CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 81: Angels and Demons 2*

Eva was nine years old the first time she saw a Valdari town.

Her family had been traveling south on a diplomatic visit, one of those once-a-decade gestures of goodwill the Celestial Courts made when they wanted something from the trade routes and didn't feel like fighting over it. Eva's mother, Seraphiel, sat across from her in the carriage with her wings folded tight and her posture so straight it looked like a punishment. Her other mother, Iessael, sat beside her and looked out the window like the landscape was an inconvenience she had not been consulted about.

The town was called Tessara. It sat on a hillside above a slow brown river, terracotta roofs running down toward the water, laundry lines strung between balconies, and the smell of something fried and spiced drifting in through the carriage shutters.

Eva pressed her nose to the glass.

There were Valdari everywhere.

Horns, colored skin, bare shoulders, laughter coming from every direction.

Two women were arguing over a fish at a stall while a third sat behind them nursing a baby without a shirt on. A group of older girls leaned against a wall, sharing a bottle, shoving each other, laughing the way Eva had never heard anyone laugh before.

A toddler ran across the street naked, screaming, while her mother chased her with one hand and a sandal in the other.

An old woman sat outside a tavern with her horns half-broken, her boots up on a barrel, eating something on a stick. She watched the carriage pass like a cat who had already decided she did not care.

Eva watched all of it. She had never seen so many people existing this loudly at the same time. In the Spire, even the children were quiet.

"Disgusting," Seraphiel said.

Eva looked at her mother.

"No restraint. No decorum. They eat, they drink, they breed like animals, and then they wonder why the Courts consider them lesser."

Seraphiel adjusted the fold of her robe without looking at the window.

"Six hundred years ago, we brought order to this continent. We could do it again if the humans and Valdari didn't have the good sense to band together every time we tried."

"It is beneath us," Iessael said. Her voice was softer than Seraphiel's, and tighter. "Especially the way they..." Her wings drew in a quarter inch. "The way they look at each other. In public. Like that is something one should do where others can see."

Eva did not know what her mother meant. She filed the sentence away for later.

"Mother," she said carefully, "the woman with the baby. Why doesn't she wear a shirt?"

The carriage was silent for a long moment.

"Because she does not know any better," Seraphiel said. "Eva. Pay attention."

Eva pulled her face from the glass.

"You will meet Valdari. In your studies, in your travels, in your career. They will be loud. They will be crude. They will try to charm you, seduce you, befriend you. And some of them will be intelligent, which makes them more dangerous, not less. But, you are Aevari. You do not stoop. You do not lower yourself. You are polite, you are professional, and you are gone. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Good."

"And if one of them touches you," Iessael added, still not looking at her, "you do not flinch. You do not pull away. You permit it once. You ensure it does not happen twice."

There was a pause. Iessael was choosing her next words carefully.

"Pulling away makes them think they have power over you. Allowing it the first time makes them think you are kind. Refusing the second time makes them think you are dignified. This is how we are seen."

"Yes, Mother."

"Good girl."

The carriage rolled on.

Eva looked back at the window.

A Valdari woman was leaning against a doorframe with her arms crossed, watching the carriage pass. She had red skin, white hair, and a soft smile on her face that wasn't directed at anything in particular. She was just standing there in the sun looking content.

Eva thought she looked happy.

Beside her in the doorway, another woman came out, said something Eva couldn't hear, and kissed her on the mouth. The first woman laughed against her lips. She pulled the second one closer by the waist, and they stood there in the open doorway in the middle of the afternoon, kissing like nobody was watching.

Eva watched until the carriage turned the corner.

She didn't say anything out loud.

Eva was thinking about that carriage ride while Katarina Montecardi bent over in front of her with both hands flat against the wall and her ass pushed out.

They were behind Ludo's villa. The party was still going inside, muffled through the stone. The terrace was empty. The bay was dark, the moon was out, and Katarina had pulled her skirt up around her waist, looked back over her shoulder, and said "well?" Eva's brain had gone somewhere far away and not come back yet.

[I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry, other Mother. I know what you said. I remember every word. And I am about to disregard all of it.]

Katarina's ass was right there. Round, firm, framed by the hiked-up fabric of her skirt. She was looking back at Eva with those purple eyes, waiting, and Eva was so hard it hurt.

She stepped forward. Her hands found Katarina's hips, her cock pressed against Katarina's ass, and Katarina pushed back into her, just a little, just enough.

"You need an invitation?" Katarina said.

[Apparently I do. Apparently I need a formal, handwritten, sealed invitation to do the thing I have been thinking about doing for the past two months. Apparently, my body won't move without one. Thank you, Mother, for that.]

Eva pushed into her.

Slowly, at first. Katarina's ass was tight, hot, and Eva had to stop halfway in just to breathe.

The heat was unbelievable. Katarina's body was gripping her cock from every direction at once. Eva could feel her own pulse in it, hard and fast, and a small, stupid part of her brain was insisting this was a medical condition and she should sit down. Then Katarina rocked her hips back and took the rest, and Eva's hands tightened on her waist hard enough to leave marks.

"There you go," Katarina said. Her voice was steady, almost casual, which was infuriating. "Not so hard, is it?"

[Shut up. Please shut up. If you keep talking I'm going to finish before I start.]

Eva pulled back and pushed in again. Harder this time. Katarina's hands slid on the wall, she braced herself, and her back arched. Eva watched her own cock slide into Katarina's ass while her vision went white at the edges.

She found a rhythm. Eva had never done this before and it showed. Katarina was pushing back into every thrust, her body warm and tight, and Eva couldn't think about anything except the way Katarina's back looked in the moonlight, the muscle along her spine, the way her shoulders flexed every time Eva drove into her.

She couldn't get enough. Katarina's body tried to drag her cock back in every time she pulled out, like it was begging her to stay, and every push back in felt better than the last. She was probably going at this like a madwoman. She was probably making a fool of herself. Katarina was breathing harder and pressing back harder, so apparently her fool was acceptable.

"Harder," Katarina said.

Eva went harder. She grabbed Katarina's hips with both hands and slammed into her, and the sound of their bodies meeting was loud enough that someone inside the party could probably hear it if they were near the terrace door. Eva didn't care. She didn't care about the party or the terrace or the fact that she was an Aevari fucking a Valdari against a wall at a house party while three drinks sat in her stomach and her mother's voice sat in her head and neither of them was winning.

Katarina dropped her forearms against the wall and let her head hang between her shoulders. Eva fucked her like that, bent over, pinned. Every time Eva bottomed out, Katarina's whole body rocked forward and her hands scraped the stone. Eva watched her cock disappear into Katarina's ass over and over, slick in the moonlight.

[This is the best thing I've ever felt. This is better than a perfect score on a formation exam. This is better than my aunt's approval. This is better than anything my mothers ever told me I should want instead of this.]

Eva's hips stuttered. She was close, too close, too fast. She grabbed Katarina's waist, buried herself as deep as she could go, and came with her forehead pressed between

Katarina’s shoulder blades. Her wings flared open behind her, wide and shaking, and she stayed there for a long time, breathing hard.

When she finally pulled out, Katarina straightened up, fixed her skirt, and turned around.

She was grinning.

And she was hard. Her cock was straining against the front of her skirt, obvious and thick. She reached down, pulled the fabric aside, and let Eva see it.

"My turn," Katarina said.

Eva looked at Katarina’s cock. She looked at Katarina’s face. She looked at Katarina’s cock again.

[... Oh no.]

Chapter 82: Angels and Demons 3*

{Katarina}

The view in front of Katarina would have been unthinkable in the past. Whether that’s this life’s past or the other’s.

In front of her, Eva was on her knees, making eye contact with Kat’s cock, wondering perhaps what she was even supposed to do right now. It was equal parts adorable and hot.

Katarina grinned.

"Come on, give it a kiss."

Eva gave her a look that felt like she was debating whether to take Katarina’s head off or not. It just made Katarina’s dick harder.

But, tentatively, perhaps before she could back off, Eva forced herself to move forward. Her lips touched Katarina’s dick for a few precious seconds.

... But that was all that happened, actually, for too many seconds.

Until, with a trembling jaw, Eva opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out.

[There we go!]

Eva’s tongue touched the underside of Katarina’s cock and her whole face scrunched up like she’d just bitten into something sour. Then she licked again, slower, longer, and the scrunch faded into something closer to concentration. Like she was studying it.

[She’s treating my dick like a formation diagram. She’s literally trying to figure it out. That’s so Eva it hurts.]

Eva licked from the base to the tip, experimental, methodical, then did it again on the other side.

Her silver hair fell across her face. She pushed it back with one hand, kept going. By the fifth or sixth pass she’d found an angle she liked, her tongue pressing flat along the shaft in long strokes that made Katarina’s thighs tense.

Then Eva took the head into her mouth.

She went too far on the first try, gagged and pulled back. Katarina’s hand came to the top of her head, gentle. Eva looked up at her.

"Slower," Katarina said. "Use your tongue more."

Eva glared at her. Then she tried again.

This time she took just the first few inches, wrapped her lips tight, and sucked. Her tongue pressed against the underside, her cheeks hollowed.

It was clumsy. Eva clearly had no idea what she was doing beyond basic mechanics. Katarina’s cock throbbed in her mouth anyway.

Eva bobbed her head. Slow, shallow, figuring out the rhythm as she went. She kept one hand on Katarina’s hip for balance, the other on the base of Katarina’s cock. Her grip was too tight, but Katarina didn’t correct her on that one. Eva pulled back to the tip, tongued the slit, took her in again.

This time it was smoother, deeper. Katarina’s hand tightened in her hair before she could stop it.

"That’s good," Katarina said. "You’re doing good."

Eva kept going.

Somewhere around the dozenth bob she figured out what to do with her tongue while she was sucking. Katarina actually said "oh" out loud, which got her a tiny, smug glance from below before Eva went back to it like she hadn’t heard. She started taking more, deeper each time. Katarina let her head fall back, looked at the sky, thought about absolutely nothing for a while.

Then she looked down. Eva was on her knees with Katarina's cock in her mouth, blue eyes half-closed, spit on her chin.

[Oh, that's not bad. I'm actually getting kinda close.]

"Come here," Katarina said.

Eva pulled off and looked up at her, confused.

"Come here. Stand up."

Eva stood. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Katarina grabbed her by the jaw, kissed her.

Eva went rigid against her mouth. Her hands hung at her sides like she'd forgotten they existed. Katarina kissed her anyway, soft, slow, holding her there by the jaw until Eva's shoulders dropped, her mouth opened, and she tentatively kissed back.

It wasn't like the first kiss outside the party. That one had been drunk, desperate, and full of teeth. This one was quiet. Katarina's thumb traced Eva's cheekbone. Eva's hand found Katarina's wrist and held it.

When Katarina pulled back, Eva's eyes were wide, her lips were wet, and she looked like her brains had been scrambled.

So, Katarina gave her some direction.

"Turn around," Katarina said.

It took her a moment to process, but Eva turned around.

Katarina put a hand on her back, pushed her forward gently until Eva braced herself against the wall, in almost the same position Kat had been in. Then she pulled Eva's hips back, and dropped to her knees.

Eva's cock was hard again, hanging between her thighs, and behind it, between her balls and her ass, her pussy was wet. Katarina could see it in the moonlight, pink and slick. She had a full half-second of just looking at it while a part of her brain that had been waiting a long time for this opportunity made some quiet, specific plans.

She leaned forward, dragged her tongue across it in one long, flat stroke.

Eva's knees buckled.

Her whole body jerked forward. She caught herself on the wall. Katarina grabbed her thighs to hold her steady, licked her again, slower this time, pushing her tongue between the folds and tasting her properly. Eva was sweet and warm. Her thighs were shaking against Katarina's palms.

Katarina ate her out like she had all night. She pressed her tongue inside Eva's pussy, fucked her with it, then pulled back and circled her clit with the tip, then went flat and broad again, alternating pressure and speed until Eva's legs were trembling so bad that Katarina was doing most of the work keeping her upright.

Eva's hands were flat on the wall, her head was hanging between her shoulders, she wasn't making a sound. Dead quiet. Her jaw was clenched, her eyes were shut, she was taking it in complete silence, which Katarina found so typically Eva that she almost laughed with her mouth still on her.

She pulled back, stood up. She wiped her mouth, grabbed Eva's hips, lined herself up.

"Ready?"

Eva nodded with one sharp jerk of her head.

Katarina pushed into her pussy.

Eva was tight. Tighter than Katarina expected, wet enough that she slid in to the hilt on the first stroke. Eva's back arched, her fingers scraped the stone wall, she still didn't make a sound.

Katarina pulled back, thrust into her again. Harder.

Silence.

Again. Harder.

Eva's whole body rocked forward with the force of it. She caught herself, pushed back. Katarina grabbed her hips, set a rhythm, steady, deep, fucking Eva's pussy against the wall of Ludo's villa while the party played on inside.

On the fifth thrust, Eva broke. A single sound, sharp, high, escaped from between her clenched teeth. Her pussy squeezed Katarina's cock so hard that Katarina had to stop moving for a second.

Katarina leaned forward, pressed her chest against Eva's back, and whispered "you feel incredible" against the side of her neck. Eva's whole body shuddered. Her pussy clenched again. Katarina started moving faster.

She fucked her until Eva’s arms gave out, until she was pressed flat against the wall, cheek against the stone, cock dripping onto the terrace tiles. She fucked her until Eva stopped trying to be quiet and started gasping on every thrust, small, sharp, and involuntary. She fucked her until her own orgasm built at the base of her spine. She grabbed Eva’s hips, drove in deep, came inside her with her teeth against Eva’s shoulder.

They stayed like that for a while. Katarina pressed against Eva’s back, still inside her, both of them breathing hard.

"... Holy shit," Katarina said.

"... Please don’t say anything," Eva replied, post-orgasm clarity hitting her like a freight train, probably.

"No."

"I hate you."

"That’s a funny thing to say with my dick literally still inside of you."

Eva groaned.

Katarina’s legs were not cooperating.

After untangling herself from Eva, she made it back to Compasso through sheer willpower and a route that avoided every populated hallway she knew of. Her thighs ached, her lower back was sore, and she was pretty sure she had stone dust on her knees from the terrace.

The academy was empty. Clearly, Ludo and her friends weren’t the only ones partying tonight. She understood. The Dimostrazione had even left her pretty exhausted.

Her room was dark. Pirra was asleep in her bed, curled on her side with her ears twitching faintly at whatever elves dreamed about. Katarina sat on the edge of her own bed, pulled off her shoes, and picked up the communication stone on her nightstand.

It connected on the second pulse.

"Mm. Kat?" Vessa’s voice was groggy. "It’s late."

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"... We fucked."

A pause. Then Vessa was awake.

"You and Eva?"

"... Yes."

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy SHIT! HOW WAS IT?"

"Vessa, Pirra's sleeping."

"I don't care about Pirra! Tell me everything! Did she... wait, who topped?"

"We... kinda took turns."

"TURNS!?"

Pirra rolled over and mumbled something into her pillow. Katarina pressed the stone closer to her ear.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"You will tell me RIGHT now, Katarina Montecardi."

Katarina chose that moment to drop the call, smiling.

Chapter 83: Legitimacy

The next morning, Katarina indeed kept her word.

"So, what happened!?"

"So nothing. We were behind Ludo's villa," Katarina said, sitting cross-legged on her bed with the communication stone in her lap. "On the terrace."

"Outside!?" Vessa's voice crackled through the stone. "Katarina Montecardi, you fucked an aevari outside a party?"

Katarina was a bit surprised by how slutty the whole thing sounded when it was put like that.

"... It was a private terrace."

"It was OUTSIDE!"

Katarina rolled her eyes.

"Moving on. She bent me over first."

"SHE topped YOU?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Because you don’t let anyone top you!"

"That’s not true. Pernella topped me at the harvest festival."

"Pernella is six feet tall and made of muscle. Eva is an aevari."

"An aevari topped me against a wall, yeah."

From the other bed, Pirra groaned into her pillow. She hadn’t opened her eyes yet and didn’t seem interested in changing that. Katarina made a mental note to try to be a bit quieter.

"And then?" Vessa asked.

"... And then I topped her."

"How?"

"I ate her out first."

"You ATE HER OUT? Since when do you eat people out? You never eat me out!"

"That’s not true either."

"It’s a little true."

"I eat you out all the time."

Pirra groaned louder. She pulled her blanket over her head and became a lump.

A knock came at the door. Katarina got up and opened it. Ludo was standing in the hallway holding two cups of tea and looking far too alive for someone who’d hosted a party that went until three in the morning.

"Morning! Figured you girls would want some tea."

"How are you awake right now?"

"Practice." Ludo handed her both cups and peered past her into the room. "Is she alive?"

Pirra made a sound that almost felt like a death rattle.

"Barely," Katarina said. "Thanks for the tea."

"Tell her I said good morning."

"She's right there. Tell her yourself."

"Good morning, tesoro!" Ludo called into the room at full volume.

The lump that currently was Pirra flinched.

Ludo left with a grin. Katarina closed the door, walked over to Pirra's bed, and set one of the cups on her nightstand.

"Tea."

"Why?"

"Because Ludo brought it. And, given her experience with drunkenness, I assume it'll help."

Pirra's hand emerged from the blanket, found the cup, and retreated back under the covers with it. Slurping sounds followed.

Katarina sat back down on her bed and picked up the stone.

"Still there?"

"Obviously I'm still here," Vessa said. "You were at the part where you ate her out."

"Right. So, after that, I, uh, turned her around and fucked her against the wall."

"And?"

"What the hell do you mean, and?"

"Details, details!"

Katarina sighed dramatically.

"And she was really, really tight."

"Yeah, figures... You’re probably her first."

"Maybe."

"Kat."

"What?"

"Did she like it?"

"Yeah," Katarina said. "I think she liked it."

"Good." Vessa sounded satisfied. "So, what happens now? Are you two a thing?"

"What? Hell no. We are not a thing. We’re project partners who had sex."

"Kat, you ate her pussy and came inside her against a wall. That’s well beyond standard project partner behavior."

"It was a celebration. We got full marks on the Dimostrazione."

"Ooh, congrats! Are you dating her?"

"No. I’m dating you."

"Do you want to date her?"

"No," Katarina replied again. "Like I said, I’m dating you."

"Liar."

"So be it. I’m gonna go now. I need to make sure my roommate hasn’t died."

"Alright, bye!"

Katarina let the qi in the communication stone go and the call went away. She set it on her nightstand, picked up her tea, and took a sip. It was actually good. Ludo knew what she was doing.

From across the room, Pirra’s blanket moved. One ear emerged, then the other, then a pair of amber eyes squinting against the morning light.

"Did you say you fucked Eva?"

"Nah, you imagined it."

Pirra stared at her for a long moment. Then she pulled the blanket back over her head and groaned so loud it echoed off the walls.

Katarina sipped her tea and smiled.

The Compasso looked different when you weren't in a hurry.

Katarina walked the hallways at her own pace for what felt like the first time since she'd arrived. No workshop to get to, no class to skip, no prototype to stress over.

The year was done. Her scores were in. The Dimostrazione was behind her and she'd walked out of it with full marks and a product that half the merchant families in the Consortium were apparently fighting over.

She made her way to Pelegatta's office on the second floor. The door was open and Eva was already inside, standing in front of Pelegatta's desk with her hands clasped behind her back. Pelegatta was sitting behind a stack of papers and looked like she'd been in this chair since dawn.

"Montecardi. Good. Sit down."

Katarina sat.

"I'll keep this brief," Pelegatta said. "Your Dimostrazione project has generated significant interest. I've received inquiries from six merchant families since the presentation. Three of them have submitted formal requests to discuss licensing terms."

Six. Katarina kept her face neutral but her pulse picked up.

"The Consortium's trade review board has also flagged the container for their quarterly innovations report, which means it'll be in front of every major house on the continent within two months." Pelegatta leaned back. "In short, you two built something that people want to buy. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Professora," Eva said.

"The question now is how you want to handle the inquiries. I can put you in touch with the families directly, or I can route them through the Consortium's standard licensing process. Either way, I'd recommend you two decide on terms before anyone gets in a room with you."

Katarina opened her mouth, but Eva spoke first.

"They should speak to Katarina."

Katarina turned her head.

"It's her product," Eva said. She was looking at Pelegatta, not at Katarina. Her voice was flat and factual. "I built the secondary array, but the concept, the design, the commercial vision, all of it is hers. I contributed one component. Any licensing discussions should go through her."

Pelegatta looked at Katarina. Katarina looked at Eva.

[... What?]

She'd expected a fight. She'd expected Eva to demand equal say in the negotiations, demand her name on every contract, demand co-ownership at minimum. She'd been preparing for that fight since the day she'd brought Eva onto the project. She had arguments lined up and counterarguments behind those and a fallback position behind those.

Eva had just handed her the whole thing.

"Are you sure?" Pelegatta asked.

"I'm sure. I'll want credit on the design documentation, naturally, but the business side is Katarina's domain."

Pelegatta looked between them, shrugged, and made a note.

"Fine. Montecardi, I'll send the inquiries to you. Don't make me regret endorsing you."

"You won't, Professora."

They left the office together. The hallway was empty, afternoon light coming through the windows, and Katarina waited until they were a good distance from Pelegatta's door before she spoke.

"That was... unexpected."

"What was?"

"You. Giving me the licensing rights."

"I gave you the business side. I kept design credit."

"Still. You could have asked for more."

"I could have. But I built one array. You built the product. It would have been dishonest to claim equal ownership."

[Who are you and what have you done with the woman who argued with me on a daily basis?]

"Well," Katarina said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They walked. Katarina glanced at her sideways.

"So. Last night."

Eva's stride didn't change, but her wings pulled in about half an inch.

"What about last night?"

"We had sex."

"I'm aware."

Katarina raised a brow.

"... On a terrace."

"I was there, Montecardi."

"Just making sure we're on the same page."

"We are on the same page. The page where we don't discuss it in a hallway."

"Fair enough."

They kept walking. Katarina was about to let it go when Eva stopped.

Katarina stopped too.

Eva turned to face her. Her hands were at her sides, her jaw was tight, and she had the expression of someone about to do something they'd been rehearsing in their head for the past twelve hours and still weren't sure about.

"Where are you going? After this?" Katarina blinked.

"After the semester? Back to Vellasera. My family's there. My house, my business. Why?"

"And after that?"

"What do you mean, after that?"

"I mean... what's next. For you. Where are you going next?"

Katarina stared at her. Eva was blushing.

"Geographically, I mean."

"... Why?"

Eva stepped forward, grabbed the front of Katarina's shirt with both hands, and kissed her.

Katarina's brow shot through the roof.

It was stiff. Eva's nose bumped hers, her grip on Katarina's shirt was way too tight, and her wings flared out and knocked against the hallway wall. The whole thing had the energy of someone jumping off a cliff and regretting it halfway down.

Then her hands slid from Katarina's shirt to her waist, and then to her hips, and she pulled Katarina closer, and the kiss got softer and warmer and Eva's thumbs pressed into Katarina's hipbones and her body was flush against Katarina's and she was shaking, barely, just enough that Katarina could feel it.

Eva pulled back. Her face was solid silver from her cheeks to her ears. Her hands were still on Katarina's hips and she didn't move them.

"I want to do it again," Eva said.

"The kissing or the sex?"

Eva's blush got worse.

"... Both."

Katarina grinned.

"Fine by me, Caelestis."

Eva let go of her hips, straightened her dress, and walked away at a pace that suggested she'd used up every ounce of courage she had and needed to go recharge somewhere private. Her wings were still half-open and she didn't look back.

Katarina stood in the hallway alone, watching her go.

[Huh. So the angel wants a round two. And a round three. And, apparently, my home address.]

She put her hands in her pockets and started walking.

[This is going to be complicated.]

Chapter 84: Extended Partnership*

Eva had her pinned.

Currently, on this fine day, she had one hand braced flat on the bed beside Katarina's head and the other hooked under her knee, hiking her leg up against her own pale shoulder.

Eva's wings were half-flared and shaking a little. Her silver hair was stuck to her forehead. Her dress was on the floor somewhere near the door, along with most of Katarina's clothes and one of Katarina's shoes, which had been kicked off so hard it had hit the wall.

And she wasn't about to go pick any of that stuff up, because Eva was going to town!

Katarina locked her ankles behind Eva's lower back and pulled her in deeper, grinning.

Eva, faintly blushing as she thrusted in and out of Katarina's pussy, looked away.

"What?" Katarina asked.

"Don't look at me like that."

She scoffed.

"Like what?"

"Like that!"

Katarina took her hands off Eva's back and instead placed them on her cheeks. She pulled Eva down and stuck her tongue out, licking a quick stripe across Eva's bottom lip.

"You're doing great. Keep going."

Eva, even more embarrassed somehow, nodded and kept going.

[She actually is getting better at this. Last time she didn't know what to do with her hips. Today she's actually using them. Quick study, this one.]

Eva rolled her hips and Katarina’s smug little theory got punctuated for her. Her toes curled.

[Mmm... Okay, very quick study.]

The bed was rocking. Eva had one hand fisted in the pillow next to Katarina’s head and was breathing hard through her nose like she was trying very hard not to be loud. The wings kept fluttering when she snapped her hips, which Katarina had figured out was an involuntary aevari thing and had decided was her favorite part. So, naturally, she reached up and ran her thumb along the base of one wing, right where the joint met Eva’s shoulder.

Eva’s whole body twitched.

"Don’t do that, Katarina, I will lose it."

"And?"

"Katarina!"

"You can lose it. I don’t mind."

She ran her thumb along the joint again, slower this time. Eva’s hips stuttered. Her wings did a thing that, on any other person, Katarina would have called a shiver. Then she ducked her head down and bit Katarina on the neck, which was unexpected, but also nice, so Katarina laughed and arched up into her. Eva, taking that the wrong way (or possibly the right way), got her hands under Katarina’s hips and started fucking her in earnest.

The door opened.

"... So I said to her, I said, ’I don’t really understand why,’ OH GODS!"

Pirra’s voice, from the doorway. Then the door slammed shut so fast it rattled in the frame.

From the hallway, in a voice an octave higher than usual: "I AM SO SORRY!" Then Ludo, distantly, asking what was wrong. Then Pirra, muffled, saying something Katarina couldn’t make out but could guess at pretty well.

Eva went very, very still.

Her cock did not. It was, technically, still doing its job. The rest of her, however, had become a statue, with the specific kind of statue posture that you only see on people who have just realized they are visible.

She looked down at Katarina with eyes the size of dinner plates.

"You didn’t lock the door."

Katarina shrugged.

"I forgot."

Eva blinked.

"You forgot."

"Mhm."

"Katarina."

"Yes?"

"That was your roommate."

"I know. I live with her."

Eva’s face was doing something silver and complicated. Katarina decided to let her work through it for about three seconds. Then she remembered Eva’s cock was still inside her, which made the three seconds feel substantially longer than three seconds.

"Eva."

"What?"

"You’re stalling."

"I am processing."

"You can certainly process everything while moving."

"K-Katarina, your roommate just saw me—"

"Eh, come on, she saw nothing she hasn’t seen me do before."

She rolled her hips up into Eva’s, slow, just to see what would happen.

Eva exhaled through her nose, got off the bed, walked the two feet to the door, locked it, and came back. She climbed on top of Katarina and resumed her position without a word.

"That’s the spirit," Katarina said.

"... Shut up."

Eva kissed her, and the bed went back to its work.

[I'll apologize to Pirra later. With tea. ... Maybe with two teas.]

There was a balcony near Katarina's room.

It had two chairs, a little iron table, and just enough space for a person to stand if she didn't mind her elbow brushing the railing. Katarina had only ever used it for laundry, which was on a line above her head right now, but tonight she'd dragged one of the chairs out and sat sideways in it with her legs over the armrest and a glass of wine in her hand.

The sun was going down over Pavona. The rooftops were turning the color of old copper and a bell was ringing in one of the lower districts, marking something. Katarina didn't know what.

Eva was behind her, in the doorway.

She was wearing one of Katarina's robes. She'd been quiet for about three minutes, which was a long time for Eva, who in Katarina's experience generally said exactly what she was thinking the moment she thought it. Katarina had given her the time. Eva was leaning on the doorframe with her arms crossed, and Katarina could feel her thinking from across the room.

"You know, I keep waiting for you to tell me when you're leaving."

Katarina smiled into her wine. There it was.

"You could've just asked."

"I'm asking now."

And Katarina answered:

"Two weeks. Maybe three, depending on how long the licensing takes to finalize."

"Mhm."

Oh, the wine was good. Ludo had sent up a bottle as a "congratulations on the scores" gift.

Eva went quiet again. Katarina did not turn around.

"How many licensing requests have you gotten?" Eva asked.

"Twelve, last Pelegatta updated me. Six families, three Consortium reps, three independents who heard about the Dimostrazione secondhand. One of them is offering me a three-year retainer."

"I predict you're going to say no to that one."

"Of course I'm going to say no to that one. Three years of exclusivity to one house is how you get owned by that house, and I don't get owned."

[I'm trying to be the one doing the owning, after all.]

Katarina swirled her wine and watched a flock of birds she didn't recognize wheel out over the harbor. There were a lot of things in Pavona she'd never seen before. She'd be sorry to leave the food. And the workshop. And, possibly, the silver-winged woman currently standing behind her in a borrowed robe.

[Possibly... Mostly.]

"What's your plan?" Eva said. "After."

"Go home. Set up a manufacturing arm in Vellasera, we have the labor and the port. I want the first units shipping within six months."

"Six months is fast."

"Four is faster."

"You're going to manufacture them yourself?"

"I'm not letting some other house's craftsmen anywhere near my array, Eva. At least, not yet. I don't care how nice they are about asking."

"That's a lot of capital up front. The formation work alone, if you're scaling for export..."

"I have a lot of capital. And I have people who can do the formation work in their sleep at this point, honestly."

Eva was quiet for a moment.

"It sounds like you've thought of everything."

"I try to do just that."

Eva was quiet again. Katarina took another sip and waited her out.

"I could," Eva started.

[Oh.]

Katarina turned her head. Eva was looking at the floorboards, mouth slightly open, mid-sentence and stalled. Her arms had uncrossed at some point. One hand was holding the other at the wrist, in front of her, like she didn't know what else to do with them.

"You could what?" Katarina asked, gently.

"... I..."

Eva's eyes came up, finally, and met hers. There was something in them that Katarina hadn't seen before. Not at the Dimostrazione, not even after they'd been brought back from the camp.

[Oh, sweetheart. Just say it.]

Katarina did not say that out loud. She kept her face still and waited, because pushing Eva right now would be like trying to coax a deer out of the woods by yelling at it.

Eva took a small breath. Her mouth opened again.

A knock at the door.

Eva's head snapped up. Katarina sighed.

The knock came again. Sharper this time. Whoever it was, they were not going away.

Katarina swung her legs down off the armrest. Eva had already stepped aside. Katarina crossed the room, opened the door, and found a third-year she vaguely recognized from the dining hall standing there looking flushed and out of breath.

"Signora Montecardi?"

[Signora. Not just Montecardi. That's new.]

"That's me."

"You have visitors. At the front gate. Three of them."

"Did they say who they were?"

"The Black Lotus Sect."

Katarina blinked.

[... Huh.]

She looked back at Eva, who was watching her with an expression that had quietly shelved whatever it had been about to say.

"Tell them I'll be down in ten minutes."

Chapter 85: The Black Lotus

The visitor's parlor at Compasso was on the ground floor.

It was a square room with high ceilings, dark wood paneling, and the kind of furniture that looked expensive and was, in fact, deeply uncomfortable. Katarina had been in here exactly once, on her first day, when she'd checked in. She didn't remember it being this cold.

Eva had peeled off at the staircase. She had something to finish, she'd said, and would catch up with Katarina later.

She straightened her sleeves outside the door, took a breath, and went in.

There were three of them.

Two were standing. They were both women in dark robes, both broad-shouldered, both silent and attentive.

The third one was sitting in front of them.

He was a man. That was the first thing Katarina noticed, because she'd been expecting another woman, this being a Valdari academy and all. He was human, sharp-jawed, with black hair pulled back into a tail that fell down his back. His robes were the same dark color as the other two but his were edged in a deep, lustrous color Katarina couldn't quite name.

[... Oh, this man looks like he stepped out of a stage play. All he's missing is the dramatic monologue and the throwing-a-cup-of-tea moment.]

He stood up when she walked in. The two bodyguards did not.

"Signora Montecardi."

His voice was low and even. He inclined his head, just enough to be polite. Katarina inclined hers back at the same depth.

"And you are?"

"Master Vannico. I represent the Black Lotus Sect."

"A pleasure."

"Please. Sit."

She sat, he sat, and the bodyguards kept standing. There was a tea service on the table between them, which someone had clearly set up in the last ten minutes, and Katarina noted that the cups were already poured. Nobody had asked her how she took her tea.

[They're not here to drink the tea. They're here to set a tone. Fine. Let's set tones.]

She didn't touch the cup at all.

"I'll get to the point, Signora," Vannico said. "Your insulated container."

"Go on."

"The Sect would like to acquire the licensing rights."

"All of them, I assume, or you wouldn't be making the trip."

"All of them. Exclusive, perpetual, all territories."

[... All of them. All of them! He just walked in and asked for the whole thing.]

Katarina folded her hands in her lap.

"Then let's hear what you're prepared to put on the table."

He told her.

The number landed in the room like a dropped plate. The two bodyguards did not react, because they had been trained not to, but Katarina felt the air change around them anyway.

It was a stupid amount of money. It would buy houses. Plural. It would let a young Signora like her retire her family's debts, renovate the estate, and still have enough left over to buy a small island.

Katarina looked at Vannico for a long moment.

Then she shook her head.

"No. Thank you, but no."

Vannico's expression didn't change but his eyes moved, just the tiniest bit.

"... No?"

Clearly, he hadn't considered this outcome.

"The licensing rights aren't for sale, Master Vannico. Not to the Black Lotus, not to anyone. I appreciate the offer, and I want to be clear that I do appreciate the seriousness of it, but my answer is no."

"... Signora. With respect. I don't think you've fully considered the number."

"I considered it the moment it left your mouth. It's a generous offer, I understand. I'm still declining it."

The shorter of the two bodyguards shifted her weight. Vannico raised a hand without looking and she stopped.

"Perhaps I miscommunicated," he said. "The Sect is prepared to be flexible. If exclusivity is the issue, we can discuss territorial limitations. If the structure isn't to your liking, we can structure it as a royalty agreement."

"The structure isn't the issue. I've seen the structure you're proposing about a hundred different ways. They all end with the licensing rights belonging to you and me belonging to a contract."

"That's a rather cynical reading."

"It's an accurate one. The container is going to generate revenue, Master Vannico. Significant revenue, for decades, in markets that haven't even been mapped yet. You know this, which is why you're here in person with a number that large. And I know it too, which is why I'm the one who's going to capture that revenue."

He studied her.

[He's recalibrating. Look at him. He came in here expecting to negotiate a price and now he's having to revise the assumption that there was a price.]

"You're young, Signora."

"I am. I'm aware. And yet, I've been aware of the potential of this invention since I came up with it in my mind. Does that surprise you?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. You meant that I'm young enough to where I should take a generous offer in front of me without understanding what I'd be giving up. I appreciate

the concern, but I do understand. Offers like this don’t come twice, is what you’re about to tell me."

"... Offers like this don’t come twice."

"They’ve come three times already this week, Master Vannico. The container is going to do a great deal of business for me. I’d rather do that business myself."

He was quiet for a long time after that. Long enough that Katarina started counting the seconds. She got to nine before he moved.

Vannico set his cup down. He hadn’t touched the tea either, she realized.

He stood. The bodyguards adjusted.

"Then I won’t waste any more of your time, Signora."

"Thank you for coming."

He inclined his head again, the same shallow degree as before, and turned for the door. The two bodyguards fell in behind him.

He was nearly at the door when he stopped.

He spoke over his shoulder, easy, like he was making conversation.

"We’ll be watching your business with interest, Signora Montecardi."

"Please do. It’s going to be very interesting."

He started walking again. Then, to the bodyguard on his left, half a chuckle in his voice:

"... Stubborn as her mother, this one."

Katarina’s head snapped toward him.

The door closed.

She sat there for a long moment with the untouched tea in front of her, her hands suddenly very still in her lap.

[... Do they know one of my moms?]

Katarina paced.

She had her arms crossed and she was wearing a path from the door to the window and back. The wine on the side table was warming up. She'd forgotten about it. She'd been doing this for about ten minutes.

[Black Lotus. Black Lotus. What do I know about the Black Lotus.]

Not much, was the answer. She'd heard the name a few times. Mostly from Ottavia's cousins, who heard things, and once from an aunt of Vessa's who had said "oh, you don't want to mess with them" with the kind of cheerful dread people use for distant disasters. Someone at the festival had brought them up too, same energy, same lack of specifics.

[People I don't want to mess with. Great. Very actionable. A sect that scares merchants. A sect that travels with bodyguards and a stage-play villain. A sect that came all the way to Pavona to make me an offer they apparently thought I couldn't refuse.]

She stopped pacing in front of the window and stared out at the rooftops.

[And one of them knew my mother. Which one?]

That was the part she kept circling back to. Seris was the obvious answer. Seris with her wine, her secrets, and the way she still wouldn't talk about cultivation when Katarina asked. Seris had a past. Katarina had known that since she was four years old. But Brynn...

Brynn had a history too. Brynn had run with mercenaries. Brynn had killed six armored beasts barehanded last spring. Brynn had a frontier history that nobody had ever fully laid out for her.

[Either one of them could have a relationship with a sect like that. And neither of them is going to volunteer the information.]

A knock at the door.

"Signora?"

It was the third-year again. Katarina opened the door. The girl was holding a small stack of envelopes.

"More offers. Pelegatta said to bring them up."

"How many?"

"Four. One of them's from a House Verascari."

[Verascari. Old name. Wine money, I think.]

"Thank you."

She took them and closed the door.

She sat down at her desk, broke the seals one at a time, and started reading.

Three hours later, the wine was gone.

The four envelopes had become four files, the four files had become a column of notes, and the column of notes had become a single page that summarized terms, pressure points, and which of the four houses she actually wanted to deal with. House Verascari was the best of them. Two of the others were fishing. The fourth was a polite no, dressed up as a "future possibility."

She set the pen down.

[Three hours of paperwork. Zero answers about the Black Lotus.]

She leaned back in the chair.

[... But I'm going home in two weeks. And then I can just ask.]

Chapter 86: Goodbyes

The trunk wouldn't close.

Katarina pressed down on the lid with one hand and tried to push a stack of folded tunics flat with the other. The trunk politely informed her, by way of springing back open the moment she let go, that this was not going to work.

[I packed too much. How did I pack too much? I came here with one bag.]

She had, in fact, come here with one bag. She was leaving with that bag, a trunk, and a separate satchel for the air conditioner prototype, which sat on her desk wrapped in three layers of cloth like a very expensive newborn.

Pirra was sitting on Katarina's bed with her legs crossed and her chin in her hands.

She hadn't said much in the last ten minutes. She'd offered to help once, gotten waved off, and had then resigned herself to watching Katarina lose a fight with luggage. Her boots were on the floor in two different corners of the room, which was Pirra — she never thought about where things landed.

"You could leave a tunic," Pirra said.

"I could not leave a tunic."

"You have six."

"And I'll need all six."

"For what?"

"For knowing I have six."

Pirra didn't laugh, but the corner of her mouth twitched. Katarina kept pressing on the lid.

[She's not going to make it through this without saying something. I can feel it. Three. Two. One.]

"It's going to be weird without you here."

[There it is.]

Katarina sat back on her heels.

She looked over at Pirra. Pirra was studying the floor between her own feet with great concentration, like there was something written on it she was trying to read.

"It is going to be weird," Katarina said. "For about a week."

"A week. That's all you're giving it?"

"Maybe less. You'll get used to it. Ludo's going to be in here with you constantly anyway, you won't even notice I'm gone."

"T-That's not the same."

"Of course it's not the same. Ludo's bigger than me."

Pirra's mouth twitched again.

"Listen," Katarina said. "I'm going to be a forty-minute spirit rail ride away. You have two more years here. You're going to keep finding excuses to call me at strange hours and I'm going to keep pretending I'm annoyed about it."

"Pretending?"

"Mostly. You should pace yourself, though. If you call every night I'll have to charge by the hour."

Pirra finally looked up. Her amber eyes were a little glassy, which Katarina decided not to comment on, and her braid had come loose on one side, which Katarina also decided not to comment on.

"I'll visit," Katarina said. "First break. I'll come up, I'll stay for a few days, I'll be unbearable about my air conditioner, and then I'll leave again and you'll be relieved."

"You promise?"

"I promise. Now help me sit on this trunk."

Pirra got up and sat on the trunk.

The lid closed.

The hallway outside Katarina's room was busier than usual, because it was the last week of the semester and half the academy was doing some version of what Katarina was doing, except slower and with more crying.

Ludo and Tavia were waiting at the end of the corridor.

Ludo had her arms full of what looked like food. Tavia was leaning against the wall with one hand in a pocket and the other holding a half-eaten pear, because Tavia was never not eating something.

"There she is," Ludo said. "The leaver."

"That's what we're going with, then?"

"It's a terrible word. I'm trying it on and it's not working."

"You picked it."

"I'm aware."

[She brought food. Of course she brought food. She thinks I can't afford to eat between here and Pavona station.]

"What's all this?"

"Travel food."

"It's a forty-minute walk to the station."

"And then a four-day train ride, Kat, which I assume you also forgot to plan around, because you forget to eat when you're working."

"... That's fair, actually."

Ludo dumped the bundle into Katarina's arms. There was bread in it. There were two oranges. There was something wrapped in wax paper that smelled like cheese and would, Katarina realized, ruin her entire trunk if she didn't repack it carefully.

"Thank you, Ludo."

"Don't thank me, eat it."

Tavia took a bite of her pear.

"You actually pulled it off. The whole three years compressed into one. You absolute freak."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"I know."

Pirra picked up Katarina's satchel and the four of them started walking. Down the stairs, past the library where Katarina had spent more nights than she'd care to count, past the dining hall, out through the side gate where the porters stacked carriages on departure days.

Through the front courtyard, to the main gate, where someone was waiting.

Eva was standing just inside the gate with her hands clasped in front of her.

She was dressed for travel, which she didn't need to be, since she wasn't going anywhere. She was just standing there in her good cloak like she'd put it on in case the wind picked up.

[She came down to see me off?]

Tavia coughed a laugh into her hand.

"I'll be right there," Katarina said over her shoulder.

She turned to Pirra first.

Pirra hugged her without warning. Pirra was small and her hug was tight. She'd been thinking about it for a while.

"Don't get kidnapped again."

"I'll try."

"Try harder."

"I will. I promise."

Pirra let go, stepped back, and turned her face toward the courtyard so Katarina couldn't see it, which was fine. Katarina turned to Ludo.

Ludo grabbed her by both shoulders.

"Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"Two things. First, eat the cheese before day three or it goes."

"Got it."

"Second, you're going to write me about the toilets."

"... About what?"

"In Vellasera? The famous ones. I want to see them. I want a tour. I want you to walk me through your sewers like it's a museum."

[... The toilets have become famous? I didn't know that.]

"You want a tour of my sewers?"

"I want a tour of your sewers."

[She's not joking. She actually wants to come down.]

"Fine," Katarina said. "Bring a coat. The harbor wind cuts."

Ludo hugged her hard enough to bruise something and let her go.

Tavia just walked up, took Katarina's face in both hands, and kissed her on the mouth. It was not a polite kiss. There was tongue. Katarina's free hand, still holding the cheese

bundle, went up on its own and pressed against Tavia's hip, because what else was she going to do with it.

Tavia stepped back.

"For the road."

She turned around and walked off without looking back, the half-eaten pear still in her hand.

Pirra and Ludo went after her.

Katarina watched them go for a second.

Then she turned to Eva.

Eva had not moved.

She was still standing there with her hands clasped, and she'd watched the whole thing, including the kiss, with an expression like she was conducting an inspection.

[Be normal. Be normal about this.]

"You came down."

"I had a class on this side of the building."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"... It doesn't matter."

[Caught. Look at her. She didn't even bother to plan a fake class.]

Katarina set the cheese bundle on top of her trunk. The porter who was going to handle her luggage was hovering at a polite distance, pretending to study the gate hinges.

"Alright, Eva. Out with it."

"I was going to wish you safe travels."

"Wish me safe travels, then."

"... Safe travels."

Eva didn’t move. Katarina didn’t move either. The porter studied the hinges harder.

[What a difficult woman.]

"Eva."

"What?"

"You walked all the way down here to say safe travels?"

"I walked all the way down here because my class was on this side of the building."

"Eva, the only thing on this side of the building at this hour is the gate."

Eva looked at the cobblestones. Then she looked at the gate. Then, finally, she looked at Katarina, which was apparently the part she’d been avoiding.

"I’ll write," she said.

"Will you, now?"

"If you write first."

"Ah, of course."

"Yes."

Eva’s jaw moved like she was about to say something. Then she decided against it. Katarina remained silent, arms crossed, waiting.

"... I’ll write first," Eva said.

"There we go."

"Don’t be smug about it."

"My apologies."

At that moment, Katarina stepped in.

Eva did not step back, which Katarina considered a victory in and of itself. Then Katarina kissed her, soft, with one hand on the side of Eva’s neck where the feathers started. Eva, after about half a second of being a statue, kissed her back.

When Katarina pulled away, Eva’s eyes were closed.

She opened them.

"... That was unnecessary."

"Sure. Come visit when you have the time."

Eva nodded once, the smallest nod, and then she turned and walked back into the courtyard with her hands clasped behind her back, like she was leaving an exam.

The porter coughed.

Katarina picked up the cheese bundle and shoved it into her satchel and waved him over to the trunk. He hauled it up onto the cart with a grunt and started off toward the station.

Katarina turned around.

The Compasso stood there in the late morning sun. Pale stone, tall windows, the carved letters above the gate she’d walked under, what, three hundred times in less than a year. The library tower was just visible over the east wing. Somewhere inside, Pirra was probably already heading back to her dorm to cry where nobody could see her. Ludo was probably eating Katarina’s bread.

Eva was already gone.

She turned and walked after the porter.

She didn’t look back again.

Chapter 87: Homecoming

The Spirit Rail hissed to a stop at Vellasera’s modest platform and, before Katarina’s boots had even finished touching the boards, Brynn was already climbing the carriage steps.

"DUMPLING!"

[Oh no.]

Katarina got exactly half a step of advance warning before her mother lifted her clean off the ground, travel chest and all, and squeezed her hard enough that something in her ribs made a noise no rib should make.

"My girl!" Brynn was bellowing into the side of her head. "My PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC GIRL!"

"Mother. Mother, my chest is squishing."

Brynn did not listen.

[I'm gonna die before I even step foot back home.]

She got set down. Then, immediately, she got picked back up by Seris, who had decided to wait approximately 1.5 seconds before getting her turn.

Seris was not crying. She was very clear about that.

"I'm not crying, piccola. Don't tell anyone I was crying. I wasn't."

See?

Seris held Katarina's face in both hands and inspected it like she was checking a pearl for chips. Naturally, she kissed both her cheeks, then her forehead, and then both cheeks again for symmetry.

"You're taller. Brynn, she's taller. I'm sure of it."

"I haven't gotten taller in years, mother, you measured me against the kitchen door not even two years ago."

"Then you've gotten thinner. Or, taller and thinner. Are they feeding you up there? You can tell me. If those Pavona girls have been skipping meals to fit into their stupid little tunics and you've been doing it too, I'll send Brynn up there to overturn the dining hall."

"She's been eating, Seris. Look at her, she looks PERFECT."

"She does NOT look perfect, Brynn, look at her cheekbones, you can practically use them to slice bread."

[I am the exact same width I have been for 4 years.]

And, behind them, leaning against one of the platform posts with her hands tucked in her pockets, was Vessa.

She had her dark hair pulled back into the kind of messy knot she only ever managed when she'd done it in a hurry, and she was smiling at Katarina.

She wasn't getting involved. She was, sensibly, letting Seris and Brynn have their moment.

Katarina caught her eye over Seris's shoulder.

Vessa raised one hand and waved.

Katarina mouthed hi.

Vessa mouthed welcome home.

And, that was it. No big speech, no running across the platform into each other's arms, just the two of them acknowledging each other across about 8 feet of train station while Brynn yelled something about how Pavona's air had probably been bad for Katarina's lungs.

Honestly, Kat preferred it that way.

The carriage ride through Vellasera was something else.

The first thing she noticed was the smell, or, more accurately, the absence of it. The lower harbor road had, in her childhood, smelled like exactly what you'd expect a port town's lower harbor road to smell like in summer. Today, it smelled like the sea, warm stone, and somebody's lunch from an open window 3 stories up. And, that was it.

The sanitation lines were visible at every street corner. Smooth grey channels set flush with the cobblestones. They ran in a clean grid down the slope toward the harbor and joined into the main outflow.

[Beautiful. Just gorgeous. I want to marry these pipes.]

The first public bathhouse was operational on the corner of the Tradesman's Square, a low stone building with a tiled roof and a cheerfully painted sign that said BATHHOUSE NO. 1 in lettering she was 90% sure her mother had picked out personally. And, there was a line outside, an actual line of actual townspeople, waiting their turn to use the actual public bath.

The second bathhouse was 2 streets up, mid-construction, with scaffolding, a half-finished roof, and 2 workers sitting on a beam eating something out of a paper wrapper.

It was, all things considered, going pretty well.

"Signora Katarina!"

A woman in an apron was waving from a doorway as the carriage rolled past. Then, a vendor by the fountain. Then, a 3-person cluster of dockworkers, one of whom yelled "WELCOME HOME, TOILET LADY!" with so much joy that Katarina snorted.

The Montecardi estate looked the same.

Which was the point. After all, she'd left specific instructions.

Same walls, same cracked tile in the courtyard she'd been meaning to get to for 2 years, same vines climbing the trellis on the south wall. Naturally, familiarity was a kind of revenue stream, and she wasn't about to interrupt it.

What had changed was the inside.

Ottavia had cooked. Or, well, cooked might be understating it. Ottavia had, frankly, committed an act of culinary aggression.

There were 4 different roast dishes on the long table, 2 kinds of bread, a soup that smelled like every herb in the canyon had been recruited at knifepoint, and a salt cellar that Ottavia had, rather mercifully, placed on the sideboard instead of the table itself.

"You're too thin," Ottavia announced by way of greeting, dragging Katarina into a hug. "I knew it. I told Enza, I said, that girl is going to come back from Pavona looking like a broom handle, and here she is, a broom handle. Sit, sit, I made everything. The whole roast, the herb soup, the bread with the seeds you like, and don't tell me you're not hungry, you're hungry."

"It's been a year, Ottavia. I'm the same width I was at graduation."

"A year is plenty of time for a fancy academy to ruin a girl. Sit down before I get the spoon."

Enza was at the side door, hands folded, ledger tucked under one arm, looking, frankly, like she ran the place. Which she sort of did, now. And, Dalla was hovering near the study with a stack of bound books, practically vibrating with the hope that Katarina would ask her about them.

[Dalla. Bless her. Look at her.]

[SOVEREIGN LEDGER UPDATE]

Signora Katarina Montecardi, age 18

Credential: Compasso Accademia, full graduation

Status: Returned to seat

House Montecardi

> License: Active (renewed, 5-year)

> Revenue: A-

> Trade Routes: 4 active

> Alliances: 6

> Reputation: A

> Pending portfolio: 3 inventions (unreleased)

> Note: First post-academy quarter. Market window: open.

[Hello, gorgeous.]

She hadn't needed her Ledger too much back at the academy, but now that she was doing Signora things again, seeing it was like running into her secretary for the first time in a while.

She walked through the estate slowly, touching the corner of Seris's study door as she passed, patting the head of one of the stable cats, looking into the dining hall, where the long table had been set for 5, with a 6th place laid by Ottavia at the foot of the table for, presumably, Ottavia herself.

It was good. All of it.

It was so good her chest hurt a little.

"So," Brynn said, halfway through her second helping of roast, "Compasso. Tell us everything. Start at the beginning, don't skip anything, and I want to hear about the fights. There were fights, right? Some snotty rich girl said something rude to you and you laid her out?"

"That's not what merchant academies are for, mother."

"Then what ARE they for, dumpling?"

"Trade theory. Tariff frameworks. Inscription methodology. I drafted a paper that Professora Pelegatta said was the best first-year submission in 11 years, by the way, but I assume that's less exciting than the imaginary fight where I supposedly knocked a girl's teeth out."

"It's a little less exciting, yes."

Katarina turned to her more reasonable parent. Seris was watching her over the rim of her wine glass with an expression that was about 60% pride and 40% deeply suspicious mother.

"Don’t look at me, piccola, I want to hear about the fight too. Pelegatta’s paper is wonderful, congratulations, we’ll frame it. But the people. Tell me about the people."

"There were people. Quite a lot of them, actually. Pavona’s a big city."

"Friends, Katarina."

"A roommate. Pirra. Elf, very polite, good with hot stones, snores a little but only when she’s been studying late."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And anyone else you’d like to mention, perhaps. Anyone whose name might have come up in your letters, oh, more than 3 times. Anyone you might have spent unusual amounts of unsupervised time with. Anyone with, say, an interesting set of wings."

[Goddammit, Vessa.]

"... There were field trips. They were, admittedly, educational." [I was kidnapped by bandits and led an armed escape with the help of an Aevari girl I later fucked.] "I made friends with one of my classmates eventually. Nothing too unusual."

Seris said nothing. She just kept looking at Katarina over the rim of her glass with that particular look that had ended exactly 0 interrogations in Katarina’s favor.

[Seris suspects something. Stop making eye contact, Katarina, that’s how she gets you.]

She looked down at her plate.

"The important part," she said, "is the 3 products I’m bringing home to commercialize."

Brynn’s whole face went up like a torch.

"Products?"

"Three of them. One we’ll workshop slowly, it’s a climate control system for goods transport. One I’m releasing immediately, it’s a formation-stabilized cooling box for vineyards and fishmongers." She paused. "And the third one is, uh."

She reached into the side pocket of her travel jacket and pulled out a small lacquered case.

She set it on the table and opened it.

Inside, neatly stacked, were 6 condoms.

The dining hall went quiet.

Brynn squinted at the case. Seris's wine glass paused halfway to her lips.

"Hm? What am I looking at, exactly?" Seris asked.

[Right, they don't know these things.]

"I'm calling them condoms." Katarina picked one up and held it between two fingers, still in its little paper wrapper. "It's a..."

[Just say it, Katarina, there's no sugarcoating this.]

"... A soft membrane you put over your penis during sex. Inscription-reinforced so it doesn't tear, formation-coated to prevent the wearer's seed from making contact with their partner and provide tiny vibration. So, no pregnancy. And, since the membrane is also impermeable to qi-borne ailments, no transmission of the usual things you'd be worried about transmitting. It's reusable up to 3 times if you wash between uses, but the inscription degrades, so I'd recommend single use. The retail price is low enough to make the convenience worth it."

Seris had set the wine glass down, very, very carefully. She did not say anything for about 4 seconds, which, for Seris, was an eternity.

Then, Brynn slapped the table with both hands so hard the soup tureen jumped.

"THAT'S MY GIRL!"

"Mother. The soup."

"YOU INVENTED A SEX THING! AT SCHOOL! THAT'S MY GIRL!"

"I'm aware of what I did, mother, I was the one doing it, I just don't think we need to announce it to the entire canyon."

"SERIS. SERIS, OUR DAUGHTER INVENTED A SEX THING."

Vessa was laughing into her napkin so hard her shoulders were shaking. Ottavia had, naturally, walked over, picked one up out of the case, held it up to the light, said "huh," and walked back to the kitchen with it.

Seris asked:

"... How much per unit?"

"Production cost, 2 copper. Retail, I'm thinking 8 to start, scaling up to 12 in the Pavona markets once we establish brand awareness. The Vellasera and lower district pricing stays low because volume there is the priority, but the urban premium pricing is where the actual margin lives."

Seris took a long sip of wine.

"That's somewhere between a 300% and a 500% margin, depending on market."

"Closer to 320% baseline if we scale the inscription process the way I have in mind, and the urban tier prices itself by reputation, which I intend to manufacture."

"On a household consumable."

"With perfectly recurring demand. Every encounter is a unit, mother. We're selling into a population that has, historically, never stopped fucking and shows no signs of starting."

Seris set the glass down again, slowly. She looked at Katarina across the table for a long moment, and then she gave her that small, private smile, the one she saved for plotting against her wife.

"... We're going to be very rich, piccola."

"We are about to make so much money that the older houses are going to have to invent new ways to be rude to us."

"Don't tell your mother how rich. She'll buy something embarrassing."

"What was that, Seris?"

"Nothing, amore. Eat your bread."

Word got out, naturally, in a town this size.

Somebody, probably Ottavia, had told somebody at the bakery, and by 9 in the evening half of the lower harbor was in the Montecardi courtyard, and somebody had brought a tambour.

There were fiddles, lanterns strung along the trellis that Katarina was pretty sure nobody had hung up before today, and Brynn dancing with Greta, Vessa's mother, the one with the lung qi condition that had cleared up nicely. Greta was laughing so hard she had to keep one hand on Brynn's shoulder to stay upright.

[Oh god.]

Seris was sitting on the low wall by the courtyard fountain, chatting with 3 of the harbor wives, gesturing with her wine glass, telling some story that involved her doing a dramatic impression of, near as Katarina could tell, a customs official.

The whole courtyard was lit warm and golden, full of people who knew her name.

Katarina sat on the bench under the fig tree with her arm around Vessa, who had her head on Katarina's shoulder, and watched the party happen.

"It's good to be back," she said quietly.

"Mhm."

"It's funny. I spent the whole rail ride thinking about what I'd say when I got here, and now that I'm actually here, I don't know. It's all just... the same. The walls are the same, the courtyard's the same, even the crack in the tile is in the exact same place. And I love it. I missed it more than I knew I missed it. Pavona was great, the academy was great, but it wasn't here, you know?"

"Mhm."

Vessa was, in fact, not looking at the party. Vessa was looking at Katarina. Vessa was looking at Katarina the way someone looks at a roast dinner after a long day of fasting.

Katarina, who had her eyes on the courtyard, did not notice.

"And I have so many ideas for this place. The vineyards, the inland route, the new contracts. The cooling boxes are going to clear in 6 months, easy, and that's just the start. I want to bring 4 or 5 things to market in the next year. Real things. Things that change how people live here. And I want to do all of it with you, Vessa, I want every formation array to have your name on it next to mine, I want..."

"Mhm."

"... Are you listening to me?"

Then, Vessa turned her head very slightly, and her lips brushed against the shell of Katarina's ear, and her voice came out low enough that nobody 2 feet away would have caught it.

"Yeah. It'll be even better after I suck your cock."

Katarina's brain ejected from her skull.

"... I beg your pardon?"

Chapter 88: Good To Be Back

"... I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

She stood up, took Katarina’s hand, and tugged.

[Oh fuck.]

Katarina, who had every intention of saying goodnight to her guests properly, like a Signora, like a host, like an adult woman with civic responsibilities, got pulled out of her chair.

She did, in fairness, try her best.

"Mother, I’m just going to..."

"GO, GO! Don’t keep your girl waiting!" Brynn yelled without slowing down her dance with Greta.

Seris, on the fountain wall, did not even look up. She just raised her wine glass in a small, knowing salute and went back to her customs official impression. Apparently, Kat’s mothers, in unanimous agreement for the first time in recorded history, were perfectly fine with her being dragged off mid-party for what was about to happen.

And so, Katarina was yanked out of the public event by her girlfriend in front of half the lower harbor.

Vessa didn’t make it to Katarina’s bedroom.

Instead, in the first empty room with a door, which, as it happened, was the small sitting parlor at the end of the east hall, Vessa pushed her against a wall.

And Vessa dropped to her knees almost instantly.

[Oh, fuck me.]

She had Katarina’s belt open, her pants down, and her cock in her mouth before Katarina had finished a coherent thought about furniture.

"FUCK. Vessa. Vessa, the door isn’t... did you LOCK it?"

Vessa pulled off with a wet pop and looked up at her.

"No."

She took Katarina back into her mouth and went all the way down to the base. Her tongue dragged along the underside on the way back up like she was personally taste-testing every inch she'd been missing for 4 months.

She did it again. And again.

The third time, she went down and stayed there, her nose pressed against Katarina's skin.

[Oh god. Oh god, she's gotten BETTER at this.]

How that was even possible was not a question Katarina could answer at the moment. The question Katarina could answer at the moment was whether her knees were going to hold up against the parlor wall for another 30 seconds, and the answer was looking grim.

Vessa pulled off slow, looked up at her, and put her hand around the base of Katarina's cock, squeezing in a slow pulse that, Vessa knew, full well, drove Katarina insane.

"Vessa. Vessa, I swear to god."

"Mhm?"

"If you don't put that back in your mouth right now I am going to..."

Vessa put it back in her mouth.

Specifically, she put it back in her mouth, all the way down, and started working her tongue against the underside of Katarina's cock at the exact rhythm Katarina herself used when she was alone, which Vessa had no way of knowing, which meant Vessa had figured it out, which was the kind of detail Katarina was going to be thinking about for the rest of her natural life.

Katarina came so hard she briefly forgot what year it was, with one hand fisted in Vessa's hair, and Vessa swallowed it down like she was personally invested in the productivity of the operation.

Then, Vessa pulled off slowly, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and stood up.

"... You good?"

"No."

"Good."

Then, Katarina turned her around, walked her 2 steps backward to the parlor wall, and bent her over the side table that Ottavia, oh god, almost certainly polished every week.

"Oh?"

"Pants. Off."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Vessa got her pants off. Katarina got her own cock back to full hardness in about 6 seconds, which, given she had just come, was a personal record she was going to be quietly proud of for the rest of the week. She spit into her hand, slicked herself up, and pressed the head of her cock against Vessa's pussy.

Katarina pushed in slowly. Vessa exhaled as Katarina sank all the way in. Then, Katarina set a fast, rough rhythm.

The side table started squeaking against the parlor floor. Vessa's hand came back to grab Katarina's hip, pulling her in deeper on every stroke, and her other hand had gone down to her own cock, jerking herself off in time with Katarina's thrusts.

"Kat. Kat, I'm close. I'm close."

[Already?]

"Cum for me, then."

Vessa did, with her forehead pressed against the wall and her hand a blur on her own cock, spilling all over the leg of Ottavia's side table, which Katarina was going to have to remember to clean later. Her pussy clenched so hard around Katarina's cock that Katarina lost the rhythm entirely and just slammed in deep, twice, and emptied herself into her girlfriend.

They held there for a few seconds, breathing.

Then, Vessa, still bent over the side table with Katarina still inside her, said, slowly:

"... Again."

Katarina took 5 minutes putting the parlor back to some approximation of presentable, because she could not, in good conscience, leave Ottavia's polished side table looking like a crime scene. Vessa watched her work from the doorway and did not offer to help, which was, frankly, on-brand.

Katarina's actual bedroom, which they did, eventually, make it to, had not been slept in by anyone in 12 months. Naturally, it was exactly as she'd left it.

Same desk, same window, same view of the canyon, same small, slightly-too-low bed she had spent her teenage years cultivating on. Vessa flopped onto it like she'd been doing it her whole life, which, frankly, she had.

"So," Vessa said, half-buried in the pillow Katarina had personally embroidered when she was 12, crookedly. "Galteri."

"Oh, here we go."

"I had a great year, Kat."

"I'm sure you did."

"I had SUCH a great year."

Katarina, propped on one elbow next to her, knew exactly what was happening. Vessa had a particular tone, and that tone had a particular destination, and that destination was 100% of the time the same destination.

"Vessa."

"Mhm?"

"Just tell me how many."

"That's a brave question."

"You're right, too brave. I take it back." Katarina shifted in her position. "Was Galteri actually a formation academy to you, or did you treat it like a brothel?"

Vessa rolled onto her back and laughed up at the ceiling. The terrible embroidered pillow was clutched to her chest, and her hair had spread out across the bed.

"You're jealous."

"I am absolutely not jealous."

"Mhm."

"I am extremely well-adjusted about this, Vessa. I am a Signora of a merchant house, I am a Compasso graduate, and I have bigger things to do than sit around and be jealous of these little flings."

Vessa nodded along, absolutely certain that was the case... It was almost annoying, actually.

"... How many for you?" She finally asked.

"Four. A catgirl, a classmate, my roommate, and Eva."

"Oh, Tavia! Right, she was fun!"

"She was, indeed, quite fun, yes."

"But... Four? In a whole year."

Katarina sighed.

"It was a busy year."

"What do you mean? You basically did nothing!"

"H-Hey! Four is plenty," Katarina replied back, indignant.

"Four. You basically took a vow of celibacy."

Katarina threw a pillow at her head and Vessa cackled.

Then, they got quieter.

"Kat?"

"Mhm."

"I missed you."

"Mhm."

"Like, really missed you."

"Mhm."

She turned her head to look at her. Vessa was looking back.

[I missed you so much I almost couldn’t get on the rail home, in case the version of you waiting at the platform wasn’t the same one I left.]

"... Same."

Vessa smiled.

Katarina fell asleep somewhere near dawn with Vessa's leg thrown over hers and Vessa's breath warm against her neck.

The party had long since died downstairs, the canyon wind was coming through the window, and the bedroom Katarina had grown up in finally had two people in it for the first time.

She woke up alone.

There was a note on the pillow next to her, in Vessa's awful, slanted handwriting.

My moms have been alone for a year. Gonna go make out with them. Love you, Toilet Lady.

Katarina rolled her eyes.

[Too much information, Vessa. Jesus.]

Then, she smiled at the ceiling.

It seemed that nickname was, unfortunately, going to stick now.

The estate at 10 in the morning was a different building than the estate at 9 at night. It was quieter, sunnier, with Ottavia making a racket in the kitchen and most of the staff already 3 hours into their day. Brynn was already out somewhere, probably at the harbor. Seris, however, was usually wherever the wine was, and at 10 in the morning, the wine was in the back garden.

Katarina found her there, holding the shears next to the roses and snipping at them slowly. As far as Katarina could tell, she had not actually removed a single stem in 20 minutes.

"Mother."

"Piccola. You look tired."

"I am tired."

"Mhm. Vessa make it home all right?"

"She left a note."

"Good girl. I always liked that one." Seris finally turned around and set the shears down on the low stone wall. "What can I do for you?"

[Here we go.]

"The Black Lotus."

Seris blinked.

"... The what?"

Chapter 89: The Black Lotus Sect

"The what?" Seris asked, blinking.

"The Black Lotus sect. They showed up at the Compasso." Katarina began pacing from side to side with her arms crossed. She could remember the meeting as if it had just happened. "They wanted to buy the licensing rights off me for the air conditioner."

"Oh, piccola. Please tell me you held out."

"Of course. The rights are still mine. They had a number written down on a folded slip of paper and they pushed it across the table like it was going to make me weep. I will admit... it was a lot of zeros."

Seris gave a long, dramatic sigh.

"Because they see the potential," Seris said, getting back to her gardening. "And, more importantly, they see a girl barely out of school who they think will bite at the first big deal."

Katarina smiled a little at how clever Seris had gotten over the years. But, she wiped the smile away and kept going. This was important, after all.

"That was my read, too. You should have seen the look on their faces when I turned them down." Katarina sat on a large rock, crossing her legs. "But, after that, they said something curious."

"Oh?"

"... 'She's as stubborn as her mother,' they said."

Seris's hands stopped.

And, for a long second, the shears just hovered there. Then, they clicked shut around a stem that did not need clicking shut, and a perfectly healthy rose tumbled into the bed.

"So... What was that about?" Katarina asked.

Seris paused.

Then, she said:

"... Come with me, piccola."

[Well, here we go.]

Seris didn't say a word as they walked.

She led Katarina back through the rear hall, past the kitchen, past the study, past the small linen closet that Katarina had, as a 6-year-old, mapped in her head as part of her ongoing project to know every inch of this estate. Naturally, Seris kept going. Past a sitting room Katarina hadn't been in since she was 9. Past a long corridor with portraits of Montecardi ancestors who all, to Katarina, looked vaguely disappointed in everyone alive.

Then, Seris spoke.

"To be honest, I had hoped that this part of my life would stay buried. It seems fate has, as fate tends to, other ideas."

[Mother, please stop being mysterious for 2 seconds, you can't keep doing this to me.]

They stopped at the end of the long corridor.

Seris ran her palm along a section of the wood paneling, casually, like she was checking for dust. Then, her thumb pressed against a knot in the wood that Katarina, at 18 years old, with a photographic memory, had walked past approximately 4,000 times in her life and had never once registered as anything but a knot.

The wall rotated.

[Oh, you have GOT to be kidding me.]

The entire 8-foot section of paneling spun on a hidden axis, smooth, silent, and revealing a doorway. Beyond the doorway was a room.

The lighting was dim. The space was cramped.

And, the walls were lined with weapons.

Not decorative ones, either. Actual, working, routinely-oiled weapons. A pair of curved blades were crossed over the far wall, their handles wrapped in dark cord that had been replaced recently. A set of throwing knives sat in a leather rack. Three different spears. A long, curved bow that hummed faintly even from across the room. And, on the right wall, mounted on a wooden stand, a suit of dark lacquered armor that looked like it had not been worn in 30 years but had been polished to a mirror finish 4 days ago.

There were scrolls in a rack along the back wall. Sealed jars. A small lockbox.

Katarina stepped inside.

[Mother. Mother, our house had a SECRET ARMORY. In the WALLS.]

She did not say that out loud. She was, after all, a professional.

"Mother. Is that... is that armor in my size?"

"It's in MY size, piccola, and it was made before you were born. Don't get any ideas."

Seris stepped past her and ran a hand along the chest plate, softly, familiarly, like it was a song she hadn't sung in a long time.

Katarina shook her head, trying to focus. She cleared her throat and said:

"So, Mother. The Black Lotus?"

Seris drew a slow breath. She'd clearly rehearsed this conversation in her head before. Maybe many times, over many years.

"I was, once, part of an order, piccola. They called us the Six Matriarchs. There were 6 of us at the height of it, though the number had been smaller and larger at different points. And, by the standards of the era, we were the most dangerous Valdari cultivators alive."

"By the standards of the era. So that's modest by today's, then."

Seris raised a brow high at her.

"... I would not say so, no."

[... Right, my bad.]

"Anyway, we took contracts. We took work that no one else could take, or, honestly, that no one else could survive. The Black Lotus was a frequent client. They paid well and they didn't ask questions that the answers to would have embarrassed anyone. It was, all things considered, a good arrangement."

"I take it there's a 'and then' coming?"

"And then, I met your mother."

Seris smiled to herself.

"Brynn was a frontier fighter at the time. We met in the worst little tavern in the worst little canyon town and she, naturally, picked a fight with someone twice her size, won, and then bought me a drink while bleeding from the eyebrow. I went home with her that night. I went home with her every night after, eventually."

[I am hearing about my mothers' meet-cute in the room where my purple mom keeps her assassination knives. What an odd life I live.]

"So, I quit. I mean, I'd seen the world anyway so I was ready to settle down. As you can imagine, The Lotus was, to put it gently, displeased."

"Why?"

"They are, by their nature, a sect that does not lose assets gracefully."

Katarina filled in the blanks internally.

[Ah, because losing assets means someone else can use them later. I see.]

"I told them I was done, they told me I was not done, I demonstrated, in their own front hall, that I was, in fact, done. We have not spoken since."

"Until now?"

"... Until now."

Seris turned. Her purple eyes had gone steady. Katarina had only ever seen them like that, oh, perhaps twice in her life.

"Piccola, listen to me. The Lotus is not subtle and they are not patient. They play nice first. That's what you saw. They send polished people with polite offers and big purses. But, when that doesn't work, they just take what they want. Not always with violence. Sometimes with leverage. Sometimes with a contract you didn't realize you'd signed. Sometimes with someone you love. But, the attempt will come, one way or another."

"Then we'll watch the contracts and we'll watch the people."

"Do you understand?"

Katarina looked at the armor on the stand. Then, at the curved blades. Then, at her mother, whose hand was still resting flat on a chest plate that had clearly, at some point, been used in anger.

She smiled.

"Let them try."

The Vellasera market was, as always, loud.

Katarina walked through it with her hands in her pockets and a hood half-up, partly because the afternoon sun was getting aggressive, and partly because, frankly, she wanted 20 minutes of being a person rather than the toilet lady.

She drifted past a stall selling glazed pears. Past a fabric vendor unrolling a bolt of green silk for a customer who was, very clearly, going to haggle her into the dirt. Past a knife sharpener who waved at her.

[So. Black Lotus. If I were them, what would I do?]

She paused at a stall selling small carved jade animals, picked one up, and turned it over in her fingers. A frog. Cute.

[I'd come back. The polite offer didn't land, so the next pass is leverage. Probably a supply chain choke. "Sell it to us or we'll do this," pretty much. Probably through one of the contracts I haven't audited yet, because they'll have done the homework and they'll have found the weakest link before I have. So, I need to audit the contracts.]

She set the frog down.

[Honestly, the condom rights I'm not worried about, that's a wide market and I control the inscription methodology. The cooling box, same. The climate container is the one they actually want. So, that's the one they'll come for. And, they'll come for it through somebody I trust, because that's how they always do it. Which means I need to...]

A pair of hands drifted, very lightly, across the outside of her hip.

[Oh, you did not.]

Katarina did not turn her head. She glanced down, casually, like she was checking the time.

Her coin purse was gone.

About 6 feet ahead of her, weaving between stalls quickly, was a red-skinned Valdari girl with black hair cropped short and a brown jacket 2 sizes too big for her. She was already sprinting.

[Okay. I'm up for a race.]

Katarina smirked and broke into a run.

Chapter 90: Thief

Katarina took off.

She was not, in fairness, sprinting. She was jogging. Briskly. With intent.

It was, more accurately, the pace of a woman trying to catch a tram. And, that, frankly, was being generous to the thief, because Katarina, between her mother Brynn's 12 years of physical-cultivation drills and her own Mid-Foundation rank across all 4 paths, could have ended this chase about 4 seconds in.

She didn't. She wanted to see what the girl had.

The girl had, in fact, a lot. She ducked under a fish vendor's awning, vaulted over a low crate stack without breaking stride, and slid sideways through a gap between 2 stalls that, Katarina noted, she herself would have had to turn her shoulders for. The brown jacket flapped. The black hair bobbed. The crowd parted around the chase the way crowds always do, half-curious, half-relieved that it wasn't them.

[Hm. She's fast.]

The girl shot down a side alley. Naturally, Katarina followed. The alley narrowed. A line of laundry was strung across it at chest height, and the girl, without slowing, dropped into a slide, came up on the other side, and kept running.

[Show-off.]

Katarina ducked under it and kept after her.

Then, at the end of the alley, the girl, instead of taking the obvious left at the cooper's shop, planted one foot on a stack of crates, hopped to a windowsill, hopped to a drainpipe, and was suddenly, 6 seconds later, on the roof.

[Oh, we're getting vertical now?]

She channeled a thread of qi into her legs, planted, and went up. Crate. Sill. Pipe. Roof. The motion was clean.

The landing was cleaner. By the time her boots touched the tile, the red-skinned girl was already 3 rooftops ahead and pulling away.

The Vellasera skyline was, all things considered, a pretty fun set of obstacles. Low tile roofs, narrow gaps between buildings, drying laundry strung between chimneys, the occasional cat that had to be apologized to in passing.

Katarina cleared the first gap, then the second, then the third. Somewhere around the fourth, the thief glanced over her shoulder, clocked that Katarina was still there, and put on a noticeable burst of speed.

Katarina, jogging, matched it without effort.

She was, admittedly, having fun.

The chase ended on the flat roof of a 2-story warehouse near the harbor road. The girl skidded to a stop at the edge of it, glanced down, calculated her drop, glanced back at Katarina, and, apparently, decided the math didn't work. She turned around with her hands on her knees and her chest heaving.

"Well," the girl said, between breaths. "You're faster than I thought."

"And you're slower than you thought, apparently."

"You don't have to be a bitch about it."

"Oh, I disagree. I came down here for a quiet afternoon and you put your hands on me."

"On your hip, Signora. Briefly, I might add."

"... And took my purse."

"Well, yeah." The girl wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and grinned. "That was kind of the whole point."

Katarina almost smiled. Almost. She kept her face flat, instead, because, frankly, this girl did not need any encouragement.

"What's your name?"

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to know what to put on the writ when I have the harbor watch pick you up tomorrow."

"Yeah, you'd really write a whole writ for me. That's flattering."

"You'd be surprised how flattering I can get," Katarina replied.

Katarina walked across the rooftop slowly. Her boots clicked against the tile. The girl straightened, watchful, but didn't bolt. There was no fear in her face. She was just, apparently, trying to work out exactly how much trouble she was in.

"All right," Katarina said. "Let's do the math together, sweetheart. You stole my coin purse. I'm Signora Katarina Montecardi. By tomorrow morning, every member of the harbor watch knows your description, because Ottavia gossips like she's getting paid for it. By the day after, your face is on the door of every guildhall in the lower district. Vellasera is, frankly, not that big a town to hide in, and you, no offense, are not that subtle a thief. So, for your own sake, just hand it over and we forget the whole thing."

The girl considered her for a long second.

Then, slowly, like a woman folding a hand of cards, she reached into her jacket, pulled out Katarina's coin purse, and held it out.

Katarina reached for it.

The girl's foot came up so fast Katarina barely had time to start tensing.

It was a clean kick, right to the solar plexus. The girl had clearly done it before, and Katarina, who had, for the past 30 seconds, been monologuing instead of paying attention, took it square. The air left her lungs in a single hard cough and she folded forward, half a step backward, hand on her stomach.

By the time she had her breath back, the coin purse was, naturally, gone. So was the girl, already 2 rooftops over and cackling.

[Well... That was a neat distraction.]

"... and so she kicked me in the stomach and bolted."

"Mhm."

"Vessa, are you listening?"

"Of course."

Katarina was at her desk, working through the morning's contract pile.

Vineyard distribution renewal, 2 of them. A draft proposal for the new cooling box licensing structure. A note from Stellara, which she was, frankly, putting off opening until she had a second cup of tea in her.

And meanwhile, Vessa was, behind her, in Katarina's bed, naked.

She was on her stomach, propped on her elbows, with the bedspread pooled around her hips and her dark hair, freshly un-knotted, falling forward into her face. Her legs were kicked up behind her, ankles crossed, swinging slowly. Her number one priority of the morning, apparently, was attention.

[... I forgot how distracting all this can be.]

Katarina, with great discipline, was working as she toldd Vessa what happened.

"... a rooftop chase across, oh, 4 buildings, and she's clean, Vessa, she moves like she's been doing it since she was 8. I've never seen anyone hit a drainpipe-to-roof transition that smoothly."

"Mhm."

"And then, she just stops on the warehouse, hands on her knees, no panic at all. Looks me dead in the face."

"Mhm."

"Tells me I have 'good stamina for a Signora.' Like she's grading me."

"Kat."

"Yes?"

"Was she hot?"

Katarina, mid-signature, paused.

"... I beg your pardon?"

"Was. She. Hot?"

"... That is not the relevant detail of the story I am telling you, Vessa."

"It's the relevant detail of every story, Kat."

"She stole from me."

"And, I wanna know, was she hot while she stole from you?"

[Goddammit, Vessa.]

Katarina turned in her chair. Vessa hadn't moved. She was still on her stomach, still naked, still kicking her ankles, still smiling at her slowly.

"You are a terrible person."

"I am a curious person."

[She was, in fact, kind of hot. Red skin, sharp features, the jacket was, admittedly, working for her. Though I'm not gonna tell Vessa that.]

Katarina, very calmly, picked up the small jade frog she had bought at the market yesterday, which had been, for unclear reasons, sitting on her desk ever since, and threw it at Vessa.

It hit her in the shoulder. Vessa, who had not actually been expecting it, laughed out loud and rolled onto her back.

A knock on the door took Kat's attention back.

"Signora?"

[Saved by the maid.]

It was one of the new ones. Brilla, probably.

"What is it?"

"There's a, ah. There's a delegation. At the front gate. They've, um, asked to speak with you."

"A delegation?"

"Yes, Signora."

"And they're from...?"

"The Black Lotus Sect."

Katarina's hand stopped, halfway to her teacup.

[... Already? They didn't even let me finish my morning coffee.]

Behind her, Vessa, who had been laughing 4 seconds ago, was very quiet.

"Tell them I'll be down in 10 minutes."

"Yes, Signora."

The door clicked shut. Katarina turned slowly. Vessa was already sitting up, reaching for the shirt that had ended up on the floor somewhere in the proceedings.

"Get dressed."

"Ugh."

The delegation was, mercifully, small. Three of them, in black-and-gold robes, with the Lotus crest stitched on the left breast in dark thread. They were standing in the front receiving hall, hands folded, all 3 of them composed, pleasant, and clearly under orders to appear so.

The man at the front was not Vannico.

[Different one. Older. Sharper. Hmph.]

He was, Katarina judged, mid-50s, human, with a thin beard cut close to his jaw and dark eyes that did, in fact, smile when he saw her. He bowed at the waist, exactly the correct depth for greeting a Signora.

"Signora Montecardi. A pleasure."

"Likewise."

"My name is Renzo Caelford. I represent the southern commerce arm of the Sect. I hope our visit is not, ah, inopportune."

Katarina did not answer him.

She was looking past him, at the guard standing at his left shoulder.

She had red skin and black hair cropped short.

The thief was, very visibly, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

[... Oh, you have GOT to be kidding me.]