

[b]Chapter 5: Back Home[/b]

The mid-afternoon light is golden over Ozero School. Korzha was as quiet on the train journey as she was on the way out, but she wore a deeper frown as she did her marking. As you emerge from your hired car and servants take your bags, Korzha disappears off to the greenhouses without a word.

Doria meets you at the entrance. "Enjoyed New Belmir?" she says, beaming. She doesn't let you answer, but just rushes on: "You're just in time. Would you oversee Catarina moving rooms? You heard about the ghost thing, didn't you?"

5-return *choice 24#5 (line 37)

- I nod and say nothing.
- "Yes, it was ridiculous."
- "Where is she moving to?"
- "But I've only just arrived."
- ★ "You should have kept a closer eye on them."

Doria sighs. "It was unexpected," she admits. "It's not something we usually need to worry about. I'm sure they've learned their lessons."

She leads you into the students' block, an expansive, L-shaped white building on the opposite side of the courtyard to yours. Warm sunshine streams through the tall windows as you walk along the corridors. Paintings of landscapes and abstract swirls of color hang neatly along the white walls. The fluffy tabby cat, Amato, saunters down the corridor to wind around Doria's legs, then yours, before wandering away. It's peaceful enough until you move closer to Catarina and Simone's room, where voices are raised. You hear the fight before you see it.

Simone: "This was mine! I ordered it from the catalog!"

Catarina: "But you said I could have it!"

Simone: "That was before!"

They're facing each other with furious expressions. Though Catarina's far taller than Simone, Simone is clearly not intimidated. She's cradling a succulent plant protectively to her chest like a newborn kitten.

"Well, I'll leave you to it!" Doria says cheerfully, and makes her escape.

"Hello Carosi," says Catarina, not looking away from Simone and the plant.

5-return *choice 53#3 (line 63)

- "What exactly is going on here?"
- "Not more of this nonsense."
- ★ "Hello to you too."
- "Why are you arguing over a plant?"
- I give them a long look.

"Tell Simone to give the money plant back," Catarina says, reaching for the plant.

Simone snatches it away. "And now I want it back because it was mine in the first place," she says.

"That's not how gifts work!" Catarina says hotly.

5-return *choice 74#2 (line 85)

- "Simone can keep the plant. Catarina, let's keep moving your things."
- ★ "It was a gift. Give Catarina the plant, Simone."
- "You could share the plant on different days."
- I ignore the entire thing and start moving Catarina's bags.

Simone stares at you dumbfounded, her mouth open. Catarina neatly plucks the money plant from her hands and turns on her heel, dragging one of her bags down the corridor to her new room. You bring up the rear with the suitcase.

The new room looks identical to her old one, except the mirrored dressing table at the window is littered with nail polish, hairbrushes, and hairpins. Pietro is sitting on one of the beds looking glum while Andie carries their bag solemnly out.

"Sorry about everything," they whisper to Catarina, who nods impatiently.

Pietro groans and lies back on his bed, hands behind his head. "Make sure you keep your things on your side of the room," he says. "Or I'll kick you out and so you have to go in Viola's room instead. There's a reason why she's in her own place."

Catarina shudders. "I can't believe all this," she says, dumping her bag on the bed. "It's not Andie's fault. Now they're stuck with Simone lording it over them."

5-return *choice 111#3 (line 167)

- I tell her it makes sense that she's angry.
- I tell her she has little right to be angry.
- ★ I suggest we get on with settling Catarina into the new room.

"Kass punished you because those are the rules," you say. "It's happened, and none of us can change it. Can you start putting away your clothes?"

Catarina scowls at you. "Fine," she says, and does so, stamping as she does. "I just don't see why we had to get locked down. We said we were sorry."

5-return *choice 172#4 (line 187)

- "Why are you interested in ghosts, anyway?"
- "Maybe you can both apologize to each other."
- "I thought you were meant to be friends."
- ★ "You should have asked Kass for permission. She'd probably have said yes."
- I shrug. It really isn't my business.

Having pulled out a set of textbooks from her bag, Catarina slams them down on her desk. Pietro yelps, and Catarina rolls her eyes. "Well, now that sounds like a good idea, doesn't it?" she says, and it's more like a snarl. "But why would we think of that in the first place?"

She continues unpacking. Pietro does not get up to help; he simply watches with vague, indolent curiosity.

"The other thing," Catarina says, "is our trip to Cattlehead to the book signing. We're meant to go the day after tomorrow..."

The prospect of driving several hours with Simone, even to see a political science author, makes her look immensely glum.

5-return *choice 199#4 (line 203)

- "I need a rest. We can talk about that another day."
- "Surely the book signing is more important than the argument."
- "I cannot contemplate the thought of another trip right now."
- ★ "We'll figure out what to do. Maybe it can be canceled."

Catarina sighs and keeps hanging up her belongings. The move does not require your oversight now that Catarina and Simone are separated, so you settle into the cool quiet of your own room for some brief peace before dinner. You freshen up and change clothes, and by the time the dinner bell rings you're feeling closer to human after your long journey despite the occasional twinges of pain above your eye.

You make your way to the breakfast hall, where the sky is beginning to fade to an evening pink-gray. Delicate pale clouds are streaked across the sky. Citrus-scented lanterns have been lit at the outdoor tables to scare away biting insects, and the students have settled happily—or in Catarina and Simone's cases, pointedly separately—at their tables.

Matia rises from the staff table to greet you. "Carosi!" she says, giving you a quick hug. She feels solid and heavy against you: wonderfully satisfying.

5-return *choice 4713#3 (line 4736)

- I kiss her cheek.
- I return the hug.
- ★ I pat her on the back.
- I draw back.

Matia does the same back to you: it's a solid thump, though entirely affectionate. When you draw back, she's smiling.

"So good to see you again," she says. "It feels like it's been ages—how was New Belmir?"

5-return *choice 4767#2 (line 4771)

- "Horrible, mostly."
- ★ "It was pretty fun."
- "I wouldn't want to do it every day, but it was interesting."
- "Some of it was good. Other parts not."

Matia pats your arm. "That's good to hear," she says. "The party must have been great. I've not been to one of them myself."

5-return *choice 4779#2 (line 4785)

- "The Parliamentary Officers were gambling over what to vote for."
- ★ "There are a lot of Westerlind diplomats visiting."
- "Did you hear about what happened with Korzha?"
- "Fiore was a little stressed by everything."

Matia nods. "Yeah? Wonder what they're up to. I guess they're around in the capital a fair bit."

She leads you over to the table to settle down and eat.

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Dinner is a deliciously flavorful rice salad and crispy ham with spiced tomato sauce, along with beans and stuffed peppers. Korzha does not stay to eat hers, and instead makes a quiet apology to Kass before taking her plate away.

Raffi's busy sitting at Simone's table, where Amato has taken a chair too—it seems Simone has demanded extra support, though who knows if she really needs it—but Matia and Savarel come to sit with you and the other teachers. Matia sits opposite you with a warm smile, nudging your foot with hers under the table.

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"The meeting's next week, isn't it?" says Henriette Weder, leaning forward on her elbows.

Savarel looks a little jittery as she digs into her rice. "Yes. It should be in the evening. You're coming?"

"Just about everyone's coming," Matia says, her drawl coming out even more strongly than usual with her dry tone. "Can't have a discussion about dishonorably-discharged bandits without everyone weighing in."

Savarel sighs. "It would maybe be better if it could be settled quietly," she says.

Matia gives her a sympathetic grimace, and Savarel turns to you.

"You won't have heard about it yet," she says. "There's to be a meeting to formally decide whether to help Denario Vecoli and his friends. So I'm going to speak."

Savarel has done her research. Denario didn't introduce himself during the campsite incident.

"I'm sure it'll sort itself out in the end," Diego says. "As long as they don't come over here and bother us."

"Specialist Carosi," says Henriette. She has a sharp way of scrutinizing those whom she's curious about, and now she does look very curious about you. "I heard you used to know the leader, didn't you?"

Diego and Tibor look up and exchange glances. Still, Savarel doesn't look surprised, and of course Matia knows.

5-return *choice 303#1 (line 304)

- ★ I say how hard it is not to consider him a friend anymore. [Tests Emotional]
- I tell her I wish I could do something to help him. [Tests Humane]
- I say I'd rather not talk about it while we don't know all the facts. [Tests Cautious]
- I ask them all directly not to spread gossip about me. [Tests Decisive]

"It's difficult," you say, and as you speak you realize that it's hard to express anything other than that. Henriette gives you an expectant look and starts to say something, but Diego hushes her.

Matia gives you a steady, sympathetic look. "Course it is."

With a cough Tibor the Fiber Arts teacher changes the subject, asking Henriette and Diego about their lesson plans for next month. The conversation moves on, though with rather a stilted tone.

Dinner continues, and afterwards the students and staff alike disperse. Matia and Savarel head towards the entrance to start the drive to Elene's Prospect; you are going in the same direction back to your room, and while Savarel steps up into the truck, Matia gives you a warm look.

"I'll be thinking of you," she says. "See you next week. The town meeting will be...something."

Matia starts the truck with a rumble and reverses deftly out of the drive. As she turns, she lifts a hand to wave; Savarel nods to you.

5-return *choice 447#1 (line 448)

- ★ I turn to go back indoors.
- I wave to them.
- I nod.
- I watch the truck as it leaves.

The truck eases away down the road, the sound of the engine fading into the distance to be replaced by the sheep and cicadas. You head into the warmly-lit hall and back to your room. Home, or something like it, at last. New Belmir City and the train journey feel worlds away.

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During the next afternoon's Biology class, Korzha is as poised as ever despite her behavior at the gala and dinner yesterday. There's no sign of distress, and she is as brisk and unemotional with the students as ever.

Catarina and Simone are another story. Though Catarina's moved tables to sit with Pietro and Elian, they still glare and snap at each other across the laboratory and when Korzha calls upon Simone to answer a question about plant life cycles, Catarina glares at Simone with such venom that Simone's put off and stammers to a halt.

"I think what Simone's thinking is pistil," Catarina calls out.

Korzha gives her a flat look. "Thank you, Catarina," she says in an entirely unthankful tone.

5-return *choice 468#4 (line 522)

- I remind Catarina quietly to focus on her work. That's what she's here for. [Tests Dutiful, +Cautious]
- I encourage Catarina to do whatever she needs to stand up for herself against Simone. [Tests Callous, +Decisive]
- I advise her to strike another time when fewer people are around. [Tests Cautious, +Callous]
- ★ I tell her not to let her worst emotions drag her down. [Tests Objective, +Humane]

You lower your voice while Korzha continues talking. "Let go of this for now," you whisper. "You're letting Simone win by focusing on her and getting tangled up in those feelings. She's taking up too much space in your mind."

Catarina gives you a sidelong look, but then a smile flickers over her mouth. She nods and bends her head to write neatly in her notebook.

As the lesson continues, the students split into pairs and groups to take cross-sections of leaves and observe them under the microscope. While Catarina's gathering equipment, Simone happens to spill purified water on her shirt sleeve. Catarina gasps in outrage, but Pietro hurries her back to the table; Raffi whispers heatedly to Simone. "Stop that, Simone. Please, it could be dangerous."

"It's just a bit of water," Simone says sulkily, and huffs off to perch on her lab stool while Viola starts cutting leaves with a scalpel at top speed.

Raffi gives you a long-suffering look. "They've been like this ever since it happened," she murmurs. "I've never seen anything like it. We're meant to go out to Cattlehead on that day trip tomorrow—can you imagine?"

5-return *choice 544#3 (line 569)

- I tell her to keep Simone under control. [Tests Decisive]
- I remind her that I want the best for Catarina. [Tests Humane]
- ★ I say this needs to be calmed down: everyone's getting too emotional over it. [Tests Objective]
- I tell her this really isn't our job. [Tests Rebellious]

"They're here to learn, not to fight with each other," you say. "Why can't they leave this argument behind? If it carries on like this, someone's going to get hurt."

Raffi nods miserably. "I know. I do get it," she says. "I guess if the teachers can't get them to calm down, maybe I can."

She starts to say something else just as Korzha raises a hand for silence.

"Let's talk about Cattlehead later," Raffi whispers, and strides across the laboratory to keep a closer eye on Simone once again.

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Class carries on. Catarina and Simone settle a little better as it goes on, but by the end Korzha's voice is growing a little strained and there's tension around her eyes. You recognize the expression from the shape your own brow makes when your headache's troubling you. As the students leave, she asks you to stay a moment, beckoning you over to where she's leaning against the edge of her desk.

"I'm afraid I'm not well," she says. "Likely I picked up something on the train."

5-return *choice 607#4 (line 620)

- "Can I get you anything?"
- "I'm sorry to hear that."
- "I know what you mean. I feel rough after the journey, too."
- ★ I nod. I doubt she'd want me to fuss.

Korzha does not speak. Instead, she pause a moment to consider. She touches her temple briefly, rubbing lightly.

"Your assistance would be appreciated tomorrow," she says, "dealing with some added security around the greenhouses. In the light of the bandits and the students sneaking out. I don't want accidents."

As a captain, Korzha could technically order you to do this. But she isn't. Instead, she just looks tightly-wound. Perhaps this would genuinely help—though you are meant to be going on the trip to the book signing with Raffi and the girls. It will absolutely clash.

5-return *choice 631#1 (line 632)

- ★ "Wouldn't Matia normally do that?"
- "That's not really my job."
- "Is that such a risk?"
- "What sort of thing would it involve?"
- "Is it urgent? Could it wait?"
- "Of course. Whatever you need."

"Perhaps," Korzha says. "But she is away, and it's particularly relevant for my personal glasshouse. Ms. Frasada doesn't have clearance to poke around there."

5-return *choice 653#4 (line 666)

- "I'd be happy to help."

- "I don't know if I can spare the time."
- "I don't think so."
- ★ "I should talk to Raffi first. We're meant to be going to Cattlehead tomorrow."

Korzha nods. Her cool tone sounds a little more effortful than usual when she speaks. "Of course. If that needs to happen, it needs to happen."

She turns and sits at the desk, straight-backed, and starts leafing through the students' exercise books. You're dismissed.