

[b]Chapter 6: The Gala[/b]

Summer begins in earnest over Elene's Prospect and Ozero. The lambs, even Matilda the sickly one, have been turned out to the pastures with the help of Lulu and Bramble, and many of the students follow their lead even in Math and Literature classes. Frequently gaggles of golden-uniformed students make notes or do sketching in the gardens or beyond while a teacher holds forth; often, they'll play instruments out in the garden, and you can hear the music through open windows.

Over the weeks, a great deal of bustle builds between town and school: Matia has her work cut out ferrying students back and forth. There's to be an art exhibition in the town hall, the first of its kind to show off the older students' artwork, and the students old and young are doing much of the organization. The families are to come, and a number of artists, and academics too.

"The way we show our art," Kass says dramatically over breakfast, "is the way we shape how it is seen."

"And," Tibor says while Kass isn't listening, "these big occasions are how we get the families to donate. It doesn't matter what they make us call it—we could do with a Roldan Wing or some such."

6-gala *choice 21#1 (line 22)

- ★ "I'm glad the students' work will be appreciated."
- "Fiore Roldan might be more likely to donate to a science laboratory."
- "That's rather mercenary."
- "Does that really work?"

Tibor nods briskly. "Yes, yes, and they've done a great job," he says. "You sound like Kass. But if we want more facilities, we need more cash coming in. Maybe Elian's parents will be interested."

The week before the day of the art show, Field Marshal Alva arrives at the school with Fiore in tow. In the midst of the great fuss from everybody over Alva, which she brushes off with her usual good cheer, Fiore is rather overlooked. Beforehand, they sent you a letter saying they'd be here earlier than the other families as they want to witness the anniversary of Jaime's death with Catarina. But you do not get much chance to speak with them beyond a brief greeting, as Alva whisks you off to Korzha's office for a cup of coffee.

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Korzha is sitting at his mahogany desk. Alva looks entirely comfortable, her ankle crossed over one knee, in her leather armchair. Korzha seems to have recovered somewhat from his earlier malaise, or is hiding it better for his superior.

Nevertheless, Alva is not having any of it.

"You look dreadful, Varenn," she says. "Like you've been spending every night under those awful neon lights in the laboratory. Let me get the coffee."

Korzha rubs his smooth cheek. "I'm doing very well, Field Marshal," he says quietly. "Particularly with Captain Addario's assistance."

"Balan protect us," Alva says, "you can't just say that and expect everyone to believe you."

6-gala *choice 51#2 (line 68)

- Before Korzha can offer, I go to get Alva's coffee. It might save some effort. [Tests Cautious or Humane]
- ★ I crossly tell Alva to back off and leave Korzha alone. [Tests Rebellious or Emotional]
- The moment might feel awkward to others, but I'll let it roll off me. [Tests Objective or Decisive]
- I join in the fussing over Korzha, even though I know he doesn't enjoy it. [Tests Dutiful or Callous]

"You're making Korzha uncomfortable, and honestly me too," you say. "Please back off."

Korzha does not seem to know whether to look grateful or admonishing; Alva smiles, spreads her hands apologetically, and rises to fetch coffee for the three of you. When she returns, she turns her attention to you.

"Helen. I spoke briefly with Pastor Lopes, or Nurse Lopes, whatever she calls herself," she says, "and she agrees with me that you're not entirely well. It sounds like you've been pushing yourself a little too hard—do keep it in mind, because this was meant to be a less demanding assignment for you."

6-gala *choice 119#1 (line 124)

- ★ I smile. "I'm fine. Really."
- I sigh. "You're probably right."
- "You really don't need to ask Savarel about me."
- "I'd rather be doing something more challenging."
- "I'm doing the best I can for Honored Fiore and Catarina."
- "There's a lot going on here."
- "I don't really understand why I'm here, though."

Alva's blue eyes are as piercing as ever. "Hmm. Well," she says. "Now. There are various reasons for you being placed here, but one of them is the idea of you helping Captain Korzha

with his scientific research if the need arose. And now the need has arisen—between the extra research and teaching, Varenn's been under some pressure juggling it all."

She gestures to Korzha to demonstrate; Korzha remains motionless.

"Apparently you did an excellent job helping him with maintenance," Alva says, "which is exactly the sort of helpful attitude we like to see. So. I propose giving you an additional assignment—the research—around the edges of your work with Catarina Roldan. What do you think?"

6-gala *choice 155#2 (line 158)

- "What else can you tell me about it before I agree?"
- ★ "What level of classification is this?"
- "How would it impact my assignment with Catarina?"
- "I assume this is highly confidential."
- "What does Esteemed Kass know about this?"

Alva exchanges a glance with Korzha. "High," she says. "We can both tell you more once you've signed the paperwork. It's nothing related to the students, or to Catarina. But it is in the national interest, and I don't need to remind you that you'll need to keep the details to yourself. Sharing anything would result in a court martial. Which is why I'm being cautious about talking with you about it now—I mustn't go too deeply into it, or I'll be the one on the chopping block."

She pushes back her armchair with a squeak and picks up her cane and mug of coffee.

"I'm going to have a look in the garden," she says. "You can ask Varenn any other questions that might not be suited to my ears."

Like Kass's office, Korzha's one opens onto the sunny courtyard and garden. Alva strolls out, letting a waft of warm, scented air into the room, and starts examining the flowers. Korzha watches her for a moment before turning to you.

"I'd greatly appreciate your assistance," he says. "It would mean a great deal."

His gaze is steady, and does not give much else away, but he seems perfectly sincere.

6-gala *choice 187#2 (line 193)

- "What do you think about what you're researching?"
- ★ "It's hard not knowing what I'm agreeing to."
- "I'd enjoy working more with you, I think."
- "I will say that I'm not much of a scientist."
- I smile flirtatiously. "Could this mean we might get to know each other better?"

Korzha nods briskly. "It's practical and useful," he says. "I've been doing tests for some time now, and progress is being made. It's not as dramatic as one might hope. But when it's completed, it'll benefit the country a great deal."

He glances down at his mug, cupping it in his hands.

"I confess I've considered the conversation we had previously about...well. About spending more time together outside of work. And I realized part of my reticence was that I did not want such a large part of my everyday life to be kept secret from someone with whom I was...engaging in that sort of relationship. If that were the case, I would want to keep a professional distance."

The words do not seem to come all that easily, and he turns the mug around in his fingers as he speaks. He seems about to say something else, but then stops as the door opens again.

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Alva returns through the garden door with Mathieu the scraggy gray cat at her heels. You think he must be hungry—he rarely comes inside—but as soon as Alva closes the door he yowls to be released once more. Alva laughs and lets him out.

"Well!" she says. "What a beautiful place this is. What do you think, Helen?"

She wears the expectant expression of a superior officer who thinks she knows what she's about to hear. But though taking on this assignment would contribute favorably towards your contract negotiations at the end of the year, she has not ordered you to carry it out. You can focus elsewhere as you wish.

6-gala *choice 233#2 (line 235)

- "I don't think I can commit to this assignment."
- ★ "I'd rather not be working on something with such high stakes."
- "I'm delighted at the opportunity. I'll go for it."
- "All right...I agree. I'll do it."

Korzha does not show visible disappointment, but his mouth tightens a little. Alva nods coolly.

"Of course," she says with a faintly clipped tone. "Whatever you wish, obviously."

6-gala *choice 341#1 (line 342)

- ★ "I can't risk Catarina getting involved somehow." [Tests Cautious]
- "I can't handle keeping secrets like that. It'll show on my face." [Tests Emotional]
- "I need to look out for my own health. I can't risk that." [Tests Callous]

- "You told me to look after Catarina. I need to stick to that." [Tests Dutiful]

Korzha nods, looking a little more relaxed. Alva sighs and rises to her feet.

"I'd like to think you could prevent that from happening," she says mildly. "But I understand."

She shakes your hand and says she has a few more things to discuss. That's your cue to leave.

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Alva stays one more night before heading out at the crack of dawn to catch an early train from Elene's Prospect; you only hear about it after she's gone, while exercising with Raffi and Korzha in the gardens after breakfast.

"She needed to get back to New Belmir in the afternoon," Korzha says, and that seems to be the end of it.

You start with jogging around the borders of the garden and up to the sheep pastures, then return to the garden for bodyweight exercises. Sunlight streams down now, having burned away any dew and mist, and it's hurting your eyes; Raffi, looking concerned, hands you a canteen of water, which helps a little.

6-gala *choice 739#3 (line 754)

- I spot Raffi and Korzha's technique.
- I stretch carefully after the exertion.
- ★ I push myself to show off.

Korzha looks tired, but performs with the focused determination of someone getting through his activity: thoroughly but efficiently. Raffi clearly takes a little more pride in her ability, shaking back her hair and flexing her muscles to check and admire how they're looking.

You throw yourself into the exercises, pushing harder; Korzha does not lower himself to compete but Raffi is eager to join in. she collapses to the ground after a while, gasping but grinning.

Footsteps crunch on the gravel path behind you, and you turn to see Catarina, let out early from her music lesson. She looks tired more than anything else, and you recall that today is the anniversary of her parent Jaime's death.

6-gala *choice 904#4 (line 908)

- "How are you doing this morning?"
- I nod to her.

- "I hope you're doing all right."
- ★ "How is Fiore today?"

Catarina fiddles with her sleeve, shifting from foot to foot. "I wanted to ask," she says with a tremble in her voice. "Can you come to the church today and witness the blessing? I'd like you along. Maybe if you're there, Fiore will calm down."

6-gala *choice 925#4 (line 929)

- "Of course. I'd be honored to join you."
- "I'll go where you need me."
- I nod. I don't have a feeling one way or another.
- ★ I don't particularly like the idea, but I'll go along.

Catarina plumps down on the bench. "I'll wait for Fiore while you get ready."

Once you've finished up your final stretches and have showered in your beautifully spacious private bathroom, you meet Fiore and Catarina in Matia's truck. You sit in the front while Fiore and Catarina settle in the back; Matia nods to you cheerfully. "Right, let's get moving," she says.

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The plains are dry and golden in the summer light, with swathes of orange poppies in the distance forming bright splotches like paint on the hillside. A clear sky beams down. Catarina is quiet, but Fiore leans forward to speak to Matia.

"So do you think you'd ever want to go back to the Exploration Service?" they say.

Matia drums her fingers on the steering wheel. "Don't know, honestly," she says. "It was a lot. Fun, a lot of the time. But when people died it was rough."

She smiles at the road ahead.

"It'd be weird going back with a new name and all this," she says, gesturing at her face.

"Everyone knows, and they sent me some great gift baskets when I was in hospital for my stuff, but going back into it would be different."

Fiore leans forward further and the pair of them talk a little about which hospitals they went to and which surgeons they had. Though they went to different places, a handful of their friends have surgeons in common. Catarina rolls her eyes expressively.

Matia takes a hand off the wheel to roll one shoulder with a satisfied noise.

"All that aside," she says, "I've been living here in town a while now too, and it's not the most interesting work."

6-gala *choice 1053#4 (line 1084)

- "Maybe you should try something new. It would be more exciting." [Tests Decisive]
- "I'd be concerned about your parents if you left." [Tests Humane]
- "Maybe better not to do something wild at your age." [Tests Cautious]
- ★ "You should do whatever feels good to you." [Tests Emotional]

Matia shrugs. "Well, that's the thing, isn't it?" she says. "Knowing what does feel right. What I do know is I wouldn't want Brigit sticking her nose in. She's gone back north for now, thank Tecuzi, but she'd be here in a flash to start getting involved if I left."

"What did [i]you[/i] do in the Service?" Catarina asks Fiore.

In the reflection of the mirror, Fiore shakes their head ruefully. "We wouldn't have been particularly useful if we'd stayed," they say. "I didn't like all the physical training, and Jaime was horrible at following instructions. If I'd told my commander I wanted to stay, she'd have told me to reconsider."

"Yeah, well, most people do that," Matia says. "The way Raffi did it was smart. Getting the Service done and then moving into something better-paid."

Catarina's scowling at the mention of Raffi. "But," she says, "that laboratory thing is coming along, isn't it?"

The last you heard about that was at the Honors Ceremony, when Alva and Mandriotti were quizzing Fiore about their current ambitions. Fiore sighs. "I haven't really been in touch with the people who asked me," they say. "I don't know."

"But if you just leave it, you'll never do it," Catarina says, her voice rising.

6-gala *choice 1111#4 (line 1165)

- I advise Catarina not to pressure Fiore: it's not kind. [Tests Humane]
- "It could be a good idea to be bold and go for it." [Tests Decisive]
- "It would mean you'd contribute more to the scientific community." [Tests Dutiful]
- ★ "Just weigh up the positives and negatives. That'll give you an answer." [Tests Objective]

"I guess you're right," Catarina says.

Fiore catches your eye in the mirror and nods slightly with a small smile. they reach over to put an arm around Catarina's shoulders.

"If I was thinking about risking setting up a whole laboratory, I wouldn't be sure," Matia says from the driver's seat. "But then that's because I've no idea how a laboratory even works. I can fix trucks all right, but I'd probably break those fiddly little instruments Varenn uses."

The others laugh, and Matia looks pleased as Fiore and Catarina start talking about the quirks of scientific research in present-day Teran.

6-gala *choice 1190#2 (line 1204)

- "I'd love to hear more about fixing trucks, if I'm honest." [+Craft]
- ★ "You're an outdoors expert, though. That's not nothing—tell us about that." [+Survival]
- "Fiore, can you tell me about how the Elites deal with research and such?" [+Politics]

Matia straightens her shoulders. "Well," she says, and you spend much of the rest of the journey chatting about survival techniques in remote areas, especially the mountains. Little of it is news to you, but it's pleasant to have it all laid out, and Matia has a few tricks up her sleeve that come from long experience.

Though Catarina isn't always one for the outdoors, you see her listening closely. For their part, Fiore chips in a few times with comments about finding food and cultivating fields in barren places.

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It's late morning when you draw into Elene's Prospect. Matia jumps down from the truck and waves to you. "You lot come and let me know when you need to get back," she says. "I've got some stuff to pick up from the store."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Frasada," Fiore says, and Matia pats their arm.

"Ms. Frasada's my mom," she says. "Matia's fine. Good luck today."

6-gala *choice 1249#2 (line 1251)

- "Thanks for the lift."
- ★ "I look forward to seeing you later."
- "See you in a bit."
- I wait for us to head off.

Matia meets your gaze with her dark eyes, and smiles. "You take care," she says, voice a little softer, and she turns to head across the market square, disappearing down the street.

Fiore stretches out their arms and exhales sharply. "All right," they say. "Let's go."

