CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 5: Audit

The trade assessor was a thin woman named Valcetti with dark hair pulled into a bun so tight it looked like it hurt. She arrived at nine in the morning with the energy of someone who had already decided how this was going to go.

Oh, Katarina knew the type. She'd been the type. In her previous life, she'd walked into underperforming regional offices with that exact expression: polite, professional, and already drafting the obituary.

Seris met her at the front door.

"Signora Valcetti! You look wonderful. Did you do something with your hair? Come in, come in, I just put tea on." She had her arm looped through Valcetti's before the woman had finished saying hello. Brynn shook her hand and said something enthusiastic.

Valcetti accepted the tea, declined the enthusiasm, and asked to see the books.

[Oof. Not a good start.]

They sat in Seris's study. Katarina came too. Thankfully, nobody questioned it. Seris gave her a set of carved wooden blocks and a spot on the rug in the corner and Katarina sat there, stacking blocks, listening to everything.

[What do we know about her?]

The Ledger flickered.

Signora Valcetti: Trade assessor, southeastern district.

Previous visit: 2 years ago. Result: Conditional pass.

Disposition: Professional. Low corruption risk.

Trait: Stalwart: Cannot be charmed or bribed.

[Great. So Seris's whole thing isn't going to work. Wonderful.]

Valcetti opened the first ledger and didn't say anything for about thirty seconds. That was bad. When an auditor goes quiet at the start, it means the problems are so obvious they're deciding which one to bring up first.

"Your import duties are three quarters behind," Valcetti said.

"We've had a difficult season," Seris said, still smiling.

[How difficult?]

Import duty arrears: 11 months outstanding.

"Difficult season" is inaccurate. This is systemic.

[Yeah. I know.]

Valcetti turned a page.

"Your supply contracts with the Brevaine house expired eight months ago and were never renewed."

"We've been meaning to address that."

Another page.

"You have a textile cataloguer on payroll who hasn't filed a single inventory report this year."

[DONIA!!! I KNEW IT!!!]

Katarina placed a block on top of her tower very carefully and did not react.

Valcetti closed the ledger and folded her hands on top of it. She looked at Seris the way Vivienne used to look at division heads who'd come to a quarterly review without their numbers.

"Signora Montecardi, I want to be straightforward with you. This house has a proud history. But these books are a disaster." She said it the way a doctor tells you your cholesterol is high. "Revenue is down year over year for the fifth consecutive period. And your port tariff exemptions are based on trade volume minimums that you are not currently meeting."

[Five consecutive years of decline?!]

Confirmed. Year-over-year revenue decline:

-8%, -11%, -6%, -14%, -9%.

[It's ACCELERATING!]

Seris leaned back in her chair, wine glass in hand, still smiling. It was the smile of a woman who could have vaporized everyone in this room but was instead being told her filing was inadequate.

"We understand completely," Seris said. "And we appreciate the thoroughness."

[We do NOT understand completely! We understand NOTHING! The woman just said our revenue has been declining for FIVE YEARS and your response is "we appreciate the thoroughness"?!]

Brynn leaned forward in her chair.

"We've got a plan, actually. Whole thing's under control."

[WE DO NOT HAVE A PLAN! There is no plan! There has never been a plan! I have been alive for four years and I have seen ZERO PLANS!]

"We've been restructuring," Brynn added, with the confidence of a woman who had no idea what restructuring meant.

Valcetti looked at Brynn for a moment. Then she looked at Seris. Then she pulled a form out of her satchel and laid it flat on the desk.

"I'll be filing my assessment with the district authority this week. Based on what I've seen, I'm recommending a provisional extension. You have until the end of the fiscal year to show material improvement in your trade operations. That's roughly eighteen months."

She tapped the form.

"If, at the end of that period, the house cannot demonstrate improved revenue, active trade contracts, and compliant bookkeeping, the district will initiate..."

She paused.

Katarina's tiny hand froze over a block.

"...a formal review."

The air was sucked out of the room. The words hit Katarina like a carriage.

A formal review. A FORMAL REVIEW.

The governing authority pulling your merchant house onto the operating table, cracking open your books in front of every rival house in the district, and deciding whether you deserved to keep breathing. She knew what a formal review was because the Ledger had explained it to her last week and she had not slept well since.

Her hand was shaking. An actual, physical tremor in her four-year-old fingers. She put the block down before she dropped it.

Seris stopped smiling. Which, for Seris, was the equivalent of someone else flipping a table.

"And a formal review," Valcetti said, "could result in the revocation of your port tariff rights."

Katarina's vision went white for a second.

[The tariff rights. What happens if we lose them?!]

Port tariff exemption loss: Full import duties

apply to all goods through Vellasera harbor.

Estimated impact: Operating costs increase ~40%.

Projected survival at current revenue: 6 months.

[SIX MONTHS?!?! WE'D BE DEAD IN SIX MONTHS!!!]

She nearly fell over. Literally. She was sitting on a rug and her body decided that the appropriate physical response to catastrophic financial news was to lose all structural integrity. She caught herself on one hand and disguised it as reaching for another block.

The room went quiet. Even Brynn stopped talking, which was how Katarina knew this was serious, because Brynn never stopped talking.

"I'm not trying to scare you," Valcetti said, and she sounded like she meant it. "The district doesn't want to strip a house with your history. But there are other houses petitioning for those rights, and they have the numbers to back it up. I can only extend the leash so far."

Seris nodded.

"We'll be ready."

[We will NOT be ready! Not at this rate! Not with Fausta napping in the garden and Enza rearranging chairs and three years of unaudited expenses and a wine stain on the revenue summary page!]

"I hope so," Valcetti said. She gathered her things, shook both their hands, and Seris walked her to the door.

Katarina sat on the rug with her blocks.

She had built a tower while listening. Twelve blocks high, perfectly aligned. An architect would've been proud, not that anyone was paying attention, because she was four and towers were just what children built.

She looked at it for a long moment.

Then she knocked it over. Deliberately. The way you clear a desk before starting a new project. Clean sweep. Fresh start.

[Eighteen months. Okay. I've turned around worse.]

She hadn't, actually. Vivienne Ross had never inherited a company this far gone. But Vivienne Ross had also never had a magical system feeding her real-time data, two mothers who loved her more than anything in the world, and the kind of stubbornness that survives reincarnation.

[I need a plan. A real one. Not whatever Brynn thinks "restructuring" means.]

The Ledger pulsed softly at the edge of her awareness.

Runway revised: 18 months (hard deadline).

Tariff rights: Conditional.

Recommended action: Begin immediately.

[Yeah. I intend to.]

Katarina Montecardi, four years old, stood up from the rug, brushed block dust off her little dress, and walked out of the study with a heart blazing full of determination.

She had work to do.