowly, one hand slid down between her cheeks, and two fingers pushed into Katarina's pussy, which was embarrassingly slick.

"Fuck, you're wet."

"I've been wet since the second drink. Move."

"Right!"

Ludo lined herself up.

Ludo went slow, pushing in an inch at a time, and Katarina's forehead dropped to the sheets.

"I need more."

Ludo bottomed out.

Katarina's whole body shuddered. Ludo held there a second, breathing hard, then started moving.

Three strokes in, she was pounding.

Wet slap of hips against ass, Ludo's grip tight enough to bruise on her waist, Katarina's own hand snaking down to stroke her own cock in time. Ludo drove into her ass until Katarina was seeing spots, until her arms gave out, and her chest hit the mattress, and her ass stayed up in the air with Ludo fucking her through it.

"Fuck, I'm already getting close."

An exclamation mark popped up over Katarina's head like a cartoon at that.

"Hold it!"

Ludo stopped.

Katarina gently pushed her back.

"I'm not done with you."

She pulled off before Ludo could argue further. Ludo's cock slid out of her, wet and flushed.

Katarina flipped her over onto her back, climbed on top of her, lined Ludo's cock up with her own pussy this time, and sank down onto it in one motion.

Ludo's eyes rolled back.

"Oh, fuck me."

Katarina rolled her hips. Slowly at first, then faster, and then she found a rhythm, hips swinging.

"Please..."

"Nope. Not yet."

Katarina braced her hands on Ludo's chest, and picked up the pace. Ludo's hands flew to her hips, trying to slow her down and failing. Katarina's cock was leaking all over Ludo's abs, and her own pussy was clenching down on Ludo's cock every time she came down.

Ludo's hips bucked up.

[Oh, oh fuck.]

Katarina felt her own orgasm approaching sneakily. She barely processed it.

Katarina came first, hard, all over Ludo's chest while her pussy tightened around Ludo's cock, and that was it for Ludo, who groaned loud enough to wake the whole villa and came inside her in waves.

Katarina kept rolling her hips through it, sweat dripping off her hair.

Soon, Katarina rolled off of her and onto her back on the sheets, catching her breath.

"... Holy shit." Ludo stared at the ceiling, eyes wide. Like she just had a divine revelation. "Can we do that again?"

"Maybe if you earn it, buddy," Katarina smirked.

Back at the academy (which Ludo had been kind enough to take Pirra and Kat back to), Katarina was lying in bed. Pirra was firmly knocked out on her own.

The communication stone suddenly lit up.

She reached for it.

"Vess?"

"Hi, love, I just wanted to say good night before I passed out."

"Bit late for that. What if I was asleep?"

"As if. With all the work you've got lined up? You can't afford an early night's sleep. So, how's the big city?"

Maybe it was because she was feeling good. Maybe it was because she wanted to brag after Vessa's little call earlier.

But Katarina's lips moved before she could stop them.

"I just had sex."

Vessa squealed. Actually squealed. Katarina had to pull the stone away from her ear.

"Oh my GOD. Kat. Tell me everything, right now, who is she, oh my god I need details..."

"Mmm, maybe later. Goodnight, Vessa." Katarina grinned.

"WHAT!? Katarina Montecardi, don't you dare-"

Kat hung up.

"Serves you right," she murmured with a smile before putting her communication stone aside and closing her eyes.

Not a bad night, all things considered.

Chapter 54: Water Trick

The second prototype didn’t work either.

Neither did the third. Or the fourth.

Katarina had tried widening the bridge between the two arrays, and she’d tried narrowing it, and she’d tried a third, intermediary array that was supposed to act as a qi buffer. The buffer had held for about ninety minutes before cooking itself into a brown stain on the inside of the box.

Bettola walked past, saw the stain, and told Katarina it was going on her cleanup tab.

[Fair.]

By the fifth prototype, she was starting to suspect the problem wasn’t in the arrays at all.

The problem was that the whole thing was trying to be self-sustaining off ambient qi alone, and ambient qi wasn’t evenly distributed. It spiked. It dipped. It got absorbed by whatever cultivator happened to walk past the container on a busy trade route. A qi loop that depended on ambient draw was always going to bleed out sooner or later, and the only way to fix it was to give the system an internal reserve, which meant cores and spirit stones and—

Katarina sighed.

[That’s not infrastructure, at that point. That’s a luxury.]

Katarina set her pen down and leaned back on her stool.

She stared at the container on the bench. It being so expensive meant the thing would land on the shelf of one villa in ten thousand, and the whole point of the project had been to change the world. Not change one place at a time.

She’d been in this life long enough to know when to push and when to put a thing down. Vivienne Ross had killed more projects than she’d ever launched, and the ones she’d killed had been killed on time. A dead project you hadn’t admitted was dead was just a budget drain in slow motion.

[Okay... I'll shelf it. For now.]

She pushed the container to the back of the bench.

The thing was, she still needed something to take to Pelegatta. The twelve-month track didn't slow down because the air conditioning wasn't air conditioning yet. She needed a small win she could finish in a week and hand over with a smile.

She thought about it over dinner, and she was still thinking about it on the walk to Artigiana the next morning, and two hours into the next bench session she was still thinking about it, at which point her eyes landed on the cup she'd been drinking water out of.

Water purification.

Glamour had never been the point. Importance was the point. Every caravan, every waystation, every port town with a bad well, every ship out at sea where the barrels had sat too long.

She could do it by tonight.

She did do it by tonight.

The cup was ceramic, cheap, second-hand from a stall on the way in. The array was simple: two layers, an outer ring that heated whatever was inside to boiling in a handful of heartbeats, and an inner glyph that cooled it back down to drinking temperature immediately afterward. Both triggered in sequence by a single pulse of qi from the user.

She tested it with pond water.

Pulse. Heat. Cool.

The water in the cup was drinkable.

She tested it with pond water and a pinch of dirt.

Pulse. Heat. Cool.

Drinkable.

She tested it with pond water, a pinch of dirt, and a small piece of spoiled meat she'd asked a stall-keeper for specifically, which had been a conversation she did not enjoy having.

Pulse. Heat. Cool.

Drinkable, and the cup now smelled like a crime scene, but the water itself was fine.

[Good enough.]

She scrubbed the cup twice, wrapped it in cloth, and carried it to the Compasso.

Pelegatta was at her desk, grading.

"Signora Montecardi."

"Professora. You said you hadn’t seen anything impressive in thirty years, and that struck me as a challenge."

She set the cup on the desk.

Pelegatta looked at it for about a second.

"It’s a... cup."

"It’s a cup that cleans whatever you put into it. Pond water. Runoff. Something a rat died in. One pulse of qi and it’s drinkable."

Pelegatta raised an eyebrow but didn’t interrupt, so Kat kept going.

"Caravan stops. Frontier outposts. Ships a month out from port when the barrels have gone bad. You hand one of these to a guard, a sailor, a farmer, and they don’t need cultivation training beyond a single pulse. A Foundation-rank on their worst day could run this without thinking about it. Which means the market isn’t cultivators, Professora. The market is everyone who drinks water and doesn’t want to die doing it."

Pelegatta picked up the cup. She turned it over in her hand, and she read the arrays with a fingertip.

"You made this yourself?"

"Me, a bench at Artigiana, and about sixteen hours. The outer ring was the hard part. The inner cooling glyph was simple once I worked out the trigger sequence."

"Sixteen hours."

"Give or take. I had to sleep at some point."

Pelegatta set the cup down.

She leaned back in her chair and looked at Katarina, and Katarina read the expression perfectly. She'd worn it in a hundred boardrooms herself. Pelegatta was impressed and didn't want to reward her for it.

"It's clever," Pelegatta said.

Katarina heard the comma coming a mile away.

[But?]

"But it's not enough. It's useful, it's well-made. A second-year could file the patent, license it out to a guild, and retire at forty on the royalties. I'll even write the introduction myself if you want."

"... But?"

"But I asked you for something I haven't seen in thirty years, Signora, and I've seen cups. I've seen better cups than this, in fact. There's a formationer in Ostria who makes one that handles seawater. I've seen sanitation arrays in Brevaine manors older than your grandmother. You solved a problem people already knew they had. That's six years' worth of clever. You're still down twenty-three."

[... Damn.]

Katarina stood very still.

She was annoyed, honestly. She'd solved a real problem in a day, and the response was a shrug dressed up in polite vocabulary. But Pelegatta wasn't wrong, and that was the part that stung. A cup was a cup. Thirty years meant something nobody had thought to want yet.

She picked the cup back up, wrapped it in the cloth, and tucked it under her arm.

"Understood."

Katarina walked out.

[Fine. Air conditioning it is. Let me figure out the qi reservoir problem.]

She almost walked into Tavia in the corridor.

Tavia was leaning against the wall right outside Pelegatta's office, with one ankle crossed over the other, her tail curling slowly behind her. She'd clearly been waiting a while and didn't seem to mind.

[How did she know I'd be here?]

Katarina didn’t bother asking. She had a suspicion the answer was "because I pay attention," and she didn’t feel like giving Tavia the satisfaction.

"Katarina."

"Tavia."

"I heard you had a busy weekend."

[Oh, god.]

"Did you now?"

"Mhm. Ludo came into breakfast yesterday morning practically vibrating. She was telling anyone who’d listen."

"Telling them what, exactly?"

Tavia’s tail flicked once.

"That your ass is, and I’m quoting her now, ’a work of art.’ That you did something with your hips she’d never seen before. That she ’saw the light of heaven,’ which I personally thought was a touch much, but I wasn’t in the room."

Katarina laughed.

She couldn’t help it. It was a shameless, delighted laugh. Vivienne Ross would have stifled it at a work event on reflex, and Katarina Montecardi was learning to enjoy it instead.

"Well. Please tell Ludo I’m honored by the review, and that if she’s going to be talking about my hips in front of the silverware, she could at least do it in a lower register."

"I’ll pass that along."

Tavia straightened off the wall. She was standing a little too close now, and neither of them was pretending she wasn’t.

"Are you heading somewhere?"

"I was, actually. I have a qi reservoir problem that’s currently ruining my evening."

"Come out with me instead."

"And where would you be taking me, Tavia?"

"The Pleasure Quarter."

Katarina raised a brow.

"... That's a bit forward. And I just had sex with Ludo, so I know forward."

"I didn't say we were doing anything there. I said we were going. There's a tea house I like, musicians, a pond with fish that come up when you tap the rail. You've been here two and a half weeks and I'll bet you can't tell me what Pavona feels like after dark."

"I should really be—"

"Enjoying yourself," Tavia interrupted. "Come on, we're young! We have years to figure out whatever's got your evening in a chokehold."

Katarina thought about it.

She thought about the cup under her arm. She thought about what Vessa would have her do.

[Fine. You win again, darling,] she told her girlfriend telepathically.

"Lead the way."

Tavia grinned. And, with that, another distraction landed on Katarina's plate.

There were a few too many of those these days, but that was a problem for Future Kat to deal with.

Chapter 55: Special Products

To Vivienne Ross, the idea of following a hot catgirl into a street full of prostitutes sounded like the premise of a daydream she'd have in her office.

To Katarina Montecardi, that was just her present situation.

Tavia led her down a path composed of brick and silk. Flowing banners hung from various buildings as a bunch of elegantly nude people walked by. For a second, Katarina felt like she was back in Vellasera.

"You seem less shocked than I thought you'd be," Tavia said.

"Oh, a little bit of skin is hardly enough to shake me, given where I grew up. None of these people are even having sex."

"I suppose they save that bit for when they're inside."

"Back in my town, no one bothered."

"Sounds like a fun place."

They entered a building with a somewhat basic but still appealing design on the window of a woman lying on her side. Immediately, the scent of flowers and perfume punched Katarina’s nostrils. Then, a different feeling hit her.

She felt... lighter. Almost like she had just taken a shot.

She smiled.

[... Are there some Whispers cultivators here?]

All of a sudden, she was genuinely intrigued.

The woman behind the front counter had the ears and tail of a fox and a smile that she clearly kept in a drawer somewhere and only took out on special occasions. Next to her, leaning on the counter with her chin in her hand, was a wolf girl with silver braids and a bored look that disappeared the second she saw who’d walked in.

"Tavia!"

"Mmh, hi."

The fox girl rounded the counter in about two steps and threw her arms around Tavia’s neck. The wolf girl was slower about it but came in for a hug of her own once the fox girl moved aside.

"Finally escaped the academia?"

"You make it sound like a prison."

"It is. You just sit and, what, stare at a chalkboard all day?"

[No, she sits there and learns what she needs to make all of this possible,] Katarina thought but didn’t say.

"And who’s this?"

"This is Katarina. She’s at the Compasso with me."

"Oh!" The fox girl’s eyes widened. "A student! Welcome, welcome. I’m Dessana. That’s Ylva."

Ylva waved without straightening up.

"It’s lovely to meet you both," Katarina said, and gave the kind of smile she normally used on possible investors. "Tavia’s been telling me about this place. I..." Katarina looked the woman up and down, as obviously as she could, "I can see she wasn’t overselling."

Dessana went pink at the tips of her ears.

"Oh, she’s a sweet talker. Tavia, where’d you find this one?"

"We sort of just wandered into each other."

"The gods smiled at you. Anyway, how about..."

Katarina glanced around while the three of them chatted.

The lobby had low couches, hanging silks, and a pair of girls in translucent robes drifting between clients. The enchanted perfume was still doing its thing. Her shoulders were looser than they’d been in a week.

She waited for a lull and leaned in toward Dessana.

"Can I borrow you for a moment?"

Dessana’s ears perked up. She glanced at Tavia, who waved her off with a smirk, and followed Katarina a few paces away from the counter.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all. I have a strange question, if that’s alright."

"Go on."

"I’m a Whispers enthusiast. Self-taught, mostly. When I walked in here I felt the atmosphere change, and unless I’m very much mistaken, that’s not incense doing the heavy lifting."

Dessana’s smile stayed in place but her eyes did a quick, careful sweep of the lobby.

"... You’ve got a good nose."

"I have a good everything. Don’t worry, I’m not mad or anything. I’m curious. What are you using?"

The fox girl hesitated. Katarina let the silence sit. She’d done this a hundred times in her old life. You asked the question, you smiled, you waited, and people filled the silence for you because silence was uncomfortable and talking wasn’t.

It was shocking how often that worked.

"It’s light work," Dessana said eventually, dropping her voice. "Senses stuff. Nothing invasive. Just... we take the edge off when people come in. Helps them unwind. Makes the scents a bit nicer, makes the lighting feel a bit softer. That kind of thing."

"Does it work on everyone?"

"Mostly. Some cultivators notice. Most don’t."

"And your clients. How many come through a night?"

Dessana thought about it, fingers tapping the counter behind her.

"A normal night? Eighty, maybe a hundred. Weekends, more."

Katarina kept her face neutral. She did not let her face do the thing it wanted to do, which was light up like a temple festival.

A hundred clients a night. In one building. In one district. In one city.

[Okay. Okay. There’s potential here. Let’s think about this for a second.]

A hundred clients meant a hundred transactions. Transactions meant fluids. Fluids meant, in a world that had cultivation but had never, as far as Katarina could tell, invented latex, a whole host of things nobody wanted to deal with after the fact. Diseases. Unplanned pregnancies, which in an all-futa race were absolutely still a thing, especially one that enjoyed sex as much as the valdari did. The laundry alone had to be a nightmare.

She smiled at Dessana.

"Thank you. That’s very helpful."

"... Helpful for what?"

"Oh, nothing yet."

[Everything.]

Dessana gave her a long look, decided she didn’t want to know, and drifted back toward the counter.

Katarina rejoined Tavia, who was now in the middle of a debate with Ylva about whether one of their regulars had actually gotten engaged or was just saying that to get a discount.

Katarina slid in beside her, hands folded behind her back, and did not let on that she had just, in the lobby of a brothel, had an idea. A real idea, that could make up the twenty-three year gap between inventions.

Contraceptives.

Katarina spent the next morning in the Artigiana with a sheet of parchment, a scrap of treated fabric, and an incredible amount of focus.

She'd found it. A problem she could solve.

The fabric was a thin silk-cotton blend she'd bought from a market stall on the way over. She'd picked it because it was the cheapest thing they had that wasn't going to fall apart if you breathed on it but was thin enough to not feel horrible wrapped around a dick. Good enough for a prototype.

The formation itself was embarrassingly simple once she sat down and thought about it. Preservation arrays kept things fresh by creating a barrier between what was inside and what was outside. Formation masters used them on crates of fruit, on wine casks, on the jade tablets they used to send messages. All Katarina had to do was shrink one of those barriers down, apply it to a flexible medium, and make it durable enough to survive a few minutes of, well, use.

Then she added a second layer.

A Whispers touch. Nothing invasive. Just a very light sensory enhancement to keep the thing from feeling like a sheet of fabric, which it very much was going to feel like without help. The same principle Dessana had described the night before. Take the edge off. Make the experience a little nicer.

[A little nicer. I'm not trying to sell them something worse than nothing. I'm selling them something that's better than unprotected, which is a low bar, but a meaningful one.]

By noon, she had three prototypes laid out on the bench. By three, she'd tested them against saltwater, warm water, and a palmful of oil, and all three held. By five, she'd stitched the formation into the fabric itself so it wouldn't wear off after a single wash.

Bettola walked by at some point and stared at them.

"What are those?"

"Preservation wraps."

"For what?"

Katarina looked up at her.

"... Produce."

Bettola squinted, shrugged, and walked away.

Pelegatta was in her office with her coat halfway on when Katarina knocked.

"I'm leaving," Pelegatta let her know.

"This won't take long."

"Everything you say takes long, Signora."

Katarina was still somewhat pleased at the fact that Pelegatta insisted on calling her that instead of Montecardi, but she didn't let it show.

Katarina stepped in anyway and set one of the prototypes on the desk. Pelegatta looked down at it. Then up at Katarina. Then back down.

"... What am I looking at?"

"A preservation formation woven into a flexible fabric. Paired with a light sensory enhancement. Durable, cheap, and reusable up to about six applications before the formation degrades."

"And its purpose is?"

"It's a contraceptive. Or, uh, in other words, it prevents pregnancy."

Pelegatta went very still. One arm was still in her coat sleeve. She did not put the coat on the rest of the way.

"... Go on."

"Not just pregnancy, actually. Disease prevention. Fluid containment." Katarina watched her face. "My understanding is that currently, most Valdari just accept the risk."

"And most humans pray."

"Well, this doesn't require divine intervention. No, this works every time. It's mechanical."

Pelegatta picked the prototype up. She held it between two fingers, turned it over, and gave it a look like she was trying to decide whether it had offended her personally.

"Target market?"

"Everyone. But to start, I was thinking pleasure houses. High volume, repeat clients, regulated supply chains. From there it scales out to general consumer. General consumers will trust it more when they hear that literal prostitutes avoid diseases and pregnancy using it."

"Unit cost?"

"Under a copper mark, at volume. Retail at three to five, depending on the market."

Pelegatta put the prototype back down. She finally finished putting on her coat.

"That cheap?" She was truly confused.

"It’s really quite easy to make. The fabric is harder to acquire than the formations, even."

Pelegatta nodded slowly.

"It’s a good idea."

Katarina waited for the but.

"But."

There it was.

"I don’t endorse ideas. I endorse products. You’ve shown me a prototype that you made in one day, with no market data and no customer validation. It’s clever, I won’t lie. It might even be real. But I’ve watched first-years walk into my office with clever things and watched them end up as failures three years later when the clever thing turned out not to work in the field."

She picked up her satchel.

"Prove it works. Then we can talk about the workshop."

She walked past Katarina and out the door.

Katarina stood in the empty office with her prototype on the desk and a very, very small smile on her face.

[Prove it works.]

She picked the prototype up and rolled it between her fingers.

[Well. I suppose I’m going to have to have a lot of sex.]

Chapter 56: Study

"So... people wrap this around themselves and that’s it?"

The wolf girl tried stretching the condom. Katarina took it out of her hands before she could break it.

"Indeed. So, in order to find out if this works or not, I need the following from you: give these to half of your workers, and don’t give these to your other workers. Then, track their pregnancies, and we’ll see if it works or not."

It would take more time than Katarina liked, but Pelegatta was right. She needed to prove this thing worked.

Dessana turned the prototype over in her hands, slowly, like she was already calculating what it would cost her to say yes.

"And we keep records?"

"Yes. Who used one, who didn’t, who got pregnant, who didn’t, who got sick, who didn’t. Just numbers. No names if you don’t want to share names."

"... And you’ll pay for the test batch?"

"Free. You won’t spend a copper until it works and you want to keep buying them."

Ylva, who had been listening from the counter with her chin back in her hand, finally spoke.

"That’s a better deal than the last three people who came in here trying to sell us something."

"I’ve heard. I figured I’d open with it."

Dessana exhaled, set the prototype on the counter, and nodded.

"Fine. A month. We’ll try it for a month and I’ll give you your numbers. If the numbers aren’t there, you walk and we never had this conversation."

"Agreed."

Katarina extended a hand. Dessana shook it.

The month moved fast.

Katarina took Trade Infrastructure, Ethics, Cultural Negotiation, Comparative Economic Systems, and a seminar on formation supply chains that she'd enrolled in on a whim and which turned out to be her favorite class of the semester.

In debate class, the professor set the week's topic as tariff reform in a fictional human city-state whose economy Katarina dismantled in eight minutes flat. The student arguing the opposing position, a tall heir with good cheekbones and bad sources, spent most of those eight minutes trying to interrupt her. The professor eventually asked him to stop. Katarina's closing argument was three sentences long. Two of them were questions. He answered neither. The professor gave her the round.

In economic modeling, she was handed a mock scenario involving a port strike and asked to draft a contingency. She drafted three. The professor asked which one she'd recommend. Katarina said the second one, because the first assumed the strike resolved in under a week and the third assumed the opposite, and the second was the only one that worked in both cases. The professor wrote something down and moved on to the next student, who looked like he wanted to leave the academy entirely.

Ludo invited her to another party. Katarina said she was busy. Ludo pouted so hard, Katarina's heart stung. She went anyway and got home at four in the morning with Ludo's lip print still on her collarbone.

Pirra was still gradually getting less shy which Katarina still found charming. Tavia was still flirting with her, which Katarina was still enjoying.

Vessa called twice a week. Sometimes she had a friend in the room. Sometimes she didn't. Katarina had stopped being surprised by either state of affairs.

Eva still said nothing to her. Katarina still didn't care.

And somewhere in the middle of all of that, a month passed.

The brothel smelled the same as it had the first time. Perfume, flowers, the faint undercurrent of sweat from the rooms upstairs. Dessana was at the counter with a ledger in front of her, which was not a sight Katarina had expected to find charming, but she did.

"You came back."

"I said I would."

"People say a lot of things. Usually right before they stop returning the letters."

"Well. I'm returning the letter."

Dessana slid a ledger around so Katarina could see.

Two columns. Left column, the girls who'd used the prototypes. Right column, the ones who hadn't. A running tally of clients under each name, plus columns for pregnancies and for any illness reported.

Katarina's eyes tracked down the page.

Left column: zero pregnancies. Zero illnesses.

Right column: two pregnancies. Four illnesses.

[Oh, hello.]

She kept her face carefully neutral. It was a skill she'd spent two lifetimes sharpening, and it was still the hardest thing she did on a regular basis.

"That's not all," Dessana said.

"Tell me."

"Word got out. People learned that we have something that makes sex feel better while also making it safe. Our weeknight traffic is up. Weekend traffic is up more. Ylva had to turn people away last Saturday, and Ylva doesn't turn anyone away. She held a grudge about it for two days."

Dessana closed the ledger and looked at Katarina across the counter, and whatever calculation she'd started at the start of the month was finished now.

"We want to keep buying them. And we want to be first in line when you scale."

Katarina grinned.

"I will see what I can do."

Pelegatta was at her desk with a stack of essays in front of her, and when Katarina walked in, she didn't even look up.

"I have numbers."

Katarina set the ledger on the desk. Then she set a second piece of parchment next to it: a one-page written statement from Dessana, signed, stamped with the house seal of the brothel, and summarizing the results of the trial.

Pelegatta stopped marking the essay in her hand.

She read the statement first, set it down, opened the ledger, and ran a finger down the pregnancy tally. She turned a page, then turned it back. She read the columns again, slower this time, and the office went very quiet.

Katarina, who had been planning to sit down, didn't. She paced.

"Zero pregnancies in the test group over a month. Two in the control. Four reported illnesses in the control, zero in the test. The house's weekend traffic is up roughly thirty percent because clients are asking for the product by reputation. They didn't advertise. Word spread on its own. The product sells itself because it solves a problem that no one has previously tried to solve, solves it at a cost that any pleasure house in the district can afford, and it adds to sex on top of all that."

She turned, still pacing.

"You said prove it works. I proved it works."

Pelegatta's eyes stayed on the ledger.

"Also, you know as well as I do, a brothel is the most serious endorsement I could have possibly gotten. A brothel does more volume in a single weekend than a married couple does in a year. Different clients, different bodies, different acts, different durations. If I had run this trial in a dry goods shop or a grain warehouse, you'd be looking at maybe a dozen data points. I ran it in the most punishing use-case environment in the city, and the formation held through every single deployment."

She turned, still pacing.

"You couldn't design a better stress test if you tried. The product got beaten up by professionals for a month and came out of it with a waiting list. That is a product that's ready for market, Professora, and you know it is."

Pelegatta closed the ledger.

She put her hand flat on top of it and looked at her desk, and she looked at it long enough that Katarina started running the odds on which way this was going to go.

Then she opened a drawer, pulled out a blank sheet of academy letterhead, and began to write.

Katarina held herself very still. She was not going to grin. If she grinned, Pelegatta was going to look up and see the grin, and Katarina was fairly certain an academy endorsement could be withdrawn on a whim if the recipient visibly enjoyed receiving it.

Pelegatta signed the letter, sealed it, and held it out without looking up.

"Workshop access. Independent project. Don’t embarrass me."

Katarina took the letter.

"I won’t."

"Close the door on your way out."

Professora Vanta read the letter. She read it a second time. She looked for a moment like she was going to turn Katarina away anyway on principle, and then she stepped aside.

"Don’t touch the third bench. That’s mine."

"Understood."

"Don’t waste materials. I count everything."

"I wouldn’t dream of it."

"Don’t set anything on fire that you can’t put out."

"Professora, I have no intention of setting anything on fire at all."

"Hmph. That’s what they all say."

Vanta waved her in and stomped back to whatever she’d been doing before.

The workshop was bigger than Katarina had expected. Three rows of benches, each one fitted with formation etchers, qi conduits, a full set of jade scribes, and materials Artigiana charged by the gram for. A cooling array hummed in one corner. A row of formation blanks sat ready to be inscribed. A small forge waited in the back for artifact work.

Katarina stepped inside, and for a second she felt the way she’d felt the first time she’d been given her own corner office with a view of the Manhattan skyline.

[Finally. Okay. Air conditioner. Let's do this properly. I need to get the qi loop to close without bleeding out at the corners, and if I use the second bench's conduit array I can actually test the flow rate in real time instead of guessing, and—]

She turned the corner between the first and second row of benches.

She stopped.

At the far bench, head down, silver hair falling over her shoulder, was Evangelina. She was writing something, and from the density of her notes and the line of empty teacups beside her, she'd been at it for hours.

She looked up.

Their eyes met.

Eva held Katarina's gaze for half a second, registered nothing in particular about it, and went back to her work.

Katarina stood very still in the middle of the workshop. Her workshop. The one she had spent a month wrestling an endorsement out of Pelegatta for, which had required a faculty signature, a prototype, and a written review from a brothel.

[... You have got to be kidding me. How the hell did she get in here before me?]

Chapter 57: Deserved

She tried not to make it obvious. She really did.

But as she sat there, Eva's presence kept tugging at her eyes like they had gravity. She had so many questions. What was she doing? Was she doing it well? Was it worthy of this place?

But, most prominent among them:

[How the hell did you get in here?]

"Do you need something, Montecardi?"

Eva hadn't looked up. Her quill kept moving across the parchment, steady and neat, like she was dictating a letter to a very obedient scribe.

Katarina, who had been staring for a solid thirty seconds, recovered in about half a breath.

"Just admiring the view."

Eva turned a page. She still hadn't looked up. Her silver hair fell forward over her shoulder and she tucked it back without breaking the rhythm of her writing.

"If you have a question, ask it."

Katarina considered pretending she didn't have one. Then she decided that was beneath her.

"How did you get in here?"

That got Eva to stop writing. She set her quill down, very carefully, and finally lifted her head.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. How did you get workshop access?"

"I walked through the door."

Katarina gave her a very slow blink.

Eva's wings shifted slightly behind her, the way a cat's tail moves when it's irritated. It was the first real expression Katarina had ever seen on her in a while, and it amounted to mild annoyance.

"You're acting like this is some sacred ground, Montecardi. It's a room with benches."

[It is sacred ground! I had to invent CONTRACEPTIVES to get in here!]

"It's a competitive resource. You need a faculty endorsement to use it."

"I have one."

"From who?"

Eva picked up her quill again. Her eyes went back to her parchment. She'd clearly been asked this question before, and her voice was flat with it.

"My aunt is on the academy board."

"..."

Katarina kept her mouth shut.

She kept it shut because she was a professional, and because the first thing out of it was going to be an obscenity Brynn would have applauded and Seris would have pretended not to hear. She let the silence sit instead. She'd learned a long time ago that silence was a weapon, and she was curious what Eva would do with it.

Eva kept writing.

[Oh, she's good. Not defensive, not apologetic, not even rude about it. She said it the way someone would say "I own a house."]

"Nepotism," Katarina said, mostly to hear it out loud.

"If you prefer."

"I do prefer. One should prefer the words they use be accurate. I spent a month building a product and proving it worked in order to sit where you're sitting. And you walked in here because you happen to be related to someone."

Eva finally set her quill down for real this time. She turned on her stool and looked at Katarina directly.

Her eyes were very pale blue. Up close, her face was the kind that would have put her on magazine covers back on Earth, and Katarina noticed this, filed it away, and did not let it change anything about her posture.

"Did it occur to you, Montecardi, that I might also be qualified?"

"It occurred to me. Then I thought about the fact that you got in without having to prove it."

"And?"

"And I'm wondering if you can."

Eva didn't move. Not a blink, not a flinch. She looked at Katarina for another second, and then a small, cold smile arrived on her face and settled there like it meant to stay.

"Well then, watch me."

She turned back to her parchment and picked up her quill.

Katarina stood there for another second. Then she walked to the second bench, dropped her satchel on it with slightly more force than was strictly necessary, and pulled out her notes.

She laid out the sketches for the container. The qi loop she'd been struggling with for a month sat at the top of the first page, the arrows running into corners that kept bleeding energy, and she stared at it like the answer was going to crawl out of the parchment if she glared hard enough.

From the far bench, the scratch of Eva's quill continued.

Katarina tuned it out.

She had work to do, and she wasn't about to waste another second of her workshop access thinking about whose aunt sat on whose board.

"I mean, I'm just saying," Katarina said, pacing the length of the dorm. Pirra's eyes tracked her back and forth. "I spent all of last month carefully making sure I had a viable product for the market on my hands and she just... what, asked her aunt to please let her in? What the fuck!?"

Pirra, to her credit, had not interrupted once.

She was sitting cross-legged on her bed with her auburn braid over one shoulder and her hands in her lap, watching Katarina wear a path into the rug.

"And her face! She didn't even look guilty about it, Pirra. She said it the way you'd tell someone what you had for breakfast. Like it was nothing. Like the rest of us working for it is just a quaint little hobby!"

"Mm."

"And then she had the nerve to ask me if it had occurred to me that she might also be qualified, and I said it did occur to me, and then I thought about it, and I couldn't stop thinking about it, Pirra, because here's the thing. Maybe she is qualified. Maybe she's brilliant. I don't know! I can't know, because she didn't have to prove anything to get in there!"

"Mhm."

"That's the part that's eating me! I don't mind losing to someone who earned it! I would love to lose to someone who earned it, because then I could learn something. But this?"

Katarina stopped. She turned to Pirra with her hands out, palms up, like she was asking the universe a question.

"This is just somebody's aunt doing a favor."

Pirra considered her for a moment.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Please."

"Does it actually bother you that she got in early? Or does it bother you that it was easy for her?"

Katarina opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again before she managed an answer.

"... Both. It’s both."

"Okay."

"Is that bad?"

"I don’t think so. I think you’re just mad."

"Well, of course. I’m extremely mad, Pirra. Downright irritated!"

"I can tell." Pirra smiled. "You’ve been pacing for twenty minutes."

Katarina looked at the floor. She had, in fact, worn a path in the rug.

She took a slow breath and let it out.

"Pelegatta needs to hear about this."

"Does she?"

"Yes. She needs to know what her colleagues are letting through the door."

"Kat, at least sit down first."

"I’ll be back in an hour."

Katarina was already at the door.

Pelegatta’s office had the door cracked open.

Katarina stopped with her hand raised to knock. There were voices inside. One was Pelegatta’s. The other was measured, precise, and recognizable inside of three words, and Katarina’s stomach sank before she’d finished identifying it.

"... the problem is that letters of credit get forged all the time, and nobody catches it until the goods arrive. By then the carrier's been paid, the real bank's money is gone, and the forger is three kingdoms away."

Pelegatta asked:

"And your proposal?"

"Split the formation in half," Eva replied. "The bank of origin inscribes one half, the carrier inscribes the matching half at the same time, with the same qi signature. Neither half does anything on its own. But when they're brought together at the destination bank, they complete, and the formation closes. Like snapping two pieces of jade back into a single stone."

"And forgery?"

"Can't pass. A forged half has the wrong qi signature, so when it's brought against the real half, the formation fails to close. The destination bank sees the failure in real time, before any goods change hands. The forgery catches itself."

"Cost?"

"Marginal. The inscriptions are single-use and can be prepared in bulk. The formation is small and doesn't require specialized qi, so any bank clerk with Foundation training can cast it. The primary cost is adoption, which is why I'd start with the human merchant guild in Carravia. They handle the largest volume of mid-distance trade on the continent and have the most exposure to forgery losses. Get Carravia on board and every bank from Ostria to the northern passes follows within a year."

Katarina closed her eyes.

[... Oh, fuck.]

It was a good idea.

It was actually a staggering idea, once she laid it out in her head. Right now, every merchant on the continent absorbed forgery losses as a cost of doing business. Banks charged premiums to cover it. Carriers charged premiums to cover it. Everyone paid, and everyone had always paid, because nobody in this world had figured out how to catch a forgery at the moment it tried to cash in.

Eva's system didn't catch forgeries. It made them impossible to commit. A forger would know before they tried that their forged half wouldn't close the formation, so they wouldn't bother trying in the first place. At least, not until a counter was invented.

Overnight, a whole category of fraud would just stop existing, and the premiums built on top of it would follow.

It was the kind of quiet, infrastructural change that reshaped a continent's economy without anyone outside banking noticing. The kind of thing Katarina would have been proud to invent herself.

She stepped back from the door.

She walked down the hall without a plan, made it to the stairwell, and stopped at the railing. Her jaw was doing the thing jaws were not supposed to do. Her pulse was worse.

[She IS qualified. Goddammit!]

Katarina went back down to the dorms. Pirra was still on her bed. She looked up when Katarina came in.

"That was fast."

"I didn't knock."

"Why not?"

Katarina sat down on her own bed. She stared at the ceiling.

"Because she was right and she was qualified."

Chapter 58: Just Ask

Thus began Katarina's quest to finish introducing air conditioning into this world while simultaneously ignoring the angel on her shoulder.

Or rather, near her shoulder.

Or rather, a few tables away from her shoulder with her wings neatly tucked behind her and her legs crossed as she jotted stuff down in her notebook, looking considerably less perplexed by all this than Katarina was.

[Either that or her poker face is incredible.]

Katarina sighed and got back to work.

For about ten minutes, it actually worked.

She was focused. The qi loop was running circular now, she had three variations of the preservation array sketched out on her parchment, and she was deep enough into whether she could bleed the excess qi into a secondary cooling layer that she forgot Eva was in the room at all.

Then Eva made a small sound.

It wasn't much. Just a quiet "hm" from across the workshop, the kind of sound a person makes when something has clicked into place. Katarina's head didn't turn, but her attention did.

Then came the scratch of Eva's quill, faster now, confident. Triumphant! Whatever she'd just figured out, she was writing it down fast enough that she'd obviously solved something real.

Katarina's own quill stopped moving.

[... I wonder what she's working on.]

She tried to push the thought away. She pushed it right back into her brain from a different angle.

[It's not even curiosity. It's market research. If her product is going to be announced at the Dimostrazione alongside mine, I should know what I'm up against. That's not nosy. That's diligent.]

Katarina, very diligently indeed, put down her quill.

Attempt one was casual.

She got up from her bench, stretched, and walked to the supply shelf on the far wall like she had a legitimate reason to be there. Her path took her within about eight feet of Eva's bench. She glanced sideways as she passed.

Eva's notebook was tilted at an angle that made it impossible to see what was written.

[Of course.]

Attempt two was the long way around.

Katarina walked to the workshop door, looked out into the hallway like she was expecting someone, and then walked back via a route that took her past the back of Eva's bench. She got about two feet past it before she realized she couldn't see anything from this angle either, because Eva's wing was blocking her view.

[Strategically placed wing, huh? Classic.]

Attempt three was the jade scribe.

Katarina didn’t need a jade scribe, but there was one on the shelf directly across from Eva’s bench, and reaching it required her to stand at an angle that put Eva’s notebook fully within her peripheral vision.

She picked up the scribe. She turned it over in her hands like she was examining it. She let her eyes drift.

The notebook was covered in formation diagrams.

Tight, clean, circular arrays with inscription notations in the margins, and one larger diagram in the middle of the page that Katarina couldn’t quite make out because she couldn’t turn her head without making it obvious.

She squinted.

"Is there something I can help you with, Montecardi?"

Katarina froze with the jade scribe halfway to her chest.

Eva still hadn’t looked up.

"I’m getting a scribe."

"You already got the scribe. Now you’re standing there holding it."

"I’m... choosing which one."

"There’s only one to choose."

Katarina looked down. Eva was correct.

"I thought there were two."

"There aren’t."

"I see that now."

Eva finally looked up. Her pale blue eyes met Katarina’s, steady and unhurried, and Katarina realized Eva had watched the whole sequence, start to finish, and had simply been waiting to see how long it would take Katarina to embarrass herself.

"If you want to see what I’m working on, you could ask."

Katarina’s face was warm. She hated this.

"Okay, what are you working on?"

Eva smiled.

"Wouldn’t you like to know?"

"And then, Pirra, she caught me. She caught me looking and she didn’t even have the decency to be annoyed about it, she was just... amused, she was amused, Pirra, which is worse than being angry, because being angry means you care, and being amused means you don’t even rank!"

"Wow."

"And the way she said it. ’If you want to see what I’m working on, you could ask.’ Like I was a child."

"No way."

"And of course I shouldn’t have asked, because asking means admitting I care, and the whole point is that I don’t care, I’m just doing market research, and now I can’t even do the market research because she’s watching for it. But now she thinks I care!"

"Really?"

Katarina stopped.

She looked at Pirra. Pirra was sitting on her bed with her chin in her hand and her eyes on the far wall, nodding at regular intervals.

"Pirra."

"Mm."

"Are you even listening to me?"

Pirra looked at her. Her expression was gentle and entirely without guilt.

"Kat. We’ve had this conversation four times this week."

"... We have not."

"Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday evening after dinner. And now."

Katarina opened her mouth to argue, and then she thought about Monday, and then she thought about Tuesday, and her mouth closed on its own.

She collapsed backward onto her bed and stared at the ceiling.

"This angel is going to kill me, Pirra."

"Probably."

"I mean it. She's going to be the death of me. I'm going to die in that workshop and they're going to find me slumped over a preservation array with my last words being 'I was just getting a scribe.'"

A knock at the door.

It opened before either of them could respond, because that was the kind of person who was knocking.

"Katarina!"

Tavia leaned into the open doorway.

"Hm? Is something up?"

Tavia took about three steps into the room, vaulted onto Katarina's bed, and landed in a crouch directly on top of Katarina's stomach.

Katarina's air left her in one clean oof.

"Tavia," she wheezed, laughing.

"Mm?"

"Get off."

"No."

Tavia adjusted, getting comfortable, and settled into a straddle on Katarina's abs with her tail flicking lazily behind her. She was grinning down at Katarina with her chin propped on one hand.

From across the room, Pirra made a sound like a teakettle that had been kicked.

"Tavia! You can't just..."

"Pirra, breathe."

"You’re on her!"

"I’m aware."

Katarina, flat on her back with a catgirl perched on her midsection, tilted her head to look at Pirra.

"Pirra, my friend, welcome back. Did you enjoy your brief vacation?" Katarina asked blankly.

"I..."

"I was worried we’d lost you to the ’Mm’ and ’Wow’ phase forever. It’s good to have you."

Pirra went pink and looked at the ceiling.

Tavia leaned forward, resting her forearms on Katarina’s sternum like it was a very comfortable pillow.

"Soooo.... Do you want to hang out?"

"That would be infinitely easier to consider without a catgirl weighing me down."

"Is that a yes?"

"That’s a ’get off me and ask again,’ you menace."

Tavia grinned, sighed, and rolled off her in one motion, landing on her feet next to the bed like she’d been practicing the maneuver.

Katarina sat up, rubbed her stomach, and looked at Pirra, who was still pink.

"Come on. Both of you. I need air."

The walk from the dorms to the academy’s east garden took them past the main lecture hall, the library, and the row of afternoon tea stalls. Tavia had her hands behind her head. Pirra walked on Katarina’s other side with her arms wrapped around a stack of books she’d decided to bring for reasons that were unclear to everyone including herself.

"Did you hear the rumor?" Tavia said.

"Which one? The one about Ludo trying to buy an entire dessert cart last weekend, or something new?"

"Something new. And better. Field trip."

Katarina stopped walking.

"A field trip, sorry? Like, the academy is sending us somewhere?"

"Mm. Hasn't been announced yet, but my cousin's in second-year, and she said her cohort got shipped out to some mining town last year for a full two weeks. 'Practical immersion,' apparently. First-year thing too, from what she heard. We should get the official word any day now."

Katarina resumed walking, slower now.

"Two weeks."

"That's what she said."

"Two weeks of my workshop time, Tavia. I just got workshop access. I just got it, after a month of invention and prototyping and bribing a brothel, and they want to take it away from me for two weeks to send me to some mining town?"

"Kat, it's a field trip. It'll be fun."

"Fun is a distraction. I don't have time for fun. I have time for a cooling container and a proof of concept and a presentation that's going to make Pelegatta admit she should have endorsed me on day one."

They rounded the corner into the garden path and Katarina nearly walked face-first into a small, tightly-dressed group coming the other way.

Evangelina was at the center of them.

She was flanked on either side by two humans Katarina vaguely recognized from the lecture halls. One was the tall heir with the good cheekbones from debate class. The other was a round-faced girl who was mid-laugh when she spotted Katarina, and the laugh died in her throat.

Eva did not slow down. She did not look at Katarina. She walked past her like Katarina wasn't there.

But as she passed, she turned her head, just slightly, and flipped her silver hair over her shoulder.

Then she was gone.

Katarina stood on the garden path with her hands clenched at her sides.

[I am going to throttle her.]

Tavia, behind her, whistled low.

"Oh, wow."

"Don’t."

"Did Caelestis just flip her hair at you?"

"I said don’t."

"No, I need to process this, give me a moment." Tavia stepped in front of Katarina with both hands up, eyes wide, theatrically stunned. "Evangelina Caelestis, who does not historically notice that other people exist, turned her head and flipped her hair over her shoulder. Slowly. On purpose. While pretending she hadn’t seen you."

Katarina groaned loudly.

[... You know what? Maybe a field trip would be of SOME use. If it means I could find a way to avoid a certain angel for a little while.]

Chapter 59: Creative Solution

Thankfully, Eva appeared to be busy this evening.

Katarina had her notes spread across the entire bench. Three formation diagrams, a stack of preservation arrays at various scales, a small jade plate she was using as a test surface, and a cup of water.

The qi conduits on the academy bench were on a different tier than the Artigiana’s. Stable flow, no fluctuations, real-time readouts on a small jade panel built into the bench itself. In other words, she could watch her formation breathe in real time, and that alone was enough to identify the problem more clearly than the Artigiana had ever let her.

The qi was bleeding.

Not at the corners anymore. The circular loop had fixed that part. It was bleeding through the array itself, leaking out the bottom into the air, the way water leaks out of a clay pot that hasn’t been properly fired.

Every time the loop completed, a fraction of a percent of the qi was lost. Over an hour, that fraction added up. Over four hours, it was enough that the cooling failed.

She tried sealing the underside of the array. The seal held for an hour, then cracked.

She tried a denser inscription medium. The medium absorbed the qi instead of channeling it.

She tried a smaller loop with a faster cycle. The faster cycle generated heat, which was the entire opposite of what the array was supposed to do.

Katarina set down her quill, put both hands flat on the bench, and stared at the diagram in front of her.

[The qi has to go somewhere. That's the rule. You can't make it loop forever in a closed system, because closed systems don't exist. Even cultivators bleed qi. That's why we have to keep cultivating. The body refills what it loses.]

She thought about that for a second.

[So I need a way to refill what the array loses. Or I need to stop trying to keep it forever and just accept the loss as part of the design.]

She picked her quill back up and sketched a new diagram, frowned at it, and crossed it out. She sketched another one and crossed that one out too.

The cup of water on her bench had gone cold for the fifth time. The light in the workshop had shifted from afternoon to something closer to evening. Her hand was cramping and her back hurt from leaning over the bench for hours.

She put the quill down for real this time and leaned back on her stool.

[Okay. I'm not going to solve this tonight. I'm going to leave the workshop, eat something, sleep, and come back to it.]

She started to gather her notes.

Then she stopped.

Halfway through stacking her parchments, she paused with a sheet of formation sketches still in her hand. She was looking at the qi-bleed diagram.

[Wait.]

She set the parchment back down on the bench.

[The bleed is the problem. But what if the bleed is also the solution?]

She sat down.

Trade Infrastructure was in its second hour and Katarina had no idea what Pelegatta had been talking about for the last forty minutes.

She had her notebook open and her quill in her hand. The page in front of her had four words at the top, "supply chain redundancy," and then a series of small spiral diagrams that had nothing to do with supply chain redundancy and everything to do with the qi bleed problem she'd been chewing on since the night before.

The bleed was the solution. She knew that now. The question was how. If the array was going to leak qi no matter what she did, then the leak needed a job. Something that would consume the lost qi productively instead of wasting it. A second formation that fed off the bleed and did something useful.

Cooling. Maybe more cooling. Maybe a sustained outer layer that ran on the waste qi, freeing the primary loop to focus on the core temperature.

Or...

[Or what if the secondary formation cycles the bleed BACK INTO the primary? A pump. A qi pump. The bleed isn't lost, it's recycled, and the system runs at a stable equilibrium.]

Her quill made a small, frantic mark on the page.

"Montecardi."

Katarina looked up.

Pelegatta was at the front of the room with her arms crossed, her eyebrow raised, looking like she had already called Katarina's name twice and was prepared to make the third time uncomfortable.

"Yes, Professora."

"Define vertical integration in the context of trade."

Katarina blinked.

"Vertical integration is when a single entity controls multiple stages of a supply chain. In trade, that typically means a merchant house owning the production source, the transport infrastructure, and the destination market simultaneously. The advantages are margin capture and supply security. The disadvantages are capital intensity and exposure to single-point failures, particularly during regulatory changes or regional instability."

She drew another small spiral.

The classroom was quiet.

Pelegatta stared at her, made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a grunt, and moved on.

"... Correct."

Katarina nodded without looking up.

Pelegatta stood there for another beat. Then she moved on to the next concept.

Pirra, in the seat next to her, leaned over.

"Kat."

"Mm."

"What are you doing?"

"Working."

"You're in class."

"I can do both!"

"You haven't looked up in twenty minutes."

"I looked up just now. Pelegatta asked me a question, and I answered it."

Pirra glanced at the spirals on Katarina's page. They had grown. There were now nine of them, in a rough grid, each one slightly different.

"Are those... are those the formations?"

"Mm."

"For what?"

"The container."

"I thought you put it down for the night."

"I picked it back up."

Pirra sighed quietly.

"Kat. You haven't slept."

"I-I slept some."

"How much?"

"... Enough."

Katarina drew another spiral. The qi pump idea was forming in her head now, shape by shape, and she could see the math of it lining up in a way it hadn't before. A primary loop running cold, a secondary loop catching the bleed, the secondary pushing recovered qi back into the primary on a delay so the system stayed in balance instead of overloading.

It would work. She was almost sure it would work. She just needed to get back to the bench and...

"Before we close out today."

Pelegatta's voice cut through her thinking.

Katarina looked up properly this time.

Pelegatta had set her notes down on the lectern and was standing in front of it with her hands clasped behind her back.

"I have an announcement to make."

The room shifted. Quills went down. Students sat up straighter.

Katarina set her own quill down, the spiral diagram half-finished beneath it.

"This year's first-year cohort will be participating in a field trip."

The room shifted. Tavia, two rows up, turned around in her seat to grin at Katarina, who pretended not to see her.

"Not all of you, however."

The room shifted again, uneasily.

"This is a curated participation. Students were selected based on academic standing, demonstrated initiative, and the recommendation of the faculty committee. The names will be read at the end of class. Those of you who are not on the list will continue with the standard curriculum."

Katarina picked her quill back up.

[Right. Not me, then.]

She wasn’t bitter about it. She was just doing the math. "Curated participation" meant connections, endorsements written by aunts on the academy board, family names that had carried weight in Pavona for generations. It meant Eva. It probably meant Ludo. It did not, in any reasonable accounting, mean an eight-week-old Vellasera Signora-Designate who’d spent most of those weeks bickering with her professors and extracting product testimonials from a brothel.

[Fine. More workshop time for me.]

She went back to her spirals.

"... I will now read the names of the selected students."

"Cosima Belveri. Naveena Achetti. Ludovina Marchisio. Evangelina Caelestis."

[Called it.]

"Tavia Rinossa."

[... Wait, really? Huh.]

"Pirra Cosia."

Katarina’s quill stopped. She glanced sideways at Pirra, who’d gone very still with her hands flat on her desk and her eyes wide.

"Bettina Vasco. Renata Otelli. Dovinia Marsetti. Katarina Montecardi."

Her quill twitched.

She kept her face exactly as it had been thirty seconds ago, when it had belonged to a woman who wasn’t on the list. Now it needed to belong to a woman who’d known all along that she would be.

[Holy shit.]

"Selected students will receive their itineraries by end of week. Departure is one month from today. Duration is two weeks. The destination is the Baccara Corridor, inland to coast. You will be observing real cargo, real merchants, real terrain. Class dismissed."

Tavia was at Katarina’s desk before Katarina had finished standing up.

"You’re on the list! I’m on the list! Pirra’s on the list!"

"Tavia, the entire class can hear you."

"That’s the idea."

Pirra hadn’t moved. Katarina nudged her shoulder.

"Hey."

"... I’m on the list."

"You are."

"Why am I on the list?"

Katarina crouched a little so they were at eye level.

"I guess someone on the faculty likes you. Come on, I’m hungry. Get your books."

Pirra gathered them slowly, like she was afraid that moving too fast would unselect her.

Outside in the hallway, Katarina let herself smile. Just a small one, just for herself.

[The Baccara Corridor. Real cargo. Real merchants. Real terrain... Okay. I’ll allow this.]

Chapter 60: Miserable*

Katarina groaned.

"Here."

"Huh?"

"Some tea."

Katarina took it from her hands and took a sip. The relief was immediate.

"It’s enchanted with Grace qi."

[God bless magical healing.]

It had been six days.

Six days of Katarina at the workshop bench from sunrise until the lamplighters made their second pass. Six days of tea instead of meals, formation diagrams instead of sleep, and a growing pile of failed prototypes shoved into the corner of her bench like a graveyard.

The qi pump idea had survived contact with reality for about forty-eight hours before the secondary loop started destabilizing in ways Katarina hadn't predicted. She'd torn it down, started again with a different ratio, torn it down, tried a buffer layer, and torn it down again.

The bleed wanted to go somewhere. She just couldn't figure out where.

The worst part had been four days ago, when one of the prototypes had finally held for nine straight hours, and Katarina had been so close to celebrating that she had actually lifted her arms in triumph at her bench, which was the exact moment Eva had walked past on her way to her own station.

The prototype failed three seconds later. The internal temperature spiked, and the jade plate she'd been using as the cold surface cracked clean down the middle.

Eva paused. She looked at the cracked plate, then at Katarina, who still had her arms half-raised, and then she kept walking without a word.

Katarina had wanted to throttle her with both hands.

[She didn't even smirk. She didn't need to. Her FACE was a smirk.]

The memory still had Katarina's jaw clenching. She took another sip of the tea Pirra had brought.

The Grace qi worked its way through her shoulders and down into her lower back, and for the first time in six days she could sit upright without something complaining about it.

"Better?" Pirra asked.

"Much. Thank you."

"You should sleep."

"I'm going to."

"You said that yesterday."

"And I'm saying it today, which proves I'm consistent."

Pirra gave her a look that was disappointed and forgiving in roughly equal measure.

She gathered her satchel.

"I have Comparative Economic Systems in twenty minutes."

"Go. Take notes for me."

"Kat."

"I know. I will sleep. I promise."

Pirra hesitated at the door. She looked at Katarina, then at the workshop bench in the corner where the latest failed prototype was sitting, then back at Katarina.

"... Drink the rest of the tea."

"Yes, ma’am."

The door closed behind her.

Katarina drank the rest of the tea.

She set the empty cup down, leaned back in her chair, and stared at the ceiling. Her brain felt like it had been wrung out and put back in slightly damp. The qi pump was still spinning behind her eyes. The bleed. The recycle. The buffer that wouldn’t buffer.

In her satchel, the communication stone pulsed warm.

Katarina sat up, fished it out, and felt the thread of Vessa on the other end.

She smiled before she’d even answered.

"Hi, baby."

"Oh, you sound miserable."

"I am miserable, Vessa, it’s been a NIGHTMARE."

"Tell me everything."

Katarina leaned back in her chair and put her free hand over her eyes. The stone was warm against her ear. Vessa’s voice was the first thing she’d heard in six days that didn’t come with an ulterior motive or a deadline.

"There’s an angel."

"An angel?"

"An aevari. Same difference. Her name is Evangelina. She's in my ethics class. She got into the academy workshop a full month before I did because her aunt sits on the board, which I only found out by directly asking her, and which she told me like I'd just inquired about the weather."

"Mhm."

"Though, to be honest, it's obvious she's brilliant. She invented a paired-inscription fraud prevention system in two weeks. Pelegatta endorsed her for it. I had to invent contraceptives to get a workshop slot, and even then Pelegatta made me run a clinical trial in a brothel before she'd sign anything."

"Uh-huh..."

"And she keeps walking past my bench."

"Mhm."

"She doesn't even say anything. She just walks past and looks at whatever I've just failed at, and walks away, and I, fuck, I want to choke her!"

"Mhm."

"So, yeah," Katarina sighed. "That's been going on for a bit."

There was a pause.

"Oh, this is so much better than I thought."

"What?"

"You like her."

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"No, I just told you I want to throttle her, that's not the same as liking her."

"Sometimes it is."

"What?"

"Babe, I have known you for a decade. You have a very specific tone of voice that only comes out when a woman is getting under your skin. Do you know how I know what tone you use? Because you have used it for me. About me. Many times. When I go out of my way to annoy you, I mean."

Katarina opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again before any words made it out.

"... It is not the same."

"It absolutely is the same."

"It’s NOT, because I LIKED you."

"And you like her."

"I do not like her. I find her insufferable."

"That tends to be the same thing for you."

"VESSA."

Vessa was laughing now, a real laugh, the one that bubbled up out of her chest when something delighted her. Katarina hadn’t heard it in person in a little while and it made her nostalgic.

"Okay, okay, I’ll concede: you probably just want to fuck her."

"I regret bringing her up at all."

There was a small sound on Vessa’s end of the line. A clatter. A door. Voices in the background.

"Sorry. We’re loading some stuff. Talk to me, what else."

"Actually, how are things there? How’s the work?"

"Ooh, over here? It’s good. It’s really good, actually. I’m doing layered preservation for a big shipment next week and Master Galteri thinks I’m ready to lead the array myself. Which would be a first-year doing a master-track project. Which is, you know, big."

Vessa said it casually. The way she always said everything. But Katarina could hear the smile in it.

"Oh wow, that’s huge."

"Well, it’s still pending approval. Don’t jinx it."

"I’m still proud of you."

"Mm. Thank you, baby. Anyway. Three years and we’re back together, hm? You’ll be done with Compasso, I’ll be done with Galteri, and we can finally..."

"One year, Vessa. I told you. I'm doing the three-year program in twelve months, I'm not... I'm not sitting through this for three years. I can't."

"Ah, true, you're already getting migraines." Kat could hear someone faintly calling out to Vessa. "Ooh, I'm needed. Love you. Drink water. Sleep tonight. Goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight."

The stone went dark in her palm.

Katarina sat with it for a moment, the warmth fading slowly out of the jade. Then she set it on her desk, leaned forward, and put her face in her hands.

Then there was a knock. And then, the door opened.

"Hi!"

Katarina did not look up. She knew that voice.

"Tavia."

"You sound terrible."

"I'm having a moment."

"I can see that."

Tavia stepped in, kicked the door shut behind her, and crossed the room to plant herself on the edge of Katarina's bed. Her uniform was rumpled. Her tail was loose and lazy.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"I'm supposed to be doing lots of things. I'd rather come bother you instead."

Katarina looked up at her. Tavia was grinning, that easy grin she always wore when she'd already decided how the next twenty minutes were going to go and was waiting for Katarina to catch up.

"You look like death."

"Thank you."

Tavia patted her thigh.

"Come here."

"What?"

"Come here. To the edge of the bed. Sit."

Katarina, too tired to argue, moved to the edge of the bed. Tavia slid off and crouched in front of her, hands on Katarina’s knees.

"Tavia."

"Mm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Helping you relax."

"Tavia."

"Kat. When was the last time you stopped thinking about a formation array for more than five minutes?"

"... I don’t know."

"Right. So, take a moment and chill out for a bit."

[Just like that!?]

Tavia’s hands moved up. She undid the laces of Katarina’s trousers slowly, like she had all afternoon to do it. Katarina, who had been trying to formulate three different reasons to say no, found that none of them were arriving fast enough to use.

Tavia got the trousers open, freed Katarina’s cock, and looked up at her, grinning. The grin was a promise that this was going to take a while.

"Lean back."

Katarina leaned back.

Tavia took her into her mouth in one slow, unhurried slide, and Katarina’s head hit the wall with a thud as her brain finally, finally stopped thinking about qi loops.

Tavia’s mouth was hot. Her tongue worked the underside of Katarina’s cock in long, slow drags. Her hands stayed on Katarina’s thighs, holding her steady, and her tail flicked against Katarina’s calf in a slow, contented rhythm.

Katarina groaned and let her head fall back further. The stress of six days drained out of her shoulders in one long exhale.

[... Oh. Oh, that's nice.]

Tavia took her deeper. Her throat opened around Katarina's cock and she swallowed once, twice, the muscles working around her, and Katarina's hips jerked up before she could stop them. Tavia took it without breaking rhythm and sank further down.

It didn't take long. Six days of exhaustion plus a catgirl's mouth was not a fair fight. Katarina felt herself crest and tried to warn her, mouth open, but Tavia just looked up at her, held her gaze, and went deeper, and that was the end of it.

Katarina came with a low groan, hips bucking, and Tavia took every drop. She held Katarina in her mouth a few extra seconds, swallowing slowly, then pulled off with a soft, wet sound and licked her lips.

She tucked Katarina back into her trousers, retied the laces neatly, and stood up.

"Better?"

"... Mm."

"Good." She leaned down, kissed Katarina's forehead, and headed for the door. "See you tomorrow."

"What- you're leaving?"

"Yep. Bye~"

The door closed behind her.

Katarina sat on the edge of the bed with her trousers retied and her brain pleasantly empty for the first time in six days.

[... Was that a fever dream???]