CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 111: Performance

{Samara}

In the end, Samara crossed the road.

The workshop lock was a joke. Vessa had walked her through here twice already, chatting the whole time, never once thinking of her as a person who picks locks for a living. So getting in took her about as long as it takes to feel terrible about it.

Which was to say, not long at all.

Inside, it smelled like cedar shavings. There was a half-finished cold container on the bench, with Vessa's neat little handwriting on a tag tied to the handle.

[Just pick a shelf and be done with it.]

She tucked the stone behind a jar of reagent dust on the high shelf, somewhere you'd never look unless you were dusting. And Vessa did not strike her as a woman who dusted. Then she stood there a second, and promptly let herself out.

[There. Done.]

She pulled her hood up and went home.

{Vessa}

Dusting was one of Vessa's favorite hobbies!

Most people thought it was boring. Vessa thought it was relaxing, wiping things down and lining them back up just so. And the high shelves were the best part, since nobody else ever touched them, so they got properly filthy, which made the aftermath look that much better.

So there she was the next morning, up on the stool with her rag, humming to herself, running the cloth along the high shelf. She reached behind the jar of reagent dust, and her fingers bumped a little gray something that absolutely, definitely, one hundred percent did not belong there.

Vessa knew her own shop. She knew where every jar sat. She'd never put anything behind that one in her life.

So she leaned in, peered down behind the jar, and the second she saw the little seam of quartz down its side her whole stomach dropped through the floor.

[That's a listening stone. That is a LISTENING STONE!!!]

And it was sitting in her workshop. In her shop. Behind her reagent dust. Which meant somebody had been in here, somebody had climbed up to her shelf, somebody who knew her, somebody she'd let in...

[Oh no. Oh no no no.]

And then a colder thought caught up to the first one, and this one she made herself finish, because it mattered. If that was a listening stone, then it was listening. Right now. To her.

Vessa clapped both hands over her own mouth before anything dumb could fall out of it.

[Don't touch it. Don't say anything. Be a normal girl in a normal shop, Vessa. You can do that. You absolutely can do that.]

She could not, really, but she tried.

She climbed down off the stool quietly, left the stone exactly where it sat, and walked herself to the door at the most boring pace she had ever walked anywhere in her life. Then she got outside, shut it behind her, and ran the whole way to the Montecardi estate without stopping once, which, given the hill, was frankly a real athletic achievement she'd have been proud of any other day.

{Katarina}

Vessa came through the door pink, gasping, and already talking, which was normal, except there was no candle-shop sparkle under it this time, which was not.

"Kat. Kat! There's a stone in my shop, behind the reagent dust. I never put it there, I climbed up and it's got this little seam down the side and I think, I'm pretty sure, I think it's a listening... Oh gods."

"Breathe first." Katarina set down her pen. "So, where, exactly?"

Vessa told her all about it.

The high shelf, the quartz seam, the part where she'd had the good sense to keep her mouth shut and walk out. Kat listened, and somewhere behind her eyes, two separate facts reached over and held hands.

[A listening stone. In Vessa's shop. Behind the dust, where nobody would ever look.]

She already knew whose it was. But knowing and seeing were two different things, and Katarina did not act on the first when she could afford the second.

"Show me. And from the second we're through that door, you don't say one word in there you wouldn't want read aloud in a courtroom. Got it?"

Vessa nodded.

They went to the shop. Kat stopped just inside the door, by the front counter, and did not take one step closer.

The stone was right where Vessa said, all the way across the room on the high shelf, a dull gray nothing peeking out from behind a jar.

[Oh, hello.]

She didn't need to hold it. She could see the seam from here, that telltale line of keyed quartz, and the Ledger filled in the rest before she'd even finished looking.

Object: Paired Listening Array.

Make: Central-kingdom inscription, Lotus-pattern fold.

Status: Active. Currently transmitting.

So. Black Lotus. Renzo.

Of course it was.

Katarina almost smiled, and only didn't because a smile was something a clever enemy could hear in your voice three sentences later. She'd built an empire once on not being the one who got careless first.

She leaned her head in close to Vessa's, turned them both away from the shelf, and dropped her voice down to almost nothing.

"It's a listening stone. Lotus make. It's on right now, so whatever it's catching, it's catching live. Don't look at it. Don't change your face."

"Then we smash it," Vessa breathed back in complete seriousness, "or move it, or chuck it in the harbor, or, Kat, somebody was in my shop, somebody stood right where I'm standing..."

"We leave it exactly where it is."

Vessa opened her mouth, then shut it again, the whole protest stuck behind her teeth where her voice couldn't get to it.

"...You want to keep a spy rock on my shelf," she managed, finally. "On purpose?"

"They handed us a present, Vessa." Kat kept her voice to almost nothing. "You don't throw it back. You open it quietly and read every word inside."

Here was the thing, and it was so good she needed a second to enjoy it even at a whisper.

A listening stone only worked one way. Renzo could hear what was said near it. But he had no way of knowing what Kat knew, which meant he had no idea she'd found it at all. He thought he was listening through a keyhole. He didn't realize Kat was already on the other side of the door, holding a script.

[An enemy who hands you their ears hands you a mouth. You don't break the thing. You feed it.]

"If we smash it," Kat murmured, while Vessa's eyes got bigger and bigger, "Renzo learns we found it, he gets careful, and next time he tries something I can't see coming. But if we leave it right there, sweetly, picking up every word we want him to pick up..."

"...then you get to tell him whatever you want," Vessa breathed, and then her whole face changed, the fear sliding straight off and the grin sliding straight on, because if there was one thing Vessa loved more than candles it was being on the winning side of a mean little plan. "Oh. Oh, that's nasty. I love it. Can I help?"

"You're going to do most of it."

So they staged it.

The idea was simple. Vessa goes back to the shop, carries on like a girl who never found a thing, and from now on, anything they wanted the Lotus to believe, she'd just say out loud near that shelf like an idiot who had no clue she was being heard. Easy. They'd rehearse at the estate, though, safely out of the stone's range, because a listening stone that got to hear Vessa practice her lies a dozen times would rather defeat the point.

The execution was where it got rough, because Vessa, it turned out, was the single worst actor Katarina had ever witnessed, and Kat had once sat through a board member fake-crying about quarterly losses.

"Okay," Vessa said, way too loud, planting her hands on her hips in the middle of Kat's room as a rehearsal. "GOSH. I sure am ALONE in my WORKSHOP, thinking about HOUSE MONTECARDI'S SECRET PLANS..."

"No."

"...which I, a TRUSTED MEMBER of the inner circle, know ALL about..."

"Vessa. Stop. Nobody talks like that."

"Y-You said say it out loud!"

"Out loud, not like a town crier announcing a fire." Katarina pinched the bridge of her nose. "Quieter. Bored. Like you're talking to yourself because you forgot something, not performing a play for the back row. Again."

Vessa took a breath, screwed her face up in concentration, and tried again, smaller this time.

"...Ugh, where'd I put that note about the, um, the route thing..."

"Better. Less 'um.' The 'um' sells it but you said it like you were reaching for it."

"This is so hard. How are you good at this?"

"Thirty years of meetings I wasn't allowed to be honest in."

"What?"

Katarina waved a hand.

"Again. And drift while you say it, walk around, don't aim your voice at the shelf. People who know they're being heard aim. People who don't, wander."

By the fourth take Vessa had actually gotten decent.

The bored little mutter, the half-finished sentences, the whole texture of a girl alone in a room not thinking about being overheard. Somewhere around the sixth take, Vessa had migrated. Katarina wasn't sure exactly when. One minute she was directing from the chair, and the next Vessa was in her lap, still running lines, one arm looped around Kat's neck, one hand wandering down Kat's side. And that hand had nothing to do with acting.

Neither of them said anything about it. There were priorities.

"Again," Katarina said, very evenly, ignoring the hand. "And this time, mention the Greypass shipment, but get the date wrong. On purpose. Subtle."

"Mm." Vessa's mouth was near her ear now. The hand kept wandering. "The Greypass run leaves the... eighth, I think? No, ninth..."

"Perfect. That's the one. Do it exactly like that." Kat made a note on the desk without looking, because if she looked down she was going to lose the thread entirely, and the thread mattered. "You're a natural liar when you stop trying."

"Best compliment you've ever given me."

"I know."

Chapter 112: Taste

{Samara}

Standing guard for Renzo while he listened to a rock was, hands down, the most boring job Samara had ever been handed.

He sat there at his bare little table with the paired stone cupped in both hands, head tilted, eyes half shut, like a philosopher. He'd been at it a while now, and he could happily keep at it a while more.

Samara stood by the door, watched the wall, and tried not to think about anything, which she was bad at, since thinking was basically all she did anymore. Her feet had gone to sleep one toe at a time about twenty minutes back, and she'd counted the boards in the floor twice since.

The stone hummed faintly. And suddenly, Vessa's voice came out of it.

"...ugh, where did I put that note about the route thing..."

And Samara, who had spent a real chunk of this week getting flirted into a puddle by that exact voice, knew at once that Vessa was acting.

The words were fine. It was how she sounded. Vessa, in real life, never once sounded that aimless. The girl did not sound like the type to wander around her own shop going "ugh, where did I put."

This was a performance. A pretty good one, honestly. The little bored mutter, the half-finished sentences. But Samara had watched the real thing up close, and this wasn't it.

[She knows. She found the stone, or somebody did, and now she’s feeding it.]

Samara opened her mouth. She considered saying something. But, then, she closed it again.

Renzo was smiling, after all. Actually smiling, the thin pleased version he did when a plan went his way, leaning over the stone like it was singing to him.

He had no idea. The man who read everybody was being subjected to Vessa’s bad acting and it was working on him.

[Huh. Would you look at that.]

And Samara just... let him.

"She’s careless," Renzo murmured, pleased. "Talks to herself. The young ones always do." He set the stone down. "This is good, Samara. Better than good." Then he gave her the little go-away flick of the fingers, the one she hated most. "But it’s done its work. Go pull it before someone trips over it. A found stone is worse than no stone at all."

"...Yeah," Samara said. "Sure."

And she went, because that was the job. She was getting awfully tired of it, though.

She gave it till evening, until she watched Vessa lock up the shop and head off down the harbor road toward home, basket on her hip, humming, the absolute picture of a girl with nothing on her mind.

Then Samara slipped in the back, easy as the first time.

The shop was dim and quiet. She crossed to the high shelf, climbed up, reached behind the reagent dust, and closed her hand around the little gray stone. That same sour twist came back, the one she’d felt putting it there. Funny how the job didn’t get any lighter from the other direction.

"Did your boss like what he got?"

Samara nearly came off the stool.

She turned, and there was Vessa, standing in the middle of her own shop with her hands planted on her hips, not humming at all anymore.

She hadn’t gone home. Of course she hadn’t gone home. She’d circled back, or never left, and Samara had walked right into it like a rookie, which, after so many years, was frankly embarrassing.

[Played by her of all people. Goodness.]

"...He did, actually," Samara said, because there was no point pretending. She climbed down off the stool with the stone in her fist. "Loved it. Said you were careless. That you talk to yourself too much."

"I’m glad. I worked really hard."

"It showed."

For once, Vessa stayed dead serious.

That was new, and it landed worse than yelling would have. So Samara did the only useful thing left to do. She set the stone on the bench, put her thumb to the seam, and pressed. It crushed like a dry shell, the quartz line splitting, the hum dying with a little fizzle.

Done.

"There," Samara said. "Off. Whatever your girl’s plan was, it’s got one more dead rock in it now."

"You didn’t have to do that."

"Cleaner this way. Can’t have it turning up on a shelf again." She brushed the gray dust off her hands. "Renzo gets his dead rock, you get your shop back. Everybody walks away happy."

"You broke into my shop."

"Twice, technically."

"T-That doesn’t make it better!"

"Can’t say I didn’t try." Samara almost smiled, and caught it before it got all the way up. "You leave the back latch sitting loose, you know. A child could get in. You should fix that."

"Oh, so now you’re giving me security tips. On the shop that you broke into." Vessa threw her hands up. "Do you hear yourself?"

"Every day. It’s a problem."

"It is a problem!" Vessa took a step closer, and the bright went out of her voice. "Why do you even work for him?"

Samara paused.

Sometimes she asked herself the same thing, even though she knew the answer.

"You don’t know my life," she said flatly.

"So tell me about it. Why do you work for those assholes?"

Instead of doing that, Samara walked past her.

"Good luck keeping this place locked."

Vessa looked at her, and for once she didn’t have a bright thing to fire back.

And Samara put her hood up and walked out.

{Katarina}

Out of everything on the Tideglass to-do list, wine tasting with Duscari was easily the best part. Kat had decided that around three cups in. And since she was the one who wrote the list in the first place, she figured her opinion counted for something.

The festival prep was loud, even in the afternoon. Somewhere behind them a band kept starting the same song and stopping it, seemingly trying to get it just right. People kept wandering past with food to offer to the new tourists.

Kat ignored all of it. She had good wine in front of her and a clever woman to argue with, and honestly, that was about as good as a workday ever got.

They’d set up in the shade behind the stalls. There was a whole row of open bottles lined up between them. Duscari really loved this part of the job, Kat could tell. She poured every cup with a big flirty grin and called out every flavor as she went. Some white liquid, some red one, and then a fizzy one Kat couldn’t even name, which she immediately decided she needed six cases of.

"This one," Duscari said, nudging the dark red across. "Tell me what you get."

Kat swirled it, sniffed it, and took a sip. She kept her face totally blank the whole time. Hiding what she was thinking was a skill she’d kept from her last life, honestly.

"Cherry. Pepper. Something smoky under it." She set it down. "And it’s overpriced, but you already know that, which is why you led with the smoke. You want me distracted by how good it is before I look at the number."

Duscari laughed. She liked getting caught, apparently.

"Gods, you’re no fun to sell to."

"I’m the most fun to sell to. I actually buy." Kat tapped the dark red. "This one. For opening night, the good stalls. People drink with their noses on night one, they’ll pay for the smoke. The fizzy one for the late crowd, when nobody’s noses are working anymore. We’ll talk volume."

Duscari pushed a fourth bottle across before Kat had even finished.

"And this one. Don’t argue, just try it."

Kat tried it. It was annoyingly good. Sweet, easy to drink, and it pretty much sold itself.

"Two cases," Kat said.

"Four."

"Three. And you stop topping up my cup when you think I’m not counting. I’m always counting."

"...Three," Duscari said, happy to be beaten down a case. "Gods, where have you been all my career."

"Making other people rich." Kat drained the last of the smoke red. "I’m correcting it."

"One of these days you’re going to tell me how you got like this," Duscari said.

"I died once. It really reorganized my priorities."

Duscari thought that was hilarious. She had no idea Kat meant it.

Then she filled both cups again, slower now. She’d gone quieter, more serious. So Kat set her cup down and actually paid attention.

[She’s circling something.]

Duscari wasn’t usually the quiet type. The whole time Kat had known her, she’d filled every gap with a joke or a sale. So her going quiet now meant something. Kat had sat across from enough nervous people to know the move, though. You don’t push. You just wait and let them get there on their own.

Duscari turned her cup around in her hands for a moment. Then she just said it, all casual. Or she tried to, anyway.

"Somebody made me an offer, you know." She looked up. The grin was still on her face. But it wasn't in her eyes. "About you, actually."

[Well, I have to hear about this.]

Chapter 113: Will She?*

"Somebody made me an offer, you know." Duscari was still grinning. "About you, actually."

Kat set her cup down and waited. She'd learned a long time ago that the fastest way to make someone talk was to shut up and let the silence do the work.

It worked. Duscari turned her cup around in her hands a couple times, then started talking.

"I was doing prep this morning. Unloading the carts, getting the bottles sorted, you know, the boring part." She waved a hand at the row of crates behind the stall. "And this polite little human comes up to me. He asked if I was the wine merchant working with the Montecardi girl, and when I said yeah, he got real friendly about it."

"Black Lotus," Kat said.

"He never said it out loud, but he didn't have to." Duscari made a face. "I've sold wine to enough sect people to know the type. They've all got that same smile, like they're doing you a favor just by talking to you."

[Renzo's people. The man can't help himself.]

"What did he want?"

"One of those cold boxes." Duscari nodded at her. "The ones you already promised me. He knew I had units coming and asked, real nice, if I'd hand one over to him instead. He offered me stupid money for it."

Kat already knew where this was going, but she let her finish.

"And when I said I wasn't sure that was mine to sell," Duscari went on, "he got even nicer about it. You know how some people get nicer the second they're threatening you? Like that. He said it'd be a shame if my carts ran into trouble on the road. Real concerned for me, apparently. Something about how the coast gets dangerous for a merchant traveling alone."

[There it is.]

So that was Renzo's contingency, the second version of it. He'd told Kat to her face that he was going to buy a unit and reverse-engineer it like an honest customer. And now here he was, leaning on her supplier to skip the line. Buy from the source, scare the source a little, get the box before launch day so his formation people could crack it early.

It was a good plan, honestly. Kat could respect a good plan. She just didn't intend to let it work.

"So," Kat said. "Are you going to give him one?"

Duscari was a businesswoman. She'd weigh the threat against the deal, then pick whatever kept her carts safe and her purse full. Kat couldn't really blame her for that. She'd have done the same in her shoes.

What she didn't expect was for Duscari to lean across the little table and put both her hands on Kat's thighs.

[...Huh?]

Kat went still. The hands were warm through her clothes, and they were not resting anywhere polite. Duscari's face was a lot closer than it had been a second ago, and she was grinning right at her.

"I don't know," Duscari said, soft. "Will I?"

Kat looked at her. Duscari looked right back, not blinking, hands still resting easy on Kat's legs.

[Oh. So that's how it is.]

She wasn't really asking about the cold box anymore. The box was the smallest part of it.

Kat thought about it for about half a second.

The festival was loud behind them. The band kept starting and stopping the same song, and a kid somewhere was yelling about fried fish. Nobody was looking at the shady spot behind the wine stalls. Even if they were, this was the Valdari coast. Nobody here cared.

So Kat smiled, slid out of her chair, and went down onto her knees, into the small dark space under the table between Duscari's legs.

"Let's talk about it," she said.

{Vessa}

Here was the thing about Vessa that Katarina, for all her brains, never fully got. Katarina solved problems by sitting in a room and thinking really hard. Vessa solved problems by knowing everybody.

And Vessa knew *everybody*.

She'd been working the town for two days now. A word here at the fish stall, a word there with the old ladies who sat by the harbor wall all day with nothing to do but watch people. She didn't ask anybody anything straight out. That would've tipped people off. She just complained, real friendly, about a certain red-skinned woman who kept coming into the shop, and let everyone fill in the gaps with their own gossip.

It was the easiest thing in the world. People love to talk.

The trouble was, nobody had much to say.

Most folks just knew Samara as that tall scary one with the Lotus people. A couple of the harbor wall ladies had clocked her as good-looking, which Vessa agreed with, but that was about it. Nobody knew where she came from. Nobody knew her business.

She was a hard woman to keep track of, and she left almost nothing behind for the gossip mill to chew on!

Except for one thing.

She'd been seen walking a few times.

Three separate people had mentioned it without thinking it mattered: the old fish-cart guy, one of the dock boys, and a woman who sold candles two streets over. All three had seen Samara walking out toward the edge of town after dark, away from the harbor-road inn where the rest of the Black Lotus were staying. She headed the other way every time, out past the last houses toward the open country.

At first Vessa figured it was just thief stuff. Casing places, maybe, scouting routes out of town, whatever it was thieves did at night. That made sense. That was probably all it was.

But the more she turned it over, the more it nagged at her.

If Samara worked for the Black Lotus, and they were all staying at that inn off the harbor road, then she should be staying there too. That was where her people were. That was where the meetings happened. Renzo lived up on the stripped-bare top floor, and Samara was up and down those stairs all the time. Everyone knew that.

So why was she walking out of town every night, away from her own people, toward a place with no houses?

[She’s not sleeping there.]

Vessa stopped dead in the middle of the harbor road, basket on her hip, and let that sit.

Samara wasn’t just walking. She was sleeping somewhere else every night, somewhere nobody would think to look. And whatever was out there, it was something she didn’t want the Lotus to see.

[Now that’s interesting.]

{Katarina}

Duscari had stopped being able to form full sentences a little while ago.

She had one hand gripping the edge of the table so hard her knuckles went pale, and the other one holding the back of Kat’s head, just hanging on. Her hips kept lifting off the chair. Every time they did, Kat pressed her back down with a palm on her stomach and kept going at her own pace.

Kat was, frankly, very good at this. Thirty-two years of keeping everything locked down in her previous life, and it turned out all that discipline made for an excellent work ethic in other areas too.

She pulled off just enough to talk, one hand still working Duscari’s cock slowly, moving up and down.

"So," Kat said. "The cold box."

"Oh gods," Duscari managed. "Are you, hah, are you serious right now? You’re really going to talk business?"

"I’m always going to talk business." Kat ran her thumb in a circle over the head of her cock and watched Duscari’s whole body jolt. "Are you giving him one?"

"No." It came out fast. "No, gods, no, I’m not giving him anything, the deal’s yours, it’s all yours, I’ll take the risk on the carts, just please..."

"Good answer," Kat said, and she meant it.

Then she leaned back in and took her cock all the way down to the base. Duscari’s head dropped back, and she stopped trying to talk entirely.

Kat let her enjoy it for a moment. Then she pulled off again, slowly, and looked up at her, like she was finishing a contract review.

"If you hand him one anyway," Kat said, "I'll bite your dick off."

{Vessa}

Vessa walked home that evening with a plan, which for her was a rare and exciting thing!

She wasn't going to tell Kat. Not yet. Kat would tell her "no Vessa, we need to be smarter and more boring" or something. She'd sit in a room, think about it for three days, then come up with seven reasons it was a bad idea.

And, to be fair, Kat would be right. It was a bad idea.

But Vessa had spent a week getting flirted at by a woman who couldn't say one true thing about herself, and she was past being careful. She wanted to know what was out there past the edge of town.

So tomorrow night, when Samara went walking, Vessa was going to follow her.

Chapter 114: Tail

{Vessa}

Following somebody at night was harder than Vessa thought it would be.

She'd figured it'd be easy. You just walk behind the person, right? But Samara was quick and quiet. She kept stopping at random to look behind her, so Vessa had to keep diving behind carts, behind barrels, behind one very surprised goat. By the time they got past the last houses, her heart was going so hard she was sure Samara could hear it.

[Okay. Okay, stay calm. You're a merchant's daughter out for an evening stroll. A totally normal, casual stroll. In the dark. Way out past town. With no good reason.]

She winced at herself and kept going.

The town lights fell away behind them. The road turned into a dirt path, then thinned out into not much, just dry grass and the odd scrubby tree. Samara never slowed down. She moved like she'd walked this exact route a thousand times, which, Vessa figured, she probably had.

Then, up ahead, there was a little light.

Vessa dropped flat into the grass and watched.

It was a camp. A small one. There was a single tent patched up in a few places, a mule tied off to a stake, a low fire burning down to coals. It wasn't a thief's hideout or a sect outpost. It was just a place where somebody lived, and not a nice one.

And there was a woman by the fire.

She was old. Older than Vessa expected, anyway. Red-skinned like Samara, with gray streaked all through her hair, sitting hunched by the coals with a blanket over her shoulders. When Samara walked into the light, the old woman looked up and said something Vessa couldn't hear. Her whole tired face went soft.

[Is that her mom?] Vessa asked herself, squinting.

Samara crouched down next to her. She pulled something out of her bag, food, it looked like, and pressed it into her mother's hands. She did it so gently that Vessa almost didn't recognize her. This wasn't the smug woman who broke into shops and crushed listener stones. This was somebody's kid bringing dinner home.

Vessa felt bad for her, suddenly. She hadn't expected that.

Then the old woman shifted the blanket, and Vessa saw her wrist.

There was a mark on it, a dark band burned into the skin, with little lines of script worked through it. Vessa had spent enough time around formation work to know a binding seal when she saw one. She'd never seen one on a person before, though.

[That's an indenture mark. Her mom's bound.]

And, with that bit of clarification, it all clicked together at once: the camp out past town, the walking every night, how Samara always kept her cards so close to the chest.

She was hiding this. Her mother, sick and old, bound to somebody by a debt seal, living in a patched tent on the edge of nowhere.

[She's not a believer. She's just paying off a debt.]

Vessa was so busy thinking about it that she forgot the number one rule of following somebody: keep watching them.

"Get up."

"EEK!"

Vessa's blood turned to ice water.

Samara was standing right over her. She hadn’t been by the fire two seconds ago, but now she was here, and her face was the worst thing Vessa had ever seen. None of the teasing shop-Samara was left in it. She looked furious, and under the fury, she looked scared.

"S-Samara," Vessa said. "Hi. Funny story, I was just..."

"Get. Up."

Vessa got up.

Samara didn’t grab her. That was the thing Vessa kept thinking about afterward. A woman that fast and that angry could’ve done anything. She didn’t lay a finger on her. She just walked Vessa back up the path a ways, far enough that the firelight and the tent disappeared behind a rise. Then she turned on her.

"You followed me."

"...A little."

"How much is a little?"

"All of it," Vessa admitted. "From town. You stopped a bunch of times, by the way, you’re really good, I almost lost you twice..."

"Vessa." Samara said it sharp, and Vessa shut up. "What did you see?"

There was no point lying. Samara had caught her flat on the ground twenty feet from the camp.

"Your mom," Vessa said quietly. "And the mark on her wrist."

For a second Samara didn’t say anything at all. Her hands had curled into fists at her sides, shaking a little. Vessa got the feeling she wasn’t even angry at her anymore. She was angry that it had happened at all.

"You don’t say a word," Samara said, low. "Not to your shopkeeper friends. Not to the Lotus. Not to anyone."

"Samara..."

"I mean it." She took a step closer, until Vessa’s back hit a tree, and then she loomed right over her. "You think this is a game. You and the Montecardi girl, playing your clever little merchant games. This isn’t a game to me. Do you understand?"

Vessa understood. She also noticed that Samara still hadn’t touched her.

"I won’t tell the Lotus," Vessa said. "I promise. I swear it."

"Good."

"But I’m telling Kat."

"What did I just..."

"She already knows about you, Samara. She has from the start. There’s no point hiding it from her." Vessa kept her voice steady, which was hard with a furious valdari a few inches away. "And, look. Kat’s not going to use this against you. That’s not how she works. She doesn’t kick people who are already down. She fixes things!"

"Nobody fixes this," Samara said.

Before Vessa could answer, Samara turned and walked back down the path toward the firelight. Vessa stayed where she was, heart pounding, everything she thought she knew about Samara turned upside down.

[Well. Kat’s going to want to hear about this.]

{Katarina}

And, indeed, Kat listened to the whole thing without saying a word.

Vessa told the whole story sitting cross-legged on the end of Kat’s bed, still keyed up from the walk back, talking with her hands. She went through all of it: the camp, the mule, the old woman by the fire, the food Samara brought her. And the mark on the wrist.

When Vessa got to that part, Kat took a moment to think.

[Aha... So, there’s the leash she’s been hiding this whole time.]

Katarina had been thinking about this for weeks. Samara didn’t fit. Every other Black Lotus piece on the board made sense. Renzo wanted market share, Dario wanted a fight, the bandits wanted money. Clean motives, easy to understand. But Samara was sharp enough to see every trap Kat laid, and she’d walked into the job anyway. That had never added up. Smart people don’t sell their loyalty cheap. So either Samara was getting something huge out of the Lotus, or they had something on her.

And it turned out, they had something on her. They had her mother.

[She’s not a believer. She’s bought. The Lotus is holding the debt on her mom, and as long as they hold it, they hold her.]

It changed everything.

Kat had been treating Samara like an enemy agent, somebody to fool or get around. But Samara wasn't an enemy. She was a hostage with a job. And a hostage with a job could be turned, if you took away the thing holding her.

[Buy the debt. Or break it. Either way, you take the leash out of Renzo's hand and put it in mine.]

Buying a debt was easy enough, if you knew who held the paper and what they'd take for it. Breaking one was harder. Probably illegal, too, and definitely more fun. Either way, it started with one boring little question: how much had the Lotus paid for Samara's mother, and how much of it was left?

Kat didn't smile, because Vessa was watching, and Vessa got weird when Kat looked too pleased about people's misery. But inside, the Ledger was lighting up like a festival.

She'd kept her face still, but apparently not still enough.

"You're not going to do anything mean to her, right?" Vessa said. "She's not... I don't think she's a bad person. I think she's just stuck."

"I'm not going to do anything mean," Kat said, and meant it. Mean was inefficient. "I'm going to do something helpful. Eventually."

Vessa looked at her for a second, then nodded, satisfied. She trusted Kat. Kat took that more seriously than she'd ever say out loud.

Then Vessa frowned, like she'd just remembered something.

"Oh. There was one more thing. Probably nothing."

"Tell me anyway. The nothings are usually the something."

"The mark. The indenture seal on her mom's wrist." Vessa scrunched up her face, thinking. "I only saw it for a second, but... I've been doing formation work for years now, right? And that seal looked janky to me."

"Janky?" Kat repeated.

"Janky," Vessa said firmly, like that explained anything at all.

Kat had absolutely no idea what that meant. But she filed it anyway.

Chapter 115: Threads

{Katarina}

Kat had two leads, and she hated chasing one at a time when she could chase both at once.

The first one was a leak. Somebody kept knowing things they shouldn't. Even with the listener stone dead before it could result in any actual damage, things were still slipping out of her operation. Little things, mostly. Which supplier she'd talked to, which day a cart moved. But somebody was clearly watching her now.

The second was Vessa's word. Janky. The indenture seal on Samara's mom looked off to a trained formation student.

Kat didn't know what that meant yet, but a flawed binding seal meant the binding had a weak point. And a weak point was something Kat could use.

So she wrote two letters that morning. One to Rizzi, down on the Coppara docks, asking very politely about money. One to Signora Valcetti, asking very politely about seals.

Then she sat back and waited, because that was the part she was best at.

Rizzi wrote back first. She was quick like that. The woman lived on the docks and saw every coin that moved through Coppara. Plus, she owed Kat a favor or two from the crane business.

What Rizzi sent was a name on a disbursement seal, the mark that gets stamped on a payment when it clears through a banking house. Kat had asked her to trace where the Black Lotus money in Coppara actually came from, who funded their little operation. The answer came back as a small red seal pressed into the bottom of Rizzi's note.

Kat looked at it for a long time.

[I've seen this one before.]

She had. She never forgot a thing she'd seen once, and she'd seen this exact seal weeks ago, upside down, on the tea-house chit Renzo signed when he served her that insulting human tea.

She'd clocked it then. Lotus payroll, routed through a debt-servicing house. She'd figured it was something above Renzo's level and moved on.

It was the same seal. The same house funded Renzo's people in Vellasera and the Lotus operation down in Coppara.

That was both leads starting to come together, and Kat loved it when that happened.

Vessa had said the indenture seal on Samara's mom was a binding script. A binding script and a banking script weren't the same thing, but they got made by the same kind of formation work, by the same kind of house. So Kat wrote one more letter, fast, to Valcetti, with one very specific question: who in the southeast does both debt seals and indenture binding under one roof?

Valcetti, being Valcetti, didn't gossip and didn't speculate. She just sent back a single name. It was a matter of public record anyway, something Kat could've found herself with enough digging.

The name was Drava.

Kat said the name out loud in the empty study, just to hear it.

"Drava."

[Okay. Who the hell is Drava?]

She pulled everything she had.

The Ledger helped, but mostly it was just Kat sitting there going back over every scrap she'd collected for months: Renzo's chit, Rizzi's seal, Samara's debt, Duscari's offhand comment weeks back that the polite human leaning on her had smelled like "debt folk," people who lend money and never forget what they're owed.

All of it pointed one way.

And it flipped the whole board over.

[Wait. Hold on.]

Kat had been running this entire campaign as Montecardi versus the Black Lotus. House versus sect. Her clever boxes against Renzo's clever pressure. She'd treated Renzo as the top of the pile, the man giving the orders, with maybe some vague parent entity behind him that she'd get to eventually.

But she'd had it backwards.

The Black Lotus was in debt. They owed Drava, the same as Samara's mother owed Drava, the same as half the operations Kat had been bumping into all season owed Drava.

Renzo was a lieutenant. He was working off a balance, just like Samara, just one rung higher.

[The Lotus is just another debtor. Drava's the one holding all the leashes.]

It was, honestly, a good play. A horrible one, but a good one.

Kat had spent her last life around money like this. The quiet kind. It just wants to own all of it, the company, the fight, the stage, and skim a little off the top, forever. You don't beat that kind of money by selling more boxes than them. They don't care about boxes.

Money like that wins by owning the ground everybody else has to stand on. It was exactly the game Kat would have played in her old life, back when she still had a company to play it with.

There was really only one way to fight money like that. You made the thing it wanted more expensive to take than it was worth to own. You made owning it a headache, a cost, a problem that ate into the cut they planned to skim forever. Kat had done that before, to other people. She could do it again.

Then Kat thought of something worse.

She already knew there was a Drava person in town.

There was an assessor working Vellasera.

She'd been around for a couple weeks. A quiet woman, very polite, very correct. She inspected routes, checked paperwork, never once raised her voice. Kat had written her off as routine. Every district had assessors crawling around during festival season. She'd been pleasant, she'd been cold, she'd asked all the normal questions. She'd even complimented the spirit-rail contracts, said the routing was clever. Kat had taken it as a compliment. Now she understood it for what it was: an appraisal.

[She's Drava's. She's been standing in my district the whole time, smiling at me, and I waved her off as paperwork.]

Kat's eyelid twitched.

That was the part that actually stung. The real player had walked right up to her, been pleasant, and gotten written off as boring. Kat had stared at Renzo's hand the whole time, never once looking at whose hand was behind it.

[... Maybe I've been getting too comfortable, huh? Vivienne would have noticed her.]

She started laying it out for herself, calm now.

A problem this big was actually kind of fun. If Drava held the Lotus's debt, then leaning on Renzo did nothing, he'd just get squeezed from above and squeeze her right back. If Drava held Samara's mother's debt, then that flawed seal Vessa spotted mattered more than ever, because it led all the way to the top, past Renzo. And if Drava had an assessor

already standing in Vellasera, smiling, then the real move was already happening, somewhere Kat wasn't looking, while she pre-sold cold boxes at the festival.

She did not like that last thought. She liked it so little that she stood up and started pacing. Pacing was for people without a plan, and Kat didn't have one yet. But she did have one thing going for her. Drava didn't know Kat had caught on yet, and an edge like that had a short shelf life.

She had to move first.

[So... what's the play? If you owned the debt on every operation in three districts, and you'd just noticed a clever little merchant girl building something actually valuable, what would you do? You'd just... take the valuable thing. The legal way. The quiet way.]

Kat stopped pacing.

[The routes. The Greypass. The roads are the only thing I own right now that's worth owning.]

She was still standing there when the knock came.

It was a runner. One of Rizzi's, a human, breathing hard like he'd come a long way in a hurry. Rizzi only spent good money on a fast runner when something couldn't wait for a normal letter.

Kat took the note and read it standing up.

It was short. Rizzi didn't waste words when something scared her, and this one barely had any words at all.

The Drava assessor, the quiet polite one working Vellasera, had been busy. She'd been going around, very correctly, very legally, buying things. Specifically, she'd been buying up liens. Old debts, claims, back-tariffs attached to the Greypass routes, the little ones nobody had bothered to collect on for years. They just sit forgotten in a registry until somebody goes digging.

She was buying every Greypass route lien she could find.

Kat read it twice.

[They're not after the box.]

The box was only ever the noise. It kept her busy for weeks while the real work happened somewhere else, in registry offices and lien ledgers, paper changing hands. Quiet, legal, final.

[They’re foreclosing on my roads.]

Drava wanted the one thing House Montecardi actually had: the routes, the roads Kat had bled to clear and keep safe. And they were doing it the exact way Kat herself would’ve done it, with paperwork, bought quietly, three intermediaries deep, while the mark was distracted by a festival and a clever box.

Kat set the note down on the desk, very carefully.

"...Well," she said, to nobody. "That’s a problem."

Chapter 116: The Plan

{Katarina}

Kat sat at her desk for a long time with Rizzi’s note in front of her. Then she did the thing she was good at and started over from scratch.

[Okay. Start over. Throw out everything you thought you knew and rebuild it with Drava on top.]

For weeks she’d had Renzo at the center, the one who wanted her box, leaned on her suppliers, gave the orders. But Renzo was a middleman. A guy working off a balance, one rung up from Samara, scared of the people above him.

Above him was Drava.

So Kat moved Drava to the top and watched everything underneath line up again.

The Black Lotus, in debt to Drava. Samara’s mother, in indenture to Drava. Half the operations she’d bumped into all season, paying Drava. Duscari’s "debt folk." The polite assessor in town. The Greypass liens getting bought up quietly and legally.

All of it stopped being a dozen separate problems. It was all one thing, and that thing had a name.

[Drava’s a debt house. That’s the whole thing. They lend money, they own what they lend against, and they collect, forever.]

Kat had known money like this on Earth. The quiet money. It just wants to own the people who run the company, then own the people who own them, and sit at the top collecting forever.

You can’t out-sell it. You can’t out-fight it. It doesn’t care about your product.

She stared at the wall and let it sink in.

For the first time in a long while, she felt outplayed.

Drava had been moving for months. While everyone was running around like a chicken with its head cut off over the cold containers, the arrays, etc., the real work was happening in registry offices.

She was losing, and she knew it. So she asked herself the question that actually mattered.

[What does this enemy actually run on? What's the one thing it can't survive without?]

The answer came quickly, and Kat sat up straight.

[Trust.]

A debt house has exactly one asset: the seal.

When Drava stamps a debt, everyone up and down the continent has to believe that stamp is real. That's the whole business. A letter of credit, an indenture, a lien, every single piece of paper Drava owns is worth exactly as much as people's faith that the seal on it is genuine and the claim behind it is good.

Take that away, and Drava is just a pile of paper nobody has to honor.

[And the thing is...]

Kat started to smile.

[...I already built the weapon. Before I'd ever heard the name Drava.]

She'd done it for a completely different reason.

See, back when she was protecting the cold box, she'd gone to Valcetti and gotten her arrays certified. Publicly. On the record. It had cost her, sure. Every rival now knew what real Montecardi work looked like. But it bought her something better: any copy of her work was legally untradeable on assessed routes.

The law itself would reject a fake.

To do that, before the cold container was even a thing, she'd spent a year pushing Valcetti and the district to adopt a certification standard. A real one. A way to check whether a seal, any seal, was authentic, properly filed, and backed by a real claim. She'd built it as an anti-counterfeit tool, so nobody could fake her toilets.

But a tool that proves a seal is fake doesn't care whose seal it is.

[It works on Drava's paper too.]

Kat got up and started pacing again, fast this time. The whole thing was coming together at once.

Drava's entire move against her depended on paper. Liens, debts, claims, all of it bought quietly, filed in registries, presented as legal fact. Their assessor walked around Vellasera being polite, since all the power was in the paperwork. The paper did all the threatening for them.

But Kat's district ran on the certification standard now. Her standard. She'd made authenticity district law. And if she could prove that Drava's liens, the ones being used to foreclose on her Greypass routes, didn't meet that standard, that the seals were old, or filed wrong, or backed by claims that didn't hold, then the law she'd built would throw them out. The law would do it on its own. The same rules that protected her box would gut Drava's foreclosure.

[I built an anti-counterfeit machine to protect my toilets. And it turns out it's an anti-Drava machine, and I made it before I knew Drava existed.]

She stopped pacing.

[And Vessa said the indenture seal looked janky.]

It all snapped together so hard Kat actually laughed out loud in the empty study.

Vessa, a trained formation student, had looked at the binding seal on Samara's mother's wrist and said it looked off.

Janky.

At the time Kat hadn't known what that meant. Now she did. If Drava's indenture seals were sloppy, if they cut corners on their binding work since nobody had ever been able to challenge them, then their debt seals were probably sloppy too. The whole empire might be built on paper that couldn't survive a real inspection, because for a hundred years nobody had ever been allowed to inspect it.

Nobody except a district that now had a certification standard and a Signora who knew exactly how to use it.

[So here's the play.]

Kat sat back down and pulled a clean sheet toward her, very calm now, because a problem this big was finally a problem worth her time.

[One. Get every Greypass lien Drava's assessor has bought. Rizzi can get me the registry copies. Two. Run all of them against the certification standard. Find the flaws. There will be flaws. Vessa already saw some. Three. This isn't a lawsuit or a brawl. Just prove, on the public record, that Drava's paper can't pass my own district's law, and let the law throw it out. Four. And once Drava's seals are publicly worthless here... that indenture on Samara's mom is a Drava seal too.]

She underlined that last one twice.

That was the part she liked best. Vessa would call it sweet. Kat called it good business.

If she could break Drava's claim on her routes by proving the paper was junk, then the exact same proof broke their claim on Samara's mother. One move, two prizes. Free her roads and pick up the best intel asset around, the woman who knew the Lotus inside out. All at once, all of it legal.

[Buy the debt? No. Even better. The debt was never real, and I'm going to prove it.]

Kat looked at her four-step list, and for the first time since the runner showed up, she felt good.

She'd been outplayed for months, watching the wrong hand the whole time. But quiet money like Drava's had never once been challenged, and a power that's never been challenged gets sloppy. The whole thing is built on one assumption: that nobody can read its paper.

Kat could read its paper. She'd built the standard for reading paper.

Drava was bigger than Renzo, bigger than the Lotus, bigger than anything she'd taken on since she got here. A whole debt empire, three districts deep, maybe more. Going after it was probably insane. Kat had been called worse, and she'd been right before.

[Yeah. Let's take the whole thing apart.]

She reached for her pen to write to Rizzi.

{Vessa}

Vessa was alone at the workshop, inscribing a real cold container, when the door banged open hard enough to rattle the shelves.

She jumped about a foot.

"We're closed for..."

Then she got a look at the guy in the doorway. Young, human, well-dressed. He swaggered in like he'd never once been told no in his life. Vessa had never met him, but she'd heard about him from Kat, and the second she saw the sneer she knew exactly who he was.

[Dario. Renzo's son. The one who wants to fight everybody.]

He had two big guys behind him, and he was already looking past Vessa at the container on the bench, the real one, the working one, his eyes going greedy.

"You're the Talori girl," Dario said. "The Montecardi bitch's little pet."

Vessa stepped sideways, putting herself between him and the bench.

"And you weren't invited."

"My father wants to do this slow." Dario cracked his knuckles and grinned. "Buy a box. Be polite. Wait. I'm tired of waiting." He nodded at the container behind her. "So I'm just going to take one. Right now. And we'll see how clever your witch is when the whole thing's already in our hands."

Vessa's brain started going very fast.

Three of them, one of her. No weapon on her side of the bench either, unless an inscribing stylus counted, which it really didn't. She made cold boxes for a living. These guys broke things for a living. The math was not good. She needed a real plan, and she needed it fast.

[Oh no.]

Chapter 117: Rash Decisions

Vessa worked in the Talori workshop most afternoons, inscribing preservation arrays onto shipping boxes. She had never once expected to get robbed while doing it.

But here she was, inching sideways along the bench with her hands up, trying to look harmless. The two big guys had spread out to cover the door, and Dario was still grinning at her like the whole thing was already over.

[Okay, stall. That's what Kat does. You can talk, so talk.]

"You really don't want to do this," she said. "These boxes are inscribed to a Montecardi signature lock. You crack one open without the key array and it just, poof, fries itself. You'd be carrying off a very expensive paperweight!"

That was a complete lie. There was no signature lock. But it was the best she could do right now.

Dario’s grin didn’t move.

"Then you’ll come too. And you’ll open it for me."

[Oh, that backfired spectacularly.]

"I-I don’t even know which ones work," she tried, scrambling. "I just inscribe what I’m told! I’m not in charge of anything, I’m barely an intern!"

"Enough." Dario nodded at the bigger of his two men. "Grab her. We’re taking the girl and the box both."

The big guy took one step forward.

"Dario."

Everyone stopped.

Samara was leaning in the doorway. Vessa hadn’t even seen her come up.

[Samara!]

"Your father told you not to do this," Samara said. "Specifically this. I remember. He said, ’Dario, do not touch the family, do not touch the friends, do not touch anything that breathes near a Montecardi.’ I was standing right there."

"My father," Dario said, turning to face her, "is wasting all our time. We sit in that stripped-out inn, we drink human tea, we play polite while a demon brat runs circles around us. Enough." He spread his hands. "We’re in a den of degenerates, Samara. Why are we asking nicely? We take what we want and we leave."

"Because your father told you not to."

"My father isn’t here."

The room went quiet.

Vessa’s heart was hammering. She looked between them. Samara hadn’t moved from the doorway. Dario was glowing now, a faint heat coming off his skin.

[This is going to get really bad, isn’t it?]

"Last chance," Samara said. "Walk out."

Dario smiled.

"Take them both."

The two humans moved at once.

What happened next, Vessa barely caught.

Samara came off the doorframe. The first guy swung at her and hit nothing. She wasn't there anymore. She was already inside his reach with an elbow buried in his gut, and he folded. The second one got a hand on Vessa's arm. He didn't keep it. Samara's foot caught the side of his knee and he went down screaming. Before he hit the ground, she'd hauled Vessa behind her by the collar.

It took maybe four seconds, all in all.

[As expected of a fifteen-year thief...!]

Both of Dario's goons were on the floor. One was curled up holding his stomach. The other was clutching his knee and groaning. Vessa really wished he'd stop.

Samara's face hadn't even changed. She just stood between Vessa and Dario now, ready to go again.

"You really want to be the third?" she asked him.

Dario's hands were still glowing. The heat in the room had climbed. Vessa swallowed hard, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of her neck.

[He's a cultivator. The goons were nothing. But him...]

For a second, nobody moved. Dario looked at his two downed men, then at Samara. The light around his hands flickered.

"Master Dario."

Another one of Renzo's people had appeared at the door, an older human in a neat grey coat, completely unbothered by the two bodies on the floor. He gave a small bow.

"Your father requests your presence. Immediately."

Dario went stiff at that word. The glow died, and whatever he'd been about to do, he swallowed it.

"Fine," he spat. He jabbed a finger at Samara. "This isn't your business, dog. You take our coin, you do what you're told. Remember that." He stepped over one of his own groaning men on the way out, like the guy was a piece of furniture. "Get up. We're leaving."

The goons dragged themselves up and limped after him. The grey-coat official bowed again and followed.

And then they were gone. The workshop went quiet, and Vessa realized she was still holding her breath.

She let it out.

"Samara, you, that was, oh my gosh." She grabbed Samara's arm with both hands. "That was so cool! You just, bam, and then, bam! Are you okay? Are you hurt? Did one of them touch you? I thought I was going to die, I thought I was actually going to die!"

"You weren't going to die." Samara gently pried her hands off. She wasn't even breathing hard. "He's stupid, but he's not stupid enough to put a Montecardi friend in the ground. His father would've handed him to Seris in a sack."

"Okay, but you didn't even know that for sure when you walked in!"

"I knew enough."

She turned to go.

"Wait." Vessa took a step after her. "Why'd you help me? You work for them."

Samara paused in the doorway. She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Tell your Kat something for me," she said. "That target she's got on her back? It isn't just on her. It's on everyone standing near her. Her moms. Her friends." She looked at Vessa. "You."

Then she walked out, and Vessa stood there in the wrecked workshop, staring at the empty doorway.

Katarina didn't say anything for a while.

Vessa had told the whole story twice now, the second time slower because Kat had asked her to.

They were in Kat's room. Vessa sat on the edge of the bed swinging her feet, and Kat stood very still by the window with her arms folded.

[Dario walked into the Talori workshop and gave the order to grab Vessa.]

She turned the sentence over, and every time she did, she got colder.

The CEO part of her brain had spent thirty-two years filing everything into two neat boxes, acceptable cost and unacceptable cost. This was sliding hard out of the first one.

"Kat?" Vessa said. "You good?'

"I'm fine."

"You're a bit... quiet."

Kat gave a long exhale.

[Let's review.] Kat made herself walk through it. [Renzo and I have an understanding. He plays his game, I play mine. He buys units at launch, I find a way around it, we both keep our gloves on. That was the arrangement. That was clean. That was business.]

She exhaled again.

[And then his idiot son put his hands on my girlfriend.]

... That wasn't business anymore.

She'd told herself, this whole time, that the Black Lotus was just another competitor. They were bigger, they were smarter, sure, but they were the same thing she'd been beating since she was four years old, with a wine-stained ledger and an eighteen-month clock. You don't hate the competition. You win. Hating them just makes you sloppy.

She looked at Vessa, completely fine because a bought thief had decided to be decent for four seconds.

Four seconds. That was the margin.

[Let's be very clear about what almost happened today. If Samara doesn't walk through that door, Dario takes Vessa, maybe to crack a box, maybe to use as a lever against me. The second he has her, every clean line I've drawn around this whole conflict is gone. There's no version of me that negotiates politely while they're holding her. He knows that. He's just too stupid to know that he knows it.]

She'd run the Black Lotus like she ran everything else, as a system.

Renzo was a node, the contract was a variable, the debt-house above him was an unknown to be solved. You don't get angry at a spreadsheet. You read it, and you find the cell where it breaks.

[No. We're past competitors now.]

The cold in her chest finished settling into place. It didn't feel like rage. Rage was hot and loud. It made you sloppy. This felt like the moment in a board meeting when someone made a mistake so large that the only question left was how thoroughly to end them.

[I'm going to wipe the Black Lotus off the face of the earth.]

She let the thought sit. Then she started building.

[What do I know?]

She knew Renzo was careful.

He gave explicit orders, he kept his own son on a leash, and he yanked that son out by the collar the second the leash snapped. That was a careful man sitting on top of a crew that included a bored heir who didn't respect him and a hired blade he'd just let someone call a dog.

[All those problems are connected.]

Dario was reckless and convinced his father was weak. Renzo was strong enough to slap him down once, but maybe not twice. And above both of them sat the debt-house, the parent entity she still couldn't put a name to, the money that turned the Black Lotus from a nuisance into a threat.

And underneath all of it, holding the whole thing up with rented muscle, was Samara.

Chapter 118: Personal

Katarina sat at her desk with the seal in front of her.

It wasn't the real seal, of course. But still, Vessa had described it in pretty decent detail and Katarina recreated it.

So, Samara was the crack. Kat had decided that the day the thief walked out of the Talori workshop with a warning instead of a knife. A bought blade with a conscience was a lever, and the paper that owned her family was where to push. So Kat had sent Vessa to copy the seal. If the indenture had a flaw, she wanted to find it first.

[Show me what you are.]

Kat leaned in. She'd been angry since yesterday. The CEO part of her brain kept telling her anger would make her sloppy, but the rest of her kept telling that part to shut up.

The door opened. Vessa came in without knocking and flopped onto the edge of the desk.

"You've been glaring at that thing since I walked in," Vessa said. "Last time I walked in, I mean. It's a piece of paper. It can't even glare back."

"I'm aware of how paper works." Kat didn't look up.

"No, I know." Vessa propped her chin on her hand and watched her for a moment. Then, slower, "It's kind of hot, though."

Kat looked up.

"What is?"

"This." Vessa waved a hand at all of her, then slid off the desk. She came around behind the chair and set her warm hands on Kat's shoulders, working at the knots. "Normally you're all, 'Everything's a system, Vessa, anger is a bad input, Vessa.'" She did a little impression that was honestly pretty accurate. "And right now you look like you'd set the whole street on fire if it sped things up. I'm into it."

[She's not wrong about the bad input thing. I really do say that.]

Kat let her keep going. It felt good, but she kept her eyes on the seal.

"Take a look at this," she said.

"I'd much rather look at you."

"Vessa." Kat tapped the corner of the rubbing. "The seal. You said it looked janky, and you were right. So tell me what's wrong with it."

Vessa leaned over her shoulder, which put her mouth right next to Kat's ear. Her hands slid off Kat's shoulders, down onto her chest, fingers spreading. They kept going.

"The outer ring," Vessa said. "It's not closed. See? That's not a mistake from me, that's how it was. A binding seal needs a full circuit or it doesn't bind clean. Whoever drew this cut the loop short by, like, two characters. Cheaped out. Probably trying to fit more of them on one plate."

[I see.]

Kat felt the whole thing turn over in her head, fast. Vessa's hands had moved lower, down her stomach, and Kat let them. She could do two things at once. If anything, Vessa sharpened the thinking.

"So it's non-conforming," Kat said.

"It's lazy work, is what it is. Whoever did it was in a hurry."

"No, it’s better than that," Kat said. "It’s a defect." She started laying it out, half to Vessa and half to herself. "Everyone treats an indenture like a fact. Samara’s mother signs her life over, the debt-house holds the paper, that’s that, you serve until it’s paid. Everybody looks at the sob story. The poor woman, the debt, the daughter working it off. Nobody looks at the paper itself." She tapped the broken ring again. "But it’s not a fact. It’s a contract. And a contract is only as good as the seal that binds it."

Vessa had reached the laces of Kat’s trousers, working them loose, and Kat kept talking.

"A debt-house has exactly one asset. Trust in their seals. That’s the whole business. People honor their paper because the paper is supposedly perfect. Impossible to forge. Airtight." Kat’s breath went a little uneven as Vessa’s hand slid in and wrapped around her cock, but her voice stayed level. "And I spent a lot of time making certified seals the law of this district. Through Valcetti. Every binding array traded on assessed ground has to conform to the standard or it’s worthless."

"Uhuh... Seals. Yeah."

[Jesus Christ, Vessa.]

Vessa stroked her slowly, thumb working the head, her other hand braced on Kat’s thigh. Kat let her hips push up into it once and kept going.

"This indenture has a broken ring. It’s non-conforming. Which means," and here Kat actually smiled, for the first time in two days, "on any assessed ground in this district, it’s unenforceable. It’s not a binding contract. It’s a piece of paper a sad woman signed under a seal that doesn’t legally hold."

"Mm." Vessa kissed the side of her neck and kept her hand moving, faster now, slick. "So you can free Samara’s mom?"

"I can void the whole indenture." Kat’s hand closed on the edge of the desk. Vessa was working her in earnest now, palm tight, rhythm steady. Kat was getting close, and she kept talking through it anyway. The two halves of her brain refused to take turns. "The leash on Samara, gone. Drava loses an asset. The Black Lotus loses the person they’ve been using to spy on us. And I do it with a rule I wrote before I even knew Drava existed, for completely different reasons."

[The anti-counterfeit tool is the anti-Drava tool. I built the weapon before I found the enemy.]

Vessa twisted her wrist just right. Kat’s thoughts blanked as she came, hips jerking up into Vessa’s fist, one hand white-knuckled on the desk. Vessa stroked her through it, grinning against her neck, clearly very pleased with herself.

"There." Vessa sounded delighted. "You look almost relaxed. It’s very unsettling on you."

Kat slumped back in the chair, breathing hard.

"Enjoy it. I fully intend to go back to wanting people dead in about a minute."

"I know you do." Vessa wiped her hand on a rag from the workbench. "So what's the catch? And don't tell me there isn't one. You got all the way to the part where you gloat, and then you stopped."

Kat sighed.

"To void it, I have to file the original. Not a rubbing, the actual indenture paper, so the assessor's office can confirm the defect and strike it from the record." She stared at the smudged seal. "And there's exactly one person holding the original."

"Please tell me it's someone reasonable. Someone who takes money."

"The Drava assessor. The cold, courteous one. The one quietly buying up every lien on my Greypass roads."

She wouldn't sell, wouldn't trade, wouldn't be charmed out of a single page.

[Of course it's her. The one foreclosing on my roads is holding the one piece of paper I need to break her boss's leash.]

"Oh." Vessa took that in. "So you have to get it from the one person on the continent who'd pay good coin to watch you go under."

"She would." Kat almost smiled again. "She also has no idea what she's actually holding. Yet."

{Renzo}

Two floors up, in the stripped-bare inn the Black Lotus had not bothered to furnish, Renzo Caelford listened to his son scream.

The cane came down again across the backs of Dario's thighs. The man holding it was one of Renzo's own, and he did the work with no feeling in it at all. Dario was bent over a crate, hands flat against the wood. He was past pleading now, into the part where it was just noise.

Renzo sipped his tea. It was a bitter human-kingdom blend, the only sort he drank.

"Five more," he said.

"Father, please, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking..."

"You went to the Talori workshop." Renzo set the cup down. "After I told you, by name, not to touch the family. Not to touch the friends. Not to touch anything that breathes near a Montecardi. Do you know why I gave that order?"

Dario didn’t answer. The cane came down. He answered after that, in a manner of speaking.

"Because the mother of that house is Seris Montecardi," Renzo said. "Whom you have never seen fight, because the last people who saw Seris fight are not available to discuss it. You nearly handed our entire operation to a woman who could turn this inn and everyone in it into a fine red mist before her wine got cold." He nodded at the man with the cane. "Three more. He’ll remember three better than five."

When it was done, they helped Dario from the room, white-faced. Renzo was left alone with his tea and the quiet.

He was not a fool, whatever his son was. He knew the Montecardi girl could move against him for this. It was an assault on her people, on assessed ground, in her own district. Technically she could have his whole crew thrown in a Vellasera holding cell and let the courts grind on it for months.

[Let her try.]

He thought of the contingencies he’d put in place the day he arrived: the liens, the assessor, the paper, all sealed and routed long before now. It was leverage enough to turn a dungeon cell into an inconvenience. The girl thought this was about a cold box, a contest between merchants.

Renzo drew a clean sheet toward him and uncapped his ink. He wrote in the small, even hand he used for Drava and Drava alone.

Our business in Vellasera with the amateur Signora will be concluded shortly. The pieces are placed. She does not yet see the board.

He sealed it, and the wax took the mark cleanly, every ring closed.

Chapter 119: The Assessor

The Drava assessment office had taken the third floor of the old customs hall, and Katarina climbed the stairs to it the morning after she’d worked out the seal.

She’d read up on Severina Corvani on the way, Drava’s senior assessor for the southern districts. The reports all said the same three things, and Kat had heard versions of them before, about Valcetti, which was the only reason she took them seriously now.

[Can’t be rattled. Can’t be bought. Can’t be charmed.]

They were three locked doors. On most people, you found the one that opened. On a Corvani, you didn’t bother knocking on any of them.

So Kat wasn’t going to. She’d spent thirty-two years on Earth learning that the people you couldn’t move with money or pressure or flattery could always be moved by paperwork they’d agreed to themselves.

Charm was a lever. So was a tax code. The second one just took longer to set up.

The office was cold, decorated to make people feel small. Corvani sat behind a wide desk, a young human clerk hovering at her shoulder. She stayed seated when Katarina came in. She looked Kat over slowly, like Kat was a child who’d wandered somewhere she didn’t belong.

"Signora Montecardi." Corvani’s voice was patient. "The famous toilet lady." She gave a small smile. "Sit. Tea?"

"Please," Kat said, and sat.

Corvani poured two cups and slid one across the desk with two fingers.

"It’s a charming little district you have here," she said. "Vellasera. So earnest. All those eager small houses scrambling over their fish routes." She sipped. "I find it refreshing. After the capital, you know. Everyone here tries so hard."

[There it is. The pat on the head.]

"I’m sure," Kat said.

"So." Corvani folded her hands. "What can a real assessor do for a provincial one? Because I assume you’re here to ask me for something. They always are." She tilted her head. "Let me guess. You’ve heard I hold paper on your Greypass liens. You’d like me to be reasonable about it. Perhaps you’ve brought a gift, or a clever argument, or that famous Montecardi charm." She smiled again. "I’ll save you the trouble. I am not reasonable, I cannot be bought, and your mother’s reputation does not frighten me from two districts away. You may finish your tea, and then you may go home."

The clerk shifted, looking a little embarrassed for Kat.

[As expected of a Drava apex. She’s already won this conversation in her head. She thinks I came here to beg. Good. Let her keep thinking that for ten more seconds.]

Kat drank some of the tea. It was good tea, to be honest.

Then she set the cup down. She reached into her coat and laid a single folded document on the desk, square in the middle, on top of nothing.

The clerk’s eyes dropped to it.

"I’m not here to ask you for anything, Assessor," she said. "I’m here because you’ve already been served."

Corvani’s eyes went to the paper. She left it where it lay. Her smile held, but her eyes stayed on it a beat too long.

"Two days ago, I filed a certification audit with the district assessment office," Kat said. "Against the house of Drava. Specifically against every lien Drava holds on the Greypass corridor." She kept her voice level, the same voice she’d used in a hundred board meetings to deliver news people didn’t want. "You’re free to fight it. I’d encourage you to read the statute first, though."

"And which statute would that be?" Corvani’s hands stayed folded. But she’d stopped smiling.

That was what progress looked like on this battlefield.

"The Certified Seal Ordinance. District statute, ratified a little while ago under Assessor Valcetti’s office." Kat let that sit a beat. "I wrote most of it."

The clerk’s head came up.

"It requires that any binding array traded or enforced on assessed ground conform to the certified standard," Kat went on. "And it includes an audit provision. When a house’s seals are placed under certification audit, that house is compelled to produce all district paper bearing those seals, for assessment, until the audit clears." She nodded at the folded document. "All of it. Every lien. Every contract." She paused. "Every indenture."

The room went quiet. Corvani’s hands came apart on the desk.

[She gets it now.]

"You understand what I’ve done," Kat said, because she wanted to hear her say it.

Corvani picked the paper up at last. She read it without hurry, top to bottom, and Kat watched the exact moment the apex stopped looking at her like a child.

"You've turned your own ordinance into a subpoena," Corvani said.

"I built a law that says nobody trades fake seals in my district. It turns out a law like that has teeth in both directions." Kat mirrored her, hands folded on the desk. "You can't be rattled, you can't be bought, and you can't be charmed. I guessed all three of those before I came up here. So I didn't try any of them. I'm not moving you, Assessor. The statute is. You're compelled. Produce the paper."

The clerk was staring openly now, looking from Kat to his boss and back.

"Assessor, she, can she actually, is that..."

"Be quiet," Corvani said gently. She kept her eyes on Katarina the whole time.

For a moment Corvani simply looked at her, and Kat braced for a fight, for a delay, for some clever counter the capital must have taught a woman like this.

It didn't come. A careful part of her filed that away.

"Well," Corvani said. "Isn't that something?" She turned to the clerk. "The Drava district file. The Vellasera box. Bring it."

The clerk scrambled out. He came back with a heavy case. Corvani opened it herself and began laying documents across the desk, unbothered, fanning them out like she was dealing cards: liens, service contracts, transfer notes. And there, third from the top, sat an indenture, the charcoal-dark binding mark stamped at its foot.

[That's the one.]

Kat reached for it. Corvani let her, and that was the first thing that snagged.

The indenture named one Samara, daughter of a debtor woman, term of service against an outstanding balance. Kat scanned to the seal. The outer ring of the binding array, exactly as Vessa had said, ran two characters short and never closed.

Corvani leaned over and tapped it with one polished nail.

"You'll want to note the outer circuit," she said pleasantly. "Non-conforming. Cut short, see? It won't pass your standard. An indenture under a defective seal isn't enforceable on assessed ground." She straightened, smiling again, helpful now. "But of course you knew that, clever girl. That's why you're here."

Kat held the paper and went still.

An apex does not help you for free.

[Stop. Slow down.]

She made herself sit still and run it, cold, her face giving away nothing.

[She was ready to throw me out two minutes ago, patting my head. And the second she's compelled, she doesn't fight, doesn't stall, doesn't bury the indenture three boxes deep where I'd have to audit for a month to find it. She hands it to me third from the top. And then she points at the defect herself.]

In other words...

[She wants me to find it and void it.]

Kat looked up at Corvani. She looked back, patient, and waited.

[Why? Samara's their asset, their leash on a useful thief, their listener in my district. Voiding this indenture frees her, cuts the leash, costs the Black Lotus a spy. So why is Drava's own assessor sliding me the knife and showing me where to cut? A house doesn't loosen its own collar by accident. If she wants Samara free, then a free Samara does something for Drava that a leashed one can't. Or Samara isn't the prize at all, and she's only the bait for a trap I haven't found yet. Either way, Drava is a step ahead of me, and I came up here certain I was the one holding the surprise.]

Kat didn't have the answer. She hated that.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Assessor," she said, and her voice came out perfectly level. "I'll be filing the defect."

"Naturally." Corvani poured herself a little more tea. "Do give my regards to your mother."

Kat gathered the documents, stood, and walked out, holding them flat against her chest. She made it all the way down the stairs and into the cold street before she let herself look at the question head-on.

[I came up there to take something from them. I walked out carrying exactly the thing I wanted, handed to me with a smile, by an apex who could have buried it for a month. Which means I didn't take it. She gave it to me.]

She tucked the paper deeper into her coat and started the walk home.

For the first time since the cold box, Katarina Montecardi felt like she was holding a winning card she hadn't actually been dealt.

Chapter 120: The Collar

Katarina laid the indenture flat on her desk. She had no intention of filing the defect just yet.

She'd told Corvani she would. She'd said it calmly on the way out the door, I'll be filing the defect, and she meant for Drava to keep believing it. Let them think the provincial girl took the easy win they'd gift-wrapped for her. Let the story stand.

The story was a lie, and Kat had known it since the moment the apex tapped that broken ring with her own polished nail.

She pulled up the Ledger.

[Query. What does the house of Drava gain if I void this indenture?]

The Ledger answered immediately.

Insufficient data. Voiding the indenture removes Samara as a Black Lotus asset. No modeled benefit to House Drava.

[Right. No modeled benefit. Which is the problem.]

Kat leaned back and laced her fingers.

She ran it cold. This one concerned her, which only made her colder. An apex assessor, two districts out of her home territory, could have buried this indenture under a month of audit boxes. Instead she set it third from the top and pointed at the flaw herself.

Women like Corvani didn't do favors. Women like Corvani didn't make mistakes. So the favor was the move.

[A debt-house doesn't hand you the knife to cut its own leash. Not unless the cut serves the house. So I can't just cut where they want me to cut.]

That was the whole of it, really.

The void was the one play Corvani actively wanted, which made the void the one play Kat wouldn't make. Whatever freeing Samara did for Drava, it served Drava, not Kat, and Kat was done doing free work for people who patted her on the head.

She'd seen this shape before, on Earth. A rival firm would suddenly stop fighting you over the thing you'd fought about for months, roll over, let you have it, smiling the whole time. Every single time, it meant the prize had stopped mattering and you'd missed the moment it happened. The easy win was never the win. The easy win was the distraction you paid for with the real one.

But she still wanted the leash off, and feeling good about it was not the reason. A leashed Samara was a Black Lotus listener in her district, and Kat wanted that listener cut loose from the people pulling it. The trick was to cut the collar the right way.

[The indenture isn't the collar. The indenture is just the instrument. Samara works the Lotus to service her mother's balance. Void the indenture and Samara stops serving, sure. But the balance is still there, and whoever holds it holds the family. Drava wants me staring at the instrument so I never look at the balance underneath it.]

Kat smiled slowly and asked the Ledger one more thing.

[Query. The underlying balance attached to this indenture. What's its enforceable value, given that the binding seal has now been recorded as non-conforming by Drava's own assessor?]

Recalculating.

A house cannot enforce district paper it has been formally recorded as knowing to be defective.

Corvani's notation of the non-conforming seal is now on record.

Estimated enforceable value of the balance: heavily impaired.

Acquisition at significant discount: feasible.

[There it is.]

The defect Corvani had so helpfully pointed out was a lever. The second the apex put her nail on that broken ring and said the words out loud in front of a clerk, she'd put on record that Drava knew the paper was bad. A house couldn't turn around and enforce a balance it had just admitted, on the books, was sitting under a junk seal. The enforceable value of that debt had cratered the instant Corvani opened her mouth.

Corvani had manufactured the discount herself. She'd done it to make the void irresistible. Kat was going to use it to buy the collar instead.

She went back up the customs hall stairs the next morning.

Corvani was at her desk again, tea already poured, wearing the same patient smile as yesterday. The clerk hovered at her shoulder.

"Signora Montecardi." Her voice was indulgent. "Come to file your defect? I had the forms set aside for you. You'll want the void recorded before Tideglass, I imagine. Such a clever little victory for the festival season."

[She's already written the ending in her head. The provincial grabs the void, frees the thief, struts home. Let's not.]

"Actually," Kat said, and laid a different document on the desk, "I'm here to assume a balance."

Corvani's smile twitched.

"I'm sorry?"

"The debt underlying the Samara indenture. The mother's balance." Kat tapped her own paper. "You recorded the binding seal as non-conforming yesterday. In front of a witness." She nodded at the clerk, who went a little pale. "Which means Drava can no longer enforce that balance at value on assessed ground. It's impaired paper now. So I'm offering to take it off your hands. At the impaired rate, naturally. The rate your own notation created."

The clerk looked at Corvani. Corvani kept her eyes on Kat.

For the first time, the patient smile sat on her face without anything behind it.

"You're not filing the void?" Corvani asked.

"I might. Eventually. I haven't decided." Kat kept her voice pleasant, the exact register Corvani had used on her yesterday. "What I'm doing today is buying the debt. And I'm leaving my certification audit open while I do it." She let that land. "You produced one indenture for me, Assessor. The audit covers all of Drava's district paper. I see no reason to close the books over a single sheet when there's a whole box I haven't read."

[There. Watch the certainty go.]

It was small.

The crack barely showed. But she went quiet for one beat too long, and her eyes moved over Kat's face like she was re-reading a document she thought she'd already finished. That was the tell. The apex had built her whole plan on the provincial grabbing the shiny void and crowing about it. Instead the provincial had walked past the void, taken the thing underneath, and announced she was going to keep digging.

[She gave me a discount to make me stop looking. I took the discount and kept looking. Now she doesn't know what I see.]

"You understand," Corvani said slowly, "that assuming a balance is not the same as forgiving one."

"I understand exactly what it is," Kat said.

"Then you understand what you're holding." The smile came back, thinner now, and this time it had respect in it, which Kat counted as a bigger win than the paper. "Very well, Signora. The balance is impaired. I won't pretend otherwise on the record. The transfer is clean." She drew the form toward her and signed it without another word of argument. There was no argument left to make. She slid it back. "Congratulations. You've bought yourself a debt."

"I've bought myself a debt," Kat agreed, and gathered the deed.

She made it down the stairs and out into the cold street with the document flat against her chest, the same as last time. Except this time she actually had what she'd come for, and she knew exactly what it cost.

Then the catch landed, a beat after the win.

[Okay. So. From where I'm standing, I just out-played a Drava apex, kept my audit open, and pulled a family's debt out of the Black Lotus's hands at a discount they made for me. Clean. Elegant. A genuinely beautiful piece of work, if I say so myself. From where Samara's standing, though.]

Kat slowed to a stop in the middle of the street.

[From Samara's side of the table, I freed nobody. Her mother's been a line item on someone else's ledger for fifteen years. And all I just did was move the line item onto mine. I bought her mother's collar.]

A year ago the math would have been the end of it: debt acquired at a discount, asset secured, file closed. The math was clean, and it used to be the only part of any of this she looked at.

She stood there with the deed against her chest, festival banners going up overhead. The problem in front of her was simple. She had to walk up to a woman who'd been a number on someone's debt sheet since before her daughter could read, and tell her that number was Katarina Montecardi's now.

[And Samara is going to find out about it in a moment. The one thief in this district sharp enough to see through me is going to learn that I bought her family's debt the same week her own side handed it to me at a discount, and she is not going to assume I did it to be nice. Why would she? Nobody's ever done anything for that family without a hook in it. This'll go great.]

She sighed, tucked the deed deeper into her coat, and started walking toward the outskirts camp.

[And she’s right. I want something. And, I plan to get it.]