CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 7: Supply and Demand

The training yard behind the estate was a flat stretch of packed earth with a wooden post at one end that Brynn had apparently been punching for so long it had a permanent dent shaped like her fist.

Katarina stood in the middle of it, barefoot, with her arms at her sides and her knees bent in what Brynn called a "rooting stance." It was sort of like squatting over an invisible chair.

"Wider," Brynn said.

Katarina widened her stance. Her thighs burned.

"Wider."

"If I go any wider I'm going to split in half."

"That's the spirit! Now breathe."

[Okay, calm down. This is a corporate wellness seminar. That's it. I am at a corporate wellness seminar and I can't leave because my boss is also my mother. Breathe.]

Brynn demonstrated the breathing pattern. In through the nose, hold for three counts, out through the mouth. She made it look effortless. Unless valdari and human physiology were the same, this woman probably had lungs the size of throw pillows.

"You're pulling the qi in with your breath," Brynn said. "It's everywhere. In the air, in the ground, in your body. You just have to learn to feel it."

[Right. Qi is everywhere. It's a resource that permeates the entire system and needs to be channeled to specific areas for maximum effect.]

That sounded familiar.

[She's kinda describing supply chain logistics.]

Katarina breathed in, held it, and breathed out.

"Good! Again."

She did it again. And again.

The breathing part was easy. Thirty years of sitting across from men who wanted to watch her flinch had given Vivienne Ross the lung control of a free diver. She could regulate her breath the way other people regulated their temper.

Brynn noticed.

"Your breathing is perfect," she said, and she sounded surprised. She crouched down in front of Katarina and put a big, warm hand on her stomach. "Here. Can you feel that? When you breathe in, there's a little pull right here. That's qi moving."

Katarina focused. There was a faint tug below her navel, like a muscle she didn't know she had was flexing on its own.

[What am I feeling?]

The Ledger flickered.

Qi detected: Trace amounts. Circulating along primary meridian.

Cultivation status: Pre-Foundation. Normal for age.

Note: Breathing efficiency is abnormally high for a five-year-old.

[A decade of quarterly earnings calls will do that to your diaphragm.]

"Now," Brynn said, standing back up and putting her fists on her hips, "try the punch."

Katarina punched.

It was the same sad little punch from last year, except now she was five instead of four, so it traveled maybe ten inches instead of eight. Her form was terrible, her weight transfer was nonexistent, and the sound it made when it hit Brynn's open palm was less "impact" and more "polite suggestion."

"That's great, dumpling!"

[Do not patronize me, woman. It is not great. That punch would not bruise a grape!]

"The power comes from here." Brynn tapped her own hip. "You're punching with your arm. Punch with your whole body."

Katarina tried again. The sound upgraded from "polite suggestion" to "firm request."

"Better! See? You're a natural!"

[... Meh.]

She went back to the breathing exercise while Brynn moved through a series of stances that made her look like a very large, very dangerous yoga instructor. Katarina followed along where she could and focused on the breath where she couldn't.

In, hold, out.

The qi moved. She could feel it now, thin and faint, like a current of warm water running just under her skin. It pooled in her core and then spread outward when she exhaled, reaching toward her fingers and toes before fading.

[It's a circulation system. Input, storage, distribution. The breathing is intake, the core is the warehouse, and the meridians are the distribution network.]

She almost laughed.

[Come on. I've been optimizing distribution networks for fifteen years. If qi flows the way inventory flows, then the bottleneck isn't capacity, it's routing. I need to find the inefficiencies in the meridian system and redirect flow to where it's needed most.]

"Mother."

"Yeah, dumpling?"

"When you move the qi around, does it go the same way every time? Like, is there a set path?"

Brynn blinked. Then she grinned so wide her canines showed.

"You felt the pathways already? At five?!"

"..."

Katarina blinked.

[Was that not supposed to happen yet?]

"That's my girl!" Brynn scooped her up, and Katarina was airborne before she could protest. "Seris! SERIS!"

Seris was not present. Brynn was yelling at the estate in general.

[Please put me down. I was having a breakthrough in applied logistics!]

Brynn did not put her down. Brynn carried her on her shoulders for the next twenty minutes, telling every single person they passed that her daughter could feel qi pathways at five years old.

Nobody was as impressed as Brynn wanted them to be, but that didn't slow her down. Fausta, who was doing nothing on a bench, said "How lovely" without looking up from doing nothing.

[This woman is being paid fourteen silver marks a year to sit on that bench and say "how lovely" to passing mothers. I am going to fire her so hard her grandchildren will be unemployed!]

But under the indignation, somewhere Katarina refused to look directly at, there was the warm pressure of Brynn's hands on her ankles and the way Brynn's shoulders shook when she laughed. Vivienne Ross had never sat on anyone's shoulders. Vivienne Ross had never had anyone to sit on.

[Anyway. Qi pathways. Interesting stuff.]

Dinner was stew again. Ottavia had made it too salty again. Katarina ate it without complaint because picking battles was a skill that transferred across lifetimes and overcooked stew was not a hill worth dying on.

Seris was on her third glass of wine and telling a story about a merchant she'd met in the port town who had tried to sell her a "genuine pre-war artifact" that was obviously a painted rock.

"She kept saying it was blessed by a Formation master," Seris said, holding up the rock in question. She'd bought it. "Fifty copper for a rock, Brynn. Fifty copper."

"Why did you buy it?"

"She had a very honest face."

[She spent fifty copper on a painted rock because the woman had a nice face. She is the head of a merchant house. She is the HEAD of a MERCHANT HOUSE.]

Brynn was laughing so hard she kept choking on bread, and Seris was waving the rock around like it proved her point.

So, Kat sighed and decided to stop thinking about this rock and start thinking about the Torvano contract.

She'd found it two weeks ago during one of her nighttime study raids. The Montecardi estate bought grapes from a supplier named Torvano for wine production. The contract was old, the prices were above market rate, and the quality reports showed a spoilage rate that would have gotten any vendor in Katarina's old life fired on the spot.

[What's our spoilage rate on Torvano grapes versus the regional average?]

Torvano spoilage rate: 23%.

Regional average: 8-12%.

Torvano contract price: 14% above current market rate.

[We are paying MORE for grapes that rot TWICE AS OFTEN. This is not a vendor relationship. This is theft with a handshake!]

And she would address this, but the timing had to be right.

Katarina couldn't walk up to Seris with a spreadsheet and a vendor termination notice. She was five.

But she could ask a question. One question, placed at the right moment, the way you drop a single data point into a meeting and let the room do the rest.

She waited for a lull. Seris finished her story. Brynn wiped her eyes and reached for more bread. The table went comfortable and quiet for a few seconds, the way it does when everyone's chewing and no one's started the next topic yet.

Katarina looked up from her bowl.

"Mother, why do we pay Mrs. Torvano for grapes if her grapes are the yuckiest?"

Brynn stopped chewing. She looked at Seris.

Seris looked at Katarina. Her wine glass paused halfway to her mouth.

"W-What do you mean, piccola?"

"Ottavia said last week that she had to throw out a whole crate because they were mushy. And then the week before that she said the same thing. And she always says it's the Torvano ones!"

That was true. Ottavia complained about the Torvano grapes on a regular basis, loud enough for the whole kitchen to hear, which was how Katarina had first picked up the thread. She'd just followed it back to the contract.

Seris set her wine glass down.

"She did say that," Seris said, and the words came out slowly.

"So why do we still buy from her?"

Katarina took a bite of stew, just a kid asking a kid question. Nothing more to see here, just a five-year-old who noticed that the cook kept complaining about the same grapes and wondered why.

Brynn was still looking at Seris. Seris was looking at the table, and there was that crease in her brow again. The same crease from when she'd found the dog-eared contracts on her desk.

"That's a good question," Seris said.

[Yes it is.]

"I'll look into it."

[PLEASE DO!!!]

The conversation moved on.

Brynn started talking about Katarina's qi progress and Seris's face brightened and the Torvano question dissolved into the noise of dinner the way a single dropped pebble disappears into a pond.

But it had landed. Katarina could tell because Seris reached for her wine glass twice in the next five minutes and didn't drink either time. She was thinking.

[Good.]

The next morning, Katarina woke up early and padded to the hallway outside Seris's study.

The door was closed, but she could hear papers rustling inside.

She pressed her ear to the wood. Seris was muttering a name. Torvano.

There was more rustling, then a drawer opening and closing. Then there was quiet, and then Seris said a word that Katarina recognized from Brynn's vocabulary. The kind of word that mothers weren't supposed to say.

Katarina grinned.

She walked back to her room before anyone saw her, climbed into bed, and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

The Ledger pulsed.

Torvano contract: Flagged for review by Seris Montecardi.

One liability identified.

One down. About forty to go.

[But we're moving.]

Chapter 8: Course Correction

Signora Valcetti came back on a Tuesday, and this time she didn't look like she was writing an obituary.

She looked confused.

Katarina sat on the same rug in the same corner of Seris's study with a different set of blocks, because she'd outgrown the first set, and watched Valcetti page through the books looking skeptical and, increasingly, a little impressed.

"... Your wine export margins have recovered," Valcetti said.

"We renegotiated with Brevaine," Seris said. She was sitting behind the desk with her ankles crossed, wine glass in hand, looking for all the world like a woman who had always known exactly what she was doing.

[You did not know what you were doing. I PUT the Brevaine contract on your desk with the penalty clause circled in what I told you was a "pretty drawing."]

That had been month two of Katarina's shadow consulting operation.

Month one was the Torvano grapes. Seris had investigated the contract after Katarina's dinner table question, found the spoilage rates, and terminated the agreement within a week. She'd switched to a local grower whose product was cheaper and didn't rot. The savings alone had shaved four percent off their monthly expenses.

Month two was the Brevaine contract. Katarina had climbed onto Seris's desk while she was reading, picked up the contract, and drawn a circle around the penalty clause in red

ink. "Pretty!" she'd said. Seris had stared at the clause for a very long time before saying one word that Katarina hadn't heard her say too often.

"Motherfucker!"

Kat couldn't help herself.

"What's that mean, Mother?" She asked cutely.

"Nothing, piccola. Don't repeat that."

Anyway, the renegotiation was completed within two weeks.

Month three was the Coretti warehouse. Katarina had spent an entire afternoon "playing shop" at Seris's desk, lining up contract folders by size. Biggest on top, smallest on the bottom. Then she'd pointed at the biggest one, which happened to be the Coretti markup schedule, and said:

"Mother, this one's really heavy. Is it important?"

Seris had picked it up, read it, and gone very quiet.

The Coretti markup was renegotiated by the end of the month.

Month four was Fausta's turn, and oh god how Kat had been looking forward to this.

Katarina hadn't even needed to do much for that one. Seris had started actually walking the grounds after the Brevaine wake-up call, and it turns out that when you pay attention to your own estate, you notice that your gardener hasn't gardened in three years!

As much as Kat wished she'd been the one to lay down the hammer, Seris had instead and Fausta was reassigned to the vineyard, where she could at least carry baskets. (Though Katarina doubted she could even do that much, but oh well)

Donia was let go with a severance that Katarina thought was too generous but couldn't argue with because she was five.

Enza was still employed. Seris had given her the title of "household coordinator" and a list of actual duties, which was not an ideal solution, but it was better than paying a woman to haunt the east wing.

All of this Seris believed she had figured out on her own, which was part of the goal, but it had a disturbing side effect.

Seris was unbearably smug these days.

[Seris Montecardi, my birth mother with the body and mind of a stripper in a place where strippers own land, apparently. But give her a reason to look at a problem and she'll solve it. The issue was never her intelligence. It was attention.]

Valcetti turned another page. Then another. She went through the whole book without speaking, and when she closed it, she looked at Seris the way auditors look at numbers that don't match what they expected, and what she'd expected was a corpse.

"This is a significant improvement, Signora Montecardi."

"Yes," Seris said, examining her nails. "It is."

Kat rolled her eyes.

[Oh, God.]

"I'll be honest. I expected to be filing for a formal review today."

"I can see why you might have." Seris took a sip of wine. "But we've been quite busy."

[She is going to be INSUFFERABLE after this.]

That said... Seris had said "we."

Not "I." We.

Katarina liked that more than she should have.

Valcetti made a note on her form. Katarina couldn't read it from the rug, but the Ledger could.

Assessor's note: "Unexpected course correction. Recommend continued provisional status with standard review in twelve months."

[Twelve months. We bought ourselves a full year!]

The port tariff was safe. The license was intact.

Nobody was getting formally reviewed.

Katarina placed a block on top of her tower and did not react, because she was five and five-year-olds didn't care about trade assessments. But something warm and tight in her chest loosened for the first time in months.

The wine came out before Valcetti's carriage had cleared the estate gates.

Not the regular wine, either, no, Seris went into the cellar and came back with a bottle that had dust on it, which in this household meant it was either very old or had been knocked behind a shelf and forgotten about. Given this family's inventory management, both were equally likely.

"To us!" Brynn said, raising her glass so hard the wine sloshed.

"To the Montecardi name," Seris said, and clinked.

They drank. Brynn finished her glass in one go and poured another. Seris was already on her second by the time Katarina had processed the toast.

[We passed a basic audit by the skin of our teeth and they're celebrating like we just went public. This family's bar for success is underground.]

Brynn scooped Katarina off the floor and spun her around, and Katarina's legs went out sideways and the room blurred and she made a sound that was supposed to be a protest but came out closer to a laugh.

"We did it, dumpling!"

[You didn't do anything! I did everything! You were doing push-ups the entire time!]

"You did it," Katarina said, because again, she was five and five-year-olds said things like that.

Brynn's whole face cracked open. She crushed Katarina against her chest and squeezed, and for a few seconds Katarina let herself stay there. Brynn was warm and solid and smelled like the training yard and the stew she'd helped Ottavia make for dinner, and the arms around Katarina were so big and so sure that for one stupid, inconvenient moment, the CEO brain went quiet.

Vivienne Ross had never been held like this, not once, not by anyone.

Katarina squirmed free and landed on her feet. She stood in the middle of the room, looked up at her two mothers, both of whom were pink-cheeked and grinning, and thought:

[We're stable. But stable isn't growing. Stable is just dying slowly. I need to know exactly where we stand. Everything. Ugh, I wish there was a way to view our full status.]

The Ledger answered.

Not the usual flicker of gilded text at the edge of her vision. This was bigger. A full display opened in front of her, translucent jade panels arranged in columns, more information than the Ledger had ever shown her at once.

[THE SOVEREIGN LEDGER]

Signora-Designate: Katarina Montecardi

Sovereign Qi: 0/???

[Attributes]

Analysis: 9/10

Negotiation: 8/10

Leadership: 7/10

Intimidation: 2/10 (Age penalty)

Charm: 3/10 (Age penalty)

Physical Ability: 1/10 (Age penalty)

[Traits]

Photographic Memory — Perfect recall of all observed information.

CEO Brain — Automatically identifies inefficiencies, power structures, and leverage in any system.

[Skills]

Room Reading — Assess emotional state, motivations, and honesty of anyone in conversation range.

Strategic Patience — Plant information and wait for others to act on it.

Vendor Assessment — Instantly identify unfavorable contract terms, markup discrepancies, and spoilage irregularities.

Breath Control — Abnormally efficient qi intake.

Toddler Camouflage — Disguise high-level analysis as innocent child behavior. Current cover: Holding.

[House Montecardi]

License: Provisional | Deadline: ~12 months

Revenue: D-

Trade Routes: 0

Alliances: 0

Reputation: F

Active Liabilities: 2

[Holdings]

Montecardi Estate — D

Vellasera Port — D

Vineyards — D

Iron Mine — D

[Contracts]

Brevaine Supply — C (Renegotiated)

Coretti Warehouse — C (Renegotiated)

Port Tariff Arrangement — D

Torvano Grape Supply — ~~F~~ (Terminated)

Vineyard Distribution (Port) — B

[Personnel — 12 Staff]

Seris Montecardi — Head of House

Negotiation: 2/10 | Administration: 3/10 | Charm: 9/10 Loyalty: Family

Brynn Montecardi — Co-Head of House

Negotiation: 1/10 | Administration: 0/10 | Intimidation: 9/10 Loyalty: Family

Dalla Orenzi — Bookkeeper

Competence: 4/10 | Reliability: 7/10 | Loyalty: 8/10

Ottavia — Cook

Competence: 6/10 | Reliability: 8/10 | Loyalty: 9/10

Fausta Morani — Vineyard Laborer (Reassigned)

Competence: 3/10 | Reliability: 2/10 | Loyalty: 2/10

Enza — Household Coordinator

Competence: ?/10 | Reliability: ?/10 | Loyalty: ?/10

Stablehands (x2) — Unassessed

Remaining Staff (x4) — Unassessed

Katarina stared at the display. There was a lot to process.

[Physical Ability: ONE? I've been training with Brynn for over a year!]

She scrolled down to the House overview and her mood dropped harder.

[Revenue: D-. We clawed our way up to a D-minus. I'd celebrate, but that's like celebrating because your house is no longer actively on fire. The foundation is still charred. Hm... Zero trade routes, zero alliances, and everybody still thinks we're a joke. But we're a D-minus joke now, which I'm guessing is more than we were six months ago.]

The contracts looked better, at least.

She closed the display. The jade panels faded and the room came back into focus.

Her mothers were on their second bottle. Maybe their third. Brynn had pulled Seris onto her lap and Seris was laughing with her head tipped back and her wine glass dangling from two fingers.

Honestly, the circumstances made Katarina want to drop the entire act.

"Um, what does 'reinvestment' mean?" Katarina asked.

Neither of them looked at her. Instead, they stayed nose-to-nose.

"Brynn, stop, she's right there—"

"She’s five, she doesn’t know what we’re doing."

[I know EXACTLY what you’re doing and I am trying to CONDUCT BUSINESS.]

Seris kissed Brynn, and it was not a quick peck. It was the kind of kiss that had a trajectory, a destination, and absolutely no interest in Katarina’s reinvestment plan.

Brynn’s hand slid down Seris’s back.

Seris moaned into Brynn’s mouth, loud enough that Katarina wanted the last five seconds stricken from her memory.

[... I am trying to save this family and my mothers are in heat.]

She turned around, walked out of the room, and put herself to bed.

The sounds started about ten minutes later. The walls in this estate were not thick enough. They had never been thick enough. Katarina pulled a pillow over her head and pressed it against both ears.

It didn’t help.

[MEMO. To: Both of my mothers. From: Your firstborn daughter and chief financial strategist. Re: Workplace professionalism. It has come to my attention that certain members of this household have been engaging in recreational activities during business hours. While I appreciate the value of employee morale, I must insist that all non-work-related physical contact be confined to AFTER the quarterly reinvestment strategy has been reviewed and approved. Failure to comply will result in a formal written warning.]

From down the hall, Seris said Brynn’s name loud enough to rattle the windows.

[ADDENDUM: Soundproofing the master bedroom is now Priority One for next quarter’s capital expenditure budget.]

She pulled the pillow tighter and started mentally drafting a vineyard optimization plan.

It was going to be a long night.

{Stellara}

The Brevaine district sat forty miles up the coast, where the canyon cliffs gave way to rolling green hills and the estates got bigger the higher you climbed.

Stellara Brevaine was on her terrace when her secretary brought the report.

She read it twice.

"Provisional status extended," she said. "Twelve-month review."

Her secretary said nothing, which was the correct response.

The Montecardi review had been a formality. Everyone in the district knew the house was circling the drain. Stellara had been watching it happen for two years with the patience of a woman who had already drafted the bid for the port tariff rights, already scouted the infrastructure, already calculated the margins.

When the Montecardi lost their license, those rights would go to auction, and Stellara would acquire them at a price that would make her competitors choke.

And now the report said "unexpected course correction."

She set her wine glass down.

"Who renegotiated their contracts?"

"The Signora, apparently. Seris Montecardi."

Stellara frowned.

She knew about the Brevaine renegotiation firsthand, because it was her house's contract. The new terms were fair, which was the problem. The old terms had been bleeding the Montecardi dry, and Seris had apparently woken up one morning and decided to fix that.

Stellara had met Seris twice. Once at a trade summit where the woman had spent more time flirting with her own wife than networking, and once at a regional guild event where she'd charmed half the room and failed to close a single deal.

Seris Montecardi was painfully beautiful, surprisingly pleasant, but about as financially sophisticated as a desert crab.

And now she'd renegotiated three contracts, cut dead weight from her workforce, and stabilized a house that had been hemorrhaging money for half a decade?

Something didn't add up.

Stellara had been running a merchant house since before Seris Montecardi had married into one, and every instinct she had was telling her that Seris hadn't done this alone.

"Keep watching them," Stellara said. "I want... quarterly updates."

Her secretary nodded and left.

Stellara picked up her wine and looked out at the harbor. She'd been so certain the Montecardi house was finished. Certainty was expensive when it turned out to be wrong.

She was going to find out who was actually running that house.

Chapter 9: Metaphors... Maybe

A few years passed.

Katarina was now nine years old and could circulate qi through her primary meridian without passing out, which Brynn treated like a national holiday and Katarina treated like meeting a quarterly benchmark.

The training had changed over the years.

No more invisible chairs and sad little punches, oh no.

Brynn had moved her onto real cultivation exercises: directing qi from core to limbs, holding it in specific meridian junctions, and cycling it back through the body in a continuous loop. It was like running a pump system through a network of pipes, except the pipes were inside her and the pump was her willpower and if she lost focus the whole thing collapsed and she got a headache that lasted for hours.

Anyway, she was decent at it.

Her qi reserves were average for her age, her circulation speed was slightly above average thanks to the breathing control she'd built early, and her physical reinforcement was still garbage because her body, while no longer the size of a large cat, was still the body of a nine-year-old girl who weighed about as much as a sack of flour.

[Status.]

The window opened. She'd gotten used to calling it up by now, the way she'd gotten used to the Ledger. Just another tool in the kit.

[THE SOVEREIGN LEDGER]

Signora-Designate: Katarina Montecardi

Sovereign Qi: 12/???

[Attributes]

Analysis: 9/10

Negotiation: 8/10

Leadership: 7/10

Intimidation: 3/10 (Age penalty)

Charm: 4/10 (Age penalty)

Physical Ability: 2/10 (Age penalty)

[Physical Ability: TWO. I've been training for five years and I went from a one to a TWO.]

Intimidation and Charm had at least crept up a point each. Leadership was holding at seven, which she attributed to the fact that three members of the estate staff now came to her with questions before going to Seris, though they'd never admit it and neither would she.

She scrolled down to the House overview.

[House Montecardi]

License: Active Revenue: D+

Trade Routes: 1

Alliances: 0

Reputation: D

[D-plus on revenue. One active trade route. And our reputation crawled up from an F to a D, which means people in the district have gone from laughing at us to politely ignoring us. Progress.]

She closed the window before the Physical Ability score could annoy her further.

There was another thing she'd noticed, and it was stupid, but she'd noticed it.

She'd caught her reflection in the training yard water basin that morning and the face looking back wasn't quite as cute anymore. Not in the round, squishy, pinch-my-cheeks way that had been her primary tactical asset for five years. Her face was losing the baby fat, her cheekbones were sharpening, and her jawline was coming in.

She looked like a kid now, not a toddler, and kids didn't get carried around and cooed over and forgiven for being in rooms they shouldn't be in.

[... My cute card is expiring and I don't have a replacement strategy yet.]

"Focus, dumpling! You're leaking qi from your left shoulder again."

Katarina pulled her attention back. The qi was leaking from her left shoulder, which was a recurring problem. The meridian junction there was narrow, or at least it felt narrow, and every time she tried to push qi through it at full circulation speed it spilled out like water from a cracked pipe.

She adjusted. Slowed the flow, widened her focus, and guided the qi through the junction with more care. The leak stopped. The circuit held.

"Better," Brynn said. She was sitting cross-legged across from Katarina with her eyes half-closed, tracking Katarina's qi with her own senses the way a mechanic listens to an engine. "You think too much, though. You're trying to steer it. Let it flow."

[Letting things flow is not in my skill set. Letting things flow is the opposite of my skill set. My skill set is micromanagement.]

"You know," Brynn said, stretching her arms over her head with a crack that sounded like someone stepping on a branch, "you remind me of Marga."

"Who's Marga?"

"Woman I ran with on the frontier. Before your mother, before all this." She waved a hand at the estate. "Meanest cultivator I ever met. Five foot nothing and she could crack a formation array with her bare hands. We didn't have tutors or training manuals. Just us and whatever we figured out between jobs."

[Frontier mercenary cultivation. No structure, no methodology, pure improvisation. That explains a lot about Brynn's teaching style, honestly.]

"Marga used to say cultivation is like sex. You can read about it all you want, but you won't get anywhere until you stop thinking and just do it."

The words left Brynn's mouth with the casual ease of a woman who had forgotten her audience was nine.

Katarina looked at her...

... and held back a smirk.

"Mother, what's sex?"

The color drained from Brynn's face so fast it was visible even through her red skin. Her yellow eyes went wide and her mouth opened and closed twice without producing sound. Kat tried to look as curious and innocent as she possibly could.

"It’s, uh. Well! That’s a. You see, when two people, or, well, sometimes more than two people, but that’s, that’s not the point, the point is—"

Katarina tried her hardest not to laugh and asked:

"Is it like wrestling?"

"NO. I mean. Well. In a sense. Seris? SERIS!"

Seris was not available. Seris was in her study, reviewing contracts, doing the job that Katarina had spent four years tricking her into learning how to do.

"It’s when two grownups like each other very much and they... express that. Physically."

"Like hugging?"

"Sure! Like hugging! Very intense hugging! With. Uh... Parts. Can we go back to the qi exercises?"

[Ah, sweet mother of mine, I know exactly what sex is. I mean, even if I hadn’t reincarnated, it would be hard not to know when I have heard you and Mama doing it approximately two hundred times through walls that you both refuse to soundproof. Still, watching you try to explain it might be the single greatest return on investment I’ve ever gotten from a conversation.]

"Okay, Mother."

Brynn exhaled like she’d just survived a life-or-death scenario.

Meanwhile, Katarina circulated qi through her left shoulder junction without a single leak.

Marga might have been onto something.

The study was different at night.

During the day, Seris’s desk was a command center. Papers stacked, wine at hand, Seris performing the role of Signora with increasing competence and only occasional wine stains.

At night, with a single lamp burning and the canyon wind pushing through the open window, it was just a desk in a quiet room.

Katarina sat in the chair beside it. She could reach it without climbing now, which still felt like a personal victory every time.

Seris had the household ledgers open between them.

This had become their routine over the past year, once or twice a week, after dinner. Seris would go through the numbers and Katarina would sit beside her and listen, and sometimes Katarina would point at something and ask a question that wasn't really a question, and Seris would pause and think and occasionally change something.

It wasn't shadow consulting anymore. It was closer to a partnership, even if Seris didn't fully realize that's what it was. She'd just gotten used to having Katarina there the way you get used to a second pair of eyes on a document. You don't question it. You just start leaving space for it.

Tonight they were going through a supply contract for grain.

One of the newer ones, picked up after the Torvano termination to diversify their food sourcing. The terms were fine and the pricing was competitive, but the delivery schedule had a gap in it. A two-week window every quarter where no shipments arrived, which meant the estate had to buy from the port market at a markup to cover the shortfall.

"Here," Katarina said, pointing at the delivery dates. "There's a hole."

Seris leaned over and looked. Her brow creased.

"Every third month. We go two weeks without a delivery."

"And during those two weeks, Ottavia buys from the port market."

"At port prices. Which are..."

"Higher."

Seris exhaled through her nose. She picked up a quill, made a note in the margin, and then put the quill down.

Then she put the ledger down.

She leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling. Her arm came around Katarina's shoulders, half a hug, absentminded, like she'd done it without deciding to.

"You know," Seris said, "my life used to be so different."

Her voice was quiet and a little confused.

"Really?"

She didn’t look at Kat. Instead, she sighed and said:

"I could level mountains. I could challenge the heavens themselves."

She said it the way someone else might say "I used to run marathons" or "I was pretty good at piano when I was young." A fact about a different person who happened to share her name.

Kat’s eyes widened.

[What the…?]

"And now I’m sitting here trying to figure out why our grain deliveries have a two-week gap." She let out a breath that was almost a laugh. "I guess one never truly knows where they’re going to end up."

Katarina didn’t say anything.

Instead, she sat under the weight of her mother’s arm and gazed up at her, wondering how much of that was an exaggeration.

Level mountains. Challenge the heavens.

[… That didn’t sound like a metaphor.]

Seris then looked down at her. Whatever had been in her face a moment ago was gone, replaced by the warm, slightly wine-buzzed look of a mother who had remembered her daughter was in the room. She kissed the top of Katarina’s head.

"Sorry. Ignore me. I get weird after nine o’clock."

"Okay… Can I see the grain contract again?"

Seris laughed and handed it to her, and they went back to the numbers. The moment passed the way all of Seris’s moments passed, quick and quiet and sealed behind a smile.

Katarina pretended to read the contract. She was thinking about mountains.

[… Come to think of it, I still don’t truly know my parents, do I?]

Chapter 10: New Contact

School was not what Katarina expected.

On Earth, school had been a building full of children who didn't want to be there, taught by adults who had stopped wanting to be there about a decade ago. Vivienne had treated it the way she treated everything else: as a system to be mastered, optimized, and moved past as quickly as possible. She'd graduated two years early and never looked back.

This was different.

The school sat on a ridge above Vellasera, a wide stone building with open archways that let the sea breeze through the classrooms and, based on the visible crack running along the south wall, hadn't seen a maintenance budget in years. About forty kids, ages seven to thirteen, were split into groups by ability rather than age. The teachers were local Valdari who volunteered in rotating shifts, which was equal parts charming and terrifying.

[A volunteer teaching model. No standardized curriculum, no formal accreditation, no quality control. This is either very innovative or very negligent and, if the pattern is to hold, I would go with the latter.]

The reading and arithmetic were beneath her. Obviously. Back on Earth she'd been literate in two languages before most of these kids could hold a spoon, and her talent had come to this new world with her. But she sat through the lessons without complaint, because being the weird overachiever was a worse strategic position than being the quiet kid who kept her head down.

The history, though. Now, THAT was useful.

The teacher, a retired merchant named Aurelia who had a voice like gravel in a bucket, spent the first lesson talking about the Valdari trade wars of three centuries ago. Not some sanitized version, either, but the real thing. Which houses fell, which houses rose, who betrayed whom over a spice route, and how a single failed shipment of volcanic salt triggered a cascade of defaults that bankrupted four families in six months.

Not to mention the beheadings.

[That's a supply chain contagion event, eh? Four bankruptcies from one failed shipment. That's tough.]

Katarina took notes and she organized the information in her head. The other kids were less interested. Two in the back were flicking pebbles at each other, a girl near the window was braiding her own hair.

Nobody talked to Katarina. She'd been here three days and the social dynamics had already crystallized in the way that children's social dynamics always do, fast and ruthless. She was the quiet, intense girl who sat in the second row and watched the teacher like she was memorizing her, which she was, but they didn't need to know that.

[Good. I don't need friends. I need information.]

Break happened around midday.

Kids spilled out of the archways into a courtyard with a stone fountain and a few scraggly trees that looked like they'd given up on life around the same time the south wall cracked. There were groups forming and conversations erupting and someone produced a ball and a game started that Katarina didn't understand and didn't care to.

She sat on a bench at the edge of the courtyard with her back against the wall and her eyes on the crowd. Force of habit. Vivienne had always eaten lunch at her desk, but the instinct to map a room's social structure was the same whether the room was a corporate cafeteria or a schoolyard.

[The tall kid with the blue skin is the social center. Everyone orbits her. The two girls by the fountain are the secondary cluster, and the kid sitting alone by the tree is the outcast. Standard hierarchy.]

Someone sat down next to her.

No warning, no introduction, just a body dropping onto the bench with the casual confidence of someone who had never once considered that they might not be welcome.

The girl was about Katarina's age, maybe a little younger. Pink skin, dark hair cut short and uneven like she'd done it herself with a knife and a vague sense of optimism. She had a cloth bundle in her lap that she was already unwrapping.

And she went:

"Want half?"

She held out a piece of flatbread with some kind of spiced meat folded into it. Her hand was steady and her face had already decided Katarina was going to say yes.

Katarina looked at the bread, then at the girl, then back at the bread.

"I... have my own lunch."

"Yeah, but mine's better! My mom makes the spice blend herself. She says it's a family secret."

Katarina blinked.

"... Is that so?"

[Who exactly is this person?]

Katarina took the bread. It was good. The spice blend was, in fact, just salt and pepper and a bunch of what tasted like cumin, but the ratio was solid.

"I'm Vessa," the girl said. "Vessa Talori. My family runs the dry goods shop on the harbor road. Do you know it? It's the one with the blue awning. My mom says the awning is our 'brand identity' but it's really just because blue fabric was on sale when she bought it!"

Katarina blinked again.

The girl kept going.

"My other mom's been sick," Vessa continued, tearing into her own half of the bread. "But she's getting better. The healer said another month, maybe two. She's got this thing with her lungs where the qi doesn't circulate right, so she gets tired really fast, but she's doing exercises and it's helping. Mom's running the shop alone until she's back, which is why I'm helping more after school. She's great with customers but terrible with inventory. Last month she ordered twice as much lamp oil as we needed because she forgot she'd already placed an order the week before!"

"Uh huh..."

[She has been talking for fifteen seconds and I already know her name, family business, shop location, and her mother's approach to marketing. This is either the most efficient networker I've ever met or the least guarded person alive.]

... Why was she telling Katarina this? Katarina had said approximately four words to this girl and was getting her family's full financial disclosure in return.

"I'm learning formation work," Vessa said. "For preserving goods. You know, the arrays that keep food fresh? I'm not very good yet but Maestra Aurelia says I have a feel for it. I think she says that to everyone, but still. It's cool. You draw these patterns with qi-infused ink and then you channel energy through them and the food just doesn't rot. Which is kind of amazing when you think about it. Like, the bread just sits there being bread for weeks."

She took another bite.

"What do you do?"

Katarina stared at her.

"I study," Katarina said.

"What do you study?"

"Everything."

Vessa nodded like that was a perfectly reasonable answer and not at all strange.

"Cool."

They ate in what Katarina would have called a comfortable silence, except she wasn't comfortable, because she didn't know what to do with a person who just sat next to you and gave you food and told you about their entire life's story.

The bell rang. Kids started filtering back inside. Vessa hopped off the bench, brushed crumbs off her shirt, and looked at Katarina.

"See you tomorrow!"

She was gone before Katarina could respond, jogging toward the archway with her empty cloth bundle flapping in one hand.

Katarina sat on the bench for another few seconds.

The Ledger pulsed.

New contact added: Vessa Talori.

Family: Talori Dry Goods, Vellasera harbor district.

Strategic value: Negligible.

Threat level: None.

Katarina read it twice. Then she stood up and walked back to class.

[What the hell just happened? Did I just... Make a friend?]