CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 71: Lived Experience

Tavia worked fast.

By breakfast the next day, it became clear she'd been busy. The small percentage of students who had gone on the field trip would walk up to Kat and be like, "Hey, we heard you're collecting anecdotes? Can we say something?" While the students who didn't go would look at her with sympathy and pity.

And Katarina guessed that the Compasso knew how dangerous a weapon sympathy could be.

"Is it true?" Pirra asked as they ate together.

"Maybe, maybe not. That doesn't matter," Katarina replied. "What matters is that the ball is in the Compasso's court."

Pirra chewed on that for a second.

"Meaning what?"

Katarina didn't answer right away.

Across the dining hall, Pelegatta was standing near the faculty entrance with two students from the field trip, a second-year Valdari and one of the human girls. Pelegatta's hands were moving while she talked, which was unusual for her. Pelegatta was not a hand-talker. Pelegatta was a stand-still-and-make-you-feel-like-you-failed-your-mother type of communicator, and the fact that she was gesturing wildly meant she was either explaining something complicated or defending something uncomfortable.

Katarina nodded toward them.

"See that?"

Pirra looked.

"Pelegatta?"

"Mhm. She's been over there for ten minutes. Those two were in the pen with us. And she's not listening to them, she's talking at them, which means she's not gathering information. She's distributing a message."

Pirra looked back at Katarina with her fork halfway to her mouth.

"You can tell all that from here?"

"She's using her hands."

"... So?"

"She doesn't use her hands. The fact that she's doing so here means she's uncomfortable. Which means someone above her told her to go talk to the students who were taken, which means the faculty had a meeting this morning, which means the academy is preparing their response." Katarina took a bite of bread. "They'll move today. Probably within the hour."

"Move how?"

"They'll want to get ahead of it. Right now the story is 'the academy sent students into a known danger zone and not only didn't warn them, but also didn't prepare adequately,' and that's a terrible story for them, so they need to reframe it into something like 'the academy's long-standing field protocols ensured a swift resolution,' which is also terrible, but at least it puts them in the active voice."

Pirra put her fork down.

"Kat, what if they expel you?"

Katarina looked at her.

"For what?"

"For... I don't know, stirring things up? Making them look bad?"

"Pirra, think about it for a second. I am, right now, the student who got half the group out. Everyone knows it. The faculty knows it. The students who were in that pen know it, and they've been telling every single person who will listen. If the Compasso expels me for asking questions about an incident where I saved their students, what does that story look like?"

Pirra opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again.

"... Bad."

"It would be a catastrophically stupid decision, and Fossaverde did not get to where she is by being catastrophically stupid. She'll want to talk. She'll want to find out what I want, and she'll want to offer me something that makes me feel heard without actually costing the academy anything. That's what I would do."

"You’re very scary sometimes."

"Thank you."

They ate in silence for about thirty seconds.

Katarina was on her second piece of bread when a third-year she didn’t recognize walked up to their table, gave a short nod, and said:

"Montecardi? The Headmistress would like to see you in her office."

Pirra’s eyes went wide.

Katarina smiled at her, wiped her hands on her napkin, and stood up.

"Told you. Within the hour."

"Kat..."

"I’ll be fine. Save me a roll."

She followed the third-year out of the dining hall and didn’t look back.

Katarina stood in Fossaverde’s office. The woman had her hands interlocked in front of her mouth in that "what am I going to do with you?" pose that bosses liked to put on whenever someone on their team misbehaved.

Of course, it didn’t rattle Kat in the slightest. She’d probably given this look to five times the amount of people Fossaverde had.

So, she didn’t speak. She answered Fossaverde’s silence with more silence and waited till she broke the ice.

Fossaverde broke first. She always would have. People in her position couldn’t afford dead air the way Katarina could, because dead air in a room where one person had leverage and the other had a title meant the title was shrinking by the second.

"I’ve been hearing about a certain... situation," Renata said. "Students approaching you. Sharing their accounts of the corridor incident. Filing formal statements."

Katarina blinked.

"Oh, that. I wouldn’t call it a situation, Headmistress. A few of my classmates wanted to talk about what happened to them, and I listened. It felt like the right thing to do. These people went through something awful, and they deserve to be heard, you know?"

Her tone was a bit dramatic, but it got the point across.

Renata smiled. Oh, Katarina had seen that smile in boardrooms on Earth. It meant, "I know what you’re doing and I’m going to let you know that I know what you’re doing without saying that I know what you’re doing, because saying it would mean admitting it’s working."

"You’ve made quite the impression since arriving here, Signora Montecardi. Your professors tell me you’re ambitious. You enrolled in triple the standard credit load, and you secured independent workshop access within your first semester." She leaned back in her chair. "Not an easy thing to do. Especially with how disillusioned Professora Pelegatta has been lately."

"She saw the potential in my projects," Katarina said with a shrug.

"I imagine a student like you has certain... academic goals. And I wonder what the academy could do to make an ambitious student feel more supported."

[And there it is. The opening offer.]

Katarina had run this negotiation a hundred times in her old life, before she switched sides. The boss calls you in, acknowledges your leverage without naming it, and then starts fishing for your price.

The trick was never to name it first. The trick was to let them bid against themselves until the number got close to what you actually wanted, and then adjust from there.

"That’s very kind of you to ask," Katarina said. "I do think the academy has a lot to offer."

"We do. For instance, I understand your workshop hours are currently limited to evenings and weekends. I could arrange for expanded access. Mornings as well, full seven-day availability."

"That’s generous."

She didn’t say yes. She just let the word "generous" sit there, which was a polite way of saying not enough without being rude about it.

Renata read the room.

"Additionally, I’ve been considering a formal commendation for the students who showed leadership during the corridor incident. Your name would be at the top of that list,

naturally. A commendation from the Compasso Accademia carries weight with the Consortium. It opens doors."

Katarina tilted her head.

A commendation was nice. A commendation was, in fact, useful, and six months ago she would have taken it without a second thought. But the thing about leverage was that it spoiled fast.

In other words, she had it right now, in this room, in this conversation, and she would not have it next week.

"Headmistress, I appreciate the thought. I really do. But what would actually help me, and I'm being honest with you here, is flexibility."

"Flexibility?"

"I don't want to attend classes I don't need. I've read ahead in every course I'm enrolled in, and sitting through lectures on material I already know is time I could be spending on work that actually matters. I want free access to the workshop, no hour restrictions, no scheduling approvals. And I want my Dimostrazione assessed on the merits of my independent project alone, not tied to group presentations or collaborative benchmarks."

She let that land.

"In exchange," Katarina continued, "I think the testimony situation, as you called it, dies down naturally. People move on. The corridor incident becomes something that happened, and the academy becomes the institution that handled it gracefully. Everyone wins."

Renata didn't move for about ten seconds.

It was, to her credit, a very deliberate ten seconds. The kind of silence that was designed to make the other person squirm and reconsider, and Katarina respected the technique even though it didn't work on her. She'd sweated out quarterly earnings calls for thirty years. Ten seconds of eye contact with an academic was a spa day.

Renata opened a drawer, pulled out a sheet of paper, and wrote something on it. Clean, quick strokes, no hesitation, which told Katarina she'd already decided before the pen touched the page.

Then, she slid the note across the desk.

Katarina picked it up and read it.

Academic independence authorization, effective immediately, signed by the Guild Mistress. Workshop access, class exemptions, independent Dimostrazione assessment.

All of it, in writing, with Renata’s official seal at the bottom.

She signed it, set the pen down, and stood.

"Thank you, Headmistress. I won’t waste the opportunity."

"I’m sure you won’t."

Katarina turned and walked to the door. Her hand was on the frame when Renata spoke behind her.

"Signora Montecardi."

Katarina looked back over her shoulder.

"I look forward to your Dimostrazione."

Katarina smiled, walked out, and closed the door behind her.

Chapter 72: The New Status Quo*

Last time, when Katarina skipped her classes, it was out of exhaustion.

Today it was partly because she needed to get work done...

... But also partly because she could.

She spent the morning in the academy workshop.

The air conditioning prototype was still giving her problems. The formation array held temperature beautifully for about six hours now, which was an improvement over the original four, but six hours was a parlor trick, not a product. She needed indefinite cycling. She needed the qi loop to feed back into itself without bleed, and every configuration she tried either destabilized at the seven-hour mark or burned through the power source like it was trying to set a personal record.

She logged the failure, adjusted two junction points, and started a new test cycle. Then she sat back on her stool, stretched her neck, and stared at the container.

[Okay... What am I missing?]

She was about halfway through mentally redesigning the interior array when a shadow appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Hi!"

Pirra was standing at the edge of the workbench with her hands clasped in front of her and her ears slightly angled back, which was her version of looking sheepish. She was wearing a cream-colored tunic that was slightly too big for her and her hair was messier than normal.

Vanta materialized from somewhere. Katarina raised a hand.

"She’s with me," Katarina said.

Vanta grunted and disappeared again.

Pirra sat on the empty stool next to Katarina and pulled her knees up. She looked around the workshop like she’d never been inside one before, which she probably hadn’t.

"So you’re really just... not going to class anymore?"

"I’m going to some classes... The ones that are useful. Everything else, I have a note." Katarina grinned. "From the headmistress herself."

"I still can’t believe you got the Headmistress to excuse you from class. Like a parent or something."

"Essentially."

Pirra shook her head, but she was smiling.

She’d been smiling more lately, actually. Sitting straighter, talking louder in group settings, wearing her hair down at least twice in the past week, which was new. Pirra used to braid her hair every single morning like it was a religious obligation.

"So," Katarina said, adjusting a formation node with a thin stylus. "How’s Ludo?"

Pirra’s ears went flat.

"W-What do you mean, how’s Ludo?"

"I mean how is she? As a person. In your vicinity. Which she has been in... A lot, lately."

"She’s... we’re friends."

"Oh, I imagine you’re very friendly, indeed."

Pirra’s face went a shade of pink that clashed beautifully with her auburn hair. She opened her mouth, closed it, glanced sideways at Katarina, and then said, very quietly:

"She keeps inviting me to things."

"What things?"

"Lunches. Study sessions. She brought me pastries yesterday. From that, uh, place on the canal."

"The expensive one?"

"... Yes."

"Wow. She's courting you."

"She is NOT courting me, she's just... attentive."

"Pirra, she bought you pastries from a shop that charges three silver for a roll. That woman is trying to wife you."

Pirra pulled her knees tighter to her chest and didn't deny it, which told Katarina everything she needed to know. The slightly old now Pirra, the one from orientation week, would have denied it six times and changed the subject. This Pirra was sitting there with pink cheeks and a small, private smile and not denying a single thing.

Good. Ludo was loud, pushy, and aggressively social, which was exactly what Pirra needed. Left to her own devices, Pirra would spend her entire academy career in a library corner with her braid pulled tight enough to cut off circulation. Ludo was the antidote to that.

They talked for a while longer. Pirra asked about the prototype, and Katarina explained the qi cycling problem in terms simple enough that Pirra could follow, and Pirra asked two questions that were actually quite good, which Katarina told her, which made Pirra smile again.

Eventually the morning light shifted and Katarina realized she'd been at the bench for five hours.

"I need to go change," she said, standing. "Walk back with me?"

They walked back to Compasso together. The campus was quiet at this hour, most of the students in afternoon lectures, and they made it to Katarina's room without running into anyone worth acknowledging.

Katarina pulled her shirt off over her head and tossed it on the bed.

The room was quiet.

She reached for a fresh tunic from the shelf, and when she turned back, Pirra was staring at her.

Not at her face. At her stomach, her chest, the line of her hips above her waistband. Pirra's amber eyes were wide and her lips were slightly parted, and she wasn't blinking.

Katarina stopped.

[Oh.]

She held the tunic in one hand and didn't put it on. She looked at Pirra. Pirra looked at her. The silence lasted about three seconds, which was long enough for Katarina to read exactly what was happening and short enough that Pirra hadn't yet realized she'd been caught.

Then Pirra realized she'd been caught.

Her ears went flat. Her face went red. She opened her mouth to say something, probably an apology, probably something about how she wasn't looking, probably the worst lie Katarina had heard since Brynn said they had a plan.

Katarina dropped the tunic on the bed and took a step toward her.

Pirra waved her hands back and forth.

"I-I-I-I wasn't... I didn't..."

"Do you want to?"

Pirra's mouth closed. Her ears stayed flat, but her eyes didn't move. They stayed right where they'd been. On Katarina.

She didn't say anything for a long moment. Then she swallowed, and nodded once, very small.

Katarina smiled.

Pirra kissed carefully at first, methodical, like she was following steps she'd memorized from a book. Then Katarina put a hand on the back of her neck, pulled her in, and the book went out the window.

They hit the bed sideways. Pirra's tunic came off over her head, got stuck on one ear, and Katarina had to help her yank it free. They were both laughing, kissing again, messy, graceless, exactly as fun as it should have been.

Pirra was lean under her clothes. Narrow waist, small chest, freckles across her collarbones that Katarina hadn't known about, was now cataloging for no professional

reason whatsoever. Her ears were pinned flat, which Katarina was learning meant a lot of different things depending on the context. In this context, it meant please keep going, also I might die.

"Breathe," Katarina said.

"I am breathing."

"Pirra, I'm literally on top of you. I can feel that you're not."

"... Okay, fine, maybe a little."

Katarina laughed, kissed her neck, and slid a hand down between them.

Pirra hiccuped.

Katarina rolled her onto her back and took her time. Pirra was wound tight enough to snap and Katarina figured one of them should be relaxed about this. She pinned Pirra's wrists above her head with one hand, loosely, more suggestion than force, and Pirra arched up into her so hard that Katarina had to use her hips to hold her down.

"You good?"

"Mhm."

"Words, Pirra."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm... yeah, please, please keep..."

"Please what?"

Pirra's ears went completely flat and her face went the darkest shade of red Katarina had ever seen on an elf.

"Please, Kat."

Good enough.

She slid down between Pirra's legs first, took her cock in her mouth, and worked her there until Pirra's hands were knotted in the sheets, her hips trying to come up off the mattress. Then she moved up, kissed her, and lined herself up.

The first thrust got a noise out of Pirra she'd been clearly trying to hold in. The second one finished her resolve. Pirra's pussy was tight, slick around Katarina's cock, her legs hooking back around Katarina's waist on instinct, pulling her in deeper.

"That’s better," Katarina said.

She fucked her slow at first, all the way in, all the way back, watching Pirra’s face. Pirra’s cock was hard against Katarina’s stomach with every thrust. Pirra had her hands gripping the sheets above her head, ears doing a complicated thing that Katarina filed away for later study.

"Kat..."

"Mhm."

"Faster, please, oh fuck, please, please..."

Katarina obliged. She got her hand under one of Pirra’s knees, pushed it up toward her chest, opened her wider, drove into her at the angle Pirra had clearly been asking for. Pirra’s whole body went taut under her. Her free hand grabbed for Katarina’s shoulder hard enough to leave marks.

Pirra came first, quick and shaky, with her face buried in Katarina’s shoulder, her cock spilling between them, her pussy clenching so tight around Katarina’s cock that Katarina had to stop moving for a second to keep from following her right there. She rode it out, pulled out as Pirra was still trembling, finished on her stomach, and let Pirra collapse back into the mattress.

They lay next to each other afterward. Pirra on her back, Katarina on her side with one arm folded under her head.

"That was great," Pirra said, staring at the ceiling.

There was a small pause.

"But I’m not Ludo," Katarina finished.

Pirra turned her head on the pillow. Her ears twitched once.

"... Yeah."

"That’s fine."

"Is it really? Because I feel like a kind of awful person right now, Kat, just lying here."

"Pirra, this sort of thing doesn’t have to be that deep."

[Even I’ve come to understand that at this point.]

Pirra smiled, a real one, not the careful measured ones she usually handed out, and looked back at the ceiling.

There was a knock at the door.

Three knocks, actually, rapid and impatient, followed by a voice that could cut glass at thirty paces.

"Pirra? Are you in there? One of the second-years said she saw you go in with Kat and I swear to the fucking Matriarchs if you two are studying without me again I will..."

Pirra sat bolt upright.

"That’s Ludo."

"I know."

"I’m naked."

"I know."

"KAT."

Katarina was already pulling her trousers on. She grabbed her tunic off the floor, pulled it over her head, and crossed to the door while Pirra scrambled for the sheets behind her.

She opened the door.

Ludo was in the hallway with one hand raised to knock again.

She started indignant, went confused, and landed on deeply interested in about a second flat. Her eyes flicked past Katarina to the bed, where Pirra was wrapped in a sheet up to her chin with her braid half undone and her ears flat enough to be invisible.

"Oh," Ludo said.

"She’s all yours, buddy," Katarina said, slipped past her into the hallway, and didn’t look back.

Chapter 73: The Matter At Hand

Of course, there was still the matter of the air conditioning container.

She still hadn’t fixed the qi bleed issue. As much as she tried, the perfect loop would never come. At some point in the process, the qi she infused into the container would leave.

And this would remain on Katarina's mind even when she was actually attending classes. Like now, in Pelegatta's class as he discussed the cultural factors that might pop up between valdari-dwarf negotiations, all she could think about was air conditioning.

"Now, keep in mind that whenever you do trade with the dwarves..." And on and on went Pelegatta's voice while all Katarina could hear was her own voice going:

[How the FUCK do I get this qi to stay in the container?] She paused. [Okay, the previous solution, before all that kidnapping stuff happened, was to find something for the qi to do... Maybe making it a two-part machine would result in more stability than what I'm trying to do now?]

She wasn't sure, though.

Something took her out of her theorizing, though. That was, the fact that Pelegatta was looking right at her.

"Did you hear me, Signora Montecardi?"

"... Uh, what?"

The class snickered.

Pelegatta sighed.

"We're doing another group project."

"Oh... Cool."

"I wasn't done," Pelegatta said. "And, because of how well you two performed last time, I'm putting you with Evangelina."

"..."

Katarina blinked.

"What?"

[Pelegatta... You sneaky little...]

Pelegatta had apparently gotten a neat little idea. If Katarina didn't have to attend her classes regularly, she'd give Kat a project that didn't require class participation.

So, she gave her a group project, to be handed in at the very end of the semester.

"And so, here we are again," Katarina said, sighing dramatically. "Did you miss me?"

"No," Eva replied flatly. "What are we going to do?"

That was a good question.

The assignment was a trade proposal. Full write-up, market analysis, risk assessment, projected returns, the works. Due at the end of the semester, which gave them roughly two months, which was generous by Pelegatta's standards and probably meant the grading was going to be brutal.

They were sitting across from each other at a table in the back corner of the library. Eva had her notes already laid out, organized by section, color-coded.

"We could do a cross-border grain distribution model," Eva said. "Human-to-Valdari supply chain, tariff analysis, seasonal pricing adjustments."

"Boooring."

"It's practical."

"It's boring and practical. Pelegatta's read nine hundred grain proposals in her career. She'll grade it 'fair' and forget about it by dinner."

"Fine. What do you suggest?"

"Well, we should probably do something she hasn't seen before. Something that makes her sit up in her chair and go 'oh, that's new.' That's how you get a top mark."

"And what counts as interesting to you?"

Katarina paused.

"... I'll know it when I hear it."

"How convenient."

Katarina leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling. Eva watched her do it with an expression that communicated, very clearly, that she found the whole performance exhausting.

"What about formation-based infrastructure?" Katarina said. "A proposal for modernizing cargo transport along one of the southern corridors. New preservation methods, faster turnaround, lower spoilage. We could even pitch it as a cost-saving initiative with real numbers."

"That’s just logistics."

"Everything is just logistics. The question is whether you dress it up well enough that people forget they’re looking at logistics."

"I disagree. The question is whether the underlying model is sound."

"The underlying model is always sound. Nobody gets to this stage of the game and submits bad math. What separates the top mark from the second mark is presentation, framing, and whether or not you made the reader feel something while they were looking at your numbers."

Eva stared at her.

"She’s asking for a trade proposal and you want to make her feel something?"

"Okay, sounds hard, but look," Katarina said. "What about this? We take a real problem, something that actually exists right now in Valdari trade infrastructure, and we write the proposal as if we’re pitching it to a real client. A real pitch, with real numbers, to a real house, solving a real problem."

"Which problem?"

And there it was. The thought landed in Katarina’s head fully formed, the way good ideas sometimes did, like it had been waiting in line and finally reached the front.

The air conditioning container.

She could share it. Right now, right here.

Tell Eva about the prototype, the qi bleed issue, the six-hour cycling limit. Frame the trade proposal around a new product that didn’t exist yet, a formation-powered temperature regulation system with applications in cargo transport, food preservation, medical storage, residential comfort.

The proposal would be brilliant because the product was brilliant, and two people working on the technical problem would get to a solution faster than one.

Eva had workshop access. Eva had a forgery-detection system that, much as Katarina hated to admit it, demonstrated real formation talent. Eva was smart, meticulous, and would probably find the qi bleed fix in a week if Katarina gave her the specs.

She thought about it for exactly four seconds.

[No.]

The air conditioning project was hers. It was her Dimostrazione flagship, her proof of concept, the thing that was going to make every merchant in the room sit forward and reach for their coin purse. Sharing it with Eva meant sharing credit, sharing ownership, sharing the moment when Katarina stood in front of the panel and presented something that nobody on this continent had ever seen before.

She'd shared enough things in her old life. Not this time.

"I'll think about which problem," Katarina said. "Give me a day."

Eva looked at her for a moment, like she could tell Katarina had just decided something and wasn't sharing what it was. Then she gathered her notes, tapped the edges even against the table, and stood.

"One day. Then we start, with or without your inspiration."

"Noted."

In the end, they got nothing done.

"We'll figure something out, just... Okay, goodbye to you too." Katarina muttered as Eva turned and walked away.

Katarina walked back to her room, kicked her shoes off, and fell onto the bed face-first. The mattress smelled like Tavia's perfume.

[... Productive day, huh?] She groaned.

She was about three minutes from falling asleep when the communication stone on her nightstand buzzed.

She reached for it without opening her eyes, pressed her thumb to the surface, and Vessa's voice filled the room.

"Kat."

"Mm?"

"Go outside."

"What?"

She could literally hear Vessa smiling.

"Go to the front of the academy."

Katarina opened one eye.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Vessa, I'm lying down. I've had a day. Give me one good reason to put my shoes back on."

"Because I'm your girlfriend and I said so."

"... Okay, fair."

Katarina stared at the ceiling for about five seconds. Then she rolled off the bed, shoved her feet back into her shoes without lacing them, and walked out.

The hallway was empty. The stairs were empty. The front courtyard of the Compasso was mostly empty too, just a few students sitting on the low wall near the fountain, and the usual cluster of second-years pretending to study under the colonnade.

Katarina walked through the main archway and looked around.

And there she was.

Vessa Talori was standing at the bottom of the steps with a travel bag over one shoulder and her dark hair cut shorter than the last time Katarina had seen her, just above her jaw now, messy from the spirit rail.

She was wearing a loose green tunic and she had a big, smug grin on her face, one that took up her whole face.

Katarina stopped walking. She processed this dubious reality and asked:

"... What are you doing here?"

"Surprise."

"You're supposed to be at the Conservatory."

"I am at the Conservatory. Monday through Friday. It's Friday evening." Vessa dropped her bag on the ground and put her hands on her hips. "Are you going to stand there all night or are you going to come down here and kiss me?"

Katarina went down the steps two at a time. It was honestly a bit embarrassing but she was too busy having her world shaken to care.

Vessa caught her with both arms around her neck and kissed her, and Katarina grabbed her by the waist and pulled her in close. For about ten seconds, neither of them said anything or thought anything or did anything except stand there at the bottom of the Compasso steps with their mouths together and their arms around each other.

"So, uh... What are we doing?" Katarina asked. "Like, did you just come here to make out with me for a few seconds? I mean, I don't mind, but-"

"I'm staying for the weekend," Vessa cut her off. "Well, if I can anyway. I mean, that was the goal."

"..." Katarina nodded. "Let them try to kick you out."

She then scooped Vessa up into her arms and raced back to the dorm room, just in case any guards were about to try just that. And Vessa grinned the enitre way.

Chapter 74: Weekend Fling 1

Katarina really, really missed Vessa. And she was showing her how much in exactly the way Vessa would most appreciate it: making out on her bed.

Vessa had her back against the pillow with Katarina over her, one palm flat against the wall, and they'd been at it long enough that Katarina had stopped keeping track of time. Katarina had missed everything about Vessa, from the way she felt to her scent, badly enough that she wasn't in any hurry to stop.

Then Vessa's hand slid down her stomach and started working at the laces of her trousers, and Katarina grabbed her by the wrist.

"If you start that," Katarina said, "we won't stop."

Vessa looked up at her.

"Maybe I don't want to see the Compasso that badly."

"Come on, you came all this way," Katarina said. "Let's at least give it an hour or two before I put you on your knees."

"How very romantic of you~"

Vessa held her gaze for a second, smiling, and then sighed like she was making a genuine personal sacrifice for the relationship. She moved her hand and Katarina let go of her wrist.

"By the way, are you actually free?" Katarina asked. "The full weekend? No projects, no Conservatory thing you forgot to mention?"

"Yes, Kat."

"You’re sure?"

"Kat, I am completely, entirely free until Monday." Vessa tilted her head. "Are you done?"

"..." Katarina blinked. "Okay. Just making sure."

Suddenly, the door opened.

"Hey Kat, Ludo wanted to know if you were..." Pirra trailed off. "Oh."

Pirra took in the scene before her. Vessa had moved her hand but not her body, o she still looked like she was about to give Katarina a good time.

Pirra stood in the doorway with one hand still on the latch. Then, her face went red.

"I-I’ll come back later!"

The door shut.

Vessa laughed loudly. Katarina dropped her head.

[Oh, god.]

"Holy shit, was that your roommate?" Vessa asked. "Or one of your girlfriends?"

"My roommate." Katarina sighed. "You’re the only girlfriend I have."

"Mmhm." Vessa raised an eyebrow. "So how many girls have you slept with since you got here?"

Katarina opened her mouth and closed it.

Vessa’s grin got wider.

"Okay, anyway," Katarina said. "I’m going to show you around the academy."

"Right now?"

"Right now, before we spend the entire weekend in this bed and you leave having seen nothing but my ceiling."

"Pretty decent ceiling, though."

"Up."

Vessa laughed and sat up, fixing her hair with both hands. Katarina grabbed her shoes off the floor and started lacing them.

"Ooh, you know who I really want to meet? I want to meet Eva," Vessa said.

Katarina stopped lacing.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we're not friends. What am I gonna say? Hey, rival-slash-work partner, come meet my girlfriend? She doesn't give a shit."

"Okay, fine, but, but, maybe let me see her from a distance or something! Point her out to me if you see her."

"Sure. Who knows? Maybe you'll get lucky." Katarina stood up, and grabbed her coat off the hook. "Come on. I'll show you the workshop first."

Katarina held the door open. Vessa walked through it, already peering down the hallway, and Katarina followed her out before she could decide she wanted to go find Eva herself.

[If she meets Eva, they're either going to hate each other or team up against me, and I genuinely don't know which is worse.]

The Compasso was prettier in the afternoon light and Vessa was not shy about saying so.

She pointed at things. She said "ooh" at the colonnades and "wow" at the bay view from the eastern terrace and "holy shit" at the size of the main lecture hall, and Katarina watched her do all of it with quiet satisfaction, like she was showing off a house she bought.

They were crossing the courtyard near the fountain when Katarina spotted a familiar pair of cat-like ears.

Tavia was sitting on the low wall with her legs crossed and her tail hanging down behind her, eating something out of a paper bag. She looked up as they approached and her whole face lit up.

"Kat! And... oh." Tavia's eyes moved to Vessa, traveled down, then back up. "Hello~"

"This is Vessa," Katarina said. "My girlfriend. Vessa, this is Tavia. The, uh, catgirl I told you about."

"Oh~" Vessa grinned.

Tavia hopped off the wall and walked right up to Vessa without a moment's hesitation. She was shorter than Vessa by a few inches, which put her eyes right about at Vessa's mouth.

"You're even prettier than Kat said."

"Kat talks about me?"

"She tries not to. That's how I know it's serious."

Vessa laughed. Tavia laughed. Their eyes met.

Katarina turned to look at the fountain. It was a nice fountain. She'd walked past it two hundred times and never really looked at it before, and she was looking at it now because it was there and it was neutral and nothing about it was going to cause problems.

Her eyes drifted to the eastern walkway. Then the colonnade. Then the library steps.

No silver hair. No white wings.

[Good.]

She turned back.

Tavia had one hand on the side of Vessa's neck, Vessa had one hand hooked into the back of Tavia's belt.

They were kissing. Not a polite kiss, either. Tavia was up on her toes, their mouths were open, and Tavia's tail was standing straight up like a flagpole.

Katarina stared.

[... Wha...?]

They pulled apart. Vessa's cheeks were flushed dark pink and Tavia looked like she'd won something.

"She's a good kisser," Tavia told Katarina. "I mean genuinely, where did you find her?"

"... My hometown," Katarina said, still staring in awe.

"I've had years of practice," Vessa said.

"It shows. Kat, she's incredible, you have to let me keep her."

Katarina snapped out of her trance, shaking her head.

"She's not a stray," Katarina said. "She belongs to herself."

"Exactly," Vessa said. "So I can come back whenever I want."

Vessa wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at Katarina, and then her eyes dropped about two feet, and her grin got so wide it nearly left her face.

"Kat."

"What?"

"You're hard."

Katarina looked down.

She was, in fact, visibly hard, which her trousers were doing absolutely nothing to hide.

Tavia cackled loud enough that a second-year across the courtyard looked over.

"Oh, this is fun," Tavia said. "Can I come with you two? I have nothing going on this afternoon."

"We're doing a tour of the campus. You've been here longer than I have, you've already seen all of it."

"The campus looks completely different when there's someone new seeing it for the first time. I'll be quiet, you won't even notice me." Tavia looped her arm through Vessa's like they'd known each other for years instead of forty-five seconds. Vessa let her.

And, they walked. Tavia asked Vessa about the Conservatory, Vessa told her about formation work, and Tavia listened with both ears forward, which meant she was actually paying attention. Vessa asked Tavia what she studied and Tavia said "negotiation and, honestly, people," and Vessa said "same thing," and they both laughed. Katarina walked slightly behind them and accepted her fate.

The workshop was quiet when they got there. A few students at benches along the far wall, nobody Katarina knew. Vanta was in her usual spot by the door and looked at Tavia and Vessa like they were insects that had flown in through an open window.

"They’re with me," Katarina said.

Vanta grunted.

Katarina led them to her bench and pulled the cover off the prototype. It sat there looking unimpressive, which was fair, since it was an unimpressive-looking metal box with formation arrays scratched into the interior walls and a qi conduit running through the base.

"This," Katarina said, "is going to change the world."

"It’s a box," Tavia said.

"It’s a box that keeps things cold, yes."

"... A cold box?"

"An air-conditioned container. You put qi into it, the formation cycles the temperature down and holds it. Food stays fresh. Medicine stays viable. Rooms stay cool in the summer. It’s preservation formations but better, cheaper, and portable."

"Does it work?" Vessa asked.

"For about six hours. Then the qi bleeds out and it stops."

"So it doesn’t work."

"It works for six hours."

"Kat."

"I’m close!"

Vessa leaned over the container and studied the formation lines. Her eyes moved quickly and methodically, tracing the flow paths. She’d gotten better at this since the Conservatory.

"Your cycling loop has a dead spot," Vessa said. "Here, at the junction. The qi pools instead of cycling. That’s probably where you’re losing it."

[... Huh.]

Katarina looked at where Vessa was pointing. She’d checked that junction before, but not from a flow perspective. She’d been thinking about it as a power problem. Vessa was reading it as a plumbing problem.

"I'll take another look at it," Katarina said.

Tavia had already gotten bored with the container and was poking at a stack of scrap materials on the adjacent bench. Vessa was still studying the array. Katarina was about to pull out her notes when the workshop door opened behind them.

Eva walked in.

She didn't look at them. She went straight to her bench on the far side of the room, set her bag down, and started pulling out her materials. Quiet, efficient, completely in her own world.

Vessa grabbed Katarina's arm.

"Is that her?" she whispered.

"Don't look at her, she's going to notice."

"I'm not looking, I'm glancing. There's a difference." Vessa's grip tightened. "Kat, she's gorgeous. Why didn't you tell me she was gorgeous?"

"I'm telling you right now we're leaving." Katarina covered the prototype, grabbed Vessa by the hand, and looked at Tavia. "Come on, both of you."

Tavia slid off the bench and fell into step behind them. Vessa kept looking back over her shoulder as they walked out and Katarina kept her moving with a firm grip on her wrist.

They made it out of the workshop, across the courtyard, up the stairs, and down the hall to Katarina's door. Katarina opened it, pulled Vessa inside, and Tavia followed without being asked.

The door closed.

And Katarina locked the door.

Chapter 75: Weekend Fling 2*

When Katarina saw Vessa, and Vessa told her she'd be staying over for the weekend, Katarina should have guessed it would turn out like this.

Vessa was on her left. Tavia was on her right. Both of them on their knees in front of her, both of them with their mouths on her cock, while Katarina stood with her back against the wall, hands flat against the stone, bracing herself so she wouldn't fall over.

[Good God Almighty. I've never been particularly religious, but I can certainly say this is a divine experience.]

Vessa's tongue ran up one side while Tavia's ran up the other, slow, coordinated, like they'd rehearsed this, which they hadn't, which made it worse, because it meant they were just naturally good at sharing. Vessa took the head into her mouth, sucked. Tavia dipped lower, licked the base. Katarina's hips jerked forward hard enough that Vessa pulled back, laughing.

"Sensitive?"

"Shut up."

"She's very sensitive," Tavia confirmed from below. "You should hear her when you get the spot under the..."

"Tavia, I swear to God."

Tavia got the spot under the head and Katarina's brain went white for half a second.

They traded. Tavia took her into her mouth, all the way, ears flat, tail curled up behind her, while Vessa kissed the shaft and watched Katarina's face. Vessa had always liked watching her reactions. She'd told Katarina once that the best part of sex was seeing the exact moment someone stopped thinking. Katarina had called her manipulative. Vessa had said "yes" and not elaborated.

Tavia pulled back, lips wet. Vessa leaned in from the other side. Then they were both at the tip together, mouths open, tongues touching with Katarina's cock pressed between them. Tavia kissed Vessa with Katarina's cock still between their lips. Vessa kissed her back. Katarina looked down at the two of them making out around her dick, thought absolutely nothing for about three full seconds.

That was the exact moment the door opened.

"Hey, I was wondering if..."

It was Pirra.

Pirra stood in the doorway with books in her arms, ears straight up, eyes wide, mouth open.

There was a silence.

Katarina looked at Pirra. Vessa looked at Pirra. Tavia, who still had her tongue on Katarina's cock, looked at Pirra.

"I... I'll..." Pirra's voice came out about two octaves higher than usual. "Later. I'll. Later."

The door slammed shut. Footsteps retreated down the hallway at a pace that could only be described as a full sprint.

Vessa buried her face in Katarina's hip, laughing so hard her shoulders shook. Tavia sat back on her heels, wiped her mouth, grinning.

"That poor girl," Tavia said.

Katarina groaned and let her head fall back against the wall.

[She's gonna hate me.]

That was twice now.

Twice Pirra had walked into her own room and found Katarina in some state of sexual activity with a different combination of women. At this point, Pirra was going to start knocking on her own door, which was a sentence that shouldn't have made sense and yet made perfect sense given the circumstances.

"Was that the elf from earlier?" Vessa asked, still laughing, her breath warm against Katarina's hip.

"Yes."

"... She's going to need therapy."

"She's going to get a new roommate."

Tavia stood up, stretched, put one hand on Katarina's chest.

"So," she said. "Are we done talking about the elf, or should I stop?"

Katarina looked down at her. Tavia's amber eyes were half-lidded, her tail swaying behind her, and she still had spit on her chin. She looked like she had absolutely no intention of stopping anything tonight.

Vessa, still on her knees, looked up at Katarina too. Same question, different face.

"Lock the door," Katarina said.

Tavia locked the door.

Katarina had achieved enlightenment.

It was like every muscle in her body had independently decided to stop holding tension at the same time, and her brain, for once, was not running calculations or drafting memos or keeping track of who owed what to whom. She was just lying there. Existing. Like a warm rock in the sun.

Vessa's head was in her lap. Tavia had left about twenty minutes ago, citing a study group she was already late for, and had kissed both of them on her way out like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You look peaceful," Vessa said.

"I am peaceful."

"That's terrifying."

"Why?"

"Because you're never peaceful. The last time you looked this relaxed was after you restructured the port tariff schedule. You said, quote unquote, 'I feel like I just came.'"

"... That does sound like me."

Vessa rolled onto her back so she was looking up at Katarina from her lap. Her dark hair fanned out across Katarina's thigh. She was wearing the lazy, fond expression Katarina had come to recognize as Vessa being happy without bothering to perform it.

[God, I've missed that look.]

They stayed like that for a while.

Then the peace ended, because Katarina's brain rebooted like it always did, and the first thought that loaded up was the air conditioning container.

"I think I've been approaching it wrong," Katarina said.

Vessa answered without opening her eyes.

"The container?"

"Yeah. I've been trying to stop the qi from bleeding out. Plugging the leak, basically. Making the loop airtight so nothing escapes."

"And it doesn't work."

"Well, it works for six hours. Then the bleed wins. I'm thinking, what if the bleed isn't the problem? What if I'm supposed to let the qi leave, but give it somewhere to go? Route the excess into a secondary function. A heating element, maybe, or a humidity regulator. Something that uses the runoff so the system stays balanced."

"A two-part machine?"

"Right. The primary loop handles the cooling. The secondary loop catches the bleed and converts it. The system stays in equilibrium because nothing is wasted. It's not a closed loop, it's a cycle."

Vessa opened her eyes.

"That could work."

"It could... But the secondary array needs to be calibrated to match the bleed rate exactly, and I don't know what that rate is because it changes depending on the ambient qi density of wherever the container is sitting."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that if I put it in Pavona and it bleeds at one rate. If I put it in Vellasera, it bleeds at a different rate. I need someone who can build a self-adjusting formation array that recalibrates in real time."

"Can you do that?"

Katarina was quiet for a second.

"Maybe. Eventually. But I'd be figuring it out from scratch and that's months of work on just the secondary component."

Vessa sat up and turned to face her, crossing her legs on the bed.

"What about Eva?"

Katarina blinked.

"What about her?"

"She's good at formation work, right? You told me she built a forgery-detection system that you couldn't find a flaw in."

"I said I didn't find a flaw. That's different from saying there isn't one."

"Kat."

"What?"

"You said, and again I'm quoting you, 'she deserves it.' About her workshop access. You, Katarina Montecardi, admitted someone else earned something. That's basically a marriage proposal coming from you."

"That is a massive exaggeration."

"Is it, though?"

Katarina pulled a pillow into her lap and looked at the wall.

"She's my project partner for Pelegatta's class. That's it. We can barely agree on a topic for the group assignment. I'm not going to walk up to her and say 'hey, I know we argue every time we're in the same room, but would you like to help me invent something that could reshape continental trade infrastructure?'"

Vessa proceeded to ask the very simple question of...

"Why not?"

"Because then she'd know about the project. She'd have a stake in it. She'd want input, creative control, credit. And this is mine, Vessa. This is my Dimostrazione piece. I'm not splitting it."

Vessa looked at her for a long moment.

"Okay," she said. "But you just told me you can't build the secondary array alone. Not in time."

"I said it would take months."

"How long until the Dimostrazione?"

Katarina didn't answer.

"Think about it," Vessa said. "That's all I'm saying. You don't have to share the whole thing. Just the part you need help with. You're allowed to ask for help, Kat. It's not a weakness."

"I know it's not a weakness," she replied, a bit childishly.

"Then why does your face do that every time I bring it up?"

"My face isn't doing anything."

"Your face is doing a lot right now."

Katarina threw the pillow at her. Vessa caught it, laughing. She threw it back, Katarina caught it and held it against her chest like a shield.

[She’s not wrong. I can’t build a self-adjusting array in time and Eva probably can. But asking Eva means trusting Eva, and trusting Eva means...]

She looked at the water stain.

[... I’ll think about it.]

She did not commit to anything, she wouldn’t allow that much.

But... she would indeed think about it.

Chapter 76: Weekend Fling 3

On Sunday, they decided to spend the day in Pavona. Just the two of them, doing a bit of window shopping, getting to know the scenery.

At least, that was supposed to be the plan. As far as Katarina was concerned, Vessa’s reactions to everything were far more interesting than their surroundings.

She’d ooh, she’d ahh, her jaw would drop, and her eyes would follow any decent curves that happened to draw close. Katarina smiled at every single one.

"What is that?"

"That would be a store."

"What’s that!?"

"That’s... a bathhouse."

"What is THAT!?"

"That’s... just someone’s house."

And the luxury sights continued from there.

Pavona was built for people who had money and wanted everyone else to know it. The streets were wide and clean, the storefronts had actual glass windows instead of shutters, and every other building had some kind of decorative stonework that literally served no

structural purpose whatsoever but probably cost more than the Montecardi estate's annual food budget.

Vessa loved it. Every block was a new discovery. She dragged Katarina into a perfume shop and smelled fourteen different bottles and bought nothing.

She pressed her face against the window of a jeweler's and said "Kat, look at that necklace" and Katarina looked at the necklace and thought about how many formation arrays she could buy with the price tag and didn't say that out loud.

They ate some kind of fried pastry from a street vendor. Vessa got sugar on her nose and Katarina wiped it off with her thumb. Vessa kissed her thumb and a passing woman gave them a look. Katarina gave her one back.

But somewhere between the third shop and the fourth, Katarina's brain started drifting.

The secondary array. The self-adjusting calibration. The bleed rate that changed based on ambient qi density. She could picture the problem in her head like a diagram, all the lines and nodes and flow paths, and she could see where the solution lived. It was right there, just past the edge of what she knew how to build.

A two-part machine. Primary cooling loop, secondary conversion loop. The qi bleeds out of the first, feeds into the second, and the system stays balanced. Simple in theory.

In practice, the secondary loop needed to sense how much qi was coming in and adjust its intake in real time. That was adaptive formation work. That was the kind of thing the Galteri Conservatory taught third-year students.

That was the kind of thing Eva had already demonstrated she could do.

[Shit.]

"You're thinking about the container again," Vessa said.

"No I'm not."

Vessa raised a brow high.

"... Okay, I am."

They turned a corner onto a quieter street. Fewer shops, more residential. Ivy growing up the walls of a building that looked older than the rest of the city. Vessa looped her arm through Katarina's and leaned into her shoulder.

"You know what I think?" Vessa said.

"You think I should ask Eva."

"I think you should ask Eva."

Katarina groaned.

"It makes sense, Kat. She's right there. She's in the same workshop. She already builds adaptive arrays. And you need a self-calibrating secondary loop, which is literally what adaptive arrays are for."

"I know what adaptive arrays are for."

"Then you know I'm right."

Katarina looked up at the ivy. A fat little bird was sitting in it, staring at her like it too had opinions.

"If I bring her in on this, she'll want to know everything. The full design. The theory. The commercial applications. She'll have questions that I'll have to answer, and then she'll have ideas that I'll have to consider, and then she'll have opinions that I'll have to listen to, and before I know it the project is half hers."

"Or you set the terms up front. You tell her exactly what you need, exactly what you're offering, and exactly where the line is. You're a Signora, Kat. You know how to structure a deal."

"This isn't a deal. This is my project."

"It's your project that doesn't work yet. And it won't work in time unless someone helps you with the part you can't do alone."

The bird in the ivy flew away. Katarina watched it go.

[She's right. And I hate that she's right. And I especially hate that she's right about Eva, who will be insufferable about this.]

"Fine," Katarina said.

"Fine?"

"Fine. I'll ask her."

Vessa squeezed her arm and kissed her on the cheek.

"See? That wasn't so hard."

"It was incredibly hard. I’m in physical pain."

"You’re so dramatic."

"I’m not dramatic. I’m principled. There’s a difference."

"There really isn’t."

Katarina bumped her with her hip and Vessa bumped her back. They kept walking through Pavona’s quiet streets, arm in arm, while Katarina mentally drafted the exact wording of a conversation she was already dreading.

[Keep it professional. Offer her a clearly defined scope. Don’t let her see the full picture until she’s committed. And for fuck’s sake, don’t let her think she’s doing me a favor.]

The spirit rail station in Pavona was nicer than the one in Vellasera, which wasn’t saying much, since the one in Vellasera was basically a platform with a bench and a sign that leaned slightly to the left. This one had columns, a tiled roof, a waiting area with actual seating.

Katarina hated all of it because it was where Vessa was about to leave. Again.

They stood on the platform together. Vessa had her bag over her shoulder, her hair was still messy from everything they got up to, and she was smiling at Katarina like she wasn’t about to get on a rail car and disappear.

"Two months," Katarina said. "End of semester. Then we head back to Vellasera together."

"Two months," Vessa repeated. She reached up and fixed a strand of Katarina’s hair that didn’t need fixing. "You gonna survive without me?"

"I’ve been surviving just fine without you."

"Barely."

"... Adequately."

Vessa laughed.

She pulled Katarina in by the front of her jacket and kissed her, one hand on her jaw, the other still holding the strap of her bag. A couple of passengers on the platform glanced over with mild interest and looked away. Katarina put her arms around Vessa’s waist and held her there for a few extra seconds because nobody was going to stop her.

When they pulled apart, Vessa pressed her forehead against Katarina’s.

"Can’t wait."

"Me neither."

"You’re going to ask Eva today, right?"

"I said I would!"

"Yeah, but I know you, Kat. You’re going to walk back to that academy, find a reason to put it off, and then I’m going to spend my whole rail ride thinking about whether you actually did it."

"... I’ll do it today."

"That’s all I’m asking."

The rail car chimed. Vessa kissed her once more, quick and hard, then turned, and stepped through the doors. She found a window seat, dropped her bag, waved. Katarina waved back. The doors closed. The car pulled away, Vessa’s face got smaller until the rail curved south and she was gone.

Katarina stood on the platform for a few seconds longer than she needed to.

[Okay. Time to go be professional.]

She walked back to the academy.

The campus was quiet in the early evening. Most students were in their rooms or at dinner, and the empty hallways echoed with Katarina’s footsteps as she made her way toward the workshop.

Eva might not even be there. It was Sunday evening, after all. Most people had better things to do than sit in a workshop right now.

But, then again, Eva wasn’t most people. Eva probably thought weekend evenings were peak productivity hours, which Katarina recognized because she thought the same thing herself.

The workshop door was open.

Katarina stepped through and stopped.

Eva was at her bench, leaning forward over whatever she was working on, weight on her elbows, hips pushed back against the edge of the stool she was half-standing against. Her silver hair hung over one shoulder. Her wings were folded loosely behind her. Her skirt had ridden up just enough from the angle that Katarina's eyes went exactly where they shouldn't have gone.

... That was Eva's ass. Right there, right in front of her.

And she was staring at it.

[Stop staring at it.]

She stared at it for one more second.

[STOP.]

She cleared her throat.

Eva straightened up and looked over her shoulder. Her expression went from focused to neutral the moment she saw who it was.

"Montecardi."

"Caelestis."

"Can I help you?"

[Yes. Unfortunately.]

Katarina pulled a stool up to the adjacent bench, sat down, put her hands flat on the surface. She took a breath. She organized the sentence in her head. She thought about what Vessa had said about setting terms up front, about being clear, about asking for help not being a weakness.

"I have a proposition for you," Katarina said.

Eva turned fully around on her stool and crossed her arms.

"I'm listening."

Chapter 77: Cooperation

Katarina took her over to her own bench, across the room.

Once there, she unveiled the object of her obsession. The project that had been keeping her up at night throughout most of her stay here at the Compasso.

"Alright, so, you see this box?" Katarina said. She was being a bit bitter in her delivery, but she couldn't help it. Having to share this with someone else was, in itself, a bitter experience.

"Yes."

"Okay, so the idea is that this thing," she patted it like the hood of a car, "is supposed to keep whatever's inside cold."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

She watched Eva absorb the information in real time. Her skepticism was immediately apparent, though she made sure to keep her poker face up.

[Okay, go ahead. Say it's not possible, turn around, walk away, and then I can tell Vessa about it.]

But Eva didn't do that.

Instead, Eva rubbed her chin as she stared at the container and then asked:

"That would require infinitely looping qi, wouldn't it?"

Katarina blinked.

[... She figured that out already?]

"Yes."

"But, no matter how talented you are, a little bit of bleed is inevitable, and even a little bit would put an expiration date on this thing."

Again, Katarina blinked.

[She figured this out already!?!?!]

"... Yes."

Eva nodded slowly.

She stared at the container, like she was theorizing about it right before Katarina's eyes, which was really annoying because Katarina was sure she looked like that too on occasion, and it almost felt like looking at someone trying to imitate her.

"So, what's your offer?"

Katarina shook her head, bringing her attention back.

"Okay, I'll pay you," Katarina said. "Consulting basis. I need someone who can build a self-adjusting secondary formation array that recalibrates based on ambient qi density. You build it, I integrate it, and I compensate you for your time. Fair rate. No strings."

Eva looked at her.

Then she looked at the container.

Then she looked back at Katarina.

"No."

"No?"

"I don't want your money, Montecardi. If this thing does what you say it does, it's worth more than a consulting fee." Eva tapped the side of the container with one finger. "I want in. Full partnership. We develop it together and we present it together at the Dimostrazione."

Katarina's stomach dropped.

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"Because this is my project. I conceived it, I designed it, I built every prototype from scratch. You'd be contributing one component."

"One component that you just admitted you can't build yourself."

"I said it would take time."

"Time you don't have."

Katarina opened her mouth. Then she closed it.

[She's using my own argument against me. She's using the exact logic that I would use if I were sitting where she's sitting, and she knows it, and I know she knows it.]

"I’m offering you money for a defined scope of work," Katarina said. "That’s a clean arrangement. No shared credit, no shared ownership, no arguments about whose name goes first on the presentation."

"And I’m telling you I’m not interested in being your contractor." Eva leaned back on her stool and crossed her arms. "You came to me because you need something you can’t do alone. That’s not a service request, that’s a partnership. And if you want my skills, you take them on partnership terms."

"That’s not how this works."

"That’s exactly how this works. You said it yourself in the library last week. ’Everything is just logistics. The question is whether you dress it up well enough.’ Well, I’m not interested in being dressed up as your hired help when I could be your co-presenter."

Katarina stared at her. Eva stared back. Her blue eyes didn’t waver, and she sat there with her arms crossed like she had all night.

"Fine," Katarina said.

"Fine?" Eva repeated.

"Partnership. Equal credit. Joint Dimostrazione presentation. But I lead the design. You build the secondary array to my specifications, and if we disagree on technical decisions, I get final say."

"You get final say on the cooling system. I get final say on the adaptive array."

"... Fine."

"Fine."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Katarina wasn’t sure if they’d just made a deal or declared war, and she suspected the answer was both.

Eva pulled her stool closer to the bench.

"Show me the formation layout," she said.

Katarina pulled out her notes, spread them across the bench, and started talking. Eva listened. Then she asked a question. Then she asked another one. Then she pulled out her own notebook and started sketching something alongside Katarina’s array diagram, and Katarina watched her draw and thought, grudgingly, that the lines were very clean.

They worked until the lamplighters made their first pass outside the windows and neither of them noticed.

{Eva}

"See you tomorrow," Katarina said as she left.

Naturally, they weren't able to figure it out on day one, but that wasn't the expectation either of them had set, so it was okay.

Eva watched her go and then, as soon as she was gone, she let out a sigh of relief.

Working with Montecardi was exhausting. Not because she was difficult, although she was, but because she was fast. Eva was used to being the smartest person in the room. She'd been the smartest person in the room at every school, every temple study group, every family gathering since she was old enough to read. Then she'd come to the Compasso.

Katarina Montecardi had walked in, started sketching formation arrays on chalkboards like she was bored, and Eva had spent the last three months pretending that didn't bother her.

It bothered her.

She packed up her notes, covered the container, and left the workshop.

Her room was on the third floor of the east wing, which was where they put the students without Pavona connections or old money. Her roommate was a Valdari girl named Giula who studied commodity pricing and had said maybe forty words to Eva since the semester started. Eva didn't mind. Forty words was plenty.

Giula wasn't there. Eva dropped her bag on her bed, opened the drawer of her nightstand, and pulled out her communication stone.

She left the room and walked. The stone connected on the third pulse.

"Eva." Celestine's voice was warm and slightly amused, which was her default setting. "You're calling late."

"I needed to work."

"On a Sunday?"

"I have a new project."

"You always have a new project. How's the academy?"

Eva turned a corner and started down the long corridor that ran along the south side of the building. Moonlight came through the arched windows in pale blue rectangles on the floor.

"It’s fine."

"That bad?"

"It’s not bad. It’s just..." Eva pressed the stone against her ear and frowned. "The food is too rich. Everything is seasoned like they’re trying to hide something. Half the students can’t hold a conversation without flirting, and I had to sit through a forty-minute lecture last week on ’cross-cultural negotiation sensitivity’ which was really just a Valdari woman telling me to smile more."

Celestine laughed.

"And the professors?"

"Competent. One of them is genuinely good. The rest are adequate."

"High praise from you."

"I don’t give high praise. I give accurate assessments."

"You sound like Mother."

"Don’t say that."

Celestine laughed again. Eva smiled despite herself. Celestine was eleven years older and had spent most of Eva’s childhood making sure Eva didn’t turn into a complete copy of their mother, which was a losing battle, but Celestine fought it with good humor.

"I miss you," Eva said. She didn’t say it often. It cost something every time.

"I miss you too. But, eh, you’ll survive."

"I know I’ll survive. I just don’t enjoy it."

They talked for a few more minutes. Celestine told her about the weather in the north, about their cousin’s engagement, about the new meditation instructor at the family temple who Celestine described as "aggressively serene." Eva listened, walked, the hallway stretching out ahead of her, quiet and blue.

She ended the call near the west wing stairwell. She was about to turn back toward her room when she heard something.

A voice from around the corner, low and strained, coming from one of the alcoves that lined the corridor.

Eva stopped walking.

"Fuck, Kat, I'm gonna..."

Eva's whole body went still.

She knew that voice. That was the catgirl. Tavia.

She should have turned around. She should have walked back the way she came and pretended she hadn't heard anything. That was the correct, dignified, appropriate thing to do.

She took one step closer.

The alcove was half-hidden behind a column. Eva pressed her back against the wall and looked.

Tavia was on her knees. Katarina was standing over her with one hand against the wall, the other in Tavia's hair. Tavia's mouth was full, her tail was lashing, Katarina's hips were moving in slow, deliberate rolls. Neither of them had any idea Eva was there.

Eva stopped breathing.

She pulled back behind the column. Her heart was slamming against her ribs, her face was so hot she could feel it in her ears, her own cock was hard, straining against her skirt. She pressed her back flat against the stone and stared at the ceiling.

[I did not just see that. I am going back to my room. I did not see anything.]

She could still hear them.

[Move. Move, Eva. Walk away.]

She didn't walk away. Not for another ten seconds. Then she pushed off the wall, turned on her heel, and walked back toward the east wing as fast as she could without running.

She didn't look back.

Her cock didn't go down until she was in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin and Giula snoring softly across the room.

She stared at the ceiling for a very long time.

Chapter 78: Working Theory

Katarina was in a pretty good mood as she went back to Vanta's workshop the next day.

How could she not? Hanging out with Vessa had been fun and seeing her reminded Katarina of what it was all about: skipping lessons about stuff she already knew and heading back home to be with her friends and family.

[I feel determination surging through me!] She thought, hair on the verge of turning blonde from sheer will.

In any case, she felt good.

She felt even better as she walked into the place and, again, was greeted by Eva's ass, directly aimed at her.

[You know what? I feel so good I'm not even going to pretend. Damn, that's a nice body she's got.]

Of course, she had to act with some semblance of professionalism, so insead of going, "hey, nice ass," she walked up and went:

"Good morning."

"..." Eva looked back over her shoulder and remained silent.

[... Okay.]

Katarina shrugged and took her seat.

"Alright, so, the bleed issue. What did we decide on last time?" She asked.

Eva cleared her throat and actually spoke back this time.

"The array can be molded to its own separate purpose and perhaps then we can loop it back into the main formation which, maybe, could achieve the infinite rotation we need."

"Right," Katarina nodded. "I'll get started on it."

That made Eva arch a brow high.

"Uh, no, I will," she said. "You can focus on refining the main formation."

"It's literally my project!"

"That you brought me onto. This is more closely tied to the matter that made you seek me out in the first place. I should work on it."

Katarina deflated.

"Fine."

So, they promptly got to work.

That said, on Kat's end, there wasn't a whole lot to work on. She wasn't one to brag (too much, anyway), but the main formation was...

[Wait, no, I can tighten that line up.]

Then she found another, then another.

Soon enough, she was redesigning the entire thing.

Katarina had not blinked in hours.

Okay, maybe she had. Once or twice. But, largely, she'd been staring at her container. There it sat, right in front of her, mostly new and redesigned, with Eva on the other side, putting the finishing touches on the complimentary array.

[Oh, man. The time kinda flew by. Whoa.]

She took stock of her work. Not bad. She could probably find little things to touch up here and there, but if she went down that road, the sun would come up again before she was done.

So, she decided to concede here and leave the rest of her refining to Future Katarina.

Looking off to the side, it seemed someone else had made a similar decision.

Eva was asleep. She had her head down on her crossed arms, eyes closed, with her part of the container right in front of her, like she'd fallen asleep mid-work.

[Aw, look who couldn't keep up.]

Katarina walked around the table for a better view.

Honestly, it was insane how different the aevari's face looked when she didn't seem so constipated. Free of any tension, her elegance shone through a bit more... Even if it was partially dimmed by the drool about to escape her lips.

Katarina stood there for a while. Longer than she should have, probably. But the workshop was empty and nobody was around to judge her for it, so she let herself look.

Eva’s wings twitched once in her sleep, a small, involuntary flutter, and her fingers curled tighter around her own forearm. The drool was winning its battle with gravity. Katarina considered waking her up, considered leaving a note, and then considered the fact that she didn’t owe Eva anything past business hours and that the appropriate thing to do was go to bed.

She went to bed.

{Eva}

"Honestly, it was kinda cute."

"Fuck off."

"What? Everyone drools on occasion."

Eva’s hand tightened. They were back at the bench the next morning, sitting across from each other, and Eva had shown up with a crease on her cheek from sleeping on her arms and a mood that could curdle milk.

"Can we focus?" Eva said.

"I’m focused. I’m also observant."

"Observe the formation array."

"I am. I’m observing it and I’m observing that you had drool on your face."

"If you say anything about drool one more time I will leave."

"... It was adorable."

"I’m leaving."

"Sit down, I’m done."

Eva sat down. She went back to her section of the array without another word, though her wings pulled in about half an inch tighter than usual. Katarina grinned and went back to hers.

They worked through the morning.

Katarina refined the primary cooling loop, tightening junctions, smoothing flow paths, making adjustments she'd identified the night before. Across the bench, Eva built the adaptive secondary array with a precision that Katarina would never admit out loud was impressive but was, in fact, impressive. Her lines were clean, her nodes were evenly spaced, and she worked without hesitation, like she'd already solved the whole thing in her head and her hands were just catching up.

They didn't talk much but, then again, they didn't need to.

Katarina would finish a section and slide the container across. Eva would examine it, nod or frown, and slide it back with a note scratched in the margin. Katarina would read the note, adjust, and slide it over again. It was efficient. It was almost pleasant, if you ignored the fact that they'd been arguing about drool twenty minutes ago.

By early afternoon, the pieces were ready.

Eva set the secondary array into the base of the container and connected it to Katarina's primary loop. The junction points aligned. The flow paths matched. On paper, the qi would cycle through the cooling system, bleed into the secondary array, get converted and fed back into the primary, and the whole thing would sustain itself indefinitely.

On paper.

"Ready?" Katarina asked.

"Ready."

Katarina placed her palm flat on the side of the container and pushed qi into it.

The primary loop lit up first. A soft blue glow traced the formation lines along the interior walls, cycling through the pathways she'd designed, cooling the air inside the container in real time. She could feel the temperature drop through the metal.

Cold. Clean. Steady.

Then the bleed started. She felt it, the qi leaking out of the primary loop at the junction she'd been fighting for months, trickling away. Her stomach clenched.

But this time, the qi didn't vanish. It hit Eva's secondary array and the array caught it. The adaptive nodes lit up, green against the blue, and the bleed was pulled in, converted, and routed back into the primary loop. The blue glow pulsed once, brighter than before, and steadied.

The container hummed.

Katarina pulled her hand away. The formation kept running.

She looked at Eva. Eva looked at her.

"It’s holding," Eva said.

"It’s holding."

"The secondary array is compensating. The bleed is cycling back. The temperature is..." Eva put her hand on the side of the container and her eyes widened slightly. "Cold."

"Cold," Katarina confirmed.

They stared at the container. It hummed. It stayed cold. The formation lines glowed blue and green and the qi kept cycling and nothing destabilized and nothing bled out and the loop was running and it was running and it was still running.

"Okay," Katarina said. "Okay, it might take a few days before we know if the loop is truly indefinite, but this is... this is good."

"This is very good."

"This might be the best thing I’ve ever built."

"We."

"What?"

"The best thing we’ve ever built."

Katarina looked at her. Eva’s face was still doing its default neutral expression but her wings were loose, the loosest Katarina had ever seen them, and there was color on her cheeks, faint silver that the Aevari got instead of red.

"Yeah," Katarina said. "We."

She grinned and stretched her arms above her head, arching her back. Her shirt rode up, the muscles in her stomach pulled taut and she twisted at the waist, working out the stiffness from sitting all day. She rolled her neck, sighed, and dropped her arms.

Eva was staring at her.

Not at her face. Lower. Eva’s blue eyes were fixed somewhere around Katarina’s waist, her lips were slightly parted and she wasn’t blinking. And her skirt was tented.

Visibly... Unmistakably... Tented.

Eva didn’t seem to notice. She was still staring, frozen, like her brain had disconnected from the rest of her body and left everything running on autopilot.

Katarina noticed.

She smiled slowly.

"See something you like, Caelestis?"

Eva’s eyes snapped to Katarina’s face. Then they dropped to her own lap. Then they went wide.

The color on her cheeks went from faint silver to full metallic in about half a second. Her wings snapped shut against her back so hard Katarina heard the feathers rustle. She stood up, knocking her stool back, grabbed her bag off the floor, and walked out of the workshop without a single word.

She didn’t run, exactly. But she was moving at a pace that was one deep breath away from running, and she didn’t look back, and the workshop door swung shut behind her hard enough to rattle the hinges.

Katarina sat alone at the bench.

She looked at the container, and then back at the door.

[Huh.]

And then she leaned back on her stool and laughed.

Chapter 79: Passing Time

The next morning, Katarina was already at the bench when Eva walked in.

"Morning, Caelestis."

Eva sat down without looking at her.

"Don’t."

"Don’t what?"

"Whatever you’re about to say. Don’t."

"I wasn’t going to say anything."

"Good."

"I was just going to ask how you slept."

"Fine."

"Good. Soundly? Comfortably?"

"Montecardi."

"No unusual dreams? Nothing... distracting?"

Eva put her bag down on the bench, stood up, and turned toward the door.

"Okay, okay, I'm done," Katarina said. "Sit down. We have work to do."

Eva stood there for a second, wings tight, jaw set, flush creeping up the back of her neck. Then she turned around, sat back down, and pulled out her notes.

They didn't mention it again.

What they did instead was watch the container. The formation was still running. Blue and green, steady hum, cold to the touch. The qi loop had been cycling for sixteen hours without interruption and neither of them wanted to jinx it by celebrating too early.

"We should check it every twelve hours," Eva said. "Measure the internal temperature and the qi density at each junction point. If the bleed is happening, it'll show up as a gradient shift before the temperature changes."

"Agreed. I'll take mornings, you take evenings."

With that settled, they got to work on the presentation materials.

The Dimostrazione was five weeks out and they needed more than a cold box. They needed numbers, projections, market analysis, a pitch that would make the merchants in the audience reach for their coin purses. Katarina knew how to do that in her sleep.

Days passed.

The weeks blurred together in that way they always did when Katarina was locked in on something.

She'd wake up, check the container, log the numbers, then either head to the workshop or to one of the few classes she still attended. Pelegatta's lectures were the only ones she bothered with consistently. Everything else was background noise.

Tavia came by on Wednesdays. It had become a thing, though neither of them had formally established it.

Tavia would show up at Katarina's door after dinner, Katarina would let her in, within ten minutes Tavia would be face-down in a pillow with Katarina's hips snapping against her ass, her tail wrapped around Katarina's forearm. Tavia liked it rough on Wednesdays. She said it was because her negotiation seminar was on Wednesday afternoons, her professor made her want to bite someone. Katarina was happy to be the beneficiary of that frustration.

Pirra stopped knocking. She'd just open the door, check for bodies, and proceed accordingly. Most of the time the room was empty or Katarina was alone at her desk. Twice it wasn't, and Pirra had gotten so efficient at the door-open-scan-close cycle that Katarina barely registered it anymore.

One Thursday, though, Pirra didn't leave.

She came in, saw Katarina at the desk in her underwear, and sat on her own bed with her textbook like nothing was unusual. They studied in comfortable silence for about an hour. Then Pirra asked Katarina something about tariff law that turned into a twenty-minute conversation that turned into Katarina on her back with Pirra on top of her, riding her, braid swinging, ears flat, textbook still open on the other bed.

The workshop became Katarina's second home. She and Eva settled into a rhythm that was functional if not friendly. They bickered about everything, sure, but they got work done... Most of the time.

"The problem," Eva said. "You establish the need first. Then you present the answer."

"The solution," Katarina said. "You grab their attention with the product. Then you explain why it matters."

"That's showmanship."

"Yes. It is. And it works."

"It's manipulative."

"Eva, we are trying to sell something. The entire exercise is manipulative."

Eva's wings twitched.

"Fine."

Five weeks passed. Then it was the week of the Dimostrazione.

Katarina stood at her bench on Monday morning and looked at the container.

It was still humming. Blue and green, steady, cold. She put her hand on the side and felt the chill through the metal, same as the first day.

She pulled up the log she'd been keeping, every twelve-hour reading since the prototype went live, ran her eyes down the columns.

Temperature: stable.

Qi density at each junction: stable.

Gradient shift: zero.

Bleed rate: zero.

Five weeks. No degradation. No bleed. The loop was holding.

She flipped to the last page of the log and stared at the number at the bottom.

Zero.

Eva walked in behind her. Katarina heard her set her bag down and pull up her stool. She came around the bench and stood next to Katarina, looking at the log.

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"It works," Eva said.

"... It does."

The container hummed between them, cold... steady...

... Infinite.

The Dimostrazione was held in the Compasso's central theatre, a tiered stone hall with seating for about two hundred and a raised stage at the front where the presenters stood behind a long table.

The judges sat in the first row: four merchants from the Consortium, Fossaverde, Pelegatta, and some other professors Katarina didn't recognize.

The students went in alphabetical order by house name, which meant Katarina and Eva were somewhere in the middle, which meant they had to sit through the first half.

Some of it was painful.

A pair of second-years pitched a regional livestock exchange that fell apart the moment a judge asked about veterinary inspection protocols.

They hadn't considered veterinary inspection protocols. Their faces said as much.

The next group presented a luxury textile import scheme that was, on paper, fine, but their lead presenter kept saying "um" every third word and the judges' eyes glazed over by minute two.

There were a few good ones, though.

A human girl whose name Katarina didn't know pitched a mobile apothecary network that linked traveling healers with supply depots along major trade routes. Her numbers were solid, her delivery was clean, she answered every question without flinching. One of the Consortium merchants wrote something down, which was the closest thing to applause these people gave.

Then it was their turn.

Katarina stood. Eva stood. They walked to the stage together and Katarina set the container on the table.

"Good afternoon," Katarina said. "My name is Katarina Montecardi. This is Evangelina Caelestis. And this," she tapped the side of the container, "is the future of trade infrastructure on this continent."

She let that sit for a second.

"This is a formation-powered temperature regulation system. You put qi into it once and it keeps whatever's inside cold. Indefinitely."

One of the Consortium merchants leaned forward.

"This device has been running for five weeks without interruption," Katarina continued. "Zero bleed. Zero degradation. The formation is self-sustaining through a dual-loop system designed by myself and my partner. The primary loop handles temperature regulation. The secondary loop, designed by Signorina Caelestis, is an adaptive array that catches any qi runoff and converts it back into the primary cycle."

Eva stepped forward.

"The adaptive array recalibrates in real time based on ambient qi density," Eva said. Her voice was steady. No ums. No hesitation. "This means the container functions identically regardless of location, altitude, or environmental conditions. A merchant moving goods from Pavona to the northern border will experience zero performance difference."

Katarina pulled out the presentation boards.

Market projections. Cost analysis. Manufacturing estimates. Applications ranging from food transport to medical storage to residential cooling.

She walked the judges through each one. Eva fielded the technical questions. They traded off without stepping on each other's lines because they'd rehearsed this nine times in the workshop, arguing about every word until neither of them could find a flaw.

The judges asked questions. Good ones. Hard ones. Katarina answered the commercial questions. Eva answered the formation questions. A Consortium merchant asked about scalability. Katarina walked him through a three-phase rollout plan that she'd drafted on Earth in a previous life for a different product entirely, adapted so cleanly that nobody would ever know.

When they finished, the head judge marked his slate.

Full marks. Across the board.

Katarina looked at Eva. Eva looked at Katarina.

Neither of them smiled, because they were professionals. But Eva's wings loosened about an inch, Katarina's jaw unclenched for the first time in an hour, and that was enough.

They walked off the stage and sat down.

"We did it," Eva said quietly.

"Yep. It's done."

They sat through the rest of the presentations in silence. Katarina didn't hear a single word of any of them.

Afterward, outside the theatre, the students spilled into the courtyard and the noise level tripled immediately. People were laughing, complaining, comparing scores, generally behaving like the semester was already over even though it technically wasn't.

Ludo appeared from somewhere and grabbed Katarina by the arm.

"Afterparty. My place. Tonight. You're coming."

"I just sat through three hours of presentations, Ludo."

"Which is exactly why you need a drink. Pirra's already confirmed. Tavia's bringing something from the Pleasure Quarter that she won't describe but promises is 'an experience.' You're coming."

Katarina looked at her.

"... Fine."

"Wonderful. Sundown. Don't be late."

Ludo vanished back into the crowd. Katarina watched her go and shook her head.

[I could go back to the workshop and start on the manufacturing specs.]

She thought about it for about two seconds.

[Or I could go to a party.]

She went to the party.

Chapter 80: Angels and Demons 1

Loud music and alcohol felt different when you had reason to celebrate.

It was a similar scene today to that first party. People enjoying themselves, getting lost in bottles and rhythms. But, now, Katarina actually felt compelled to join some of them.

Not just that, but a lot of them knew her. Some from the kidnapping, some from the Dimostrazione. But, right before the end of the year, Katarina had managed to become a known factor.

[Oh, Vessa, if only you could see me right now. Ah, well, I'll tell you all about this later.]

Asking herself, "what would Vessa do?" Katarina joined the crowd.

A girl with small, perky boobs and a curvy body grinned when she saw Kat and approached her. Without a word, she put her hands on Katarina's hips, and Kat let her. They swayed side to side. Kat was a bit awkward, of course. She was no dancer. But, the other girl didn't seem to mind.

Then, another girl spun Katarina around and a new set of hands found her waist, and Katarina smiled as she danced with the newcomer as well.

A hand fell on her shoulder and, at first, she thought she'd found her third partner for the night. Instead, it was Ludo, holding a glass and a smile.

"Good to see you!"

"It's good to be here," Katarina replied. "I figured I could use a moment to let loose."

"That you did. Way too much tension in your shoulders."

"Where's Pirra?"

"She's waiting for me on the balcony."

"So, why are you here and not on the balcony?"

Ludo grinned.

"I needed to let you know something in advance. See, uh, a certain someone also agreed to come."

Katarina's brows shot through the roof and flew through the sky.

"... No."

"Uh-huh," Ludo nodded, proud of herself. "I mean, chances are she'll change her mind at the last second, right? But, still, just in case, I wanted to let you know."

Katarina nodded slowly.

"... Why me?"

"Why do you think? You're closer to her than anyone else here. She'll be your problem. I mean," Ludo winked, "if she comes."

And just like that, with that brief, world-shaking suggestion, she left, presumably to go have fun with Pirra.

[Well... That's quite the revelation. But, eh, it doesn't matter. I mean, really? A party? With a bunch of drunk, horny valdari? Eva would NEVER...]

She trailed off as someone new came into the room.

Eva stood in the doorway like she'd taken a wrong turn on her way to a temple and ended up in hell.

She was wearing a white dress Katarina hadn't seen before, fitted at the waist and loose at the shoulders, and her silver hair was down instead of pinned back. She looked good. But she also looked extremely out of place.

A topless girl danced past Eva with a cup in each hand. Eva's wings pulled in tight against her back like she was trying to fold herself out of existence.

Katarina watched her from across the room. Eva scanned the crowd, found Katarina, and immediately looked away like she hadn't been looking in the first place.

Katarina looked away too.

Then she looked back. Eva was looking at her again.

[Oh, for fuck's sake.]

She could have allowed this to continue for 20 more times but the bit was already dead. So, instead, Katarina rolled her eyes and walked over.

"Caelestis."

"Montecardi."

"What did Ludo have to do to get you here?"

"She asked four times. The first three, I said no. The fourth time... I don't know. I suppose my defenses had been degraded by then."

It was the most words Katarina had ever heard her say in a row. At least, that wasn't related to schoolwork.

Eva seemed to realize this halfway through and stopped talking.

A girl walked past holding two cups and wearing a skirt so short it was closer to a suggestion than a garment. Eva's eyes followed her ass for a full second before snapping back to a very interesting spot on the wall.

Katarina watched this happen and didn't address it.

"You look like you're waiting to be executed."

"I feel like it. Can’t believe your people are like this. Back home, my kin would rather be tortured than show this much of their chests. Meanwhile, here, these women are having fun with their clothes off, Montecardi."

"Welcome to Valdari culture."

"It’s something, alright."

Katarina looked at her. Eva’s face was neutral, but there was a faint silver flush on her cheeks and she was gripping her own elbow hard enough to wrinkle her sleeve.

Katarina wondered: "What would Vessa do here?"

[Vessa would get her a drink.]

Katarina went to the table, grabbed two cups, filled them both from the bottle Ludo had left out, and brought one back. Eva took it with both hands and stared into it like she was looking for answers.

"I don’t usually drink."

"I figured. You’re holding that cup like it insulted your family."

Eva lifted it to her lips and took a small sip. Her whole face tightened. She swallowed and made a noise that wasn’t a word.

"It gets better around the third one," Katarina said.

Eva took another sip, then another, and by the time she lowered the cup again she was looking at Katarina with an expression Katarina hadn’t seen on her before.

"I think your people are insane," Eva said. "No offense."

"None taken."

[I mean, the casual discrimination would have gotten you buried on social media back on Earth, but I suppose that’s just normal here.]

"I have been here for a month and I do not understand how any of you get anything done," Eva explained. Her eyes drifted for a moment before shooting back to Kat. "There are women fucking against a wall ten feet from me. I can see them right now. I will see them when I close my eyes tonight."

"That’s the wine talking."

"It’s been one sip."

"Three sips. And no, it isn't. That's just what happens when you stop pretending you don't notice."

Eva didn't answer. She took another drink.

Katarina leaned against the wall next to her, close enough that their shoulders almost touched, and let the silence sit.

Across the room, the topless girl, one of many actually, with two cups had found a third cup somewhere and was attempting to hold all of them at once. Eva was watching her.

Eva was watching her for a long time.

"You know... I'm happy we got full marks on the project," Katarina said eventually.

"Mhm."

"Even if it took us thirty minutes to agree on the subtitle."

"Forty."

Katarina raised a brow at her.

Eva looked back at her, took another drink without saying anything, and went back to watching the girl with the cups.

Katarina counted that as a win.

The second cup went down easier than the first.

By the third, Eva told Katarina about the Conservatory her sister had wanted her to attend instead of Compasso, about applying behind her mother's back, about the look on her mother's face when the acceptance letter arrived.

Eva laughed. Then, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand and looked annoyed at herself for making the sound.

Somebody bumped Eva from behind and pushed her forward. She caught herself with a hand on Katarina's shoulder. She left it there for about three seconds longer than she needed to.

At some point, they moved outside.

The terrace behind Ludo’s villa overlooked the bay and the noise from the party was muffled enough that Katarina could hear the water below. Eva leaned on the stone railing with her cup in both hands and stopped fixing her hair every time the breeze moved it.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do your horns ever, uh... itch?"

Katarina turned her head. Eva was staring at her horns very intently.

"... What?"

"I’ve been wondering for a month."

"... They’re bone, Eva. They don’t itch."

"My wings itch sometimes."

"Your wings have feathers. That’s a different problem."

Eva nodded like she was filing this away for a report. Then her eyes drifted from Katarina’s horns down to Katarina’s face, and they stayed there.

Katarina tried to ignore it, but after 30 seconds of Eva staring at her, it became a bit difficult.

"You’re looking at me," Katarina said.

"... You should have been an aevari," Eva said casually. "Maybe then, we..."

["We" what, exactly?]

Katarina let the comment drop, though.

Eva took another drink without breaking eye contact, and Katarina realized that the railing was not very wide, and that they had drifted toward each other without either of them deciding to.

Eva’s wing was pressed against Katarina’s arm, warm, heavier than she’d expected.

Eva set her cup on the railing, missed slightly, and the cup wobbled. Katarina caught it before it went over the edge. By the time she looked back up, Eva was much closer than she had been three seconds ago.

"I..."

"Yeah?"

"... I am about to make a very bad decision," Eva said.

"Really?"

"Yes. I have thought about it. It is bad. I'm going to do it anyway."

"That's probably the-"

Eva kissed her.

It was terrible. She came in at the wrong angle. Their teeth clicked. Eva pulled back, pouted for a moment, tilted her head the other way, and tried again.

The second attempt was better.

Katarina took over. She tilted her head, slid a hand up to Eva's jaw, and stopped Eva from doing anything ambitious. Eva, to her credit, figured it out fast. Her free hand found Katarina's hip and gripped too hard, which was fine, which was actually pretty good.

Eva's wings opened halfway and knocked the empty cup off the railing. Neither of them looked.

When they broke apart, Eva blinked at her like she'd forgotten what planet she was on.

"That was stupid," she said.

"Mhm."

"I should not have done that."

"... Probably."

Then, Eva kissed her again.