CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 101: Problem Solving

They laughed.

Katarina watched it happen, and she got it. A teenage merchant girl in a fighting stance was probably the funniest thing these four had seen all week. She had nice clothes, soft hands, a soft house, and a reputation for never throwing a single punch in her life. So they laughed. To them, she'd just told a joke without meaning to.

"I guess she needs some convincing," the one in front said.

And so he walked up to punch her in the face.

He was slow about it, too. He wasn't really trying to hurt her, he was trying to scare her into folding. He cocked his arm back nice and wide, so she'd see it coming and panic.

Katarina did not flinch.

So she stepped in instead of away. She grabbed the arm, turned her hip, and threw him clean over her shoulder, just like Brynn had drilled into her ten thousand times in the yard. He hit the road on his back hard enough to knock the air out of him, and then he just lay there coughing.

The lane went quiet for half a breath.

[Oh, now they're paying attention.]

"G-Get her!" The guy on the ground yelled.

Then it started for real.

The other three came at her at once, which was smart if you believed your opponent would be going down easy. Katarina pulled fire into her right hand, just a low curl of it, not enough to burn the street down but plenty to make a grown adult jump back when it licked at their face. One of them did exactly that and stumbled into the warehouse wall, so she gave him a second curl of it across the knuckles to make him think twice about reaching for her again.

The woman from the front was better. She came in with the working blade low and fast, no wasted movement, and for a second Katarina actually had to respect it.

Then she made four of herself.

None of it was real, of course, just the Path of Whispers doing what it did best, but the woman didn’t know that. Suddenly there were five Katarinas in the lane, every one of them rolling her neck and grinning. The woman’s blade went for the wrong one and passed through empty air. She overbalanced. Katarina, the real one, stepped inside her reach and put a palm of fire into her ribs, so the woman folded around it and went down coughing.

The last one tried to run.

[No.]

She didn’t even bother with the fancy stuff for him. She just tripped him with a low sweep, the move Brynn always called "embarrassing on purpose." He went face-first into the cobbles and stayed there, hands over his head, done.

And then it was quiet again, save for some pained moans.

Katarina stood in the middle of the lane and looked at the four of them. They were crumpled and groaning, and none of them were getting up in a hurry. The fire in her hand burned itself out. Her heart was going fast, but her hands were steady, and that was good enough.

[Not bad.]

She rolled her shoulder and felt it pull weirdly, and when she looked down there was a thin red line across the top of it where the woman’s blade had caught her after all. It wasn’t deep. It stung more than it bled. She must have taken it during the illusion bit and not even noticed, which was careless enough to get a person killed.

[... Brynn will berate me for hours when she hears about this, though.]

She could already hear it. The lecture about footwork, then the one about awareness, then the one about why a Signora has guards for exactly this reason, all of it at top volume with both hands waving, capped off with a tight hug that hurt worse than the cut. Seris would be quieter about it. Seris would just give her a look, and somehow that was always worse.

Katarina sighed and pressed her hand to her shoulder.

[Oh well. I need more training.]

Then she stepped over the man at her feet and went home for lunch.

Brynn started before Katarina even finished telling the story.

"Four of them??? Four!? And you walked into it, with the wall on one side and the fishery on the other, which means you let them pick the ground, which is the first thing, the very first thing I ever taught you about a road like that."

"I know."

"And then you didn’t notice the blade. You didn’t notice it, Kat. It opened your shoulder and you found out later, like reading about it in a letter!"

"I know."

"You know how someone dies? That. That right there. Not the big swing you see coming. The little one you don’t, because you were busy being clever with your lights and your fire and you forgot you have a body, and the body is the part that bleeds. Hell, what if it was poisoned!?"

"I know."

And so it went, on and on, Brynn pacing the length of the kitchen with both hands waving. Katarina sat at the table and said "I know" so many times the words stopped meaning anything. She did mean them, though. That was the annoying part. Brynn was right about every single thing, and being right was what made it impossible to argue with her.

The hug came at the end, like it always did, and it hurt worse than the cut.

"You scared me," Brynn said into her hair, quieter now.

"I scared me a little too," Katarina said. It was true, and her mothers were the only people on the continent she’d ever admit it to.

Seris had watched the whole thing from the doorway without a word, and that was worse than the yelling. She just looked at her, calm. Then she came and sat at the table and folded her hands.

"So," Seris said. "It isn’t only the Black Lotus."

"No. It isn’t." Katarina set the cloth down. "My announcement had some... side effects. Word got out. People talked, and now it’s not one enemy, it’s a rumor. ’The Montecardi girl is building a box that keeps food cold for months.’ That kind of thing travels."

"And every house on the coast does the math on what it’s worth," Seris said.

"Right. So I’m not looking at the Black Lotus anymore. I’m looking at everybody."

And that was the real problem.

The cut on her shoulder was nothing. The bruises on the four idiots in the lane were nothing. The thing that mattered was the part Seris had put her finger on without raising her voice once.

The Black Lotus was patient, smart, and played a long game. These four had been none of that. So somewhere between those two extremes there was probably a whole crowd of people circling her. She didn't know how many of them there were, or how clever they were, and that was a problem.

[How smart are they, though? That's the real question.]

"Here's what I keep coming back to," Katarina said. "Samara. Remember her. I fed her a set of bad plans once, on purpose. A trap to make her stumble. She took one look, knew it was a trap, and wouldn't pass it up the line. She can't build a box to save her life, but she can smell bullshit when she sees it."

"She's the dangerous kind," Seris said.

"She is. But here's the thing." Katarina leaned forward. "A Samara doesn't send four thugs to mug me in a fishery lane. The people circling me are either Samaras, or they're the four geniuses I just left bleeding in an alley." She paused. "And I'd bet almost all of them are the second kind."

So that was a plan. It came together fast, the pieces clicking together while she sat there with a cold cloth on her shoulder.

"We make bad ones," she said.

Brynn stopped pacing.

"We make bad what?"

"Cold containers. We build a run of them faulty, on purpose. They'll look perfect. They'll hold the cold for, oh, three days, four, and then the array inverts and the whole thing turns into a warm box full of spoiled fish." Katarina was smiling now. She knew it, and she didn't care. "And then we get sloppy. We let it slip where a batch is being stored. We make it easy. We practically leave the door open."

Seris caught up before Brynn did. She always did.

"And whoever steals them," Seris said slowly, "builds their own off the example. And theirs all fail."

"Theirs all fail. In front of their buyers, ideally. Three days after they've promised everyone the best preservation array on the coast." Katarina shrugged, then winced, because shrugging was apparently off the table for a while. "A Samara would catch it. She'd take one look and know. But the Samaras were never going to be my problem. So I'll fool the rest."

Brynn looked at her for a long moment.

"You're a little frightening sometimes, you know that?"

"I know," Katarina said. "You keep telling me."

Chapter 102: Set In Motion

{Brynn}

The plan went out the gate two days later, and Brynn went with it.

Right now, she didn't look like Brynn, though. That was the point. She'd wrapped a plain brown cloak over her muscles, tied her white hair back under a hood, and traded the loud frontier swagger for a bored slouch.

She looked like a hired guard who'd done this run a hundred times. Nobody on the road gave her a second look. She was just another big woman watching over another small caravan of merchants and their crates, and one of those crates was a cold container, sitting right on top where it was easy to see and easy to grab.

Vienna walked up beside her. Vienna was an old friend from the frontier days. You could call her up and say "help me get robbed on purpose" and she'd just ask when and where. She was tall, scarred across one cheek, and right now she was glaring at the crate.

"You're telling me," Vienna said, "that we're hauling a broken box across two districts so somebody can steal it?"

"That's the job."

"It's a stupid job."

"It's a fun job." And so Brynn reached over and spanked Vienna's ass.

Vienna rolled her eyes and stayed right where she was.

They didn't have to wait long.

The attackers came out of a tree line about an hour past the crossroads. Six of them, on foot. They were fast and quiet, clearly hoping to swarm the wagons before anybody could draw.

Under any other circumstances Brynn would have killed all six in about the time it takes to sneeze. That was the hard part of this whole thing, actually, the not-killing. She'd been told very clearly. Keep everyone alive. Hers and theirs. Make it look like a real fight that a real guard could lose.

So she made it look real.

She knocked two of them flat with the flat of her blade, then took a third by the collar and threw him into a fourth. The whole time she kept her body between the merchants and every blade that came near them. Vienna fought at her back, just as careful, cracking wrists and knees instead of opening throats.

Nobody important got hurt. A merchant got a shallow cut on the arm and shrieked about it, which honestly helped the show.

And then, when the timing was right, Brynn did the thing that went against every instinct she had.

"Fall back!" she roared. "Leave the crates! Move, move, go!"

The merchants scattered. The wagons rolled. And the cold container sat there in the road, looking perfect and completely useless. Six bandits stood around it like they'd just won a war.

[Perfect.]

Brynn caught Vienna's eye as they pulled away, and Vienna just shook her head at her. First fight either of them had ever lost on purpose, and Brynn had a feeling she'd be hearing about it over drinks for years.

{Seris}

Forty miles south, on a different road, Seris did the same thing.

The disguise didn't quite fit her, and she knew it. She wore the neat dark merchant clothes of a young Signora, the same kind Katarina wore, her horns half-hidden under a traveling hood, and she held herself small and careful, the way her daughter did. Anyone watching from a distance would think the Montecardi girl herself was making the run. That was the point. Let them think the prize was riding in person.

Her ambush came at a river, four of them this time, and Seris handled it with a great deal less drama than Brynn had.

No roaring, no throwing anyone into anyone. She just moved through them, a palm here, a turned wrist there, and put each one down without breaking a sweat. She could have unmade all four of them with a single thought. That was a secret she'd kept for two hundred years, though, and she kept it now.

Then she let her shoulders drop and made her voice high and frightened. She called for the retreat in a tone that sounded exactly like a scared little Signora.

The crate stayed behind in the mud.

Seris walked away from it without looking back, and, somewhere under the hood, she was almost smiling.

{Katarina}

Katarina was on the couch when they got back, and Vessa was lying across her lap, which was where Vessa lived these days whenever she was home from Galteri.

So Katarina got her debrief like that, with one hand resting on Vessa's hip and the other holding a cup of tea, while two of the most dangerous women on the southern coast stood in her sitting room and reported in like junior staff.

"Six of them total, north road," Brynn said. She was still in the brown cloak, and she was grinning ear to ear. "Walked right into it. Took the box, shook each other's hands, the whole thing. I almost felt bad. Almost."

"And Vienna?"

"Vienna has not stopped talking shit since. She lost a fight on purpose for the first time in three hundred years and she's taking it like a death in the family." Brynn dropped onto the arm of the couch, which creaked. "I'm going to be hearing about it at every drink for the rest of my life."

"Let her sulk. She earned a sulk." Seris had stayed by the window, still in the dark Signora clothes, and she looked far too comfortable in them. "Mine were sweeter about it. Four at the river, and one of them bowed to me before he drew his knife. An actual bow. I nearly told him to keep the box for the manners alone."

"They thought you were me," Katarina said.

"They were thrilled to be robbing a Montecardi in person. I didn’t have the heart to correct them." Seris tipped her head, dry as ever. "You should be flattered, piccola. I make a very convincing you."

"You’re enjoying this far too much. And nobody got hurt? Either side?"

"One merchant caught a nick on the arm and screamed like I’d taken his leg off," Brynn said. "Helped, honestly. Sold the panic. Other than that, everyone walks home tonight, ours and theirs." She rolled her shoulder and sighed. "You want to know the hard part? Holding back. I had a man’s collar in my fist and a perfectly good tree right there and I just had to... let him run. Do you know what that does to a person?"

"You’ll recover."

"I might not."

"And right now, this minute, two different crews think they just got rich."

"Halfway home and counting their money," Seris said. "Right on schedule."

[Good. Good, good, good.]

And so Katarina sat back and let herself feel pleased for exactly one minute, because she’d earned that much.

Two faulty containers were now sitting in the hands of two different groups who thought they’d pulled off the heist of their lives. In three or four days, those boxes would invert and turn into very expensive crates of warm, spoiled garbage, ideally in front of whoever these people had promised the moon to.

"Now we wait," Katarina said, scratching Vessa’s hair. Vessa pushed up into her hand like a cat. "Somebody’s going to embarrass themselves very publicly, and then the rest of them are going to get nervous, and a nervous thief is a careful thief, and a careful thief is a slow thief. I just need everyone slow for eighteen more days."

There was a knock on the door.

Katarina sighed, eased Vessa up off her lap, and went to answer it. It was Samara on the step, leaning on the doorframe like she owned it.

"Signora," Samara said. "Strange week on the trade roads."

"You came to my house to discuss rumors?"

"The day’s news is just that spicy," she replied. "Word is House Montecardi’s lost two shipments to bandits in the space of a few days. Bandits." She let the word sit. "I’ll be

honest, it made me worry. Your house built its whole name on the Greypass. Safest routes on the coast. And then, all at once, you can't get a crate from one town to the next without some roadside trash walking off with it?"

"It's been a humbling day."

"See, that's what I can't square. I didn't think those kinds of days happened to you."

"You think very highly of me."

"I think exactly highly enough of you. That's the problem." She leaned in a little, dropping the performance, talking lower now, almost friendly. "I told someone, recently, that there was no money on this coast worth touching a Montecardi shipment for the next month. That it would be the most expensive box they ever opened." A pause. "Nobody listens to me. It's the great tragedy of my professional life."

"That does sound tragic." Katarina kept her face perfectly pleasant. "You should work for people who appreciate you."

"Problem is, I was wrong today."

"We're all wrong sometimes. You'll get over it."

Then Samara's eyes moved past Katarina, into the house, and they stopped.

Vessa had gotten up off the couch and was stretching. She was wearing the dress she always wore around the estate when she thought it was just family, which was to say barely a dress at all. It was short enough that bending over was a community event, and the top showed off half her tits. Vessa was cheerfully unaware that she was being looked at.

Samara was very aware.

[Oh, she's still doing that.]

Katarina watched Samara watch Vessa. She watched the sharp clever face go soft and dumb for half a second.

[... What?]

Samara, the clever, competent, and terrifying Black Lotus thief, was staring at Vessa like she just saw a celebrity at her favorite cafe.

"In any case." Katarina stepped sideways to block the view and smiled at Samara, sweetly. "Lovely chat."

And she closed the door in her face.

[... What the hell was that about?]

Chapter 103: Hard To Process

{Samara}

The Black Lotus had taken the whole top floor of a merchant’s rest off the harbor road, and they still hadn’t unpacked a single crate.

They genuinely expected to be out of here that damn fast.

Samara climbed the stairs, nodded at the guard on the landing, and found Renzo at the window with a cup of tea, watching the harbor like he was already counting the ships he’d own.

"You heard about the boxes?" She asked.

"I heard two crews robbed House Montecardi blind today." Renzo didn’t turn around. "It’s slowly becoming the talk of every tavern on the coast."

"It’s bait." She crossed her arms. "Nobody loses two shipments in four days by accident. Not someone as smart as her. She put those boxes on the road so somebody would grab them, and somebody grabbed them, and whatever’s inside is going to blow up in their hands. I’d bet my whole fee on it."

Renzo finally turned around. He was smiling, and that was the annoying part. He was always smiling, like the whole world was a card game and he’d already seen everyone’s hand.

"You’re probably right," he said.

"Then why do you look happy about it?"

"Because they weren’t my crews." He sipped his tea. "Some greedy little houses are about to learn an expensive lesson, and I get to watch it for free. Why would I be angry? Well played to the Montecardis, I say. Meanwhile, my plan hasn’t moved an inch. She sells her boxes, I buy one, and the Sect takes it apart bolt by bolt. There’s no trick she can play on a paying customer."

Samara didn’t answer that, and so he kept going.

"I'll admit it, though. I thought she was a clever child with a lucky streak." He set the cup down. "She's craftier than that. Feeding the wolves her own garbage so they're too sick to hunt when it matters. That's craft. I respect it."

"Great. Should I tell her you're a fan?"

"You should go get some sleep. You look terrible." He waved a hand at the door, already turning back to the window. "I'll send for you when I need eyes again."

And that was that. Fifteen years in the trade and she still got dismissed like a kid being sent to bed.

The walk out of the city took her the better part of an hour, past the harbor, past the last row of warehouses, out to where the road went to dirt and the lamps stopped. Their camp sat in a dry field just off the trail, one tent, one fire pit, one mule that hated her.

Her mother was sitting by the fire with a shirt in her lap, sewing by the light. Mirella was small, smaller every year it felt like, with the same red skin as Samara and gray streaking through her braid.

"You ate?" her mother asked, without looking up.

"In the city."

"... Are you sure? I mean, you always say that."

"And it's always true." Samara dropped down across the fire from her and pulled off her boots. "How are the hands?"

"The hands are fine. I'm sewing, aren't I?" Mirella held up the shirt as proof. Her knuckles were swollen again, and they both pretended not to notice. "Did the fancy man pay you?"

"End of the month. Same as always."

"And how much of it do we keep this time?"

Samara didn't answer right away, and that was an answer on its own.

The math never changed too much. The Lotus paid her with one hand and collected with the other, and the debt her mother had signed twelve years ago shrank by a little less than it should every single month. That was the whole arrangement. That was why a thief who could've worked for anyone on the coast kept fetching and carrying for a man like Renzo Caelford.

"Enough," she finally said. "We keep enough."

Her mother laughed low, and Samara stretched out on her bedroll and stared up at the sky.

The fire popped. Somewhere back toward the city, two crews of idiots were sitting on stolen boxes, dreaming about money they were never going to see.

Then, her brain went, without permission, straight back to that doorway.

That woman with the pink skin, on the couch, lying on her stomach in that tiny excuse for a dress, with her whole bare ass on display like it was nothing, round and soft. Completely unaware. Just living her life while Samara forgot how words worked.

She rolled over and shut her eyes.

The ass stayed in her thoughts.

[She’s the Montecardi’s girl, dumbass. Stop.]

The fire burned down, and her mother started snoring, and Samara fell asleep anyway, still thinking about it.

{Katarina}

The market had one topic this morning, and it was her.

And how could she not be on the rumor mill? House Montecardi had been robbed twice in four days. The house that tamed the Greypass, the house that put toilets in the lower quarter, was losing crates to common bandits like some two-wagon outfit from the hills.

Katarina couldn’t walk ten steps without catching a new version of the story. By the fish stalls, the bandits were six men. By the bakery, they were twelve. And by the time she reached the spice row, somebody had apparently given them a warship.

Nobody questioned the warship, though.

Two porters argued about it right in front of her without realizing who she was. One swore the bandits had a Sovereign cultivator running the crew. The other said no, no, he’d heard it from his cousin, who hauled for the Montecardis, and it was an inside job. Katarina picked through a basket of plums and listened to both of them be wrong with total confidence. She could’ve corrected them, sure. But where was the fun in that?

"Signora!" A dried-fruit seller leaned over her table, face full of sympathy. "We heard. Terrible, just terrible. Are your people alright?"

"Everyone's safe, thank the tides." Katarina let her shoulders sag a little, just enough to sell it. "The goods, though. Well. We'll recover."

"Of course." The woman pressed a bag of candied figs into her hands and refused payment, and Katarina thanked her and moved on, playing the young Signora having a very hard week.

By her fourth stall, she'd collected the figs, a discount on olives she hadn't asked for, and a free wedge of cheese "for the household, Signora, please." Apparently, getting robbed was great for business. She made a note of that, then made a second note to never say it in front of Brynn, who would absolutely try to get robbed on purpose.

[Day two.]

That was the real number.

The decoy arrays held cold for three days, four at the most, and then they flipped and cooked whatever was inside. So, somewhere out there, two crews were showing off a stolen miracle box to whoever they'd promised it to, not knowing that when the time came to cash in on it, the boxes would freeze their dreams instead.

She bought vegetables she didn't need, let three more merchants feel sorry for her, and was almost off the square when Enza caught up with her, slightly out of breath and holding a ledger like a shield.

"Signora. The harbor council sent another letter."

"About what this time?"

"Tideglass."

[Right. That.]

Because the world didn't pause just so she could run a trap.

The Tideglass Festival was two weeks out. The coast's big late-summer party, three days of thanking the sea for not killing anyone this year. Three days of wine, music, and long tables in the streets where everybody fed everybody.

And then there was the part the Valdari were most famous for: the open season.

Tideglass nights were for chasing whoever caught your eye, and for being caught by whoever you let catch you. Nobody on this coast had ever pretended otherwise.

And Vellasera’s Signora hosted the whole thing. She’d already hosted one of these before, so she vaguely understood what needed to be done, but the timing was horrible.

Still, she’d have plenty of help, since her moms were the festival’s two most devoted participants. Brynn won the harbor wrestling tournament every single year and cried about it every single year, and Seris treated the open season like a personal performance review. So Katarina was going to be running the entire event while her mothers were its main attraction.

"Tell the council I’ll have the wine contracts confirmed by Friday," Katarina said, already sorting it in her head. "Duccetti for the reds, Parenna for the table wine, and get me quotes on lamp oil before the price jumps, because it jumps every year and every year they act surprised."

"Yes, Signora."

"And the long tables come out of the festival budget this time, not house funds. I wrote it into the charter myself."

Enza scribbled. Katarina looked out past the stalls at the harbor, at the boats, at a town that was going to spend three days drunk and extremely distracted right around the time her containers launched.

[Huh. That timing might actually be useful.]

She filed the thought and went home.

Chapter 104: Interest

{Vessa}

Vessa was halfway up a ladder restocking lamp wicks when the bell over the shop door rang. She looked down, and oh, this was going to be a fun afternoon.

The red-skinned woman from the street was standing in the doorway of Talori Dry Goods, trying very hard to look like a regular customer. It was Samara, the Black Lotus thief Kat had recently told her about.

Now that she knew what was up, she was excited. Kat always forgot this, but Vessa was a businesswoman too.

These games were fun for her, as well.

[Don’t smile too big. Be normal. Be a shopkeeper.]

"Welcome in!" Vessa called down. "Be right with you!"

"No rush," Samara said, and then she picked up a coil of rope and studied it very seriously.

Sure she did.

Vessa came down the ladder slowly, and she may have arched her back a little more than the ladder strictly required. And when she glanced over, Samara was staring hard at the wall of fishing hooks. She'd clearly just been caught looking.

"So what are we shopping for today?"

"Rope," Samara said.

"That's a mooring line. It's for boats. Do you have a boat?"

Samara paused.

"I'm considering one."

"Well, when you get it, that's the rope you'll want. Anything else you need?"

"... Candles. Salt. Uh." Samara's eyes dropped, just for a second, to the front of Vessa's dress, then snapped back up with visible effort. "Twine."

"Candles, salt, and twine." Vessa started gathering them off the shelves, chatting the whole way, because chatting was her gift. "You're not from Vellasera, right? I'd remember you. Are you staying for Tideglass? Please say yes. Everybody should do at least one."

"I've heard about it."

"Hearing about it doesn't count." Vessa set the goods on the counter and leaned on it, chin in her hand, looking up at her. "Three days of food, music, and dancing, and on the third night there's the lantern swim, where everyone goes into the shallows with floating lights. It's the most beautiful thing on the whole coast."

Samara opened her mouth, then closed it. What finally came out was:

"How much for the candles?"

"Four coppers." Vessa rang it up, taking her time. "I'm Vessa, by the way."

"I know." She said, a little too fast. "I mean. The woman at the fruit stall said. The shop. Talori. You're the Talori daughter."

"Mhm." Vessa pushed the wrapped bundle across the counter and held onto it a half-second after Samara's hand landed on it. "And you are?"

There was another pause. Vessa could practically see her deciding whether to lie.

"Samara."

"Pretty name." She let go of the bundle. "Come back when you've got that boat."

Samara walked out fast. The bell rang, and Vessa cackled the second the door shut.

"... This is too much."

She told Kat about it that evening, naturally, sprawled on the estate couch with her head on Kat's thigh while Kat read shipping papers above her.

"And then she said she was considering a boat. Kat. She panic-invented a boat."

"She bought a mooring line?"

"No, I rescued her from the mooring line. She bought candles, salt, and twine. All of which I seriously doubt she needs." Vessa grinned up at her. "She knew my name before I said it, too. She's been asking about me."

Kat lowered the papers, and Vessa watched her girlfriend's brain go to work. Her brow creased a little.

"So, hold on, she came in person, to your shop, two days after I shut a door on her," Kat said. "She's smart enough to know I'd hear about it within the hour. The Lotus probably wants a channel into this house that isn't my front door."

"Hm. Maybe. Except she was really bad at it."

"Define bad."

"I caught her staring and she looked away so fast she almost hurt herself. She could barely finish a sentence with me leaning on the counter. And you already know about the boat. If the Lotus sent her to work me, they sent the wrong woman."

Kat went quiet.

"... You think she likes you?"

"I think the big scary spy has a crush on me, yes. I've seen that exact malfunction on half the harbor. It's not subtle."

"Spies can fake a crush."

"Nobody fakes panic-inventing a boat. You'd fake being smooth."

Kat sighed.

"Fine. That fits better than anything I've got. Here's the thing, though. I can't read her, and gods know I've tried. She's the one person in this whole mess I can't file, and that bothers me more than the entire Black Lotus Sect does."

"Lucky for you, she apparently goes stupid around exactly one person on this coast." Vessa pointed at her own face. "So, hear me out. She's clearly coming back to the shop. I keep being friendly, she keeps buying twine she doesn't need, and people tell me things, Kat. They can't help it, it's my gift. Give me a few visits and I'll know what the Lotus actually wants from you."

Kat thought about it. Vessa could tell she wanted to say no and couldn't find a reason.

"Alright."

"Deal. And how far am I allowed to take the flirting?"

"Vessa. You and everyone I know sleep with half the town at every festival anyway. Do what you must."

"Oh my gods, I'm a honeypot. A Tideglass honeypot."

"... Please never say that in public."

Vessa pulled Kat down by the collar and kissed her, grinning. And somewhere in the back of her happy, buzzing head, she was already planning what to wear to work tomorrow.

She had a mission now.

{Katarina}

Inscription work was the closest thing Katarina had to meditation that actually worked.

She was in the estate workshop with her sleeves rolled up, hunched over an open cold container, running a thread of Artisan qi through the cooling array line by line. The trick

was consistency, not power: the same depth, the same spacing, every stroke matching the last one, forty-three units in a row.

It was slow, precise, boring work, and most cultivators in this world, dreaming of challenging the heavens or whatever, would rather die than do it. Katarina found it deeply soothing, though. Numbers behaved. Arrays behaved. Nobody in this room was trying to steal anything.

She was two lines from finishing the lid when the workshop door banged open, and Ottavia came in carrying a basket of onions. She was, very obviously, also carrying gossip.

"Signora. You will not believe what I heard at the fish market."

"Tell me anyway."

"You know my cousin’s wife, the one who hauls freight down the south road? She was in Coppara yesterday." Ottavia set the basket down so her hands were free, because this was clearly a two-hand story. "House Sarrenzi. You know them? Big warehouse family, very proud, very loud. They’ve put up notices all over the Coppara docks. A public demonstration, three days from now, of a, and I am quoting the notice, a revolutionary preservation chest."

Katarina set her stylus down very slowly.

"A revolutionary preservation chest?"

"Revolutionary!" Ottavia threw her hands up. "Three days! They’re inviting merchants, ship captains, half the port. My cousin’s wife says they’re renting the big quay stage, the one with the awnings. After your boxes got stolen, and now this? I’m telling you, Signora, somebody robbed you and is about to sell your own idea back to the coast. The shamelessness of these people. In my day, a thief at least had the decency to be quiet about it."

[Three days. Public stage. Invited audience.]

Katarina did the math, and it was beautiful.

The bait crate from the north road had a three-to-four day fuse on it before the array flipped and cooked everything inside. House Sarrenzi had clearly bought the stolen box, or stolen it from the thieves, it didn’t really matter which, copied the visible inscription work, and rushed straight to a stage.

And that meant, in three days, in front of merchants, captains, and half of Coppara’s port, they were going to seal fresh goods inside a chest designed to turn them into warm garbage.

And she didn’t even have to do anything. They’d rented the stage themselves. Truly considerate of them.

"Signora, why are you smiling like that? It frightens the staff when you smile like that."

"No reason." Katarina picked the stylus back up. "Ottavia, do me a favor. Have one of your cousins get a letter down to Coppara for me tonight. Just a friendly note to dockmaster Rizzi, saying I heard there’s an exciting demonstration coming up, and that she should make sure all her crane crews and warehouse people get the afternoon off to attend. Big moment for the port. Everyone should witness it."

Ottavia squinted at her. She’d worked in this house long enough to know when Katarina had a scheme cooked up. She didn’t seem to care, though.

"Consider it sent." She picked her basket back up, then paused at the door. "Oh, and dinner’s ready in ten minutes. I made my grandmother’s salt-cod stew. Family recipe. I used the good cod."

[The salt-cod stew, the one where the recipe is somehow saltier than the cod.]

Katarina kept her face perfectly still.

"Wouldn’t miss it."

"Ten minutes! If you’re late, Brynn eats your share, you know how she is." And she was gone down the hall, already yelling at somebody about table settings.

Katarina looked down at the half-finished array, then at the door, then seriously considered whether finishing the lid could be stretched into a forty-minute job.

[... On second thought, maybe the Compasso’s cafeteria food wasn’t that bad.]

She sealed the line, washed her hands, and went down to dinner anyway.

Chapter 105: A Second House Has Altered the Plan

{Katarina}

Festival paperwork was its own war.

Katarina was at her desk, practically buried in it. Wine contracts, lamp oil quotes, a permit for the long tables, and a strongly worded letter from a harbor councilwoman

about whose street got the musicians' stage this year, all taking up way too much mental space.

She was halfway through approving the lantern order for the third-night swim when Enza knocked and handed her a folded letter, sealed with a smudged thumbprint of tar.

[Ooh, Rizzi?]

Katarina opened it.

Got your note. Crane crews and warehouse hands get the afternoon free, the whole quay's coming. Whatever you're up to, I don't want to know, just don't break my docks.

One more thing, since you like knowing things. The Sarrenzi box isn't the only one floating around. Word on my docks is the second chest got fenced down the coast, and the buyer was Petra Olcari. Yes, that Olcari. Thought you'd enjoy that. R.

Katarina set the letter down and stared at the wall for a moment.

[She was right. I'm enjoying this already.]

Anyone who'd done six months of business on this coast knew about Sarrenzi and Olcari. Their feud was so old it didn't even need a reason anymore, though there was one buried somewhere two generations back, a route contract that one grandmother stole from the other grandmother, or the reverse, depending on which house was telling it. Since then, the two houses had undercut each other on everything and seated themselves on opposite sides of every room. It was two warehouse dynasties on one stretch of coast, with forty years of pure spite between them.

A very productive use of everyone's time, of course.

And now, by complete accident, each of them was holding one of her faulty boxes.

Katarina leaned back in her chair and put the plan together piece by piece. It was so clean she almost laughed out loud.

Because here was the thing about Valdari houses, something she'd learned by year three in this world. Face was currency here. A house's reputation set its credit, its alliances, its prices, its seat at the table.

And the one thing no house could ever do, under any circumstances, was let a blood rival claim a public triumph without answering it. That went double in festival season, when the whole coast was watching and every win got retold at a thousand long tables for the rest of the year.

If Sarrenzi stood on a quay stage and unveiled a revolution while Olcari sat home in silence, then every merchant from here to Pavona would read that silence as surrender.

Olcari wouldn't allow it. She just had to find out in time.

So Katarina would make sure she found out.

She wouldn't hear it from Katarina herself, obviously. The news had to travel like normal gossip: sideways, secondhand, and smelling like the docks. So she did it in three steps.

Step one, she mentioned it to Ottavia over breakfast dishes, as casually as possible: shame about that Sarrenzi demonstration, three days out, the big awning stage on the Coppara quay, all those invitations, the Olcaris are going to be sick when they hear.

Step two, Ottavia, who could no more sit on gossip than she could under-salt a stew, would pass it to her cousin's wife on the south freight road by noon.

Step three, the cousin's wife drank at the same Coppara tavern as half of Olcari's warehouse foremen.

And, by tomorrow morning, Signora Petra Olcari would hear, from her own loyal people, that her rival was about to claim the future in public, right before the festival, with a stage, an audience, and forty years of spite watching.

Ottavia would never know she'd been step one.

And Petra Olcari, holding what she believed was the exact same miracle in her own warehouse, would do the only thing a Valdari Signora in her position could do. She'd answer on the same day, in the same plaza if she could muscle the space, and, conveniently, she could, since the Olcaris held the south end of that quay. She'd stage an even louder counter-demonstration to steal the day right out from under the Sarrenzi name.

So, in three days, there would be two rival houses, two stages, and two of Katarina's boxes, both built to fail on the same fuse, in front of the same crowd, on the same afternoon.

She hadn't even planned this part. She'd built two traps and the coast's oldest feud had volunteered to spring them as a double act.

Katarina pulled the lantern order back in front of her, signed it, and moved on to the wine contracts, humming a little.

Around her the festival paperwork went on being tedious, and somewhere down the coast, two proud old houses began their last three quiet days.

Three days went by, and Katarina spent them being very visibly boring.

She signed festival paperwork, walked the market, and sighed sadly whenever anyone mentioned her stolen shipments. Then, on the morning of the third day, she put on a plain gray traveling cloak, told her mothers she was off to inspect lantern suppliers, and caught the early coach to Coppara.

Some things you simply had to see with your own eyes.

The plaza was packed. Rizzi had kept her word, and the cranes stood empty. What looked like every dockhand, merchant, captain, and bored fishwife in the port had turned out.

At the north end of the plaza stood the Sarrenzi stage, covered in awnings and banners, with a cloth-draped chest sitting on it like a shrine.

And at the south end, because the coast's pettiest miracle had come through right on schedule, stood a second stage, hammered together in two frantic days, flying Olcari blue.

The two houses were pointedly not looking at each other across the plaza, which clearly took enormous effort.

[Oh, this is already wonderful.]

Katarina found a spot by a stack of crates, hood up, and hadn't been there five minutes when Rizzi appeared beside her, arms crossed. She didn't say anything, she just kinda stood there.

The Sarrenzi matriarch went first. She was a big silver-horned woman with a voice built for stages, and she gave a speech about innovation, about vision, about House Sarrenzi leading the coast into a new age.

Katarina had to bite the inside of her cheek, because she'd written better launch copy in her sleep, twice, in two different worlds.

Then she swept the cloth off the chest, and there it was: her box. The hinges, the proportions, and the inscription work had all been copied line for line onto Sarrenzi cedar. The thing was holding three days of stolen cold and one very large fish.

"Sealed fresh three days ago!" the matriarch boomed. "Witnessed by my own foremen! Behold the future of trade!"

She opened the lid, and the future of trade hit the front four rows.

The array had flipped sometime that morning, by the look of it, and three days in a heat-trapping box had not been kind. The smell that came out of that chest was an event. The matriarch recoiled mid-gesture, a buyer in the front row gagged into his own hat, and the people behind them got to watch a prize fish slide out of the chest as gray, steaming sludge. It hit the stage boards with a wet slap.

The plaza went silent for one beautiful second.

And then, from the south stage, came the answering scream.

Olcari, hearing the crowd turn, had rushed her own unveiling to steal the spotlight, and her display wheel of aged mountain cheese chose that exact moment to let go. It liquefied, right there on the velvet, folding down into a bubbling yellow puddle in front of a hundred witnesses. Signora Petra Olcari stood over it with her mouth open while it dripped off the edge of her brand-new stage.

What followed was the fastest face-collapse Katarina had ever witnessed, and she'd sat through earnings calls where billions evaporated.

"SABOTAGE!" the Sarrenzi matriarch roared, jabbing a finger across the plaza. "You did this, you jealous old crow!"

"ME?" Olcari screamed back over the crowd. "Look at your own stage, you thieving fraud, you can't even rob a house properly!"

And that, right there, was both houses confessing in public without noticing.

The crowd, however, noticed immediately. The laughter started somewhere in the back by the cranes and rolled forward like a wave. Within a minute, two of the proudest houses on this stretch of coast were standing on rival stages, ankle-deep in spoiled goods, shrieking accusations at each other while the whole port howled.

And this was weeks before Tideglass, the one season where every house on the coast was supposed to be polishing its name. They'd lit their own faces on fire at the worst possible hour, and they'd sold tickets.

But the best part, which Katarina genuinely hadn't planned, came from the crowd itself. An old captain near her crates shook his head at the whole spectacle and said, loudly, to no one in particular:

"That's what you get. Everyone knows stolen Montecardi work dies in your hands. Those arrays answer to the house."

It wasn't even slightly true, and yet it was the single best piece of marketing anyone had ever written for her, free of charge.

[I literally could not have paid for that.]

Katarina pulled her hood a little lower and laughed the entire coach ride home.

Chapter 106: Interrupted*

The morning after the plaza, the letters started arriving before breakfast even started.

By the time Katarina sat down at her desk, there were eleven of them. By midmorning, there were twenty-six. Enza had stopped announcing them and just started stacking. They were all pre-order inquiries: merchants asking about early allocation, about exclusive district rights, about whether the Signora might find room in the first production run for an old friend of the house.

Some of these were the same people who'd pressed candied figs into her hands last week and told her how terrible it all was. The fruit seller's cousin wanted four units. A wine shipper who'd spent the spring calling her "the toilet girl" behind her back wanted twelve, and opened her letter with "esteemed Signora."

And the reason was all over the harbor by now, carried up the coast overnight by every sailor who'd watched two houses drown in sludge and cheese. The story had hardened into one perfect sentence: stolen Montecardi work dies in your hands.

The arrays answer to the house. Don't rob her, buy from her.

Katarina opened the Ledger.

[House Montecardi — Cold Container Venture]

[Pre-orders: 61 units (climbing)]

[Public Sentiment: "Cursed to thieves, golden to customers"]

[Marketing Spend: 2 faulty containers, 1 rumor, 0 marks]

She looked at that last line for a long moment, with deep professional satisfaction.

[Getting robbed twice was the best ad spend of the quarter.]

It really was. She'd run campaigns on Earth that cost eight figures and moved sentiment three points. This had cost her two sabotaged boxes and a sentence whispered over breakfast dishes. And it had turned theft itself into her brand protection.

Brynn, though, must never hear that sentence. She'd spent that robbery holding a man's collar next to a perfectly good tree and letting him run. She was still recovering. If she

found out her sacrifice had been filed under "marketing," she'd make the sad bear face for a week.

Some numbers stayed in the Ledger.

The launch math had settled cleanly, too. Tideglass opened in ten days. The festival's first morning was the opening market, when every merchant on the coast set out their best and the whole district came to spend.

So that was the launch: day one of Tideglass, a Montecardi stall at the heart of the opening market, with forty-three real units plus whatever she and Vessa finished by then, all in front of the biggest, drunkest crowd of the year.

[Hehehe... I can't wait!]

She worked straight through lunch on allocation lists, deposit terms, and a polite-but-firm reply template for everyone demanding exclusivity. Then in the afternoon she took herself out to the workshop, rolled her sleeves up, and got back to inscription. Pre-orders were promises, after all, and promises needed boxes.

She was four units in when the door opened. Vessa came in carrying a basket, wearing her short blue dress.

"I brought lunch," Vessa said, "and I'm here to help inscribe."

"You ate lunch at your shop two hours ago. Ottavia told me."

"I brought you lunch, and I'm here to help inscribe."

"You did arrays all morning at the shop, your qi's spent, and you told me yourself that doubling up makes your lines wobble."

"My lines are fine. Mostly. They're mostly fine."

"Vessa..."

"Okay." Vessa set the basket down, hopped up to sit on the workbench right beside the open container, and crossed her legs slowly. "Then I'm here to supervise."

"What's even in the basket?"

"Bread, cheese, and two plums... that I already ate on the walk over."

[Uh huh.]

Katarina went back to the array. She got one full line done. It was a good, clean line, and she was honestly proud of it, since Vessa had spent the entire time tracing one fingertip along Katarina’s forearm, up and down.

"Watching you work is stupidly attractive, you know that?" Vessa leaned in next to her ear. "I used to lose whole hours at the shop just staring."

[... How is one supposed to respond to that?]

"I have nine units left today."

"Mhm." Vessa slid down off the bench. Then, instead of going anywhere reasonable, she stepped over Katarina’s legs and settled into her lap, facing her, knees on either side of the chair. The short dress rode up her thighs and gave up entirely. "So work. I’m not stopping you."

She rolled her hips, once, right over where Katarina’s cock was already waking up under her trousers, and gave her the world’s least innocent smile.

[... I have nine units left!!!]

"You’re a menace," Katarina said.

"I’m a supervisor~" Vessa was already pulling at the laces of Katarina’s trousers, quick little tugs, and her grin got wider when Katarina’s hard cock sprang free into her hand. "Oh good, the staff is motivated."

There was, naturally, nothing under the dress. Vessa lifted up on her knees, lined the head of Katarina’s cock against her pussy, already slick, and sank down in one slow, greedy slide, all the way, until she was seated flush in Katarina’s lap with both arms looped around her neck.

"There," Vessa sighed, happy as anything. "Keep working."

"You cannot be serious."

"Nine units, Signora. The pre-orders are climbing." And she started to move, lifting and dropping in an easy rhythm, her wet pussy gripping tight around Katarina’s cock on every stroke.

So Katarina, who had restructured a regional economy and was in the process of outmaneuvering a whole sect, decided to take the challenge, because she had never once been able to turn one down. She reached past Vessa’s hip and fed a thread of qi into the next array line while her girlfriend bounced on her cock.

The line came out clean. It was a little slow, though.

[I am the greatest multitasker on this continent.]

"Are you actually," Vessa laughed, looking back over her shoulder at the box, riding her the whole time, "are you actually inscribing right now?"

"You said keep working." Katarina's voice came out rougher than planned, because Vessa had started grinding down at the bottom of each drop, tight little circles that were doing serious damage to her line spacing. "This unit ships Thursday."

"You're unbelievable." Vessa took Katarina's face in both hands and kissed her, still laughing. Then she picked up her pace, bouncing harder now, the wet sound of it filling the workshop, her bare ass slapping down against Katarina's thighs. "Put. It. Down."

Katarina got half of one more line done. Then Vessa deliberately clenched around her. Katarina's hand skidded, leaving a qi smear across two perfectly good glyphs, and that was the end of professional conduct in the Montecardi workshop.

[Okay fuck this.]

She grabbed Vessa by the hips with both hands, and thrust up into her pussy hard, meeting her on every drop. Vessa stopped teasing and just rode, dress slipping off one shoulder. Katarina pulled the front of it down, got a tit in her palm, and dragged her thumb over the nipple while she fucked up into her.

"There she is," Vessa breathed against her mouth. "Finally."

It didn't take long after that, for either of them.

Vessa came first, grinding down hard and shaking through it, her pussy fluttering tight around Katarina's cock. That squeezed Katarina right over the edge behind her. She buried herself deep and came inside her girlfriend with her face pressed into Vessa's neck, hips jerking through the last of it.

For a while they just sat there, Vessa draped over her like a warm blanket, Katarina's cock still inside her, the smeared array sitting on the bench in silent judgment.

"That one's ruined," Katarina said into her shoulder.

"You can fix it in ten minutes and you know it."

"Twelve minutes."

"I'll supervise."

Katarina burst out laughing. Vivienne Ross had never once laughed like this in thirty-two years. And she was still smiling into Vessa's hair when somebody pounded on the workshop door.

"Signora!" A young runner's voice came through the door, out of breath. "Signora, are you in there? Message from the harbor inn!"

Vessa lifted her head. They looked at each other.

"One moment!" Katarina called, in her best calm Signora voice. Vessa climbed off her lap with a wet, obscene slip and started straightening her dress, shaking with silent giggles. Katarina laced her trousers back up with cum-sticky fingers and decades of boardroom composure.

She opened the door looking perfectly composed. The runner, a dock kid of maybe twelve, held out a sealed note and rattled off the message anyway.

"From Master Renzo Caelford, Signora. He requests a private meeting. At your earliest convenience, he says. He means soon, though."

[Well. Okay then.]

Katarina took the note, tipped the kid two coppers, and looked back at Vessa, who was sitting on the workbench again, dress mostly fixed, eyes bright.

"Renzo wants to talk," Katarina said. "Privately."

"The launch is in ten days, and most of the competition is busy tripping over themselves." Vessa swung her feet. "I'd want to talk too."

Chapter 107: Deal

{Katarina}

The Black Lotus had taken the whole top floor of the plain inn off the harbor road, and they'd done absolutely nothing with it.

That was the first thing Katarina noticed when the runner showed her up. The furniture was still in its shipping crates, stacked against the wall and roped shut. There was no crest over the door, no banner, no rug. Just bare boards, one table they'd uncrated for the occasion, and two chairs.

[They're not unpacking because they don't plan to stay. Cute.]

Renzo Caelford stood when she came in, which was polite. He gestured her to the chair across from him, which was also polite. Then he poured her tea.

And that was the insult.

On this coast, when making a deal as a human with a valdari, you didn’t open a deal with tea. You opened it with wine. Valdari hospitality ran on it. You poured, you drank, and you let the other person see you weren’t in a hurry, that their company was worth a cup before a single number got said out loud. That was the whole point. Wine first, business after.

Tea was a central-kingdom thing. Tea told you this was just business and nothing else, that there’d be no warmth, no waiting, no pretending either of you liked the other.

Renzo set the little cup down in front of her, steam coming off it, and he smiled. He knew exactly what he’d just done.

"Signora," he said. "Good of you to come so quickly."

[Oh, we’re doing it like this? Sure, then.]

Katarina sat. She looked at the tea, then she reached into the bag on her shoulder, pulled out the bottle she’d brought along just in case, and set it on his bare table with a solid little clunk.

It was Duscari red, two years aged, blue wax over the cork, from a vineyard forty miles up her own coast.

"You’ll forgive me," she said, pulling the cork with her thumb, "but I’m home, and at home we do this properly."

She poured two cups. His first, then hers. She slid his across the table so it sat right next to the tea he’d given her, the two drinks side by side, his insult and her answer. She left them both there for him to look at.

Renzo looked at the wine a moment. Then he picked it up and drank. He looked like she’d taken a point he hadn’t planned on giving away.

"Good wine," he said.

[One to nothing.]

"I’ll be honest with you," he went on, settling back. "I asked you here to congratulate you."

Katarina waited. People who opened with a compliment usually had a knife somewhere behind it.

"The boxes," he said. "The ones that vanished off the roads and turned up rotting on two stages in Coppara, in front of the whole port. That was good work. The best anyone's run on me in years."

"I had a run of bad luck with bandits," Katarina said. "Terrible, really. I'm a victim here."

He laughed.

"Of course you are." He set his cup down. "Let me be clear, Signora. Those weren't my people on those roads. The crews that grabbed your bait, the houses that copied your work and stood it up on a stage, those were greedy little nobodies who heard a rumor and ran at it. They burned. That's their problem, not mine."

"Mhm."

"My plan never moved an inch," Renzo said. "I didn't chase your decoys, and I didn't lose a single mark. So no, I'm not here angry. I don't hold grudges against good work. I'd rather learn from it."

[He's telling the truth. That's the annoying part.]

And it was. She'd built that whole trap for the dumb, greedy field, and the dumb, greedy field had walked right into it. Renzo had just stood off to the side and watched it happen with his hands in his pockets. He hadn't lost a thing, though. He'd never reached for the bait in the first place.

Which meant his actual plan was still sitting there, untouched, waiting.

"So here's where we are," Renzo said. "You launch in ten days. At Tideglass, I'm told. Big stall, big crowd, the whole coast drunk and spending." He spread his hands. "And on that morning, Signora, I'm going to walk up to your stall like anybody else, and I'm going to buy your cold containers. With marks. At your posted price. Like an honest customer."

There it was.

[And there's the knife.]

"You can't stop me," he said, calm as anything. "I'm not a thief. I'm a man with coin who wants to buy a thing you're selling to the public. And if you turn me away, in front of that crowd, on the day you're supposed to be the people's Signora..." He shrugged. "What does that look like? The girl who beat the big bad sect by being fair, by selling to everyone, suddenly won't sell to a paying customer? That folk-hero story of yours is lovely. It only works if you never say no out loud."

Katarina looked at him.

Admittedly, he wasn’t wrong, and that was the worst part.

Her whole brand right now was that she played clean and they didn’t. If she refused him in public, she handed him the exact story he wanted, that the Montecardi girl talked about fairness but didn’t mean it. And then he’d carry her box home and pull it apart with the whole Sect behind him.

It was a good trap, and she could admire it. She’d seen plenty like it before, clean books that looked perfect right up until she found the lie somebody had buried in them.

So she didn’t argue it. She went the other way instead.

"Can I ask you something?" She picked up her wine, easy, like they were just talking now. "Off the deal."

Renzo nodded.

"What’s it like," she said, "working for a subsidiary?"

It was a small thing. She said it lightly, like she was asking after somebody’s bad knee. And she watched his face the whole time she said it.

His smile didn’t drop. He was far too good for that. But it slipped, just a hair, a millimeter at the corner. You don’t catch a thing like that unless you’ve spent two lifetimes getting paid to read rooms.

[There it is.]

The Black Lotus called Renzo their "southern commerce arm," and an arm wasn’t the body.

Somebody had hands on his shoulders that he answered to, just like Cabrian. She’d suspected it before. Now she knew, because a man who’s truly at the top doesn’t flinch when you call him middle management.

"I run the southern operations," Renzo said, smooth again, the millimeter gone. "We all answer to something, Signora. You answer to that crowd you love so much."

"I do," she agreed, pleasantly. "I just like knowing the shape of who I’m talking to."

He decided they were done immediately after that, which suited her fine.

He reached for the inn’s bill, the little folder left out so guests could sign for their room and their food. He opened it to put his name to the tea. And he did it like important men

do, turned toward himself, not thinking about the girl across the table. What could she possibly see from over there?

A lot, as it turned out.

Katarina read upside down as easily as other people read right side up. The page was a plain record of money paid out, just room, board, and a messenger fee. But there, stamped at the bottom where the Sect's coin came from, was the seal.

It wasn't a Black Lotus seal. It was a debt house, Vannetti, out of the central kingdoms. They loaned you money and then owned a piece of you until you paid it back.

So the Black Lotus didn't pay its people straight. It ran their wages through a debt house.

[Which means the ones drawing that coin aren't just hired. They're owed against.]

And that, quietly, was the most useful thing she'd picked up all afternoon.

Someone you just pay can walk away whenever they like. But someone you pay through a house they already owe money to can't. They show up anyway. The other option is worse. It was a leash dressed up as a wage.

She kept her face flat and filed it where she filed everything.

"Thank you for the tea," she said, standing. She left the wine. "Keep the bottle. Welcome to the coast."

The Lotus floor let out onto a narrow landing, with a stair down to the harbor road. Samara was there, leaning on the rail, waiting to walk her down, like she always did.

Except today Samara had done something to herself.

She'd traded the road clothes for a deep red wrap that actually fit her, sleeveless, cut to show off arms a fighter had earned and a back that went on for a while. Her short black hair was styled. She'd done up her eyes. She looked, and there was no other honest word for it, distractingly good.

"Signora," Samara said. She'd caught the half-second too long Katarina spent looking, and she was grinning about it. "You can look, you know. Staring's the rude part."

Katarina huffed, lifted her chin, and walked right past her down the stairs.

She had a debt house, a subsidiary, and a launch to think about. She did not have time to think about Samara's arms.

She thought about them most of the way home.

Chapter 108: Information Gathering

{Vessa}

The whole waterfront had turned into a different place overnight, and Vessa loved it.

She walked the harbor road with a basket on her hip and just grinned at all of it. They'd strung glass floats between the buildings, hundreds of them, blue, green, and pale gold, hanging on lines that crossed back and forth over the street so the whole road sat under a little glass sky. Wine stalls were going up everywhere, and the sellers were already fighting over who got which corner, which was honestly half the fun. Somebody two streets over was tuning a stringed thing very badly. The fish sellers had the late-summer catch out, the big silver stuff, the good stuff, the stuff Tideglass was actually about.

And every single piece of it had Katarina's fingerprints on it.

[She did all this.]

That was the part that got Vessa, walking through it. Three weeks ago this had been a normal grumpy port that couldn't agree on anything. Now it ran like a clock. Her girlfriend had sat at a desk buried in permits, lamp-oil quotes, and angry letters about whose street got the musicians. And she'd just... fixed it.

The way she fixed everything. Quietly, completely, like it was nothing.

Watching Kat work was the most attractive thing in the world, and watching a whole town move because Kat made it move was somehow worse.

[God, I've got it bad.]

The wine sellers had been at it since dawn. Two of them, Duli and old Marra, were arguing over the same corner by the rope-maker's, and the second Vessa came past they both rounded on her like she'd been appointed to settle it.

"Tell her," Duli said. "I had that corner last year."

"You had the corner by the well last year." Marra didn't look at Duli, only at Vessa. "She's a liar, and her wine tastes like she washed her feet in it."

"It's an acquired taste!"

"Split it." Vessa didn't slow down. "Duli takes the morning crowd. Marra takes the evening drinkers, who tip better anyway, so really she's done you a favor, Duli. And the both of you stop screaming across my family's shopfront before my mother comes out to see about the noise." She was already past them. "Lovely. So glad we sorted it."

Behind her the shouting dropped to grumbling. It usually did, the moment she got far enough off.

So Vessa was already in a very good mood when she spotted Samara.

She was over by a half-built wine stall, pretending to look at the harbor. She wasn't, though. Nobody looks at a harbor like that, stiff, shoulders up around their ears. She was watching the street and trying hard to look like she wasn't, which, fair, that was her whole job. Vessa knew exactly what Samara was and who she worked for. Kat had told her all of it, and said she could do whatever she liked with it.

[Whatever I like, hm?]

Well. It would be fun. And it was sort of her job now too.

So Vessa changed course and went straight at her, basket and all.

"You again," she said, bright, like running into her was the best thing all week.

Samara turned, and for half a second she looked like a kid caught stealing, which was adorable on a woman that tall. She had a candle in her fist.

"Tideglass," she said, holding it up like that settled it. "Need them for the festival, don't I?"

"Mm." Vessa came in close, closer than she had any reason to be, and looked up at the candle instead of at her. Samara was tall, and Vessa was extremely not. "Everybody gets the sunberry ones for Tideglass. That's plain tallow you've got."

Samara looked at the candle. She set it back on the shelf.

"Then sell me a sunberry one."

"You'd do better at Lyna's stall, down by the water. Hers are half what I charge." Vessa shrugged. "I keep telling my mothers we'll lose every candle on this street to Lyna. They keep telling me about margins."

"What time do you close?"

"...Why's that?"

"Wouldn't want to cost your mothers a sale."

"Lyna delivers, you know. Right up to your door. You'd never have to walk this road again."

"I like this road."

There she went.

A cheaper candle, a shorter walk, a girl who'd carry it all up the hill for her, every one of them turned down so she could stand here one more minute. And she'd done it without once saying so out loud. Vessa could have kissed her right there. She decided she'd rather make her wait for it.

"We close when my mother's chest gives out on the dust, so, practically never." Vessa reached up and slowly brushed a speck off Samara's collar that wasn't there. "Which leaves you all afternoon to think up your next reason. Rope, was it, on Tuesday? Lamp oil before that. You go through more of my shop than the whole harbor does."

"You sell good rope."

"We sell the same rope as everyone on this coast."

"Yours is better," Samara said it looking at Vessa, not at any rope.

Vessa let that sit between them, pleased, and didn't argue it.

A woman from the next stall leaned in to ask whether the shop had any oilcloth left. Vessa answered her without once looking away from Samara, a price, a yes, the second shelf on the left. The woman thanked her and went.

Samara had watched all of it.

"You didn't look at her once," she said.

"I know where the oilcloth is." Vessa smiled up at her. "I keep an eye on the whole street. It's the job."

Samara didn't answer that. She just looked at her, steady, and let the excuse die where it stood.

And there, for once, Vessa had nothing to add to it. She'd been the one to close the gap. She wasn't about to step out of it now.

Samara's eyes dropped to Vessa's mouth, just for a second, then came back up. There was the answer, and neither of them had said a word.

"You know I work for people you shouldn't be this friendly with," Samara said, quietly.

[Oh. That's sweet.]

"I know exactly who you work for," Vessa said, and she kept it light, because the best part was letting Samara wonder how much that meant. She didn't say a word about Kat, or the green light, or any of it. She just smiled. "I'm friendly anyway. It's kind of my whole thing."

"That's a bad habit."

"Best one I've got." Vessa smoothed the collar flat one last time, and left her hand there a breath longer than she needed to.

Samara looked at her for a long moment. Her face went soft and stayed that way. Vessa knew she had her. Fully. The careful part of her had packed up and gone home. It left this big quiet woman just standing in the street getting flirted into the ground in broad daylight.

So Vessa decided to have a little fun with it.

She let the moment hang. Then she went up on her toes, slowly, one hand still resting on Samara's collar, and she leaned in like she absolutely meant it. She watched Samara's whole body tip down toward her to meet it, watched the tall scary thief melt, eyes starting to close, watched her lean the rest of the way in.

And right then, an inch short, Vessa stopped.

She dropped back down onto her heels, gave Samara's chest one little pat, and stepped back with the sunniest smile she owned.

"Come have dinner at my place sometime," she said, like she hadn't just done that at all. "My moms always cook way too much."

Samara just stood there.

She blinked at the empty bit of air where Vessa had been a second ago. It took her a real moment to catch up to what had happened. When she finally got there, the look on her face landed somewhere between robbed and impressed. Vessa thought that was a perfect look for her.

"...Yeah," Samara said. Her voice came out a little rough. "Yeah. Okay."

"Great!" Vessa pulled her basket back up onto her hip and was already turning away. "I'll send word."

"You played dirty," Samara said to her back.

"I know!"

And Vessa walked off down the glass-lit street, swinging her basket, feeling extremely good about herself. Behind her, Duli and Marra had already found something new to fight about. Somebody finally got that stringed thing in tune. The whole town smelled like salt and spilled wine. The good days were just getting started.

She'd flirted a Black Lotus spy into a puddle and gotten her to agree to dinner at the house, where she could get a good long look at her. And she hadn't given up a single thing doing it. Kat was going to be so smug. Vessa couldn't wait to tell her.

[Job well done if you ask me.]

Chapter 109: Host

{Vessa}

Kat had told her, flat out, that she wasn't coming.

"It's your dinner," she'd said, eyes still on her inscription work. "You set it up, you run it. I'll be a Chapter behind on the festival ledgers and very glad to miss salt-cod night. Besides, do you know how awkward that would be? Go have fun."

So it was Kat's house, Kat's family, Kat's everything, and Kat herself was the one part of it that wasn't going to be there. Vessa had thought about that the whole walk over with Samara.

Samara was off the second they stepped through the gate.

She didn't say anything about it, but she didn't have to. Vessa just watched her go a little stiff in the shoulders, watched her eyes do a slow pass over the courtyard, the lamps, the door, like she was counting exits, and Vessa knew exactly what she was thinking.

This is the Montecardi estate. This is also Vessa's house, clearly. And here was Samara, walking into it on a dinner invite from the Montecardi Signora's girlfriend, which was about the strangest place a Black Lotus spy could find herself standing via invitation.

Vessa decided not to make it easy on her. She just took her hand and pulled her inside.

Then Brynn happened.

"There she is!" Brynn came across the front room like a landslide, red, huge, and grinning. She had Samara by both shoulders before the poor woman's coat was even half off. "Vessa's friend! Welcome, welcome, sit, you're letting the warm out. Seris! Seris, the girl's here!"

"I can hear you, my love. The whole coast can hear you."

And Brynn was already pressing a cup into Samara’s hand, the good cup, the guest-cup, wine to the brim, before Samara had gotten one arm free of her sleeve. Vessa watched that part closely.

Here was the thing about the guest-cup. Every Valdari child knew it. You took the wine your host put in your hand. You drank it. That was the whole deal, going back further than anybody could remember. The cup said you’re safe under this roof, and I’m safe with you in it. And turning it down, just letting it sit there in your hand, was a slap in the face. It meant you’d come into someone’s house meaning them harm. There was no soft version of it.

Samara knew. Vessa watched her clock the cup, clock what it meant, do the whole quick read in about half a second, this woman who worked for people aimed straight at the family feeding her. And Vessa saw the exact moment she decided. Her throat moved. She lifted the cup and drank.

[Good girl.]

"There she goes!" Brynn boomed, delighted, and clapped her on the back hard enough to stagger her. "Drank it like she was born here. Vessa, I like this one."

"Everybody likes me, Brynn."

"They do! Now sit, before Ottavia’s stew sets like mortar."

Seris came in then, and the temperature of the room changed.

She didn’t do anything, though. That was the unsettling part. She just smiled, warm, and said how nice it was that Vessa was bringing friends around, despite the fact that she, of course, knew this woman.

She poured Samara more wine and asked after the festival prep. And the whole time, her purple eyes never quite left Samara’s face.

Vessa had known Seris for years. She’d been fed by her, scolded by her, hugged by her. And she’d never been under this level of scrutiny from Seris.

Samara sat very straight and answered every question like it might bite.

Vessa loved her moms-in-law-ish, but she let it ride. A little fear was good for the digestion.

Dinner was the salt-cod stew, which meant it was wonderful and also a bit of a war crime.

Ottavia set it down beaming. Vessa took one spoonful and felt her whole mouth pucker, because somehow, against all reason, Ottavia had made the stew saltier than the salt-cod

itself. The cod was in there as a calming influence. Samara took a bite, her eyes went a little wide, and she reached fast for her water. Vessa kicked her gently under the table, like this was her way of being welcomed to the family.

And then Greta leaned over.

Vessa's mom had come along, of course. She'd never miss a free dinner and a chance to talk wine with Brynn. She was mid-sentence about barrels when she just tipped sideways and dragged a slow, lazy kiss across Vessa's mouth, tongue and all, casual as passing the salt. Then she went right back to her barrels.

Vessa giggled. But across the table, Samara dropped her fork.

It hit the bowl with a clatter. She caught it and looked very hard at her stew. Vessa wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, completely unbothered.

[Hm... Not from Vellasera at all, are ya?] Vessa clocked.

"More stew?" Vessa asked her sweetly.

"I'm. Good." Samara cleared her throat. "Thank you."

So the warmth was real, all of it. And the whole time, under it, Vessa was working.

She was good at this. She'd never had to learn it, it just came free, like a knack for remembering faces. People wanted to talk about themselves. You gave them a soft opening, a little ledge to step onto. They climbed up and told you their life. She'd done it to half the harbor. So she lobbed Samara the easy ones, gentle, nothing that looked like a question.

"Where are you from? You don't sound coast."

"Around, mostly." Samara dragged a piece of bread through her stew. "Never stayed put long enough for any of it to stick."

"Mm." Vessa propped her chin on her hand. "Anybody waiting on you back wherever-around? Somebody who worries?"

"You worried about me, Vessa?" She just smiled, and that was the whole answer, handed right back across the table.

And every time a runner had come to the shop with a letter for her this past week, Vessa had watched Samara go tight and tuck it away fast, so she tried that one too, light as anything.

"You always look like the house is on fire when one of those letters turns up. What's the rush?"

"Work never sleeps." Samara shrugged. "Somebody always needs a thing done yesterday." She smiled and went back to her stew.

And that was it. That was all Vessa got, every single time.

It wasn't that Samara lied. Vessa could spot a lie at forty paces, she sold dry goods. It was that there was nothing to spot. Samara just deflected, warm, every single time, a wall with no edge to it, no seam to get a fingernail under. She'd turn the question into a joke, or hand it back, or give an answer so small it slid right off the table. And she did it without thinking, easy, like it was older than the meal, older than Vessa, a thing she'd been doing since before she knew she was doing it.

[Huh.]

That was new. Vessa flirted with the whole coast and read every one of them like a price tag. She couldn't read this one at all, though. And she found she didn't like that nearly as much as she'd thought she would. One person on the whole coast, and she couldn't get the lid off.

She didn't let it show. She just kept smiling and passing the bread.

She cornered her after, out on the porch, once Samara made her excuses to leave early and Brynn was loudly insisting she take stew home in a jar.

Out there it was just the two of them, the dark, the harbor sounds. And Vessa let the shopkeeper drop, all of it, the bright voice, the toes, the little game.

"Hey." Vessa bumped her shoulder against Samara's arm, which was about as high as she could reach. "No angle on this one, I promise. I like you, you're good company. That's the whole pitch."

Samara looked at her like she wanted to answer and couldn't find where she'd left the words.

"You don't have to hand me anything," Vessa said. "Door's open is all. Whenever you want it. I mean, maybe not here. But my shop, at least."

And Samara opened her mouth.

"The stew was nice."

That was it. That and that she'd had a nice time, but also that she really did have to go.

A lie she could've worked with. This was just a soft no, dressed up nice.

"Get home safe," Vessa said, and meant it.

Samara took her jar and went, quick, down the dark road. Vessa watched her go, and the good night went a little flat.

She went up to Kat's room after.

Kat was still awake, ledger open, lamp low. She looked up when Vessa came in and read her face in about a second, like she read everything.

"That bad?"

"No." Vessa sat down on the edge of the bed and thought about how to say it. "Good, actually. I like her. I really do."

"But."

"But something's eating that woman alive, Kat." Vessa frowned at the lamp. "And I couldn't get a single inch in. Not one. I've never not gotten an inch in."

And Kat, who had her own quiet reasons to wonder exactly who was holding Samara's leash and how short it was pulled, set her pen down.

"Tell me everything," she said.

Chapter 110: Listening Stone

{Samara}

Samara couldn't stop thinking about the dinner, which was a problem, because thinking about the dinner didn't get anything done.

She lay on her bedroll in the dark, the tent flap open. She stared up at the canvas and ran it all back. The big red one had clapped her on the back hard enough to bruise. The purple one had smiled the whole time. The salt cod had nearly killed her.

And then there was Vessa, who'd handed her a wine cup she couldn't say no to. She'd sat across the table being so warm that, for about an hour, Samara forgot she was working at all.

And that was the part that scared her, the forgetting.

Then there’d been the porch. Vessa had dropped the whole act out there, the bright voice and the toes and the little game, and just said it plain.

No angle. The door’s open whenever you want it.

[She liked me. She said it plainly. Nobody ever says it plainly.]

Her mother shifted in the other bedroll and coughed, that wet rattle she’d had for years, and Samara stopped thinking about Vessa.

She got up quietly so she wouldn’t wake her. She checked the mule on the way out, scratched its nose, made sure the line was tied off, and then she walked down off the rise toward the town, toward the lamps and the glass floats, toward the inn where Renzo would be sitting with his human tea, ruining a perfectly good evening.

The Lotus floor was bare as ever. The crates were still stacked along the wall, the furniture still half-packed, like they might pick up and leave tonight. Renzo sat at the one table they’d bothered to set up, and he didn’t look up from his papers when she came in.

"You ate with them," he said.

So he already knew. Of course he already knew.

"Montecardi’s girlfriend asked. Turning it down would’ve looked strange."

"It was good of you to accept." He set down his pen. "Useful, even. You’ve got a way into that house now."

"I’ve got a way to dinner. That’s not the same thing." Samara stayed standing. She always stayed standing in this room. "Besides, Vessa’s not in anything, Renzo. She runs a dry goods shop and does a little array work. That’s all she is. She doesn’t know what we’re doing, and she’s never once sat in a room where any of it got decided."

"She works in the workshop where the cold containers are inscribed. That’s all she needs to be doing to qualify for what I have in mind."

"... And that is?" Samara raised a brow.

Renzo took something out of his pocket and set it on the table between them.

It was a small gray stone, no bigger than a knuckle, keyed to its pair. You set it somewhere with talking in it, and the pair hummed every word back to whoever held the other one. He just left it sitting there on the wood.

"A listening stone?"

"You're going to put that in the Talori workshop," he said. "You've got access no one else does. The girl will walk you right in."

Samara looked at the stone and didn't pick it up. And she felt that hot tightness behind her ribs that wanted to tip the table over and walk out into the night, keep walking. She didn't do it, though. She never did.

Renzo sighed, seeing her hesitate. He laced his fingers together and said:

"Samara. Your contract has a renegotiation clause. You read it. Your mother read it too, before her eyes got bad." He said it gently, like he was telling her about the weather. "The clause lets the Lotus call the full balance whenever it suits us. The whole debt, all at once. And you don't have the whole debt, do you? You don't have a tenth of it. You've got a tent, a mule, and a sick woman who belongs to us until the last coin's paid."

"I know what's in the contract."

"Then you know what calling it would mean. The camp. The mule. Your mother goes into proper indenture, the kind with walls, not a tent on a hill." He picked the stone back up and held it out to her, across the table, on his open palm. "Or you walk a friendly girl back into her own workshop and you set this on a shelf. One of those is very easy. So choose."

Samara looked at his hand for a long time.

And then she took the stone, put it in her pocket, and walked out without saying anything, because there wasn't anything to say that wouldn't break something she couldn't afford to break.

{Katarina}

Signora Valcetti read the certification papers for exactly as long as they deserved, not one second more, and then she stamped them. Katarina had to work very hard to keep her face professional.

"Your arrays meet assessed standard," Valcetti said, in the flat way she said everything, the way that couldn't be charmed or bribed or rushed. "The inscriptions are clean. The tolerances are documented. The signature work is consistent across all forty-three units. Certified."

"Thank you, Signora."

"Don't thank me. The paperwork was correct. That's the whole of it."

Which was, somehow, the highest praise the woman had in her. So Katarina took her stamped folio, walked out into the street, and let herself enjoy it, just for a minute. A clean little win that nobody had handed her and nobody could take back.

Because here was the trade she'd made:

Certifying her arrays meant putting real Montecardi work on the public record. It told every rival on the coast exactly what genuine Montecardi inscription looked like, right down to the signature curl, which was basically a gift to anybody trying to copy her. She was spending her secret. She knew that.

But she was spending it to buy something the law would hold onto for her. A certified array was a registered array. Any copy of a registered array was a forgery, and forgeries couldn't move on assessed routes. So the Sarrenzis, the Olcaris, and whoever came next could reverse-engineer her box all they wanted. The second they tried to sell it anywhere that mattered, an assessor like Valcetti would stamp it untradeable, and they'd be stuck sitting on a warehouse full of cold boxes they legally could not move.

So she'd traded a secret for a lock. And the lock was made out of other people's laws, which meant she didn't even have to guard it herself.

[Best kind of fence. The one the other guy's paying for.]

She was very pleased with herself the whole way home, and that always left her keyed up, brain still running the numbers, the old corner-office hum that never fully shut off no matter how good the day got. There was only one thing that ever really worked on that.

And so, that evening, she went to the baths!

The baths were the one place Katarina actually let herself switch off. Warm water, low lamps, the whole room smelling like the cedar oil Seris bought by the crate. She sank in up to her chin and felt her shoulders finally quit on her. First time all day. And, good grief, what a day it had been.

Seris was already in, naturally. She could smell a good mood coming, after all, and got there first just to ambush Kat's dignity. Katarina drifted over and tipped her head back without asking, because asking was for people who hadn't been doing this their whole life, and Seris just laughed and reeled her in.

And so Kat ended up exactly where she always ended up, the back of her head pillowed between her mother's tits, the water holding her up, nothing in her hands for once.

[...Yeah. I'm not moving for an hour. Try and make me.]

"Valcetti certified the arrays," she said up at the ceiling, real casual, like she hadn't been dying to say it since lunch.

"I heard. Ottavia announced it with the soup." Seris's fingers ran slowly through Kat's wet hair. "Aw, my brilliant girl! You locked the whole district out with one little stamp."

"Mhm~ That was the whole point." She played it cool and unbothered, absolutely not glowing like a hot coal on the inside.

"Mm. And did that great stone wall of a woman say a single nice thing to my girl, or did she just stamp and scowl her way through it?"

"She told me the paperwork was correct."

Seris pulled back a little to look at her, scandalized.

"That's all? After forty-three units?"

"From Valcetti, that's a love letter." Kat shrugged against her. "She doesn't hand those out twice a year. I might frame it."

That got a real laugh out of Seris. She leaned in, arms wrapped around Katarina. She was already kind of wrapped in all things Seris, and yet Seris managed to wrap more of herself around her. Amazing.

"Listen to you~" She put her chin on Katarina's shoulder, grinning. "Thirteen years building this house back up from a wine stain on a ledger, and now you've got the assessors doing your guard duty for you." She kissed the top of Kat's head, then her temple, then her cheek, proud, the same as she'd done since Kat was knee-high. "I'm so proud of you I can't stand it. Now tell me about Tideglass," she said, as she kept kissing Kat's neck over and over again.

"Good grief," Kat sighed, though she tilted her head to the side to make it easier for her. And so, she told her about Tideglass.

The wine stalls, the glass floats, which musicians got which street, and whether Brynn could be trusted anywhere near the open casks. (She could not. Everyone knew it. They were going to let her near them anyway, because that's just how this family worked.) And Katarina lay there, warm and held, letting the numbers in her head finally, finally go quiet.

{Samara}

The stone weighed nothing. It was knuckle-sized and light as a pebble, so it had no business sitting in Samara's pocket like a brick. But there it was.

She stood across the road from the Talori workshop with her hood up, watching the one lit window like it might do something. It didn’t. Of course it didn’t. It was a window.

[Just walk over there. Set the stone, walk back, done. Easy. He said it himself. Easy.]