CEO Reincarnation

Chapter 61: Field Trip 1

Time passed.

Katarina got no closer to finishing the container. And while "surrender" was not a word in Katarina's vocabulary, the phrase "tactical retreat" was.

So, she adjusted her mindset.

[You know what? Maybe this field trip will be good for me. Yeah, a little bit of time to calm down, think about something else, and learn about the world. I could make use of this.]

That was what went through her head as she gathered around with the other students, all looking like excited children as they stood in front of the Compasso.

"Pirra, you brought how many books?"

"Six."

"Pirra..."

"What?"

"It's a two-week trip."

"Yes."

"You're going to be on a carriage. Then you're going to be at a port. Then you're going to be on a ship. When are you going to find the time to read six books?"

"A-At night."

"At night you're going to be exhausted from observing 'real merchants in active trade operations.' Pelegatta's words."

Pirra adjusted the strap of her satchel and looked at her shoes.

"... I might have time."

Katarina sighed and dropped it. She was not going to win this argument, and Pirra clutching six books to her chest like they were small, brave companions was, frankly, charming.

The two of them stood at the edge of the small crowd of students gathered in front of Compasso's main gate.

Three carriages were lined up along the avenue, each one polished to a shine and pulled by enchanted beasts that Katarina was pretty sure had been groomed for the occasion. The morning was bright. The air had that early-spring crispness that made even the broody students look like they were having a decent time.

The faculty was clustered near the front carriage, murmuring among themselves and pretending not to triple-check a checklist.

"Anyway, you ready for two weeks of carriage food?" Katarina asked with a smirk. "Huh? Huh?" She nudged Pirra with her elbow.

"Nope. Are you?"

"I packed some jerky."

"... How much jerky?"

"Enough for, maybe, one valdari and one short, studious elf."

A weight suddenly landed on Katarina's left arm.

"Good morning."

Tavia had hooked her arm through Katarina's elbow and was now leaning her cheek against Katarina's shoulder with her eyes closed.

"Tavia."

"Mm."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to nap."

"Standing up?"

"Talented, aren't I?"

Katarina chuckled.

"Tavia, you can’t sleep on me. I have to walk."

"Then carry me."

"I’m not carrying you."

"Ludo would carry me."

"I’m sure Ludo would. Ludo is not currently here."

"Hi!"

Ludo was, in fact, currently there.

She slid in beside them with her hair freshly braided and a travel cloak that, against all reason, looked formal. Katarina did not know how a travel cloak could be formal. Ludo had managed it.

"You didn’t tell me you were coming over here," Ludo said, and pouted up at Katarina. "May I stand with you, Signorrra?"

"It’s a public space."

"That’s a yes." Ludo wedged herself in on Katarina’s other side, which left Katarina now flanked by a sleeping catgirl and an enthusiastically affectionate Pavona heir, with Pirra peering at the whole arrangement from a respectful distance.

[... How did this happen?]

The faculty cluster began to break up. Pelegatta peeled off from the group, walked to the front of the gathered students, and clapped her hands once. The students went quiet.

Behind her, two other professors took up positions on either side, and a third stood at the front carriage with a clipboard.

"Good morning."

A scattered chorus answered her.

"Before we begin, I want to be very clear about something."

The students straightened.

"This is not a field trip."

A small ripple. Tavia, against Katarina’s arm, made a small skeptical "hm."

"This is a research mission. You are first-year merchant students at the most prestigious mercantile academy on the continent, and you have been selected specifically because the faculty believes you can extract real, observable insights from active trade operations. You are not children. You are not tourists. You will be observing professionals at work, and you will be expected to behave as though you are professionals yourselves."

Pelegatta's eyes swept across them.

"Is that understood?"

A chorus of yes-Professoras.

"Good. Boarding will begin in five minutes. Please form lines according to your assigned carriages. Be efficient about it."

She turned to confer with the clipboard professor.

A beat passed.

Then Pelegatta turned back to the crowd.

"All right, come on."

The students cheered.

Tavia, fully awake now, punched the air. Pirra clutched her six books tighter and grinned. Ludo squealed. Katarina smiled at her shoes and shook her head.

Honestly, Katarina would be lying if she said she didn't feel a little bit giddy about this.

Comparing this to some of her previous trips, like when she went to handle that bit of business for Stellara Brevaine, most of her travels thus far, in this world, had been work-related. ALL of her travels back on Earth had been work-related.

In a sense this was too, but the energy was different.

The carriage was nicer on the inside than it had any right to be.

The exterior had read like a polished travel coach, which Katarina had expected, but the interior was a long, wide cabin with cushioned bench seats running along both walls, a low table between them, polished wood paneling, and tall windows that ran nearly floor to ceiling. The whole thing rolled forward smoothly on a set of enchanted wheels that didn't bounce or rattle or make any of the noises Katarina associated with carriages from her childhood. The Compasso did not skimp on student transportation, apparently.

It was, in a way, a school bus. Just one that had been raised by a luxury hotel.

Katarina took the window seat across from the door. Pirra sat next to her with her stack of books in her lap. Tavia and Ludo took the bench across from them, Tavia immediately stretching out across the cushion with her hands behind her head, Ludo arranging herself like she was posing for a painting.

The carriage rolled.

Pavona slid past the window with its polished avenues, white stone facades, and high archways. Then the avenues thinned, the city's outskirts came up, and the road opened into countryside.

Katarina watched.

The land was greener than she'd expected. Rolling hills, old stone walls dividing pastures, occasional clusters of olive trees that looked like they'd been there since before the Compasso existed. People worked the fields in the middle distance. Long-haired beasts grazed along the ridge lines. A river ran beside the road for about an hour and then peeled off into a ravine.

Two carriages rolled ahead of theirs, one behind, the rest of the cohort spread across them. The faculty were probably up at the front doing whatever it was faculty did on field trips, and Eva was probably somewhere in the middle, sitting very straight and writing very small in a notebook.

Katarina did not think about Eva. Much.

"We're going to pass close to it, you know."

Pirra was looking out the window with her chin in her hand.

"Close to what?"

"The border. The Baccara Corridor runs along the edge of the southern Valdari territory. There's two human nations on the other side. We'll be a couple of days' ride from both at the closest point."

Katarina turned to look at her.

"Is that a problem?"

"No. We'll be fine. I just think it's interesting."

"Pirra, you can't say something like that and then say 'I just think it's interesting.' Define 'fine.'"

Pirra adjusted her books. Her voice stayed level.

"There's... been tension along the border for a couple of years now. It hasn't gotten to formal hostilities or anything, but the two human nations have been building up their garrisons, and small things keep happening. Trade caravans get stopped and inspected on flimsy pretexts. There've been a few skirmishes between scouts. A couple of merchants have reported that their goods were 'misplaced' at customs and somehow never turned up again."

"And we're going there."

"We're going to a Valdari port. The corridor itself is safe. The faculty wouldn't take us if it wasn't. It's just... well, it's like..."

She thought for a moment.

"It's like walking down a road that runs near a feud between two sects. You're not in the feud. The feud isn't aimed at you. But the road still runs through the part of the world where it's happening, and sometimes you can hear it."

Katarina turned that over in her head.

[Two nations stacking troops along a Valdari border, low-level harassment of trade, no formal declaration. Sounds familiar. Patterns like this hold for a decade and then explode in a single quarter.]

She filed it. Not for now, but for later, for a quiet evening with a notebook and a cup of tea, when she could pull the thread and see what was on the other end.

For now, she leaned back in her seat and let the country roll past the window.

Across from her, Tavia stretched, yawned, and slid off her bench. She crossed the small gap between the seats, landed on Katarina's lap with her usual lack of warning, and curled up there like a much, much larger cat. Her head went on Katarina's thigh. Her tail draped over Katarina's calf. Her ears twitched once and settled.

"Tavia."

"Mm."

"I'm sitting."

"And I am napping. Both can be true."

Pirra glanced at the arrangement, decided it was beyond comment, and went back to her book.

Katarina sighed and let her hand drop into Tavia's hair. Tavia pressed her cheek harder against Katarina's thigh.

[... Fine.]

She lounged. Properly. With one arm along the back of the bench, her feet up on the low table because nobody was going to stop her, a catgirl in her lap, an elf next to her, the carriage rolling smooth and slow through Valdari countryside that smelled like grass and old stone.

[Maybe I have been working too hard.]

The hills rolled by. Tavia purred.

There was no rush.

Chapter 62: Field Trip 2

Two days into the trip, the carriages stopped at a roadside trading post.

It was the kind of place that existed because two roads met and someone had decided, "you know, it feels weird there not being anything here." So now there was a long, low timber building with hitching posts out front and a covered yard where wagons pulled in and out all day. The whole place smelled like grain dust, and Katarina breathed in the smell of infrastructure.

The faculty had arranged this.

Pelegatta lined the students up along one side of the covered yard and told them, flatly, that they were about to observe a real negotiation between a Valdari grain merchant and a human buyer, and that they were to stand very still, watch closely, and on no account interrupt or react.

High-stakes shit. This was a boxing match in the world of business, and while none of the other students looked like they gave a damn, Katarina felt like she was sitting ringside at a championship fight.

[Real negotiation. Let's see this.]

It turned out to be the worst negotiation Katarina had ever watched in either lifetime.

The deal was real. The audience was the problem. The Valdari merchant was a stout woman with a copper-skinned face and a clipboard, and the human buyer was a thin reed of a man drowning inside one of those layered central-kingdom traveling coats.

They sat across a wooden table from each other in the middle of the covered yard with thirty first-year students staring at them from twenty feet away, and you could see, in real time, both of their professional careers leaving their bodies.

The Valdari merchant kept clearing her throat. She would name a price, look up at the wall of staring students, lose her train of thought, and then start the sentence over with a slightly different number. The human buyer was no better. He was sweating through his collar. At one point he went to write something down, dropped his pen, picked it up, dropped it again, and then looked at the students like he wanted to apologize to them personally for wasting their time.

[They're going to give the entire deal away just to make this stop.]

The merchant offered a discount that Katarina was almost certain she had not intended to offer, and the buyer accepted it before she could correct herself. They shook hands. Money changed hands. Grain was loaded.

It took roughly fourteen minutes, and Katarina watched both of them lose money the entire time. It was like watching two surgeons operate on each other while a tour group took notes. Pelegatta thanked them warmly, the students applauded politely, and the merchant and buyer fled in opposite directions like the building was on fire.

[That was a war crime.]

"What did you think?" Pirra asked under her breath as they walked back to the carriage.

"I think we just watched two professionals get psychologically dismantled by being looked at."

Pirra snorted.

"Pelegatta's going to spend an hour tomorrow lecturing us on what they did wrong, and the actual answer is 'we put them on a stage.'"

The inn that night was a long, two-story stone building with a courtyard out front, a stable wing that smelled, and a dining hall that took up most of the ground floor.

Katarina spent the afternoon walking the place.

She told herself she was stretching her legs after the carriage. She was, in fact, redesigning the inn in her mind.

She couldn't help it. Her CEO brain treated every poorly designed building like a personal insult, and this inn was, frankly, mouthing off.

[The kitchen vents through the wall facing the courtyard, so everyone eating outside gets a face full of smoke. Move the vents up to the roof and put a chase along the south wall. That's a one-day job for one person.]

She walked past the front desk and frowned at it.

[Reception is in the worst spot in the building. You walk in, you're already past it, and now the desk clerk has to flag you down from behind. Move it ten feet forward and angle it toward the door. I could fix this with a hammer and an afternoon.]

She drifted out into the side courtyard.

[Two staircases, both interior. No external access to the second floor. If there's a kitchen fire, half this building dies. Add a stair on the east face. I am begging you.]

She rounded the corner of the side garden and stopped.

Eva was sitting on a stone bench under an arbor with her back to the path. She had one knee crossed over the other and a small jade communication stone in her palm. Her wings were folded tight against her back.

Katarina took one quiet step into the shadow of the wall.

[... What are we doing here, exactly?]

She knew exactly what she was doing. She was eavesdropping on her classmate, and she was not going to course-correct.

Eva sounded exhausted.

"... I know. I know, auntie. I'm not asking to come home, I'm just saying."

There was a pause.

"It's two more weeks. Then I'm back at Compasso, and it's another full year of this."

There was another pause.

"They're so loud. All of them. The girls in my dormitory, every conversation is at full volume, and the food is so heavily seasoned I can taste it three corridors away. I had a meal yesterday that was just oil and salt and a piece of fish in the middle for company."

[Brutal.]

Katarina pressed her shoulder to the wall and breathed slowly.

"... No, I know. I know they don’t mean anything by it. It’s just how they are. I just..."

Eva let out a long, weighted sigh, like she’d been holding it in for weeks.

"I can tolerate it. I can. But every morning I wake up and I count how many days are left, and I don’t think that’s a healthy way to live, auntie."

There was a longer pause. The jade clicked softly as Eva adjusted her grip.

"I will. I promise. I’ll be polite. I’ll do the work. I’ll come home in the summer break and you’ll get the version of me that hasn’t been ground down by..."

She trailed off and started a fresh sentence.

"... by people who don’t understand me."

Katarina took one step backward, then another, and slipped around the corner of the wall before Eva turned.

She walked back to the inn through the side courtyard and did not redesign anything on the way, which, for her, was practically a vow of silence.

[Huh.]

Dinner was a meal Eva would have hated on sight. Katarina, by contrast, was happy to be eating something with seasoning on it.

She was working through a plate of roasted root vegetables and some kind of sausage, with Pirra on her left and Tavia draped across the bench on her right pretending the wine wasn’t watered, when she noticed the conversation at the next table.

Two human merchants, weathered men in the layered coats of the central kingdoms, had a map open between them and were arguing loudly enough that Katarina could pick up every word from her bench. Her CEO brain perked up like a hunting dog.

"... I’m telling you, the Fauci’s been the standard route for fifteen years."

"But it hasn’t been, Bertrand. Not for the last six months, anyway. Half the caravans coming through Saritta are going south now. Half. Talk to anyone."

"Going south adds nine days."

"Yeah. Nine days, and you arrive."

Bertrand made a noise.

"You're being a coward."

"I'm being a man with a wife and two daughters who'd like to see me again. The Fauci has been a little too dangerous lately. Bandits, supposedly."

"Bandits in the Fauci. Be serious. The Fauci's been clean for a decade."

"Yes. For a decade. And now it isn't, and nobody seems to want to talk about why."

There was a long silence at the table.

"... How much did we lose on the southern route last year?"

"Less than we'd lose on a single Fauci ambush. We're not insured for that pass anymore, did you know that? The guild quietly stopped writing policies on it eight months ago. Eight months. Nobody put out a notice. You just go to renew and they tell you no."

"... You're serious."

"Yeah."

The two of them went quiet for a while after that, the map still spread between them. Katarina, meanwhile, was about to vibrate out of her seat. Free dataset, dropped into her lap, by two strangers who had no idea she was even listening.

[Two human nations stacking troops along a Valdari border. Trade caravans being stopped at customs. Fauci pass suddenly unsafe in a way it hasn't been in ten years. The merchant guild quietly pulling insurance on the route eight months ago without a public notice. "Bandits, supposedly. Or something pretending to be bandits."]

She took a sip of her watered wine.

[Pirra was right. You can hear it from the road. You can also hear it from across a dining hall while people you have never met argue with each other about a man named Marien.]

Pirra, sitting next to her, was on book number three of six and entirely missing the conversation. Tavia was eating an apple with her eyes closed and looked like she might be asleep.

Katarina set her cup down and stared at the candle in the middle of the table for a long moment, listening with one ear to the merchants, who had moved on to arguing about whose turn it was to pay for dinner.

Then she went back to her sausage.

There would be time, later, for the notebook and the tea.

Chapter 63: Field Trip 3

Sciolto was big.

Not Pavona-big, but big enough. Six trade roads met at Sciolto, which meant six trade roads' worth of wagons, hand-trucks, and stressed-looking foremen all trying to occupy the same square mile at the same time.

The faculty lodged the students in a rambling old inn on the edge of the merchant quarter, and Pelegatta gathered them in the courtyard after breakfast.

"Today's exercise." The students went still. "We have arranged for a number of local merchants to run mock negotiations with you. Each pair has been assigned a specific deal, a specific counterparty, and a specific scoring rubric. The merchants have been briefed and compensated. They will play their role honestly. They will not go easy on you."

There was a small groan from somewhere in the back. Pelegatta did not look in its direction.

"You will work in pairs. Pairs were assigned by faculty. They are not negotiable."

[Of course they aren't.]

"Montecardi. Caelestis. Daccia, the spice merchant on Vetrera Lane. Sell her a wholesale lot at a minimum of fifteen percent above market value."

[OF COURSE.]

Pelegatta read the rest of the list. Tavia got paired with a tall human girl, while Pirra got paired up with Ludo. Tavia waved at her cheerfully.

"You have until sundown. Go."

The students scattered.

"I'm taking the lead."

Eva said it without turning her head. They were three minutes into the walk through the merchant quarter, weaving past hand-trucks and crate stacks.

"You're not."

"I am. The rubric is fifteen above market and there's a textbook approach for clearing it. I'm not gambling on whatever angle you've cooked up."

"The textbook approach is comparables, Eva. You're going to walk in and quote indices at her. She's a regional spice merchant of thirty years. She has eaten that approach for breakfast."

"You don't know that."

"I do, actually. I have done this for a living."

"You're seventeen."

"Yes, well... I'm still a Signora."

"Look. I have an angle. I did a little bit of research on this place beforehand and merchants here usuaally hold inventory in a warehouse that costs them money every single day they don't move product. We don't argue the spice. We argue her carrying cost. We make her time the resource on the table."

Eva slowed half a step.

"That isn't in the rubric."

"The rubric is where we have to land. It doesn't tell us how to get there."

"The faculty assesses us on method as well as outcome. If we clear the floor with a non-standard approach, we get a low pass."

"Or we get a high score and a note in our file about creative methodology. Pelegatta told us on day one this academy trains merchants, not test-takers."

They arrived still arguing, or rather, Katarina was still arguing and Eva was walking ahead like she'd never met her.

Daccia's shop was a long, low building that smelled like every spice Katarina had ever heard of and four she hadn't. You could practically cure meat by standing in the doorway too long.

Daccia herself was a heavyset Valdari woman with deep red skin, her silver hair cropped short, sitting behind a wide counter with a slate in one hand and a wax tablet in the other, and her face suggested very strongly that she was here under duress.

When the two of them walked in, she did not look up.

"Compasso girls."

"Yes, Signora," Eva said.

Daccia named a number.

She just stated it, low enough that Katarina nearly laughed out loud.

["I'm uninterested and unimpressed. How can you fix both problems?" I can respect that.]

Eva's wings folded close.

"Signora Daccia, with respect, I'd like to revisit that figure. Comparable wholesale lots in the southern districts have been trading between four and six silver per measure over the past quarter, with the Marenetto index showing..."

"Wrong index," Daccia said.

She still hadn't looked up.

"... I'm sorry?"

"Marenetto's a coastal index. Sciolto's an inland market. Different demand profile, different transport costs, different season. You're quoting me numbers from a market I don't sell into."

Eva opened her mouth.

Daccia kept going.

"Second, your 'comparable lots.' What grade?"

"Mid-grade."

"Mine's not mid-grade. Mine's lower-mid at best, and we both know it, or you'd have led with grade and not price. Third, your timing. Past quarter. We're in the next quarter now. Prices have moved. Did you check?"

Eva had not checked.

She recovered, which was impressive, but the recovery took two full seconds, and two full seconds in a negotiation might as well be the off-season.

"Signora..."

"Walk me through it again."

Eva did not walk her through it again.

"Signora Daccia, may I?"

Daccia, finally, looked up. She had pale yellow eyes, and she gave Katarina a long, slow blink. Kat had seen that blink twice before in her old life, both times across a boardroom table from someone about thirty seconds away from telling her to leave the building.

"Go on."

"I'd like to set the lot aside for a moment. May I ask how long you've been holding your current inventory?"

"Six weeks."

"And the warehouse on the east side of Vetrera, that's yours, isn't it? The one with the secondary loading bay."

"... Yes."

"You're paying about two silver a week on that space, give or take. Plus the spoilage protection arrays, plus the formation maintenance on the climate locks. Call it three silver a week, fully loaded. So a lot you're holding for six weeks has cost you eighteen silver in pure carrying before you've moved a single measure."

Daccia tilted her head.

"My warehouse cost is my problem. It's not your discount."

"It isn't, you're right. Until the seasonal turn."

"Go on."

"You've got the seasonal turn coming up. Saffron and the warm-spice mixes are going to spike in the next six weeks because the southern festivals start in late summer, which means warehouse space is going to be the most expensive resource you own, not the spice itself. Every measure of last quarter's inventory you're sitting on is a measure of next quarter's profit you're not making. The longer you hold, the worse it gets."

Daccia put the slate and the tablet down on the counter, slowly. She was treating Katarina as a peer now. Eva had never once been treated as a peer in her life.

"Keep going."

"So when you opened with that price, Signora, I think what you were really telling us is that you don't want to move this lot at all. Which is reasonable. It's lower-mid grade, and you'd rather not take the markdown. But every week you sit on it, you're taking a markdown anyway. You're just not calling it one."

Daccia’s eyes had narrowed by about half.

"Hm."

"We’re prepared to take the lot off your hands today. At a price that lets you free that warehouse space and get ahead of the seasonal turn. Which I’d argue is worth more to you than the difference between mid and lower-mid grade."

There was a long silence.

Daccia named a new number.

It was higher than Katarina had hoped.

She countered.

Daccia countered the counter.

Katarina did not look at Eva. She did not need to. She could feel Eva watching, and she could feel the moment, three exchanges in, when Eva stopped being mad and started taking actual notes. Her pen scratched quickly and steadily on her tablet.

They closed at seventeen percent above market, two full points above the floor.

Katarina kept her face neutral, which took every ounce of professional muscle she had in either lifetime.

Daccia wrote the score on her slate and turned it around.

"You’re the first pair to clear the rubric all morning. Out."

She waved them out with the back of her hand.

Outside, Katarina was, by any reasonable measure, unbearable.

"You’re not even going to acknowledge that I just won that for us?"

Eva did not turn around. She did not slow down. She did not say one word the entire walk back to the inn, and Katarina, after a few more attempts, gave up and walked the last three blocks with a smile so wide her face was starting to ache.

[Fine. Be like that. I’ll go gloat at Pirra.]

She climbed the stairs to the second floor, turned down the hallway toward Pirra's room, and slowed.

There was a noise coming from inside.

Katarina, by virtue of having ears, could identify it within half a second. By virtue of having been a teenager in this body for several years now, she could identify it even faster than that. Pirra was, to use the technical term, getting railed.

She reached the door. It was not fully closed.

[... It would be very wrong to look.]

She looked.

Through the inch of open door, Katarina could see Pirra on her back on the bed, knees folded up against her shoulders, with Ludo on top of her.

Ludo had Pirra's wrists pinned to the mattress with one hand and a fistful of Pirra's hair in the other, and she was fucking her at a pace that explained the noise. Every thrust drove a fat, veined cock most of the way out of Pirra's pussy before slamming it back in to the hilt, and Ludo's heavy balls smacked against Pirra's ass in steady, unrelenting time. Pirra's eyes were rolled back. Her thighs were shaking. She was making noises that Katarina was definitely going to bring up in casual conversation later.

[... That is, frankly, a very good dick. I would know.]

Katarina allowed herself a half a second more, because she was, after all, she was only valdari.

Ludo's hips were doing something Katarina was absolutely going to think about later in private. Pirra moaned out a please that Katarina had never once heard her use in any other context, and Ludo answered by driving in harder.

[Okay. Yeah. Walking away. Walking away right now.]

She eased the door back to its original position and walked very quietly down the hall the way she had come.

[... I'll gloat later.]

Chapter 64: Field Trip 4

The carriage rolled out of Sciolto two hours after sunrise, and Katarina was in fine form.

"I’m just saying."

"Please stop," Pirra said, arms crossed and her head resting on top of them.

"No, no, I’m not judging you, she’s good, isn’t she?"

"Stop."

"Seeing her fold you like a letter was crazy, though."

Pirra lifted her head and pouted at Katarina, her whole face going tomato red, and made a noise that was half whine and half complaint.

"Kaaaaaat!"

Katarina cackled.

Tavia was across from them with her feet up on the bench, eating a piece of dried fruit and looking pleased about something unrelated to the conversation. Ludo was in a different carriage today, which was the only reason Pirra was still alive and hadn’t fully dissolved into the upholstery.

"Pirra. Pirra. Look at me."

"No."

"Pirra."

"What?"

"How were her..."

"I will throw a book at you."

"You only brought six. You can’t afford to lose one."

Pirra reached for one of her books, and Katarina laughed and held both hands up in immediate surrender.

"Okay, okay. I’m done, I’m done."

She wasn’t done. She was going to circle back to it after lunch. But for the next ten minutes, in the spirit of generosity, she let Pirra read in peace and looked out the window instead at the road and the low yellow hills rolling past.

The carriage rolled, and then it stopped, and the driver pulled the reins so fast that the cabin lurched forward an inch, which sent Katarina's stomach somewhere up around her collarbone.

Outside, someone shouted, then someone else shouted back.

Tavia sat up. Pirra closed her book. Katarina realized the shouting was coming from all around the carriage now, not just the front, and that several of the voices were not voices she recognized.

[Oh.]

Then everyone moved at once. A guard barked an order Katarina didn't catch, the carriage rocked as the lead horses pulled against their traces, a sword cleared its sheath outside, then another sword cleared its sheath outside, and then qi started flashing in the gaps between the curtains.

Tavia ducked low on her bench, and Pirra grabbed Katarina's sleeve hard enough to hurt.

A body hit the side of the carriage.

It was a guard. Katarina recognized the uniform before she recognized the face, and then she recognized the face, and then she stopped looking out the window because there was blood on the wall beside the glass and she was not, under any circumstances, going to look at that.

[Eyes up, Kat. Up.]

Another impact rocked the carriage. The driver shouted, and then the driver stopped shouting. Pirra was breathing too fast.

"It's okay," Katarina heard herself say, in a voice that sounded calmer than she felt. "It's okay. Stay low. Just stay low."

[Why am I the one talking? I have never been in a fight in my life. Either of my lives!]

The fighting outside seemed to last forever, though it was probably ninety seconds at most.

Katarina, who had once timed an entire IPO roadshow down to the second, couldn't have said how long it actually lasted, because the part of her brain that did that had stopped doing anything at all and was just watching the door of the carriage and waiting for it to open.

Two qi flashes happened, very close, very bright, and then there was nothing for a beat, and then footsteps, and then the door of the carriage was wrenched open from the outside and a woman stuck her head in.

She was human, with cropped dark hair, deep tan skin, and a long scar across the bridge of her nose. There was a sword in her right hand and there was blood on the sword. A wide black sash was tied around her waist and knotted on the hip, and it looked, unfortunately, like a uniform.

She looked at Katarina, then Pirra, then Tavia. Her face was bored.

"Out."

Katarina put a hand on Pirra's wrist and squeezed once.

[So, what's the plan here? Don't be the loud one? Don't be the obvious one? Don't be the one she remembers?]

She got up slowly with her hands visible. Tavia followed, and Pirra came last, clutching one book against her chest like it was going to stop a sword.

They climbed out into the road, and there were so many bodies that Katarina tried to count them and gave up. She got to four guards and stopped. Two more guards were on their knees with their hands behind their heads, one of them bleeding from the temple. The horses, she was relieved to note, were still alive.

The road was full of people in black sashes, more of them than Katarina would have guessed. Twenty, maybe twenty-five, spread out along the line of carriages, and they moved like a crew that had done this many times.

Students were filing out of the other carriages in small, frightened lines, hands up, eyes on the ground. Eva was three carriages down with her wings drawn tight and her face very still.

Pelegatta was at the front of the line.

She was talking to a tall valdari woman with green skin, a shaved head, and one black horn shorter than the other. The leader, presumably. Pelegatta's voice was low and steady, the kind of voice you used on a horse, and it was carrying just enough that Katarina caught the end of it.

"...understand that the consequences for the Compasso Accademia losing forty students would be considerable. The Consortium would respond. Houses would respond. You don't want this kind of attention."

The green woman tilted her head.

"Signora. Who said anything about losing them?"

Pelegatta said nothing for a long moment, and then she lowered her hands a fraction. Katarina knew that gesture. Pelegatta was recalculating.

"Walk your students," the green woman said, almost gently. "Quietly. We have a long way to go, and I would prefer that everyone arrive in roughly the condition they're in now."

Pirra's hand tightened on her sleeve.

"Kat. Kat, the sashes."

"What about them?"

"That's La Cintura Negra."

Katarina didn't recognize the name, but she recognized the tone.

"How bad?"

"Bad, Kat. Outlaw sect. They work the corridor and the hill country south of it."

[Got it. Wonderful. Love that for us.]

The scarred woman walked off down the line, counting heads, and Katarina watched her go and started counting too, because counting was the thing she could still do.

The camp was a long way off the road.

Katarina lost track of how far somewhere in the second hour. The camp itself was tucked into a fold between two hills, with tents and a low timber lean-to that was clearly the kitchen, and a flat patch of dirt in the middle where the students were marched and told to sit. Forty-one students, seven faculty, all of them on the ground in rows.

Pirra dropped down beside her and put her forehead against her knees. Tavia sat on Katarina's other side without a word and pressed her shoulder against Katarina's arm. Eva was a few rows over.

The black sashes formed a loose ring around them and didn't speak to them, didn't hurt them, didn't come near them at all, which was somehow worse than if they had, because it meant whoever was making the decisions hadn't made them yet.

Then one of them did walk over.

He was a big human man with a hammer on his back, and he stopped in front of a Pavona girl in the second row who was crying and not being quiet about it. He told her to shut up. She didn't shut up. He cuffed her across the side of the head with the back of his hand, and she went very quiet very fast, and a thin line of blood started crawling down from her ear.

Katarina looked at her knees.

[Okay. Okay, that happened. We're not going to think about that for a second. We are going to go back to what the green one said. She said losing. Who said anything about losing them. That was not a denial of violence, but it was a denial of murder, and right now we're working with what we've got. Forty-one of us walked in here and forty-one of us are sitting in nice neat rows and one of us is bleeding from the ear, sure, but none of us are dead, and that is a choice somebody made. Which means they want us alive. Which means they want us for something. Which means... we have time. Wonderful! I love having time. Time is my favorite resource.]

She lifted her eyes back up and looked at the camp, slowly, taking it in piece by piece, the tents and the kitchen and the corral and the ridge above where she could already pick out two lookouts who hadn't been on the path with them.

[All right. We can work with this.]

Chapter 65: Field Trip 5

The pen had been built for animals.

That much was obvious from the smell, which lingered in the dirt despite somebody's recent attempt to throw some fresh straw down. The walls were old, dark stone stacked waist-high and then continued upward in fresh planking that someone had hammered together fast and not particularly well. The planks went up about ten feet. There was a gate at one end, two guards posted outside it, and a small open square of sky overhead.

The students were marched in a few at a time and told to sit.

Katarina sat against the south wall with Pirra on one side of her and Tavia on the other. The faculty were gathered near the gate, Pelegatta at the front, the others behind her. Eva was across the pen, against the far wall, alone, her knees drawn up and her wings folded so tight they looked stitched to her back.

Katarina leaned her head back against the stone and let the day do what it was going to do.

The afternoon dragged.

Nobody talked above a murmur. A couple of the human girls cried for a while and then stopped. One of the Valdari girls threw up against the planks, but otherwise hadn't made a sound.

Nobody wanted to attract any unnecessary attention. It was a good idea, Katarina thought.

The guards outside the gate rotated once, on what looked like a four-hour schedule, and somehow they changed absolutely nothing about how they stood.

Around late afternoon, the leader walked the perimeter.

Katarina hadn't seen her up close until then. She was Valdari, green-skinned, a little under six feet tall, with two long horns that curved back over her skull and a black sash wrapped twice around her waist.

She walked the outside of the pen once, slowly, looking in through the gaps between planks. She didn't look at any one student in particular. She was counting heads, or checking the build of the wall, or both.

She stopped in front of Pelegatta on her way back around.

They spoke for less than a minute. Katarina was twenty feet away and couldn't hear a word of it, which wasn't for lack of trying. Pelegatta's face stayed level. The leader's stayed bored. Whatever was said, Pelegatta nodded once, the leader nodded once, and the leader walked off toward the largest tent and disappeared inside it.

Pelegatta stood where she was for a long moment.

Then she started moving through the pen.

She did it group by group, three students at a time, sometimes four. She crouched down to be eye-level with whoever she was talking to and she kept her voice so low Katarina could only catch the tail end of each conversation as Pelegatta moved along.

She got to Katarina's wall after a while.

"Pirra. Katarina. Tavia."

"Professora," Pirra said quietly.

Pelegatta crouched. She had one hand on her knee and the other flat in the dirt for balance, and Katarina noticed for the first time that there was a smear of dried blood along the cuff of her sleeve. Not Pelegatta's, probably. Somebody else's.

"I want you all to listen carefully and stay calm."

"Yes, Professora."

"Ransom letters have already gone to the academy. We have arrangements for this. You pay, the academy pays, the matter resolves."

[... I'm not exactly glad to hear that, but, well, what else can we do?]

"How long?" Katarina asked.

"A week. Two at the most. It's happened before, it's not going to be the last time."

"And until then?"

"Until then you do exactly what you're told. You stay quiet. You don't draw attention. And you don't, under any circumstances, give any of these people a reason to remember your face." Pelegatta's eyes moved across the three of them. "Be as boring as the person sitting next to you. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Professora," Pirra whispered.

Tavia nodded.

Katarina nodded too.

Pelegatta looked at her for a half-second longer than at the other two.

"Good."

She moved to the next group.

Katarina watched her work down the line.

[A week. Two at the most. The Compasso has standing arrangements, which means this happens often enough that they have a process for it, which also means La Cintura Negra knows the process. The price is already known, the timeline is already known, and everybody on both sides knows how this goes.]

The math should have been comforting.

It wasn't.

Katarina had spent two lifetimes around deals that had a known shape, and she knew exactly how often a deal with a known shape collapsed because somebody on one end decided, halfway through, that they wanted more.

A new leader, a change in the market, a drunk negotiator, a guard who got bored and did something he wasn't supposed to. There were a hundred ways for a routine ransom to stop being routine, and the longer the holding period, the more ways became live.

She kept her face flat.

[A week is a long time. Two weeks is forever.]

Pirra was watching her.

"You're scaring me a little, Kat."

"What? Why?"

"You haven't moved in like ten minutes."

"I'm just thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

"... About how we're going to be fine."

Pirra didn't look convinced. Katarina didn't blame her.

The light went orange, then red, then dark.

Lanterns came on around the camp. The guards outside the gate were replaced by a fresh pair, both of them human, both of them carrying short blades and looking like they would rather be anywhere else. The new pair was less alert than the previous pair. One of them leaned against the planking and started picking at a loose thread on his cuff. The other watched the kitchen instead of the pen.

[Good. Note that.]

Katarina counted.

She did it without moving, without looking like she was doing anything at all. She counted the planks across the long wall, then the planks across the short wall, then the gaps between them, which were narrow but consistent, about a finger's width. She counted the height of the planking against the height of the stone underneath, then estimated the total at nine and a half feet, give or take.

All well and good, but more importantly, she counted the guards.

Two at the gate. One on the ridge above the camp, visible against the lantern light when he moved. One at the path that led down to the creek, mostly obscured. One walking a slow loop around the kitchen and the corral, who came past the pen every six or seven minutes and who, she noticed, looked at the gate and not at the walls.

She counted faces. The big Valdari with the hammer. A heavily scarred man. Three more she had pegged from the march. Two more she hadn't seen until just now, both of them coming out of the largest tent with stew bowls.

She built the picture in her head and held it there the way she used to hold a balance sheet, with every cell connected to every other cell.

[Twenty-five visible during the day. Probably thirty total with rotations. Maybe more if they have a second camp. Two-guard rotation on the pen, four-hour shifts. Lazy after dark. The kitchen draws their eyes.]

Pirra had fallen asleep against her shoulder. Tavia was awake. Across the pen, Eva hadn't moved.

Katarina was building her third pass over the camp when the door of the largest tent opened again, and the green-skinned leader walked out.

She walked the line of the pen with the same slow, bored walk as before, stopped at the gate, and said something to one of the guards. The guard opened the gate. The leader walked into the pen.

Every student went still.

She walked past the faculty without looking at them, walked along the line of students, and didn't stop. She got most of the way to the far wall, where Eva was, and Katarina's stomach dropped. The leader passed Eva without slowing.

She stopped two students further down.

It was a Valdari girl Katarina didn't know. Yellow skin, dark braids, quiet. Katarina hadn't heard her speak once on the entire trip.

"You. Up."

The girl looked up.

"Me?"

"Up."

The girl got up slowly, her hands shaking. The leader took her by the upper arm, turned her around, and walked her out through the gate. The gate closed behind them. The leader walked her toward the largest tent, the tent flap opened, and the two of them disappeared inside.

Katarina swallowed.

Tavia, beside her, hissed through her teeth.

Pirra stirred against Katarina's shoulder, half-awake.

"Kat?"

"It's okay."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

[... Okay. We REALLY need to get out soon.]

Pirra settled, her breathing slowed, and Tavia didn't move.

Katarina kept her eyes on the tent and didn't look away for a long time. When she finally did, she put her hand on top of Pirra's, where it had fallen across her own knee, and she squeezed it once.

"We'll be fine," she said.

Chapter 66: Field Trip 6

The Valdari girl was returned before dawn.

Katarina didn't see her come back through the gate. She heard the gate, then the soft scuff of feet across the dirt, and by the time she turned her head, the girl was already curled on her side against the wall opposite Eva, with her back to the pen and her knees pulled up against her chest.

Nobody asked her anything.

A few of the human students tried, in whispers, and gave up when she didn't respond. One of the faculty went over and sat down near her without speaking and stayed there for a long time. The girl didn't move, didn't turn her head, didn't make a sound.

Katarina watched her for maybe a minute.

Then she made her decision.

She gathered them in pieces, slowly, in small shifts of position over the next hour.

A stretch here, a request for water there, three students pulled aside one by one in the quiet half-hour after the dawn shift change when the new guards were still settling in. Sinda first, a Valdari girl who'd asked good questions in Pelegatta's class on cargo flow. Then Roan, a tall human boy from the carriage behind hers who looked like he could run if he had to. Then Tavia.

She didn't pull Pirra. Pirra was staying in the pen, where she would be safe regardless of what happened next.

Then she went to Pelegatta.

"Professora."

Pelegatta was sitting against the planks with her eyes closed. She opened them.

"Katarina."

"We're not waiting for the ransom."

Pelegatta's expression didn't change.

"Sit down."

Katarina sat. The other three drifted over and sat as well, low and casual, with their backs to the gate so the guards saw nothing more than a small huddle of students looking miserable, which was exactly what the guards had been seeing for sixteen hours.

"We are not waiting," Katarina said again, quietly. "Every day we sit here is another roll of the dice. The girl across the pen was one roll. The next one might be worse. And the longer we sit here, the more chances they have to decide they want more than the academy will pay them, which is a thing that happens with ransoms, Professora. I've watched deals like this collapse for less."

"Katarina."

"Hear me out."

"I am hearing you. The Compasso has standing arrangements. The leader has accepted the terms. Within a week, two at most, this will be over. If you try to escape and it fails, students die. If you try to escape and it succeeds, the people they leave behind in this pen are the ones who pay for it. Do you understand what you would be doing?"

"I understand. I’m doing it anyway." Katarina looked across the pen. The Valdari girl hadn’t moved in two hours. "That is not going to be me," Katarina said, pointing at her. "That is also not going to be Pirra. Or Tavia. Or the next one she picks, whoever she is. We are not sitting here and waiting for it to be one of us, Professora. With respect."

Pelegatta closed her eyes again.

The silence stretched, and Katarina was already running through what to do next, who to talk to, how to move without faculty backing, when Pelegatta opened her eyes again.

"... What’s your plan?"

Katarina nodded.

Tavia, against Katarina’s leg, pressed her cheek lightly to Katarina’s knee.

[Okay. We’re moving.]

She crossed the pen at midmorning.

Eva didn’t look up when Katarina sat down beside her. Her wings were still tight, her arms still crossed, the dirt around her undisturbed, like she had been carved into the wall overnight.

"I’m getting out tonight."

Eva didn’t move.

"I’m putting together a small group. We’re going to slip out, find a militia or a garrison, and come back with people who can do something about all of this. I want you in the group."

A pause.

"Yes."

Katarina turned her head.

"... Yes?"

"Yes. I’m in."

[Just like that? Three weeks of you assigning me the lesser sections without making eye contact and now I get an immediate yes? I am going to find out what's in that head of yours, Evangelina, but it isn't going to be today.]

She didn't ask.

"Be ready after the second shift change," she said instead, and got up.

The argument started ten minutes later, behind the lean-to side of the pen, where the angle of the planking gave a little cover from the gate guards' line of sight.

"Everyone."

"No."

"Eva, what?"

"I said no. We are not taking everyone, Katarina, and I'm going to tell you why."

[Oh, here we go.]

Eva's voice was low, controlled, and absolutely furious.

"Five people can move quietly through a forest at night. Five people can stay off the trails. Five people can cover a distance in a day that fifty people cannot cover in three. Fifty people make noise. Fifty people leave tracks. Fifty people include the one in seven who panics, who twists an ankle, who breaks a branch, who cries, who decides halfway through that they want to go back. Fifty people get caught. Five people get to a militia."

"They could kill the ones who stay."

"They could. They probably won't."

"That's a very confident 'probably,' Eva."

"They have already accepted ransom terms. They sent the letters yesterday. They know the academy is going to pay. Killing students after a ransom has been agreed brings other sects down on them, and they know it. They are bandits, Katarina. They are not stupid. The risk to the students who stay is real, but it is smaller than the risk to fifty students walking through that forest in the dark."

Katarina opened her mouth to argue and stopped. She thought about the math instead.

[Fifty people. One in seven panics. That's seven panics during an escape from an armed camp at night. Five people, all of them picked for steadiness, in the dark, in trees they don't know.]

The answer was the answer.

"... Fine."

Eva didn’t gloat about it. She just nodded once.

"Five," Katarina said. "You. Me. Sinda. Roan. Tavia."

"Tavia?"

"She has cat eyes, Eva. She can see in the dark. We need her."

"Fine."

Night came.

The shift changed at full dark. Katarina watched the new guards take their positions, watched the kitchen-loop guard come past the pen at his usual six-minute interval, and waited until he was on the far side of the lean-to.

Then she closed her eyes and reached for the path of Whispers.

She had been practicing this for two years, in the quiet half-hour before sleep, building and unbuilding small, controlled illusions until she could place a sound exactly where she wanted it. She hadn’t used it in the field. She had never needed to. She used it now.

A man’s voice, low, cut off mid-sentence, twenty feet into the trees on the side opposite the gate. A second voice further out, a scuffle, the crack of a branch.

The two guards on the kitchen loop stopped.

They looked at each other. One of them said something Katarina couldn’t catch. The other adjusted his grip on his blade.

Katarina pushed another sound, a grunt, a footfall, just enough.

Both guards moved toward the trees.

[Yes.]

She held her breath.

The flap of the largest tent opened, and the green-skinned leader walked out.

She walked straight past the trees and looked at the pen instead. She walked the line of the planks slowly, the way she had walked it the first night, and Katarina, crouched against the wall with her heart slamming against her ribs, watched her stop in front of the gate.

The leader pointed.

"You. Come."

Katarina turned her head.

She was pointing at Pelegatta.

[No.]

Pelegatta was already standing.

She looked at Katarina across twenty feet of pen and lantern shadow, solemn and resolved, and the two of them held each other's eyes for a long moment that Katarina was going to remember for a long time.

Pelegatta gave her a small, tight nod.

[Go.]

The whole instruction was in the line of her jaw and the set of her mouth.

Pelegatta walked off.

Katarina's hands shook, and then she stopped them.

She turned toward Sinda, Roan, Tavia, and Eva, who had drifted into position over the past hour and were sitting in a loose cluster against the south wall with their wrists bound in the rope La Cintura had used on the drivers.

She reached out with her right hand. She didn't touch the rope. She didn't need to. She had been doing this in the back yard of the estate since she was nine.

A small, focused flame, no wider than her palm, ate through the rope around Sinda's wrists in one breath. Then Roan's. Then Tavia's. Then Eva's.

Katarina burned her own last.

The rope dropped into the dirt.

She looked up. The kitchen-loop guards were still in the trees, looking for a sound that wasn’t there. The gate was being closed behind Pelegatta. The leader was walking her toward the tent.

[Now.]

Chapter 67: Field Trip 7

They went over the wall.

Roan first, because he was the tallest. He braced both hands flat against the top of the planking, pulled himself up in one motion, swung his leg over, and dropped to the dirt on the outside with a quiet thud. Sinda and Tavia followed easily. Eva was slowest. Her wings made the climb awkward and she had to rotate her shoulders to clear the lip.

Katarina went last.

The kitchen-loop guards were still in the trees. Forty seconds, maybe fifty, before they came back. She put her boot on the lower seam where the planking met the stone, pushed up, caught the top, and dropped.

Her feet hit the ground. The five of them stood in the strip of open ground between the lanterns of the camp and the dark line of trees twenty feet away.

"Go," Katarina whispered.

They went.

Tavia led. Her eyes caught the lantern light at the edge of the trees and reflected once before they were inside the dark.

They had been moving for maybe four minutes when the whistle came, high and short, two notes, then a third further back answering it.

"Aaaaand they’ve already spotted us," Tavia said.

"How many?"

"Two so far."

[Two scouts on perimeter. Whoever else they have in the trees. Then the camp, when the camp realizes.]

"Fuck it. Keep going. Don’t run straight. Curve north."

Sinda glanced back.

"Why north?"

"Because south is the road and they'l guess that we want the road."

They curved.

The whistles came again, this time a little bit closer.

Katarina was running with her hand on Pirra's old satchel strap, which Pirra had pressed into her hands two minutes before the gate opened, and she was thinking very hard about the people she had assembled.

She had no clue about Eva, but Sinda was a merchant's daughter. Roan's father, Katarina was now remembering, ran a small dry-goods route in the central kingdoms. Tavia could fight, but only the way most cultivators could fight, which was to say she had been taught forms in a school by a teacher who got paid by the hour.

The point being: none of them had a Brynn.

None of them had someone putting boulders on their back and making them carry them for ages.

It wasn't a comfortable thought, but it was true. Out of the five of them, the one who had spent her childhood being tossed in the air by a frontier fighter and her teenage years being drilled in the back yard by the same frontier fighter was the only one with any real instinct for what was about to happen.

She was the best fighter here.

[That is appalling.]

The first scout came through the trees on her right.

He was human, small, fast, with a short curved blade in his right hand. He moved on the balls of his feet, and he came at her from a forty-five degree angle with the blade low and his off hand up to grab her shoulder.

Katarina did what Brynn had taught her.

She didn't back up. She stepped in. Her left forearm came up and outside his reaching hand, pushing it past her body. Her right palm came up under his chin and shoved his head back. His blade arm came across because he was committed to the cut, and the cut went into the empty space her hip had been in a half-second ago. She kept moving forward, hooked her right foot behind his left ankle, and dropped her weight.

He went down hard on his back.

Brynn had made her practice that throw a thousand times. Brynn had made her practice it on Brynn, who weighed three of her, and who had landed every time anyway.

The scout's head bounced off a root and he stopped moving.

[... Holy shit, is he dead?]

She didn't have time to find out.

"Kat!"

Tavia.

The second scout was on Tavia. He had her by the upper arm and was trying to swing her into a tree, and Tavia, low and braced with her tail flat behind her for balance, was twisting her shoulder against the angle of his grip, slowing him down without quite breaking free.

Katarina ran.

She was about four steps ahead when, suddenly, Tavia went limp.

It was a deliberate drop. Her knees folded, her weight came off her feet, and the scout, bracing against her resistance, lost his leverage all at once. He stumbled forward over her. His chin came down at exactly the height of Tavia's mouth.

Tavia bit him with everything she had, and the scout screamed. His blade arm went up and away from Tavia because his entire body was now responding to the fact that there was a catgirl attached to his face.

Katarina arrived. She caught his wrist with both hands, twisted it inward and back, and the blade dropped into the leaf litter between her boots.

She kicked it away. Tavia let go. The scout fell sideways.

Sinda, who had stopped ten feet ahead, gasped.

"Move," Katarina said.

They moved for another two minutes.

Then there were more.

Katarina counted four this time, coming through the trees from the north, fast, in a loose wedge, with a fifth one further back, a small horn at her belt. They had heard the scream and pulled in.

"Eva, behind me. Sinda, Roan, keep going. Tavia, left flank."

Tavia broke left without asking.

The wedge hit them four seconds later.

The lead one came at Katarina. She was Valdari, big, shorter than Brynn but built like her, and she had a heavy single-edged sword that she carried high. She swung it down at Katarina's head in a vertical chop that would have ended the fight if it had landed.

Katarina didn't try to stop it.

She stepped inside the swing, inside the sweep of the woman's arms where the weapon couldn't reach her. Her shoulder hit her sternum, her left hand came up and grabbed the sash at the chest, and she pivoted on her front foot and dropped her over her hip.

The Valdari woman went down on her side, the sword dropping out of her hand on the way down. Katarina kept hold of the sash, used the woman's weight as an anchor, and came down on top of her with a knee in the soft spot under her ribs.

The Valdari folded.

The second one was already on her.

He punched her in the side of the head, hard enough that she felt the inside of her cheek split against her teeth. Her vision went white at the edges. She tasted copper. She was on her knees before she had registered being knocked off her feet, and the second man was lifting his foot to bring it down on her chest.

A blue-white flash cut across her field of vision.

Eva had stepped past her and put her open palm on the second man's chest, and a gust of wind threw him backward into a tree trunk.

He slid down the trunk and didn't get up.

Katarina got her feet under her.

"Thanks," she said, and the word came out thick, because the inside of her mouth was filling up.

"Behind you."

The third one was coming.

Katarina turned. He had a short staff and he swung it sideways at her ribs. She got her left forearm up to block it and felt the bone go bright with pain, cracked but not broken, and the staff bounced off her arm and came back at her temple. She ducked, the staff hit the tree behind her, and she came up under it, drove her shoulder into his stomach, lifted, and dumped him backward over her hip.

He landed hard. She came down on his throat with her elbow, and he stopped trying to get up.

[That's three.]

Behind her, off to the left, Tavia was on top of the fourth one with her hands locked around his wrist, and Roan, who hadn't kept going after she had told him to, had come back with a fallen branch and was hitting the fourth one in the back of the head with it. The fourth one stopped.

The fifth one was raising the horn to her lips.

Katarina ran at her.

She saw Katarina coming, brought the horn down, and reached for a knife at her belt. The knife cleared the sheath.

Katarina went under it.

Her shoulder hit the woman's hip and she went down on her back with Katarina on top of her. Her knife hand swung at Katarina's side and Katarina caught it at the wrist with her right hand and slammed it against a root until her fingers opened. The knife dropped.

Katarina hit her in the face three times, until she stopped moving.

Her right knuckles were wet, her own blood mostly, the skin open across all four of them.

The clearing was quiet.

[Go. Go now. There will be more.]

"Run," Katarina said.

Her voice wasn't quite right. She tasted copper still.

They ran.

They came out of the trees at first light.

It was a cart road, narrow and rutted, running roughly east-west along the bottom of a shallow valley. There was a low hill on the far side and a trickle of smoke rising from somewhere beyond it. A chimney. A building. People.

Katarina's left arm was hanging at her side at a slightly off angle, not broken but not happy either. Her cheek was swollen on the inside and the outside both. There was a cut above her eyebrow she didn't remember getting, and her shirt was stuck to her ribs on the right side with something that had dried. Her knuckles were a mess.

The others were better off. Tavia had a bruise across her jaw and a scratch down her forearm. Roan and Sinda were both untouched, though Eva was the cleanest of all of them. She walked beside Katarina with her wings folded and her eyes on the smoke at the top of the hill.

"Can you keep going?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Your arm."

"I know."

"You should let me look at it when we stop."

"When we stop."

Eva didn't push it.

They started up the road. Katarina kept her right hand pressed flat against her side, put one foot in front of the other, and didn't let herself think about Pirra in the pen, or Pelegatta in the tent, or the math of any of it.

[Get to help. Then think.]

Chapter 68: Field Trip 8

{Pelegatta}

They were marched out of the pen at first light.

The leader hadn't slept. Pelegatta noticed it immediately, along with the size of the new escort. And why would she? While she was using Pelegatta to get off, her captives escaped.

So now, there were twelve guards instead of two, all of them awake, weapons in their hands rather than at their belts. The tone of the camp had changed in the night. Pelegatta could feel it in how the bandits looked at the students, which was no longer bored.

The five empty spaces along the south wall of the pen hadn’t gone unnoticed.

The leader walked at the front of the line. She didn’t speak. She had asked Pelegatta one question shortly before the march and Pelegatta had answered it honestly. She had said she didn’t know where they were going. The leader had accepted the answer, which was a small mercy.

The path wound up out of the camp and into the trees.

Pelegatta walked between two students. A human boy on her left whose name was Renzo, a human girl on her right whose name was Ila. Ila was crying without making any sound.

"Walk straight," Pelegatta said to her, very quietly. "Eyes on the ground. Don’t look at them."

"Where are they taking us?"

"I don’t know."

"Are we going to be okay?"

Pelegatta opened her mouth to answer and an arrow came through the throat of the bandit walking ahead of her.

He went down sideways. He was dead before his shoulder hit the dirt, and he took most of the path with him. The bandit on his left was reaching for his sword when a second arrow took him through the side of the neck.

A horn sounded somewhere up the slope.

The trees came alive.

Soldiers in the dark green of the southern Valdari militias broke from cover on both sides of the path. Thirty, maybe forty. They came through the brush at a run, blades and short spears out, fast and hungry, and they hit the line of bandits before half of them had finished turning around.

The bandits closest to the front broke first. Three of them tried to run and were cut down before they had cleared ten feet. The leader didn’t run. She turned, drew the heavy sash blade at her hip, put her back to a tree, and the militia closed on her in a half-circle.

Pelegatta grabbed Ila by the shoulder and pulled her down into the dirt.

"Stay there. Don’t move. Don’t get up until I tell you to."

"Professora..."

"Don’t move, Ila."

Ila didn’t move.

Pelegatta lifted her head a fraction and looked up the path.

There were figures on the ridge above the trees, four of them. Three militia officers, and a fifth shape with wings folded and pale hair. Eva.

Next to Eva stood a smaller figure with dark hair, both hands closed at her sides.

Their eyes met across two hundred feet of forest and morning light.

Pelegatta let out the breath she had been holding for thirteen hours.

{Katarina}

The cottage at the top of the hill had belonged to a retired militia captain.

They had walked up the cart road and knocked on the door. The woman who opened it took one look at the five of them, at Katarina’s swollen face, at Sinda’s bloodless cheeks and Tavia’s bitten-down knuckles, and moved into action without a word, the way somebody moves when they’ve handled this kind of arrival before.

The militia had moved fast.

A medic had arrived inside three hours. He reset Katarina’s left arm in one motion, which was roughly as enjoyable as it sounded, then put healing qi into her face, her ribs, and her arm in three deep passes. He told her in no uncertain terms that the bone had been cracked and she’d been very lucky about the rest of it. Then he sent her to bed, and Katarina, running on nothing but fear and adrenaline, slept for six hours straight on the captain’s spare bed.

She woke up sore but whole. The cuts had closed. Her cheek had gone down. Her arm moved when she asked it to. She spent twenty minutes on the captain’s back porch topping off the medic’s work with her own grace-path qi until the knit felt clean.

And,she had woken up to find that the militia was already mobilized.

Two units from Castelvarra. One from the smaller post at Brema. A senior officer had wanted to speak with the five of them about the camp layout, and Katarina had drawn the whole thing from memory on the captain's kitchen table while Eva, who was the only one of them who hadn't slept, watched her sketch and made small, precise corrections in the margins.

The two of them had agreed on every detail.

Now Katarina was standing on the ridge above the trees with the morning sun on her face, and she was watching the militia close on the bandit camp from three sides.

La Cintura Negra had operated in the corridor for a long time, which meant they were used to being the predators. They were not used to people knowing exactly where their camp was, how many of them there were, which direction they would march their captives in the morning, and which stretch of path was tight enough that a hidden archer could put two arrows down it without being seen.

Katarina watched the first arrow take a bandit through the throat, then the second one take the next bandit. She watched the green-clad shapes pour out of the trees, and she watched the bandits, who had brought twelve guards expecting to manage a frightened group of students, realize what was actually happening to them.

Some of them ran. Most didn't get far.

A few tried to fight.

The leader was the last one standing. Katarina watched her put her back to a tree and meet the militia with a heavy curved blade in both hands, and she watched the militia officers form their half-circle and not close it. They wanted her alive. They had asked Katarina, very specifically, whether the leader was the one they wanted, and Katarina, drawing the camp on the kitchen table, had said yes.

The fight took maybe ninety seconds. Two of the militia went down with cuts they would walk away from. The leader took a spear butt to the side of the head and dropped her sword.

Katarina exhaled.

It came out of her slowly. Her ribs still pulled when she did it. She felt the air go out of her chest and felt the low, tight knot under her sternum go out with it, the one that had been sitting there since the green-skinned woman had pointed at Pelegatta in the lantern light and said "you, come."

Pelegatta was on her feet, unhurt, helping a human girl off the ground. Katarina could see Pirra further down the path, sitting against a tree, alive.

[Okay.]

That was all.

Just okay.

The senior officer on the ridge said something to one of his lieutenants and walked off down the path toward the action. Pelegatta climbed the slope alone. She moved slowly, because her right knee was favoring her left, but she didn't stop. When she got to the top of the ridge she walked past the lieutenants and the medics and the two militia scouts who had been watching with binoculars, and she stopped in front of Katarina.

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then she put her hand flat on Katarina's shoulder.

"You did well."

"Thank you, professora."

Pelegatta looked at her for a long second. She had a smear of dirt on her cheek and a bruise along her jaw that hadn't been there yesterday, and her eyes were red-rimmed but steady.

"We will talk about the rest of it later."

"Yes, Professora."

She squeezed Katarina's shoulder once and walked past her toward the cottage. She didn't look back.

Katarina watched her go and let her own shoulders drop maybe an inch.

Eva came up the slope a few minutes later.

She walked over to where Katarina was standing and stopped about three feet away. She didn't sit. She didn't lean against anything. She had her wings folded close and her hands clasped in front of her.

Katarina waited.

Eva looked off down the slope, toward the trees, toward the militia roping bandits' wrists together and stacking weapons in the dirt.

"Thank you."

It came out tight, like it cost her something to get the two words past her teeth.

"... You’re welcome."

Eva nodded once.

She didn’t say anything else. She turned and walked back down the slope toward the militia line, and Katarina watched her go, watched her wings shift once as she stepped over a root, and didn’t call after her.

[Huh.]

She turned back toward the trees.

The sun was higher now. She could see all the way down the path to the creek bed at the bottom of the valley, where the medics were starting to bring the students out in small groups. Two hundred feet down, Pirra was on her feet again, looking up the slope. When she saw Katarina, she lifted one hand and waved.

Katarina waved back before walking down to meet her.

Chapter 69: The Talk of Compasso

Katarina dreamed about the bandit with the staff.

He came at her again, the same sideways swing at her ribs, except this time when she got her forearm up the bone didn’t crack and the staff bounced off her arm and back at his own face. He stumbled. Brynn was standing behind him with her arms crossed and that ridiculous grin Katarina had grown up with.

"That’s my girl!"

Katarina paused.

"Mother?"

"Did you see that, dumpling? Did you feel that?"

"I... I think so?"

"You did so good! So, so good."

Brynn picked her up under the arms and lifted her into the air, the way she had when Katarina was four, except now Katarina was seventeen and Brynn was lifting her anyway. Katarina laughed.

Then, she woke up with a groan and her face mashed into a pillow that smelled like Pirra.

The sun was already up.

Katarina rolled onto her back and squinted at the ceiling. She flexed her fingers. She could almost feel a phantom soreness to them.

Across the room, Pirra was face down on her own bed with one arm dangling off the side and her hair across her face. She probably hadn't moved in hours. She might not have moved since they'd come back from the welcome banquet last night, which had run very late and involved a lot of speeches all of them had been too tired to listen to.

Katarina sat up.

"Pirra."

Nothing.

Katarina smiled.

"Pirra, it's morning."

Nothing.

"Pirra, the building is on fire!"

Pirra's hand twitched and went still.

Katarina laughed and shook her head, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and started getting dressed.

Yeah, she figured half the academy was going to miss morning classes. It was going to be a slow day for Compasso's faculty, and the faculty deserved it after the two weeks they'd had.

The hallway was emptier than usual.

Katarina walked toward the dining hall and noticed it almost immediately, but it wasn't just the emptiness. It was the way the few students who were up looked at her. A second-year human girl coming the other way nodded at her. Katarina didn't know the girl's name. The girl knew Katarina's, apparently.

"Signora Montecardi."

"... Morning."

The girl kept walking.

[... Huh.]

It happened again at the foot of the main staircase. A pair of Valdari second-years stepped aside to let her pass and one of them gave her a small bow of the head. They had ignored her completely the first six weeks of the term.

By the time she got to the dining hall, she had been nodded at, deferred to, and once outright stared at by a group of first-years who started whispering to each other before she had cleared the doorway.

[What is happening???]

She got bread, fruit, and tea from the long table at the far end of the hall. When she turned around to find a seat, a hand was waving at her from the second table on the left.

It was the cluster of Pavona girls. The ones who ran the room.

They had never once waved at her before.

Katarina considered, for one full second, walking past them and sitting alone at the end of the hall. Then she considered what Vivienne Ross would have thought of declining a sudden surge in social capital. She walked over and sat down.

"Katarina! Sit, sit, please." This was the redhead. She had been one of the people who had said "Vellasera, the fishing village?" in the first week. She didn’t appear to remember that. "We were just talking about you."

"I bet you were."

"You look great, by the way. I genuinely cannot believe what you did. None of us can. The whole table has been losing it all morning."

The girl on her left nodded along.

Katarina ate a piece of bread.

"I’m okay."

"How is your arm?"

"Healed up."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes."

There was a small pause. They hadn't been expecting that answer. Katarina watched them recalibrate in real time, which was, frankly, a small bright spot in an otherwise tedious morning.

Then Ludo arrived.

She slid into the bench next to Katarina and put a hand flat on her shoulder.

"There she is. The talk of the academy."

"Really?"

"Yep. Two of the third-year boys asked me about you this morning. I don't talk to third-year boys. I talked to them today. Because of you."

"Thank you for your sacrifice, I guess."

"They asked if you were single."

Katarina rolled her eyes so hard they almost fell out of her skull. The Pavona girls laughed.

She finished her bread, drank her tea, and got out of there as soon as it was polite to.

The attention was annoying. It was also, very obviously, useful, the way a lever was useful when you were trying to move something heavy. The Pavona girls had social weight that Katarina had been trying to build from scratch for two months. Now it was being handed to her, free of charge, because she had punched a few bandits in a forest. Her brain was already filing the Pavona heirs under future leverage and beginning to sketch what a Vellasera-Pavona trade alignment might look like.

She just needed an hour without being looked at.

The library at this hour was as close to that as Compasso got.

Katarina pushed through the double doors and let the quiet wrap around her. She was three steps into the main reading room before she registered that one of the long tables along the wall had a single occupant. One with white wings and pale hair, and a book open in front of her with a pen in her right hand.

Eva looked up.

Their eyes met.

Eva looked back down at her book.

Katarina almost kept walking, then changed her mind. She crossed the reading room and sat down across from Eva at the same table.

Eva didn’t look up.

Katarina sat for a moment, watching her read. Eva’s pen hadn’t moved since Katarina sat down. The page hadn’t turned, either.

"What are you reading?"

"Trade ethics."

"On a Tuesday?"

"Yes."

"After last night?"

"Yes."

"You’re insane."

"I guess ’dedication’ isn’t a thing in your parts?"

"This seems more like ’unhealthy obsession’ to me."

[Yeah, I’m one to talk.]

Eva’s mouth twitched at the corner. She turned a page.

Katarina took an apple out of her pocket, set it on the table, and started eating it. Eva did not comment on the apple, which was the closest Eva had ever come to letting Katarina exist in her vicinity without making it feel like an imposition.

They sat for a while.

Eva read. Katarina ate. A first-year human girl came into the reading room, saw who was at the wall table, and quietly went to sit somewhere else.

After a few minutes, Eva said, still to her book:

"Your map was correct."

"Hm?"

"Your map," Eva said again. "When we were trying to figure out how to find help. Your map was right."

"Yours was correct too."

"No, mine had three errors. Yours had none."

"Three?"

"Yes." Eva paused. "How did you get it right while having spent barely any time in that place?"

[Photographic memory, mainly. But she probably wouldn't believe that, would she?]

"I'm good with maps."

Eva's eyes moved off the page and onto her.

"You're good with maps?"

"Mm."

"Katarina. You drew a forty-acre camp from one night of looking at it. You drew the slope down to the creek bed and you weren't on the slope down to the creek bed. At night."

"I was paying attention."

"Everyone in that pen was paying attention. None of them could have done what you did."

Katarina shrugged and took another bite.

Eva looked at her for another second, then closed her book entirely and slid it into her bag.

"Fine. I asked you a real question. You gave me 'I'm good with maps.' Go enjoy your morning."

Katarina shrugged and left, and took her apple with her.

The hallway outside her dorm was as empty as the rest of the academy had been, which made the decision to skip class easy.

Half the school was asleep. Pelegatta would understand. The faculty had basically said as much at the banquet. And Katarina, who could probably teach Trade Infrastructure better than Pelegatta could on her best day, wasn't going to feel guilty about taking a morning off after getting kidnapped by an outlaw sect.

She opened the door to her room, expecting Pirra to still be face down in the same position.

Pirra wasn't in the room.

Tavia was.

Tavia was on Katarina's bed, on her side, with her tail curled over her hip and her cheek on Katarina's pillow, which now smelled like her. She opened one eye when Katarina walked in.

"Hi."

"Hey... Don't you have your own bed?"

"Eh, this one's warmer."

"It hasn't been warm for an hour."

"It was warm an hour ago." Tavia stretched. Her whole body went long across the bed, arms over her head, back arched, tail extending behind her. Then she rolled onto her front and pushed up onto her hands and knees. "So, are you gonna sleep the day away like the rest of these fools, or can we find a better way to pass the time?"

She got on her knees and looked over her shoulder at Katarina.

Then, she reached one hand back, lifted the hem of her skirt up over her hips, slow, all the way up to her waist, and held it there.

She wasn't wearing anything underneath.

Katarina blinked.

Then, shaking her head with a smile, she shut the door behind her.

[... Okay, the nap can wait.]

Chapter 70: Thinking Out Loud*

Tavia's back was against Katarina's chest.

Katarina had her hands hooked under Tavia's knees, Tavia's arms locked behind her with her own forearms, Tavia off the bed entirely, suspended against Katarina's body with her thighs spread wide and her tits bouncing in the air with every thrust. Katarina was driving up into her pussy from below at a steady, mean rhythm that had Tavia's claws dug into the meat of Katarina's biceps from behind.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck, Kat."

"Mhm."

"You... you're... oh fuck, oh fuck, you're hitting it, right there, right there, you have to keep..."

"I am keeping." Katarina smiled.

"...keep doing... oh fuck."

Tavia's tail lashed against the side of Katarina's hip. Katarina shifted her grip on Tavia's left knee, pulled it higher, and opened her up wider. Tavia's pussy clenched so hard around Katarina's cock that Katarina actually missed a beat.

"You're squeezing me like a... oh, fuck..."

"Like a what?"

"I forgot what... keep going, Kat, please..."

"You started a sentence."

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up..."

Katarina laughed and bounced her in the air.

"Use your words, Tavia."

"I can't."

"That's what I thought."

She walked them backward two steps, turned, and dropped Tavia onto the mattress on her front. Tavia caught herself on her hands and knees with her tail high and her ass in the air, and Katarina was inside her again before she had finished settling.

The headboard hit the wall. It hit the wall on every thrust, which Katarina would have ordinarily slowed down for, except half the academy was either asleep or in class, and the

half that wasn’t probably owed Katarina a noise complaint or two for the past week of being looked at in hallways.

Tavia’s face was pressed into Katarina’s pillow, which was good, because Tavia had given up on words and was working her hips back into Katarina’s at a rhythm of her own, ass up, spine arched, tail curled high enough to brush Katarina’s chin every other thrust.

Katarina leaned forward over her and got a fistful of Tavia’s hair.

"Look at me."

Tavia turned her head as far as the pillow let her. One amber eye, blown wide, found Katarina’s.

"Tell me when."

"Now. Right now."

"Oh. Okay then."

Katarina drove in to the hilt and held it there.

Tavia’s whole body went rigid under her, back arched, claws digging into the sheets. Her pussy fluttered around Katarina’s cock in long, slow waves, and her own cock spilled across Katarina’s bedsheets, which Katarina was going to need to wash later, and was, in the moment, not going to think about.

She pulled out, rolled Tavia onto her back, and finished on her stomach.

Tavia watched her do it.

When Katarina was done, Tavia reached up with one finger, dragged it through the mess on her own belly, and put the finger in her mouth.

"... You’re a menace," Tavia cackled.

"I’ve been told."

She lay on her back with one arm over her face.

Tavia, post-cleanup, was draped across the foot of the bed with her chin propped on Katarina’s ankle, still naked, still purring faintly. The purring was an involuntary thing for her after sex, which Katarina had learned the second time they did this and which Tavia had been faintly embarrassed about for about eight seconds before getting over it.

The ceiling of the dorm room had a small water stain in the upper left corner that Katarina had been meaning to mention to maintenance for two months. She watched it for a while. Her body was buzzing the pleasant low-frequency buzz of a job well done, and her brain, treacherously, was already moving on without her.

She thought about the breakfast table.

She thought about the redhead saying we were just talking about you, and the way the second-year girl had nodded at her in the hallway, and the way the Pavona crowd had reorganized itself around her without anyone consulting her about it.

She thought about the look on Pelegatta's face when she had put her hand on Katarina's shoulder. She thought about the bandit leader being walked down the path with her wrists bound.

She thought about the report the militia was going to file.

Not just that, but who would read that report, who at the academy had known the Compasso had standing arrangements with outlaw sects like La Cintura Negra.

And she thought about the fact that those arrangements had been in place long enough for Pelegatta to describe them without hesitation, and about the fact that nobody at the academy had warned the students about the corridor before sending them through it.

She turned her head toward the foot of the bed.

"Tavia."

"Mm."

"You know, I bet someone could really mess with the academy right now."

Tavia opened one eye.

"Mess with how?"

"Imagine if a student, just hypothetically, started formally collecting testimonies from the kidnapped group. From every student who was in the pen. Got everything in writing. Filed complaints with the Consortium. Maybe a letter to a few of the more public houses about the academy's response, the lack of advance warning, the standing ransom arrangements. Just to see what happened."

The other eye opened.

Tavia lifted her chin off Katarina's ankle.

"... Are you doing that?"

"I'm just thinking out loud."

"Mhm. Sure you are."

"I am."

"Kat. I have known you for ten weeks and I have never once heard you think out loud about anything that wasn't already a plan with three steps and a contingency." Tavia laughed. "The Pavona girls are going to lose their minds."

"The Pavona girls do not need to know I started anything."

"Oh, they will not know. They will know that suddenly there are testimonies, and a complaint with the Consortium, and a few letters out to some very specific houses, and that the academy is on the back foot, and that the student body is unhappy with how they handled it. And they will not know who started any of it. They will only know that everybody is talking about it, and they will want to be in the middle of the talking, because that is what Pavona girls do."

"Ah, good... You understand the assignment."

"I do indeed, Signora."

"Do not call me Signora when you are naked on my bed."

"Do not be Signora-shaped when you are naked on your own bed and I will stop."

Katarina laughed.

Tavia stretched and yawned, her tail flicking up over her own thigh and back down.

"I will spread the rumor by lunch."

"What rumor?"

"Whatever rumor you would like me to spread, my Signora. I am a cat. I have many friends. I sit in many laps. I hear many things. I also say many things, and people, for some reason, listen to me."

"It's because they want to fuck you."

"Yes. That helps."

"Just... light groundwork. Nothing pointed yet. Just the idea that the academy could have done more. That somebody, maybe, should look into it. A little bit of unease. Let it spread on its own."

"Mm. Unease. I can do unease."

"Casual. No source."

"Kat, I have been gossiping since I had teeth. I know what I am doing."

"And not at the Pavona table. Start with the second-years."

"Ah. Slumming."

"Ground floor."

"Same thing."

"You have thought about this a lot for someone who is only thinking out loud."

"Tavia."

"I am going. I am going." Tavia rolled off the bed and started pulling her clothes back on, slow and lazy. She paused with her shirt half on and looked back at Katarina over her shoulder. "This is the most fun I've had with my clothes off."

"You had your clothes off for the part before this conversation."

"Yes. And the conversation was better."

"... Get out."

"I am out." She got the shirt the rest of the way on, stretched once for Katarina's benefit, and padded toward the door. At the threshold she paused, one hand on the frame, and looked back. "By lunch."

"By lunch."

She got out. The door closed behind her.

Katarina lay on her back on her ruined sheets with one arm still over her face, listening to the building. Pirra was probably still asleep one wall over.

Half the academy was still in bed. The other half was in classes that Katarina was pointedly not attending. Outside her window, a couple of birds were doing whatever birds did at this hour.

She moved her arm and stared at the water stain in the upper left corner of the ceiling.

[Three months in. They threw a field trip at me, lost half the cohort to a marauder sect, recovered the cohort because of me, and have not yet had the conversation with the student body about what just happened. They will have to have it, eventually. It might as well be on my schedule.]

She smiled.

[A simple optics play. Let’s see if I’m rusty or not.]