CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 91: A Second Try

Renzo let the silence sit for a moment before he spoke. He was in no hurry, and he wanted her to know it.

Then he gestured. The delegate at his right produced a contract on cream-colored paper and laid it on the low table between them.

"We've had time to reconsider," Renzo said. "Our previous offer did not reflect the true value of your work, Signora. Vannico is a capable man, but he's young. He led with his first number. I prefer to lead with my best."

Katarina picked up the contract and read it.

[Huh.]

It was roughly double what Vannico had put in front of her in the spring, which itself had been an absolutely insane amount. The exclusivity clause was gone. The term had dropped from 10 years to 4, and the licensing structure had been loosened in all the places she'd flagged as dealbreakers last time. She read it a second time to find the catch.

But she didn't find one. On paper, it was, frankly, a good deal.

Sovereign Ledger:

Offer terms: Favorable.

Buyer-absorbed markup: ~30%.

Assessment: Generous. Unusually so.

[So that's the play. Send a kid to lowball me, let the kid strike out, then send the adult in with a real number so it lands like a gift. Honestly, it's clean. I'd have done it. Generous still makes me nervous, though.]

"It's a serious offer," she said. "I'll give you that much."

"I'd hoped you'd think so."

Then Renzo showed her what he was really there for.

He turned to Seris.

Seris was in the chair by the window, one leg crossed over the other, watching the meeting the way you watch a play you've already sat through. She hadn't said a word since the bowing.

"Signora Seris." His voice changed when he said it, warmer. "It has been a long time."

"Has it? I stopped keeping track, Renzo. One year of quiet looks rather like the next."

"I'll be honest with you, since we're old enough to skip the dance. I came hoping you'd hear the offer too." He glanced once at Katarina, then back to her mother. "The young run hot. They see a sect out of the central kingdoms and they assume the worst of it. But you knew us. We were good to you, in our time, were we not? You left on good terms. I'd only hoped that, if your daughter were uncertain, a word from someone who remembers those days might... settle her."

[And there it is.]

Sovereign Ledger:

Primary objective: Seris's influence over Signora-Designate.

Cooling-box contract: Inducement.

The deal is the bait. Your mother is the hook.

[They came home because they want her across from me at dinner, telling me they're decent people. "Take the money, Katarina, they were always kind to me." They overpaid by a third just to buy an advocate inside my own house. Clever.]

Katarina looked at her mother and waited.

Seris uncrossed her legs and stood. She crossed the hall, lifted the cream-paper contract off the table, and handed it back to the delegate who'd brought it, folded exactly as it had arrived.

"You were good to me, Renzo. I won't pretend otherwise." She gave him a lovely smile with nothing behind it. "But that was a different woman, and I left for reasons that haven't changed since. My daughter runs this house. I don't tell her what to sign, and I'm certainly not about to start over a few pleasant memories. If she wants your deal, she'll take it. If she doesn't, no amount of me reminiscing across a dinner table is going to move her."

Renzo held her gaze a moment.

[He’s deciding whether to push it.]

He decided against it.

"Of course," he said, and bowed to exactly the correct depth. "I’d have expected nothing less. The offer stands, Signora Montecardi, should you ever care to revisit it. We’ll see ourselves to the gate."

The three of them turned for the door, and the guard at his shoulder went with them.

"Wait."

They stopped. Renzo looked back, patient.

Katarina nodded toward the guard, who had spent the entire meeting studying a point on the ceiling with scholarly focus.

"Your guard and I have some unfinished business from yesterday. I’d like a word with her before you go." She paused. "Privately, if you’ll allow it."

Renzo glanced at the girl. She glanced back. Katarina couldn’t read what passed between them, but she filed it away for later.

"I see no harm in it," Renzo said. "She isn’t on duty again until we reach the rail. Take whatever time you need."

He bowed a final time and stepped out, the other 2 behind him. The door clicked shut.

Which left Katarina alone with the thief.

"So," Katarina crossed her arms, "tell me why I shouldn’t have you arrested."

"Aw, come on. That’s a cold way to talk to a friend."

"I literally don’t even know your name."

"Samara." She said it like she was doing Katarina a favor. "There. We’re basically besties now."

"We haven’t even made it to acquaintances yet."

"Friends-adjacent, let’s say." She dropped onto the arm of one of the couches, completely uninvited, and let a boot swing. "So, Signora. How much was even in that pouch?"

Katarina didn’t answer. She just stared at the woman.

"Come on, ballpark it for me. I’m curious. Couple silver marks? Handful?"

"Forty."

Samara whistled.

"40 marks. And how long’s it take a woman like you to make 40 marks? Round up, don’t be modest."

"An afternoon, probably."

"Aw, look at that." She nodded slowly. "So I take one afternoon from you and you take it so personally?"

"It’s less about the money and more about the principle. Someone put their hand on me and walked off with something that was mine. The amount has nothing to do with it. I’d have chased you the same for one copper."

"Mm. I can respect that."

She stood and crossed the hall, slow and easy, until she was a good deal closer than the conversation needed her to be. Katarina held still. This woman had put a boot in her stomach 18 hours ago. She wasn’t about to let her do it again.

"Step back."

"I’m only looking." But she stepped back, palms up, grinning. "But alright, fine. Be that way."

"Anyway, as I was saying," Katarina cleared her throat. "Why shouldn’t you spend the night in the local dungeon?"

"Good question. Let’s see... Probably because I didn’t steal anything from you. You’d have a hard time proving theft when nothing was stolen, right?"

Katarina raised a brow high.

"I watched you do it."

"You’re looking a lot, sure, but you’re not seeing. Check your sash. Left pouch."

Katarina didn’t move.

"Go on."

[... What the hell is she up to?]

Slowly, with her eyes on the woman the whole time, she reached down.

Tucked into the fold of her sash, snug against her hip, was the coin pouch. She pulled it loose. The weight was right. She tugged the string open, counted, and the 40 marks were all there.

[What the fuck?]

Katarina hesitated for a moment. She was certain the woman had run off with this same pouch. So, how exactly had she put it back? When had she put it back?

She looked up.

"So," Samara said, thrilled with herself. "Still gonna accuse me of stealing?"

Katarina turned the pouch over in her palm.

"You sprinted across half the harbor to keep this yesterday, then today you slip it back into my clothes without me feeling a thing. Which means either you're the worst thief in Vellasera, or robbing me was never the point. And I don't think you're the worst thief in Vellasera."

"Smart girl." Samara hopped back up onto the couch arm. "I never wanted your 40 marks, Signora. I wanted to know who I was working a town next to. Robbing you was just the fastest way to find out."

"I take it sending letters is unusual where you're from?"

"Could I? 'Dear Signora Montecardi, I'm a hired sword with the sect that's been circling your trade route all year, do let me know a good afternoon for tea.'" She snorted. "You'd have walked me to the gate inside a minute, smiling the whole way, and fed me whatever you wanted me believing. People lie with their mouths, Signora. They don't lie with their feet. I learn more about a woman in one afternoon of robbing her than a year of her polite talk."

[That's... not wrong. Goddammit.]

"And what did the robbing teach you?"

"Plenty." She held up a finger. "You came after me yourself instead of whistling for the watch. You enjoyed it, too, so don't waste my time pretending otherwise. And you didn't pull qi until I went vertical, which means you could've had me off that first rooftop whenever you pleased, and you let me run anyway because you were having a nice time." A second finger went up. "You threatened me with a writ instead of a fist, which tells me

how you'd rather fight. And after I put a boot in you and bolted? You didn't send a single soul after me. You went home and slept on it."

She spread her hands.

"Every port from here to Pavona's got a story about the toilet lady who dragged a dead merchant house up out of its own grave. I'm going to be in your town a while. I wanted to see for myself whether she lived up to the telling, or whether it was all just nice noise."

"And the verdict?"

Samara looked at her for a long moment and then shrugged.

"So, am I free to go, Signora?"

Katarina shrugged back.

"Go. Wouldn't want to keep your Lotus friends waiting."

Chapter 92: The War Room

Seris's study was still too small for a war council, which was, Katarina supposed, fitting, because the war was small too...

... For now.

She had the cream contract flattened on the desk, the one Renzo had taken back and that she'd, naturally, copied from memory the moment he was out the gate.

Beside it she'd set 3 things in a row: a list of what Samara had told her, a list of what Samara had let slip without meaning to, and a blank sheet. The third list was the one that mattered, and she hadn't written it yet.

Brynn was leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed, taking up most of it. Seris was in her usual chair by the window, wine within reach but untouched, which was how Katarina knew she was paying attention.

"Here's where we are," Katarina said. "They tried to buy me, I said no, and now I'd like to spend our time thinking about what they might do about that, not on the offer itself."

"You should know the offer was real, at least. Double is double." Seris turned the stem of her glass. "They don't waste coin to be cruel. If they paid that much, they wanted you badly."

"They wanted my product badly. They couldn’t care less about me." Katarina tapped the list of slips. "And the guard told me more than Renzo did, without meaning to. Samara’s not sect. She’s hired. Brought in from outside for one job, and the job was me. They put a freelance thief on me to take my measure before Renzo ever set foot on the property. You don’t do that for a trade deal, Mother. You do that for a target."

Brynn nodded along.

"Here’s where I keep landing. They’ve gone through the whole polite menu now. Lowball, then the generous number, then leaning on you to talk me into it. That’s everything a reasonable house tries. So I have to ask myself what a patient enemy does when reasonable doesn’t work."

Seris answered without looking up from her wine.

"They stop being reasonable."

"That’s my worry. I thought to myself what I’d do in their position and here’s what I came up with. I’d put pressure on the supply routes. I’d put pressure on our suppliers. I’d make a shipment go missing, and I’d turn that into a story about how the Greypass is back to not being safe." She turned the contract a quarter-turn on the desk and frowned at it. "Of course, there’s a chance they do none of that, and Renzo writes us off and goes home. But, well, I’d be greatly surprised if that happened."

Brynn pushed off the doorframe.

"Let’s not sit here guessing about it." Her voice had dropped into the register Katarina had heard maybe four times in her life. "I know which inn they took. Give me Marga and the crew and one evening, and I’ll explain to that man, very slowly, that he shouldn’t make enemies out of us."

"No."

Brynn’s murderous aura then broke and she got whiny.

"B-But, Kaaat! I’d have them packed and gone before you finished your tea!"

"I know you would. That’s not the part I’m worried about." Katarina tried to be gentle with her. She knew her mom’s tendencies, after all. "Think about what he carries home after. A Valdari house threatened a sect man over a misunderstanding. Couldn’t be reasoned with, settles things with fists, exactly what you’d expect from demons. Every human guild from here to the capital has that story memorized inside a week, and not one of them signs with us again. He’d lose three men and win the whole war in an afternoon. I’m not handing him that for free."

Brynn’s hands flexed, but she stopped, which was its own kind of love.

Katarina turned to Seris.

"I need to ask you something, and I need the real answer, not the polite one you'd give a stranger. When you worked for them, what were they actually like? Not the people. The machine. How did it win?"

Seris was quiet for a moment. Then she reached for the wine after all and held the stem without drinking.

"It bought. That was always the first move, and most of the time it was the only one. They'd pay three times what a thing was worth, because owning you was simpler than out-fighting you, and they could always afford simple." She turned the glass slowly. "Some things won't be bought, though. A person digs in, won't sell, won't scare." A pause. "That's when they'd send someone like me. And after that, the thing was never a problem again."

[There it is. There's the whole company in 2 sentences.]

Katarina pulled the blank sheet toward her and finally picked up her pen.

"Thank you. That's the part I needed."

"So what's the plan?" Brynn, still wary.

She was already writing.

"Their whole game is money, and then force when money fails. It's the only language they speak." She didn't look up. "So if it ever comes to that, I won't argue with them in it. I'll bankrupt the conversation before it starts."

[Though... I believe we may have to deal with one annoyance or two before the real game starts. Meh, I'll be ready.]

{Pell}

Pell had robbed a merchant house before. The trick was you went in quiet and you went out quick.

This one was going to be easy. Everybody said so. Two women ran the place, an old retired one who drank a lot and a young one who built those strange "toilets", and the young one wasn't even a fighter, she was some kind of clerk who'd gotten famous for plumbing.

Bracca had laid it out 3 times on the walk over. Get in, find the cold box, find the drawings if you can’t carry the box, get out. The sect was paying in gold and asking no questions, which were Pell’s two favorite things in one job.

There were 6 of them crouched in the dark below the vineyard wall. Bracca up front, then the twins, the big one whose name Pell never learned, and the quiet one who handled the knives. A dog somewhere down in the port wasn’t barking, which was good. Pell flexed her fingers and breathed.

"Workshop’s the low building, east side," Bracca whispered. "In and out. Anybody screams, we leave."

They went over the wall.

The estate was darker inside than Pell expected, all old stone and long halls, the kind of place that used to be grand and had stopped trying. They moved through it the way Pell had moved through a dozen houses, low and spread out, and nobody stopped them.

And that, in hindsight, should have been the first thing to bother her. Houses this size had guards. This one had a hallway, a draft, and the smell of last night’s wine.

The workshop door was unlocked.

[Too easy. But I’ve thought that on jobs that went fine.] So Pell pushed it down and went in with the rest.

There were workbenches, tools, half-built frames of some metal box she didn’t recognize, and standing in the middle of all of it, holding a cup of tea like she’d been expecting company since supper, was the young one.

The clerk.

The toilet lady.

She looked at the 6 of them with no fear at all, which Pell did not like one bit.

"You’re late," the young woman said. "I thought you’d come around midnight. You’re nearly an hour past."

Bracca had her blade half out.

"Hand over the box and the drawings and nobody bleeds."

"See, that’s a generous offer, and I want you to know I appreciate the structure of it." The clerk took a sip of her tea. "But I think you’ve got the wrong impression of how tonight goes. I’m not the one who’s going to stop you."

Pell’s gut went cold a half-second before her brain caught up.

"She is."

The door behind the clerk opened, and the old one walked in.

She didn’t look like much, honestly. Purple skin, black horns, a robe she hadn’t bothered to tie properly, huge tits, and hair loose like she’d been woken up and couldn’t be made to care.

She looked at the crew the way you look at a mess somebody tracked across a clean floor.

Then the air changed.

Pell had stood next to cultivators before. She knew what qi felt like coming off a real one, a pressure on the chest, a weight in the teeth. This was the floor dropping out of the world. This was every animal part of her that had kept her alive for 31 years screaming, all at once, in one voice:

Run.

The big one didn’t run. The big one, to his eternal credit, raised an axe.

And the big one was airborne, folded around nothing, traveling backward through the workshop wall in a noise like a building giving up. He landed somewhere out in the dark, didn’t get up, didn’t make a sound, and Pell honestly couldn’t tell from where she stood whether he was even alive.

The woman rolled her shoulder, once, like she’d slept on it wrong.

"Out," Bracca said. Her voice cracked.

Pell was already gone. They all were, knives dropped, dignity dropped, scrambling back through the halls and over the vineyard wall and down the slope toward the port, 5 of them where there’d been 6, and Pell ran until her lungs were full of fire and then ran some more.

Behind her, faint, she heard the clerk’s voice drifting out through the hole in the wall, mild as anything.

"Mind the grapes on your way out!"

Chapter 93: Reports

The reports were on her desk before the tea was, which was the only part of the morning going to plan.

Katarina read them in order. A grain shipment held up outside the Greypass on a "road safety advisory" that no authority had actually issued. 2 of her inland suppliers suddenly nervous about the next delivery window as a result.

And, folded in among the trade slips like it had grown there overnight, a broadsheet out of the lower district with a headline about a string of robberies and a question, in large friendly letters, about whether the corridor was as safe as the Montecardi claimed.

[There it is. Right on schedule. They didn't even wait a day. Hell... They may have done this before they even offered me their deal.]

Sovereign Ledger:

Route disruption: Confirmed, 2 of 3 inland lines.

Rumor seeding: Active. Source untraceable (intended).

Narrative: "Greypass unsafe." Plausible. Damaging.

"They're fast," Katarina said, sliding the broadsheet across the desk. "I'll give them that."

Seris picked it up. She read it the way she read everything, lazily, until she got to the part that mattered, and then her purple eyes went still.

"This was printed last night. Before the bandits ever climbed the wall." She set it down. "They had the story written before they knew whether the robbery worked. They were always going to run it."

"Mhm. The box was a bonus. The fear was the product." Katarina took her tea from Brilla at last and wrapped both hands around it. "Steal the prototype, lovely. Don't steal the prototype, also lovely, because now somebody's broken into a Montecardi workshop and there's a headline asking why the famous safe corridor can't keep thieves out of its own house. Either way, Renzo gets his story."

"He's good," Seris admitted.

"He's no amateur."

And that left the matter of their guest.

The big one had not, in fact, died going through the wall, which spoke well of Valdari masonry and better of his skull. Two of the stablehands had found him at dawn in the vineyard with a dislocated everything.

He was propped in a chair in the corner of the study now, wrists bound, one eye swollen shut, looking like a man who had recently been used to demolish a building.

Seris crouched in front of him, unhurried, in no rush at all.

"Who hired you?"

"A woman." His voice came out thick. "In a tavern. Coppara. Paid half up front, gold, said we'd get the rest after."

[Yeah, after going through what he went through, I'd talk fast too.]

"Her name."

"Didn't give one. They never do." He tried to shrug and regretted it immediately. "Said the job came from a sect. Didn't say which. We didn't ask. Gold's gold."

[And there's the wall. A hired crew, hired by a cutout, paid by a name nobody said out loud. Renzo's hands are clean all the way down. Naturally.]

Katarina watched him a moment longer and got nothing, because there was nothing to get. He was a tool, and tools don't know whose hand they're in.

"He's telling the truth," she said. "He doesn't know anything. They made sure he couldn't."

Seris stood and brushed off her knees.

"Then he can be uncomfortable somewhere else." She nodded to the two maids by the door. "Take him down. Feed him. Don't be gentle, but don't be cruel, he's just the help." The maids each took an arm, and the big man was hauled out, feet dragging, like a man whose week was not improving.

The door shut. Brynn, who had been a coiled spring in the corner the entire time, finally spoke.

"So what does Renzo do next?"

"I don't know."

Both her mothers looked at her.

"I mean it. I can guess. More routes choked, more rumors, maybe an offer to graciously 'help' secure the corridor for a fee, which would, admittedly, be very funny. But guessing what the Black Lotus does is a losing game. They've got more coin than me, more swords

than me, and a man running this who's been patient for 30 years." She set her tea down. "So I'm going to stop trying to predict him and do the one thing I actually control."

"Which is?" Seris asked.

Katarina pulled the cold-container file to the top of the stack and opened it.

"They want a slow, scary season. The Greypass looks dangerous, the Montecardi look fragile, and the fear does the work for them over months. So I'm not going to give them a slow season." She found the launch timeline, picked up her pen, and drew a hard line through the date. "We were going to bring the cold containers to market in the autumn. We're doing it in 3 weeks."

The trick to a launch was to never call it a launch. You called it a favor.

Katarina worked the market square the way she'd once worked a trading floor, stopping at the stalls of the people who mattered and only the people who mattered. She had a list in her head, naturally, of every merchant in Vellasera who'd asked about the cold container in the last 6 months, sorted by how much they could move and how loud they'd be about it once they had it.

She started at the top.

"3 weeks," she told Govanna, who ran the largest fish operation on the harbor road and had spent the spring asking, very casually, whether the cooling boxes kept fish or only wine. "First run, limited. I'm letting a few houses in early. I thought of you."

Govanna's eyebrows went up under her hat.

"3 weeks. I'd heard autumn."

"You heard right. I changed my mind."

"What's a unit run me?"

"Come by Thursday and we'll talk like adults." She was already moving. "Bring your volume numbers. Real ones, Govanna, not the ones you tell the tax assessor."

She laughed, delighted, and that was one.

She did it five more times across the square. The fruit consortium, who could keep stone fruit firm across a 2-week haul and knew it. The two rival butchers, separately, neither told about the other, which would make Thursday interesting. A spice broker who didn't

need cooling and wanted in anyway purely because everyone else did, which was, frankly, the easiest sale of the morning.

Every one of them was surprised by the timeline, every one of them leaning in, every one of them already doing the math on what a head start was worth.

[Let them talk. Let the whole square talk. By Thursday, I want "the Greypass is dangerous" drowned out by "the Montecardi are launching early and there aren't enough units to go around." You can't sell fear at a sold-out launch.]

Sovereign Ledger:

Pre-launch interest: High.

Soft commitments: 4.

Scarcity narrative: Building. Counter-pressure effective.

She was halfway across the square, turning over how many units she could actually have ready in 3 weeks, which was fewer than she'd implied to 6 people, when a voice landed at her shoulder, close and amused.

"You know none of them are going to pay what we offered you."

Katarina didn't jump.

Samara had fallen into step beside her, hands in her jacket, looking out at the stalls like a woman with nowhere to be and all day to not be there.

"That didn't take you long."

"I'm not following you, before you say it. I'm walking through a market in the middle of the day, same as half the town." Samara nodded at Govanna's stall, receding behind them. "I'm just saying. We'd have paid you double and not made you sweat a fishmonger in the sun for it. That one back there is going to grind you down to nothing and go home bragging that she robbed the Montecardi girl."

"Govanna will overpay me by Thursday and thank me for the chance. She just doesn't know it yet." Katarina kept walking. "And your double came with a 4-year leash and a man who wanted my own mother to walk me into the collar. Strange how nobody mentions that part of the offer."

"Mm. We're not real subtle, I'll give you that." Samara didn't sound bothered by it. "Doesn't make the number wrong."

"Aren't you meant to be guarding someone?"

"Renzo's at the inn writing letters. The man doesn't need a sword, he needs a scribe, and I've stabbed exactly zero pieces of correspondence in my career." She tipped her head. "So I've got the day. Thought I'd find out how the famous Signora spends a morning, since the famous Signora is apparently all anyone in this town wants to talk about."

[She's fishing. The whole sect just took a swing at me last night and they've sent the charming one back to watch how I take it. Smart. I'd do the same.]

"If you're going to trail me all morning, you can make yourself useful while you do it."

She pulled the rolled spec drawings out from under her arm and pushed them into Samara's hands before she could think better of it.

Samara took them, surprised, then pleased.

"You're handing the sect's hired thief your secret plans, Signora. Bold."

"You seem to be forgetting, I let you get away last time. Run off again and you won't see daylight in years."

Chapter 94: Bait

"So how's it work?" Samara asked, tapping the rolled drawings against her shoulder. "The box. Walk me through it."

"You're holding the answer. You don't want to take a look?"

"I can't read a formation array to save my life. I steal them, I don't draw them." She said it cheerfully, like it was a charming quirk and not a confession of intent. "Humor me. Big picture."

[She's asking a question she already knows the shape of.]

"Big picture, it keeps things cold." Katarina stepped around a woman hauling water and didn't slow. "That's the whole sell. Cold goes a long way in a place where it's warm 10 months a year and your fish dies in an afternoon."

"That's what it does for you. I asked how it works."

"To me and to my customers, those are the same sentence."

Samara laughed.

"All right. Keep your secrets, Signora. Can't blame a girl for trying."

[And there’s the tell. She didn’t want the pitch, she wanted the mechanism, and you don’t send someone to lift the mechanism off a woman you’re still planning to pay double for it. Unless you’d rather not pay at all.]

They walked. The square thinned into the cooper’s lane, quieter, the noise of the market falling off behind them.

"Your turn," Katarina said. "How does a sect out of the central kingdoms decide a little coastal house is worth all this?"

"You’re small now. You’re not always going to be small though, and this could be what changes that."

"That’s a very careful way to put it."

"It’s the only way worth putting it." Samara walked a few steps before she went on, and when she did the easy lilt had gone out of her voice. "The people who pay me don’t chase small things. They chase things that aren’t going to stay small. Somebody up the chain looked at a dead merchant house that clawed itself back to life inside 8 years, and they ran the next 8 in their head, and they didn’t care for the answer." She glanced at her. "You’re not a box to them, Signora. You’re a line on a chart going up, and they wanted in on that."

[For them to identify my trajectory so quickly is the impressive part here.]

"So they’d rather own the chart than race it."

"They’d rather own anything than race it. Owning’s a fixed price. Racing’s a coin toss, and they hate a coin toss." Samara cut a look at her, sidelong and pleased with herself. "But you knew that. You handed me half that speech yourself yesterday, near enough word for word."

They came out onto the harbor road, the sea flat and bright in front of them. Samara squinted at it like it had wronged her somehow, and Katarina found, to her mild irritation, that she was having a good time.

"You’re not what I expected," Samara said.

"Go on. What was the briefing on me?"

"I was told you’d be the kind of buttoned-up clerk who’d bore me to death about margins and never once look me in the eye." She handed the drawings back, having carried them the whole way without once unrolling them, which Katarina noted. "You’re a lot more trouble than that. Don’t let it get around. It’ll wreck your numbers."

"I’ll take my chances."

They reached the turn for the estate road.

And, suddenly, Samara peeled off with a lazy 2-finger salute, headed back toward the inn and her letter-writing master, and Katarina watched her go for exactly as long as was reasonable and not one second more.

Then she smiled to herself.

[She didn't unroll them. Disciplined. But she'll hand them up the chain, or they'll lift them off me some quieter way, or that big idiot in the dungeon already told them what he saw on the workbench. One way or another, the Black Lotus gets a look at how the cold container works.]

She held back a giggle.

[Which is exactly why the array on that sheet is wrong.]

She'd drawn it herself last night. A clean, confident, completely functional-looking formation that would chill a container beautifully for about 3 days and then quietly turn on itself, warming everything inside until it spoiled. The flaw sat 4 nodes deep, in the sort of place a thief in a hurry or a rival in a lab would never think to check, because it looked finished.

[Steal it. Please. Build a hundred. Spoil a hundred shipments and stamp your name on every one of them.]

{Samara}

The Black Lotus did not believe in being comfortable somewhere they didn't mean to stay.

Samara had worked for richer outfits that traveled worse, and for poorer ones that traveled better, and the Lotus landed in a place all their own. They'd taken the whole upper floor of a merchant's rest off the harbor road, a clean, plain, unremarkable inn, and stripped the rooms of anything that suggested they'd be there long.

No banners. No crest on the door. The good furniture they'd shipped in stayed in its crates, stacked against the wall, because crates that never come out are crates you can leave with in an hour.

Renzo had a desk, a lamp, and a stack of letters, and that was the whole of his ambition for the room. He was sealing one when she came in, pressing the lotus into the wax like a man doing the 40th of something.

"You followed her."

"All morning. She works the market like she’s running for office. Stops at the right stalls, skips the wrong ones, knows everybody’s name and everybody’s numbers." Samara dropped into the chair across from him, uninvited, which he allowed. "And she moved the launch up. 3 weeks instead of autumn. The whole square was buzzing about it by the time I left."

Renzo’s hand paused over the wax, then went on.

"She’s accelerating." He said it the way you’d note a fever climbing. "Good. Frightened houses move fast and badly. She’s trying to outrun the story before it sets, which means she’ll spend everything she has to do it, and when the routes stay choked and the units don’t ship clean, the fast move is the one that finishes her." He set the sealed letter on the stack. "A patient man only has to be right about where the road ends. He doesn’t have to win a single step along it."

"And if the units do ship clean?"

"Then we make the offer again, from higher ground, and she’s grateful for it the second time." He looked at her at last, mild and sure of it. "There’s no version of this season where the Montecardi come out ahead. There’s only how long she insists on finding that out for herself. We’ll be home before the snow comes north. We always are."

Samara made a noise that could pass for agreement and let him get back to his letters.

She’d heard the speech before, in other rooms, about other people. She still couldn’t tell if the man was always right or just always sounded it, and she’d stopped trying to work out which a few towns ago.

Her own room down the hall had a bed and a window and nothing else worth naming. She sat on the bed and took the thing out of her jacket, the formations she’d just lifted off the Signora.

A folded square of paper, tucked where the spec drawings had ridden. Not the big rolled set, she’d handed those back on purpose, since carrying the obvious thing while taking the quiet thing was the oldest trick she owned.

This was smaller. A working note, by the look of it, with numbers and a sketch of the array and cramped little margin scrawls in a fast hand.

She’d been at this for years. She knew the feel of a clean lift, and this one had felt clean in the moment.

So why did it sit wrong now?

[Because she’s too smart for it.] Samara turned the paper toward the lamp. [That woman read a thieving crew, a sect man, and a whole market square in a day apiece and called every one of them right. And she lost her private notes to a hired sword like me?]

She didn’t have the cultivation to tell whether the array on it was true or a lie. That was the whole joke of her, she could steal anything and understand none of it.

But she knew people. People were the one thing she read better than Renzo did, and she’d have bet the rest of her fee on it.

And the longer she sat with the paper, everything she knew about the toilet lady kept saying the one thing, over and over.

This was handed to me.

[The only question left is whether she knows she handed it over.]

Samara folded the note shut and, for the first time on this job, didn’t know what she was going to do with it.

Chapter 95: The Waiting Game

{Katarina}

All Katarina could do from that point was wait.

She was good at waiting. It was, in fact, one of the few things she’d done in both lives without ever getting tired of it. You set the thing in motion, you stepped back, and you let other people walk the path you’d already mapped.

The trick was never to look like you were waiting. To fill the wait with so much real work that you forgot, occasionally, that you were holding your breath.

It was late. The lamp on her desk had burned down to the steady part of the night where the estate went quiet, and the canyon wind did the only talking.

She had the launch logistics spread in front of her, the real launch.

[... I’ll be honest, when I thought of moving up the launch, I may have failed to take into account the massive boost in work that would result. Oh well.]

Behind her, in the bed, Vessa was asleep.

She’d come back from the workshop hours ago, ink-smudged and full of opinions about preservation nodes, talked at Katarina through an entire late dinner, and then folded into

the bed mid-sentence the way she always did, like sleep was something that happened to her rather than something she chose. She was on her stomach now, one arm flung off the edge, breathing slow and even.

She turned back to the desk and let the question she'd been circling all evening come fully into the light.

Would Samara take the bait?

[She's not dumb. That's the problem. The big idiot in the dungeon would've handed that note straight up the chain and never thought twice, but the Lotus would question why I released him to begin with, so I couldn't hand him the fake plans. Meanwhile, Samara watched me work.]

She tapped her pen against the desk.

[But knowing it's bait and knowing what to do about it are different problems. She can't read the array. She told me that herself, and I believe her, because nobody admits to a weakness that specific unless it's true. So even if she smells the trap, she can't prove it without handing the note to someone who can read it, which means handing it up the chain, which is exactly what I want her to do. The suspicion doesn't save them. It just makes her feel clever while she carries my poison to their door.]

She set the pen down. That part held. That part was clean.

The part that didn't hold, the part she kept turning over like a stone with something written on the underside, was simpler and more annoying.

[I don't actually know if she cares whether the Lotus wins.]

That was the variable she couldn't price.

Vannico cared. Renzo cared. But Samara had walked Kat's whole morning with her hands in her pockets, fishing for the mechanism and not pushing too hard when she didn't get it, handing back the rolled drawings she could've kept, carrying them the entire way unrolled.

She'd done the job and somehow given the impression she didn't much mind how the job ended.

[She could be hired help with no loyalty to the people paying her. Either she takes the note up the chain because it's the job, or she sits on it because the job stopped being interesting, or she does something I haven't thought of, which is the option I hate.] Katarina rubbed her eyes. [I built the trap for a thief who wants the box to help her masters. I'm not sure I built it for whatever she actually is.]

Vessa shifted in the bed, mumbled something that was either Kat’s name or a complaint about node alignment, and went still again.

Katarina smiled.

[I guess we’ll see.]

She was reaching for the cold tea she wasn’t going to drink when a soft knock came at the door, the careful kind, the kind the night maid used when she wasn’t sure she should be knocking at all.

"Signora? I’m sorry, I know it’s late."

[Samara. It has to be Samara, doubling back to feel me out, and that would actually answer the question, wouldn’t it?]

"Send her in."

The door opened.

It was not Samara.

Silver hair. Blue eyes. White wings folded neatly against a traveling cloak, and a perpetually impatient look Katarina had gotten to know well.

"... Eva?"

The aevari stepped forward once.

"... Greetings. I heard some news," Eva said. "I thought I’d visit. I hope that’s okay."

Eva sat on the edge of the couch, neat and contained, wings folded so they wouldn’t crease against the cushions. Katarina had two maids make tea for them.

"So, is it true you moved the launch up?" Eva asked. "The cold containers, autumn to 3 weeks. I’ve heard it from four different people and I wanted it from you."

Katarina, who had not been expecting business talk at this hour or from this person, took a second to recalibrate.

"It’s true. Where did you hear it?"

"Where didn’t I? Pavona, the rail, a wine factor in Coppara who talked about nothing else for an entire carriage change." Eva’s pale eyes were steady. "It’s not a secret, Katarina.

Your launch is the single most-discussed thing on this coast, and it has been since the day the Black Lotus tried to buy you and you turned them down."

[... Ah.]

"That got around?"

"That got everywhere." The composed face cracked, just slightly, toward amusement. "Think about how it sounds from the outside. The Black Lotus walks up to a little coastal house Signora with more gold than that house has seen in a generation, sets it on the table, and the girl running the place looks at it and says no. Do you know how rarely anyone says no to them? People have been retelling that for 2 weeks. Half of them are sure you're brilliant, the other half are sure you're about to get yourself killed, and every last one of them is waiting to see which."

[Of course. I was so busy reading Renzo's move that I forgot the move I was making was loud. I refused him publicly. That was a statement on my part.]

Sovereign Ledger:

Public profile: Sharply elevated.

Sentiment: Net favorable (underdog framing).

Strategic value: Significant. Underexploited.

"So you bringing the launch forward," Eva went on, "nobody read that as panic. They read it as nerve. The girl who turned down the Black Lotus is so sure of her boxes that she's shipping early to prove it. That's the version going around now." She paused. "Which I'm fairly sure you didn't leave to chance."

[She's good. She always was. That's exactly the story, and I'd only half-built it on purpose.]

"Sixty percent on purpose," Katarina said. "I'll let the other forty take the compliment."

Eva almost smiled.

The tea arrived. The maids set it down and retreated, and that was when Brynn came in.

She came in like the room had been waiting for her, and she came in entirely naked, because she'd woken up, registered that there was tea happening somewhere in her house, and prioritized accordingly. Her white hair was a disaster. She was scratching her stomach.

"Oh, tea, thank the depths." She made for the pot, nodded at one of the maids on the way, and added, with a grin, "Lovely braids today, by the way, you're going to break hearts," purely because Brynn flirted the way other people breathed. The maid rolled her eyes and smiled.

[Ah. Tuesday.] Katarina sipped her tea. This was simply the climate she lived in.

Then, she glanced at Eva.

Eva was not handling it with the same equanimity.

Eva was staring, pale blue eyes locked, throat working, a flush climbing up her neck and into her ears and lighting up the whole of her face. Aevari, raised in the cold disciplined north where desire was a thing you earned through restraint, sitting very upright on a Valdari couch while a 6-foot red-skinned demon woman strolled past pouring tea, huge cock swinging with every unbothered step.

Brynn clocked the guest mid-pour.

"Oh, hey. Didn't see you sitting there. You one of Kat's?"

"... Classmate." Eva's voice came out half a register too high. "From the academy."

"Compasso girl, look at that. Stay for tea, there's always too much." And Brynn wandered back out the way she'd come, cup in hand, scratching, gone, and the silence she left behind had a specific shape.

Eva cleared her throat. Then cleared it again.

"I'll be in town a day or two," she said, with the careful diction of a woman rebuilding her composure brick by brick. "If you'll have me. I'd like to see this launch everyone won't stop talking about. And I." A breath. "It occurred to me you might like the company of someone who isn't here to buy you or rob you, for a change."

"I'd like that," Katarina said, and meant it. "Stay here, then. We've got more rooms than people. You could have the whole east wing and never hear another soul."

"No." Eva said it fast, then caught herself. "Thank you. The house is very... warm. I'll take a room down at the harbor. It's nothing against your hospitality."

[It is entirely against my mother's anatomy. But I'll let her keep the excuse.]

"Suit yourself. I'll have someone walk you down."

Eva stood, smoothed her cloak, gathered the last of her dignity, and let the maid show her out, and Katarina sat with the cooling tea and watched the door close behind her.

[Eva Caelestis, here, unannounced, the same week the Black Lotus decides to make my life difficult.]

She turned it over.

[An Aevari with a sharp head, a formation license, and family connections that open doors in places I can't reach. Showing up offering company... I wonder if she'd like to be useful.]

Chapter 96: Factors To Consider

"Ah, so that's what's happening?"

Eva nodded after hearing the parts Katarina had neglected to mention before.

Specifically, everything about Samara.

"Are you certain she'll hand the fake plans over?" Eva asked.

"Not at all. Depends on where her priorities lie. Assuming she figures out they're fake, if all she cares about is her own standing, she'll hand them over. If she cares about the sect, she'll withhold them."

"I feel like betting on the idea that she doesn't care about the people she's guarding is foolish."

"Guard is just one of her occupations. She's also a thief, and thieves aren't known for sentiment."

"I suppose you're right." Eva shrugged.

"The part I actually want to know," Katarina said, "is whether they know about you."

Eva tilted her head.

"Would it matter?"

"It matters quite a bit. They've had eyes on me for weeks. Presumably, since before I actually came back to Vellasera. Samara's the one I caught, which means there's one or two thieves hovering around me at all times that I didn't." She turned her cup. "So the question is whether you're already written down as 'Montecardi associate, watch closely,' or whether you're still just 'Aevari, passing through, ignore.' Especially since you left your name out of the licensing."

Eva nodded slowly.

"I came in on the public rail. I gave my own name at the inn. I haven't hidden anything, because I didn't know there was anything to hide from." Eva thought it through. "If they're thorough, they know an Aevari arrived and they gathered from the academy that, while I don't own the project, I worked on it alongside you."

"Depends how good their people are. Renzo's are good."

[Good costs money, though, and you don't pay your best to chase every tourist off a rail. They'd note you and move on, unless you gave them a reason to look twice.]

"Here's what I think..." Katarina said. Eva waited. "You're conspicuous, Eva. No offense, but there are maybe 3 Aevari south of the mountains in a good year, and people remember every one of them. You're not gonna sneak anywhere. But that's exactly why the plan I'm cooking up will work. Nobody whispers schemes in front of a foreign noble, and nobody guards their mouth around one either, because they figure you don't care about local nonsense." She set the cup down. "A curious northern visitor wandering the harbor, asking innocent questions about the famous cold box everyone's talking about. People love explaining their town to an outsider. They'll tell you things they'd never tell me, because to me they'd be negotiating, and to you they're just showing off."

Eva's pale eyes sharpened. [There it is. She does like a good problem.]

"You want me to listen to the rumor mill?" Why?"

"To see what they're saying about the Lotus's side of this. I want you to stand in the middle of town with a nice face and let it talk to you. What the town's saying today. What the Lotus's people are putting out. Whether the 'Greypass is dangerous' line is sticking or sliding. I can't fish for that. I'm the fish."

Eva inclined her head, pleased to be useful and not about to admit it.

"I can do that."

[Good. That's Eva placed.]

The door opened.

Seris came in without knocking, because it was her house and the concept had never occurred to her, wearing a robe that was, technically, tied.

"I heard voices. Do my girls need anything? Tea, food, wine? We've got those almond things Ottavia made, if I can find where she hid them from Brynn."

"We're fine, Mother."

But Seris had already turned to the guest and leaned down to get a proper look at her, one hand braced on the back of the couch, which did a great deal to the front of the robe.

"And you're Katarina's classmate. The Aevari. Aren't you lovely?"

Eva opened her mouth and nothing useful came out.

Because Seris was leaning, the robe was losing, and Eva, raised on a frozen peak by people who treated wanting things as a moral failing, was now confronted at close range with the better part of Seris Montecardi's chest. Two things she clearly very much wanted to look at and had been raised to die before acknowledging.

"I'm. Yes. Eva. Caelestis." She fixed her gaze on a point a careful 6 inches above Seris's horns and did not let it drop. "Thank you. I'm well. We're well. We don't need anything."

"You're sure? You look a little flushed, sweetheart."

"The. Climate," Eva said. "It's warmer here. Than the mountains."

"Mm. It is that." Seris straightened, and the immediate emergency partially resolved itself. She ruffled Katarina's hair on the way past. "Shout if you change your mind. Lovely to meet you, Eva. Do stay a while."

She swept out, robe and all, and Eva exhaled like she'd come up from underwater.

{Eva}

Eva had visited 6 cities on 3 trade circuits and considered herself difficult to scandalize. Her mothers had made her that way. Trained her to be such.

Still, Vellasera was making a real effort.

She walked the harbor road at midmorning with her cloak drawn close and her composure drawn closer, and everywhere she looked, the town was simply out. A fruit seller worked her stall bare-chested, tits resting on the melons while she made change, entirely unbothered. Two women kissed against a doorway like they had nowhere else to be and no intention of going there. A dockhand hauled rope stripped to the waist, and below the waist too, cock out and swinging, which Eva clocked exactly once and then strenuously did not clock again.

[How? How exactly did this town produce a genius on Katarina's level? There's no quiet here. No discipline. It's all skin and noise and wanting, in the middle of the day, and somewhere in this an inventor popped up?]

It did not compute. Eva had been raised to believe excellence came from restraint, that you sharpened a mind the way you sharpened steel, by grinding everything soft off it. And here was the counterargument, selling fish with her chest on the counter.

"You're new." A Valdari woman fell into step beside her, smiling, horns filed to little gold points. "I'd remember the wings. And the rest of you." She looked Eva over, slow, the way you might admire a sunset or a good cut of meat. "Drink with me sometime, northern girl?"

"I'm... I'm working," Eva managed.

"Pity." And she peeled off, no wound taken, already smiling at someone else.

It happened 3 more times in as many streets.

A baker. Someone's grandmother. A girl who couldn't have been 20, who winked and called her "feathers". None of them meant a thing by it. That was the part Eva's northern head couldn't hold. Flirting here cost nothing and promised nothing, picked up and set down as easy as shells on a beach.

But she had a job, and the job was a mercy, something to point her mind at that wasn't anatomy.

She drifted between stalls and asked her innocent questions, the curious foreigner, and people were glad to explain their town to her. The cold box was all anyone wanted to talk about. 3 weeks, had she heard, the Montecardi girl moved it up. Some said she was a marvel. Some said she was reckless. A spice seller leaned in and confided that the Greypass had gotten dangerous again, robberies, you understand, and Eva noticed how cleanly he recited it, like a line he'd been handed instead of a thing he'd seen.

[There. That's what Katarina wanted to know. The story's out, but it's thin. People repeat it. They don't believe it.]

She'd turned to go when a voice stopped her.

"You came down from the estate."

A woman leaned against a post with her arms crossed, red-skinned, black hair cropped close, watching Eva with open and friendly interest. She stood loose and balanced, the way fighters did.

"I did," Eva said carefully.

"Thought so. You've got the look of someone who slept somewhere nicer than the rest of us." The woman grinned. "So you know the Signora? Katarina?"

"Indeed, I do. We were classmates, at the Compasso."

"Huh. That's fascinating." She turned that over. "How close are you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Cause she's so hard to read and I wonder what she's like. Really, that's all. You know... What she's like when nobody's buying or selling." A pause that tried to be casual and didn't quite manage it. "She say much lately? About anything in particular?"

[She's fishing.] Eva had sat across enough tables to feel a hook when it brushed her. She gave the woman nothing but a polite, blank smile, the northern kind, the one that had frustrated 3 generations of merchants.

"We mostly discussed coursework."

The woman laughed, like the dodge was the answer she'd been expecting and didn't mind getting.

"Sure you did." She pushed off the post. "Well. If you see Kat soon, do me a favor. Tell her not to underestimate me so badly next time."

And she walked off into the crowd, unhurried, gone between one stall and the next.

Eva stood there a moment.

[... What was that about?]

Chapter 97: Word Games

Eva came back a little after midday with the sun on her wings and a merchant's worth of gossip in her head, and she laid it out the way Katarina liked things laid out. Cleanest facts first.

"The danger story is planted." She'd declined a seat and stood by the window instead, which was very Eva. "I heard it 4 times, almost word for word, from people who had no business agreeing that precisely. A spice seller recited it to me like he was reading off a card. Robberies, the Greypass isn't safe, you understand. He didn't understand. He'd just been told to say it."

"Word for word is the tell," Katarina said. "Real fear is sloppy. Everybody's scared of a slightly different thing. When the wording's identical, somebody handed it out." [Good. That confirms it. Renzo's seeding a story, not riding a real panic. Which means it's fragile. A planted line dies the second a louder, truer one shows up, and the launch is the louder, truer one.]

"That was my read too." Eva almost looked pleased. "It's loud, but it's hollow. People repeat it and then watch to see if it's real. They don't believe it yet. They're waiting to find out."

Sovereign Ledger:

Rumor penetration: Wide.

Conviction: Low.

Vulnerability to counter-narrative: High.

"Then we're fine there, more or less. Good work." Katarina meant it. Eva had walked into a strange town and come back with the one number that mattered. "Anything else?"

Eva hesitated.

"One thing. It might be nothing." She turned from the window. "A woman cornered me by the harbor. Red-skinned. Stood like a fighter. She knew I'd come from the estate, and I don't know how. She asked if I knew you, then she asked what you were like. Specifically, what you're like when, and I'm quoting, 'nobody's buying or selling.'"

The pen in Katarina's hand went still.

"Then she gave me a message. Tell Kat not to underestimate her so badly next time." Eva watched her face. "I assumed it was the thief you mentioned. Samara. Does it mean something?"

Yeah, it meant something.

It meant rather a lot, actually.

[That's not a fighter's line. She's talking about the paper.]

Because there was exactly one thing Katarina had ever done to Samara that involved underestimating her.

[The fake array. I handed her something that looked finished and bet she couldn't read it, bet that even if she smelled the trap she couldn't prove it, so she'd carry it up the chain feeling clever the whole way. And she's just told me, through a courier, with a smile, that she made it the second she touched it. The real message is, what kind of idiot do you take me for, Signora? Polite as anything.]

It landed like a slap.

[I built the whole plan on her being a tool that didn't know it was a tool. Okay, noted.]

Katarina set the pen down and made herself breathe, because the slap wasn't the problem. The slap she could take. Being wrong was useful. It told her that her estimation of Samara was wrong.

The problem was the part underneath.

[Why tell me?]

That was the thing she couldn't get past. A careful thief, the kind who hands back a coin purse to set up a second theft, does not announce she's onto you. Surprise is the whole job.

If Samara knew the plans were fake, the move that serves her is silence, let Kat keep trusting a dead trap, let Kat make her next call on a false read. Telling her burns that for nothing.

Unless it bought something Katarina couldn't see.

[A thief doesn't tip her hand unless the tip is worth more than the surprise. So what's it worth? Is she warning me? Threatening me? Flirting? Auditioning? Is she just bored? She turned it over and every face of it pointed somewhere different.

She could not find the leverage.

[I can't file her.]

"... Well then," Katarina said as she picked the pen back up, mostly for somewhere to put her hand. "I need to do some recalculating."

"So we've lost nothing," Katarina said, walking the harbor road with her hands behind her back. "A trap she saw coming is just a trap that didn't go off. I'm out one fake drawing and a little pride, and the plan was never the drawing anyway."

"You sound almost cheerful about it," Eva said.

"I'm clarified. There's a difference."

[Square one. With the launch on the calendar, a story running in my favor, and a sect that has to move first now, because I'm the one with the loud true thing coming. Let Renzo react to me for once.]

That was the whole of it, really.

The fake plans had been a bonus shot, it missed, and a missed bonus shot cost her nothing she needed. The real weapon was the launch, 19 days out and gathering its own weight. The town was leaning in. The danger story was thin. Renzo was sitting in a stripped inn waiting for her to panic, and she had no intention of obliging him.

The docks were full. Midday on the harbor road meant fishers, factors, dockhands, a knot of off-duty porters throwing dice on a crate, and the loud business of a port town doing its work. Katarina looked at all of it and had one of her ideas, the kind that arrived fully formed and slightly reckless.

"Eva. The demonstration unit's at the workshop. The small one, on the cart."

"...Now?"

"Why not now. I've got a crowd, a hot day, and 19 days to make 'cold box' the only two words anyone in this town can say." She was already flagging down one of her stablehands. "Bring the unit. Bring ice if Ottavia has any. Tell her I'll explain later."

A launch was a favor and a favor was a story, but before either of those, a launch was theater. You couldn't sell a thing people hadn't seen work. So you made them see it work, in the sun, in front of their neighbors, with the smell of fish guts in the air and nothing up your sleeve.

The cart came. The unit was a plain metal box the height of Katarina's hip, unremarkable to look at, which was the point. She had Eva set it on the crate the porters grudgingly surrendered, and she raised her voice the exact amount a Signora raises her voice, which is to say barely, because if you make a crowd lean in to hear you, you've already won half of them.

"For anyone who's been listening to the docks lately," she called, "you've heard I'm bringing something to market. Here it is. No formation tricks you can't see, no priestly nonsense. A box that stays cold without ice, in this heat, for as long as you keep it shut." She rapped the lid. "My friend here is going to load it. We open it tomorrow, in front of all of you, and you tell me whether the fish inside has turned. If it has, you can throw it at me."

A few laughs. Good. Laughing crowds buy.

Eva played her part with northern precision, setting in two fresh fish and a wheel of the soft cheese that wept itself to slop by sundown in a Vellasera summer. She let the crowd see each item. She sealed the lid. The array along the rim drank the qi she fed it, the box gave a low contented hum, and Katarina watched 30 faces do the small arithmetic of want.

[There it is. That's the launch. A box in the sun and a crowd who can already taste fish that doesn't spoil.]

"Aw, come on." Loud, from the back, bright with delight. "You're not actually going to fall for that, are you?"

Katarina didn't have to turn to know.

Samara shouldered up through the crowd with her hands in her jacket and a grin aimed at the cheap seats, planting herself where everyone could see her, which meant being seen was the whole point.

"A magic box that keeps your supper fresh, and it's sealed up where not one of you can check it." She spread her hands to the onlookers, easy, playing them. "I've watched three different carnival women run that exact trick up this coast. Box stays shut, you go home happy, you open it next week and your dinner's gone green and the clever girl's two towns over spending your coin." She winked at Katarina. "No offense, Signora."

The crowd rippled, half laughing, half curious, every one of them watching now.

[There's the angle. She's not threatening me and she's not warning me. She's handing me an audience and a fight, in public, where I can't have her hauled off without proving her point for her. The rich Signora silences the poor heckler. She built that in about four seconds.]

[She's good. Genuinely.]

Katarina turned, slow, and looked at the thief grinning in the middle of her crowd, and felt something she hadn't felt in a negotiation in a very long time.

She felt like having fun.

[All right, Samara. It's on.]

Chapter 98: Opinions

"Do you have any concerns, ma'am?" Katarina asked. "You clearly have opinions. Let's hear them. I'll wait."

Samara lit up at the invitation, which Katarina had counted on. A heckler you ignore owns the room. A heckler you hand a microphone has to actually perform.

"My concern, Signora, is that it's shut." Samara spread her hands. "You're asking me to believe in cold I can't feel. Open it up. Let me put my hand in and feel the chill come off it right now, and I'll buy the first one myself."

"And the moment I open it, the cold leaves, and you've learned that I can chill a box for the 3 seconds the lid's up. The seal is the whole product. You're asking me to break the

thing to prove it isn’t broken." Katarina got a few nods for that. "I’ll give you a better deal. Tomorrow it’s still shut, and you open it, and you judge the fish."

"Eh, I dunno." Samara turned it over. "Here’s my next one, then. A crate on a dock for an afternoon, nice flat weather, friendly faces. That’s not a trade route. Real fish rides 3 weeks on red rock, under the scorching sun, with bumps and rocks. Does your pretty box survive 3 weeks of that? Or just one sunny day in front of people who like you?"

[She got a little poetic there,] Katarina thought, suppressing a giggle.

"That’s a good question, ma’am."

The crowd murmured, because Signoras did not generally concede to hecklers, and Katarina let them feel the surprise.

"You’re right. One afternoon doesn’t prove 3 weeks. So I’m not asking anyone to take 3 weeks on faith. The houses in the first run get trial terms. A sealed unit fails on the road, I eat the loss, not the buyer. The risk sits on me. That’s the offer."

"Generous." Samara’s grin sharpened. "And if 40 boxes fail on 40 routes, and you can’t cover 40 losses, you’re bankrupt, I’m still out my fish, and a guarantee’s only ever worth the house standing behind it."

"The house standing behind it turned down more Black Lotus gold than this port has seen in 10 years." Katarina paused half a beat. "You may have heard. We’re not exactly doing poorly, are we?"

The crowd snickered and murmured. Kat had a point.

Samara dipped her head, conceding with good humor, the way you tip a hand you lost on purpose.

"All right. Then here’s the real one." She turned to the onlookers, dropping Katarina entirely, talking to them now. "Say it works. Say it’s perfect. You all build your living on the Signora’s miracle box. Every fish you sell runs through her array. And then one quiet morning, she sets a new price. She doesn’t even have to be greedy about it. She just has to own the one thing you can’t do without anymore." Samara shrugged. "Free advice, friends. Be careful who you let make you comfortable."

[That’s the Black Lotus’s own gospel, almost word for word. The monopoly play. Own the thing, don’t compete with it. She’s selling them the sect’s philosophy, but presenting it as a danger in my case. That’s incredibly shameless!]

"Question. You sell fish today," Katarina said. "Who makes your ice?"

Samara opened her mouth and Katarina kept going, to the crowd now, same as she had.

"When the ice doesn’t come in August, who sets that price? You’re already owned, friends. By the rot you scrape off your stock every summer and the ice man who knows you’ve got no choice. I’m not offering you a new master. I’m offering to sell you back the fish you currently throw in the harbor." She rapped the box once. "Tomorrow. Midday. You can decide then, friends."

And that was where Katarina decided to leave it.

Because both of them were right and neither could prove it standing there, and a crowd can smell an argument that’s run out of evidence. Samara couldn’t show the box was a trick. Katarina couldn’t show it wasn’t, not for another day.

The porters drifted back to their dice. A factor said he’d come look at the cheese tomorrow and meant it. A handful stayed, leaning in to ask Eva questions, which was a handful more than Katarina had owned an hour ago.

A draw. An honest one.

"Same crate, tomorrow," Katarina called to Samara as she and Eva turned up the quay. "Bring a crowd. You’re good for business."

Samara laughed and waved her off, and that was the round.

Eva waited until they were clear.

"You didn’t win that."

"No, but then again, neither did she. You can’t win an argument when the proof’s a day out. The best either of us could do was hold our half." Katarina walked, turning the woman over in her head, and for once a piece of her clicked into place.

[She’s better than I thought. She found the soft spot in my pitch in 10 seconds and fought me flat with no preparation in front of my own crowd. But, every single thing she said was, to put it this way... "common sense". The monopoly angle was the only economic concern and she got that from the Lotus. Everything else was just her having decent critical thinking skills.]

Katarina nodded to herself.

[She’s no businesswoman.]

{Samara}

"She’s quick," Samara said, dropping into the chair across from Renzo’s desk. "Quick on her feet, quicker with her mouth. I went at her in front of half the harbor and she fought me to a standstill without breaking a sweat. Launch is in 19 days and the whole town’s talking about it like it’s a holiday."

Renzo went on sealing his letters, unbothered, pressing the lotus into each blob of wax.

"And the device?"

"Shut tight. She won’t open it, says the seal is the product, and she’s got the crowd half-believing her. I can’t read the array, so whether it works or it’s the prettiest con on the coast, I honestly couldn’t tell you." She propped a boot on the edge of his desk.

"Get your foot off my desk."

She took her time about it.

Renzo’s son had been at the window winding tighter by the minute, and now he came off the wall.

"This is ridiculous." [And here we go.] "We are a sect. They are 2 retired demons and a child. Give me one night. I’ll walk up that hill and come back with the box, the drawings, and an apology, and we can all go home. Why are we haggling with fish-sellers?"

Renzo finally set the seal down.

"Did you feel anything when we passed the older one at the gate? The one everybody calls the drunk."

Dario frowned.

"No. Nothing. She’s nobody."

"A woman with nothing to hide doesn’t work that hard at looking like nobody." Renzo folded his hands. "I have met perhaps 4 people in my life who could stand that close to me and read as empty air, and every one of them could have ended me between 2 breaths and chosen, for their own reasons, not to bother. If you lay a hand on that family, you’ll learn what she is. Once. Very briefly. And I’ll have to write your mother an unpleasant letter."

The room went quiet. Dario chewed on it.

[He’s right. I watched the big one go through a solid wall without that woman even changing her face. Pretty boy wouldn’t last the introduction.] Samara kept that one behind her teeth.

"Besides." Renzo picked the seal back up. "We're forgetting that we don't need to take anything from her at all."

Dario waited, jaw set.

"The moment she sells her first unit, the thing exists out in the world. In some fisherman's cart, some merchant's warehouse, the hands of people with a great deal less powerful than the Montecardis. So we buy one, or steal one, we take it apart, our artisans build our own, and we sell it cheaper everywhere with a sect's reach behind it." He smiled, small. "Let her have her launch. A clever idea is yours right up until somebody patient owns a crowbar."

[Huh. That's not bad at all.]

"So what do you want from me?"

"The same as before. Stay close to them. Watch. Tell me when she does something I wouldn't expect." He went back to his letters, which was his way of dismissing her.

[Charming.]

And, with that, she let herself out.

By evening, Samara had found her spot. A low wall up the road with a clean line on the Montecardi gate. She settled in to do the part of the job she was actually good at.

Watching.

Waiting.

Turning a problem over sideways until it showed her its soft underside.

She pushed off the wall with her head down, still chewing on it, and walked directly into someone coming the other way.

It was a good solid collision, shoulder into chest, and Samara got a hand out on reflex and caught the girl by the arm before she could go down.

"Oh, gosh, no, that was me, that was completely me, I do this constantly." The girl laughed up at her, pink-skinned, dark hair chopped short and a little crooked like she'd cut it herself in a mirror, not the least bit bothered to have just been bowled into by a stranger. "Are you all right? You looked about a thousand miles off."

And Samara, who had flirted her way out of locked cells and talked the gold teeth out of grinning men, who kept a line ready for every face in every town she'd ever passed through, opened her mouth and found absolutely nothing in it.

[... Whoa.]

Chapter 99: Instant

Samara pulled back, trying to regain her composure.

"Sorry about that. I was... lost in thought," she said.

"Oh, please, don't apologize, I came around that corner like I had somewhere to be." The girl waved both hands, batting it away. "Which I do. But that's hardly your problem. I walk into things constantly. Once I walked straight into a horse."

"...A horse?"

"It was standing very still! It looked like a wall." She laughed, bright. "So really, this is a step up. You're at least a person."

"It was my fault. I wasn't watching where I was going."

[There. Full sentence. See, you can do this. Why are you so nervous?]

"See, now we're both at it, and we'll be here trading sorries till sundown." The girl looked up at her with open warmth, no edge on her anywhere, and Samara had no idea what to do with that.

People always came at Samara with angles. They flirted, they fenced, they wanted something off her. This one just seemed glad to have bumped into a stranger, which left Samara standing in the road with her hands useless at her sides.

"Tell you what." The girl stuck out a hand. "We'll call it even. Half mine, half yours. Very fair. Everyone keeps their honor."

Samara shook it. The grip was warm and quick, gone too soon.

"Perfect." The girl beamed like Samara had done something clever. "I'm late, so I've got to run, but it really was lovely crashing into you. Try to look where you're going, mystery lady. Not everyone catches as nicely as you do."

And she was off with a little wave over her shoulder, leaving Samara feeling like she'd been hit by something a good deal bigger than a girl.

Samara watched her go. Professional habit, she told herself, tracking a target's movement, noting the gait. Except the girl walked with an easy, unhurried roll to her hips, in no rush whatsoever for someone who was supposedly late, and the trousers she had on were doing genuinely commendable work.

Samara took it all in with a calm, professional objectivity she didn't feel anywhere else in her body.

One truly outstanding ass.

[Right. That's a problem for later, and it's going to be my favorite problem. Get her name next time. Arrange a next time. You arrange things for a living, this is the easiest thing in the world...]

The girl reached the top of the road.

She didn't slow at the low wall Samara had been leaning on for the better part of an hour, or at the turn, or along the estate wall. The gate guard lifted a hand to her in lazy, familiar greeting. She walked straight up to the front gate of the Montecardi estate, lifted the latch like she'd done it 10,000 times, and let herself in.

Samara went very still.

That was the house. That was the gate she'd been watching all afternoon, the family she was being paid to watch, the one with the demon who put grown men through walls and the Signora she couldn't read no matter which way she turned her.

And the girl with the horse story and the magnificent everything had just strolled through the front of it like she paid the taxes.

[What?]

Samara walked home the long way and worked the problem the whole time, because working the problem was easier than thinking about the way the girl's trousers had moved. So...

Who was she?

Staff, maybe. Plenty of people walked through that gate who scrubbed its floors, and a maid who'd been there ten years would lift that latch exactly that easy, would get exactly that lazy wave off the guard.

[Except...]

Except staff didn't dress like that. Samara had watched the Montecardi servants come and go all afternoon, aprons and work tunics and sensible boots, and the girl had been in good

trousers and a clean shirt and not a thing on her that said she'd spent the day hauling or scrubbing or filing. She'd come home to that house at suppertime in clothes you wore to be looked at, not to work in. You didn't dress like that to go scrub somebody's floors. You dressed like that when the house was yours to walk into.

[So not staff. So one of theirs, then. Family, or...]

Or somebody was getting that into bed every night, and Samara would put silver on the second one, which meant the Signora who'd run rings around her all afternoon was also the one who got to come home to the girl with the horse story.

[Lucky bitch.]

Soon, she arrived back at the inn. Renzo looked up at her.

"Anything today?"

"Nothing," Samara said. "Didn't see a thing."

{Katarina}

The fish stew was too salty.

It was always too salty. And yet, after she'd spent a year at Compasso eating careful, balanced, expensive food made by cooks who measured their salt out with little silver spoons, and she'd have handed all of it back, every elegant plate of it, for one more bowl of Ottavia's aggressively over-seasoned stew.

[Strange how that goes. You spend years trying to claw your way out of a place, you finally taste the polished version of it somewhere else, and what you want is to come home and have your tongue insulted by your own cook.]

She had another spoonful and said nothing.

Brynn was on her 3rd bowl and her 4th retelling of how the launch was going to be, in her words, "the biggest thing this coast's seen since the tide," gesturing with her spoon hard enough to fling broth. Seris sat with her chin on one hand, not really listening.

Then the door banged open and the room got louder.

"I'm starving, do not tell me you started without me, you absolutely started without me." Vessa swept in, dropped a kiss on top of Seris's head, another on Brynn's cheek, got ruffled by Brynn's hand for her trouble, and arrived at Katarina. She did not, as a sane person might, take the empty chair beside her.

She dropped straight into Katarina’s lap.

"H-Hey." Katarina got her bowl up out of the splash zone on pure reflex. "I’m eating here."

Vessa wriggled into a comfortable arrangement, plucked the spoon out of Katarina’s hand, helped herself to a mouthful, and grimaced.

"Salty as always."

"OI," came Ottavia’s voice from the kitchen, who heard everything.

Katarina sighed, took her spoon back, and surrendered the idea of personal space, which had never once survived contact with Vessa. Her free arm went around the girl’s waist.

[God, I am so whipped. Thoroughly. Vivienne Ross would be appalled.]

Vivienne Ross could mind her business.

"Where’ve you been all day?" Brynn asked, pointing the dripping spoon.

"Everywhere. Conservatory paperwork, the harbor, Mama’s shop, then back to the harbor because I forgot the thing for Mama’s shop the first time." Vessa counted it off on her fingers and leaned more of her weight in. "Oh, and I walked into a girl."

"You walk into one every day," Seris said fondly.

"I do, but this one was worth it. Right outside, top of the road." Vessa twisted to look at Katarina, lit up. "Tall, red skin, short black hair, real pretty. I came around the corner like a cannonball, the way I do, and she just caught me. One hand! Barely even looked at me, like catching a falling girl was the third most interesting thing happening to her." She sighed, pleased with the memory. "I told her she was the hero of the story."

Katarina’s spoon slowed in the bowl.

[Tall, red skin, short black hair, top of the road right outside my gate. That’s Samara. Vessa walked into Samara.]

It clicked.

Samara had been watching the house, Vessa had walked into the house, so Samara now knew precisely which pink-skinned girl strolled through the Montecardi gate like she paid the taxes.

"Kat?" Vessa nudged her. "You froze up all of a sudden."

"I’m fine." She calmed down and decided to worry about this later. "So, uh, you were saying?"

"She was so cute, Kat." Vessa said it while watching Katarina’s face, winding her up being a reliable favorite pastime of hers. "Embarrassingly cute. I forgot how to talk. Me. You know I never forget how to talk. And I told her about the horse. The horse, Kat. First thing I say to a beautiful woman and it’s the time I walked into a horse. And she didn’t even laugh at me, she laughed like I was funny, which is worse, because now I have to find her again and be normal, and I have never once been normal."

"Oh, I’m painfully aware of that."

"Hey!" Vessa pouted at her. "Fine, I won’t tell you about the cute girls I meet from now on."

"How will I ever make it through the day?" Katarina smirked.

Katarina let it go, on the outside. On the inside she filed the thief near Vessa under a heading she’d open tomorrow, in daylight, with a plan, instead of here at a table with her whole family and a stew this salty.

"All right." She tapped the table. "We can be charmed by strangers later. We’ve got a launch in 18 days and nowhere near enough boxes."

"My moms already said the shop’s yours if you need it for this," Vessa said, and went all business in a blink, which was something Katarina loved about her.

"Tell them yes, and thank them properly. I’ll do it myself this week." [The Talori floor solves the space. Vessa solves the arrays. Which leaves the volume.] "Eva’s in town another day or two. She runs the formation side while she’s here. She inscribes arrays faster than anyone I’ve got."

"You’re going to work that poor angel to the bone," Seris said.

"She’ll have a wonderful time, trust me." Katarina was already laying it out behind her eyes, the floor, the hands, the inscription line, the 18 days, the math finally pointing the right way. "We start proper mass production tomorrow."

Chapter 100: Work In Progress*

"Of course you’re putting me to work," Eva said, drawing arrays on one of the cold containers.

"Oh, come on. You know this is fun."

The two of them had been at it for hours, getting as many containers ready for launch day as they could. Vessa had cleared out her workshop to give them the space, which Katarina had promised to pay her back for later.

She hadn’t hired anyone else to help, for one simple reason:

[The Black Lotus would buy the blueprints right off them. Or Samara would find some clever way to squeeze it out of them. Either way, until launch day, this stays with people I trust.]

And that, really, was the whole game.

Katarina had been chewing on this for a while, hands busy, head free. Nobody ever stayed ahead because their idea was special. Ideas got copied. The Romans had once found a wrecked enemy warship on a beach, a fast one that had been kicking their teeth in at sea for years. They took it apart plank by plank and built two hundred of their own off the one example. They stole the good ship and out-built everybody.

[And then they won the war. Funny how that works.]

So Katarina wasn’t trying to keep the cold container secret forever. That was a fool’s errand, and she hadn’t been a fool in two lifetimes. She just needed it to be secret for eighteen more days. Long enough to be first. Big enough that by the time the Black Lotus reverse-engineered their own version, she’d already own the market, the routes, the name. Let them copy it. They’d be copying the thing everyone already bought from her.

"You’ve gone quiet over there," Eva said. "Should I be worried?"

"You’re doing fine."

"That’s worse, somehow." Eva finished her last loop and sat back to check it, blue eyes running the line for breaks. There was a smear of inscription dust along her jaw she didn’t know about. "There. Forty-one. You realize the academy gives me a research stipend specifically so I don’t have to do piecework in a borrowed shed. The youngest Compasso graduate on record, hunched over a fish box. Hire twelve people, Katarina."

"I could hire twelve people. Then one of them goes home, mentions the clever box to a cousin, the cousin mentions a number to the Black Lotus, and the number’s always lower than you’d hope. Twelve people is twelve doors I’d have to keep shut." Katarina capped her ink. Forty-one. They were close. "You’re one door. I like those odds."

"Ah, so I’m a security measure now?"

"You’re the only person on this coast I’d trust with the seals and that includes my mothers, who I love, and who would absolutely sell the design to buy each other something pretty."

"I’m holding it together because you asked nicely and it’s a genuinely interesting problem." Eva stretched, both arms over her head, her shirt riding up. Katarina noticed, and for once let herself keep noticing. "Don’t mistake interesting for loyal, Montecardi. I’m here for the puzzle, same as I’d be here for anyone’s puzzle."

"Mm. Anyone’s."

They did the last two in silence. Katarina did the seals. Eva checked them, found nothing wrong, and looked annoyed about it.

The forty-third container clicked shut and the cold held. That was the day’s work. Eighteen days out, ahead of schedule, the math finally pointing the right way.

Katarina capped the ink.

"That’s the lot. I’ll have someone bring food up, you’ve earned the salty stew experience, it’ll change your—"

"Is stew the most exciting way this day could end?"

Katarina stopped.

Eva was looking right at her. The inscription dust was still on her jaw. She’d gone red high on her cheeks, and she was holding very still.

[Oh.]

"Perhaps not. Though, I have no clue what else you have in mind."

"Fine. I’ll be the brave one. I usually am." Eva lifted Katarina’s chin and kissed her.

Katarina grinned into it.

They didn’t make it back to the harbor inn, where Eva was staying.

Katarina’s room was closer. She pushed Eva down onto the bed, and Eva went onto her hands and knees, shirt off, trousers gone, wings half-spread for balance against the mattress.

Katarina knelt up behind her and didn’t waste time. She slid two fingers down and found Eva already wet, dragged them through it once to feel her shiver, then lined herself up and pushed into Eva’s pussy in one slow stroke.

"Oh my—" Eva dropped to her forearms.

Katarina set her hands on Eva’s hips and started moving.

She went slow first, the whole length, watching Eva’s back curve every time she bottomed out. Then faster, when Eva started pushing back to meet her, the two of them finding the rhythm together until the bed was knocking the wall and neither of them cared who heard.

Eva moved back against her like she had something to prove. Katarina obliged. She got a fistful of white hair, pulled back, and drove into her harder, the slap filling the room, Eva’s wings shaking every time she hit deep.

"Right there, don’t you dare stop—"

[Wasn’t going to.]

She kept the angle, kept the pace, reached around with her free hand and rubbed tight circles over Eva’s clit while she fucked her, and that was what did it. Eva went rigid, then came apart, clenching down around Katarina’s cock so hard it nearly took Katarina with her. Eva shook through it, forearms sliding, face going down into the blanket.

Katarina worked her through the aftershocks, slow now, gentling, until Eva reached back and caught her wrist.

"Okay. Okay. Give me a second." Eva rolled onto her back, hair a disaster, chest heaving, the most undignified Katarina had ever seen the proudest Aevari at Compasso. She looked very pleased about all of it. "That was—"

Katarina kissed her. Eva hauled her down by the neck, and the kiss went deep. Eva bit her lip. Katarina bit back.

"Round two?" Eva said against her mouth.

"Of course."

The spirit rail platform at Vellasera was loud at midmorning, full of porters, crates, and somebody’s escaped goat, and Eva stood at the steps of her carriage looking like she’d never once been bent over a bed.

"Send a stone when you’ve launched," she said. "I want numbers. All of them. I helped build the thing, so I get to gloat."

"You’ll get numbers."

"And if the Black Lotus tries anything before then—"

"They won’t get within a mile of it."

Eva looked at her, and, for a second, the composure cracked. She looked worried.

"Be careful, Katarina. They wanted those rights badly enough to send a thief and a delegation. People don’t usually take a no and go home."

"I’m always careful."

Eva nodded, leaned in, and kissed her once, quick, in front of the whole platform and the goat.

The bell rang. The doors sealed, the array beneath the rail lit pale gold, the whole line slid forward, and she was gone. Katarina stood there a moment longer than she needed to.

[Numbers in two weeks. Got it.]

And so she walked home along the harbor road, the long way, because she liked the harbor in the morning and figured she had earned a slow walk. She was three streets from the estate, in the narrow stretch where the warehouse wall ran high on one side, and the old fishery sat on the other, when four people stepped out of the shade and into the road in front of her.

Katarina stopped.

There were four of them, and they were armed, though not in any flashy way. They carried plain working blades. They spread out to cover the width of the lane, and one of them drifted behind her to take the road at her back.

"Signora Montecardi." The one in front didn’t bother with a weapon yet. "We’ll keep this simple. The plans for the cold container. You hand them over, you tell us how the seals are inscribed, and you walk back to your nice house and have your lunch."

[... They aren’t with the Black Lotus.]

She knew it the second the woman opened her mouth. The Black Lotus had already tried the harsh way, and they’d gotten their asses handed to them. From that point on, Katarina figured they’d be sneaky. These people, however, were standing in front of her now, fully expecting that she’d just hand over everything like a scared little Signora, with so many holes in their stances that Brynn would cry if she saw this shit.

[Someone heard there’s a clever box and decided buying it was too slow.]

"And if I’d rather keep my plans?"

"Then it stops being simple." The woman’s hand went to her hilt.

Katarina rolled her neck and let her qi settle, all four paths, the way Brynn had drilled into her.

[Eighteen days out, and ahead of schedule. Let’s not.]

And, she got into a fighting stance.