CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 4: Dead Weight

By four years old, Katarina Montecardi knew every person who worked in the estate by name.

There were fourteen of them. Housekeepers, groundskeepers, a cook named Ottavia who made everything too salty and didn't care, two stablehands who were definitely sleeping together based on how often they disappeared into the same supply closet at the same time, and a gardener named Fausta who Katarina had never once seen garden.

Fausta showed up every morning, walked the garden with her hands behind her back, and then sat on a bench for four hours.

In other words, she did nothing all day.

She was getting paid. Katarina had checked.

[How much is she costing us?]

The Ledger answered immediately, gilded text flickering at the edge of her vision.

Fausta Morani:

Groundskeeper (nominal).

Annual cost: 14 silver marks.

Productivity assessment: Negligible.

[Fourteen silver marks a year for a woman whose primary skill is sitting. Incredible.]

There were two others like her.

Donia, who was listed as a textile cataloguer but spent most of her time visiting her sister in the port town, and a woman named Enza whose job title Katarina hadn't been able to figure out because she didn't appear to have one. She just sort of existed in the east wing and occasionally moved furniture.

[What's our dead weight ratio?]

Current non-productive personnel: 3 of 14.

Dead weight ratio: 21%.

[Twenty-one percent! That is APPALLING!]

She kept a mental ledger on top of the Ledger.

Every name, every role, every gap between what someone was supposed to be doing and what they were actually doing. The system tracked numbers. Katarina tracked patterns. Together, they were building a picture of a household that had been running on autopilot for years, and not the good kind of autopilot.

The hard part was not saying anything about it.

She was four. Four-year-olds did not have opinions about labor allocation. They ate fruit and occasionally fell over in funny ways.

Katarina had spent the last two years perfecting the art of being a very normal, very unremarkable child (aside from learning how to talk quickly), and it was the hardest thing she had ever done in either lifetime.

[I watched Enza move the same chair three times yesterday. Three times! She moved it to the window, then back, then to the window again. That's not a job! That's a woman killing time until lunch! I could save this

household twelve percent in labor costs by DINNER if someone would let me near a desk!!!]

"Kat! Hands up!"

"ACK!"

Brynn was standing in the training yard with her fists raised and a grin so wide it was practically a semicircle.

She'd been looking forward to this all day. She had mentioned it at breakfast. And then again after breakfast. And then a third time while Katarina was trying to eat a pear in peace.

"Come on, dumpling! Left foot forward, just like I showed you!"

Katarina put her left foot forward. Her stance was terrible. She knew it was terrible because she could feel how wrong her weight distribution was, but she was four and her legs were the length of bread rolls and there was only so much a person could do with bread rolls.

"Good! Now, punch!"

Katarina punched.

... It was a small, sad punch that traveled about eight inches and connected with Brynn's open palm with a sound like someone flicking a grape.

"YES!" Brynn grabbed her under the arms and hoisted her into the air. "Did you see that?! Did you feel that?! That was so good! Seris! SERIS, DID YOU SEE?!"

Seris was not in the training yard. Seris was inside the house. Brynn was yelling at the window.

"That was incredible, dumpling. You're a natural. We're going to do ten more."

[I am not a natural. That punch couldn't bruise a peach. But sure. Ten more. I'll draft a staffing memo in my head while we go.]

They did do ten more.

Brynn celebrated every single one like Katarina had just knocked someone through a wall. By the sixth punch, Katarina had mentally drafted a preliminary workforce assessment. By the eighth, she'd outlined a restructuring plan that would save the household roughly twelve percent in annual labor costs. By the tenth, she'd identified two positions that could be consolidated and one that could be eliminated entirely.

[What would the savings look like if I cut the dead weight?]

Projected annual savings: ~42 silver marks.

Impact on operations: Minimal.

Affected roles currently non-functional.

[Forty-two silver marks doing nothing! Just sitting there, going to waste every single year, while this family's debt grows! I'm going to lose my mind!]

"That's my girl!" Brynn set her down and ruffled her hair so hard Katarina's vision wobbled. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Okay, mother."

Brynn beamed. Katarina patted her on the knee, because she couldn't reach anything else, and walked inside with the careful, dignified stride of a woman who was imagining various ways of firing Fausta.

Dinner in the Montecardi household was always loud.

The dining room was built for a family three times their size and the empty chairs were a whole thing that Katarina had opinions about, but the noise more than compensated. Brynn talked with her mouth full. Ottavia came in and out of the kitchen with dishes and commentary, because apparently being the cook also made her an honorary family member with voting rights on everything from dinner seasoning to estate politics.

Seris was draped sideways in her chair with her wine glass in one hand, playing with Brynn's hair with the other. Her shirt had slipped off one shoulder and Katarina's eyes went there for exactly half a second before she dragged them back to her plate.

[She is my MOTHER. That is my MOTHER, NUMBER ONE! We are not… God, her rack is amazing.]

"You looked good out there today, amore," Seris said, twirling a strand of Brynn's white hair around her finger. "All sweaty and serious with our little dumpling."

"I was teaching her combat fundamentals, Seris."

"Mhm. Very sexy fundamentals."

Katarina rolled her eyes.

[I am eating. I am eating right now. At this table. With both of you.]

Katarina sat in a chair that was slightly too tall for her, eating a piece of bread that was slightly too salty, and mentally reviewing the estate's quarterly expenditure reports. She'd found them in Seris's study two weeks ago. One of the pages had a wine stain on it.

[The wine stain is on the revenue summary page. The REVENUE SUMMARY PAGE! Somebody set a glass of wine on the most important document in this household and didn't even notice! I'm going to have a stroke! I'm four years old and I'm going to have a stroke!]

"Oh," Seris said, swirling her wine. "The trade assessor is coming next month."

She said it the way someone might say "it might rain Tuesday." Casual and offhand, like a trade assessor was a mild weather event and not a person whose entire job was to evaluate whether your merchant house deserved to keep its trading license.

Katarina's fork stopped moving.

[An assessor. What's a trade assessor?]

The Ledger answered.

Trade assessor: Regional authority responsible for evaluating merchant house compliance, financial health, and trading license status.

Failure to pass may result in license suspension or revocation.

[OH.]

"Signora Valcetti, I believe," Seris continued, cutting her meat with one hand while the other was still in Brynn's hair. "She handles the southeastern district. Routine review."

[THAT'S AN AUDIT!]

Brynn grunted through a mouthful of stew.

"Valcetti's fine. She came two years ago, remember? Nice woman. Liked the wine."

"She gave us a conditional pass, Brynn."

"But she liked the wine!"

[A CONDITIONAL PASS!!! We got a conditional pass and nobody thought to mention this before now?! We've had an active warning on

our trading license for TWO YEARS and the response was "but she liked the wine"?!?![]

Katarina looked at Seris. Seris was sipping her wine and looking generally unbothered, but her purple eyes had a certain irritated glaze.

Katarina looked at Brynn. Brynn was using a piece of bread to mop up sauce and appeared to be having the time of her life.

[We are not ready for an audit. We are so far from ready for an audit that "ready" is in a different country! Our gardener doesn't garden! Our textile cataloguer doesn't catalogue textiles! We have a woman whose entire job is MOVING CHAIRS and we got a conditional pass two years ago and nobody fixed ANYTHING!!!]

She paused.

[What's our probability of passing?]

Low.

[EVEN THE MAGICAL FLOATING TEXT THINKS WE'RE SCREWED!]

Katarina put her fork down.

"Mother," she said to Seris, very carefully, because she was four and she couldn't say what she actually wanted to say, which was a thirty-minute presentation on operational deficiencies with slides. "What does the assessor look at?"

Seris glanced down at her with a soft smile.

"She… checks our records. Makes sure everything is in order. Nothing for you to worry about, piccola."

[Nothing is in order! Nothing has been in order since I got here! I've seen the books! I've seen the wine stain on the books! Your filing system is a PILE!]