CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 6: Shadow Consulting

The bookkeeper’s name was Dalla, and she was sweating through her collar.

Katarina didn’t blame her. She’d seen those numbers. If she had to present those numbers to anyone, she’d be sweating too.

Dalla had the nerve of a woman who had been doing her best for a long time and whose best was not very good, and she knew it, and she was sitting across from Seris at the study desk trying to explain why the estate’s revenue was down for the fourth consecutive quarter without using the word "bad."

"The, ah, the wine exports have been... adjusting," she said.

[Adjusting. She said adjusting. What’s the actual number?]

The Ledger flickered.

Wine export revenue: Down 19% quarter over quarter.

Primary cause: Brevaine contract renegotiation.

New terms unfavorable.

[Nineteen percent and she called it "adjusting." I want to throw something.]

Seris nodded.

"Adjusting how?"

"Well, the Brevaine contract renegotiation didn’t quite... land where we hoped."

"I see."

She didn’t see. Katarina could tell she didn’t see because Seris asked zero follow-up questions. None. A nineteen percent drop in your primary export revenue and the head of this household said "I see" and moved on like Dalla had just told her the weather.

[Ask her what the new terms are! Ask her what the margin looks like! Ask her if the volume minimums changed! Ask her ANYTHING!]

Seris did not ask her anything. She smiled warmly, thanked her for the update, and told her to keep her informed.

Dalla left looking relieved, which was the worst part. She was relieved because she hadn't been asked hard questions. In Katarina's old life, a CFO who left a quarterly review looking relieved meant somebody wasn't doing their job, and the somebody was usually the person who let her leave.

[What's Dalla's competence level?]

Dalla Orenzi: Bookkeeper.

Competence: Low-moderate. Adequate at data entry.

Strategic capability: None.

Loyalty: High. Has been with the house for 12 years.

Note: Not the problem. The problem is that nobody is reviewing her output.

[So she's not incompetent, she's unsupervised. Great. We don't have a personnel problem, we have a MANAGEMENT problem. Which is worse, because at least you can fire bad personnel!]

Katarina sat in the corner on a cushion with a set of carved wooden animals arranged in front of her in what any adult would assume was a game but was actually a crude organizational chart.

The horse was Dalla. The bear was Fausta. The little fox was Donia. She'd been arranging and rearranging them for twenty minutes, mapping reporting lines, identifying redundancies, and she was about halfway through a mental restructuring plan that would save this household thirty percent in overhead when her body betrayed her.

Her eyes got heavy. Her head dipped.

[No. No no no. Not now. I'm in the middle of something. I am performing critical strategic analysis and I will NOT—]

Her chin hit her chest.

[I REFUSE TO—]

She woke up in her bed. Furious didn't cover it.

Someone had carried her. Someone had picked her up off that cushion and carried her to her room and tucked her in like she was some kind of child who needed naps. She WAS a child who needed naps, of course, but that wasn't the point!

The point was that Vivienne Ross had once gone forty-one hours without sleeping during a merger negotiation and the only side effect was a mild hallucination about a vending machine, and NOW she couldn't even make it through a twenty-minute org chart without her stupid five-year-old body shutting down like a laptop with no charger!!!

[WHO MOVED ME?! I was working!!!]

The wooden animals were on her nightstand. Whoever had carried her had brought them along. The horse was on its side.

[Even my org chart got disrupted. This family is a disaster from top to bottom.]

She lay there for a minute, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the rage to settle into something productive. It took about thirty seconds.

[Okay. Fine! If nobody in this house is going to look at the numbers properly, I'll make them look at the numbers. I just have to be smart about it.]

She was five, though.

She couldn't present a restructuring plan. She couldn't call a meeting. She couldn't fire Fausta, even though Fausta deserved to be fired, even though firing Fausta would be the single most satisfying moment of both her lifetimes combined.

But she could do something.

Seris's study was empty. Seris and Brynn were in the training yard, though based on the sounds drifting through the window, they'd stopped training about ten minutes ago and started doing something that Katarina was absolutely not going to think about.

[Focus. You have maybe twenty minutes before one of them finishes... Poor choice of words.]

The desk was its usual disaster.

Stacks of ledgers, loose papers, and a half-empty bottle of wine that Seris had apparently been using as a paperweight. Katarina pulled herself up onto the chair and surveyed the damage.

[Okay. The goal here is simple. I can't tell Seris what's wrong because I'm five and five-year-olds don't read trade contracts. But I can put the worst ones where she'll see them first. Lead her to the water. Make it obvious.]

She started with the Brevaine contract, which was the worst one. Nineteen percent revenue drop and the new terms included a volume minimum that the estate hadn't hit in three quarters.

[What's the actual penalty for underdelivery?]

Brevaine contract penalty clause: 8% of total contract value per quarter of non-compliance.

Montecardi has been non-compliant for 3 quarters.

Accumulated penalties: Significant.

[We're paying THEM for the privilege of losing money! This contract is actively eating us alive!]

She pulled it from the middle of the stack and put it on top.

Next was the supply agreement with the Coretti warehouse, which had a markup so high Katarina's eye twitched the first time she'd seen it. On top of the Brevaine contract.

Third was the port tariff arrangement, which wasn't technically a contract but was somehow costing them more in fees than the tariff was worth. She wasn't sure how that was even possible, but the numbers didn't lie, and whoever had negotiated this deal had done it while drunk.

She dog-eared the pages with the biggest losses. Little folds at the corner, the kind that could be accidental if anyone asked.

Then she found it. One contract, buried near the bottom, that was actually making money.

The vineyard distribution agreement with a merchant in the port town. Small scale, good margins, well-structured. The only contract in this entire stack that Vivienne Ross would have approved of.

Katarina drew a little flower on it with one of Seris's quills. A five-year-old had been playing in the study. That's all this was.

She put the profitable contract on the very bottom. Hidden. Because if Seris was going to learn something today, she was going to learn it by seeing how bad everything else was first. Sales 101. You don't lead with the good news. You lead with the fire and then you hand them the extinguisher.

[There. Three bad contracts on top, dog-eared at the ugly pages, one good contract buried at the bottom with a flower on it. If she can't see the pattern, I don't know what to do.]

She climbed down from the chair, grabbed a stuffed animal from the shelf by the door, a lumpy thing that might have been a bear at some point, and sat down in the corner with it.

Then she waited.

Seris came back about ten minutes later, looking flushed and very pleased with herself. She paused in the doorway when she saw Katarina on the floor.

"What are you doing in here, piccola?"

"Playing," Katarina said, and held up the bear.

Seris smiled, walked to her desk, and stopped.

She looked at the papers. Her head tilted. One hand came up and touched the top contract, the Brevaine one, and her brow creased.

[That’s right. Look at it. Really look at it.]

Seris sat down. She opened the Brevaine contract to the dog-eared page and read it. Her eyes moved left to right, slow and careful, and the crease in her brow got deeper.

Katarina held the stuffed bear in front of her face and watched over its head.

Seris went quiet. She turned to the next contract, the Coretti one, and opened that to the dog-eared page too. Read it. Turned to the third.

The room was silent except for the canyon wind outside the window.

Seris stared at the papers for a long time. Then she closed the folder, set it back on the desk, and pressed two fingers against her temple.

She didn’t say anything. She stood up, walked to the window, and looked out at the canyon with her arms folded.

Katarina watched from behind the bear.

Her heart was hammering, which was ridiculous, because this wasn’t a boardroom and these weren’t shareholders and the woman standing at the window was her mother. But the feeling was the same. The pitch had been made. The data was on the table. And now she was waiting to see if it landed.

Seris stood at the window for about a minute. Then she walked back to the desk, picked up the wine bottle, poured herself a glass, and sat down.

She opened the Brevaine contract again.

Katarina squeezed the bear.

[Did it work? Did she see it?]

The Ledger pulsed, faintly, at the edge of her awareness.

Seris Montecardi: Assessment updated.

Engagement with financial data: First recorded instance.

It wasn’t an answer. But it was a start.