CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 121: Trust

The outskirts camp was a cart, a lean-to, a cook fire, and a mule, set up in a dry field past the edge of town where nobody collected rent. Kat had pictured something grimmer. It was just small, a whole life folded down to what a mule could pull.

Samara’s mother sat near the cook fire, thinner, with a faded service mark inked at the base of her throat. She stayed where she was as Kat came up the track. Visitors had not been good news for this family in a long time.

Samara came around the cart fast, then stopped.

She covered her surprise well. Her face went flat, her arms crossed, her weight settled. But Kat had spent two lifetimes learning to catch the first half-second before people fixed their faces, and Samara’s first half-second had been real alarm.

Someone had walked up to the one thing she cared about. That was clearly not good.

"How did you find this place?" Samara said.

"Vessa told me. She tailed you. She felt terrible about it, if that helps."

"It doesn’t." Samara stepped between Kat and the fire, between Kat and her mother. The move looked casual. It wasn’t. "Whatever this is, Signora, say it and leave."

[Geez. So impatient.]

Kat took the deed out of her coat and held it up so Samara could see the seal.

"Two days ago your mother’s balance belonged to the house of Drava," she said. "As of this morning, it belongs to me. I bought it. The same week your own employers handed it to me at a discount, which is a conversation you and I are going to have later." She kept her voice flat. "I hold your debt now, all of it."

The mother went rigid behind the fire, one hand coming up to the service mark at her throat. Samara went very still.

"And before you decide what kind of person does that," Kat went on, "no. I didn’t do it to be kind. I want to be clear about that, because you’re obviously wondering what the catch is and, yes, you’re right to do so."

Samara looked at the deed, then at Kat. She almost looked relieved.

"Then why?"

"Because you're the sharpest thief in this district and right now you're pointed at me, on a leash a debt-house holds, doing recon for people who pay you in the privilege of not foreclosing on your mother." Kat tucked the deed away. "I don't like that arrangement. It's a waste, and the leash points the wrong direction. So I bought it. I want you off everyone else's string and on mine instead. The price of getting you there happens to be cutting your family loose. Fine. I'll pay it."

[Declaration made. Now she gets to be the skeptic.]

"You expect me to believe," Samara said slowly, "that the Montecardi girl spent good coin freeing a stranger's mother as a recruiting bonus?"

"I expect you to believe I spent impaired coin acquiring the best asset in the district while it was on sale," Kat said. "If it makes you feel better to think of it that way, do. It's accurate." She pulled out a second, smaller paper. "And here's the part that should actually move you. I'm only restructuring your balance. The number Drava had you running yourself ragged against forever, the one that never went down because the interest ate every payment? Gone. I rewrote it into a fixed term you can actually clear. Honest work, real ledger, an end date. Your mother stops being a line item the day it's paid, and it can be paid."

She held it out.

The mother had come up off her seat by the fire, one hand still at her throat, her eyes fixed on the page in Kat's hand. Samara took the restructure paper and read it. She read it again, slower, her eyes moving down the column to the bottom number, the end date, the thing the family had not had in fifteen years.

"This is real," Samara said.

"It's filed. Corvani countersigned the transfer herself. It's as real as a thing gets in my district." Kat put her hand out. "Come work for me. Off the Lotus, off Drava, on a clean contract with terms you can read. You don't have to trust me to see it's the better deal, and you're smart enough to know it is."

Samara looked at the hand. Her eyes went to her mother, who was watching the paper like it might dissolve, then back to Kat.

She took the hand and shook it once, still wary.

"Tentatively," Samara said.

"Tentatively," Kat agreed. "I'd be suspicious of you too."

The mother had come around the fire by then, the restructure paper still in Samara's hand. She stepped close and studied Kat for a long moment, wary still. A person didn't hand gratitude to a new debt-holder on the first day, and Kat respected that more than thanks.

"After fifteen years of a number that only ever climbed," the mother said and trailed off.

"It was built to climb," Kat said. "That's the whole product. Drava doesn't want debts paid. A paid debt is a customer lost. They want them serviced forever." She nodded at the paper. "Mine pays off. That's the difference. I'd rather have you free and earning than chained and resentful. Chained people do bad work."

The mother almost smiled.

"You talk like a merchant."

"I am one." Kat looked at Samara. "Walk me to the road. We have the other conversation now."

They walked the dry track back toward town in the early dark, the festival lanterns of Vellasera glowing faint at the bottom of the hill, and for a while neither of them said anything.

Samara broke it first.

"You should know I'm still not friends with you," she said. "You bought me. That's what this is. You can dress it up in fixed terms and clean ledgers. You still walked into my home, put my mother's life in your coat pocket, and told me to come to heel."

"That's all true," Kat said. "I'm not going to argue you out of it. I'd just point out that the people who had her life in their pocket before me weren't offering an end date." She kept walking. "You don't have to like the deal. You took it because it's better, and that's enough. I don't need loyalty. I need good work and honest reports."

Samara was quiet a few steps. Then she huffed a laugh.

"You really are exactly as cold as they say."

"They're not wrong." Kat looked at her sidelong. "And you've been turning something over since the camp. Out with it. First report, no charge."

Samara stopped walking.

"You've been twitchy since the customs hall," she said. "Vessa told me. I didn't get it then. I do now. I've worked for these people for fifteen years, and you've worked against them for two weeks. There's a thing you're missing that I'd have caught in a heartbeat."

"Then catch it for me."

"Think about who you sat across from. Severina Corvani is a senior Drava assessor for the entire southern region, and she's here in Vellasera in person, working the paper with her own hands." To her, it was obvious. "You know what a senior assessor does, normally? She signs things in a tower three districts away and lets juniors do the legwork. People at that level do not come out to the coast to personally fuss over an amateur Signora's fish-route liens."

"I know that."

"The cold box is clever, the Greypass roads are nice, the icebox launch and the festival all fine," Samara went on. "But none of it is worth a senior Drava apex leaving her tower to handle it herself. That is not the size of prize she gets out of bed for." She shrugged, hands in her coat. "You've been so busy beating her at the small game that you never stopped to ask why someone that big is even sitting at your table."

Kat stood on the dark track and felt the whole board she'd been so pleased with rearrange itself underneath her.

She'd been proud of the customs hall, the subpoena, the discount, out-thinking the unbribable apex move for move. And the entire time, she'd treated Corvani's presence as a fact instead of a question. Apexes did not leave their towers for the size of prize Kat had been guarding. She'd been guarding the wrong one.

She started walking again, faster now, the lanterns of the town swelling brighter ahead. Samara fell into step beside her without being asked. It was the first thing in two weeks that felt like a win Kat had actually earned.

[Well, this little partnership of ours is either going to blow up in my face or it's going to be the best deal I've made in months. I suppose we'll see which one.]

Given how quiet she was, it seemed Samara's mind was on the same track.

Chapter 122: What She Knows

Vessa stood by the gate and watched Katarina walk Samara onto the estate.

It was strange to see. The last time Samara had been here, she'd been stiff and careful. She'd even hesitated to drink Brynn's guest cup, like there was a chance it would be

poisoned. Now, she walked half a step behind Katarina with her hands in her pockets, sheepishly.

[She still doesn’t trust it.]

Katarina stopped in the middle of the yard and waited for everyone to look at her. Seris was on the porch. Brynn was by the woodpile, still holding an axe. Ottavia poked her head out the kitchen door.

"Everyone," Katarina said. "Samara works for us now. She’s one of ours. So treat her like staff, not a guest."

There was a short pause.

Then Brynn dropped the axe. She crossed the yard and pulled Samara into a hug that lifted her off the ground.

"Ha! I knew it!" Brynn said. "I told Seris, that one’s got a good face under all the scowling. Welcome, welcome!"

"I can’t breathe," Samara said.

"That’s the hug working!"

Seris came down off the porch slowly. She didn’t hug anyone. She just looked Samara up and down, her head tilted. Vessa knew that look. It was the look Seris gave a contract before signing it.

"So," Seris said. "You’re on our side now?"

"I’m on the side that bought my mother’s debt," Samara said. "For now, that’s the same thing."

Seris smiled.

"Honest. You’re off to a good start." She patted Samara’s cheek and turned away. "Ottavia, set another place. She eats here now."

Samara stood there in the middle of the yard. She didn’t seem to know what to do with herself.

Katarina caught Vessa’s eye and tipped her head toward the side garden. The meaning was clear. Go talk to her. Kat had things to do.

The side garden was Vessa's favorite part of the estate. There was a low wall you could sit on, and a fig tree that never grew good figs.

She brought Samara out there and they sat on the wall.

"So," Vessa said. "You work here now."

"Clearly."

"It's weird, isn't it? A week ago you were robbing our caravans. Now Ottavia's saving you a seat at the table."

Samara let out a long breath.

"You have no idea how weird. I keep waiting for someone to change their mind and throw me back out."

Vessa swung her legs.

She'd been waiting a long time for this. Flirting with Samara had started as a job. Kat had given her the go-ahead and everything. But at some point it had stopped being a job. And now Samara was sitting next to her, her shoulders finally relaxed.

"You know," Vessa said, "this whole time I kept trying to get you to open up. And you kept dodging me every time."

"... I remember."

"And now I know all of it. Your mom, the camp, the debt." She bumped Samara with her shoulder. "Was that really so hard?"

Samara was quiet for a second.

"Yes," she said. "It was."

That hit harder than Vessa expected.

She looked at Samara properly. She had a sharp face, cropped black hair, and old scars on her red skin. Samara had spent fifteen years as a number on someone's ledger. Of course it was hard.

"Well," Vessa said. "You don't have to do that anymore."

Samara turned and looked at her.

"You," Samara said, "are very annoying. You know that?"

"I’ve been told."

"You followed me all the way to my camp. You got caught. I told you to stay away and you ignored me."

"I’m bad at staying away from things I want."

"Yeah." Samara’s voice dropped. "I figured that out."

[Oh.]

Vessa leaned in. Samara met her halfway, and then they were kissing on the wall under the fig tree. It was nothing like the slow flirting back at the shop. Samara kissed her like she’d been holding it in for a month, one hand coming up to Vessa’s jaw. Vessa climbed into her lap. Sitting side by side wasn’t enough anymore.

Samara’s hands settled on her hips. Vessa got her hands under the collar of Samara’s shirt.

"Vessa! Samara! Dinner’s in ten and— OH."

Ottavia stood at the garden entrance with a ladle in one hand.

Vessa froze. Samara froze. Vessa was still in Samara’s lap with a hand down the front of her shirt. Ottavia stood there like she’d walked in on a robbery.

"Ten minutes," Ottavia said. "Wash your hands. Both of you. Different sinks." She turned and stomped back toward the kitchen, muttering. "In the garden. Like rabbits. In my employer’s garden—"

Samara dropped her forehead onto Vessa’s shoulder and groaned.

"That’s going to be all over the estate by morning," she said.

"Probably already is," Vessa said, and got off her lap before Ottavia came back.

{Katarina}

After dinner, Katarina took Samara into the study and shut the door.

"Talk," Katarina said. "Everything you have on the Lotus. Start wherever you want."

Samara dropped into the chair across the desk. She was Kat’s now, and she talked like it.

"Renzo's a lieutenant," Samara said. "You already guessed that. He has real authority over the southern arm, but he can't move silver above a certain amount without writing up the line. Dario's his son, his weak spot, and a liability. The crews that hit your caravans weren't Lotus, that part's true. But Renzo was glad it happened. He's patient. He honestly thought he'd win just by waiting you out."

Katarina nodded and let her keep going. She didn't take notes. She didn't need to.

"They have maybe eight Sect cultivators in the district, plus hired muscle," Samara said. "The inn floor's a front. They don't sleep there. Half of them rotate out to a safehouse on the Coppara road." She paused. "And the money. Everything they spend traces back through one debt house. You read the seal on Renzo's chit. Drava."

"I read it," Katarina said. "I want to know what Drava actually is. Not the rumors. What you've seen yourself."

Samara was quiet for a moment. She was deciding how much to say.

"Here's the thing nobody says out loud," she said. "Drava doesn't lend money. I mean, she does, on paper. But that's not the real product." She leaned forward. "Drava lends seals. Her whole business is being the house whose paper everyone agrees to honor. A merchant in the east takes a Drava note because a merchant in the west will take that same note, no questions, because it has Drava's mark on it. That's what they sell. Trust. Once enough houses use their seals, nobody can afford to stop. Stopping means your own paper turns worthless." She spread her hands. "The Lotus owes her silver, sure. But really the Lotus is just one more house running on Drava's mark. Everyone is. That's the trap. You don't borrow from Drava once. You borrow from them forever."

Katarina sat very still.

It was a clean setup. The kind she could respect even while planning to take it apart. You didn't sell a product. Products could be copied. You sold the agreement itself. You made everyone else's paper depend on your mark, and then you owned the ground under every deal on the continent.

[They built a platform.]

She'd known a hundred companies like that on Earth. They never made anything. They just made themselves the place where everyone else had to stand.

"There's one more thing," Samara said. "I overheard it at the inn, Renzo to one of his seniors. They're buying up every Greypass lien they can get. I assumed it was about your routes. It's not. Or not only." She looked at Katarina. "It's because Greypass is the one overland corridor in this district that isn't tied to Drava at all. Every other road, every rail line, the port leases, the warehouse rights, they all run on Drava paper. Greypass doesn't,

because some merchant kid bought it for eight silver at a bankruptcy auction and never financed it through anybody."

The room went very quiet.

Katarina almost laughed.

She'd bought Greypass when she was thirteen, a dead route nobody wanted, the only asset at the auction with no bidders. She'd bought it to break Stellara's monopoly, and it had been cheap. She'd cleared it with Brynn's old crew and turned it into a real road. She'd thought that was the whole story.

She had built one piece of free ground, one corridor that didn't answer to the debt house that owned everything else. And she'd done it years before she even knew Drava existed, for reasons that had nothing to do with them.

That was why an apex assessor had come two districts out in person. She had come for the road, the one square of the board that wasn't theirs yet.

[I plugged a hole in their map without even knowing it was there.]

She looked at Samara, who watched her with that same sharp face, except now it was on Kat's side.

"You did good," Katarina said. "Better than good."

"So what do we do?"

Katarina leaned back in her chair. On Earth, she'd spent thirty years taking pieces of boards other people thought they controlled. She'd died alone in an office, having won every game except the only one that mattered.

She wasn't going to settle for a piece this time.

"Drava wants the whole board," Katarina said. "Every road, every seal, every house standing on their floor." She smiled. "So do I. The difference is, I'm going to take it from them."

Chapter 123: Tideglass Eve

Katarina sat alone in the study the morning after Samara's report and went over the whole board again in her head.

Going over the pieces wouldn't change things too much, especially with the kind of memory she had, but it was helpful to... sort things out into different, neat little boxes.

So, taking a deep breath and expanding her scope, she started at the top and worked down.

Drava sat at the top. Her empire came down to one single thing: everyone agreed that a Drava seal was good. A merchant took Drava's paper because the next merchant would take it too, no questions, forever. That agreement was the floor under everything. It was also the whole weakness. An agreement is only worth something as long as nobody questions it.

[So you make a standard they can't pass.]

Then it hit her, and she almost laughed out loud in the empty study.

She'd already done it.

Before she'd ever heard the name Drava, she'd gone to Signora Valcetti and made certified seals district law. She'd done it to protect her own arrays from being copied back when the cold container was all that mattered in this little equation.

The rule was simple. On assessed ground, paper had to carry a conforming, certified seal, or it couldn't be traded. At the time it had cost her a secret. She'd shown every rival exactly what authentic Montecardi work looked like, just to make their copies legally worthless.

[I built an anti-counterfeit weapon. And a debt house is just a very large, very respectable counterfeit operation... you know, if you hold it to a high enough standard.]

She'd made the weapon a year before she knew the target existed. All she had to do now was point it at the right bitch whose little dogs had threatened her beloved Vessa.

[Like I said, it's personal now.]

She pulled out a clean sheet and started writing.

The move was the Greypass corridor. Currently, thanks to the little move she made as a kid, she co-controlled it with Stellara. Right now it was free ground, the one road in the district that didn't run on Drava paper. That was exactly why Drava was buying up its liens. So she'd extend her certification standard over the whole corridor. Every lien, every lease, every note attached to Greypass would have to carry a conforming district seal to be enforceable.

Drava's paper wasn't conforming. It never had to be, because it was Drava.

The second she got the certification extended over Greypass, every lien Drava had spent the last month buying would turn into worthless garbage on the only road they actually wanted.

[They came two districts out in person to buy a corridor. I’m going to make that corridor refuse their money.]

She wrote out the petition to Valcetti and sealed it with her own conforming mark. She felt better than she had in a week.

On top of all of it, there was Tideglass. The festival was coming whether she was ready or not.

The waterfront had turned into a different place this week. Glass floats hung on strings between the buildings, clinking in the wind. Wine stalls were claiming spots along the harbor road like an invading army. As Signora of Vellasera, all of it was technically Katarina’s problem.

Most of it she handed to Vessa, who was thrilled about it.

"They’re hanging too low over the fish market," Vessa said. She was walking backward in front of Katarina, pointing up at a string of floats. "Someone’s going to catch a barrow on one and pull the whole line down. So I’m having them raised. I already told the crew this morning."

"Then raise them."

"I am raising them. I’m telling you so you know it’s handled, in case someone complains later that the floats moved without permission." She beamed. "I’m being a responsible deputy."

"You’re a menace with a clipboard."

Vessa took that as a compliment and kept walking.

Katarina let her handle it. Vessa was good at this, and it freed Katarina up for the part of Tideglass that actually mattered. She was launching forty-three cold containers into the opening market with the whole district watching.

What she hadn’t expected was how useful Samara would turn out to be.

Samara found her at the workshop that afternoon and dropped two names on the table.

"You’ve got watchers," Samara said. "Two of them. Not Lotus. Just opportunists who figured out where you do the inscription work and decided to camp on it."

Katarina looked up from her array.

"You’re sure they’re not Lotus?"

"Lotus pays better. These two are working off a market rumor, not orders. One’s a runner for a Coppara house. The other’s freelance, sells whatever he sees to whoever’s buying." Samara shrugged. "Amateurs. But amateurs talk, and talk spreads."

[This is what she’s for.]

For weeks, Samara had been the one doing the watching. Now she was on the other side of it. She could spot every clumsy amateur crawling around the edges of Kat’s operation. Not long ago she’d been one herself.

"Don’t remove them," Katarina said. "Feed them."

Samara nodded.

"Already planning to. I’ll let them see me carry a crate I want them to think matters. Give them numbers that are wrong. Let them sell the wrong numbers to the wrong people." She leaned a hip against the bench. "By Tideglass, whoever’s buying intel in this town is going to be working off a map I drew."

Katarina looked at her for a second.

"You’re enjoying this?" she said.

"After fifteen years of being the one getting hunted?" Samara almost smiled. "Yeah. A little."

Renzo Caelford found out his thief had flipped a few days later.

He noticed something was missing. The reports stopped coming. Samara had been close to the Montecardi girl and her friends, close enough to hear everything worth hearing. Then all of that went quiet.

He sent a junior out to the outskirts camp. The junior came back and said the camp was being broken down. The mother was gone. The indenture, the man said, had been bought out.

Renzo sat with that for a while. He was on the top floor of the inn, surrounded by furniture still in its crates. He stayed calm. Getting angry was never useful.

But he understood what it meant.

He’d lost his eyes. The one asset he’d had inside the girl’s circle, the leash he’d held through her mother’s debt, the provincial Signora had simply reached out and cut. Worse, she’d done it cleanly, through paper. It was exactly how he would have done it himself. He could respect that. He didn’t have to like it.

"Clever girl," Renzo murmured.

Dario sat nearby, his legs still bandaged from the caning. He scowled.

"She bought our spy. We should—"

"We should do nothing you can think of," Renzo said, without heat. "You think small. You think about the thief. The thief was never the point." He folded his hands. "The point is the floor under her feet, and the floor doesn’t belong to her."

There was a knock.

A courier stood in the doorway, Drava’s grey mark on his coat. He bowed and set a sealed folio on the nearest crate. Then he left without a word.

Renzo crossed the room and broke the seal.

He read it once. Then he read it again, slower. By the time he finished, he was smiling for the first time in weeks.

The Montecardi girl had filed a certification audit against Drava’s Greypass liens. She thought she was clever. She thought she’d found the lever.

She’d forgotten the lever swung both ways.

The folio was a notice from Severina Corvani, Drava’s assessor. Under the reciprocal-audit clause, which Kat’s own open audit had triggered the moment she filed it, Drava had every right to demand the same scrutiny in return.

So Corvani was invoking it. House Montecardi was summoned to produce its full seal standard, the certification rule itself, for Drava’s review.

The summons was set for the morning of Tideglass.

It was the single most important morning of the girl’s year. The launch and the festival fell on the same day, with the whole district watching. And Drava was going to drag her into an assessor’s office to put her own law on the table.

Renzo handed the folio to his son.

"She made certified seals the law of this district," he said. "She was very proud of it." He poured himself a small cup of bitter human-kingdom tea. "Now we're going to ask her to prove her own paper is good. On the one morning she can't afford to be anywhere but the market."

Dario read the notice and slowly began to grin.

"And if her standard has a single flaw in it," Renzo said, "a single corner cut, a single thing she didn't think of, Drava finds it. In front of everyone. The morning of her own festival."

He sipped his tea.

"Let's see how clever she is then."

Chapter 124: The Launch

Tideglass opened with bells.

At dawn on the first day, the bell on the harbor master's tower rang out, and the whole waterfront came alive! Wine stalls threw open their shutters. Music started up down the harbor road. The smell of grilling fish rolled across the water.

[Ah, how festive.]

The opening market was the busiest the district got all year, and Katarina had timed everything to it.

She stood at the Montecardi stall on the main quay with forty-three cold containers stacked behind her and a crowd already gathering. Vessa was at her shoulder. Eva had sent a letter wishing her luck and demanding numbers on how the launch did. Brynn and Seris were somewhere in the crowd.

[Showtime, I guess.]

She'd done a hundred product launches in her last life. The nerves never fully went away, and she'd stopped expecting them to.

"You've all heard the story," Katarina called out, loud enough to carry through the chaos. "House Montecardi got robbed. Some very clever people stole our cold containers and tried to sell them as their own. And what happened?"

A few people in the crowd grinned. Everyone in the district knew what had happened.

Two houses had melted down in the plaza weeks ago, their stolen chests spoiling fish and cheese in front of their own buyers.

"They rotted," Katarina said. "Stolen Montecardi work dies in your hands. The arrays answer to the house." She set a hand on the nearest container. "This one won't. Because this one is real, and it could answer to you."

She opened it.

She'd sealed it three days ago in front of witnesses. Now she pulled out the contents one piece at a time and held them up: a fish with clear eyes, a wheel of cheese still firm, a bowl of fruit that hadn't browned. Three days, in the late-summer coast heat, and everything was as fresh as the morning it went in.

A murmur ran through the crowd. A few people started clapping, then more joined in.

This was the part most people never understood. The real product was the difference between this fish and the rotted one in the plaza. People bought the story, and her competitors had spent the last month telling her story for her, for free.

"Pre-orders open now," Vessa called out, holding up the order book. "First batch ships within the week. Certified seals, assessed price, no surprises."

[Look at her! Natural saleswoman, over here.]

The line formed almost before she finished.

It moved fast. Merchants who'd pitied her last week were near the front, silver out, suddenly very interested. Vessa took names as fast as she could write them, and the order book filled page by page. Katarina stood there and watched the thing she'd built convert in real time.

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

She made a mental note never to say that out loud in front of Brynn.

The book was a third full when the crowd shifted, and a man in clean grey stepped up to the front of the line.

It was Renzo Caelford.

He came up calm, like any other customer. When he reached the stall, he raised his voice so the whole quay could hear him.

"One unit," Renzo said warmly. "At your public price. I’m told it’s the finest preservation work on the coast, and I’d be a poor merchant to miss it." He set silver on the counter and smiled. "House Montecardi does sell to everyone, doesn’t it? Or only to friends?"

The crowd went quiet.

[And there’s the move.]

He’d done it perfectly. He was buying like an honest customer, in public, in front of the district that had crowned her a folk-hero for refusing the Lotus. If she refused him now, she wasn’t brave anymore. She’d just be a small house playing favorites, letting a grudge cost her a sale. He’d take her own reputation and turn it into a leash.

Vessa looked at her, panic in her eyes. Brynn, somewhere in the crowd, had gone very still.

Katarina stepped up to the counter herself.

Katarina looked at the silver, then at Renzo. The old calm settled over her. It was the calm she got when a board finally made sense.

He thought he’d cornered her. He thought the only two moves were refuse and look petty or sell and look beaten.

[You’re playing checkers.]

"Of course we sell to everyone," Katarina said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "That’s what assessed price means. Everyone pays the same. Even charming human men from the central kingdoms."

A laugh rolled through the crowd. Renzo’s smile stayed in place.

She took his silver. She took a fresh container from the stack. And then, instead of just handing it over, she set it on the counter where everyone could see. She took out her certifying mark and applied the seal in front of the entire quay.

She narrated while she did it. That was the whole point.

"Certified, conforming, assessed," she said, pressing the seal home. "This is a genuine Montecardi unit. It carries the district standard. That means it’s legal to trade on any assessed route on the coast." She looked up at Renzo, pleasant as anything. "And it means anything that isn’t this, anything without this exact seal, is a counterfeit. Untradeable. Worthless on assessed ground. Anyone who copies this, anyone who reverse-engineers it and tries to sell it, is selling a forgery the law won’t touch."

She slid the container across the counter to him.

[Buy it, then. Take it home. Take it apart. And the second you sell a single copy without paying me, you're a counterfeiter on every road I care about.]

He'd wanted to dare her into a corner.

Instead she'd sold him the one unit in the district that proved his copies would be illegal. She'd spent a year making certified seals the law, and now she'd done it again, publicly, with his silver, with him standing right there as her witness.

Renzo took the container. To his credit, he kept the smile.

But the man standing just behind him did something Katarina hadn't expected.

She hadn't even noticed him until now. He wore a grey coat with Drava's mark on the collar, an attendant, one of the silent ones who shadowed Drava's people everywhere. He stepped forward and opened a slim ledger. He countersigned the sale into it, noting the date, the price, the seal. He recorded the Montecardi mark into Drava's own books and stamped it as accepted.

Then he closed the ledger and stepped back without a word.

[...What?]

Katarina kept her face easy. But she didn't like this at all.

Drava had just put itself on record. In its own ledger, the debt house had formally accepted the Montecardi seal as good. On its face, that was a gift. It was an apex bowing to her standard, validating her law with its own paper.

So why did it feel like she'd done exactly what someone wanted?

[An apex doesn't write anything into its books unless the writing serves the house.]

She'd just made Drava acknowledge her seal. She'd thought that was her win. But the attendant had been ready. He'd had the ledger open before she finished the sale. Drava had wanted this on paper, had come prepared to get it, and she couldn't yet see what a debt house gained by going on record honoring a provincial girl's mark.

[Why do you want my seal in your books? What does that buy you?]

She filed it away. She didn't have the shape of it yet, and she wasn't going to pretend she did.

Renzo tucked the container under his arm and gave her a small bow.

"A pleasure doing honest business, Signora," he said, and walked off into the festival crowd with his attendant a step behind.

Chapter 125: The Reciprocal Audit

While the festival roared two streets over, Katarina walked into the assessor’s office to tidy up her win.

The summons was a reciprocal audit. Drava wanted to put her seal standard on the table and pick at it. Fine. Let her. Katarina’s standard was clean. She’d made it statutory, she’d made it conforming, she’d built it to be picked at and survive. Drava would find nothing. The moment she found nothing, Katarina’s audit against her Greypass liens would stand, and every piece of Drava paper on that corridor would turn to garbage.

So she walked in holding the weapon and feeling good about it.

Severina Corvani was already seated. There was tea on the table, two cups, poured before Kat arrived. The office was bare, borrowed for the morning.

"Signora Montecardi," Corvani said. "Sit. Your festival is charming. The fish smell carries all the way up here."

"You wanted my seal standard," Katarina said, and set the folio down. "Here it is. Every clause. Conforming, certified, statutory. Pick at it all you like."

Corvani left the folio sitting there.

She looked at the folio, then at Katarina, and smiled at her like she was a child showing off a drawing.

"I don’t need to read it," Corvani said. "I helped you write half of it without you knowing." She slid the folio gently back across the table. "Sit down. You’ve had the wrong shape of this from the start, and you’re too sharp to enjoy losing without understanding why."

Katarina sat. She kept her face still. Inside, the bad feeling from the quay yesterday came back.

Corvani waited, hands folded, in no hurry at all.

[She’s not performing. She thinks she’s already won.]

That was the part that bothered Katarina most. People who were bluffing pushed. People who had actually won could afford to sit there and pour you tea.

[The countersign, the ledger. She’s going to tell me what they bought.]

"Tell me what Drava is, in your own words," Corvani said. "Not the rumors. What you’ve worked out."

"Drava sells trust," Katarina said. "Your product is being the house whose seal everyone honors without question. Once enough houses use your paper, nobody can stop, because stopping makes their own paper worthless."

"Good," Corvani said. "Now. What happens to a house like that the day the question gets asked anyway?"

The room went quiet.

[...What?]

"There’s another debt house," Corvani went on, calm the whole time. "Older than us, in the far interior. For two years now they’ve been seeding doubt in our paper. Quietly. A refused note here, a whisper there, a rumor that a Drava-backed seal isn’t quite as good as it used to be. It’s working. Slowly. But trust is the only thing we sell, and trust, once it starts to go, goes like a dam. Slowly, then all at once." She folded her hands. "Drava’s business is failing, Signora. Continent-wide. We have perhaps three years before the doubt reaches the floor and the floor falls out."

Katarina sat very still.

[That’s why they’re spending. That’s why an apex came two districts out in person. Everyone thinks they’re expanding. They’re drowning.]

"A house that sells trust can’t be saved by selling more trust," Corvani said. "You can’t out-shout a rumor. The doubt is already in the old seal. The only way out is to migrate. To move every account, every route, every note, onto a new standard. A clean one. One nobody’s poisoned yet. One the public already accepts, that’s incorruptible, that’s written into law so it can’t simply be doubted away." She tilted her head. "Do you know how hard it is to build a trusted standard from nothing? It takes generations. We don’t have generations. We have three years."

[Ah... I see.]

The whole board tilted.

Every piece landed somewhere new, and Katarina watched her own cleverness rearrange itself into something she hadn’t built.

It was the certified seal law.

She’d made it statutory just a little while ago, before she’d ever heard the name Drava. It was incorruptible by design, backed by district law so it couldn’t be argued away. And yesterday, at the launch, she’d dragged it into full public view, sold a certified unit in front of the whole quay, made the entire district watch the Montecardi seal be the thing that separated real from counterfeit.

And a Drava attendant had been standing right there with a ledger open, ready to write the Montecardi seal into Drava’s own books as accepted.

[She engineered all of it. The countersign, Renzo’s whole dare, the public sale. She wanted my standard validated in front of witnesses, and she wanted Drava on record accepting it.]

"Every move you made," Corvani said, watching her get there, "I let you make. The audit you filed against our liens. I produced the indenture for you myself, remember? I tapped the defect for you. I wanted you confident. I wanted you building. The seal law, the Greypass certification, the public launch. Every win." Her voice was almost gentle. "You weren’t fighting us, Signora. You were building us a lifeboat. For free. And doing it better than any house we could have hired, because you thought it was yours."

[I built the apex its escape route. I’ve spent all this time laying the floor it means to stand on when its own collapses.]

Katarina turned it over once, fast, looking for the flaw. There had to be a flaw.

"The rival house," she said. "The one poisoning your paper. If they wanted you dead, they’d have finished it already. Why are they giving you years?"

Corvani looked almost pleased that she’d asked.

"Because killing a house the size of Drava’s is expensive and messy. Half the continent’s contracts run on our seals. They’d rather we rot slowly, buy the pieces up cheap, and inherit the floor when we fall." She tilted her head. "You understand them perfectly. You’d have done the same. So would I."

So there was no flaw. The rival was patient for the same reason Renzo had been patient. Everyone in this game won by waiting. Katarina was the only one at the table who’d spent the whole time moving.

The tea had gone cold between them. Katarina made herself breathe slowly, the way Brynn had taught her before sparring. Brynn had told her the hit you never saw coming was the one that put you on the ground.

[I never saw the blade.]

"So," Katarina said, and her voice came out level. She was a little proud of that. "You don’t want to crush me. You want to wear me."

"I want your standard," Corvani said. "And the cleanest way to take a standard is to take the house that holds it. Willingly, ideally. A standard people trust because a debt house seized it isn’t worth having." She reached into her coat. "So I’m offering terms."

She set a contract on the table and slid it across. The paper was beautiful. Drava’s grey seal sat in the corner. Below it was a blank space for the Montecardi mark.

"House Montecardi becomes Drava’s seal-authority subsidiary," Corvani said. "Your certified standard becomes the standard we migrate onto. You administer it. You keep your house, your routes, your festival, your charming little life. You become, overnight, the seal-keeper for the largest debt house on the continent. There is no merchant alive who would call that anything but the deal of a generation."

Katarina looked at the contract and left it where it was.

"And if I say no?"

For the first time, Corvani’s smile reached her eyes, and there was nothing warm in it.

"Then I do it the conventional way," she said. "We have three years to save the house. You have one morning to save your festival. Right now, two streets over, your launch is the biggest day House Montecardi has had in eighteen years." She nodded toward the window, toward the music and the order book filling up on the quay. "By tonight I can have your seal’s reputation in question across three districts. A whisper that Montecardi certification isn’t as sound as the law claims. The same poison that’s killing us, pointed at you, on the one day you can’t afford a single drop of doubt. I don’t even have to make it true. You taught me that yourself, in the plaza, with the fish." She let that sit. "Your standard only works because no one questions it. I can question it. Publicly. Today."

The festival bell rang somewhere down the harbor.

Katarina looked at the contract, the deal of a generation, with a noose folded inside it.

[Subsidiary. After two lifetimes, they want to make me a subsidiary.]

She thought about Vivienne Ross, who’d spent thirty years climbing, who’d taken board after board, who’d died alone under a fluorescent light having won everything except the only thing that mattered. She’d come here and built something real. She’d done it with her own two hands, her two moms, her annoying girlfriend, and a thief she’d just freed. It was hers. Free ground, the one corner of the map that didn’t answer to anyone.

And the apex wanted to fold it into its books like everything else.

Corvani pushed the contract one inch closer.

"Take your time," she said. "You have until your festival closes tonight." She rose and crossed to the door. "Personally, I hope you sign. You're the most useful thing this district has produced in a century, and it would be a waste to ruin you on principle." She paused with her hand on the door. "But you'll do whichever serves the house. Yours, I mean. I've watched you long enough to know that much."

She left.

Katarina sat alone with the cold tea, the beautiful contract, and the festival roaring two streets away.

[Okay. That happened. It happened and it's in the past. Now what do I actually know?]

Chapter 126: The Audit, the Other Way

Katarina sat alone with the cold tea and the beautiful contract for a long time.

The festival kept going outside. Somebody was playing a flute badly near the harbor stairs, and a crowd was cheering for them anyway. Katarina inhaled slowly.

[Okay. What do I actually know?]

She pulled the Ledger up in her mind and started filing.

Fact one:

Drava's paper was failing. Corvani had said it herself, out loud, in a formal reciprocal audit, with the session record open on the table between them. Katarina had watched the recording stone glow the entire meeting. Assessors recorded everything.

[She confessed her house's collapse into an official audit record. Why would she do that?]

Because Corvani expected only two outcomes. Katarina signs, and the record belongs to Drava's new subsidiary, buried forever. Or Katarina refuses, gets crushed by tonight, and the record belongs to a ruined provincial house nobody will ever listen to.

[She never priced in a third outcome. From where she sits, there isn't one.]

Fact two:

The Greypass corridor. Katarina had already extended her certification law over it. Every lien Drava had bought on those roads now had to pass the Montecardi standard to be

enforceable, and her open audit was in the process of proving they didn't. Drava had spent a fortune buying paper on the one corridor whose trust Katarina now legally controlled.

Fact three:

Yesterday's countersign. A Drava attendant had publicly written the Montecardi seal into Drava's own ledger as accepted, on launch day. Corvani had engineered that to validate the standard she meant to take.

Katarina stopped.

She went over fact three again.

[Wait.]

Her heart started beating faster.

[Corvani needed my standard publicly trusted before she could migrate onto it. So she made Drava acknowledge it first. Which means, as of yesterday morning, the largest debt house on the continent is on record accepting Montecardi certification as valid. My standard doesn't need Drava. Drava's own books already say so.]

She sat back in the borrowed chair.

The whole conversation replayed itself in her head.

And this time, Corvani sounded like a drowning woman describing the only rope in the water.

Drava had three years. Drava could not build a new standard in three years. Drava needed one that already existed, that was statutory, that was publicly accepted, that was incorruptible. There was exactly one of those on the continent, and Katarina was sitting in a chair holding it.

[Corvani walked in here and told me, into an official record, that her house dies without my product. Back in my old world, we called that a purchase inquiry.]

Katarina looked at the contract on the table. House Montecardi becomes Drava's seal-authority subsidiary. She almost laughed. It was the oldest trick in acquisitions, and she'd nearly missed it. The woman across the table was just that good at the delivery.

When a dying company needs your asset to survive, and it shows up at your door offering to buy you, that is the most desperate move it has left. The correct response to a buyer like that is to charge it rent.

[She has three years and one candidate. I have a statute, a public launch, and her own countersign. She thinks the clock is on me because of tonight. The clock has been on her for two years.]

Katarina picked up the contract, folded it neatly, and put it in her coat. She wasn't going to sign it, but evidence might come in handy later.

Then she stood and drank the cold tea in one go.

It was time to make moves.

The war room was the estate's dining table again.

Seris sat at one end. Brynn stood behind her with her arms crossed. Vessa had claimed the chair next to Katarina's and was holding her arm with both hands, like Katarina might get assassinated at her own dinner table. Samara stood near the wall, close enough to hear and far enough to run if things went badly (which was honestly smart of her).

Katarina laid it all out.

"She threatened us? On Tideglass? During your launch? Okay. I'm going to go have a word with her right now!" Brynn said and went to stand up.

"You will not," Katarina said. "Mom, I need her healthy and alive. She's about to become my best customer."

The table went quiet.

"...Customer?" Seris repeated slowly.

"Corvani made one mistake," Katarina said. "She spent so long studying how I fight that she forgot to check whether her own position could survive the audit she demanded. So let's run her audit back at her." She held up one finger. "Her paper is failing. She confessed it into an official reciprocal-audit record this morning. I have the session on stone." She held up a second finger. "Her Greypass liens are dead weight. My certification law covers the corridor, my open audit is proving her paper doesn't conform, and she can't foreclose on roads whose trust I legally control." A third finger went up. "And as of yesterday, Drava's own ledger publicly accepts the Montecardi seal. She built that acknowledgment herself, to steal my standard. Which means the standard she needs to survive is already, on her own books, mine."

Vessa was staring at her with her mouth open.

"No way. So she can't just take it?"

"A standard people trust because a debt house seized it isn’t worth having. Her words. Seizing me poisons the thing she wants." Katarina tapped the table. "So I invert the contract. Drava migrates onto the Montecardi standard instead of absorbing us. Every account, every route, and every note gets re-sealed under my certification. I hold the authority. I set the conforming requirements. And Drava pays me, per seal, per year, forever, for the privilege of not collapsing."

Samara choked on air.

"Hold on a minute. You’re gonna get her to pay you?"

"I’m going to make Drava my... anchor client," Katarina said. "Anchor clients defend you, because their survival runs through your product. Remember the rival house poisoning Drava’s paper? The day Drava migrates onto my standard, that rival’s two years of whisper work dies, and my seal becomes the thing half the continent’s contracts stand on. Corvani’s lifeboat is real. I’m just letting her take my spot in it, and I’m keeping the oars."

"I understood maybe a third of that," Brynn said. "But I’m very proud of you!"

Seris was smiling now. She reached over and squeezed Katarina’s hand, her thumb rubbing circles over her knuckles.

"And her threat?"

"Mutually assured destruction. If my seal’s reputation cracks today, her migration target dies with it, and she confessed on record that she has no second option. She was bluffing with her house’s life. She wants me to believe she’d burn Drava down just because I refused her. But everything she’s done so far has been calculated. She’s not crazy, and we both know it. Which brings me to the last piece." Katarina looked at Samara. "Your intel. Say it again, for the table."

"The Lotus is in bed with Drava," Samara said. "Payroll routed through her debt house. Renzo, the crews, all of it. The leash on the Lotus dies with Drava’s seal."

"So the Black Lotus is just a glorified collection agency. Every threat Renzo made, every rumor he planted, every crew that hit my roads, all of it was Drava-financed enforcement. And nobody in this district knows it yet."

Brynn frowned.

"Why does that matter for the contract, though?"

"Face," Vessa said quietly. She looked at Katarina. "It’s face, isn’t it?"

Katarina nodded.

"For the reverse migration to bind, Corvani has to sign as the weaker party, and a Drava assessor will never do that quietly. Quiet leaves her room to renege the moment the ink dries. I need it public. I need the district to watch Drava's enforcers exposed, humbled, and folded under the Montecardi seal, on Tideglass, in front of everyone. Then the migration becomes a fact the whole coast witnessed, and Corvani can never wriggle out of it. No Valdari house can walk back a surrender the district saw with its own eyes."

[And the cleanest way to expose Drava's leash is to yank it in public.]

"Renzo bought a unit from me yesterday like an honest customer, in front of the crowd. So tonight, in front of the same crowd, I'm going to show them what he actually is. Corvani watches her own enforcement arm get exposed as her enforcement arm, understands exactly how much of her position I can burn, and signs the reverse migration before the festival closes. Her deadline, my terms."

Seris pulled her in and kissed her cheek, then her jaw, lingering.

"My terrifying little girl! I could eat you alive."

"Later, mother. I'm working.

She stood, took a blank sheet, and wrote a polite, formal summons in two lines. Then she sealed it with the Montecardi mark, freshly certified and continentally acknowledged.

"Samara. Take this to the Lotus floor." She held it out. "Tell Renzo the Signora of House Montecardi requests his presence."

Samara took the letter and looked at the seal, then at Katarina. Then she grinned.

"As expected of my new boss. You're worse than they are."

"No. I'm better than they are."

Chapter 127: Renzo's Account

Katarina chose this spot on purpose.

It was the same plaza where Sarrenzi and Olcari had humiliated themselves weeks ago, right in front of the trade district. Every house in Vellasera remembered what had happened here, and she wanted that memory fresh.

She stood on the raised stone platform where the harbor announcements were made, with a table, a cold container, and a folio.

Seris stood to her left and Brynn stood to her right with her arms crossed. Samara waited at the bottom of the steps, out of sight of the crowd for now.

The district houses had all come. She'd made sure of it. Nobody could skip a public summons from the Signora of Vellasera during Tideglass without losing face. She counted the banners in the crowd: Sarrenzi, Olcari, Parenna, Duccetti. Even Stellara Brevaine had sent a representative, a thin woman near the front who was already taking notes.

[Good. Everyone's here.]

Corvani stood at the edge of the plaza under a wine stall's awning, holding... well, a cup of wine. She had arrived exactly on time and simply stood there, watching.

Then the crowd parted, and Renzo Caelford walked in.

He'd brought six people, including Dario, who was walking stiffly. Renzo himself looked calm. He climbed the platform steps at an easy pace, as if he was the one who had called this meeting.

"Signora Montecardi," he said, loud enough for the plaza to hear. "You summoned the Black Lotus. Publicly. On your festival day. I admit, I'm curious what's worth interrupting your celebration for."

"A gift," Katarina said. "You've been a customer of mine for one day. I believe in customer service."

A few people in the crowd laughed. Renzo smiled thinly.

"Then by all means, serve me."

"Gladly." Katarina put her hand on the cold container beside her. "Yesterday, at the launch, you bought this unit, in public, at the certified, assessed price. You made a point of it. An honest purchase from an honest merchant." She turned to the crowd. "And beside him stood an attendant from the Drava debt house, who countersigned the sale into Drava's own ledger. Which means, as of yesterday, the largest debt house on the continent officially recognizes the Montecardi seal as valid."

She opened the folio and held up the ledger extract.

The crowd murmured. Katarina heard someone near the front say "Drava recognized a coastal seal?" and someone else answer "Impossible! Drava doesn't recognize anyone's paper but their own."

[Perfect. Say it louder, please.]

"I mention this," Katarina said, "so everyone understands what my seal is worth before I show you the next document. Because the next document is sealed, certified, and assessed under district law. Nobody here can call it a forgery. Drava itself accepts my standard."

Renzo kept smiling, but his eyes went to the folio.

"And what document is that?"

Katarina took out the second paper and held it up.

"The Black Lotus payroll," she said. "Routed, in full, through the Drava debt house."

The plaza went quiet.

"The Black Lotus came to Vellasera calling itself the southern commerce arm of a rising sect," Katarina continued. "A trade delegation. Businessmen. But a sect doesn't pay its own people through a debt house. You only do that when your people owe the debt house, when they're collateral." She turned back to Renzo. "So every threat, every rumor, every crew that hit my caravans on the north road, all of it was debt enforcement wearing sect robes. Every single person in your delegation is working off a balance, Renzo. Including you."

The murmur turned into noise. She heard the Sarrenzi banner-holder say "Then the robbery, the demonstration, all of that was..." and trail off. An old merchant near the platform said, loudly, "We hosted collections thugs at our tables?"

A Valdari house could survive being called dangerous, but it couldn't survive being called a servant while pretending to be a peer.

Every guest-cup Renzo had drunk in this district had been drunk under a lie, and every Signora who'd poured one for him had just been made a fool of in public.

Renzo's face went stiff.

"That paper proves an accounting arrangement. Nothing more. Sects use financial intermediaries all the time."

"Fair enough. Paper can be argued with," Katarina said. "Then hear it from your own asset instead."

She looked down at the steps.

"Samara."

Samara climbed the platform. She was wearing Montecardi colors, openly, for the first time. The crowd's noise doubled. Half the district knew her face from weeks of standing at Renzo's shoulder.

"Fifteen years," Samara said. She wasn't a natural speaker, and it showed. Somehow, that only made her more believable. "My mother owed the Drava house. I worked the debt. The Lotus told me where to go and what to steal, and Drava held the balance over my head the whole time. That's the arrangement. That's everyone's arrangement in that delegation. Ask any of them who they actually answer to. Watch how quiet they get." She looked at Renzo. "I don't owe anymore. House Montecardi bought the debt and cleared my family. So I can finally say it out loud."

"Traitor!" Dario snarled from below the platform. "You gutter-born piece of..."

"Dario," Renzo said sharply.

Dario ignored him. He came up the steps fast, qi flaring around his fists, and the crowd nearest the platform scrambled backward. Katarina felt the heat from three steps away.

[Oh fuck. Elemental path, mid-Awakening at least. If that hits me, I'm spending a month in bed!]

Brynn stepped past her.

It was over so fast that half the plaza missed it. Dario swung, Brynn caught his wrist with one hand, turned him over her hip, and put him into the platform stones flat on his back. The sound was like a sack of grain dropped off a wagon. Then she put one boot on his chest, casually, like she was holding a door open.

"Stay down, kid," Brynn said. "I mean it. I've got a festival to get back to."

Dario wheezed and stayed down.

Seris was still standing at Katarina's left with her hands folded, smiling pleasantly at Renzo. Katarina heard a woman behind the platform whisper, "The mother didn't even react. Just how strong is that household?"

[Thank you, ma'am. Please keep speculating.]

Renzo looked at his son on the ground, then at Samara in her Montecardi colors, then at Corvani across the plaza.

[This is the moment. If Drava backs him, he can still fight. He can call the payroll a forgery, drag it to arbitration, and spend a year bleeding me in filings.]

Corvani took a sip of her wine and looked out at the harbor.

[And that’s my answer.]

Drava’s paper was dying continent-wide, and Corvani had exactly one asset left worth anything: credibility.

She was never going to spend a single drop of it defending a lieutenant who’d been blown in front of the entire district. Renzo had been leashed his whole career, and the hand holding the leash had just opened.

Katarina watched him work it out. He was a sharp man, so it didn’t take long. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

"What do you want?" he asked quietly.

"Sit," Katarina said, and gestured at the table.

In front of the whole district, Renzo Caelford of the Black Lotus sat down at the Montecardi table.

Katarina laid the contract out. She’d drafted it last night with the Ledger open the entire time.

"The Lotus’s debt to Drava gets bundled into the instrument I’m negotiating with the Drava house. I hold your balance, the same way I hold Samara’s. Your operation registers under district law as a licensed security and logistics firm, seal-certified, assessed, and audited under the Montecardi standard. There will be no enforcement work and no unregistered crews. You operate in the open, or you don’t operate at all." She set the pen down on top of it. "The Black Lotus becomes a Montecardi subsidiary. You keep your people, your pay improves, and nobody holds your families over your heads again. That last part is the difference between me and your old management. I suggest you think about it for exactly as long as it takes to pick up the pen."

The plaza was dead silent now. Renzo read the contract. He actually read it, all of it, while the whole district watched.

Then he picked up the pen and signed.

The crowd debated breaking out into applause but apparently felt that would be tacky.

Katarina applied the Montecardi seal next to his signature, in full view, and the recalculating got louder. Seris leaned over and kissed the top of her head, right there on the platform.

[The commerce arm of the Black Lotus, folded in one morning. Vivienne Ross spent four years on her first acquisition. I’m getting faster.]

Across the plaza, Corvani set down her cup and started clapping slowly. She was the only one clapping, and the crowd moved out of her way as she came forward.

She stopped at the foot of the platform and looked up at Katarina.

"Beautifully done. Truly. I'd sign the migration myself right now, on this table, in front of all of them. It would be the smartest contract Drava ever executed." She paused. "Unfortunately, it's no longer mine to sign."

Katarina felt a chill run down her spine.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I sent my report last night," Corvani said. "And the woman I answer to decided this matter now requires her personal attention. Drava is coming to Vellasera, Signora. Herself." She glanced at Renzo, at the contract, at the seal drying on it, and for a moment she looked almost sorry. "I applauded you today, Signora. I promise you, she won't."

Chapter 128: The Apex

Drava arrived on the last morning of Tideglass.

A single grey carriage rolled up the estate road while the harbor below was still hungover from the third night of the festival, and a woman stepped out of it alone.

Katarina watched her from the front steps.

The woman was human, somewhere in her sixties, small, with white hair pinned flat and a plain grey coat that probably cost more than the estate's monthly payroll. She carried one leather case and nothing else.

[She has no guards or aides. She walked into a Valdari district alone, the morning after her assessor got outplayed in public, and she's taking her sweet time about it.]

A chill ran down Katarina's spine.

[This woman is on a completely different level.]

"Signora Montecardi," the woman said, stopping at the bottom of the steps. "It's a pleasure meeting you."

"The pleasure's mine," Katarina lied.

"My name is Lisabetta Drava. You've been doing business with my house."

Behind Katarina, in the doorway, Seris said:

"Would the Signora like wine? Wouldn’t want the human kingdoms to think we aren’t a hospitable family."

"No," Drava said, with a dangerous smile. "I won’t be staying long."

As much as she hated to admit it, Katarina was feeling the pressure.

Katarina led her to the estate’s meeting room anyway, because the biggest negotiation of two lifetimes deserved better than gravel. Corvani was already inside, seated with her hands folded. She rose when Drava entered. It was the first time Katarina had seen Corvani look respectful toward anyone.

Drava sat and set her case on the table, leaving it closed.

"I’ll be brief," she said. "You embarrassed my assessor, you flipped my collections arm, and you drafted an instrument that proposes my house pay yours for the right to survive. I read it on the rail. It’s well made. The answer is no." She folded her hands, mirroring Corvani exactly. It was clear who Corvani had learned from. "Here is my counteroffer. You sign the subsidiary terms Severina gave you, unchanged, or by the end of this month the Drava house formally blacklists Montecardi paper on every route we assess. Every note, every lien, every certified seal with your mark on it, refused across the continent. Your standard is three weeks old. Mine is three hundred years old. When an old house and a new house call each other liars, Signora, the world believes the old house. Three hundred years buys that. It’s called tenure."

The room was quiet.

Katarina nodded slowly.

[That’s what I’d go for too.]

It was the correct move. If she were sitting on Drava’s side of the table, holding a dying brand and three centuries of accumulated reputation, she’d spend the reputation exactly like this.

Drava’s biggest weapon was age. Half the continent’s grandmothers had signed their first contracts under a Drava seal, and prestige like that could gut a young standard in a season, no evidence required.

[Not bad.]

"It’s a good threat," Katarina said. "Honestly. If our positions were reversed I’d have opened with the same thing."

Drava's right brow twitched. Katarina wondered if Drava would have made that same slip-up as a younger woman.

"Then you understand your position."

"No. If anything, it seems you don't understand yours." Katarina pulled her folio over and started laying papers on the table, one at a time, facing Drava. "Let me walk you through the audit, Signora. You came a long way. You should at least get the full presentation."

Drava visibly held back the urge to pull away.

[Come on. If you didn't think I'd be ready, clearly you underestimated me.]

"Document one." Katarina set it down. "The reciprocal-audit record from three days ago. Your own senior assessor, on district record, stating that Drava paper is failing continent-wide and that the house has roughly three years before trust collapses. Her words, her signature, her seal. If you blacklist me, I publish it. You said it yourself. When houses call each other liars, people check the paper. Mine says your house is dying, and yours wrote it."

Drava kept her eyes on the paper.

"Document two. The Greypass corridor. The one overland route in this region your house holds no paper on, now certified end to end under the Montecardi standard, by district statute. You can't blacklist your way onto a road, Signora. You either transact on my seal there or you don't transact there at all."

Katarina inhaled slowly, and kept going.

"Document three. My open certification audit against your Greypass liens. Your liens fail the standard. That's an assessed fact, on record with Signora Valcetti's office. Which means the standard you need to migrate onto, the clean one, the statutory one, the one the public watched work at my launch, is a standard your own current paper cannot pass. You need my seal more than any house on this continent, because yours is the one that's rotting."

She held eye contact with Drava for a moment, and then kept going.

"And document four." Katarina set down the ledger extract, the one from the plaza. "Your countersign. A Drava attendant, at my launch, writing the Montecardi seal into Drava's books as accepted. Your house is already on record honoring my paper. So if you blacklist it next month, you'd be calling yourself a liar, in writing, during the exact window when a rival house is whispering that Drava's word can't be trusted."

She sat back. It was time to deal the killing blow.

In those old martial arts movies back on Earth, it would be some big final blast. Here, on this battlefield? It was this:

"So here's what your blacklist actually buys you. You spend the last of your credibility torching a provincial house. Maybe it works. Maybe you knock me down for a year, two years. My house survived eighteen years of decline before I could walk. We'd take the hit, keep the corridor, keep the vineyards, keep the festival, and rebuild. We're young, and we have time. You have three years and one asset: trust in your seal. And I own the audit that kills it." She tapped the reciprocal-audit record. "You can pull me down with you if you want. For me, that's a bad quarter. For you, it's the end of a three-hundred-year house. So the only real question at this table is whether you came here to negotiate or to commit suicide."

The room stayed quiet for a while.

[If she's the kind of apex who'd rather burn than bend, I just lit the fuse. If not, then, as she can see, there's no way out but my way.]

Drava looked at the four documents for a long moment. Then she looked at Corvani.

"You told me she was worth the trip."

"I did," Corvani said.

Drava nodded.

"... You undersold it."

Drava opened her leather case at last. Inside was the migration instrument, Katarina's own draft, already annotated in careful grey ink.

"Clause nine is amateurish and clause fourteen exposes you to arbitration in two kingdoms you've never heard of," Drava said. "We'll fix both. Otherwise your terms stand. Drava's southern network, assessors, and corridor holdings migrate onto the Montecardi standard. My house pays yours a licensing rate for the seal, renegotiated every five years. House Montecardi becomes the seal-authority of the southern coast."

Drava took out a pen.

Katarina sighed.

Then, Katarina applied the Montecardi seal beside the signature.

The largest debt house on the continent had just agreed to pay Katarina rent for the privilege of continuing to exist.

[The economic apex of the southern territories, restructured before lunch. Vivienne, are you watching? We're getting so much faster.]

That evening, before the festival's closing market, Katarina found Samara in the estate yard and handed her a folded paper and a candle.

"What's this?"

"Your mother's deed. Paid in full as of this afternoon. Drava money, ironically. I thought you'd want to do the honors."

Samara stared at the paper.

Then she held it over the candle and watched fifteen years burn down to nothing in about six seconds. She stayed quiet while it burned, and Katarina stood with her.

"There's a second document," Katarina said, when the ash hit the gravel. "Your contract. The tentative one. I'm offering to convert it to permanent, on whatever terms you want to write. Pay, duties, exit clauses, all of it, your pen. Or you walk tonight with the debt gone and no strings. I'll still call it a good deal. Take your time."

Samara did not take her time. Instead, Samara got down on one knee right there in the yard, like a knight in a human storybook.

"H-hey," Katarina said. "Get up."

Samara looked up at her, and for the first time since the rooftop chase, her face was completely open.

"I work for you now. Permanently. Write whatever terms you want, Signora. I'm not reading them."

"That's a terrible negotiating position, Samara."

"I don't really care... Signora."

Across the yard, Vessa squealed like a kettle boiling over and started applauding.

Tideglass closed with too much wine, too much music, and the entire harbor pretending tomorrow didn't exist.

The estate yard was full.

Vessa was teaching Duscari a dance that Duscari clearly already knew and was pretending not to. Eva had come back on the morning rail "strictly for the launch numbers" and was still here, arguing with Samara about whether a thief could beat a cultivator with prep time. Brynn was carrying a wine barrel on one shoulder for no reason. Seris was watching all of it from the porch with a cup in her hand, and when she caught Katarina's eye, she raised it.

Katarina stood at the edge of the yard with the Ledger's closing notification hovering in her vision.

She owned the standard, and the festival below the hill was hers to run. An apex who had walked in this morning to end her had left this afternoon as a licensee, and the woman's own assessor had smiled about it. By any measure either of her lives had ever used, she had won.

She thought about Vivienne Ross, thirty-two, dying alone under a fluorescent light on a Saturday night, her phone full of unread messages from people she paid.

And then she looked at the yard.

[Katarina Montecardi is going to die very old, very rich, and surrounded by hot Valdari women. Vivienne would've called that an unserious goal, but Vivienne died alone. I'm taking the win.]

She dismissed the notification, exhaled deeply, and walked into the celebration.

Chapter 129: The Toilet Lady Sells Rain

Katarina sipped her tea.

It was fucking terrible. The humans of Karstow either were trying to insult it or had been introduced to the concept of tea two days ago. She drank it anyway and kept her face as pleasant as she could given the circumstances.

Across the table, Guildmaster Hobrecht folded his hands. He was a big man with a grey beard, and forty years of being the richest person in every room had made him confident.

"Six hundred gold marks for the license," he said. "Per year. That's our offer, Signora. Generous, considering the... novelty of the product."

[Six hundred. He said six hundred with a straight face.]

The product in question sat in the corner of the guild hall, behind a curtain. Her newest invention.

The shower!

In this world, that meant a water array, a heating rune, a pressure formation, and a drain, all packed into a stall the size of a wardrobe. Hot, falling water, on demand, in your own home. She'd demonstrated it an hour ago. Three of the junior guildsmen had gone behind that curtain and come out looking like they'd seen the face of god.

And now Hobrecht was offering six hundred marks for the rights to install them across the entire Karstow region.

"Guildmaster," Katarina said, setting her cup down. "The sanitation contract for Vellasera alone brings in four thousand a year. That's one town. You're asking for a license covering eleven towns and offering me one-seventh the value of one."

"Vellasera is Valdari territory. Your people pay for luxury. Humans are practical folk."

"Humans smell like practical folk, yes."

One of the junior guildsmen choked on his tea. Hobrecht's face didn't move, but his ears went red.

"The price stands," he said.

"Then let me help you understand what you're pricing." Katarina leaned back. "You're not buying a bathing stall. You're buying the first region-exclusive license for a product that every noble house, every inn, every bathhouse, and every wealthy merchant on this continent will want within two years. Whoever holds Karstow's license doesn't just sell showers. They control installation, maintenance, water contracts, and rune replacement for a decade. I'm offering you a river, Guildmaster, and you're haggling over the price of a cup."

Hobrecht stared at her in silence, then glanced at the man beside him, a thin accountant type named Fennick, who was sweating through his collar.

"We'll need to confer," Hobrecht said stiffly. "A recess. Until this afternoon."

"Take your time." Katarina smiled. "I have a lovely walk planned."

Outside, Katarina checked her stats.

[THE SOVEREIGN LEDGER]

Signora: Katarina Montecardi

Age: 19

Sovereign Qi: 1500

[Attributes]

Analysis: 10/10

Negotiation: 10/10

Leadership: 9/10

Intimidation: 6/10

Charm: 7/10

Physical Ability: 5/10

[Cultivation]

Rank: Peak Awakening

Path of Elements, Peak Awakening

Path of Grace, Awakening

Path of the Artisan, Peak Awakening

Path of Whispers, Peak Awakening

[House Montecardi]

Revenue: A

Reputation: A

Trade Routes: 4

Alliances: 6

Active Liabilities: 0

Katarina dismissed the panel with a thought and stepped out into the street.

Karstow was a human trade town three days inland from the coast. Timber buildings, muddy streets, the smell of livestock. People stared as she walked. A Valdari Signora with horns and purple eyes wasn't a common sight this far into the human kingdoms.

Seris fell into step beside her, parasol on her shoulder.

"So? Did they lowball you, tesorae?"

"Six hundred."

"Six *hundred*?" Seris laughed. "Do they know who you are?" Seris proceeded to explain to Katarina who Katarina was. "Nineteen years old. Signora of Vellasera. Seal-authority of the whole southern coast. What in the world is their problem?"

"It's cute, I guess," Katarina shrugged. "I'll be done with them soon, though."

They turned onto the main road. Ahead, near the caravan yard where the Montecardi wagons were parked, Samara was waiting. She was leaning against a post with her arms crossed, her expression flat. Something had annoyed her.

"Signora. We have rats."

"Talk to me."

"Someone's been at the demonstration units. The pressure formations on two of the spare stalls have hairline cracks in the rune housing. Whoever did it knew enough to make it look like transport damage." Samara pushed off the post. "Sloppy, though. They left boot prints in the wagon bed. And the innkeeper says men in white-and-grey robes have been asking around the inns about our route home."

"White and grey." Katarina frowned. "The White Reed Sect?"

"That's my read. They run the water-carrier guilds in this region. Every bucket of clean water hauled up to a rich man's tub in Karstow puts coin in their pocket."

[And the shower doesn't just sell convenience. It kills the water-hauling trade overnight. I built a product that puts a sect out of business and then parked it in their backyard. As expected of a protection racket dressed up as a sect. They're not even pretending to negotiate. Straight to sabotage.]

Brynn appeared at Katarina's shoulder. She'd been listening from the wagon, clearly, because she was already rolling her sleeves up, and she was grinning.

"Cracked rune housings," Brynn said. "On my kid's wagons?"

"Mother... Non-lethal. We're guests in this kingdom."

"Non-lethal, sure, sure," Brynn agreed cheerfully. "Samara, where are they camped?"

"Old mill, half a mile east. Six of them, maybe eight. Mid-Foundation, one Awakening at most."

"Perfect." Brynn cracked her knuckles, kissed the top of Katarina's head, and strode off toward the horses shouting names.

Seris watched her wife go with open fondness.

"Finally. She's been bored for weeks.

The afternoon session opened with Hobrecht looking nervous. He'd probably spent his whole lunch arguing with his people. Fennick had a fresh stack of papers and looked like he'd lost that argument.

"Signora. The guild has reconsidered. We can offer two thousand marks per year for the license."

"That's a much more serious number," Katarina said. "Unfortunately, the situation has changed since this morning."

Hobrecht's eyes narrowed.

"Changed how?"

"While we were negotiating, agents of the White Reed Sect sabotaged two of my demonstration units and began scouting my caravan's route home." She slid a folded paper across the table. Samara's written report. "Which tells me two things, Guildmaster. First, the local water interests already understand exactly how valuable this product is, even if the guild doesn't. And second, whoever licenses it will need the strength to defend it."

"The guild has guards."

"No, they have warehouse watchmen. I have a registered security and logistics subsidiary with sect-trained cultivators, and a route network already locked under my certification standard." She let that sit. "So here's the new offer. Two thousand five hundred per year for the license, plus a security contract with my subsidiary at standard rates, plus the guild adopts the Montecardi certification standard for all shower installations and maintenance in the region. My seal, my inspectors, my paper."

Fennick made a small wounded noise. Hobrecht stared at her for a long moment.

"Y-You’re using something that has nothing to do with us to raise the price!"

"I’m using it to prove the price was right. There’s a difference." Katarina picked up her horrible tea and took a sip. "The White Reed Sect just spent their morning demonstrating my product’s value more convincingly than I ever could. If it wasn’t worth anything, Guildmaster, nobody would be trying to break it."

Hobrecht was quiet for a moment, then began to laugh, slowly.

"They warned me about you," he said. "The Coppara dockmaster. Rizzi. I wrote to her before this meeting, you know. Asked what dealing with House Montecardi was like. Do you know what she wrote back?"

"I’m eager to find out."

"One line. ’Agree to her second offer, because the third one will own you.’" He pulled the contract stack toward himself and held out his hand for Fennick’s pen. "Two thousand five hundred. The security contract. Your standard. Done, before you think of anything else."

[Twenty-five hundred, security fees on top, and the certification foothold in a human kingdom. I walked in here this morning hoping for eighteen hundred.]

Brynn had come back from the mill an hour earlier with scraped knuckles. Everyone at the mill was alive, and none of them would be walking right for a week.

Katarina shook his hand.

Life was good.

{Eva}

A few days later, far to the north, in Pavona, Evangelina Caelestis stretched her wings until her shoulders popped.

The formation diagram on her desk was finished. A heat-cycling array for the Compasso’s new lecture hall, commissioned by the Accademia itself, based on principles she’d co-developed on the cold container project. Her third paid commission this season. Her professors had started calling her work "the Caelestis method," which was hilarious.

Eva allowed herself a small smile at the empty room.

A knock came at her door. A Compasso porter stood outside, looking nervous, like the staff always did around Aevari.

"Miss Caelestis. Visitors for you at the main hall. Family, they said."

Eva blinked.

"Family? Are you sure?"

Her family didn't visit. Her family sent letters. Formal ones, on Celestial Court paper, with seals and titles and gentle reminders about duty. Her mother hadn't left the northern peaks in thirty years.

She walked to the main hall with a bad feeling building in her chest.

They were standing by the great window. Her mother, wings folded, white robes spotless, her expression as cold as always. Her aunt was beside her. And between them, smiling at Eva, was a third woman in the formal blue-trimmed vestments of the Celestial Courts.

Eva stopped walking.

[Ugh. Anyone but her.]

Chapter 130: Praise

Eva bowed. The full Court bow, wings tucked, eyes down, and everything.

"Evangelina," her mother said. "You look thin."

"Mother. Aunt Sariel." Eva straightened. "Assessor Alcanterra."

"Oh, none of that." Feodora Alcanterra smiled at her. She was tall even for an Aevari, silver-haired, maybe four hundred years old, and she wore the blue-trimmed vestments of a High Doctrine-Assessor. "You used to call me Auntie Fea. Do you remember? You'd sit on my knee during the winter convocations and ask why the hymns had to be so long."

"I remember you told me the length was the point."

"And I was right." Feodora clasped her hands. "Look at you. Second-year at a merchant academy. Paid commissions. Your name on formation work. The Courts have been reading your file with great interest, Evangelina."

Eva kept her face pleasant. Or, at least, she tried to.

"So what brings you all the way down here?" Eva asked. "Mother's last letter didn't say anything about travel plans, and it's a long way to come without a reason."

"Official business, actually," Feodora said. "The Courts have commissioned an audit of the Compasso's southern curriculum. Trade doctrine, certification practice, formation instruction. I'll be here for a month, perhaps two. Your mother and aunt kindly agreed to accompany me, since we were coming all this way regardless." She tilted her head. "The Accademia was very accommodating. They've asked their best formation students to assist with the practical portions of the review. Your name came up first, of course."

"Of course," Eva said.

Her mother was watching her, and had been since she walked in. Eva knew that look. Every detail, the hair, the posture, the plain student robes, was going into some internal count of disappointments to be discussed later.

"We'll dine tonight as a family," her mother said. "And tomorrow, Assessor Alcanterra begins her review with the formation department."

"I'm told," Feodora said warmly, "that you'll be presenting your cold container work. I'm so looking forward to it."

[I did not agree to that. Nobody asked me to agree to that.]

"I look forward to it as well," Eva said.

The formation department's main floor was a long hall with high windows and forty workbenches. By mid-morning every bench was occupied, because word had gone around that a High Doctrine-Assessor of the Celestial Courts was conducting a review, and attendance was somehow both voluntary and mandatory.

Eva stood at the demonstration table with the cold container schematics unrolled in front of her. The full set. The array lattice, the heat-exchange cycle, the preservation interlock, all in her own handwriting, since she'd drawn up the clean copies, and, in the margins, a second person's handwriting.

Feodora stood beside her with her hands folded, examining the diagrams.

"Walk me through it," she said. "From the beginning. Loudly, please, so the students can benefit."

So Eva walked her through it. The original problem, cooling without qi bleed. The failed first designs. The breakthrough with the cycling lattice. She kept her voice flat and technical and did not look at the margins.

Feodora looked at the margins.

"This notation here," she said, tapping one. "The load-balancing correction. That's not your hand."

"No. That's my collaborator's."

"Katarina Montecardi." Feodora said the name pleasantly, clearly, loudly enough for the benches. "The Valdari Signora. The one they call the toilet lady."

A few students laughed. Eva did not.

"Yes," she said.

"Remarkable work," Feodora said, and she meant it, which was the worst part. She traced the lattice with one finger. "This cycling structure alone. Do you know, Evangelina, the Courts' own artificers spent sixty years on cold-transport arrays for the mountain granaries and never solved the frost-creep problem, and you two solved it in what, a term?"

"A little over half."

"Sixty years for the Courts, and two students do that?" Feodora shook her head slowly. "This is some of the finest formation work I have seen from a cultivator your age. Aevari talent of the first order. The precision, the discipline of the interlock, this is Court-standard craft. Better than Court-standard." She let that hang, then turned to the benches, and her voice carried. "And every unit built from it is certified under the Montecardi seal, licensed under a Valdari house's standard, and generating fees for a southern merchant family. Aevari talent of the first order, in service to someone else's signature."

The hall was quiet.

"That's not a criticism of you, dear," Feodora said, turning back to her. "You're a student. Students take the opportunities in front of them. It's a criticism of us. The Courts. That a mind like yours had to fly south to find work worthy of it, and that when the finest cold-transport array on the continent was built, there was no Aevari certification standard for it to live under. Only a Valdari one." She smiled. "That's precisely the sort of gap my audit is meant to identify."

[And there it is. This was never a curriculum review. She's here to scout. She's standing in a merchant academy using my own schematics to argue that the Courts need a rival certification standard, and she's doing it in front of forty witnesses, and she's doing it with my work.]

"The Montecardi standard is district statute on the southern coast," Eva said.

"Oh, I know," Feodora said. "I've read the filings. It's very impressive, what she built. Truly." She began rolling up the schematics. "But statute is a human and Valdari concept,

Evangelina. Doctrine is older. And the Courts have been asking themselves lately whether it's wise to let the certification of the newest, hottest commodity rest on the seal of one nineteen-year-old demon." She handed the roll back to Eva and patted her hand. "Thank you for the presentation. It was exactly as illuminating as I hoped."

Eva made it back to her room, closed the door, sat down on her bed, and stared at the wall for a while.

Then she took the communication stone out of her desk drawer. It was a Montecardi-inscribed stone, paired, one of Kat's own. She pressed her thumb to it and fed it a thread of energy. After a moment the stone warmed and Katarina's voice came through, flattened the way the stones always made voices.

"Eva. It's late. Either you miss me or something's gone wrong."

"Why can't it be both?"

"Well... I was just joking, but alright." There was a rustle of paper on the other end. "So. Talk."

So Eva talked.

Feodora, the audit, her mother in tow, the presentation, the whole performance on the formation floor. Kat didn't interrupt once, which was how Eva knew she was taking it seriously. When Eva finished, there was a long pause, and then the sound of a teacup being set down.

"So she stood in front of a whole hall of students and used the work we did together to make an argument against my house. That's ugly."

"She praised it first," Eva replied. "Just enough that the criticism attached to something real, and objecting to any of it would have looked like sulking."

"That's good technique," Kat said. "Okay. Say it back to me. What is she actually doing?"

"She's scouting whether the Courts should launch a doctrine-based certification standard and push it into your territory. Cold transport, formations, maybe seals generally. The audit is cover. The Compasso review gives her a legitimate reason to be south, to inventory what exists, and to test how people react when she frames your standard as a Valdari problem."

"I see that."

"You don't sound too worried."

"I’m reasonably worried. Doctrine-certification isn’t a paper threat, it’s an emotional one. Statutes need assessors, courts, and enforcement. Doctrine just needs believers. If the Celestial Courts declare an Aevari standard, every kingdom that worships them adopts it for free, overnight, no licensing required."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Eh," Katarina replied. "I’m sure I’ll figure something out."