

[b]Chapter 4: The Big City[/b]

With clouds of darkened smoke billowing past the window of your compartment, the train has reached the outskirts of New Belmir City. The trees are green and full now, and the jacarandas lining the railway line are heavy with purple blossoms: the weather teeters on the brink of summer, about to tip over.

It's late afternoon, and your journey with Captain Korzha has taken up most of the day. Your head aches despite the snacks and water you've had; a light throbbing pain occasionally pinches across your shoulders thanks to fitting your frame against the train seat.

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You've been called away from Oзера for one of the biggest occasions of the year: the President's Spring Honors Ceremony. Not that you've ever been in a position to attend. But you had the invitation a few weeks ago from Field Marshal Alva, announcing that she's to be Honored and demanding that you and Korzha come to celebrate; Fiore agreed for the other teachers to supervise Catarina while you're away.

Not that Korzha seems in a celebratory mood. Dressed in olive-colored corduroy pants, a buttoned-up ivory shirt, and a tie, he could be a professor on his way to a conference. He has spent most of this journey quietly marking students' work.

4-city *choice 53#3 (line 74)

- I ask about Catarina's grades, hoping for her sake that she's doing well. [+Humane]
- I openly admire his work ethic. [+Dutiful]
- ★ I tell him I'm surprised anyone would work on vacation. [+Rebellious]
- I grab a sheaf of papers and help him mark. [+Decisive]
- I don't want to disrupt him. I say nothing. [+Cautious]

"Why do the work while you're away?" you say. "What if you lost the papers, or weren't able to concentrate?"

Korzha's fountain pen pauses in its smooth passage across the page, and he glances up.

"It's not a vacation," he says. "I consider this a work trip. The Honors Ceremony isn't a party."

Further into the suburbs of New Belmir City, Korzha lays down his pen and rolls his neck slowly one way, then the other.

"You've known Field Marshal Alva a while?" he says.

You have. Pretty much since you graduated from Teranese Service, or a little before: there was a session where she came and surveyed your cohort. You must have impressed her, because when you moved into medicine, she kept an eye on you, visiting every so often and speaking with your superiors. Certainly she's been a fixture in your life for over a decade now.

Why exactly she picked you out—well, she's said you continued to impress her as you specialized. Maybe that's why she spoke for you after your injury, and why she's invited you to this celebration.

4-city *choice 105#2 (line 110)

- "I owe her a lot."
- ★ "She's smart and gets the job done."
- "I respect her, obviously. But I wouldn't say we're friends."
- "She's a good mentor, and I trust her."
- "I feel rather like she treats me like a pet or an experiment."
- "She interferes with me too much. I want to be more independent."

Korzha gives you a long look with his level gray gaze. "Yes," he says. "She took over as my overarching commander when I moved to Ozero. That's eight years ago or so. She's always been deeply committed. It's not surprising that she's being Honored."

The train draws into the station beneath vast leaded glass buttresses and slows to a halt, settling with a hiss of steam. Korzha signals a porter for your cases and you disembark together. The crowd swallows you up: commuters heading home, visitors, tourists, all busy and few looking where they're going.

4-city *choice 133#4 (line 137)

- I feel energized again.
- It's a little overwhelming.
- I can't stand it here.
- ★ Being in Ozero these last months, I'd forgotten how the city felt.

You spot Field Marshal Alva at the same moment that Korzha does: your height makes it easy to see over the crowd. Hastening down the platform, she waves as you approach.

She's not wearing a uniform today: instead, she's in a moss green skirt-suit and white shirt, with pearl teardrop earrings and a matching necklace. Her bobbed, gray-blond hair is sleek and neat. You don't know her exact age, but she's somewhere in her sixties, and as sharp as when you first met her. If it weren't for the studs on her lapel marking her rank, she could be a businessperson on her way to a meeting. She uses a wooden cane; it's shiny and elegant, and the shade of green precisely matches her suit.

"Good journey?" she says, along with vigorous handshakes and back-pats; then, before you can say anything, "Never mind that. Tedious small-talk. Lovely to see you both!"

4-city *choice 147#4 (line 161)

- I greet her politely, without much emotion. [+Objective]
- I greet her enthusiastically. [+Decisive]
- I ask why she invited us. There's no reason to. [+Callous]
- ★ I greet her formally, with respect to her rank. [+Dutiful]

You nod. "Field Marshal Alva. Thank you for the invitation."

"So formal," Alva says. "You and Korzha here are peas in a pod. All right! Let's get dinner and we can catch up. I know a wonderful Zaledoan place, you'll love it."

As the porters bring your cases, she leads you from the station into the bustling evening street. Out here everything smells of petroleum from the cars and dung from the horse-drawn carriages. The elegant arches of the station building sit behind you while Alva's beautiful carriage awaits you, pulled by four matching horses of pale gray.

"Hop in," she says cheerfully.

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Inside the carriage, the velvet seats are plush and padded; the porters have loaded your cases onto the roof, so there's plenty of room. Alva sits back with a pleased sigh. She knocks on the roof with the cane, then balances it between her knees as the carriage starts to move.

The sunshine is slowly fading, but the sky is still light blue and streaked with pale clouds. Around New Belmir it's cooler than in Elene's Prospect, but the sunlight on bricks and concrete heats everything up so it ends up warmer than the surrounding countryside. The carriage passes deftly down wide streets flanked with tall, glittering office buildings and bars. Financiers and lawyers in suits stand on the sidewalk with their sleeves rolled up and ties loosened, enjoying drinks after their long days.

"It must have been the end of the school year that we last saw each other, Varenn," she says to Korzha. "What does Herlin think of our student program? The kids doing all right? Leaders in the making, and all that?"

4-city *choice 175#3 (line 193)

- "Catarina's doing very well in particular."
- "They're fine, I think."
- ★ "Isn't it a little early to be thinking about military recruitment?"
- "The teachers are very passionate about their work."

Alva spreads her hands. "It's never too early, really," she says. "If we can prepare these young people better for Teranese Service, that's all to the good. Then we don't end up with tricky situations where unfortunates find it hard to adjust."

The carriage comes to a smooth halt outside a gold-fronted restaurant whose sign reads The Lion of the South. The carriage comes to a smooth halt outside a gold-fronted restaurant whose sign reads The Lion of the South. When you emerge, you can't help but inhale the smell emanating from it: strong and spicy, with a delicate floral undertone.

Inside, it's tiny. The sort of exclusive place rich people love: it makes them feel more special. Much of the space is taken up with a public cooking area in the center beneath a skylight, the stoves alight with flame while chefs expertly work.

"The usual, please," Alva says to the maître d', who shows you to a secluded booth above which lush pink flowers hang from the ceiling. Then, as you consult the menu which does not even have prices, "I'll pay, obviously."

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Waiters ceremoniously bring you plate upon plate of bite-size dishes: battered asparagus, miniature tagines and spiced bean soup, crunchy fried potatoes with delicately aromatic salad leaves. Battered vegetables and kebabs are cooked in front of you on the public stove as flames shoot dramatically into the air.

Alva tucks in enthusiastically, taking morsels from each small plate to combine them on hers. Between the cooking-clatter and the talk from the neighboring guests, she has to lean over the table to speak. "You remember Field Marshal Mandriotti, don't you, Herlin? He'd like to have a chat tomorrow."

You do. Izan Mandriotti was part of your court martial hearings, though Korzha doesn't know that. He's around Alva's age: a boisterous, cheerful fellow right up until he was glaring down at you from his bench and saying you deserved further punishment.

4-city *choice 210#4 (line 217)

- "If he wants to see me, that's his prerogative." [+Dutiful]
- I can feel the fear rising in my chest. [+Emotional]
- "Why, does he want to boss me around some more?" [+Rebellious]
- ★ I want to cover all my bases. "Does he have anything in mind?" [+Cautious]

Alva reaches over a plate of salmon and cheese savory briouat, her hand hovering in deliberation for a moment. Then she alights upon a tiny bowl of snail soup and takes that instead.

"He just wanted to check how things are going," she says casually, "and he wanted a hand with some errands. I'll be busy going over Varenn's reports, so I figured you wouldn't mind if I lent you to him."

4-city *choice 222#3 (line 233)

- "I'm not here to help people for no reason." [+Callous]
- "You [i]lent[/i] me to someone without telling me?" [+Rebellious]
- ★ "Of course. Whatever he needs." [+Dutiful]
- I keep any emotion out of my face and nod politely. [+Objective]

You catch Korzha's faint smile. Alva's own smile is much broader.

"Good," she says.

She sips the soup with a blissful expression before moving onto one of the beignets.

"I actually also wanted to give you an excuse," she says, "because I happen to know Lani Capello from Capello Security has got wind that you're in the city. If you're busy with Mandriotti, you'll have an easy out. Not that I'd mind if you just told Capello to shove it. They're a massive pain in the ass."

4-city *choice 246#3 (line 254)

- "What do you know about Capello?"
- "Raffi Claudian works for them."
- ★ "Thank you for letting me know."
- "Why would they want to talk to me?"
- "I'll do whatever I want."
- "Maybe I'll meet with Capello to mess with them."

You've made your way through most of the savory plates now, and Alva calls a waiter to take away the remains. "Dessert plates, if you would, and more drinks," she says.

The waiter bows and deftly gathers the plates. Alva unfolds a napkin that was twisted into an elaborate flower shape, then wipes her fingers on it delicately.

"Capello's friends with the President's friends," she says, "you know how it goes. Their company's growing, and they've been taking over some government contracts for security detail. Which I wouldn't mind so much—business is business, and all that."

From her tone, she minds very much indeed.

"The worst of it," she says, "is that Capello's been making critical noises about the military in public, and they get away with it because they gave President Faraci their new puppy, or whatever."

"What sort of noises?" Korzha asks. He's been quieter than Alva for most of the meal.

Alva waves a dismissive hand. "That we don't support veterans enough. Or help recruits adapt enough to Teranese Service. As if they'd do any differently! They have Elites' money to play with, of course they can afford to coddle their people. I think if Capello had their way, they'd abolish the Service altogether."

4-city *choice 277#2 (line 281)

- "Giving support isn't the same as coddling."
- ★ "They sound hypocritical."
- "The Service is hard work when you're so young."
- "If they don't like how Teran works, they should go elsewhere."
- "And the President tolerates this?"

Alva grimaces. "They are," she says. "Without the Teranese Service to train people up, Capello would have no one to recruit for their company. Do they really think someone like Raffi Claudian would be suitable if they hadn't gone through the Service? Ridiculous."

The dessert plates arrive: honey-soaked baklava and other pastries, flavored with delicate pistachio and heavy rose. Alva goes for a cigar-shaped pastry dusted with powdered sugar.

"Say what you like about the Zaledoans," she says, "they know how to do dessert."

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Alva keeps you and Korzha talking about Ozero, Kass, and the students for the rest of the meal. The restaurant grows warmer and louder as the evening continues; when you head out, the open air is a relief. Alva hails a hansom cab for you and Korzha, pays the driver, and turns to you.

"I'm not going to order you to do anything," she says. "You're technically on leave. But helping out Field Marshal Mandriotti out would be a smart move. I'll see you in a couple of days for the ceremony!"

4-city *choice 300#3 (line 307)

- "I'm looking forward to it!"

- "Thank you for this evening."
- ★ "All right. See you then."
- "What are you going to do in the meantime?"

Alva pats you heavily on the back. "You have a good night, now," she says. "The ceremony will be fantastic."

You climb into the cab; the seats are far less plush than those in Alva's private carriage. Through the window, Alva waves as the horses begin trotting onward.

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Outside the Three Bells Hotel is a sign claiming to be the oldest hotel in New Belmir City. It does have a squat look about it compared to the taller and more modern town buildings around it, but its marble columns, gleaming white walls, and red roof speak of old-fashioned luxury. A bellhop dressed in a purple suit greets you in the mosaic-tiled lobby and takes your cases, leading you through a courtyard dotted with lush plants and past a tall, gentle fountain. The design of the building is such that you can barely hear the noise of the streets outside: it's more of a gentle hum.

Up a winding staircase you go—the building is too old for elevators, the bellhop explains—until you reach Korzha's room. He halts and turns to you. "Goodnight," he says.

4-city *choice 326#5 (line 360)

- I smile flirtatiously. "Tonight was lovely."
- I smile shyly. "Thank you for tonight."
- I'm starting to realize I want to get closer with him outside work.
- I wish him goodnight in a friendly way.
- ★ I say goodnight, entirely professionally.
- I briskly say goodnight.

"Goodnight," you say. "If I don't see you tomorrow, I will at the ceremony."

Korzha inclines his head, a hint of a smile around his eyes. "Tonight was pleasant," he says quietly. "Goodnight."

He heads into his room—you have the brief impression of white walls and shiny gold—and closes the door behind him. Your own room turns out to be huge: your boots squeak on the shiny, granite-tiled floor and the ceiling soars overhead, decorated with stylized turn-of-the-century floral patterns swirling gold vine-like tendrils. The white walls are dotted with sumptuous portraits of centuries-old New Belmir Elites and decorated members of the military.

It may not be the clean modern lines of Ozero, but you've never had the chance to sleep anywhere this grand.

4-city *choice 371#1 (line 372)

- ★ This is absolutely gorgeous.
- If this is what Field Marshal money gets you, I hope I get there one day.
- I don't know why Alva's doing this for me, and I don't like it.
- I appreciate Alva doing this for me.

It even smells beautiful. The balcony doors are open a crack, letting in the fragrance of hanging flowers from outside.

Even so, you're aching from the journey and the exertion of going to the restaurant. Between the noise and the booth seats, you have a pounding headache.

4-city *choice 390#2 (line 393)

- I don't bother with physio today. I just want to sleep.
- ★ I start physio, but I'm too tired to do the rest.
- I do some of the exercises, then head to bed.
- I do my exercises thoroughly, even though I'm tired.

You start stretching, but quickly realize that you're grimy and dusty from the journey, and your clothes smell of the restaurant. Heading for the bathroom, there's a shower that feels as though you're in a warm thunderstorm. The water pounds your skin: a bit of relief, enough to crawl into bed afterwards.

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When you wake, your eyes feel sandy and you're stiff and sore. Your head is throbbing with pain, and when you get out of bed, heat spikes down your neck and shoulder. Your position in the night must have been tense. You take a moment to breathe and gather yourself before gulping down a glass of cold water and a couple of aspirins and getting dressed.

It's been a while since you regularly dressed in civilian clothes: really, you haven't since the hospital. So you wear:

4-city *choice 431#2 (line 434)

- A loose shirt and wide-legged pants.
- ★ Heavy-duty denim jeans and a thick shirt.
- A lightweight suit.
- Linen overalls.
- A buttoned-up dress with a gently flared skirt.

- A neat pencil skirt, blouse, and cardigan.

There's no sign of Captain Korzha, so you head to breakfast, which is a buffet affair in a light, airy room that opens onto the garden. The fountain plays amid birdsong and the distant hum of traffic. When you're partway through, a waitress in a shirt and tie brings you a small selection of letters.

The first is a note from Korzha, saying he's gone out to meet with Alva. [i]We're to discuss the research program,[/i] he writes. [i]I will be out until late. Please feel free to take the time as you like.[/i]

4-city *choice 447#3 (line 457)

- I wish I were more involved with this.
- Good. They'll keep each other occupied.
- ★ I hoped to get some time with Korzha.
- I'd have liked to get some time with Alva.

Maybe you can catch up with him later, or tomorrow at the ceremony. But the second note chases that thought away.

It's typewritten and marked with a seal from Field Marshal Mandriotti's office. He writes that Alva kindly offered him your service, since you're in the city, and asks if you'd be so good as to join him for the day at the Aladea Club, [i]that lovely little lunch place on Snowfield Avenue.[/i]

The third is from Lani Capello: handwritten this time, in a delicate flowing hand. They write that they'd love to meet with you for lunch at the Crinn's Delight restaurant, a riverboat restaurant in a north-eastern district of the city.

Across some sections of New Belmir, tramlines have been built. But even in a tramcar, you would never be able to make it to both Mandriotti and Capello, and you're not sure Mandriotti would let you leave to see Capello in any case.

You write a couple of notes back:

4-city *choice 470#3 (line 475)

- I'll meet with Mandriotti. I want to find out more about military justice.
- I'll meet with Mandriotti. Anything to improve my reputation in the military.
- ★ I'm going to Capello. I'm curious about what they want with me.
- I'm going to Capello. I don't want Mandriotti to push me around.

Field Marshal Alva will not be pleased, and neither will Field Marshal Mandriotti; still, it wasn't technically an order, and you're technically on leave. Alva will likely be distracted enough with the ceremony that she won't be too irritated.

Although the tramcar ride to Crinn's Delight has a beautiful view of willow trees and boats along the river, it takes a couple of hours. By the time you reach the restaurant you're hungry, and your head is aching again.

Still, the gentle lighting and airy pastel colors of the riverboat restaurant help you feel less frazzled after the noise and bustle of the tramcar. A waiter dressed in a neat butter-yellow suit draws you to a discreet table beside an open window whose box is filled with coastal wildflowers.

Lani Capello arrives shortly after you do. They look to be in their fifties: a deeply tanned, slim-shouldered person with smooth black hair tied back in a queue. They're wearing a simple but expensive-looking boxy jacket and loose, elegant pants. Down their neck is the dent of a pale, jagged scar that must go beneath their shirt; a life-threatening injury, you're sure.

"Lieutenant Nadol, thank you for coming," they say, drawing out the chair without the waiter's assistance. Their voice is gentle; their northern accent has a soft burr.

4-city *choice 825#3 (line 830)

- "Why did you invite me here?"
- "Thank you for the invitation."
- ★ "It was a long trip. I hope it's worth it."
- "I hope you're well."

Capello's eyes crinkle with their smile as they motion the waiter to bring drinks. "It's not a coincidence," they say. "I was curious to hear you were coming to the Honors ceremony. I wanted to see you for myself."

When the waiter pours a glass of water for them, Capello nods graciously. Their hand trembles a little when they lift the glass to their lips.

"I'd surely love to hear what you get up to at Ozero School," they say. "Such an interesting place. My employee Mx. Claudian says it's wonderful. It must be a pleasant change from the medical teams."

4-city *choice 838#3 (line 861)

- I discuss my athletic ability. [Tests Athletics]
- I mention my aptitude for the outdoors. [Tests Survival]
- ★ I mention the political nuances of Ozero. [Tests Politics]
- I say that I'm also there to help in the case of accidents. [Tests Medicine]
- I tell them I'm impressed with their information gathering. [Tests Sneaking]

"It's an interesting place," you say. "Esteemed Kass is very keen for the children of Elites to learn practical skills as well as academic ones. It means they'll bring those skills into adult life."

Capello nods intently, their gaze tracking over you. Their brown eyes are serious, but you catch the warmth of approval in them.

When the plates arrive, they're beautifully-presented and delicate sea vegetables, with Westerlind-style potato rosti and a variety of sauces from salty to sweet. The chefs have clearly worked hard to make the entire affair look effortless.

"I have to admit I'm curious," Capello says, carefully spearing a piece of Dahaikan lobster, "about the military being at the school. There's you, of course. And I heard Field Marshal Alva's doing research on the students. Why would Esteemed Kass agree to such a thing?"

4-city *choice 906#3 (line 923)

- "Alva's business isn't mine. I'm there to make things better for me." [Tests Callous]
- "I've wondered the same thing. I hope it's all right." [Tests Cautious]
- ★ "I don't care. My priority is making sure my charge is safe." [Tests Humane]
- "It's common sense that Esteemed Kass would coordinate with the military." [Tests Objective]

Capello's smile is warm. "Oh, I can see that," they say. "I'll stop beating around the bush. I do think there are alternatives to the military, like Capello Security. Yes, your medical teams help people. But so much of what it does is a monopoly, and that's such a shame."

They lean forward, voice lowered but impassioned.

"I obviously don't know all the details about your situation," they say. "But Capello offers tenure to those who earn it, on better terms than the state military. People have to race to keep up and renew their contracts, while the superiors chew people up and spit them out when they're done with them."

They lower their gaze with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Crinn. I'm sorry. I swore I wouldn't get overexcited about this," they say. "I just hate to see people mistreated."

4-city *choice 957#5 (line 1011)

- I boldly ask about Capello's connection to the President. [Tests Decisive]
- I tell them I'm loyal to my superiors and colleagues. [Tests Dutiful]
- I say I don't trust most people in authority. [Tests Rebellious]
- I tell them I'm uncomfortable with them buttering me up. [Tests Emotional]

- ★ I say I'm out for myself, not for the military or anyone else. [Tests Callous]

"For me personally, I can't bring myself to have much loyalty to them at this point. Not after how they treated me."

Capello gives you a searching look. "Well," they say. "That's good to know."

They sip their water, then wipe their mouth delicately with a napkin and change the subject smoothly to less weighty matters: the view of the river, the growing traffic on the avenues, the food here. They pay for the meal without ceremony, and when it's time to go they shake your hand.

"I may see you soon," they say. "I'll be visiting Ozero in a bit—hence my curiosity about the place. I appreciate you taking the time to come here."

4-city *choice 1025#2 (line 1028)

- I want to leave a good impression. "It was very nice."
- ★ I wonder if Capello might be useful in the long run. "Thank you for this."
- I don't care for Capello. "I don't think we have much to say to each other."
- It's risky to be seen to be friendly with them. "I didn't have a very good time."

Capello shakes your hand again, patting it with their other hand. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

4-city *choice 3570#4 (line 3611)

- I boldly say I'd like to meet again. I don't care what anyone thinks. [Tests Decisive, ++Rebellious]
- I nod calmly. I hope to use this somehow down the line. [Tests Objective, ++Callous]
- I say goodbye politely. I want to show that I'm thoughtful. [Tests Humane, ++Cautious]
- ★ With feeling, I say it was good to meet. [Tests Emotional, ++Decisive]

"I really did enjoy coming over here," you say. "The company was good and the food was delicious. When you come to Ozero, maybe I can show you around."

Capello's smile broadens. "I look forward to it," they say.

They release your hand, toss a few more banknotes onto the table as a tip, and head back onto dry land to a waiting car. They wave briefly from the passenger seat before being whisked away.

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The tram along the river is full of late-afternoon commuters returning from work. The crush is overwhelmingly tight. Dragging yourself back to the Three Bells Hotel, the cooler air is delicious. The receptionist in the tiled lobby tells you that Captain Korzha is still out, so you have a quiet dinner before turning in for bed.

The sheets are light and fresh; the mattress is exactly the right balance of soft and firm. After your tiring day, it's easy to fall asleep.

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The following morning, you're halfway through your solitary breakfast when another receptionist sidles up to you with a scribbled-down note on hotel-headed paper.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," she says diffidently. "A telephone call for you from Esteemed Kass Quintal. She says it's urgent. If you'd be so kind as to step this way?"