### Another Innocent Bystander

**Rating:** Explicit  
**Archive Warning:** Rape/Non-Con  
**Category:** F/M  
**Fandom:** Vorkosigan Saga - Lois McMaster Bujold  
**Relationship:** Ivan Vorpatril/Original Female Character  
**Character:**  
- Ivan Vorpatril  
- Miles Vorkosigan  
- Gregor Vorbarra  
- Alys Vorpatril  
- Armsman Gerard  
- Original Male Character(s)  
- Original Female Character(s)  
- Guy Allegre  
- Armsman Pym  
- Armsman Roic  
- Armsman Jankowski  
- Byerly Vorruyter  
- Simon Illyan  
- Raine Vorfolse  
**Additional Tags:** Explicit Language, Post Memory AU, Explicit Sexual Content, Vorkosigan Universe, Vorkosigan Saga AU  
**Series:** Part 1 of The AU life of Ivan Xav Vorpatril  
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- Completed: 2018-03-26  
- Chapters: 37/37  
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**Another Innocent Bystander**

by **Rose_Milburn**

**Summary**

AU Fanfiction set after 'Memory' and ending just after 'A Civil Campaign'.

All major characters and settings are the works of Lois McMaster Bujold.

There are direct quotes from *A Civil Campaign* throughout this fan fiction and I acknowledge LMB as the author of the original work.
“Don’t die on me. Don’t you dare die on me!”

Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril scrambled to find something, anything, to press against the arterial blood pumping remorselessly from the limp figure lying underneath him. All he had was a damned handkerchief. It would have to do. Clamping the wound with all his strength he gathered the frail form up as best he could with a left arm that didn’t want to work too well. He took a second to gather his wits and look at the crowd already converging on Gregor. There was nothing he was needed for there, but all the attention was on the Emperor, as it should be. What to do? Oblivious to the rest of the carnage and chaos around him he lurched to his feet and took off at a dead run. How had this ever happened?

It was only yesterday that he’d answered that particular chime on his comconsole. Gregor Vorbarra, Emperor of three worlds, wanted to speak to him, and before Ivan had had his breakfast, too. In fact his hair was still wet from the shower. He scrubbed at the dark locks with his towel as he strode to answer the call, one hand finger-combing the mess into some sort of order as his other hand hit the reply.

“Ivan. Did I wake you up?” Gregor looked repulsively spick and span, his own dark hair immaculate, no sign of bags or shadows under his hazel eyes and the silver embroidery on his house uniform sparkling a cheery greeting. Ivan did not feel like sparkling back.

“Uh, no sire. Good morning. Just getting ready for the daily grind. Flying a desk gets to be hard work, but you don’t need me to tell you that. At least I get weekends.”

A faint smile crossed the Emperor’s usually impassive features. “Well, you’ll be glad to know I’ve lined up a little task for you to enliven the boredom, if you have no objections.”

Boring was good. It meant nobody was trying to kill him, or more likely either of his more high-profile cousins.

“You mean I get a choice?” He fought to keep the suspicion out of his voice, but it didn’t quite work. He sighed. “At your command, sire.”

Gregor never really grinned, but the corners of his eyes crinkled just a bit. “There’s a parade and special award ceremony in the Great Square tomorrow. Count Vor Clarence, or rather his armsman, has just informed my people that he has most unfortunately had a fall from his horse whilst exercising this morning and he’s unable to support me as planned.”

“Vor Clarence on a horse? Poor horse. No wonder he chucked him off. I would. An airflyer, and the
most expensive airflyer you possibly could imagine would be more the thing for him. Either that or a heavy lift van.”

“Ivan, I’m not here to discuss Count Vor Clarence’s weight, or his extravagance either, for that matter. It’s immaterial.”

“No to the horse it’s not.”

“Be that as it may, I need somebody to look good for the holovids, and do the pretty afterwards. Naturally I thought of you.” Only Gregor’s nearest and dearest would detect the evil gleam in his eyes, but Ivan just knew what he was thinking.

“We’re talking parade red and blues, aren’t we? Full dress, two swords, the works?”

This time the amusement fully lit the Emperor’s eyes. “What else? If I have to suffer you can too. 1100 hours on the square. Assemble 1045 in the green antechamber.”

Ivan sighed again. “Let’s hope it’s not raining. It had better be worth it.”

“It’s worth it, Ivan. I’m presenting the decorations to the families for the Kanzian affair.”

Ivan let the banter drop, immediately sober. “Oh, that’s right. Posthumous awards. Poor sods.”

The Admiral Kanzian, pride of the Imperial fleet, had surprised a Jacksonian pirate in Komarr space a few months back. Inexplicably they’d tried to run and even more inexplicably the boarding party had died to the last man.

“Anything you can tell me so I don’t put my foot in it, sire?”

A shadow crossed his face. Gregor glanced at his comconsole to press a switch. The security scrambler flipped from standard to maximum. “It was bio-weapons, Ivan. The boarding party was exposed. They chose to – ah – sterilize the field rather than risk the Kanzian.”

Ivan tried not to imagine it. “Fuck. Ryoval’s dead, so what’s the next guess? Bharaputra revenge again?”

“We’re not sure. Guy Allegre’s still working on it, but Bharaputra is better than the alternative.”

Ivan shuddered. He’d seen just a glimpse of what the alternative could do. “I thought Cetaganda was busy in the opposite direction these days?”

“Guy will find out. Anyway, we owe these men a great debt. They were nearly all from Vor Clarence’s district, which was why he was going to be there, but you’ll do much better at the reception afterwards. I’ll have my secretary send your change of orders to Ops.”

It was a beautiful early spring day, worst luck, exceptionally warm for the time of year. The sun shone down on them as Ivan marched out and took his place just behind and to the right of Gregor on the dais. He could feel the rays warming his back. Two hours of this would cook his already overheated frame quite nicely. Full length riding boots, heavy belt for the two swords, red tunic buttoned high to the neck and blue riding breeches, even the glossy parade shako with enough gold on it to sink a battlecruiser. He would swear the matching gold bullion on his collar was designed to conduct heat straight to his neck. He itched and forced himself not to fidget as he stood at full attention as the parade marched past. First the band, followed by the Imperial Guard, and then the crew of the Kanzian, those that could be spared, at least. Ivan idly wondered when they’d been drilled into this unusually formal display. The holovid cameras hovered around them like a swarm
of flies. *Horseflies*, he thought irreverently as the dais was positioned just to the side of the mighty statue of Emperor Dorca the Just on his trusty steed, looking down at him from his hundred years of posterity.

All the colourful panoply of the Empire was being tight-beamed live to three planets, but it didn’t mean he had to like the damned intrusive drones wanting to broadcast the sad faces of the bereaved families in full-colour close-up. Gregor’s aide-de-camp, Major Vorinnis, announced the names and handed over the citations and decorations as each family came forward to receive the posthumous awards. Ivan’s attention flicked to the face of a little girl, maybe five years old, dressed in a pretty blue outfit to match her eyes. Her mother in her somber mourning clothes had spared her daughter the drabness, only the black ribbons in her hair proclaiming their loss. Ivan approved. Both of them were visibly shaking as they approached the dais.

“Madame Anna Watson and Mademoiselle Marie Watson, sire. Widow and daughter of Master Sergeant Thomas Watson, of New Sheffield in Vorclarence district.”

Ivan caught the little girl’s bewildered gaze and flicked her a wink. Poor thing. She looked so fragile. Her eyebrows shot up and she hastily looked away, back to where her Ma and the Emperor were talking. Another buzz sounded off to his right again. More horseflies. Damned holovids. How close did they want to get? He looked more closely at the drone rising past Dorca’s right shoulder. He took a second look. That wasn’t a vidcamera. That was a… was a—

“Down!” he bellowed, diving forwards to tackle Gregor in a desperate effort to protect him. Major Vorinnis leapt in from the left as the Vorbarra armmen sprang into action. Plasma arc fire sizzled overhead as he lunged to pull the little girl next to Gregor and into the feeble protection of his own body. Just as he did so a tremendous concussion hit him like a hammer blow. His shako flew off his head but he had no impression of sound, just heat and debris spearing down…

She was so tiny. His hand completely circled her thigh as the blue rags of her dress disappeared under a flood of red in an obscene caricature of his own red and blue parade uniform.

“Get out of the way!” he yelled at the startled sentry, standing shocked and gaping at the ornate gates to the Imperial Residence. “Move, dammit. Notify the infirmary.” He flew up the steps in three great strides. The main door opened, either for him or for the swarm of ImpSec guards behind him hustling the Emperor to safety. He neither knew nor cared which it was. Somewhere along the mad dash his hearing had come back to him. He turned down the corridor away from the public areas, his breath sounding hoarse in his ears now and his swords banging and clattering against the priceless antiques. A red haze clouded the edge of his vision as he forced his burning lungs to drag in more air. Just a little further…

Gregor kept good people around him. They were waiting and ready by the time he got there. The doors stood open and a secondary trauma team sprang into action as he charged into the infirmary. Ominously, more than one emergency pallet was lined up ready for customers. The Emperor’s private team stood at the alert at the main bay, but there were four people next to the paediatric pallet ready and waiting.

“Here, my lord. We’ll take her.”

“No you bloody won’t,” Ivan gasped, laying the little girl on the pallet but keeping his firm hold on her thigh. “Arterial bleeding. Start a line going before I let go.”

There was a commotion behind him as more casualties arrived but Ivan could only think of the frail
form in front of him.

“Don’t you dare die on me now, sweetheart. Just don’t.”

It wasn’t until a synthablood line pumped into her carotid artery and an oxygen mask covered half her face that he could be persuaded to let her go. A green-gowned medtech attached a flowblocker and forcibly pried his fingers away.

“There’s nothing more you can do, my lord. Come away now. You need attention yourself.”

The medtech had to repeat himself before Ivan relented at last. He reluctantly turned away, glancing down at his hands. Surprise flickered at the sight of his left hand. His right was covered with her blood, as was his tunic and breeches. His left, though. What was that? Blood was still flowing there, seeping down and across the heavy gold braid on his cuff. A steady stream of drips splattered onto the floor. He’d been cut. He hadn’t noticed, hadn’t felt it happen.

Never mind all that. The spare form of his Emperor lay in front of him on the float pallet, his uniform thick with dust and blood, medics buzzing around him like bees.

“Gregor! Shit!” He staggered over.

White faced, shocked, but blessedly alive and awake, Gregor reached out for Ivan’s good hand, pulling it in to his chest to grip it tightly over his heart, the nearest he could manage to an embrace given the circumstances.

“Ivan, you idiot! Are you alright?” Gregor smiled weakly at him. “Stop looking like that. It’s not my blood. I’m not even hurt except you knocked me out. Do you have any idea how heavy you are?”

Whatever reply he was about to make was left unuttered as Ivan’s legs buckled under him.

There was a light shining in his eyes and a mask across his face. Ivan made to push it away but thought better of it as pain lanced up his left arm and exploded behind his eyes. At his second attempt his right arm worked just fine and he struggled to sit.

“Gregor! How is he? Let me up! I have to—”

“The Emperor is fine, my lord. He has no injuries apart from a mild concussion and shock. He’ll be making a live broadcast shortly. **You** will kindly lie down again.” The speaker wore yellow collar tabs behind his caduceus insignia. Ivan vaguely recognized him, the Emperor’s personal physician, Rear-admiral Waleska. He slumped back down, dizzy with relief. Waleska wouldn’t be bothering with him if there were anything wrong with Gregor. The relief was short lived. He’d forgotten.

“Hell!” He sprang back up to sit bolt upright again, scattering a table of instruments with a metallic clatter. “Where is she? That little girl. Did she make it? And her mother?”

Waleska shoved him back down with brute force. “*Lie still,* and that’s an order, Captain.”

Something flickered behind his eyes. “Marie Watson is in surgery. From what I can gather her prognosis is very good. She’s got you to thank; well done to get her here so quickly. Her mother…” He swallowed. Ivan started to shake his head but rapidly thought better of doing anything so silly. He didn’t want to hear what was coming. Admiral Waleska swallowed again.

“I regret to say nothing could be done for Madame Watson. One of the shards entered her brain.”

Ivan closed his eyes in despair. Wait…what? **Shards?** What did he mean? A splinter weapon?
“What shards? Shrapnel?”

“Not precisely, my lord, but the result was much the same. The explosion shattered the marble plinth of Emperor Dorca’s statue. The pieces cut like razors, worse than broken glass even. Not as bad a needler burst, but not far off. You yourself have at least three wounds in your back and another more serious laceration in your left arm. And if you would lie still,” the admiral paused to shove him down again, “we can ascertain if there are any more.” His fierce expression relented just a bit, giving way to a smile of relief. “We were watching the feed on the holovid. You most undoubtedly saved the Emperor’s life.”

Noise pulsed in and out as Ivan struggled to grasp the meaning in the admiral’s words.

“Madame Watson is…dead? How many more?”

Waleska stopped smiling. “Regrettfully, Major Vorinnis was also fatally injured. However, he’s been placed in cryostasis. He has a good chance.”

Ivan sucked in a deep breath. He’d liked Vorinnis. All that blood on Gregor’s uniform…it could just as easily have been his. The room twirled and swayed around him as the medtechs cut away his sleeve. Another approached with a more heavy-duty vibraknife.

“Leave my damn boots alone,” Ivan growled. “Do you have any idea how much they cost?”

Waleska waved the techs away. “We don’t need a general anaesthetic for this if you insist. You can keep your boots, if you must.” He stopped for a moment. “We’ll just take those swords of yours, though, Captain. They’re a damned nuisance. And this is my last warning. If you won’t lie still we’re going to knock you out anyway. And I will personally take great pleasure in doing it. Stay down, you damned fool! You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

Perforce, Ivan submitted. With his sword belt off the techs made short work of his tunic and shirt. Gregor was going to get the bill for that wanton destruction, although they were both probably ruined, anyway, what with the holes and the blood and all.

He rolled onto his front to let Waleska probe the wounds on his back. The doctor cleaned them out, the slivers of marble making little pinging noises as he dropped them into a waiting bowl. He stuck up the cleaned lacerations with surgical glue. Ivan lost count after four. His arm took a bit more work, spot-welding muscles with the medical laser and then a minor nerve needed reconnecting. More surgical glue and a slick of syntha-skin later he was all done. Walesa finally stepped back, just as a medtech summoned him urgently for another crisis.

“That’ll do for now, but you’ll need a brain scan. We’ve only got the one scanner and there’s a queue. At least you’re conscious, so you can afford to wait. We’re not a major facility like ImpMil. This is more action that we’ve seen in years, and I don’t particularly want to see it again. If you’ll excuse me, my lord, duty awaits. Bed rest and painkillers for you. We’ll get you a private cubicle.”

Ivan felt perilously nauseous after all the prodding and probing, and all the hammers of hell were pounding in his skull, but there was still something he had to do.

“After I see to that little girl, Wally.” Why were there two of him? They weren’t cloning admirals these days, surely? “She can’t die now.”

“Did you just call me Wally? I haven’t had anyone call me that since the Komarr revolt. *When I held the rank of Captain.* Perhaps we should bump you up on that scanner queue. Your brains must be more scrambled than I thought. You’ve forgotten already what I just told you. The young lady
is receiving every possible attention. She’s in surgery but the situation is not critical.” He turned away at another urgent call. “I really must go.”

Ivan was Vor. He’d been born Vor, even if it was in the Caravanserai, and he’d certainly been brought up Vor. Marie was his responsibility. He snapped at the admiral’s back as the man hurried away. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

Filthy, shirtless and patched up like a space pirate he rolled off the pallet. This time there was no stopping him bar the threatened medical stunner. The Imperial Infirmary was small. There was only the one operating theatre. The bio-shield hummed as Ivan staggered up. Oops, better not to try and penetrate that. He swayed a bit, not knowing quite what to do.

A harassed medtech came up behind him with a gown and a float chair. They were obviously humouring him. Truth be told he was very glad to sit down and he half-fell, half-sat into the chair to wait.

Eventually the hum dropped and the theatre tech guided out the pallet holding Marie’s tiny still form. She still had her blood line, oxygen and a heart monitor. Ivan struggled with the controls but managed to guide his float chair along behind to her cubicle, only bouncing off the walls twice. Walking didn’t seem like a good idea. Staying conscious didn’t seem that particularly smart right at the moment, either, but stuff that. He made the effort to concentrate. “Has she got any relatives back in New Sheffield? Have they been sent for?”

The medtech shook his head. “I don’t know, my lord. The authority to operate paperwork is marked emergency permission by Imperial decree. They’ll be looking, though, in the sergeant’s records and back in her district, too.”

“I’ll stay. She can’t wake up on her own. Somebody has to make sure she doesn’t die.”

“There’s a bed for you right next door, my lord. We’ll call you straight away if there’s any change.”

“I. will. stay… Do. You. Understand?”

Whatever the medtech saw in his eyes changed the man’s mind about arguing the point. “I’ll fetch Admiral Waleska, sir. You sit right here and you can hold her hand.”

Moving was becoming harder by the second, but Ivan tumbled out of the float chair and into the more solid one by the bed. He was about done in, watching dully as the medtech strode off with the float chair, leaving the two of them together.

By the time the medtech returned with an exasperated rear admiral in tow, Ivan had gathered the little girl into his arms and had retreated as far into the corner as her tubes and lines would allow, cradling her against his chest.

“Captain Vorpatril! What the hell do you think you’re doing? She shouldn’t be moved!”

Ivan hugged his burden all the tighter. Fiercely he snapped back. “I’m telling you now, and I’m not going to keep repeating myself. I’m responsible and he is not going to die if I can help it.”

“He?” Warily, Waleska gave him a perimeter. “Won’t you get some rest? You’re my biggest worry right now. The brain scanner will be available in just a few minutes. The Emperor is recovering. He’s worried about you.”

Ivan could feel tears running down his face as he fought to breathe against a raw burning in his
chest. Just let them come near him. He’d kill the next man that tried. He knew he sounded panicky, but that’s because he was. “He’s not going to die on my watch. I won’t let him.”

Waleska dimmed the lights and then turned to speak into a comconsole before waving Ivan an acknowledgement. “I understand. We’ll leave you for a little while. Everything is going to be fine. You just need some quiet.”

As his belligerence subsided Ivan slipped into a half-doze, but movement in the corridor brought him to full alert. He winced as that damned hammer started up again. He could hardly bear the pain in his head. Worse than any hangover he’d ever had, and that was saying something.

“Ivan.” It was Gregor, clean, changed and looking only a bit the worse for wear with his usual pallor enhanced by dark circles under his eyes, and a stiffness to his walk. Ivan hugged his burden and tried to clamber to his feet in the Imperial presence.

“Stay there.” Gregor crossed the tiny cubicle and pushed Ivan back into his chair.

“You know that’s a little girl you’ve got there? Marie Watson. You saved her life in the square today.”

Ivan blinked. What? Oh yes, that was right. “Grenade. In that damned drone.”

“Yes, a grenade. You saw it and pulled us down. You saved both of us, Ivan. Everything is all right, now.”

“Everything is not all right. Not poor Vorinnis, not her mother, and not… not…” There it was again, that hot pain, searing his chest. “I couldn’t save him, Gregor. He died, and I wasn’t even there.”

“Oh.” Gregor sighed. He rubbed a hand across his face. “Waleska thought… It’s not me you’re worried about, is it?” He spoke over his shoulder and a Vorbarra armsman hurried off to do his bidding.

“We can sort this out. While we’re waiting, Captain Vorpatril, I request and require you to let someone take those damned boots off! Here, never mind. I’ll do it myself.”

Gregor Vorbarra, Emperor of Barrayar, Komarr and Sergyar, knelt at Ivan’s feet and eased first one and then the second of his knee-high boots down and off. Blood had pooled inside one of them. Gregor checked, but there weren’t any more obvious wounds. It wasn’t Ivan’s blood. He carefully eased the blood-soaked sock away, and then the other one.

They waited together. At last Ivan heard the sound of quick, light footsteps approaching.

“In here? Bloody fool, pulling a stunt like this. What’s the idiot done to himself this time? He’d better be dead at least, or I’m going to kill him.”

Miles, Lord Vorkosigan, stopped quickly as he came into sight. He was an overly short man with a slightly too large head set on a crooked neck. His features were very similar to Ivan’s with the same dark hair, but where Ivan’s eyes were brown, his were grey. He was extremely thin and his face was marred with the shadow of pain. He looked frantic with worry.

“Oh, sorry, sire. Not talking about you, of course. Thank God you’re OK. That was too damned close. I was watching the holovid. Ivan always does look good on the holovids doesn’t he? Very photogenic, but I never thought he could move that fast. I saw your broadcast, after, but we both know what they can do with them. I was already on my way over when your message came
through.”

Gregor held up both of his hands in a ‘stop’ gesture. “Miles, you’re babbling.”

Miles shut his mouth with a snap. “Sorry, sire.”

“We have a bit of a problem.”

Miles’ attention shifted from Gregor to Ivan. His eyes widened slightly, assessing. “Hey, coz. Didn’t you duck in time?”

“Miles?” The pain in Ivan’s head blurred his eyes and masked the sight of the short figure in front of him, but there was no mistaking that voice. He struggled and failed to stop a wracking sob welling up.

“Ivan, Miles wants to talk to you. You can give me the little girl. She needs her meds. She’s in no danger now. Come on, I can take her…” Gregor eased Marie away from Ivan’s suddenly slack hold, handing her off to a hovering medtech who laid her on her bed and whisked the whole contraption out of the room. Ivan hardly noticed. His gaze was fixed on his cousin’s face, trying to focus.

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“Hey, I could say the same to you. I wasn’t the one playing in the square. Everything will be fine, Ivan. Just let Waleska take another look at you. See, here he is now.”

There was no reply. Miles let out a yelp of alarm as Ivan’s full weight slumped against him.

“Shit!” Sticky, gleaming blood coated Miles’ left hand. There was a fresh trail spreading down the back of the surgical gown. At six foot one and well-muscled Ivan was no lightweight. Miles struggled to hold him on his own.

“Shit!” Gregor sprang to help.

Waleska leapt forward to cradle his head. “Pallet! Now!” He shouted. Techs came scurrying. Between the three of them they manhandled Ivan’s inert body onto the anti-grav pallet. “Brain scanner. Stat. And I don’t care who else needs it.” The doctor turned to his Emperor. “He never said a word, sire. There was so much blood when he came in, but I swear there was no obvious indication of a head wound then. We were triaging as fast as we could.”

Gregor watched the pallet as it disappeared along the corridor. He sank into the chair Ivan had just vacated, utterly spent. “Just fix it, Waleska. I need Ivan. He’s family. We’ll talk later.”
Ivan became aware of the nausea before he opened his eyes. What had he been drinking? Surely not that rotgut Vorkosigan maple mead. It must have been some session, if he didn’t remember any of it. Strange how heavy his eyelids were, though. It was almost too much effort open them. The nausea roiled in his stomach as it blossomed to blot out the other sensations. Oh no, oh shit...he had to get to the bathroom! He started to roll over but found himself held back by his well-tucked sheets.

“Lemme up. I wanna sp—“

Too late. His housekeeping service was going to kill him. Pain lanced through his head as he heaved a second time. He felt a cool, moist cloth on his forehead, nose and mouth. It was unexpected but felt blissful.

“Hey, coz. Welcome back. Don’t think I’m going to make a habit of holding the chuck bucket for you, though. Vomit up your schnoz doesn’t make for a good look from where I’m standing.”

He knew that voice. He tried again to see, squinting against the dim light. This wasn’t his nice safe bed in his nice safe apartment.

“Miles? Urgh…I need water.”

“Here you go. Just take a sip or two.” He knew that voice, too. That wasn’t Miles, and it came from the other side of the bed. A straw was held to his mouth and he managed a mouthful or two before he regretted it. He rolled to heave again. Where did all that vomit come from?

“I’m glad I pulled rank and got to hold the water,” the second voice told him.

“Gregor?” Ivan finally managed to place it. “Whass goin’ on?”

“You’re in The Residence infirmary. You were hurt. You’ve got a split head and a fractured skull and Admiral Waleska glued you back together here and there. I think he might have wanted to glue you to the bed while he was at it.”

Ivan made a grab for his wits and managed to hang on to some of them. He could only move one arm. It was late. He hurt. “How long have I been out?”

Miles washed his face again and held the cloth to his nose before he answered. “Here, blow. You’ll thank me for it.” Ivan complied. “About six or seven hours. It’s nearly midnight.”

It did feel better without vomit burning his sinuses.

“Shit. Did I miss all the fun?”

“Shit is right and it all hit the fan when you passed out. I’m sorry, coz. It was my fault. There was a slice of that damned marble sitting under your scalp. Big as a ten mark piece. It had sealed itself off until I got a hold of your head. Cut it right open again.”

“What did you do that f—No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. It feels like I got kicked in the head by Dorca’s horse.”
“Dorca’s not looking much better than you are, right now. He’s lying out in the square, if ImpSec or the Municipal Guard hasn’t cleaned him up. You got banged up pretty much, but the worst is over.”

Ivan sighed. He knew his cousin too well. “Worst is over? I hate it when you say that.”

He finally managed to get two eyes open together and focused. After a few blinks he took in his surroundings, a tiny, featureless cubicle dominated by the hospital bed. With a chair either side, there wasn’t really room for anything else, apart from the door to a bathroom leading off to his right. No windows. Ivan wasn’t too keen on small spaces, but at least there was an exit from this one. He’d definitely experienced worse. His gaze wandered between his two visitors. Miles was subtly disposing of the chuck bucket by way of a hovering medtech. Gregor had a hold of his hand. The Emperor looked a lot paler than he should have been. His eyes held flickering expressions of rage, relief and exhaustion in an otherwise bland countenance. Really, only his friends would be able to tell just how seriously pissed off he was. Heads were going to be rolling, if they hadn’t already.

“Gregor, you look dreadful. I remember now. I knocked you out. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, too, about Vorinnis.”

The Emperor rubbed his face. “He may be all right. No head wounds or anything like that. They got to him very quickly, too, with the cryochamber.” He paused, his expression very bleak. “I shouldn’t ask my friends to stand beside me. It’s bad for their health if not fatal. Too many innocent bystanders got hurt today. How can I ever ask Laisa to share all this?” His voice cracked. Emperor or no Emperor, Ivan wasn’t having any of that. “Don’t talk rot. It’s a privilege and an honour, sire. You know that.” He stopped, exhausted, but he had to convince Gregor somehow. “He’d do it again tomorrow and so would I. And it’s too late with Laisa. She’d have your hide if you tried to back out now. So would we. Honour of the Vor, don’t you know? Where is she, anyway? Waiting for you? You should go to bed. To sleep, I mean. Not—oh hell. You know what I mean. But go and get some rest.”

Miles looked at him. Gregor looked at him.

“Oh, shit. That didn’t come out right, did it? But if you do get lucky…”

The Emperor just shook his head. He squeezed Ivan’s shoulder. “Thanks, Ivan. Just…thank you for being you. I’ll go, now that I know you’re OK. I’ve had better days. I just needed…” his voice trailed off.

Needed what? Ivan could only guess. Perhaps the poor sod only needed to be near his friends? Someone had just tried to kill him, after all.

Gregor stood up. “Miles can stay with you until your mother gets here.”

Betrayed by his own commander-in-chief. What had he ever done to deserve that? Oh, that’s right. Knocked him out on the Great Square, in front of millions of holovid viewers. It took him a second to find his voice.

“You sent for my mother? I saved your life and this is how you repay me? You sent for my mother. She’s on holiday. With Simon. She’s going to kill me.”

“Oh, it won’t be as bad as that.” Gregor actually smiled. Ivan was grateful to have afforded him the amusement, taken his mind off things, if only briefly. Really, he was. Gregor went on. “There was
a choice. Tell her and let her take it out on you, or not tell her and have her take it out on me when she did find out.”

Miles chuckled and interrupted before Ivan could say something to his liege lord he might regret later.

“Worry about it when it happens. Who you do need to worry about right now is Admiral Waleska. That medtech must have tipped him off. Here he comes and he doesn’t look happy.”

The surgeon looked both exhausted and somewhat irate. His version of pissed off was a lot less subtle than Gregor’s. “I’m glad to see one of you is lying down. Sire, I’m fetching two of your armsmen to drag you to bed if you don’t go right now. If you please.” He thought for a moment and added somewhat belatedly, “With all due respect, my liege.”

Two smiles in one night. Gregor was trying to set a record. He nodded. “Marching orders, Ivan. I shall set a good example and do what I’m told. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow.”

“It’s already been a long day,” Waleska said. “Bed. Now. And take those meds I gave you. Goodnight!”

He waited impatiently until the Emperor left the room before checking Ivan’s readings, shining a light in his eyes and holding up some fingers.

“Two,” Ivan said before he was asked. He knew the drill.

“Very good, my lord.” Waleska hesitated. “May I apologise for the delay in your treatment? It was a very unusual injury to your skull, but that’s no excuse for the late diagnosis. It wasn’t metal so the preliminary scan didn’t pick it up. There’s hardly any difference in the density. It’s a minor fracture and the scar will be hidden in your hairline.” He looked abjectly guilty.

Miles cackled. There was no other word for it. “I always said you had rocks for brains. No damage to your pretty face, in other words. Just think of the mileage you’re going to get out of this, Ivan. Every Vor bud north of the Black Escarpment is going to want to run her fingers through the hair of the wounded hero.” His voice pitched up into a squeaky falsetto, “ooh, Ivan, darling, is that your scar? Let me kiss it better.”

“Ignore him, sir. He’s an idiot.” Ivan held out his hand and rustled up his best smile, or a close facsimile. It hurt to smile too much. He remembered most of what had happened, now. The doctor had been run off his feet. “You had a bit on your plate, and I didn’t exactly co-operate, did I? No hard feelings. Thank you very much for all you did, sir. I really do appreciate it. How’s little Marie doing?”

The surgeon was immune to the charm offensive, but he did relax slightly. “She’ll be sleeping until morning. There are some minor complications and we’re testing for a few things. Not anything you need worry about, however. I’m going to sleep myself and I suggest you do, too. Goodnight, my lord. My Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, Captain Vorpatril should not be disturbed any further.” With a slight bow to Ivan and a much frostier nod to the still-sniggering Miles, he departed.

Once everyone else had left Miles fiddled around a bit at the side table, re-arranging the water, a clean vomit bowl just in case, Ivan’s personal effects retrieved from his uniform pockets, the call button, and back to the water again. After a few moments, Ivan sighed. “Come on, coz. Out with it.”

Miles looked at him directly. “Do you remember what happened earlier, Ivan, when I came in?”
Oh, gods. He’d made a huge fool of himself, hadn’t he? He felt warmth flood into his face.

“Um, er...yeah. Some.”

Miles reached over the bed to take hold of his good hand, the one not caught up in a sling. His expression changed as a warm look came into his eyes. “I’m sorry. I really am. I didn’t quite realize. These last six hours I began to understand just a little, how it must have been. And I should have known, but didn’t—” he paused, swallowing before he went on. “I love you, too. Ivan. Get some sleep.”

To Ivan’s utter astonishment his cousin kissed him on the forehead before he turned off the lights and settled back into the bedside chair. “What the hell? What the actual hell? What’s with the touchy feely stuff? I’m not ten years old. Taking after your mother,” he muttered. “Crazy little git with your galactic notions. That’s Betans for you!”

But still, it felt quite nice all the same, he mused as he drifted off to doze as best he could.

There was the quietest of snores from the chair beside him when Ivan woke again. The nausea had gone, but another bodily urge threatened to become an embarrassment. The call button lay next to his hand, but the bathroom was just across the way. No one had told him he couldn’t get up, after all.

No sooner thought than acted on. Ivan pulled himself out of the bed. The bathroom door looked a lot further away now than it had a few seconds before, but he steadied himself and put a tentative foot forward, and then another. His head only swam a little bit. He swayed, standing over the toilet. The surgical gown complicated things but his aim wasn’t that bad and the relief was bliss. Even the plumbing co-operated as the water flushed almost silently.

He eased the door back open and lined up the bed. Just as his mission looked to be a complete success he heard a tiny whimper. Not Miles, he remained sound asleep. Ivan listened hard. There it came again. Holding on to the furniture and the doorframe, his bare feet made no sound as he moved to investigate.

Little Marie was stirring, her head moving from side to side on her pillow. Her eyes were wide with fear. Ivan managed to reach her bedside chair, breathing hard from the exertion.

“Da? Oh, Da is that you?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m not your Da.” He reached out to smooth the tangled hair away from her brow. The vision of her black ribbons rushed in to haunt him. She’d never see her Da again. “You try and sleep, honey. You’re safe now.”

“I want my Da. And my Ma.” Her voice wobbled. She sounded so scared.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.”

There were tears running from her eyes as she sobbed quietly.

“Aww, come here, precious.” Ivan ditched the sling and gathered her up, wincing at the stab of pain in his lacerated muscles, careful to mind the dressing on her leg. Her stick-like arms wrapped round his neck in a stranglehold.

“Shhh. Shhh. I’ve got you. Everything’s all right now. There’s nothing to worry about.”

She smelled of shampoo, sweat, and...blood. This was just...wrong.
“Who are you?”

“I’m—” so who was he? The man who stood around and watched her mother get killed? Some stranger in a fancy uniform who’d winked at her a hundred years ago?

“I’m just Ivan, honey. Your Ma and Da can’t be with you now. I’m going to look after you.”

Whatever logic was working in her drug-hazed brain seemed to be satisfied. Perhaps it was just the human touch. “My Ivan. I’m scared. My leg hurts.” Her arms closed even tighter.

“Don’t you worry, Marie.” He fought to keep it light, keep the grim determination out of his voice, but he wasn’t so sure he’d succeeded. Almost to himself, he made an oath. “Some bastard is going to pay for this, sweetheart. I swear on my word as Vorpatril.”

Ivan awoke from a doze. Two figures were standing in the doorway. Admiral Waleska wasn't enough of a fool to argue with a lady, especially with that blue blood of the Vor and social secretary to the Emperor, Lady Alys Vorpatril, but it was obviously a toss up between Lady Alys and the admiral as to which one of them wanted a piece of Ivan first. Miles, stretching a crick out of his neck, looking guilty, stood just behind them. His mother appeared as elegant as ever in her red outfit, her dark hair, still only lightly streaked with grey, artfully coiled at the back of her neck. The expression on her face sent chills up his spine. Waleska’s chest rose and fell with his carefully controlled deep breathing. His fingers tapped the seams on his regulation green trousers. Marie slept with her head on Ivan’s shoulder and her arms still entwined round his neck, oblivious to the tension. Self-preservation was the catalyst for some quick thinking.

“Shh. Don’t wake her. She's just a baby.”

“Put. her. down. and. get. out. here.” Ivan had never heard quite such a note of menace in a whisper before. The doctor radiated fury the way a nuclear core radiated gamma rays.

Every muscle in his body protested as Ivan did as he was bid. Holding his gown bunched closed behind him, he sidled out of the room and back to his own bed in very short order. It did feel good to stretch out, he had to admit. His mother tidied his sheets and kissed him on the cheek.

“Yes, mamère, but she was crying.”

“Do try to follow orders, Ivan dear,” she said. “I hear it’s a virtue to be cultivated in the Imperial Service.”

She just had to open her mouth to make him feel like an eight-year-old. Hell, she just had to look at him to make him feel like an eight-year-old.

“Yes, mamère, but she was crying.”

“No doubt the good doctor here knows exactly how she feels.” With that cryptic remark Lady Alys finished her ministrations and straightened up. She laid a hand on his shoulder for a fleeting few seconds. “I’m glad to see the reports of your injuries were somewhat alarmist, Ivan.”

For once the innocent bystander, Miles, who had followed them back into the cramped room, ran interference. He threw his hands up. “Hey, blame Gregor. He’s the one who sent for you, not me, Tante.”

She looked at him coolly for a few seconds. Ivan got to enjoy the sight of his cousin squirming. “Oh, I will no doubt be having words with the Emperor shortly, if only to congratulate him on his narrow escape. Simon would never have let this happen.”

Simon Illyan, the once-dreaded head of ImpSec for thirty years, had been medically retired after
his own near-death brush with assassination. He was the reason for Lady Alys’s holiday, much to
Ivan’s total crogglement at the thought of the two of them actually together. Simon Illyan. With his
mother.

Miles proffered his arm. “I’m just on my way to his office myself to give a morning report on the
patient’s condition. I got the summons a few minutes ago. Woke me up, actually. Guy Allegre will
be reporting for his morning briefing shortly. I want to find out what ImpSec has discovered. It
must have been a hornet’s nest at headquarters overnight.”

Lady Alys acquiesced. She turned back to Ivan for a moment, missing the ‘you owe me one’
signals passing from Miles to Ivan behind her back.

“Give me your doorcoder and I’ll have Christos pick up a change of clothing for you. I’ll be back
after I’ve spoken to the Emperor, so don’t run away. Why don’t you turn on the news? If you’re a
really good boy I’m sure someone will be along shortly with some breakfast for you, too. Give
Doctor Waleska a chance to do his job.” The ‘for a change’ remained unuttered but unmistakable.
Ivan really didn’t need a crack in his skull to give him a headache.

He laid back and closed his eyes. “Yes, mamère. I could do with a rest.”

When he opened them again Waleska was still there. “And now, my lord, if you please…”

He groaned. He’d called the Emperor’s personal doctor “Wally”, yesterday. Rear-admiral Wally.
He was so dead.

The poking and prodding and rolling over and finger counting wasn’t too bad, but Ivan felt like
he’d gone three bouts with the Koudelka girls by the time Waleska had finished with him. He was
glad to sink back into his pillows and flick on a newsvid for a distraction. Scenes from the debacle
the day before rotated through on constant loop, from hard news to the gossip segment. Before he
could turn it off his own face flashed up on the hologram, fading into scenes of him running
through the square. The smarmy innuendo of the social reporter riveted his attention. He’d never
liked her, or her attitude or her holovid channel. Now he knew why.

“No, there is no way I could do without you.” Ivan rolled over.

“Once only known for his popularity with the ladies, and prowess, among other things in the
bedroom, did I really say that? I meant on the dance floor, silly me, the Emperor’s cousin Lord
Ivan Vorpatril, son of that doyenne of the social scene, Lady Alys Vorpatril herself, has been hailed
the hero of the hour, throwing himself valiantly between the Emperor and danger, and afterwards
rushing a casualty to the Imperial Infirmary. Good morning VS has been unable to contact him for
a comment this morning as he is incommunicado recovering from his injuries. Lady Alys was seen
entering the Residence gates not long ago, rushing to be by her beloved son’s bedside. Tall, dark,
handsome and brave,” the commentator’s voice almost purred with lasciviousness, “not to mention
extremely athletic, you can rush me anywhere and anyhow you like, Ivan, dahling.”

“Oh, I am so dead again.” Ivan lay back with a groan. He felt like whimpering in the corner. Miles
was never going to let him live this down. “Dear gods, come and bury me right now.” There was
no answer to his plea. “I have to get out of town.” Perhaps Gregor had a spare dungeon, or wood
cellar. Sergyar. He could transfer out to Sergyar for about fifty years…”

Even the medtech with the breakfast tray had a smirk on his face. Ivan couldn’t eat a bite.

As it turned out, Gregor decided to return with Lady Alys to see for himself how Ivan was feeling.
He looked vastly improved from the day before, crisp and fresh in his black and silver house
uniform. It was wonderful what pain meds and a good valet could do. Miles was nowhere to be seen.

“We’ve sent Lord Auditor Vorkosigan to Vor Clarence district,” Gregor told him, in his most formal, stick-stuck-up-his-ass, voice. Ivan noted the ‘We’ with a capital letter. The Emperor’s lips narrowed with displeasure. “There appear to be some discrepancies. We feel they may well turn out to be fatal discrepancies.”

“Discrepancies?” Vor Clarence? Shit! Of course, the sudden accident with his horse. Bloody counts and their bloody obsession with murdering the Emperor. Ivan seethed with anger. He felt his jaw clamp. He practically growled. “Treason? The bastard. The… the murdering twelve-toed fat bastard! I want in, Gregor. This is personal, now. Oh, this is so personal.”

“Beware the Vor lord with a blood feud?” Gregor sighed, relaxing slightly. “I don’t blame you, Ivan, I feel the same, but you’re in no fit state to do anything at the—”

“Where’s my Ma?” There was panic in the frightened little girl's voice that interrupted. Some low-voiced murmuring from the neighbouring cubicle obviously didn’t placate the patient. “I want my Ma! I want my Da! I want my Ivan! Ow! Ow Ow!”

Ivan tumbled out of bed, not caring who saw his gown flapping behind him. In the next room the harassed medtech stood perplexed. He obviously had no experience nursing little girls, not that Ivan knew anything more, but she needed him. “Here I am, sweetheart. Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

Marie was sitting up in the bed, scooted over to the side as far as she could get, pressed against the safety rail, away from the medtech and all his evil intentions. Tears were streaming down her face as she sobbed. She held up her arms. “He’s a bad man, my Ivan. I don’t like him.”

The medtech looked like he’d been stabbed in the heart. “I only want to change her dressing, my lord! We don’t have any female medtechs assigned to the infirmary.”

“I just give us a minute. I’ll call you.”

The medtech picked up his tray and fled. “I’ll get some help.”

Ivan sat back in the chair. Marie scrambled over to cling like a monkey. What the hell was he supposed to do? He tried gently patting her back. “He’s not a bad man, Marie. You’ve been hurt and he was only trying to look after you.”

“I don’t want him. I don’t. I don’t. I want my Ma. Why doesn’t she come?”

Ivan looked rather wildly around for help. His mother and the Emperor had followed him and they both looked stricken. No help there. “Marie, honey. She can’t come. She’d very much like to, but she had a bad accident yesterday, worse than you did.”

There was total silence as Marie thought about this. He felt her whole body shrink into itself. She looked at him with the most desperate, lost look in her eyes. “Did my Ma die, my Ivan? Like my Da did? He died and can’t come home. Ma said nothing else would stop him coming.”

He could only hug her even closer. “Yes, darling. I’m so sorry. She died. She didn’t want to leave you but she was hurt so bad. She’d never want to leave you if she didn’t have to. She loved you so very much.”

Gregor looked ghastly. Was he was going to pass out? Crown Princess Kareen, his own mother,
had died horribly when he was six years old. He’d know exactly how Marie felt.

Ivan smoothed her hair down and willed Gregor to look at him. “Haven’t you found any relatives?”

He shook his head. “We got word. There are none. Both the parents were only children and the grandparents are long dead.”

“Well, she’s not going to the Imperial Orphanage. That’s just wrong.”

Gregor shook his head. “What else can we do?”

Ivan looked at his mother. She had a peculiar, half smile on her face, but her eyes were alight with a tender warmth.

She spoke up. “Well, sire, you could appoint an Imperial guardian, or two, even. What do you say, Ivan? Are you willing? I’ve always known you’d make a wonderful father.”

The most famous gamophobe in the whole of Vorbarr Sultana could only gape at his mother and manage a tiny nod. Father? There was a huge lump in his throat. He hid his face in Marie’s hair for a moment or two. Father.

Gregor broke the silence. “That seems like an excellent solution. She’ll have survivor benefits to pay for her education, of course.”

Lady Alys dismissed all considerations of money with a mere wave of her hand. She moved forwards, her gaze assessing. “Apart from the obvious, what seems to be wrong with this child? She’s far too thin. Let’s have that doctor in here at once.”

The answer left them shocked.

“Malnutrition? She’s been hungry?” Ivan thought of those skinny arms hugging him so tightly. The little mite was starving? What fucked-up system left a little girl hungry in this day and age?

Rear-admiral Waleska nodded. His voice was tight-clipped with an anger of his own. “I’ve seen the preliminary autopsy on Madame Watson. She too was well underweight, anaemic and deficient in several vitamins. She should have had her pension, enough to live on, at least. What the hell has been happening in Vor Clarence district, sire?”

The Emperor stood up. “We are going to find out. Miles is on his way. We’ll update him.”

Lady Alys dusted off her skirts. “Thank you, Gregor. It’s best left in your hands. I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of matters. In the meanwhile, with the good doctor’s permission, and yours, I shall take care of little Marie once she is able to be discharged, until Ivan is well enough the make his plans. Starving! The very idea!”
Lord Auditor Miles Vorkosigan paid attention to his surroundings once his lightflyer crossed the border and entered Vorclarence district. This was the heartland of the English-speaking firsters, long since terraformed as evidenced by the green fields and mature stands of oak and ashtree forests. It was warmer than his own district, and maples didn’t do as well, here, although there were probably a few in the higher parts. There was very little of the red-brown Bararrayan native vegetation to be seen. It looked prosperous enough, although Miles knew the traditional heavy industries of New Sheffield had been all but decimated after the Time of Isolation ended, since it was much cheaper to smelt steel and manufacture machinery out on the space stations. One of the main sources of income for the city dwellers these days had become the Imperial Service, and many twice-twenty year men retired to live on their pensions and watch their grandchildren grow, if they got the chance. There would be hundreds, if not thousands of enlisted men with homes in the capital, and there was a district military academy for officers. Lots of men just like Master Sergeant Watson and his little family, in fact.

With the well-established farmlands stretching out in every direction, however, it didn’t look like the sort of place where anyone needed to go hungry. His lips tightened in anger at the thought of the message Gregor had sent on to him. What sort of a count couldn’t look after his widows and orphans? Vorclarence was toast.

As they grew nearer to their destination Miles was alerted by the intercom to the pilot’s cabin.

“My Lord? TrafficCom New Sheffield is advising us to divert. No incoming flights have landing permission. There’s apparently an emergency, some sort of fire at the main passenger terminal.” Pym, his armsman seconded from the Count’s Score, sounded just a tad skeptical. “I can see several smoke columns, my lord.”

Diversions? A trap? Surely he wouldn’t dare. “Override, Pym. They’re stalling for time. Tell them we’ll be landing at the District Office instead.” There was silence for a few moments, then Pym switched on the speaker for Miles to hear the exchange.

“We repeat, New Sheffield Flyerport and District Office landing bays are both closed to all traffic. We require you to divert to Rotherhall or Prestwich. By order of the Count himself.”

Miles snapped on his microphone. “Patch me through, Pym.” He waited a second for the connection. “New Sheffield TrafficCom I see your Count and raise you an Imperial Auditor. This is Lord Auditor Miles Vorkosigan. I am the Voice of Emperor Gregor Vorbarra himself. We will be landing at the New Sheffield District Office. Transmitting my auditor’s code now.”

Miles pressed his auditor’s seal to the comconsole read pad, quite glad at this stage for the flight of ImpSec heavies accompanying him. The squad was commanded, somewhat disconcertingly, by an Ensign Vorberg. Miles had only had a few words with him, enough to ascertain he’d lately been on fairly close, if somewhat unfortunate, terms with the ensign’s older brother. Coincidence, or some quirk of Guy Allegre’s to remind him to take care? Hopefully both encounters with Vorberg senior were so classified the younger brother knew nothing about them. There was a minute or two of static before their clearance codes came through without further comment.

“Pym, haven’t we raised the local ImpSec office in New Sheffield, yet? What’s the problem?”
“No contact, my lord. It should be a captain by the name of Mikhail Karasavas. The channel’s open. He’s just not answering. No reports since yesterday, right about when the grenade went off, apparently. It got put on the backburner with the chaos in the capital.”

Miles felt the prickle up the back of his neck as all his senses came to full alert. He checked the stunner he wore concealed under his tunic and pressed his palm to the locked cabinet in the seatback in front of him. Nerve disruptor or plasma arc? He decided at length on one of each. He had fifteen men with him, all told, in four lightflyers. The count would have his score of armsmen, if he were stupid enough to try and use them. Miles checked the power units on the two extra weapons. Better safe than sorry. Vorclarence hadn’t actually shown any sign of intelligence so far.

The formation of lightflyers smoothly rearranged itself as they approached the landing site. It was really neat the way the escorts spiraled around their charge, always one of them above and one to the danger side, but none of them staying in the one position for long. He’d have to commend the pilots later. One flyer darted ahead, the four men it contained piling out and forming a perimeter on the roof while the others circled, checking for power readouts, imploder lances, plasma arcs, sonic grenade launchers and other welcoming gifts.

Unlike his own Vorkosigan district, where the old capital Vorkosigan Vashnoi had been immolated by a nuclear strike, New Sheffield had survived the Cetagandan War unscathed. It was a city of about half a million people, nowhere near as big as Vorbarr Sultana. The District Office was housed in a Time of Isolation stronghold, complete with three massive chimneys, crenellated walls and arrow slits. All it needed was a moat and drawbridge, Miles thought sourly to himself. The dressed stone walls would have to be two feet thick. There were probably four levels above ground and two below, including dungeons.

It was somewhat of an anticlimax when they all landed on the roof completely unopposed. Anticlimaxes were good, Miles decided. What was puzzling was that there was no sign of any sort of welcoming committee. Not a person to be seen, the only movement the lazy flapping of the district flag on its staff above the building.

Miles stayed where he was until the area had been cleared. Stunner drawn, piercing gaze darting all round, Pym walked ahead of him into the tiny staging area. Surely someone should be here? Miles tapped his wrist comm.

“Vorberg? What’s happening?”

“Cleared down to the main reception area, my lord. All safe. The rest of the building appears to be empty. There’s people you should see down here though, some armsmen. I don’t quite know what to make of it, myself.”

The lad sounded bewildered. Probably his first real mission, and scared to death, Miles mused as they made their way down the somewhat anachronous lift tube to reception. A soldier stood on each level as they floated past, with Pym and a team scanning the way ahead and four men behind him keeping an eye on their rear.

Braced rigidly to attention, a trio of count’s armsmen dressed in hideous mustard and burnt orange livery stood waiting. Plasma arc rifles lay at the feet of Ensign Vorberg. The grizzled veteran at the front of the triangle had tears running down his face. The other two didn’t look much better. Miles pulled up, assessing. Vorberg was right after all. He didn’t know quite what to make of it, either.

Vorberg shook his head. “We found them here like this, my lord. Their weapons were already on the ground. They haven’t said a word.”
Pym stepped forward. He turned to Miles. “If I may, my lord, I know this man.” At a nod of permission he continued, “Armsman Walton, isn’t it? We met last Winterfair. What’s going on?”

Walton swallowed hard. He looked from Pym to Miles and back again, before directing his gaze back somewhere over Pym’s left shoulder. “I’m into my second twenty years an armsman sworn to my lord count, him and his father before him, but I served ten with ImpSec before that, like so many.” He paused, shifting his gaze to look Miles directly in the eye. “I’ve been ordered by Count Vorclarence to kill my Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. I…I can’t take arms against my Emperor’s Voice. None of us here can. The old Count defended the District for the Regent in the face of all Vordarian could throw at him. But…my oath.”

There was nothing more unbreakable or binding than an armsman’s oath to his count. They swore allegiance to death. This defiance was literally killing him, Miles understood. Suicide would be the only honourable way out after deliberately disobeying a count’s order. Usually.

Miles stepped forwards, his voice as severe as he could make it. “Armsman Walton. Offering violence to an Imperial Auditor is Treason. Anyone ordering such a thing is committing treason of the worst kind against the Emperor himself and your count’s order was illegal. I congratulate you on your honourable decision and His Imperial Majesty will be informed of this. There will be no repercussions. Stand down. You are relieved. All of you,” he nodded to the other two as well. “Ensign Vorberg and I need questions answered. Are you willing to co-operate, or must we persuade you?”

Walton looked down at him, death still in his eyes. “I was at Tanery Base with your father. I saw your lady mother come home from her shopping trip, with you in the replicator. I’ll co-operate, my lord. No need for the fast-penta.”

Miles could only imagine the anguish Pym would go through faced with such a conflict. No doubt Vorclarence had used drastic means to coerce this man. He spoke much more gently. “Where is your family?”

Something broke in the proud armsman. His head bowed. “In the cells at the Municipal Guard headquarters.”

Not the District Residence then. Miles turned to Pym. “Get me the guard commander. This is the first thing we can fix.”

“My lord! No!” Walton interrupted urgently. “Please, my lord, no! The commander of the Municipal Guard is Lord Vorclarence.”

Miles began to understand. “Shit. The heir?” At the armsman’s nod, he started calculating. “Where are the ImpSec men, Captain Karasavas and his squad, being held, do you know?”

“Yes, my Lord, in the Residence stable block. It’s been converted to cells.”

That didn’t sound right. “No horses? What about the riding accident Count Vorclarence claimed?”

Walton’s look told him all he wanted to know, before he even spoke. “I was ordered to lie to the Emperor’s secretary.”

Miles called over his Ensign. “Vorberg, listen up. Now, armsman, can you get us in? Nobody needs to get hurt if we do this quickly and quietly.”

The District Count’s Residence, located adjacent to the administration office, was another stone building, not quite as ancient, maybe similar in age to Vorkosigan House. The two of them together
formed the east side of the Main Square. There was a high stone wall and narrow cobbled courtyard. They by-passed the main entrance and continued further north and then east along a side street to the stables gateway.

Six prisoners in their ImpSec combat blacks, guarded by the three count’s armsmen, were marched up to the stable block. It was all too simple, really. The other armsmen on guard were overpowered without a fight, stunned where they stood. In the first cell there was a single prisoner with blue tabs and silver eyes of Horus on his collar.

Captain Karasavas, sporting a lively black eye, ripped off his gag as soon as his hands were untied. He had the grey-faced look of a stunner migraine, but the utter fury boiling out of him knew no bounds. His squad, not looking much better, crawled out of the other converted loose boxes when they were released.

“Ensign. Report,” He snapped. Things moved fast after that…

The Emperor looked up from his desk the next morning. “Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril,” his armsman announced, shutting the door behind him. Ivan wore his dress greens, delivered just then to the infirmary by his mother’s servant, Christos.

“Ivan!” Gregor jumped up and circled the desk to take Ivan’s arm. “They’ve let you out! Come and sit down. How are you feeling?” He led the way to a window embrasure where a pair of couches was arranged in a semi-formal square with two armchairs, clustered round a low table. General Guy Allegre, recently appointed new head of ImpSec, rose to his feet as they walked over. Ivan had never seen a man look so shattered.

“I’ll live.” Ivan waited while the armsman returned with coffee and a tray of pastries. Once the door closed again and they had all sat down with the coffee in front of them he continued in a somewhat morbid tone of voice, “It’s only a small crack in my skull, after all. Hardly worth mentioning.”

“And the concussion?”

“Yes, well, about that. I’m sorry. Did you actually take my boots off for me? And my socks? I can’t have remembered that right, surely?”

Gregor waved his hand. “It was nothing. Right place, right time. The medtechs were chasing their tails until the reinforcements got over from ImpMil. At least it was something I could do to help.”

Ivan could feel his ears going red. “Well, thank you, but don’t you ever do that again, Gregor. It’s not fitting.”

“Cheer up, Ivan. At least it was Miles you threw up on, not me. That would have been worse.”

“Oh, gods, don’t remind me.” Ivan groaned, then relaxed. He chuckled. “Serves him right. Not that I meant to, mind you. Couldn’t help myself. But speaking of Miles, I hear you’ve had a preliminary report?”

Guy Allegre looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him. Gregor nodded, his expression turning much darker.

“I’m sending Miles all the reinforcements he needs. Vor Clarence is an outright traitor. No question. He’ll die in the Great Square where he tried to kill me. He ordered his armsmen to shoot Miles on
sight. Thank the gods the senior man held them back. All their families were held hostage, apparently. The Municipal Guard is compromised. The entire civil government is compromised. Hell, the city choir is compromised! Can you believe it cost a hundred marks to speak to the Count, or five hundred to appear in his court?"

Ivan had to close his slack jaw. “You’re joking.”

“The entire private rental accommodation market in the whole of New Sheffield is owned by members of the Vorclarence family. Everything else is owned by the Count. The cartel set pensioner rents at seventy percent of income. No wonder Marie is so thin. Miles says he’s seen lots of kids just like her.”

“What? They can’t do that!”

“Been doing it for five years, apparently, ever since the old count died. There were kickbacks on everything. You name it, you needed a permit, at some cost. Permits needed for everything. Market stalls, health services, electricity supplies, plumbing connections. Schools, even. The Municipal Guard had a call out fee. And now, if you please, Miles also reports widespread sabotage. The whole city is on the point of collapse.”

Ivan shook his head, stunned. “Has he caught the bastard?”

“Not yet. The Countess, the heir, Lord Vorclarence, and his wife and family are in custody though. That’s Aaron Vorclarence. It’s hard to keep track of them. The cousins and the nieces and the nephews and every damned last one of them apart from the count are in custody. All the shuttleports are closed and his bank accounts, what he’s holding on planet, are frozen. It’s only a matter of time, and he knows it.”

“What about the grenade?”

“Traced to the Imperial Armoury here in Vorbarr Sultana. Lieutenant Lord Brian Vorclarence, that’s the second son, is also in custody. He handed over a case of five of them to his father, no questions asked. He didn’t know what his Da planned to do with them, which is I suppose a small mercy. He got strung along with some bullshit tale about training the armsmen, but that’s no excuse and there are still four unaccounted for.”

Ivan held his head in his hands. It was incredible, the whole rotten story. “And the drone? Don’t tell me. A cousin?”

“A nephew this time. Lieutenant Charles Vorclarence. ImpSec.”

Ivan leapt to his feet. Oh, that was totally wrong. “ImpSec? *ImpSec*? Fuck, Gregor, it’s as bad as Vordarian.”

General Allegre visibly winced. The Vordarian Pretendership had killed Gregor’s mother and Ivan’s father when the Emperor was five years old and Ivan not yet born. Only Miles’ father, Regent Aral Vorkosigan, had saved the Imperium for the rightful heir.

Gregor looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth. “I’m not even finished. Captain Karasavas in New Sheffield has been reporting in for weeks to the District desk officer at headquarters—”

Ivan was way ahead of him. “Simon would never have allowed anything so moronic, surely?”

“No, not the district desk officer. But who does he summarise and report to?
“Domestic Affairs, but that’s Sokolov. He’s not related, surely.”

“And his deputy is?”

After an appalled silence they all three of them said it together. “Commodore David Vorclarence.”

“About ten percent of Karasavas’ reports were getting through. He’d even been up to HQ and banged desks in person. He was beginning to think We approved of the system.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” Ivan felt like kicking something. Not Allegre. He looked like he’s been kicked enough. “Do we have to go through the whole fucking alphabet of Vorclarences?”

“Just about. There are eighteen male members of the Vorclarence family in custody so far. Some of them are in-laws, of course. The whole thing is a stinking, putrid mess.”

Guy Allegre spoke in a hollow voice. “I really must insist on tendering my resignation, sire. It’s unforgiveable that matters got to this.”

Gregor waved him down. “It’s not happening, Guy. You’re the second one today that wants to cut his own throat. I can’t spare you.”

“Who was the first one?” Ivan asked, curious.

“Rear-admiral Waleska. He’s taking personal responsibility for missing your head wound.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. He must have saved ten lives when that grenade went off, and even I didn’t know I had a head wound. We both saw it – the place was chaos. He worked like a dog.”

“But apparently a very old dog, according to him. Too slow to react to the first real emergency we’ve had in years. I see his point.”

Ivan shook his head. “That’s just wrong. Maybe move him to a different job, but you can’t let him retire.”

At a look from the Emperor Ivan felt a blush rise up from his toes and leave by the top of his head. “Sorry, sire. I’m way out of line. I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job.”

“Not much, you’re not, but we’ll talk about Waleska later. How’s Marie?”

Ivan smiled. It was the first pleasant thought he’d had since coming in to the room. He was beginning to get used to the idea of a daughter. She was such a poppet. “She was discharged to the custody of my mother just before I came up here.” He fidgeted a little. “She couldn’t really go home with me. I don’t have the proper seat restraints in my groundcar.”

“Translated to mean you were going to drive that girl home over your mother’s dead body. It should be interesting watching you drive at the speed limit. You might even have to buy yourself a four-seater. Family model.”

All his friends were going to provide themselves with endless enjoyment at his expense, he could see. But that was later. This was now. “I won’t be driving for a while, anyway. Banned until the concussion tests come back clear. But that’s a side issue. Like I told you yesterday, I want in. It sounds like Miles needs all the help he can get sorting things out down in the district. Mamère is happy to look after Marie. I’m on sick leave, not expected back at Ops for at least a week.”

“Plus you’d really like to get out of the city for a while. I saw the vids.” Gregor came to an abrupt
decision. “Yes, you can go down there. I’m going to get Waleska to go with you. He can keep an eye on you and get that mess with the medical service sorted out.”

Something was nagging that Ivan couldn’t quite put his finger on. “But what tipped him over the edge? Why the attempt at your life? Why now?”

Gregor sighed. “Simple, really, but hard to credit. At the reception after the parade we were going to talk to all those families from New Sheffield. Something would have leaked out, or we would have at least noticed what a bad way they were in, and he couldn’t take the risk of being discovered for what he is. He was going to use the chaos to get off planet. Plus he’s gone mad.”

Ivan thought he’d been angry before. He didn’t know the half of it. White rage left him spluttering. “He was prepared to kill you and all those innocent bystanders, kill Vorinnis, a man just doing his job, and all to hide his own greed? Draw all his family into his schemes, his children and his grandchildren, ruin them all? For money? Didn’t he have any honour at all? How could a…a piece of scum like that call himself Vor?”

Gregor kept a better control on his emotions, but he was feeling them all the same, Ivan could tell. “Not for much longer he won’t. Anyway, Miles needs a good administrator over there, someone we can trust, to sort out just how deep that midden of horse shit is, so if you really are feeling up to it, thanks for the offer. I’ll have you reassigned for the duration. Waleska can ride shotgun on you, but more importantly see how many more kids like Marie we’re going to find. There’ll be a convoy of emergency rations going in, to start with.” Gregor paused. “And I will stay here to deal with the Council of Counts.”

“Good luck with that one.” The political ramifications of all this were going to be one giant headache, Ivan could just see. The last count tried for treason had been Vordrozda. Ivan had taken a great deal of pleasure in smashing him to the ground that day in the Council chamber, what, ten years or more ago? His palms itched to do the same to Vorclarenc. Vordrozda hadn’t succeeded in putting any holes in him, or Miles either, for that matter, but it wasn’t for the want of trying. Ivan had a deep-rooted personal dislike of anyone trying to put holes in him. There was a score to settle with Vorclarenc. For him, for Vorinnis, for Marie and her mother, and for every person in his district who should have been able to call on their count for justice.
The Reward for a Job Well Done

Sitting in a geriatric combat shuttle with more than sixty other men and a few tons of emergency stores and equipment, the roar of the main engine grated on Ivan’s nerves. It wasn’t often he got to wear his black combat fatigues as regulations stipulated dress greens for his regular job of driving his desk in Ops Central, but they were certainly much more comfortable. The colour suited his mood. He gave up trying to read the ream of reports, including Miles’ overnight bulletin and the ones Karasavas had sent in over the past few months, the ones that had been so neatly filed sideways and buried. He still had his persistent headache and the aches and pains from his half-healed wounds were only going to get worse before they got better in this rattletrap rust bucket. Rear-admiral Waleska and his full field hospital weren’t going to be any help until they got to their destination, either. He was travelling in a second shuttle in tandem. Ivan wouldn’t have it any other way though, as he knew from his day job that the state-of-art new shuttles were automatically allocated to the combat regiments, the shock troops that actually needed them most. They were hours away though, down on the Black Escarpment for summer training.

He closed his eyes to try and cope with the discomfort. Every time he did, the vision of little Marie saying goodbye, her lower lip trembling in distress, attacked his conscience. She was going to be perfectly fine with his mother, but he’d no sooner taken on the responsibility than here he was deserting her. She’d wanted My Ivan, not Mamie Alys or Christos or even the nurse hired for her sole care. He needed to get this mission wrapped up sooner rather than later. He had commitments now.

The medical craft peeled off to land at the shuttleport but Ivan continued to the main square in the city centre. Obviously Miles had decided a show of Imperial might wouldn’t go amiss, whatever the shuttle pilot thought as he eased the craft down with only metres to spare all round, the anti-grav units whining at the pinpoint precision. He waited to greet them on the steps of the District administration building, his grey eyes narrowed in calculation and assessment. Captain Karasavas and Ensign Vorberg together with their squads lined the perimeter. Ivan marched up to him and saluted in best parade style.

“My Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, reporting as requested.” His little cousin looked like he’d pulled an all-nighter, with drawn features and black bags under his eyes.

Miles was wearing his auditor’s chain of office over his neat grey suit. The salute for the office was perfectly correct but obviously he couldn’t return it. Instead he bowed gravely.

“Captain Vorpatril, welcome. Have your sergeants report to Captain Karasavas for billet allocation and assignments. We’ve set up an Ops Centre inside, if you’d care to accompany me. Unfortunately we’ve had some bad news today.”

As soon as they were inside the door Miles turned round to Ivan to wring his hand and stare up anxiously into his face. “It’s so good to see you up and about! You scared the shit out of me back in that infirmary, you know. How is it, really?”

Ivan knocked on his forehead with his knuckles. “Remember that museum we never got to see on Earth? Sound as the Liberty Bell,” he joked. “Better every day, actually, and from what Gregor’s told me it’s desk work you need, mostly. I can cope with that. But tell me, have you caught the slimy bastard yet? There’s an uproar in the Council of Counts. Most of them are out for blood. Vorclarence made a bad mistake with that grenade. Bleeding the proles white, gross extortion, theft and misappropriation they might stomach, apparently, but not that. Count Vorinnis is practically incandescent about his nephew. Can’t say I blame him.”
“Any news on Etienne?” Miles knew exactly what the major was going to be facing, of course, if he survived.

“It’s looking very hopeful. Gregor has sent to Escobar for one of the Duronas to supervise.”

“I wonder if Rowan will come.” Miles looked off into the distance, remembering what, exactly, Ivan wondered, but he very soon shook his head, back to business.

“It’s such a mess. I’ve declared a state of emergency and told everyone to stay in their homes. That stinking, good for nothing, fucking dog-in-a-manger saboteur has taken a plasma arc to every piece of infrastructure he could get to. He set fire to the main hospital, for pity’s sake! New mothers and babies and old people. The medical staff got them all out, but the facility is wrecked. He drew the line at damaging the main reactor, he still had that much sense left, but the power distribution lines are all fried. We’ve had two casualties trying to get the water treatment plant running. There was a grenade rigged to blow. That’s how we found out about the booby-traps. Thank heavens you brought those engineers. Everything needs to be checked for sabotage.”

“Count on at least three more grenades somewhere,” Ivan told him. “Vorclarence got his hands on five of them all told, that we know about.”

“And no doubt a few other surprises. Don’t go opening any doors you don’t know are safe. The city is completely crippled. Waleska will see to the hospital and all the medical side of things like infant health, but we need law and order patrols, secure supplies of electricity and water, welfare centres, volunteer co-ordination, educational facilities checked out and re-staffed…well, you get the idea. I want them all running yesterday. The ImpSec man on the ground here, Karasavas, is concentrating on the search for Vorclarence and his hostages—”

“Hostages?” Ivan hadn’t heard about that angle. “What hostages?”

“Two women visiting from the southern continent, apparently. Guests of the Countess; she’s been trying to line up the daughter for the younger son, or so the gossip goes. The servant that told me about them didn’t remember their names. Vorclarence grabbed them at disruptor point and left his wife behind. They’re going to be his bargaining chips, or so he thinks. He’s only got two armsmen with him unless there are some municipal guards as well. Anyway, that’s ImpSec’s headache. Once we’ve got New Sheffield organized there are two more towns waiting. Glad you came?”

It wasn’t quite yesterday but by the time Ivan signed off shift eleven hours later and crawled into the temporary officers’ mess the lights were on and staying on, sewage and fresh water were both flowing in the correct directions and emergency relief centres were operating all over the city. He found Waleska lying exhausted, his feet propped up on one arm of a leather couch. Ivan had met the three junior doctors heading the teams, two captains and a lieutenant, but they were still out on duty, as were the engineer corps lieutenants. Miles lolled in an armchair with his feet resting on a coffee table. Lady Alys would not have approved. Ivan grabbed a sandwich and a hot tea from a batman hovering in attendance and sank into a chair opposite Miles with a low groan. It was only then he realized Ensign Vorberg was fast asleep on the floor behind Waleska’s couch. Someone had very kindly placed a cushion under his head.

Miles stirred. “I was just coming to get you,” he lied. “It’s way past knock-off time. Breakfast at 0600 hours, briefing at 0700 hours. We’d better get that kid to bed.”

“Right,” Ivan agreed. “Where is my bed, by the way?”

There was no answer. Miles was fast asleep again. Ivan finished his tea and closed his eyes. The bed could wait.
There was a scramble for the bathrooms the next morning when Pym woke them all at 0530 hours. Ivan slapped on depilatory cream in between stripping off his old uniform and grabbing a new one from his bedroom, very kindly pointed out by Miles’ armsman, in what was once some sort of office. As it was the admin building and not the Residence there were only two showers in the whole place. The engineers would be clearing the District Residence as soon as possible after all the vital infrastructure had been attended to, but in the meanwhile they just had to make do. Ensign Vorberg blushed crimson with embarrassment when he realized he had kept a rear-admiral waiting. Ivan didn’t have any qualms. He just barged in on Miles in the second bathroom where he was towelling himself dry.

“I always thought you got Pym to do that,” he commented. “I bet he would if you asked him.”

Miles pulled on his boxers and undershirt. “He’d also kick your hairy ass if I asked him to, as well,” he snapped. “This bathroom is for Imperial Auditors only.”

Ivan dived into the shower. “Nice try, coz. Tell someone who believes your bullshit.”

“Aren’t you supposed to cover up that dressing on your arm?” Miles sniped back. “We wouldn’t want it going rotten and dropping off or anything.”

Ivan tore off the dressing, wincing only slightly. “Don’t need it. A bit of fresh air will do it the world of good. Are you going to stand there and watch me? Checking out the competition?”

It was a bit hard to look dignified in his underwear but Miles tried his best. “I’ll see you at breakfast, Captain.”

Three impeccably turned out officers and one stylish auditor sat down for breakfast at exactly 0600 hours, served by the ubiquitous Pym. Karasavas came in to join them not long after, having slept in his own bed for the first time in three days. Ivan took a look at him as Pym supplied him with coffee. He was not a happy man. That black eye of his had developed nicely, spreading down his face with purple and yellow bruising reaching his chin. Something seethed behind those eyes. Ivan sent Vorberg off on a spurious errand to check if the morning reports had arrived from the capital and spoke to the captain once the Ensign was out of earshot.

“Anyone filled you in on how we got into this mess?”

“No, my lord, apart from the fact that it took a bomb to get anyone at HQ to pull their fingers out of their collective ass and do something.”

“You’re owed an apology. Obviously this goes no further.” To hell with clearances, this man needed to know why he’d been treated like a mushroom. He wouldn’t have been sending in any of those increasingly frustrated reports if he’d been in on the embezzlement schemes. Ivan explained the ABCs of Vorclarence connivance. Waleska hadn’t heard the full story, either. There was an appalled silence.

“Anyone with that name is going to want to change it, after this,” he finished. “The biggest red flag should have been having Commodore D in the chain of command from the desk officer. General Allegre is all over that now and it won’t be happening again. Your reports, all of them, once they got to the proper people, have formed the basis of the work we’re doing now. You’re going to be our go-to man from now on.”

Karasavas looked partially mollified by the time he’d finished.

“Something else biting you?” Ivan asked him.
“Yes, my lord.” He turned to Miles. “My Lord Auditor, permission to kick that bastard’s butt once we catch him,” he requested. “No, two butts. The Count and the Commodore.”

Miles stood up from the table, ready to go to work. “Only if you stand in line, Captain,” he responded, “and number one in line has an Imperial boot on the end of his foot.”

Late in the evening at the end of that second day all the officers not on duty gathered in the newly scanned and cleared sitting room of Count Vorclarence’s District residence to have a glass of wine before moving in to eat in the formal dining room. A couple of the junior doctors were there, and two of the engineering lieutenants. Miles poured drinks all round. He sipped, and then grimaced.

“Cat’s piss! You’d think he’d have bought some decent wine with all that money he stole. What a day! He raised his glass in a toast to his cousin. “Here’s to you, Ivan. I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it for myself.”

“Here, here,” Waleska acknowledged, also raising his glass. “I have done you a most severe injustice, Captain. It deserves a public apology. I thought you were valued by the Emperor for your relationship and your…ah…social graces and your decorative qualities. I was clearly and demonstrably wrong. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Even Ensign Vorberg spoke up. “It was amazing the way you dealt with the warehouse manager, Captain Vorpatril. I think I’ll treasure for a long time that look on his face when the food vans started rolling out. ‘But you haven’t filled in the forms!’ Ha!”

Ivan felt his ears going red. “Karasavas has been the one actually kicking butt,” he nodded to the fourth man in the room and raised his glass again. “I just point him in the right direction.”

Miles shook his head. “Oh, I don’t think so. Karasavas is chasing his tail on the manhunt. I’ve seen how hard he’s working there. You’re the one picking up the pieces. The field hospital is running, with the plumbing and power connected. They got the food they needed from that warehouse today and not next week. Waleska has been able to treat people all day. Did you see the queues? The Municipal Guard is completely reorganized. Schools are reopening tomorrow. The shuttleport is functional for civilian operations. The traffic system is operating. How many flow charts, standing orders and rosters have you generated today? But what most impressed me was the way you talked to that string of retired and resigned former Municipal Guards you rounded up. You gave them their honour back, Ivan. Anyone could just see how proud they were to be back on duty in a force that isn’t totally corrupt any more, with somebody they could look up to. You’ve done more in one day than most people would manage in a week. If I didn’t know better I’d have thought there were three of you.”

Ivan squirmed. Trust Miles to get all proud and…and…Vorish. He was right, though. There was precious little honour round here at the moment. It was what people wanted, after all. He pulled at his collar and downed the rest of his drink in a gulp.

“It’s all logical; pretty straightforward really. If there’s something needs doing, just get it done. Plus I’ve been set a good example, Miles. What’s that favourite saying of yours?”

Miles laughed. “Forward momentum! Come on, let’s go eat. You’ll need your strength. Don’t forget you’re in charge tomorrow. I’m going back to Vorbarr Sultana after this to report in person. Gregor needs me to talk to some Counts.”

They moved through into the dining room. The table looked fancy but the meal consisted of basic field rations, no more and no less than any of the troops were served. Ivan had organized the kitchen, along with everything else.
“It’s only fair,” he explained. “Stuffing ourselves with five courses of the district’s finest under the circumstances would just be…wrong. And those bottles of wine are going on your bill, Miles.”

They held a council of war in the Emperor’s briefing room. Gregor, General Allegre, Prime Minister Racozy, Counts Vorhalas and Vormoncrief of the Conservative party and Vorsmythe and Vorbretten of the Progressives sat around the table as Miles gave his presentation. After a few moments of shocked silence they turned to planning what to do.

Gregor set the tone. “Although Count Vorclarence will have his trial in the Council before his peers, it’s a mere formality; there is no doubt at all of his guilt. The evidence is overwhelming. His heir is equally guilty. There are some severely disturbing reports being generated by General Allegre that may involve a conspiracy of more than just the Vorclarence family. For once Count Vorbarra will be casting a vote. There are no adult male members of the family who are not guilty of conspiracy to defraud at the least and treason at the worst. Any who are serving members of Our Imperial forces will be tried for Treason. There will be no lesser charges for them.”

Vorhalas spoke first. “No question, Count Vorclarence must be stripped of his privilege, face his execution in the Great Square and the Clarence family must be struck from the ranks of the Vor. There is no other way. Perhaps those civilians found guilty of the lesser crimes could be permitted to settle on Sergyar after they have paid their debt to the Imperium. They cannot remain here to be a future threat.”

A few heads nodded agreement. Count René Vorbretten shifted uneasily in his seat. “So what happens to the district? Do you intend to appoint a new Count, Sire, or divide it up between its neighbours?”

“Granting extra territory to what is it, four or five Counts, will cause a great deal of dissent,” Vorsmythe complained, “and I speak as one of the Districts that will be involved in such a course of action. He’s my neighbour. It would be very unwise, in my opinion.”

Gregor shook his head. “No, I shall have to appoint a new Count, once the district is viable again and Our Imperial forces are able to be withdrawn. What we need to discuss is what qualities we wish to see in this person, and perhaps you may advise Us on a list of possible candidates.”

Racozy called up a holovid for the brainstorming session. The suggestions came thick and fast. Miles made a few mental translations along the way.

“He must be Vor,” no question, stated Vorhalas. “That, at least, is non-negotiable, along with proven unquestionable loyalty to the Imperium. I would prefer High Vor, if at all possible, but we can certainly look at collateral branches.” No proles or Komarran terrorists need apply.

Vorsmythe added his criteria. “The District needs an excellent administrator, one who is good with people, even charismatic, and not…er…advanced in age or unable to grasp modern technologies. He’ll have to tie down his appointment for at least twenty years.” Not a doddering old fool looking back to the Time of Isolation.

“For my part,” Racozy put in, “we need someone who has not overtly concerned himself with politics. He may be as political as he likes once he has assumed the title, but he must be seen as impartial, beforehand. Otherwise it will be far too hard to carry the vote.” No one hand in glove with one of the main parties.
“But not a puppet. We’ve seen too many like that,” Vorhalas snapped. “He must have some opinions, surely.” *Not a yes man who’s going to be led by the nose by the Progressives.*

Count Vorbretten nodded. “I would like to see one with an Imperial Service background, a decorated veteran with at least ten years experience. Someone who has demonstrated his capacity for service.” As his own late father had done, everyone knew. *A hero who understands that men die in a shooting match.*

Miles put his oar in the water. “We need a man with Galactic experience, one with tolerance for non-Barrayaran points of view.” *Not a backwoods hick who’d shoot a Cetagandan on sight.*

“But he does need to be of good Barrayaran stock,” Vormoncrief insisted. “He can tolerate Galactics all he likes but there’s no need for him to *be* one of them.” He glared at Miles, himself more than half Betan as they all knew. *No screwed up ideas about equality or anything other than heterosexual relationships.*

Gregor looked around. “And I would like a man of action, someone who can make hard decisions and act on them.” *Gregor doesn’t want a milksop.*

There was a rather daunted silence round the room. General Allegre voiced what they were all thinking.

“I think it’s going to be a very short list.”

They broke up for coffee and to stretch their legs. Miles wandered over to chat to René Vorbretten to ask about his new wife. Miles envied René his luck in capturing Tatya, the cream of the crop on the social scene.

“Another one gone,” he complained. If I don’t marry a Barayarran my children won’t even be able to claim citizenship! Has Tatya got any friends?”

René laughed. “Only Olivia Koudelka. The rest are all married themselves. Your father would love a match like that.”

Miles sighed. “But Olivia wouldn’t. She’d run screaming in a week. Less.”

When Gregor finally called them to order he asked for a list of candidates. The silence was absolute. Time ticked on. René Vorbretten looked around at his colleagues, at the Prime Minister and then back to his Emperor.

“I can think of one person, Sire,” he said. Everyone perked up and looked expectant. René smiled. “Ivan Vorpatril.”
Hostage Negotiation 101

The room erupted. Miles laid down his head on the desk and howled. Vorhalas bellowed. Vormoncrief and Vorsmythe leapt to their feet, Vormoncrief’s chair clattering over with the force of his action. Two armsmen, one high and one low, threw themselves into the room, stunners drawn, only to pull up, looking remarkably foolish when they realized no one was attempting to kill their liege lord. Allegre covered his eyes with his hand. His body shook with…something. Racozy shook his head in dismay.

Only Gregor appeared unmoved. It took a while, but eventually they settled down. Miles had to bite his lip to control his unholy glee. Vorbretten looked round at them all.

“What did I say? He fits the criteria exactly.”

Gregor nodded. “I happen to agree with you, Count. I take it you don’t, My Lord Auditor?”

Miles pulled himself together. “Oh, no Sire, quite the opposite. I think Ivan would do an excellent job. He’s got lots of hidden talents. I apologise for my lack of control. I only request I’m in the room when you tell him. Thirty years of keeping a low profile…” His voice cracked. He couldn’t go on.

Gregor turned his attention to Count Vorhalas. “And what are your objections, my lord Count?”

Vorhalas spluttered. Gregor pressed him. “He’s Vor. No one who saw the vids of the parade can doubt his loyalty, or his bravery. He’s no puppet. Those were your stipulations, were they not?”

“Yes, but Vorpatril?” Vorhalas could hardly choke the name out.

Gregor wasn’t finished. “Count Vorsmythe, after hearing Lord Vorkosigan’s interim report, does Lord Vorpatril meet your criteria? What say you? His age is perhaps a little young, but he has his Galactic experience to counter that with his visits to Earth, Beta Colony, the Hegen Hub and even Cetaganda. Not too many suitable people could match that. He’s also very conversant with technology.”

Vorsmythe nodded, but his expression was still eloquent of both his amazement and his horror.

“Prime Minister. You could hardly find anyone less politically inclined or aligned than Ivan. Or am I wrong?”

Racozy looked stunned. “No, Sire. You’re not wrong, but—”

Gregor held up his hand, silencing the protest. “Exactly. Now, Count Vormoncrief. Do you have any objections to Lord Vorpatril’s pedigree? His blood couldn’t be more blue, surely. And I think he has fairly well demonstrated his sexual orientation. No Galactic notions in his head, I think you could say?”

Miles choked. He bit his hand, hard. Vormoncrief blustered, but there was nothing he could object about there. If anyone was a dedicated heterosexual it was Ivan. Very dedicated.

The Emperor was nearly done. “And so we come to you, René. Ivan’s a serving officer. He’s demonstrated leadership, generosity and utmost bravery, been wounded in the service of his
Emperor and is currently putting in a fantastic effort down in Vorclarence district, as you’ve just heard in Our Auditor’s report. All this with a crack in his skull and a not insignificant personal sacrifice at this time.”

Count Vorbretten bowed in his chair. “As you recall, Your Majesty, Lord Vorpatril is my nomination. I was serious.”

The babble broke out again as they all tried to think of someone else who had a better claim to the job than Ivan. When they finally ran out of objections, Gregor held up his hand for silence.

“First things first. Vorclarence has to be dealt with before we can even think about reorganization. We’re relying on you, General Allegre. Catch that bastard! From what you’ve said he must still be in New Sheffield, or close by, lying low. For the moment, the other matter is confidential, gentlemen. My Lord Auditor, may I see you for a few minutes after the others have gone?”

He rose to his feet. The others hastened to jump up, bowing deeply as they made their way out.

Miles waited for the door to close. He waited some more until they must have cleared the corridor and turned the corner. At last he couldn’t wait any longer. He burst out laughing again.

“Gregor, you…crafty bugger! Words fail me. I have to be a fly on the wall. Please, please, please? Can you imagine the look on his face?” Miles sat back, contemplating the future with unsurpassed delight. “I don’t know how I’m going to keep it a secret, I really don’t.”

The Emperor sighed. “For all his acting to the contrary, Ivan has grown into a decent, loyal and intelligent man, more than a match for most mere mortals. He’s capable and efficient. It’s only in comparison with hyperactive, high-achieving, manic, insubordinate, egocentric workaholics that he looks either lazy or stupid. He’s not an idiot.” Gregor cracked a smile at last. “Besides, I want to see his face, too.”

Miles tried to have the last word. “Can you imagine what my mother is going to have to say about it? She always told me he has hidden depths.”

Gregor threw in his trump card. “Miles, for once in my life I’m not the least bit worried about what your mother will have to say.”

“Oh shit,” said Miles, completely overawed by the thought. “How could I have forgotten about Lady Alys?”

Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril sat on the bed in the little examination cubicle while Rear-admiral Waleska poked at the wounds on his back, redressed his arm and ran through the usual concussion tests and blood pressure checks.

“Come on, Doc. I’ve got work to do. I’m fine. Things to do and people to see.”

Waleska pointed a finger at him. “You’ve got your orders from the Emperor and I’ve got mine. You are fine when I say you’re fine. You’re like the rest of us, overworked and underpaid. You’re still getting headaches.” It was a statement, not a question. “Three days of bed rest, fresh food and no stress.”

“Pity we don’t have the marines here, isn’t it?” Ivan remarked conversationally.

“I had to say it, but I’m not making it an order. Try and be sensible. Take these tablets and rest
when you can. If you’re not careful you’ll break down, you know, just when you really need your wits about you, and then you won’t be any use to that little girl of yours. I’m serious. You’re not a well man.”

_Mine!_ Thoughts of Marie lifted his mood immediately. _My little girl._ “I talked to her on the comconsole this morning. Mamère said she’s putting on weight already and eating everything in sight. I’m going to try to head out to her mother’s place after this, if I get the time, to see if there are any personal things she’d want. Holocubes, toys, that sort of thing.”

Waleska considered. “I’m not a Psych but it’s not five space maths. I’d say don’t get rid of anything you can possibly afford to keep, and never be afraid to talk about things with her. She’ll have so many questions when she gets older.”

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll be getting all the help I can with how to deal with her. She deserves the very best.”

Ivan picked up his black shirt. He eased in his sore arm, _with_ its new dressing, _and please do not take it off again until I say so, my Lord!_ but just as he reached for the other sleeve the sound of a large explosion rocked the field hospital. Alarms blared and a lightflyer on patrol screamed overhead. The two of them looked at each other for a heartbeat, then they bolted. Exactly two seconds later Ivan bolted back into the room, snatched up his jacket, wristcom and stunner and bolted out again, scrambling into his shirt somehow as he ran.

“Report!” He bellowed into his wristcom. Outside, they could see smoke billowing from the direction of the District residence. “How the hell did that happen? Karasavas, report, damn you! Mikhail, where are you?”

He fumed with impatience, waiting for his groundcar. “Dammit! Somebody tell me something!”

The groundcar threw up a cloud of dust as the fans whirred to a halt. Waleska practically shoved Ivan into it. “Let me know as soon as you can what I’m likely to expect. I need to get back to the trauma teams. Shit. I hope it’s not Karasavas, or Vorberg. Somebody needs to _nail_ that fucker Vor Clarence.”

Ivan’s wristcom crackled into life. “Vorberg here, sir. There’s been an explosion in the garage recharging station behind the residence. Captain Karasavas is down. Just knocked out, I think. Two other casualties from flying debris, neither critical. Positive sighting of Vor Clarence, but we’ve lost him. We’ve got a cordon out but it looks like there’s a passage from the garage, under the wall and into some utility tunnels. Requesting backup.”

“Step on it,” Ivan demanded to the driver. The command was somewhat redundant as the groundcar was up to maximum power before he’d finished talking. Ivan cursed his own stupidity. Every Count on Barrayar had been totally paranoid about security since the Time of Isolation. There was probably a warren of escape tunnels and bunkers around the residence and the District office. Karasavas would have known that, and now he’d found an occupied one. He passed the news of casualties to Waleska in the few seconds it took them to arrive in the District Square.

Vorberg signaled him into the side street running along the north of the Residence gardens to the stable block and garages. The emergency lightflyer, sirens blaring and light flashing, took off just as they arrived, heading in the direction of the field hospital. Smoke still billowed into the air from the burning building, but the main residence looked to be safe. Residence servants and a couple of engineers were attacking the fire. A unit from the Municipal Guard screeched to a halt behind Ivan’s groundcar as he got out and the firefighting team piled out to help.
The Ensign looked more than a bit disheveled, still breathing heavily and with blood stains darkening his shoulder.

“Are you hurt?” Ivan demanded.

“No sir. I carried sapper Durand out of the garage. He has a head wound. Bled all over me before I could get a field dressing on it. Captain Karasavas regained consciousness. He didn’t much like it when I put him in the ambulance, but stiff shit. We…er…tied him down. He’d lost a bit of blood, too. He’ll be OK once the doc sticks him back together. Sapper Leroy has a broken arm and collarbone by the looks. He was thrown backwards and clear but landed awkwardly.” He indicated a groundcar with a sizeable dent in a panel. “They’re on their way to the hospital.”

“Only the three casualties?”

“We found a body, what was left of it. It was one of his armsmen, covering the getaway. It’s possible there’s another one under the rubble. I’m sure I saw two of them. Our patrol spotted Vorclareence moving from the house to the garage here. No intel. yet on how he got into the house, but probably from these tunnels. Captain Karasavas and I were called in but we suspected a booby trap. The sappers had just moved in to check when it went off. If he’d waited thirty more seconds it would have been a lot worse.”

He paled just a bit. “Luckily I was on point and saw it. I just had time to shout and duck the right way. The others ducked the opposite way and got caught in the blast. I’ve requested the Residence be scanned again for further sabotage, before we get blown up in our beds.”

Ivan eyed the young Ensign with considerable respect. Maybe twenty-one years old, he’d just been nearly killed, seen a man blown to bits, saved three lives by the looks of things, and had the situation under control. He clapped him on the shoulder.

“Good work, Ensign. Let’s get after this bastard, shall we?”

Vorberg braced to attention. “My pleasure, sir.”

As the ferret squad was being assembled Ivan had a chance to check in with Waleska. He sounded quite cheerful.

“Yes, they’ll all be fine, Captain. Karasavas is under observation but I’ll probably let him out of here this evening, the others will take a bit longer with fractures.”

“Tell him we won’t wait for him, then. Vorberg is more than capable here. We’ll be playing hide and seek for a while, so I don’t know what comms will be like. I’ll try and keep you informed.”

“Keep your head down. Good luck, Ivan.”


As the team were donning their helmets, combat belts and weapons Vorberg came up to ask a question while he checked Ivan’s kit.

“Why ferret squad, sir, do you know? I know it’s a traditional name, but why? I’ve always wondered.”

Ivan returned the compliment, making sure Vorberg’s kit was complete and properly adjusted. “It’s a Terran animal. A thousand or so years ago they used to send ferrets down rabbit burrows to flush them out. Nasty little things. Like weasels, only bigger. Fought above their weight and had big
sharp teeth. Very good to have on your side in close quarters. Same as tunnel rats, really, but on steroids.”

Vorberg shook his head. “No one is ever going to believe all this, when we get back to headquarters.”

Ivan agreed. “First things first. We have to get back to headquarters in one piece, fill in the paperwork and after about six weeks of that you can tell all the tales you want in the Officer’s Mess. Keep your eyes open and your wits about you. By my reckoning one in the Great Square, one at the water plant and this one means there are still at least two grenades out there.”

“Sir! Sir!” There was an urgent call from the back door of the Residence. “Comconsole call for you sir, in the security office. It’s Count Vorclarence. He wants to speak to the commanding officer.”

Ivan looked at Vorberg. He thumped a fist into his other hand. “Yes! We’ve cornered that fat piece of crap. Vorberg, change of plans. Go get Karasavas out of the hospital. Carry him if you have to. Alert him you’re on your way. His tracking skills have to be better than mine, but we can’t wait for him. You can listen in on my helmet recorder, but don’t say a word. Go! Get the spies on to tracing this call, if they haven’t started already.”

Vorberg sprinted for the groundcar as Ivan sprinted in the opposite direction for the security office. What the hell did Vorclarence want to talk about? Good luck to the sucker if he thought he could weasel his way out of this one.

Count Vorclarence looked tired and drawn, unshaven, his hair uncombed and his house uniform bedraggled and clearly slept in. His bloated features and the fat paunch straining at his mustard-coloured tunic made him look like an overripe pumpkin. There was a long scratch down one cheek. His mouth was turned down in a frown and his eyes looked bloodshot, but fixed and determined. The non-descript stone wall background appeared artificially lit, so some sort of ancient bunker somewhere close by, maybe, but that was the only hint as to location. Hopefully the call was being traced.

“Captain Ivan Vorpatril here, Count Vorclarence. I’m the ranking officer at the moment. When may we expect your surrender?”

“Vorpatril?” he spat the name, incredulous and disgusted. “Is the Emperor sending clowns to do his work for him now? Are you the best the Imperium could come up with? Don’t you have some frill you should be shagging? You’d get medals for that. Get me someone with some authority.”

Ivan felt his muscles bunch. The man was deliberately baiting him. He took a very deep breath. “I’m the only authority you’re going to get right now. You’ve disabled all the comms to Vorbarr Sultana. Only the local networks are operating.” Ivan lied through his teeth. Vorberg would know what to do to block any outgoing messages he might try. Hopefully Vorclarence would be thinking he’d been more successful with his sabotage than he had actually been in reality.

Vorclarence snarled, “Stop playing toy soldiers and get me Karasavas! He’s the ImpSec flunky in my District.”

Ivan ground his teeth. He’d pay for that. “You’re forgetting, Count. You just blew that ImpSec squad to hell.”

He hooted with maniacal laughter, delighted. “Damn. Didn’t they jump fast enough? Pathetic. Righto, Playboy, you’ll have to do. I haven’t got time to waste chatting all day. Here is my demand. I have Madame Vorfolse here, and her daughter. They will both die if I don’t get the Emperor’s
word promising passage out of the Imperium immediately.”

He briefly flicked the vid pickup to a shot of a bound and gagged woman lying in a cell with one of the missing Mark III HE grenades tied around her neck. Her grey-streaked dark hair was wildly disarranged, tumbling down her back, and there was a large bruise over her eye. She wasn’t moving. Ivan lost it.

“You hit an old woman and tied her up? The Emperor’s not going to negotiate with a dishonourable, murdering prick like you! How do we even know Madame Vorfolse and her daughter are alive, anyway? You could have taken that vid any time in the last twenty-six hours. Talk to me when you want to surrender, you twelve-toed dog. Vorpatril out.”

Well, that went well. Just what Miles would have done…Swearing wasn’t going to help him, even if he did feel better. Ivan sucked in some deep breaths. He paced up and down as he waited for Vorberg to get back to him with a location. That bolt-hole had to be close by. Somewhere under the Residence, perhaps? Had they found all the cellars? He punched at his wristcom.

“Vorberg, where the hell are you? Where’s that location? The ferret squad’s all ready to go.”

“Coming up, sir. Patching through the co-ordinates now. We’re on our way. Captain Karasavas is with me. He says to wait until we get there. ETA two minutes.”

The ping from the comconsole alerted him to the map with the pulsing red locator. It took a second to orientate himself to the surface layout. Not under the residence, then, but under the District Office. Right underneath their noses, in fact. They’d practically slept on top of the man that first night!

The squad fanned out, but they had no luck locating an entrance to the bunker on first sweep. The obvious entry in the storeroom was blocked with debris and still smoking hot. It would take a while to clear it. The surface penetrating scanners were turning up too many possibilities in the surrounding buildings. It would take hours to check them all.

Karasavas and Vorberg arrived. The Captain looked bruised again on top of his black eye, pale and drawn with a hastily borrowed medical smock top in place of his shirt and combat jacket. Ivan could see part of a dressing poking out through the v-necked smock and his black fatigue trousers were stained and dirty. At least he had his boots on. Ivan called a hasty council of war.

“We have to get to that lunatic before he tries something else. He may, er, be a bit pissed off right now. Karasavas, are you sure you can’t recall any likely entries?”

Karasavas avoided shaking his head with a little wince. “Remind me to get the name of your instructor for Hostage Negotiation 101. He needs to be sacked. I was never allowed in the Residence, and only on sufferance under escort in the District Office. Vorclarence didn’t like proles getting too big for their boots. We’ll just have to try them all one by one.”

“That’s going to take too long. Who else but Vorclarence would know?”

Vorberg clicked his fingers. “Walton. Vorclarence’s armsman. Lord Vorkosigan stood him down after we’d found Captain Karasavas and his men the day before yesterday.”

He took off into the Residence, calling out over his shoulder, “there are three of them confined to quarters on the top floor. Meet us at the comconsole.”

Walton accompanied Vorberg back into the security office a few minutes later. He no longer wore his house uniform, dressed instead in civilian trousers and a shapeless knit top. It was the first time
Ivan had seen him.

“Armsman Walton. We need help. How do we get into this chamber?” He indicated the location on the holovid.

The armsman hesitated. Old loyalties died hard, Ivan could see. He took the man to one side a little and spoke quietly. “You must know that your Count has broken his oath to the Emperor. He placed his hands between his not three months ago, at Winterfair, and three days ago tried to kill him. He’s taken hostages, guests in his home he was duty-bound to protect. He is foresworn and his honour is debased.”

“Yes, my lord. As is mine,” Walton said very quietly.

Ivan took hold of the man’s shoulder and looked him straight in the eye. “Armsman Walton, I swear to you on my name as Vorpatril, that saving the lives of this mother and daughter will earn the Emperor’s gratitude and help to redeem much of your own honour. I further swear that no harm will come to your own family. They will have my personal protection.”

Walton took a deep breath and made his decision. “Come with me.”

Karasavas sighed. “All this Vor code. You could have just used fast-penta, you know.”
Instead of leading them downwards, Walton jogged into the district office and up two flights of stairs. He stopped at what looked like a small janitors’ cupboard and raised his hand to halt them. Ivan, Vorberg and the four-man squad lined up silently. Vorberg stood in front of Ivan, first in line.

He checked his weapons one last time. “Captain’s orders, my lord,” he whispered to Ivan. “I’m to stick to you like glue, and not, I quote, let anyone put holes in you.”

“You are not expendable” hissed Ivan, tempted to shoulder his way in front, but now was not the time to cause a fuss.

Walton opened the door to reveal an array of sonic cleaners and even a few good old-fashioned mops and buckets. He turned inside and pressed his palm to a very unobtrusive sensor plate. Silently the whole side of the cupboard slid upwards to reveal a narrow shaft. There were rungs fastened to the wall disappearing both down and up. He pointed upwards. “Roof flyer bay” he murmured, and then pointed downwards. “I’ll have to go ahead. It’s another palm code. No noise!”

He stepped onto the rungs and disappeared down the shaft with Vorberg right behind him. Ivan swallowed hard, twice, and followed. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. He wasn’t too keen on narrow spaces. The walls were ancient brick here, blackened by smoke and soot. Oh gods, he was climbing down a chimney. Someone just had to light a fire at the bottom and they’d all be cooked, or kippered more like. He forced in a deep breath and reminded himself to look down to avoid stepping on Vorberg’s head. They must have to climb down about four levels, Ivan reckoned, allowing about ten rungs per level. It was getting very narrow now as the darkness pressed in from all sides. Shit. This was not good. His left arm started to protest so he forced himself to unclench his muscles and not cling too tightly. Sweat broke out all over his body. What little light there was dimmed and vanished to a mere spot in the distance as they made their way down and the descending bodies above him blocked his vision. He could have been sitting behind his nice, safe desk right now if he hadn’t opened his big mouth. Actually, he’d still have been on sick leave. The thought left a bit of a sour taste in his mouth.

There was the tiniest of spaces at the base of the chimney, the old walled-off inglenook fireplace. There was enough room for three men to stand upright with the rest waiting above on the rungs. Vorberg switched on a pencil torch, a tiny pinpoint of illumination. Walton was signaling again, pointing to the palm lock and miming the door sliding upwards. Being slightly smaller than Ivan and narrower across the shoulder, Vorberg indicated he would go low and for Ivan to stay high. Walton was unarmed, of course. Ivan eased his stunner from his belt but made sure his plasma arc was loose in its holster. He refused to carry a nerve disruptor. That was an evil weapon. Just look at what one had done to Uncle Kou. If the enemy were bad enough the plasma arc did a good job, and with everyone else you stunned first and asked questions later.

Vorberg switched off his torch and turned on his night vision visor instead. Only then Ivan realized he could have done the same coming down the shaft and hurried to comply. He bit his lip. Ivan, you idiot! The ensign counted down with three fingers. Three, two, one – the door slid up. He rolled low and left before it was half way up and had disappeared before Ivan even moved. He quickly stepped out and right and scanned the chamber for threats at eye level. It was empty. Silently the squad filed out behind him, fanning into the room. The floor was cobbled and the walls were bare stone, too thick for any heat sensors to show much at all. It had the cool, dank atmosphere of a wine cellar, or dungeon. No, neither a dungeon nor a wine cellar would have had a fireplace. Perhaps it had been a guardroom.
There was a faint light in one corner of the room. It was an opening to a passageway and the light spilled from a room on the other side and about ten metres down. Walton, Vorberg and Ivan silently padded to the side of the doorway, leaving the corridor covered by two of the squad behind them. Just in time he remembered to turn his night vision back off again. He didn’t want to blind himself.

“Count Vor Clarence, my lord!” Walton shocked them both by calling out and stepping boldly into the room.

“Shit!” They both rolled low and fast this time, Vorberg again to the left. Ivan went right, looked up from his roll and fired, just a split second after a sizzling bolt from a plasma arc cut through the armsman where he stood. Walton crumpled to the ground, his body burned and smoking. Count Vor Clarence, caught in the crossfire of two stunner beams, slid down the far wall with a clatter, his weapon firing randomly across a desk holding a standard comconsole device. The lights went out. A sickly smell of burned flesh seared Ivan’s nostrils.

There was movement in the corridor behind them, a shouted warning of “Grenade” from their backup, plasma fire, a woman’s voice screaming hoarsely, and then another booming explosion.

“Four,” Ivan said stupidly before a rain of stone blocks, bricks and debris clattered down in the corridor, sending billowing clouds of dust and the odd bouncing rock into the room. He wanted to vomit. With his head ringing and his nose and mouth choked with dust Ivan fumbled for his helmet light as he scrambled to find some cover. The missing armsman had turned up, by the sound of things.

“Vorberg?”

“Here, my lord.” Ivan could hear him coughing and spluttering in the choking dust. He crawled through the scattered debris to reach him. The ensign had pulled himself to a sitting position against the wall. He was covered head to foot in mortar dust and bits of broken brick, gasping for breath. It looked like he’d been winded.

“I’ll be alright in a minute,” he wheezed. “Check the corridor.” He waved towards the partially blocked doorway.

Ivan ducked over and listened carefully before poking his head around, as low as he could make it. To his left a body lay sprawled, very, very dead. To his right a wall of rubble blocked the corridor floor to ceiling. No going back the way they’d come, then. There was no sound apart from the odd piece of brick or mortar settling in the debris.

Ivan coughed and spat to try and clear his mouth. “Imperial Security!” he bellowed. “Make yourself known.”

There was silence for a moment or two, and then he heard that female voice again. “Here! We’re in here. Please help.”

“Stay where you are. Don’t move. We’re coming.”

The body wore an armsman’s uniform. He must have avoided the earlier blast somehow. With the one dead in the Residence storeroom and this one, surely that accounted for all the missing armsmen from the Count’s Score? Ivan sincerely hoped so. Vorberg staggered up behind him. “Walton is dead and the Count will be out for quite a while with that double stun. I’ve restrained him anyway, just to be sure. I’m just going to check for nasty surprises. Don’t move around too much and don’t touch anything until we’re clear. We don’t want any more of the roof to come
Ivan shook his head. “You look round here. I’m going to find the women. See if that comconsole is working. Get the word out we need help.” He jerked a thumb towards the rubble pile. “I hope that wasn’t the only way out.”

Ivan eased himself over the blockage in the doorway. “I’m too old for this shit,” he grumbled to himself. His head ached, again, or still. He couldn’t decide which. His ears ached. Hell, even his bones ached. Cautiously, checking every step of the way, looking up as well as down he inched along the passage and past the dead armsman. He must have thrown the grenade just before the plasma arc hit him. He was beyond caring now.

He hadn’t gone far before he found a massive iron door set into the opposite wall. There was a barred grill at chest height. He crawled past, checking for an exit. He didn't find one. Instead he found another blockage, this one smelling of wood smoke. That would have been the Residence exit in the storeroom. They were stuck! This really, really, wasn’t good. He took a minute, forcing himself to breathe slowly. This was nothing like the last time. He had light, and there was no water waiting to inundate him here. He backtracked to the other room. He risked a quick look, ducking down and half-expecting the crackle of a plasma ray. All he saw was a glimpse of a woman lying on a stone bench. He risked another look.

“Ivan Vorfolse?” There was a sob somewhere off to his right out of his line of vision.

“Ivan rapidly checked the door. From this side it seemed clear.

“Did you see anyone doing anything to this door? Any sign of wires or booby-traps your side? I don’t want to lose you now.”

The woman had trouble talking. “It’s too dark to see properly, but no, nobody did anything to the door. The armsman just ran out a few minutes ago. He had a grenade. There’s another one, on my mother, tied to the wall. If she rolls off that bench…”

“I’m coming in. Look away, just in case. I wouldn’t put anything past this maniac.”

There was a centuries old iron bolt on the outside of the door. Vorclarence really did have a dungeon, and it was still in use. Ivan eased the bolt slowly back, and then leaned his shoulder against the weight. The hinges were well oiled and it opened soundlessly. He ducked below the level of the grill and pushed it all the way. There was no one behind it.

“Madame Vorfolse?” Ivan ripped off his helmet as he sank to one knee beside the still form on the bench. He angled the helmet light to illuminate the room as best he could. It was a fairly strong beam, but pretty narrow. He stripped her gag away and gently touched her neck, feeling for a pulse. She was breathing, but deeply unconscious. There was a wire wound and knotted around the grenade, and then attached to a ring on the wall. The pin of the grenade was tightly wired around her neck.

Ivan took a deep breath, and then another. The place stank. He turned to the younger woman. Dark hair, dark eyes, slim, and seething with utter, utter fury. She’d managed to free the gag from her mouth. Like her mother, she was wired to a ring, on the floor, but the wire was only round her wrists, deeply embedded. Ivan could see at a glance she had struggled until she’d bled, trying to get free. He crossed the three steps to reach her, kneeling down again. Like her mother she was
filthy and bedraggled, with bruises on her face and arms. He could hardly speak for the fury choking his throat. He fumbled to find the combination tool on his combat belt, literally shaking with rage so hard he couldn’t make his hands work properly.

“How long… did that piece of… of pond slime keep you here like this?” He found the tool at last, but fumbled again trying to get the wire cutters open.

She struggled to speak. “I have no idea. There’s been no light. It was just after the bomb went off in Vorbarr Sultana. He didn’t have us tied up at first.” Her voice sounded harsh and cracked. “Please, do you have any water? We haven’t had anything.”

Three days? *Three fucking days?* It took him about thirty seconds to cut the wire at the floor, and another ten to find his water bottle and hold it to her lips. “Just little sips. Take it easy.”

She struggled to get up. “Take it easy? Get my hands undone and I’ll show you *take it easy,*” she snapped. “Where is that twelve-toed lard bucket? I’m going to shove my fist down his throat so hard he… he…” her voice cracked again. “My poor mother. We tried to escape. I had my Vorfemme knife, you see. He hit her, with his fist. She was trying to protect me, but she was knocked down and hit her head. He dragged her in here and then he stunned her because she wouldn’t stop yelling and then he did… he did that to her. I’m going to kill him. Is she still alive?”

Ivan nodded. “She is, but I want you out of here before I try and take that grenade off her. It doesn’t look too complicated, but better safe than sorry.”

She’d scrambled to her feet by this time, staggering and stifling a cry as the blood flow returned to her legs.

“I’m going nowhere. Get this damned wire off me, please. My mother needs me.” She thrust out her bound hands, waiting.

Ivan hesitated. “Are you sure? It’s going to hurt like hell. It’s in pretty deep.”

She didn’t bother to reply, just kept on holding out her hands and tapping her foot. He sighed.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He tried to be as gentle as he could, but it had to be agony getting one blade of the cutters under the wire. Finally he managed it. With one last snick it parted. He saw her wince as she pried her hands apart. Ivan unwound the wire as carefully as he could. She pulled away impatiently, ripping it off. Fresh blood welled up. She pushed past him to get to her mother.

So tenderly, she brushed the hair away from her mother’s face. She looked around for Ivan, panicked. “Oh, please. Get this evil thing off her.”

“Won’t you wait outside?”

She reached for her mother’s hand. “You’re wasting time.”

Ivan took great care, checking everything carefully before he made any move. It was a pretty crude affair really, only taking three cuts to take it off her neck. There were no trick booby-traps. Ivan checked the fuse was still undamaged before slipping the grenade into the utility pocket at the front of his fatigue pants. He didn’t want anyone else picking that sucker up.

Vorberg poked his head round the corner just as he finished. “All clear, my lord, except that we’re trapped, as far as I can tell. Both exits are definitely blocked.”

Ivan leapt to his feet, shielding Madame Vorfolse as best he could. The fewer people who saw
these women in this state the better. “Go look for a first aid kit, water, anything. Blankets, if you can find them.”

Vorberg nodded and withdrew with scarcely a glance. Ivan turned to find the daughter staring at him suspiciously. “My Lord? Just who are you?”

Ivan pulled himself up to attention and bowed. “Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril, at your service, Mademoiselle. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

She just looked at him. “Save it for the Winterfair Ball, Lord Ivan. My name is Valeraine Vorfolse. My mother is Aceline Vorfolse.”

He handed her the water bottle again, and his clean handkerchief. “I’m sure my mother would know her. You don’t come to Vorbarr Sultana at all?”

He was making small talk, trying to put himself at ease more than anything. There was no way out. Madame Vorfolse looked to be the same age as his own mother. This was just so wrong.

Valeraine dampened the handkerchief and gently wiped her mother’s face. She shook her head slightly at the beautiful snow-white linen square. “Typical Vor. I’m sure your mother always told you to carry a clean handkerchief. And…and… never leave home without clean underwear, in case you get hit by a groundcar.”

She rested her head on her mother’s shoulder. Ivan turned his gaze away when he saw her shoulders shake. He gave her a moment, then laid a gentle hand on her hair. “That’s right, and always keep enough money in your boot for an autocab home. Where the hell is Vorberg? Surely he’s found something?”

He came over to kneel beside Madame Vorfolse again and recheck her pulse. “We need some better light in here. I don’t think we should move her too much if she hit her head. She’s so cold, though.”

Vorberg came back to the door with a large tunic and two bottles of water. “Best I could do,” he apologised.

As Ivan took it from him the embroidered sigil on the collar caught his eye, the oak leaf and acorn embroidered in contrasting burnt orange on the paler mustard background.

“Don’t suppose you asked if you could borrow it,” Ivan remarked.

Vorberg grinned, his teeth very white in the cloying dust that covered his face. “He didn’t object.”

Ivan grinned back. “True, I don’t suppose he did. It should do nicely.”

His own first aid kit was barely adequate but it contained a wafer-thin space blanket that unfolded to quite a decent size. Working very gently he managed to wrap it round her legs and torso, then draped the tunic over her shoulders, buttoning it up to her chin. There was still no sign of her recovering from the stun.

“Does your mother have any health problems?” he asked Valeraine. “Stunners don’t usually have this bad an effect.”

“She hasn’t been well for years. Da was killed during the Pretender’s war, before I was even born. I never knew him.” She gave Ivan a very strange look. “He chose the wrong side, I think, or it was chosen for him. He was a lieutenant at the time. He died at the space communications centre, on
the last day of fighting, with Commander Vorhalas.”

*Shit. Evon Vorhalas!* Major political trouble here. She must be just a few months younger than he was. It was no wonder he’d never met her before. And no, he’d been wrong. Most likely his mother *didn’t* know Madame Vorfolse. She’d probably made it her business *not* to know Madame Vorfolse. She wouldn’t exactly have been welcome at the Regent’s court.

“There was an amnesty for everyone below Captain, you know. There wouldn’t have been any consequences.”

All he got was another strange look in return. “Well, you can believe that if you like. My mother certainly didn’t. There were consequences. There were consequences every day of my life, growing up. We live in Vandevelde now. This is my mother’s first trip to the north continent since the war. And look how this turned out.”

She was shaking. Coming down from the adrenalin jag, obviously; shocked and most likely with low blood sugar.

“Here,” Ivan dug up a ration bar and handed it to her. He undid his combat belt and shrugged out of his jacket, wrapping it round her. “Look at me not thinking. I’m so worried about your mother I forgot to look after you.”

He opened his first aid kit again before clipping the belt back round his hips. “Let me see those wrists.”

“In a minute.” Valeraine looked around. She’d gone red with embarrassment.

“What’s wrong? Can I help?

In a very small voice she said, “Look, I really, really need to pee.”

“Oh.” He felt daunted for a few moments. They’d been down here three days, after all. Not pleasant. “Where did you go before?”

“We didn’t go anywhere before. Why do you think it stinks in here? We had to use the corner.”

“That’s just wrong. Let me check.” He stood up, then thought better of going. “Oh, hang on a minute. My helmet recorder is still working.” He clapped it back on his head again just long enough to turn off the vidcam, then returned it to its place to light the room.

“Be right back.” Ivan was glad to dash out for a while. He needed to see what Vorberg was up to, anyway. There were definitely only the two rooms with the corridor blocked with debris at either end and no sign of any facilities anywhere. Vorberg had found a couple of cold lights and the other room was lit with their green glow. He was tinkering with the comconsole, which had suffered in the plasma arc fire. Walton lay moved to one side with his limbs straightened and his face covered by a handkerchief with the District oak leaves and acorns embroidered in one corner. Vorclarence lay where Vorberg had left him when he stripped off his tunic and taken the handkerchief from his pocket. His shirt gaped slightly where some buttons had parted and a roll of fat bulged over the top of his trousers. Ivan felt like kicking him as he walked past, but Miles wouldn’t like that one bit. He was very keen on prisoners’ rights. Then again, Miles wasn’t here and he didn’t have his helmet on, after all… No, Vorclarence would get what was coming in due course. Ivan ducked back to the other room.

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can suggest, unless you want to try the rubble pile at the end of the corridor.”
Valeraine sighed. “Just turn your back. I really have to go. This hole is stinking already. One corner is as good as another.”

One more indignity. Vor Clarence’s account was adding up, Ivan thought as he went back to Vorberg again.

“Wrist comm not working either?” he enquired. “I’ve had no luck with mine.”

“I think we’re getting a signal out,” Vorberg said. “Just a locator beacon, though. There’s lots of static coming back. They’ll find us. We’ll just have to wait.”

“That’s just the point,” Ivan told him. “I don’t know how much longer Madame Vorfolse can wait. I’d better check on her again, and then I can start clearing some of the rubble. Probably the residence end would be best, so tell them that if you can get through. There’s no way we can move her up that shaft.”

Once back in the cell he turned the recorder back on, as required by his combat regs. He’d probably be reprimanded for turning it off at all, but he wasn’t having some jerk at HQ perv ing on Valeraine. Madame Vorfolse looked slightly less pale, but it was really hard to judge in the poor light. Ivan put his first aid kit back to use again, digging out an antiseptic wipe to offer to her daughter.

“That’s another Vor rule. Always wash your hands. Feel better? There’s nothing worse, is there? When you’ve got to go you’ve got to go. I still didn’t get to see to your wrists, and you haven’t opened the ration bar. You need to eat.”

She held up her swollen hands. “I couldn’t really manage.”

Ivan felt rather foolish, but that was nothing new. “Oh, I’m sorry. Here, let me.”

He took the wipe and cleaned her hands with gentle but thorough persistence, then tore open the bar and peeled back the wrapper half way down.

“Can you manage? You eat that, while I look at your other hand.” A second wipe cleaned the dried blood off her wrist. He had a couple of bandages, not much but enough to at least keep her wounds somewhat clean. He swapped and started working on her right wrist, which was in a worse state than her left one.

“You’ll need to get our surgeon to look at these. Are you able to wiggle your fingers? I’m worried you’ve cut a tendon,” he told her, supporting her wrist in one hand and gently bending her fingers with the other. She must have had really nice hands, before this. She had the remnants of elegant pink varnish on her nails under the filth where she hadn’t split or broken them. They were soft, too. He slid his bottom hand up from her wrist and held her palm and fingers loosely between both of his. He heard an intake of breath. Maybe he’d been holding her hand for a bit too long. He pulled himself together.

“You’re still cold.” He reached up to adjust his jacket more closely. “Here, slip your arm in the sleeve. That’s right, now the other one. Let me do it up.”

There was a faint blush in her cheeks as he lingered over the buttons. She looked at him, but then her eyes dropped. She didn’t make any move to pull away as he turned the collar up.

“I’m not ten years old, but thank you, Lord Vorpatril.”

He was making a fool of himself. She probably thought he was a creep trying to take advantage.
He cleared his throat and looked down. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m keeping busy. I…er…I don’t much care for small spaces underground.”

“**You’re claust—**”

“I am *not* claustrophobic.” He cut her off firmly. “It’s a perfectly *rational* dislike of being stuck underground with two dead bodies and a homicidal maniac. Not to mention I’m worried about your mama…” He looked, and then looked again. “Who, unless I miss my guess, is starting to wake up.”

Madame Vorfolse was indeed starting to show signs of life. Her eyelids flickered and her head turned slightly. Valeraine leapt to her side.

“Maman! Oh, maman. Please wake up.”

Ivan felt for the pulse in her neck. It was stronger now, and more regular. Her skin felt warmer, too, not so clammy as before. Suddenly her eyes flew open. Ivan hastily unbuttoned the tunic as she struggled to free her arms.

“Take it easy, Madame. You’re quite safe.”

She looked at him, uncomprehending, then lunged, fingers hooked into talons. Ivan reared backwards as Valeraine tried to restrain her.

“No, mother. It’s me, Raine. You’re safe now.”

“More than I can say for me,” Ivan complained. “She nearly had my eye out.” Belatedly he realized how Vorclarence had come by that scratch down his face. “Sorry, sorry. I shouldn’t be joking. Here’s the water bottle. Try and get her to take a few sips. Why don’t I leave you two to it for a while? I’m obviously upsetting her.”

He stopped in the corridor to move the armsman’s body to one side and close his eyes. It was the best he could do to give him a modicum of dignity, and the ladies were going to have to walk past him. He stood, looking down at him for a moment. Who did he have to burn the offering for him, he wondered. A wife? A mother? He hoped it wasn’t a child. Ivan wished he could give little Marie a huge hug right then.

Just as he turned to walk away he heard a sound from the rubble. Someone was working there. He ducked into the other room.

“Vorberg? Any luck? Someone’s trying to get through out here.”

The Ensign threw down his stylus in disgust. “Nothing. It’s toast and I’m wasting my time. Let’s just go dig, instead.”

Five minutes later, Ivan’s wrist comm chimed. At last a signal! “Captain Vorpatril? Karasavas here. Come on, Ivan, answer me, dammit. We know you’re there.”

“Karasavas? What kept you? We have one prisoner, two to evacuate and two deceased here.”

“Thank gods! Clearing a way through now, my lord. I’m very glad to hear your voice. Just imagine the paperwork otherwise. The shielding down here is extremely effective, but we’ve moved enough rock to get a signal through now.”

“Down here? Did you come down that damned shaft? I thought your boys would come in the other
way. *You’re* supposed to be manning the desk. You’re on the sick list.”

“So I am. I can be sick down here as well as you can. We’ve finally got hold of a grav tractor small enough to fit, so we’ll be able to move this rubble a bit more efficiently now. You’ve got Vorclarence?”

“Yes, and the hostages. They’re going to need medical evacuation, as I said. Madame Vorfolse in particular. Let Waleska know, can you? Dehydration, head wound, other minor wounds, previous medical condition and stunner shock on top of all the rest. They’ve both had pretty poor treatment.”

“Will do. It shouldn’t be long, now. We can’t go any faster as there’s not the room to get too many men in at once.”

Ivan sat down, leant against the wall and let the exhaustion wash over him. He spread his legs out and tilted his head back. He’d just about had enough for one day. Vorberg sat beside him. He took a drink from his water bottle and handed it over for Ivan to use. Ivan sipped, then tipped some water over his head and wiped his face with the back of his hand.

“Where’s a handkerchief when you need one?”
They only rested for a minute or two. Ivan scrambled up again and offered a hand to haul Vorberg to his feet. The Ensign still didn’t look all that well. He winced as he moved and Ivan heard a small gasp of pain, quickly suppressed.

“What is it? Ribs?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah, one of those damned lumps of rock. I’m suppose I’m lucky, really. I could have been under it.”

“We’ll let the experts do it from here. That’s what they get paid for. We’ll just go sit with Madame Vorfolse and her daughter.” He winked. “Watch out for the claws, though.”

The older lady had managed to sit up when they walked back in. Vorberg cracked another cold light then sat cross-legged on the floor as Ivan retrieved his helmet.

“The cavalry is coming over the hill,” Ivan remarked to her. “We don’t want any more rocks falling on our heads, so we’ll just wait here and let them do all the hard work.”

She said nothing, shivering and with her eyes not really focused on anything in particular. Valeraine huddled to one side of her with an arm round her shoulders, trying to keep her warm. The look she gave Ivan was eloquent with dismay and near panic.

“Hey, don’t worry! We’ll be out of here very soon. They’re coming. You can hear them. I’m sure it’s just a bit of shock and a bit of low blood pressure and a bit of dehydration and a bit of being not very well anyway all mixed up with it being damn cold in here. Let’s just keep her warm and conscious if we can.”

“Oh, you’re cold! And I’ve got your jacket. I’m sorry.” Valeraine started to clumsily try to undo the fastenings but Ivan reached over to still her hands.

“I’m not cold. I’ve just been throwing rocks around. Here, feel.”

He held her hand in his.

“You do feel warm.” She turned a pretty shade of pink. “I…I’m not usually like this, you know. I’m normally quite a capable person.”

He pulled a face and smiled broadly. “I know. You wanted to put your fist down Vor Clarence’s throat not so long ago.”

She smiled a little wanly back. “I might do it yet, if I get the chance. Sleazy maggot…ugh.”

“Wait…what? Did he try something—molest you? If he did I’m going to go right now and go kick him in the balls, prisoner or no prisoner. The bastard!”

Vorberg tried to scramble up. “Let me do it, sir. Or as well.”

Valeraine shook her head at the both of them. “No, no. Sit down. Behave yourselves. That’s what my Vorfemme knife was for. He didn’t try twice, and he did only try to kiss me, after all. Imagine getting kissed by that slimy slug.”

“If you’re sure.” Reluctantly Ivan sat down, not sure if he really believed her. He buddied up close
on Madame Vorfolse’s other side, wrapping an arm over the two of them together. Vorberg slumped to the ground again and slipped the old lady’s boots off, pulling her stockinged feet into his lap to give them a rub.

Ivan kept up a steady stream of small talk as they waited for the rescue, even managing to coax a laugh or two out of Valeraine. Vorberg started by responding to the wisecracks and gossip but his comments came further and further apart as he concentrated on fighting the pain in his chest. His breathing was quite shallow. Not good.

After about thirty minutes Ivan went out to check on the progress and looked in on Vorclarence, poking the bastard with the toe of his boot to check for a reaction, nothing for Miles to complain about at all, really, and especially not if he didn’t find out. On his way back to the others he finally noticed a light shining through at the top of the rock pile. He shouted, and heard Karasavas shout back a reply. In a very few more minutes a head poked through, and then the rest of the body behind, hauling a medical pack, came sliding down the pile, cursing softly. Stones rained down as the dust flew up again.

“Wally!” Ivan helped the rear admiral to his feet. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” he wheezed, coughing at the dust. “Someone mentioned casualties. Besides, all the other docs are twice my size. I have my uses.”

“You just don’t trust me, do you? I’m taking it easy, just like you said. Your customers are right this way. I think we have three casualties, not two. Vorberg doesn’t look that good. I’m starting to worry it might be a pneumothorax.” Ivan lowered his voice and helped dust down the doctor’s clothes, disguising what he was saying.

“The women are badly shocked. Madame Vorfolse hasn’t been well for some time and is not responsive. Valeraine, the daughter, has hurt her wrists. Plus she may have been sexually assaulted but she’s not telling me. I’ll see you in and leave you to it.”

“Wait until I see if I need any help.” Waleska turned on his helmet light, a much brighter affair than Ivan’s, and snapped into response mode. He was all kind efficiency as he laid out a sterile sheet for his instruments and hyposprays and snapped on some medical gloves, talking in a calm and reassuring voice as his gaze darted everywhere, mentally triaging Vorberg, Madame Vorfolse and Valeraine. He tossed some bags to Ivan.

“Get these blankets unpacked and shaken out and crank up that heat pack. It’s freezing in here.”

Ivan did as he was bid, setting the heat pack behind Madame Vorfolse’s back as directed.

“Thank you. You can go see what’s keeping my medtechs. Oh, and keep the rubberneckers out. These ladies need their privacy.”

Ivan snapped to attention. “Yes, admiral. Right away, sir.”

Waleska winked at Valeraine. “Great Square soldier,” he joked. “Except he’s all no spit and no polish today.” He coughed. “Not surprising, really, with all this dust.”

Ivan grabbed his helmet and was just about to pull the door shut behind him when he heard her say, very quietly,

“I think he’s just brilliant. I’m so grateful for the way he’s looked after my mother.”

It was very pleasant to leave the decisions to others after that. The corridor was soon boiling with
ImpSec and Engineers. One medtech gave Vorclarence a shot of synergine to bring him round. He hauled him over to sit against the wall under the watchful eye of a pair of guards. Two others respectfully loaded the dead armsmen into body bags. They quickly took them away before the ladies could see them.

“How are you going to get them out?” Ivan asked one of the men. “It’s a hell of a haul to get them up that shaft.”

“It won’t be too hard, sir,” the medtech answered. ‘We found the antigrav switches. It’s a functioning lift tube. Goes straight up to the lightflyer deck.”

He was right. The casualties were very soon cleared, Madame Vorfolse in a body lift and Valeraine under her own steam. She clasped his hand in brief gratitude as he helped her over the rocks. Waleska went with them. Vorberg hung back until Ivan ordered him out. Soon, beside himself, there were only Vorclarence and the two burly ImpSec sergeants with their impressive plasma rifles. The Count had finally come to his senses. He looked like a collapsed balloon, whimpering and complaining about his headache and his poor treatment and who had stolen his tunic? They shoved him to the escape shaft. One sergeant went first, then Vorclarence and then the other guard. Ivan took one last look around. The place was cleared.

“How bath and a good bottle here I come,” he said, bracing himself for the cramped space. It would be even worse going up. It was six levels to the roof, not the four he’d had to endure coming down. Closing his eyes, he stepped forwards.

It was bright in the late afternoon fresh air. The shaft actually opened at the side of one of the huge chimneys, well away from the main lift tube. It was astonishing no one had discovered it was there. Vorberg waited for him, swaying, stubborn to the last to the letter of his orders. Vorclarence sulked close by, flanked by his guards.

Ivan stepped out and finally let out his breath. “All clear. You’re never going to get me down there again. You should be in the hosp—”

It all happened so fast Ivan could only gape. For such a rotund man Vorclarence moved incredibly quickly as insane rage fuelled his strength. Both fists shot upwards, catching the guards under their chins and knocking them sideways. He leapt forward, snatching Vorberg’s plasma arc. Glaring wildly he grabbed the ensign round the neck and heaved him about like a giant puppet to act as a shield. He backed up and shoved Vorberg with all his strength into Ivan, knocking them both off balance and down. A plasma bolt narrowly missed their heads as they tumbled over. He slapped his palm to the lift tube sensor and jabbed the button to reverse the polarity. As he started sinking a shot melted the switch housing then he fired the plasma arc continuously up the shaft. Anyone trying to follow was a dead man.

“What the hell does he think he’s doing?” Ivan leapt to his feet. He hauled the gasping Vorberg back up with a fist to his collar. Realisation hit him quickly. “Oh, shit. The weasel’s probably got another way out we didn’t spot. I bet it goes into the Residence.”

Men were running everywhere, clattering down the stairs and yelling orders. The two guards were trying to angle fire down the shaft without getting killed themselves.

“Stand back and take cover!” Ivan roared. “I’ve seriously had enough of this shit.” He reached into the front pocket of his combat pants and pulled out the grenade he’d been carrying since he’d taken it from around Madame Vorfolse’s neck. He held it out to Vorberg, who nodded with grim satisfaction and extracted the safety pin. They exchanged fierce grins before Ivan lobbed it down the shaft. “Five,” he said.
They both ducked.

Quite some time later Karasavas sent a volunteer down on a rappelling harness to collect some evidence. *If he could find any.*

The manhandling by Vorclarence had been the final straw in Vorberg’s brave fight to stay on duty. He coughed, bringing up a smattering of blood. Karasavas shooed the pair of them away, shaking his head in disbelief at the chaos.

“Here, put your arm around my shoulder.” Ivan said, trying to help Vorberg over to the landing pad. “Oh, shit, not that shoulder. That one’s got a hole in it.” He ducked around the other side.

Vorberg yelped as he tried to assist him again. “Ow! That’s the side my damned ribs are on….”

Ivan looked at Vorberg and Vorberg looked back. A second later they both burst out laughing.

“Oh, gods. Don’t make me laugh. Ow!” The Ensign doubled over in pain, tears streaming down his face. As they waited for the lightflyer to return they argued about which one of them should hold the other up. Finally it was settled when they both just sat down on the parapet, exhausted.

Ivan personally escorted Vorberg into the hospital, handing him over to one of the medical service Captains. Before he left he grasped his hand.

“It’s been a sincere pleasure working with you, Ensign,” he said. “I don’t think the Imperium has anything to worry about if the Academy’s turning out men like you. I’ll see you tomorrow before you stand down, but just in case I don’t, look me up when you get back to Vorbarr Sultana. I’ll help you write those damn reports that are going to be coming out of our ears.”

Vorberg blushed red with pleasure. “Thank you, my lord. And I’ll buy you a drink in the Officer’s Bar. Hell, I’ll buy you a bottle!”

“Why don’t we get Wally to buy us one each?” Ivan winked and waved a half salute. “Rear admirals get paid way more than we do.”

He went off in search of Waleska and the two hostages. It was a bit hard to knock on a canvas wall, so he cleared his throat to announce his presence in the little side-room to the main ward. Only two of the beds were occupied and both of the patients appeared to be sleeping. The doctor was sitting beside Madame Vorfolse, who had been cleaned up, dressed in a gown and who lay peacefully with an oxygen mask over her face. A saline drip fed into her arm and a dressing covered the side of her bruised face.

“How’s she doing, doc?” Ivan asked in a low voice.

Waleska turned and took a good look at him. “Stay right where you are,” he ordered. “We just got everyone clean. I suggest you go and do the same.”

Ivan looked down at himself and grinned wryly. “I’ve heard of getting your hands dirty, but this is above and beyond. The guys back in Ops would never believe me. I should get a holo of this.”

He scowled at the doctor. “I haven’t forgotten what you called me. ‘Great Square soldier’ indeed. You might just pay for that crack. Anyway, as I said I called by to find out how our patients are doing.”

“They’ll be fine. Madame needed her blood sugar adjusting and has a concussion. I’m getting lots of practice with concussions, except *she* isn’t arguing with me. It’s a toss up who’s more
insubordinate, you or Karasavas. Mademoiselle just has that injury to her wrists, dehydration and exhaustion.” He paused. “You don’t have to worry about your other concern. Vorcliffe didn’t do anything to her. She’s shocked, of course, but she should be up and about tomorrow after a good rest.”

“Lord Vorpatril?” It was Valeraine. Their voices, low pitched as they were had still awoken her. She held out her hand to him. “We heard another explosion. Is it true? One of the medtechs told me you’d dealt with Vorcliffe.”

She looked small and vulnerable lying there, her eyes smudged with exhaustion and her wrists ringed with better dressings than he had been able to provide. Ivan badly wanted to cross to the bed and take that little hand into his own. He had to remind himself he was on duty.

“Sorry, Mademoiselle, I can’t come in until I’m clean. Let’s just say I found a good use for that grenade I took off your Mama’s neck. I gave it back to the creep who put it there. He won’t be bothering you again.”

There was a flurry of sheets. Valeraine leapt out of the bed and launched herself into his arms. Startled, his reflexes kicked in and he grabbed her back. She was naked under the gown, soft and shapely and utterly, utterly delicious.

“Yessss. He got his. Oh, thank you so much!” she said, and kissed him soundly. Wow. Ivan didn’t at all mind kissing her right back.

“Break it up, you two.” Admiral Waleska looked at them and sighed. “Would you look at the mess? A clean gown and back to bed for you, Mademoiselle.”

He turned a wrathful eye on Ivan. “And you, Captain, are dismissed.”

“What? Oh, yes.” He snapped to attention. “Beg pardon, sir. I’ll go write some reports.”

Waleska shook his head. “I let you off this morning, and look what happened. Now I’m ordering, in writing if I have to. Good food, bed rest, no stress. No alcohol. But take a shower first.”

“That’s a low blow. No alcohol?”

“Dismissed!”

Ivan struggled up from the depths of sleep to find his cousin Miles standing in the doorway to his room. Light streamed in around him, silhouetting his shape with a bright corona that hid his expression.

“Urgh,” Ivan said, pulling a pillow over his head. “Too bright.” Seconds later the smell of coffee reached his nose. He pulled the pillow away again, squinting against the glare.

“Whassa time?”

“Time to get your fat ass out of bed, coz. I have a very fast and very expensive lightflyer on the roof next door waiting to take you back to Vorbarr Sultana. Your presence is Requested and Required.” His voice took on a tone bordering on gleefully malicious, “on the carpet, in front of the Imperial desk, to explain yourself.”

“What have I done now?” Ivan complained, sitting up and holding his hand out for the coffee
Miles had brought with him.

“Splattering a District Count all over the walls of his administrative building excluded, of course?”

“Oh, that.” Ivan took a deep swallow of the scalding coffee, hot enough to make his eyes water. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

He took a second swallow, draining the cup. “I’ve got things to do and people to see this morning.” He stretched, wincing. “Besides, I’m on sick leave. Three days bed rest, in writing. Good food, no stress and no alcohol. Can you believe anyone would do that to a man?”

Miles gave him a very dry look. “You want me to get on the comconsole and tell Gregor that Ivan says he can’t come because he’s got a headache and a note from his doctor? I don’t think so, Sunshine. And before you come up with excuse number two, Christos let me into your apartment and I have your dress greens with me. Pym is very kindly unpacking them and giving them a quick seeing-to.”

“I can’t go back just yet. I—”

“That’s a Request and Require, Captain Vorpatril. You have twenty minutes. Meanwhile I’ll be talking to Captain Karasavas. You can eat on the way.”

The little sadist banged the door on the way out. He didn’t even take the coffee cup back with him. More than somewhat dismayed Ivan crawled out of bed. Everything ached again. He really did have things to do, commitments, in fact. He turned on the shower and slapped on depilatory cream as he waited for the water to warm up. He found the pack of painkillers Wally had given him and popped two of them without getting the depilatory in his mouth. He’d learned that lesson the hard way. He couldn’t go back to Vorbarra Sultana now. He’d only just got here! There’d be twenty reports on his desk with more to come. He needed to visit the hospital. He needed to see Vorberg, and Madame Vorfolse. And check with Karasavas. Oh, shit, he hadn’t got out to Madame Watson’s house to get Marie’s things. He wanted to talk to Waleska, and he most certainly wanted to see Valeraine.

All he got to see was the last of New Sheffield disappear into the distance. They’d all just been left in the lurch by his sudden recall. She’d think he didn’t really care, just when things were looking promising, too. He sighed. Look on the bright side. Perhaps he’d get to see little Marie today, though, if he didn’t get thrown in a cell for assassinating a Count, whatever that crime was called. It couldn’t be treason, surely. It was Vorclarence who was the traitor. Counticide? Just plain old murder, maybe. Oh well, he’d soon find out.

Miles hadn’t been exaggerating about the ‘very fast’ in his description of the lightflyer. It was very shiny, too, and black, with the Vorbarra arms picked out on the door, and on the pilot’s livery. This wasn’t a Service vehicle; it was Gregor’s new personal toy. He’d heard him talking about taking delivery of it a couple of weeks back. It was his betrothal present.

“Has Gregor had a chance to use this himself, yet?” Ivan asked, looking round the exquisitely upholstered rear cabin. It even smelled new.

“This is the shakedown flight,” Miles told him. “Gregor isn’t allowed in it until everything has been tested to ImpSec and his armsmen’s satisfaction, so don’t go putting your feet on the seats. Or throwing up.”

Ivan glowered at his cousin. “So that ‘you can eat on the way’ comment was a bald-faced lie, wasn’t it? No doubt you’ve had breakfast. That’s the second doctor’s order you’ve broken today.
Rest and fresh food, wait—make that the third order. Rest, fresh food and no stress. I’m going to sic him on to you. You don’t cross Wally and think to live. You are toast, coz. And I’ll hold his coat.”

“You’ll probably get all the rest you’re going to need, where you’re going.” Miles handed him a data recorder. “Start writing your report now. It’ll take your mind off…things.” He studiously avoided looking Ivan in the eyes, turning to his own data reader to study his no-doubt top-secret auditorial-eyes only crossword puzzle, or something. Ivan felt like throwing the data recorder at his head, but that might be construed as treason. Or it might mark the upholstery. He couldn’t decide which was worse, right at the minute. The little git was so enjoying making him squirm.

“Even a condemned man gets breakfast,” Ivan grumbled, keying the recorder on and detaching the stylus. Where to start? Well, start at the beginning. That was logical. With a sigh, he began writing.

The carpet in Gregor’s waiting room was very luxurious, deadening any sound of footsteps or scraping chairs. He’d been studying it for the last half hour at least, while Miles tittle-tattled on him, armed with the report Ivan had finished five minutes before they landed. The only sounds he could hear were Gregor’s secretary tapping at his comconsole and his own stomach grumbling at the lack of breakfast. Never mind breakfast, it was nearly time for lunch. Ivan crossed his arms and tilted his head back. Perhaps the ceiling would be more interesting…

“Captain Vorpatril? Captain? The Emperor will see you now.”

Ivan jerked awake. Oh, shit, had he really fallen asleep? He’d told Miles he needed rest. Hastily he tried to pull himself together, smoothing down his hair with his hands and checking the sit of his uniform. He felt a bit woozy, truth be told, standing up so quickly like that. He needed a minute.

“The Emperor is waiting.”

Well, he wasn’t going to get his minute. He pulled up straight and marched in, passing the two armsmen either side of the door, coming to full attention in front of the desk. His heart sank. Dressed in his most severe black and silver house uniform Gregor sat at the desk, writing some notes on a flimsy. At least it wasn’t a death warrant. That was always written on very expensive real paper. Over at the couches Miles reclined, his ankles crossed, hands behind his head, lolling around like he was having a wonderful time. General Allegre wasn’t quite so relaxed. Someone had shoved a poker up his butt no so long ago, by the looks of him. Ivan could feel his gaze boring in to him.

The door closed behind him. Gregor pressed a button that would lock it, then finally looked up.

“At ease, Captain.”

It wasn’t stand easy and it wasn’t Ivan and it wasn’t even Lord Vorpatril. Warily, Ivan moved into a formal parade rest with his feet shoulder width apart, his hands clasped behind his back and his gazed fixed on the Vorbarra arms on the wall behind the desk. Whatever it was, this was not good.

“We’ve read your report. Is there anything you’d like to add?”

Was he missing something? Ivan wracked his brains. “I may not have emphasized enough the truly excellent work carried out by Rear Admiral Waleska, Captain Karasavas and in particular Ensign Vorberg, sire.”

“No, you emphasized all that. It has been noted.”

He was missing something. Ivan risked giving Gregor a quick glance. He needn’t have bothered.
Gregor was as inscrutable as only he could be. “Well then, no, sire, I don’t think there’s anything else I should have mentioned and haven’t.”

Gregor let out a breath. “Let me be more specific. What was your motive for killing Count Vorclarence, and especially why did you include Ensign Vorberg in your action?”

“Motive? The bastard needed to be dead. Another two inches lower with that plasma arc and Vorberg and I would have been dead ourselves instead. He’d just murdered his own defenceless armsman in cold blood and was about to escape.” He paused to take in a breath. “If I needed any more motive that grenade I used was the one I’d just taken from the neck of an innocent woman, a guest in his home he’d taken as hostage. One that he’d put there…and, and I thought Vorberg might like to join me in doing it. He’d seen exactly what had happened in that bunker. He’d seen the hospital, and the power plant, and the water treatment works. He deserved a reward. I wouldn’t have needed to do a thing if those two ImpSec goons hadn’t been fast asleep on the job, though.” He ran to a stop.

“You were aware Count Vorclarence was to be tried in the Council of Counts, and yet you appointed yourself judge and jury in their place?”

Shit, is that what Gregor thought he’d done? It hadn’t been like that at all. “If you say so, sire, I suppose I did. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“And no one influenced you in that decision? Not Vorberg, for instance, or others more senior?”

“It wasn’t a decision, not one I’d made in advance, anyway. And Vorberg most certainly was only doing his duty and following orders. To his own personal cost.” Ivan really, really didn’t like the way this was going.

“It wasn’t pre-meditated? Not revenge? Not a Vor Lord with a blood feud?”

Now Ivan really was dumbfounded. “Only if the Vor Lord we’re talking about was Count Vorbarra. You’re the one who needed to be avenged.” His brain was starting to turn a bit foggy. He should have eaten something.

Gregor threw down his stylus in disgust and wiped a hand over his face.

“I’m obliged to ask you this last question. Did you kill Vorclarence with the intention of preventing him being interrogated, to protect others who may have been otherwise implicated? Others who may be seeking to place another Emperor on the camp stool?”

Ivan choked. What other Emperor? Oh, fucking hell. Him? He couldn’t force a word out of his mouth. His whole world, everything he believed to be true, and honest, and good, fell around his ears in a heartbeat. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and then another. Eventually he managed. “No, sire. I did not.”

“And you’d swear to that? Repeat it under fast-penta?”

He staggered as his knees buckled before he could regain control of himself. What did they think he was? The shards of his precious friendship with the man in front of him tinkled round his feet. Ivan drew himself back to attention. “I swear on my word as Vorpatril, but if you don’t trust that Allegre can get his fucking fast-penta out right now.”

Gregor looked over to the couches. “Have you heard enough, General? Are you satisfied?”

Allegre nodded. “We had to be sure, sire. There could have been a leak. And we have that other
testimony.”

The Emperor’s mouth hardened into a line of displeasure. “You call that testimony? The commodore couldn't be given fast-penta, remember. He was trying to save his own skin. We were sure all along, Allegre. You’re the one that needed to be convinced. Captain Vorpatril had no motive to murder Count Vor Clarence.”

“Noted, sire.”

Gregor sighed. “Relax, Ivan. Come and have some coffee.”

Ivan ground his teeth. Murder? Murder? They weren’t accusing him of murder. Allegre was accusing him of High Treason. Relax? Have a coffee with that damned weasel and his…his weasel-brain thinking? He’d rather drink poison.

“Permission to be dismissed, sire. You have my report. I need to return to my duties, unless you’d prefer my resignation.”

Gregor pointed to the couches. “Get down off your high horse. It’s exactly what the Council of Counts is going to ask you, if not more. Sit, Ivan.” He unlocked the door then spoke on a comlink, asking for coffee and refreshments.

Ordered to obey, Ivan marched over to a hard chair set to one side of the couches and sat bolt upright on the edge, his hands balled into fists on his knees. He caught his cousin’s gaze on him and snarled in a very soft voice as Gregor crossed the room behind him.

“You bastards.”

Miles sat up a little straighter. His expression changed, but he made no reply as an armsman entered just then, laden with a tray of coffee, sandwiches and pastries. Ivan made no move to touch anything, even when a full cup of coffee was set in front of him.

“Not hungry, Ivan?” Miles inquired, sipping from his cup.

“I seem to have lost my appetite,” he managed to choke out past the rock that had lodged in his throat. He had to get out of here soon, before he said something he regretted. Weasel words and weasel politics. He needed to see his mother and Marie, and get back to New Sheffield to finish the job he’d started. He sat and stared at General Allegre instead.

Miles shifted with impatience. “Oh, come on, Ivan, don’t be an—”

“Don’t you dare!” Ivan couldn’t help himself, Emperor’s presence or not. He shouted at his cousin. No, he bellowed at his cousin, and at that twelve-toed prole Allegre.

“You will not call me that. Not about this. Never about this. Vorpatrils have been loyal to the Emperor for generations. Nearly as many generations as you Vorkosigans.” He nearly spat the name. “Have I ever lied on a report? Been dishonest in my duty? To be publicly questioned about my motives in the service of my Emperor. I thought he was my…my friend! No, I am not an idiot to bitterly resent having my honour so mortally insulted.”

He was shaking from head to foot. He couldn’t get a deep enough breath to begin to try and control himself. There was a deathly quiet in the room. Miles stared at him, open-mouthed with shock. General Allegre sat up straight, as if to speak, but nothing came out of his mouth.

Very carefully, Gregor replaced his coffee cup on the occasional table in front of him. He stood.
Ivan leapt to his feet, rigidly at attention again. The Emperor waved the other two men to remain where they were.

“ivan.” He took hold of him by the elbow. “Please come with me.” They walked over to the door, which opened on a half-squad of armsmen, bristling with weapons and suspicion. Gregor waved them away. Without leaving go of Ivan’s arm he spoke to his secretary.

“I’ll need a ground car and driver at the West Portico. I believe Lady Alys is in her office today. Please ask her to meet us there as soon as possible.”

He steered Ivan towards the exit. “This way, Ivan. Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

They walked in silence through the corridors and down the staircase to the entry hall, startled servants and officials ducking out of the way as an armsman led them out. Ivan concentrated on his boots. He could look at his boots. Move one foot, then the other foot. Do it again. Just walk. They reached the West Portico as the car pulled up outside. Lady Alys arrived from her office, not quite running but moving at a very brisk pace. She looked the picture of puzzlement and concern. Gregor held his hand up as she opened her mouth.

“No questions, please, Alys. I have been truly humbled by your son today. I am so very sorry this has happened. Please, would you take him to your apartment? I don’t want him to be on his own. He needs to rest and I doubt he’s had any food since yesterday. He’s not to go out anywhere tonight, although I’m sure Simon would be happy to share a glass with him if Ivan wants to do that later. I’ll be in touch very soon.”

Lady Alys opened her mouth again, and then thought better of it. Gregor himself opened the canopy and ushered Ivan inside the ground car, and then assisted Lady Alys in afterward. She took hold of Ivan’s hand, but said not a word on the short journey back to her apartment. Ivan said nothing either, just looked at his boots, those vile accusations going round and round in his head. They were paranoid maniacs, the whole fucking lot of them. How could they? How could Miles, and how could Gregor?
Simple Lessons

Someone had called ahead. When the Vorbarran ground car reached Lady Alys’s apartment building, Christos stood waiting to open the canopy for them. He assisted her out and then at a signal from her leaned back inside to Ivan.

“My Lord? My Lord Ivan, please come inside.”

Ivan indistinctly heard someone talking but it wasn’t until Christos reached over to touch his arm that he paid any attention. He did what he was bid and exited onto the street. He looked around, vaguely confused.

“This isn’t my building.”

“No, my Lord. Mademoiselle Marie is waiting for you here.”

*Ohhh, yes, Marie.* Ivan blinked once or twice. And there she was. Simon had brought her down to the foyer. When she saw Ivan looking at her she broke away from Simon’s hand and limped over to him.

“My Ivan! You came back!” She held up her arms, blinking uncertainly when he made no movement towards her.

“My Ivan?” She asked again. Her bottom lip started to tremble. He shook his head to clear the fog.

“Oh, sweetheart! It’s so good to see you.” He swept her up, one hand cradling her head into the side of his neck. All those bastards could take a wormhole jump to the other side of hell. Who needed them, anyway? There was more truth and honour in this little girl than the whole seething cesspit at ImpSec. He buried his face in her soft black curls. A sob broke from his throat but he fiercely suppressed it.

“Let’s get you back inside and you can tell me what you’ve been doing while I’ve been gone. Have you been drinking all your milk?”

He hugged her fiercely all the way up to the penthouse suite and into the little room his mother had turned over for her use. Apart from the white ruffled bed there was a squishy leather rocking chair in one corner. They sat in it together.

“Did you get my steggy?” she asked. “You said you would go and find him.”

Well, that was one more black mark to chalk up to that Vorkosigan runt, Ivan thought viciously.

“I’m so sorry, Marie. I never got to your house at all. I had to chase a bad man and then the Emperor wanted to speak to me so I had to come right back. You always have to do exactly what the Emperor says, you know. He needed to speak to me in a big hurry.”

“Did he have his hat on?” she asked. “He had a big hat on when I saw him. He looked scary.”

“He didn’t have his hat on, but he looked pretty scary to me too, today. I was in trouble.”

“Oh!” She pulled away to look up into his face. He’d seen his mother looking at him just like that.

“What did you do, My Ivan? Did you say sorry?”
He thought about that one for a moment. “No, I didn’t say sorry, because I hadn’t done anything to be sorry for. The Emperor thought I’d done something really bad but someone else had told him the wrong thing. It’s all very complicated.”

“What’s comp…licated?”

“Sorry, sweetheart. Complicated is when everything is all mixed up and it’s not easy for everyone to understand.”

He could see her thinking about that one. After a second she snuggled back down. “Well, My Ivan, if you didn’t do anything wrong the Emperor shouldn’t be cross with you. That’s not fair.”

Ivan sighed. He ruffled her hair. “Oh, darling, you got that right.”

"But next time, if you do do something wrong, remember you have to say sorry.”

They sat quietly, gently rocking for a few minutes. It felt right, sitting here like this, letting the world go by. He was just dozing off to sleep when she pulled away again.

“Did you catch the bad man you were chasing?”

He smiled at her, baring his teeth just a little bit. “Oh, yes, sweetheart. I did. And he was very, very sorry.”

The smell of Ivan’s favourite spiced soup and fresh-cooked bread lured him out of Marie’s room at last. He felt like an old, old man as she tugged him along to the dining area. It was a real struggle just to put one foot in front of the other. There were only three places laid for the late lunch, but it was Simon Illyan and not his mother who came to join them.

“Your mother is a remarkable woman, Ivan,” he said, once they were seated with the steaming bowls set in front of them. “She knew she wouldn’t be able hold back from trying to find out what happened, so she’s taken herself back to work. I have my orders. Food, bed and babysitting. I’m fairly confident the babysitting is for Marie, but you know your mother.”

Ivan managed half a smile, but turned his attention to the little girl.

“Be careful, sweetie. It’s hot. Just take a little bit at a time. Mamie isn’t here, so we don’t mind if you blow on it, do we…um?” He stopped. What did Marie call Simon? He didn’t know. Hell, he didn’t know what to call Simon.

“Papi Simon will deal with the bread,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “and he doesn’t mind if you dip it in. Our secret.”

She giggled. Simon chatted away to Marie while Ivan ate his soup, and three slices of bread. Make that four slices of bread. It wasn’t nearly as spicy as he remembered, but little girls wouldn’t like it the way he normally did. Simple routine eased the hot ache in his chest just a little. Too many emotions in too short a time had left him so flat and apathetic. Empty. Is this what heartbroken felt like?

They didn’t linger at the table. Christos came in to fetch Ivan away to the guestroom, where some old ship-knits were laid out for him and a sleep-timer sat on the bedside table with a glass of water. It was too hard to argue any more today. Ivan stripped off his uniform and pulled on the knits. He sat on the side of the bed for a while, just thinking, or trying to. Christos handed him the tablet and
“Are you going to tuck me in, too?” Ivan grumbled.

“Only if you wish, my Lord.” Christos dimmed the windows and scooped up the scattered clothing. Ivan tumbled into the bed. He didn’t particularly notice when Christos left the room.

The six-hour sleep timer did its work. Ivan woke up gradually, content just to lie and think for a while. Wally had been right, damn him. He’d cracked. He thought back to Gregor’s words in his office. What was that he’d said? ‘I’m obliged to ask you this question’. What did that mean, exactly? Had someone insisted he asked? He wouldn’t put it past that devious maniac he shared a great grandfather with. You had no control over what family you ended up with, after all, but no, it was more likely Allegre. He would see a conspiracy behind every bloodweed bush, he would. One treacherous Vor probably looked very like another one as far as he was concerned. Ivan sighed. He’d have to apologise at some point. There was nothing more he could do tonight. Tomorrow he’d get on the first available shuttle back to New Sheffield. At least he had friends there.

There was a bustle out in the hallway, the tramp of booted feet Ivan wasn’t used to hearing in his mother’s normally serene home. Before he could do much more than wonder the door slid open and two burly armsmen stomped in. What the fuck?

Well, they weren’t hauling his butt off to ImpSec HQ in a tangle net. After they’d cleared his room and the tiny bathroom they stomped out again. That was because they weren’t ImpSec heavies. They’d been dressed in Vorbarra black. That could only mean one thing. Gregor was here?

Another figure appeared in the doorway, one he knew only too well. It could mean two things, actually. The Emperor’s Voice was here.

“You can just piss right back off to where you came from, you little shit.” Ivan was not happy to see his cousin.

“Didn’t you hear me? Fuck off.” He looked round for something to throw. The bedside glass seemed like a good idea. He’d deal with his mother’s outrage later. The glass hit the doorframe with a very satisfying thunk but it just bounced off. Good thing, really, as shattered glass and bare feet didn’t exactly mix. The wet carpet he could deal with.

“I’ll just wait outside then, shall I?” Miles hadn’t even ducked. Winced a little, maybe, but not ducked. His chin came up in that tic he had when he was feeling defensive. Ivan looked around for something else to throw. Miles disappeared.

Armsman Gerard didn’t give him a chance. He walked right up to the bed and looked sternly into Ivan’s eyes. “If you please, my Lord.”

Maybe it did mean one thing, after all. Gerard would never leave his master’s side.

“Someone stole my clothes, armsman.”

Gerard was implacable. “Knits will do fine, my Lord, under the circumstances.” He relented just slightly. Lowering his voice, he whispered, “It wouldn’t do to keep his Imperial Majesty waiting, would it?”

Gregor was pacing up and down in the little study Simon had got into the habit of using as his own. He looked up as Ivan came in. Gerard quietly shut the door behind him, leaving them alone.
They regarded each other for several seconds.

“Ivan, I’m so sorry—”

“Sire, I’m sorry—”

They stopped and looked at each other again. Gregor indicated a chair. “Can we talk?”

“Of course.” Ivan waited for the Emperor to sit first. His normally unreadable face showed distinct signs of unhappiness. Ivan couldn't ever remember Gregor looking like that, even when they were boys.

“I talked to Rear Admiral Waleska after you left. He’s filled me in on a few things.”

Good old Wally. He’d give the devil himself a serve if he were interfering with one of his patients.

“Nothing Lord Auditor Vorkosigan couldn’t have told you, I’m sure, and I told him I wasn’t fit.”

“Miles feels really bad, too, you know.”

“Well that breaks my heart. The little git can suffer. Where did the jack-in-the-box get to, by the way?”

Gregor shrugged. “I think he said he’d wait outside. He only got over the threshold in the first place because he was with me. Christos didn’t seem to be too pleased to see him.”

“Right. Was there something else, sire?”

“Ivan.” Gregor hesitated. “There are three men in the whole Imperium I can truly call my friends. I can’t afford to lose any of them. And there’s only two of those I can call family. Plus I can’t afford to lose my social secretary, either.”

He was diverted for a moment. “What’s m’mother got to do with this?”

Gregor actually shuddered. “She resigned. On the spot. She’s always been in my corner before this. When she came back to the Residence this afternoon she was not a happy lady. Then she found out I’d as much as accused you of treason and she nearly had my hide. Flayed, skewered and spitted. Mad Yuri’s dismemberment would have been a vivisection demonstration class by comparison if she’d had her way. A finding of no confidence in her son was a slur on her entire family’s honour. Did she need to remind me that her late husband had been the grandson of Prince Xav? It was impossible to continue serving such an ingrate. etc etc etc. She didn’t stop for ten minutes straight. And she only stopped then because she had Miles waiting for her in her office. She was just warming up for him.”

“She did all that?” Ivan had too often been on the sharp end of her tongue. Oh, mamère. Somebody tried to hurt your boy?

Gregor nodded. “She most certainly did. She also said she was sure I could arrange my own wedding.”

“Was there blood?”

Gregor shook his head. “But if I told Laisa she’d have the bits your mother left behind.”

There was another silence in the room. “Three?” Ivan asked, dubiously.

“You’ve got Laisa.”

“Laisa is my heart. She’s my breath. She’s my comfort and my every joy, but Laisa didn’t jump off the deck with me at Vorkosigan Surleau, or fight the Cetagandans. She didn’t take the blame for that flagon of rot-gut maple mead, and she didn’t give me a model Vorsmythe Dolphin 776 for Winterfair.”

“My mother bought you that.”

“I know.”

Ivan thought some more. ”I shouldn't have shouted in your office.”

"Gerard might have stunned you if you'd shouted at me. Luckily it was Miles. Am I forgiven yet?"

“Two conditions. Let me get that little git in here for the first one. Stay right there.”

He strode out of the room, stopping only to ask Gerard to go in to see his master. Outside the main door to the apartment the two junior armsmen stood on silent watch. Miles paced up and down, casting anxious glances at the door. He smiled a brilliant smile as Ivan marched up to him.

“Iv—arghh” Ivan grabbed him by the scruff of his scrawny neck and hauled him completely off his feet.

“Come with me. Call me an idiot, would you?”

Luckily it was only a few steps back into the apartment. Miles managed to get a breath eventually. Ivan dumped him in the study and went off to search for his mother. He found her at last in the kitchen. She looked worried. Only a catastrophe would have caused her either to look worried or to sit in the kitchen. Simon Illyan accompanied her at the worktable, sharing a bottle of her favourite white wine.

“Mamère, Simon. Would you come with me, please?”

Lady Alys looked up in alarm. “Ivan, are you feeling quite well now?”

“Never better. I need you, if you don’t mind?”

He offered her his arm, for all the world like they were leaving the ballroom floor at the Imperial Residence, ship knits and bare feet notwithstanding. He escorted her back to the study. The other three stood waiting for him, totally unsure what was going on.

Ivan arranged them, two on Gregor’s right and two on his left in an arc. He stood facing them all.

“I’ve had a gutful of this treason slur. I need to make my position perfectly clear.” He counted them off. “Right. We have a sworn liegeman, an Imperial Auditor, a twice-twenty time-served officer and the most respected lady on Barrayar right now. Mamère, unless there’s something you’ve never told me, you’ll be the only person here who can be questioned under fast-penta if it should come to that. I apologise in advance for any indignity that may come of this.” He stopped to kiss her hand and cheek. “You are all witnesses for my oath.”

With deadly seriousness, Ivan sank on one knee in front of the Emperor. He held out his hands and placed them between Gregor’s. Looking straight into his eyes he spoke with a simple, fervent
“I, Ivan Xav, do swear on my name as Vorpatril to be true to my liege lord Gregor Vorbarra, long may he reign, Emperor of the Barrayaran Imperium and his heirs and successors. I also swear on my name as Vorpatril to defend and protect my Emperor until death against all treason and lese-majesty.”

There was a total silence in the room. Gregor took one deep shuddery breath, then a more controlled one. His voice was firm when he spoke.

“We, Gregor Vorbarra, Emperor of the Barrayaran Imperium, do accept your fealty and your name’s word, Ivan Xav Vorpatril, Our trusted friend, in Our name and in the name of Our heirs and successors. We swear to you on Our name as Vorbarra that We will hold Our hand in protection over you from this day forwards.”

Nobody moved.

At last, Alys broke the spell. She found a handkerchief and wiped her brimming eyes.

Ivan grinned. “May I get up now, please?”

Gregor hauled him to his feet and into a brief embrace. “That’s the second time today you’ve humbled me, Ivan Xav Vorpatril. You mentioned another condition?”

He nodded. “Yes, sire. I need two hours in New Sheffield to go find Steggy. Oh, make that three conditions. I have to go to a funeral, too.” He paused, thinking. “Possibly four. My mother gets her job back.”

Simon stepped forward. “I think this calls for champagne.”
When the others followed Gregor into the main sitting room, Miles waited to pull Ivan to one side. They looked at each other, eyes wary. As the silence lengthened, Ivan folded his arms. He wasn’t going to make it easy for the miserable twisty homunculus.

“The Count-my-father always wanted me to be honourable, Ivan. He probably mentioned it to you, too. He’d be ashamed of me if he knew about this. My honour is just ashes in my mouth. I am so very, very sorry. I thought it would be fun to bait you just a little bit. Allegre had this preposterous idea about a coup. He insisted we question you.”

“Honour? You’re the little runt that used to march around Vorbarr Sultana with a seal dagger stuffed in your belt, full of swagger, just like a cock bantam. You can’t help yourself, can you? All show and no substance.”

Ivan watched Miles blink. Was he crying? He took a step closer. Hah! He was crying!

“Except I saw you sworn in as Imperial Auditor at Winterfair, and I have never been prouder of anyone in my entire life. You had me in tears. That honour of yours is going to burn you up, Miles Naismith Vorkosigan. Just don’t you ever think honour means anything less to me.”

Ivan took a second step. “If you weren’t such a midget I’d give you a big fat hug. You need a box.”

Miles sniffed.

Ivan slung his arm around Miles’ neck and dragged him off to the sitting room.

“Well, I can’t even get pissed. Doctor’s orders. No alcohol. You can drink my share. Let’s go talk to Gregor about a coup.”

Four apprehensive sets of eyes turned to watch as Miles and Ivan walked into the sitting room. Even Gerard breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the two of them together.

“What’s everybody standing around for? Sit, why don’t you? And no, you paranoid Ceta-under-the-bed worry-worts, you can’t all sit facing the door. Gerard can. That’s his job. Mamère, won’t you sit here, and Simon?” He handed his mother into a seat. That was one couch sorted.

“Your Majesty? You get to sit beside the weasel, if you can bring yourself to do it.” That was the second couch. “I’ll sit in the armchair, but first…” He hauled over an upright chair, faced it towards the door and pressed Gerard into it, then handed him a glass of the champagne Simon had poured. He only sat down when everyone had a drink, his an apple juice. blergh.

“You’re my first witness, Gerard. I’ve never actually made a personal oath before. My military oath was said with fifty other Ensigns in a room the size of a parade ground.”

The armsman raised his glass in a toast.

“And very proud to be so, my lord.”

“Thank you.” He waited a moment while they all drank, then turned to the Emperor.

“Gregor, can we talk coups for a minute, please?”

Miles nearly choked. “You were serious?”
“Oh, yes. I’ve been doing a bit of thinking. Anyway, it’s worth checking something out. Vorclarence went through the Imperial Academy, didn’t he?”

Gregor nodded. “Yes, I’ve seen his file. But if you’re thinking along the lines of Vordarian, he was ten years too young to be a contemporary of his, and there’s no documented link. It’s been looked at.”

Ivan shook his head. “No, not Vordarian. What about Evon Vorhalas, though? Has anyone had a look at that angle? Madame Vorfolse’s late husband was a lieutenant under him at the space communication centre. Died on the same day, too.”

Lady Alys pricked up her ears. “Are you talking about Aceline Vorfolse? But you can’t be. She died in the Pretender’s War. The Vorfolses always did manage to pick the wrong sides. She used to be Aceline Vorkalloner when we were girls together, before she married Valery.”

“She was very much alive when I saw her yesterday. And her daughter.”

“Daughter?” For the second time that night Ivan saw tears in his mother’s eyes. “Oh, she had a daughter! When things settled down, I asked Count Vorfolse what had happened to her. They weren’t all that closely related, just second cousins, but they were still family. He told me that he had no good news to give me of her or the child. He told me…” she paused, thinking back. “No, he inferred that she’d died. A daughter would have been the final straw for Vorfolse. We were such friends. I was very sad to think she’d died, but there was so much else to worry about, then.”

She gave Ivan the look. “We even had the same obstetrician.”

He just rolled his eyes. “Two weeks late. Nine pounds. Not my fault.”

Gregor caught Ivan’s eye and tipped his head towards Miles. His whole mien had changed. Lady Alys wasn’t the only one who could do a look. The grey in his eyes had darkened, one hand up to his chin. He jumped up and started pacing.

“Perhaps Allegre was on to something after all — no, nothing to do with you, Ivan, before you prickle up again. He wouldn’t just snatch that coup theory out of thin air. What if Vorclarence was rounding up Vordarian sympathisers, or their survivors? We’re going to have to get on to all of Vorclarence’s contacts, see if there were any links. Check the Academy graduating class that year…”

He was off and running. “We’ll have to have them in for questioning.”

“Who? The Vorfolses?” Ivan looked at him with dismay. “They were totally innocent bystanders! You can’t do that to them.”

Gregor intervened. “He’s right, Ivan. We need to find out.”

“You’re not going to put those poor women into ImpSec custody. That’s just wrong. They only got out of that hellhole yesterday. They’re still in hospital.”

Miles snapped his fingers. “They can stay at Vorkosigan House. We can watch them there. I’ll go and get them tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll go and get them. It’s the least I can do. I need to go back anyway, remember? I have a duty to them. Plus I have to get Steggy and I need to see my doctor because I am not well.”

Miles snickered. He sat down again, then nodded. “Yes, that might work. There’ll be a lot to do
here. Thanks, Ivan. I owe you one.”

“Good. You can lend me Pym, if he doesn’t object. It won’t be until I’ve made the arrangements, but I have a very honourable man to lay to rest. Armsman Walton. He redeemed himself the only way he knew how, after he was forced to choose between his Emperor and his Count. I realise now why he did what he did. The rest of his score are either dead themselves or in prison. I think he should have at least one fellow-armsman to mourn him. Even if it’s from another Count’s score.”

Gerard glanced at his Imperial Master. He must have seen some slight signal of permission.

“If you please, my lord, I would call it a privilege if I could accompany you as well.”

Ivan nodded. “Thank you. That would be a rare honour. I’m sure it will bring a great comfort to his family.”

Miles must have still been feeling guilty.

“You can have the Count-my-father’s new man as well. He’s still learning the ropes and needs the experience. He’s from Hassadar, name’s Roic. He can check out the Municipal Guard for you if you get the chance. He was a patroller before he came to us. Three makes a very respectable show, after all. Armsmen come in very handy, sometimes. You should try it. Ow!”

Miles jumped.

Gregor put his hand out to steady him. “What’s the matter, Miles? Stub your toe? You should try and sit still, you know.”

“You…you…” Miles spluttered to a halt.

“What was all that about?” Ivan looked from one to the other, suspicious.

“Miles has a bad habit of talking in front of armsmen as if they’re not there. I was just reminding him that Gerard here is a person, with feelings.”

Gregor gave Miles a very long, hard look.

“We’ll leave you to liaise with ImpSec on the Vorhalas theory, shall We?”

Miles looked a trifle subdued. “Yes, sire.”

Ivan snorted. “Good, because I’ll be speaking to General Allegre when hell next freezes over. He’s not family. He’s not forgiven.”

“Well,” Lady Alys changed the subject. “Please give Aceline Vorfolse my very best love, Ivan. I’ll most certainly call on her at Vorkosigan House once the unpleasant business has been cleared up. Tell her I’m sorry I’m not able to offer her my hospitality, but with Marie there are some difficulties space-wise.”

_Not to mention Simon Illyan shacked up in the second best spare bedroom._ Ivan really wished he had the courage to say that aloud.

“Ivan, dear,” his mother continued, “have you given any thought to Madame Watson’s service? I know you’ve had a great deal to do. Is there a memorial somewhere for her husband? I’m sure it would be a comfort for Marie in later life to have them lie together.”

Ivan hadn’t given it a thought. He should have. He looked at his mother in dismay.
“Her father doesn’t have a grave. And as for her mother, I don’t even know where they’ve taken her.”

Gregor held up his hand. “Don’t worry about any of that, Ivan. We’ll take care of it. Just liaise with my secretary for suitable dates. We’re sure quite a lot of people will wish to be there. We’re all going to be needing some support.”

“Thanks, Gregor. I’ll be going to her house so I’ll see what I can find there. We might just pack it all up and have ImpSec deal with it all. Least they can do.”

Gerard murmured something and Gregor flicked a glance at his chrono. “I need to go. Ivan, can I take a peek at Marie? I promise not to wake her up.”

“I think that will be fine. I actually haven’t met her nanny myself, yet. Mamère arranged all that. Her name is Ma McIver.”

A woman in a neat grey dress rose from her rocking chair when they entered the bedroom. She held a finger to her lips and bobbed a brief curtsey. Her shock when she realized just who had walked into the room caused her eyes to open with an expression bordering on horror. She curtseyed again, much more deeply this time. Ivan and Gregor stood either side of the bed for a little while.

“She’s had a very mild sedative to sleep,” Ma McIver whispered. “She woke crying for her Ma last night, and then for ‘My Ivan’. She told me all about you this afternoon, my lord. It’s better if she sleeps, for a few weeks at least. The doctor suggested it.”

Ivan kissed his fingers and touched them to Marie’s hair. “We won’t wake her. Thank you, Ma McIver, for taking such good care of her.”

Gregor nodded to her and tiptoed out without saying a word.

Once out in the corridor Gregor held out his hand. “Get some more sleep. Come to the Residence for breakfast. We’ll have a lightflyer waiting for you there. Not my present from Laisa. Trust Miles to get one up on me like that. Anyway, I want to make sure I see you eat, and we can go over what he’s found out overnight. 0630 not too early for you?”

“At your command, sire.” Ivan turned the handshake into another brief hug.

“I really am sorry, you know. I should have known you’d never think anything like that about me. Miles, yes. You, no. That’s what made it so devastating.”

“No, not Miles either Ivan. You know that.”

“Yes, but don’t let him hear that. You try and get some sleep, too.” Ivan gave Gregor a broad wink. “…Unless you get lucky.”

Christos, that pearl of family retainers, may he always walk in sunshine, dropped Ivan at the gates to the Imperial Residence at 0620 hours. He’d been showered, shaved, dressed in an impeccably presented uniform and ready to say goodbye to Marie at 0600. She, bless her heart, had tumbled out of bed in her pretty lace nightgown to wind her arms around him. When she heard he had to go see the Emperor for breakfast, she gave him an extra hug.

“Don’t let him be cross with you, My Ivan. Just say sorry anyway.”
Ivan was still smiling at the thought of her advice when he saw Guy Allegre hurrying down the steps towards him. He stopped smiling. He braced to attention and saluted. Allegre was nearly past him before he noticed. He very correctly returned the compliment and nodded.

“Vorpatril. I’d hoped to speak with you, but something has come up.”

“That’s quite all right, sir. I doubt we’d have much to say to each other anyway.”

The general hurried off to his waiting ground car. It disappeared at full speed in a flurry of hissing air fans. Ivan watched it go.

What had got him into such a flap? He shrugged. He didn’t really care, when it came right down to it.

An armsman escorted Ivan to a small private parlour near Gregor’s office. A buffet service bar along one side of the room held a variety of dishes wafting delicious aromas around the room. Two coffee carafes steamed gently. The table was set for four, one of the places already occupied. He knew the man, an old gentleman with an ample girth, a shock of white hair and a rumpled, oversized suit with lots of pockets. What was he doing here?

“My Lord Auditor Vorthys! Good morning, sir. I wasn’t expecting to see you this morning.”

The Auditor stood up to shake his hand. “Vorpatril, isn’t it? No, you’re quite right. I wasn’t really expecting to be here. Some sort of emergency overnight. Young Miles has just gone to find the Emperor and let him know I’m here.”

Gregor, the poor sod. He’d obviously had no chance to get lucky last night. Quite the opposite, by the sound of things.

A few moments later the two others came in. Gregor was neatly dressed as always, but there was a look about his eyes that suggested he hadn’t been to bed at all. Miles carried a thick stack of flimsies and a small bulky folder.

The Emperor indicated the buffet. “Gentlemen, good morning. The agenda for today’s meeting has doubled if not tripled, so we won’t be standing on ceremony. Please help yourself to food, and we’ll get started.”

Once they were all seated Gregor reached for the first flimsie. “Overnight word has come in regarding a major incident involving the Komarran Soletta Array. News is sketchy, but it doesn’t look good. There’s been some sort of explosion involving an inner system freighter and the array is badly damaged. We’re just waiting for the next reports to come in, but I fear this is going to be an extensive investigation.”

Komarr. Laisa’s home.

Ivan’s brain started working overtime. “You’re thinking a dissident protest because of the wedding?”

Gregor shook his head. “Not at this time. That wouldn’t make any sense for dissidents to wreck their own future. It’s too early to think anything yet, but what We are going to do is send My Lords Auditor Vorthys and Vorkosigan to conduct the investigation. Obviously, this is going to impact severely on the Vor Clarence affair. My Lord Vorthys, much of this next won’t be relevant to you, so We thought you might like to look at the preliminary damage reports while you eat.”

Miles handed over the bulk of the flimsies he had with him.
Vorthys reached for them, already setting his formidable brain to work as he scanned the first page.

Gregor turned back to Ivan. “Keep eating. Your agenda is as follows. One. Thanks to Miles and Emperor Dorca you’re off the hook with Vorclarence. On reading Dorca’s Law on Imperial Auditors, any Count who murders, attempts to murder or orders another to murder an Imperial Auditor is automatically subject to attainder, and the really old-fashioned no trial needed attainder at that. There were several reliable witnesses to Armsman Walton’s confession that Vorclarence ordered him to murder Miles. I think it was originally designed to keep old Pierre Le Sanguinaire in check, but it will do nicely for our purposes. There’s nothing the Council of Counts can get you for there.”

Ivan swallowed a mouthful of coffee and pastry. “I’d forgotten the murder charge. I was thinking more of the treason charge at the time.”

“Good job I didn’t forget it then, isn’t it?”

“Er, yes, sire. Thank you very much.”

Gregor smiled faintly. “You’re welcome. Two. Congratulations, Captain. You, and Major Vorinnis, have been awarded an Imperial Gold Star in recognition of your gallant actions of four days ago, presentation schedule to be arranged.”

Ivan could feel heat washing up into his face. He opened his mouth and shut it again.

The Emperor watched his expression change. “Wise move. Don’t tell me you don’t deserve it.”

“Well, I don’t need a reward for doing what any other person would have done. What I was thinking, though, was could you please postpone any ceremony until Vorinnis is able to receive his as well? In person?”

Miles got up from his seat at the table and moved round to shake Ivan’s hand. “Well done, Coz. Congratulations.”

Lord Auditor Vorthys looked up from his reading, gave them all a slightly bemused look and went back to what he was doing.

Gregor continued. Three. “Also in recognition of their sterling efforts, Captain Karasavas is promoted to the rank of Major and Ensign Vorberg to the rank of Lieutenant, both to receive in addition an Imperial Bronze Star for their bravery. We thought you might like to present them their rank badges this morning when you get to New Sheffield.”

“Now that I really do approve of—hold on just a damn minute. A captain can’t present a major—I see where this is going, and no. All the different kinds of Hell, no.”

Miles laughed. “Nothing wrong with your wits today, Ivan.”

Gregor frowned at both of them. “We’ll come back to that. With Miles pulled off this investigation, the man on the spot down there is going to need some serious clout to deal with matters—“

“You can stop right there, I told you, no. I only just made captain. You can’t possibly—“

Gregor stared down his nose. “Did you just interrupt your Emperor?”

Ivan gulped. “Yes, sire. I am really sorry to be so impertinent, but Gregor, please, you can’t do this
to me!"

"We have no intention at this stage of promoting you to Major—"

"Thank goodness. That’s a very wise decision—"

"You just did it again."

Something really, really bad was coming. Ivan just didn’t want to hear it.

"Sorry, sire. I really am."

"Four. So We, in Our wisdom and trust in your loyalty, are appointing you temporary Ninth Lord Auditor—"

Ivan leapt to his feet faster than a greased pig at the Midsummer games. "Are you friggin’ insane?"

Gregor took a deep breath. "Sit down, Captain Vorpatril. You’ll have the armsmen in here again."

Ivan did as he was told. He really regretted the breakfast he’d just eaten. He stared at Gregor. He stared at Miles. Lord Auditor Vorthys lifted his head from his work and stared at him for a moment.

"Congratulations, my Lord," he murmured, and went back to his thoughts.

"No, no, no, no. You can’t do this. You can’t make a captain an Imperial Auditor!"

"Seems to me I remember making a washed-up lieutenant an Imperial Auditor not so long ago—"

He heard but ignored Miles’ outraged intake of breath, "So I can certainly do the same for you. — And that will teach you to steal my new lightflyer, Vorkosigan."

He held up a hand to stem Ivan’s flow. "It’s happening. This is Our wish, unless you have a very good reason for refusing."

He’d gone back to the Imperial ‘We’. Ivan looked at Gregor in appalled…appalled crogglement.

There was no other word for it.

"Oh dear gods. You really mean it."

Gregor pressed his wristcom. In a few moments his Major Domo entered the room, carrying a tray with a long black case Miles recognized.

The Emperor opened the box. "Don’t worry, Ivan. It’s been sterilized. Would you please kneel?"

With Miles and Lord Vorthys as witnesses, Gregor administered the oath. For the second time in less than a day Ivan found himself with his hands between Gregor’s. He watched in stunned dismay as his Emperor placed the chain of office around his neck.
“Something worse than being an Auditor?”

There was a five, a six and a seven on the agenda. Ivan had no idea what any of them were until he looked again at the flimsies Miles had pushed into his hands. He sounded very annoyed.

“Come on, Ivan, snap out of it. We’ve all got serious work to do. Here’s the Request and Require for the Vorfolses to be brought to the capital. Here’s the order for your new ImpSec Security detail. And here’s the front door key for Vorkosigan House.”

“Eh, What?”

“That got you to pay attention, didn’t it? I’m going to Komarr. You’re bringing the ladies back there this afternoon. Armsman Pym will be in charge. Put them in my old bedroom and the room next door. You can stay on the second floor in the guest suite next to my rooms. You’re not getting the key to the wine cellar. Pym is keeping that, but don’t forget to be nice to Ma Kosti.”

“Why am I staying at Vorkosigan House?”

“Because, My Lord Auditor, your security level just went through the roof. The House has already got the highest security in the city, you haven’t got your own security detail yet and you don’t want to cause any inconvenience to your family, do you?”

The implications of his new appointment came crashing down on Ivan. He’d always had a very inconspicuous ImpSec perimeter, but he’d regarded with horror the total lack of privacy the Vorbarra and the Vorkosigans had to endure. “Shit.”

“At least it’s only temporary for you. You never know, you may get a taste for it.”

“What, having an armsman to wipe my—”

Ivan stopped just in time. Gregor was looking at him. He was just a tad annoyed, too.

“The sooner you get on to it the sooner you can hand back the seal. Make sure you read all the data again on the way. You’ll be liaising directly with Guy Allegre after this, so it’s up to you to make that situation work. He’s actually a good man, you know. He only did his duty. We really must get on, now, Ivan. Congratulations and best of luck.”

And that was it. Ivan automatically jumped to his feet as Gregor took his leave, Miles and Vorthys in tow. He looked around the empty breakfast parlour. What the hell did he do now? He picked up his stack of flimsies and the folder containing the two sets of promotion orders and collar tabs and packed them into his new, code-sealed data case, opening and shutting it twice to get the hang of using his new gadget.

“Ahem.”

Ivan whirled around to see an ImpSec captain standing in the doorway. “Your lightflyer is this way, My Lord Auditor.”

_Ohhh, this all needed thinking about._ He could do that on the way to New Sheffield. His head reeled as he followed the captain along the echoing corridors and up to the rooftop. A six-seater courier awaited him, escorted by a flight of Imperial Service Stingers. The four pilots, a major and three captains, sprang to attention and saluted in unison. Ivan nearly dropped his data case in surprise. He returned their respects gravely. They weren’t saluting him, of course. They were...
saluting his office.

“Let’s go, gentlemen. We’ve got work to do.”

He caught sight of himself in the highly polished canopy of one of the escorts as it snapped shut in preparation for take-off. He did look rather smart, it had to be said. Looking on the bright side, the appointment had to have some advantages. No queuing for traffic control was one of them. Using the emergency service altitude was another. In an unbelievable short space of time they had cleared the city and were on the way.

Some deep breaths, and then he started to read all the briefs with determined concentration, making notes as he thought appropriate. The file on the Auditor’s rights and responsibilities nearly scared the pants off him. He wasn’t ready for this. He really wasn’t. Ma Vorpatril’s little boy had got himself into deep, deep shit.

After ten minutes of panic, Ivan re-read the file. The honour he had been given was a profoundly serious one, and he had made a profoundly serious vow to his Emperor, until he could hand it all back. It was time to put his big boy hat on. Gregor’s life could depend upon this investigation. And until his Imperial cousin finally got himself married and had at least triplet boy heirs, it was in his own best interest to remember his own life depended upon it as well.

They landed at the District Office. It was impossible to believe he’d only been away for the one night. His whole life had turned upside down in a little over what, something like thirty hours? The escorting flight of stingers peeled away to land at the shuttleport. They’d be at constant readiness for him. The courier was his for the duration, and no doubt there would be a groundcar with ImpSec escort as well. He was going to have to sharpen up his act, if he was the Emperor’s Voice. Gregor never disrespected service personnel. These men would die for him.

Speaking of which, there was an honour guard drawn up, a squad of men in dress greens, headed by, yes, Mikhail Karasavas. Well, that was good. His first job needed witnesses.

A sideman popped the canopy. As Ivan stepped out the squad came to the present. He very properly returned the salute and turned briefly to thank his pilot before stepping forward to greet Karasavas. The look on the man’s face was an absolute picture. Hadn’t he known who the new Auditor was?

“Good morning, Mikhail. Nice of you to come and say hello.” Ivan held out his hand. “I’m glad to see you looking better.”

“Er, the same to you, My Lord Auditor.” Karasavas shook his hand firmly. “Would you like to come with me to the office?”

“In a moment. I have a little job to do first. Please stand your squad at ease.”

He handed his data case to the sideman to hold while he extracted the relevant order.

“I need you to please stand at attention, Captain. I have an order for you.”

Ivan felt a real rush of warmth as he read the document in a firm and confident voice. What a privilege!

“Gregor Vorbarra, Head of the Barrayaran Imperium. We, reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and Integrity do hereby promote Mikhail Leonid Karasavas to the rank of Major. You are in such manner and on such occasions as may be prescribed by Us to guide, exercise and discipline both the Inferior Officers and Non-Commissioned Members serving under
you in Our Imperial Service and use your best endeavour to keep them in good Order and Discipline.” He paused for a moment. “Congratulations, Major!”

Karasavas just gaped at him.

“You’re supposed to salute,” Ivan whispered. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back to saluting you instead in a few weeks.”

Karasavas pulled himself together and saluted smartly.

A senior NCO in the squad took one pace forwards. “Three cheers for Major Karasavas!”

“May I?” Ivan stepped closer and deftly removed the blue collar tabs, replacing them with bright and shiny violet ones instead. Karasavas’ Eye of Horus pins almost looked like peacock tails in the bright sunshine. They shook hands again as the men cheered.

“Right. Back to work. Lead on, Major. I have an appointment at the hospital this morning.”

One job done. Ivan moved down his list as he sat in the back of his ground car on the way to the hospital. Three jobs at the hospital. Better get the personal one done first.

There was another honour guard waiting at the hospital entrance. Rear-admiral Waleska in his best dress greens stood at their head. Ivan turned to Karasavas, who sat beside him.

“What sort of orders did you get about the new Lord Auditor, for heaven’s sake? Does Wally know it’s me?”

Karasavas just grinned as he waited for the sideman to pop the canopy. “He does now. If I can get blindsided I don’t see why I can’t share the joy.”

‘Joyful’ wasn’t a good way to describe the admiral’s expression. Ivan took a deep breath. Shit! There was even a holovid reporter waiting to capture the greeting. He groaned. He could just imagine the clip on the evening news. ‘Ivan dahling inspects our hard-working medical staff. Doesn’t he know they have better things to do?’

He kept everything as formal as he could until the two of them stepped into the admiral’s office. His ImpSec guards stood at each end of the little corridor and Karasavas peeled off to check the perimeter. Waleska just looked at him. Ivan was the first to break this time.

“I didn’t do it, it wasn’t my idea, but I’ve got the job and I intend to do a good one.”

“I’m sure you will. Now, are we going to talk Admiral to Lord Auditor, or doctor to patient?”

There was a lot riding on this. Ivan took the chain off his neck and laid it on the desk. “Captain Vorpatril reporting for his check up, sir.”

Waleska moved behind his desk and sat down. Seeing the look on his face, Ivan braced to attention.

“Do you happen to have with you the medication I gave you two days ago, Captain?” he asked, very mildly.

“Er, yes, sir. I do. In my pocket.”

“Kindly get it and read aloud the directions given to you.”
Ivan did as he was bid. “Take one tablet with food every eight hours. Do not take any more than three tablets in any twenty-six hour period. Rest and avoid stress. Do not undergo strenuous activity, consume alcohol, drive or operate machinery. If you experience any adverse affects seek medical advice immediately.”

“Thank you.” His voice sounded milder still. “Now, tell me what you actually did.”

Ohhh shit. He was in for a bollocking.

“T ook two tablets after a swig of coffee, hopped on a lightflyer to the capital, took over an hour to write a report, fell asleep in the Emperor’s waiting room, nearly passed out when I stood up and got questioned about treasonable activity and murder by the Emperor, the Head of ImpSec and the Lord Auditor. Lost my temper when the Lord Auditor started to call me an idiot and screamed at him. I couldn’t stop shaking, afterwards, and then I sort of spaced out. Sir!”

“How would you describe your stress levels?”

Ivan really didn’t want to answer. Waleska waited. “…Extreme, sir.”

The admiral leapt to his feet. He didn’t raise his voice by much. He didn’t have to.

“You bloody fool. You could have killed yourself, gone into cardiac arrest, had toxic shock, post concussive syndrome or had a stroke, even. By the grace of some good fortune and possibly because you’ve kept yourself extremely fit, you’ve managed to avoid any of those fates so far. What have you got to say for yourself?”

“Sorry, sir?”

“Sorry? Sorry? Pah! Get your shirt off and lie on the bed. I need to find out what damage you’ve done to your liver and kidneys. Not to mention your brain, but I won’t bother looking for that. I’m not going to find it, am I, Captain?”

Ivan winced. At least he hadn’t called him an idiot. Fool he could live with. He lay still as the doctor scanned his systems, checked his wounds, at least you kept the dressing on this time and shone a light into his eyes. Three fingers this time. After heart function, liver function, kidney function and brain function tests Ivan was all functioned out. At last he was allowed up to dress.

“I’ll give you a much milder painkiller as I think that skull fracture is healing remarkably well. There’s no sign of swelling on the brain and liver and kidney function are average for your typical High Vor playboy. Please read the directions this time. Rest when you can.”

Ivan dressed himself again. “I’ll be sure to, sir. Was there anything else?”

Waleska sighed. “Sit down, Ivan.”

Uh oh, now what?

“Oh, before I start on that, I have something to give you.” He extracted a ‘patient effects’ bag from a drawer in his desk. “These are the contents of Vor Clarence’s tunic pockets. I judged they might be sensitive. I was going to give them to Karasavas but I’ve seen you first.”

“Thank you.” Ivan took a quick look. Lots of the usual stuff to be found in anyone’s pockets, plus a stunner, several code-keys and a bunch of antique-looking mechanical ones. He signed the receipt for them and put the bag in his data case.
“Yes, this may well be very useful. Thanks again. Now, what did I need to sit down for?”

Waleska looked at him for a longish spell, as if trying to make up his mind what to say.

“Am I right in thinking you found Mademoiselle Vorfolse somewhat attractive?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir, under the circumstances I thought she was a remarkably brave woman. She’s very pretty. I think she was, anyway, under all the dirt. Very nice hands. I was hoping to see more of her.”

“I thought you did see more of her.”

Ivan actually felt himself blushing. “Not really, just a glimpse or two. Those gowns are quite comprehensive, really.” Now if he’d asked him had he felt more of her than might be appropriate he possibly would give him a different answer. But that wasn’t his fault and no one could make him say it was.

“Well, that’s not a good idea. She has your handkerchief under her pillow.”

“She does? But that’s kind of sweet, isn’t it? She must like me.”

“There are about twenty different syndromes I could mention, but unhealthy hero-worship is a simple way of describing it. A tall, dark and handsome knight rode right on in there on his shining white horse and slew the dragon for her, didn’t he? Just like Vorthalia the bold.”

“You could look at it like that, I suppose.”

The doctor hesitated. “I need to say this. There is also the matter of your reputation, and your new appointment. Valeraine is your contemporary in age, Ivan, but she’s lived in a small South Continent town for nearly thirty years. Never been anywhere. I doubt very much she knows how to play your games. She’d be no match for one of your Vor charm offensives. Nor would ahem... escorting one of the witnesses in your investigation be seen as anything other than a conflict of interest at best and exerting undue influence at worst.”

He didn’t pull any punches, did he? He’d never have believed Wally would be such a...such a spoilsport. Ivan felt a real sense of disappointment. He sighed. Damn the man. He was right. His heart sank into somewhere south of where it usually sank. He may as well cut his throat now and be done with it. Had Gregor hamstrung all his chances of getting lucky with one fell stroke?”

“No sex?”

“Not with Valeraine. And think extremely carefully before you do it with anyone else. There will be people who want to exert influence on you.”

“Strictly professional?”

“Strictly professional. And that may well prove very difficult to maintain, if you remain in contact. Hopefully her emotions will fade to a normal level and then you can try your luck again if you’re still of the same mind after you are no longer in such a powerful position...”

He sighed. “Can I drink, yet?”

“Not to see the bottom of the bottle. Social niceties only. Maybe one a day, but avoid it if you can.”

Bugger
“I have to take them both to Vorkosigan House for questioning. I have a warrant.”

“Let me see that. Madame Vorfolse really shouldn’t be travelling.”

Ivan handed it over. “It’s a Request and Require. I wasn’t happy but there are things we need to find out.”

“They’re going to be fast-penta’d? That’s highly inadvisable, but needs must, I suppose. My first loyalty is always to the Emperor. If you want to take her back today I’d better come with you and keep an eye on her. She’s due a transfusion,” he looked at his chrono, “right about now, so she can’t be moved for two hours.”

That complicated things. Ivan mentally rearranged his ‘to do’ list. In two hours he could find Steggy, arrange for the house to be packed up, see Walton’s family, and also take Valeraine to collect their belongings from the District residence. In all likelihood the women wouldn’t be coming back here again. Simple, really, no stress.

“I can work round that, if you can, sir. I’ll be grateful for the help. You can be chaperone, too.”

“Put that chain of yours back on and we’ll go see the ladies. You don’t want me to tell them they’re under arrest, I hope?”

Ivan thought of one last thing.

“Before we go, may I ask what has happened to Armsman Walton?”

“He’s here in the morgue, with the others, waiting on instructions. I can give you the details of next-of-kin.”

“Thank you. I presume they’ve been informed?”

“They have. Karasavas drew the short straw.”

Valeraine and her mother were both sitting up and chatting to each other when they arrived at the side ward. Ivan watched the change of expression on Valeraine’s face when she saw him. She looked like a flower opening up in the sun. She was beautiful. Stunningly, desperately, beautiful. He felt something clench in his chest. Dear gods…

“Lord Vorpatril! I nearly didn’t recognize you in that uniform. And what—” her eyes opened even further in amazement, “what is that round your neck?”

“Lord Vorpatril has been appointed Ninth Lord Auditor by his Imperial Majesty to head the inquiry into the Vorclarence conspiracy,” Admiral Waleska told them. “He has some news for you.”

As soon as she heard the name Madame Vorfolse sat up straighter, looking intently at her visitor. Ivan crossed over to the bed and took her hand, kissing it very briefly.

“Madame Vorfolse, my mother, Lady Alys, sends her very fondest love. She was overjoyed when she learned that you had survived the Pretender’s war, and also that you have a daughter. She is very keen to meet you once all the necessary legalities have been completed.”

“So you must be Ivan! Your mother was keenly awaiting your birth when I last saw her. I moved away very soon after, to Vorfolse’s district and then to Vandeville. I never heard anything further from her, apart from what we’ve seen on the holovids now and then.”
“Count Vorfolse led her to believe you were both dead, Madame.”

“Did he? Is that why? —No, never mind. All that life is past, now.”

She lay back, closing her eyes for a few moments. Ivan cleared his throat.

“I have here an order from his Imperial Majesty requesting your presence in the capital to assist with the inquiry. Arrangements have been made for you to stay at Vorkosigan House and Rear-Admiral Waleska will accompany you in case of any medical developments. I believe you’re about to undergo a treatment, so we’ll set our departure for 1200 hours.”

He turned to Valeraine. “In the meanwhile, Mademoiselle Vorfolse, I would appreciate it if you could accompany me this morning. You may have thirty minutes to collect all your belongings from the Residence, with help if necessary.”

That brilliant smile faded from her face, to be replaced with a wary caution. “Is that requested, or Requested and Required, My Lord Auditor? Can we refuse?”

Ivan shook his head. “I regret not, Mademoiselle, but you are not under close arrest, or anything like that. More of a material witness, at this stage.”

“At this stage?”

He felt like something stuck on a kennel man’s boot. “You will receive every attention to your comfort, I assure you. Lord Vorkosigan’s cook is legendary.”

“We don’t want to go to Vorbarr Sultana. We have personal reasons not to go there.”

This wasn’t getting any better. “I’m sorry, but that’s not an option.”

Valeraine looked at her mother. Something passed between them. It almost looked like despair.

“Can our presence be kept secret? There is…a certain person we don’t wish to find out about our existence.”

Ivan shrugged. “At this stage, the only people who know about you in Vorbarr Sultana all have a higher security clearance than I do. I’ll certainly remind them to keep your names private. The staff at Vorkosigan House can be trusted not to gossip.”

They didn’t look too convinced. He tried again. “Can you tell us the name of the person you wish to avoid?”

“No, don’t worry.” Valeraine shook her head. “I’ll get dressed and be ready in ten minutes. Oh, and I have something to return to you. I’ll just get it.”

He rather wished she’d keep his handkerchief. He rather wished it wasn’t his duty to make sure her interrogator asked her whom it was she wished to avoid and why. This job sucked. He rather wished Gregor hadn’t given it to him. He was going to end up just like his paranoid cousin.

He’d forgotten all about his combat jacket. She reached into a locker and turned to give it to him. “It was very kind of you to lend it to me. I really appreciated it. It’s been cleaned. And, and thank you for the water, too.”

She sounded crushed.

But she’d kept the handkerchief…
The Lord Auditor has a nice, stress-free morning

There was a third thing to do at the hospital. While they waited for Valeraine to get ready Ivan called in Karasavas and his minders. Wally accompanied them as they made their way to the ward where Vorberg was receiving treatment. Just before they turned the corner Ivan pulled up short.

“Shit!”

Karasavas had his stunner out so quickly Ivan didn’t even have a chance to blink. The squad closed up and surrounded him. “What? Where?”

“Oh, sorry Major. Not an alert, just a sort of channeling experience.”

“What in all hell are you talking about, My Lord Auditor?”

“Family history. It’s just struck me this is something very similar to the stories I’ve heard about something my Uncle Aral once did.”

“Uncle Aral?” Karasavas looked a bit bemused. Wally supplied the details.

“Admiral Lord Regent the Prime Minister Viceroy Count Aral Vorkosigan to the rest of us, and only the gods know if I got that in the right order. Uncle Aral to my Lord Auditor.” Ivan could see Wally was behaving himself in front of the enlisted men. The look in his eye told him something different.

“Oh. That Uncle Aral.”

Wally nodded. “Yes, that Uncle Aral.” Every tale and legend of the greatest man in Barrayaran history was well known to every Imperial Serviceman.

“How Commodore Koudelka got his red tabs, you mean,” Karasavas said. “You’re right. It is a bit like that.”

On consideration, Ivan shook his head. “Not much like it at all, really, except I’m going to ask Vorberg to do some deskwork for me while he’s recovering, and he gets a bedside promotion. He’s getting bright new shiny tabs. Who the hell would want my old ones, when it comes right down to it? Not exactly hero material in my service history.”

Vorberg was startled by the posse that descended on him. He looked very apprehensive. “Am I going to be arrested after all?”

Ivan shook the ensign’s hand in greeting. “What, for murdering the Count? I got off. There’s no way they can pin anything on you. Thank Emperor Dorca.”

Vorberg had had time to take in Ivan’s Auditorial splendor, and Karasavas’ shiny purple tabs. “Oh, congratulations, Major! Someone showed some sense at last. And, My Lord Auditor… I’m speechless.”

Ivan quirked his eyebrow. “I had plenty to say about it, don’t you worry about that, but here we are. It’s only temporary. Ensign Vorberg and Major Karasavas, before I go on, it is my very great
pleasure and privilege to inform you that you will both be receiving the Imperial Bronze Star at the next scheduled investiture. There will possibly be a couple of bad luck badges, too, at Emperor Gregor’s discretion."

“Wounded in Action awards? For us?” Vorberg looked the picture of incredulity.

“You were wounded, weren’t you? In action, on His Majesty’s service?”

Vorberg looked at Karasavas. “I suppose we were.”

Ivan checked his chrono. “Time is pressing, Vorberg. Are you able to stand up?”

“Yes, of course sir. I’m just waiting to be discharged, actually. Admiral Waleska is a bit late with his rounds because we had a flap about a VIP visiting at short notice.” He scrambled out of bed and stood up with only a quick intake of breath.

“Behave yourself.” Ivan called the group to attention. As he read the formal words he watched Vorberg’s colour as it changed from red to white back to red again. He hoped the lad wasn’t going to end up back in the bed.

“Congratulations, Lieutenant Anton Mattis Vorberg.”

They had to find his combat shirt in the footlocker to exchange the tabs. Ivan made him put it on over his pyjama top to take a holo. “Send it to your mother. Now, we’ll leave you to get dressed. You have three minutes. Meet me at the main door. I’ve got a job for you.”

Wally coughed. Ivan took the hint. “You will be working in one hour increments, twenty minutes in between to rest, and you’ll be keeping a log. No more than five hours work today, max. I’ll be checking. Does that suit, Admiral?”

“It does, My Lord Auditor. See me for your medication, Lieutenant.”

They exchanged a wicked grin and both spoke at the same time. “Make sure you read the damn label.”

In the ground car Valeraine sat quietly in one corner. She’d greeted Vorberg with a smile, but studiously ignored Ivan. Karasavas kept his eye on her and two other guards squeezed into the front. Ivan handed Vorberg the bag of Vorclarence’s effects. “Log this in as evidence and sort it all out, and see what you can find to fit those keys. Some of them might be for Vorclarence House in the capital, but you never know. See what, if any, money trails you might find. We’ve got you to thank for saving them, so you can have the honour. Watch out for anything that might go bang.”

With the extra chore to do Ivan had reversed the order of his job list. They quickly entered the District Residence and went up to the rooms Valeraine and her mother had used. She drew in a breath of shock at the signs they had been searched.

Ivan saw her distress. “There shouldn’t be anything missing, but please look through and let me know. I’m sorry but I need you to get packed as quickly as possible. Time is short.”

He helped her to find her cases and went through the wardrobe and cupboards, laying clothes and shoes on the bed for her to pack. There wasn’t much to do. It was a quick repeat in her mother’s bedroom. Valeraine snatched up a jewellery box and checked through it, visibly relaxing when she found what she was looking for. Ivan pretended not to notice.
In just under half an hour they were back in the groundcar, minus Vorberg.

“For my next stop it would be better if you waited in the car. The driver will look after you. I won’t be too long, I hope.” Ivan wasn’t looking forward to this.

They pulled up in a standard housing district. The sight of the car caused everyone in the vicinity to vanish. Ivan could just imagine the curtains twitching. Karasavas insisted he clear the area first. He and his two men scanned their surroundings, then nodded to Ivan. The front door was opened after the second ring by a terrified woman in a shapeless grey dress. She looked to be in her late sixties, Ivan guessed, but she could have been younger.

“Madame Walton, I’m Lord Auditor Vorpatril. May I please come in?”

She stood back to let him pass. Karasavas entered first, cleared the room and left to stand back outside by the front door. She stood, trembling, not saying a word. Ivan took his cap off, tucking it under one arm.

“Please sit down, Madame. There’s nothing to distress yourself about. I came to offer my condolences and discover your wishes for your husband’s service.”

“Oh.” She crumpled just a little bit, sinking into a chair. Things went quite smoothly after that. Just as he stood to leave he passed her a credit chit and one of his visiting cards.

“For your immediate expenses, Madame. Please see Major Karasavas for all matters to do with the funeral, but if there is anything else I can help you with you have my number there.”

“Can you tell me how he died?”

Ivan sat down again. Nobody had told her?

“He was a very brave man, Madame, and sacrificed his life to save mine, and Lieutenant Vorberg’s. I regret he was hit with a plasma arc. I was there. I can assure you it was instantaneous. I’m not able to tell you anything else about the incident, but you can be very, very proud of him.”

Her eyes were shining with tears as she let him out of the house. No doubt she’d be weeping once he’d gone. That bastard Vor Clarence was chalking them up.

He sat silently in the car on the way to Marie’s house. Karasavas let him sit for a while. Eventually he spoke. “Not good?”

“No, not good. Why didn’t you tell her how he died?”

Karasavas flicked his collar insignia. “She was so terrified of these she actually fainted before I could give her any details. She had family there, so I exercised my discretion and ran like a chicken. I’ll go back out of uniform when I get the chance. I’m supposed to be scarier than Mad Yuri’s ghost to the bad guys, not harmless little old ladies!”

They sat thinking for a little while. What must it be like to be married to an armsman, or a soldier? Ivan asked a question.

Are you married, Mikhail?”

Karasavas’ face softened. “Yes, I am. I have Helena and two little girls. We were thinking of a boy. Perhaps we can go ahead now I have my promotion. I have you to thank for that, don’t I?”
“Nothing you didn’t deserve. Just remember that when I’m a lowly Ops Captain needing a favour. And I hope you realize that’s a joke.”

“I’ll have to put it in my report, and that’s not a joke. It looks like we’re arriving.”

That’s what he got for trying to be friendly to a weasel. Ivan didn’t think Karasavas was really serious. He hoped.

The ground car had been making slow progress through narrow streets but it had finally whispered to a stop outside a grim apartment block. There was not a tree or a blade of grass to be seen anywhere in the near vicinity. Ivan shuddered. He turned to Valeraine. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to come in, Mademoiselle Vorfolse? You may be better than I am at spotting what a young girl would consider essential.”

Five of them trooped in and up to the Watson’s floor. The two guards carried bundles of evidence bags to use for packing. Ivan was glad it was only five levels as the lift tube didn’t work. The emergency stairwell was clean, but that’s all that could be said for it. Ivan checked his flimsie and stopped outside the door. There appeared to be three more apartments on this level, two opposite and one adjacent. Out of courtesy he tried the door chime first, and then knocked. There was no answer but he didn’t expect one. It took Karasavas about twenty seconds to override the lock. He went in first.

“Clear.”

One guard remained at the door while the others went inside. Ivan stopped to take stock, looking round. There was a combined kitchen/eating/sitting area with two doors leading away. One was a bath and the other a small bedroom. A wardrobe stood in one corner. Two single beds were pushed up against the walls, with a small dresser and chair between. On one bed sat a stuffed stegosaurus, knitted in remnants of what looked like some sort of woollen fibre. The body was the colour of service-issue socks but the back plates were all the colors of the rainbow. His eyes and mouth were embroidered on with a lop-sided grin.

In deadly silence they wandered around, not touching anything at first. The décor varied in shades of grey. He couldn’t see a comconsole, or a vid player, or even a heater of any sort.

Karasavas started his vidrecorder. He followed Ivan around, documenting what was in the cupboards and on a small bookshelf. There was a table with two chairs and a low sort of lounge that had seen better days. The whole flat was spotless, scrubbed and polished.

On the kitchen table there lay some carefully folded wrapping paper and two bags with department store labels. A small card sat on the top. With the compliments of Count Vorclarence. Please wear to the medal ceremony.

Valeraine wandered into the kitchen area. There was a box of groats, some powdered egg substitute and three cartons of synthamilk. Half a small loaf of bread, a jar of cheap brilberry preserve, foil packs of processed vegetables and a carton of instant tea sachets made up the total stock of food. Colourful drawings of animals and others of Ma, Da and Marie, done on the insides of bakery bags, were stuck to the pantry door.

Back in the bedroom Ivan picked up Steggy. He wandered round aimlessly, into the bathroom, out to the kitchen and looked again in the pantry. He sat down at the little table and hugged Steggy to his chest. A tear ran down the side of his nose and dripped onto the scrubbed and worn surface.

“If that shitspitting scrote wasn’t already dead he’d be on a wormhole jump to hell faster than a…”
than a…” He couldn’t think of a thing to say. He took a breath, then another one. “Right.” He leapt to his feet. ‘This is so wrong. This is five hundred fucking types of wrong. Karasavas! Get the Engineers down here. You! What’s your name?”

The trooper leapt to attention. “Accardi, My Lord.”

“Get knocking on doors, Accardi. Start making a list of who needs what. That useless offsider of yours—”

“Lindquist, My Lord?”

“Right. Lindquist! Stop standing at the door scratching your ass and find me a working comconsole. Right now!”

He took a series of deep breaths as he paced up and down. “Valeraine, would you please pack all the clothes and shoes you can find? It won’t take long. Pack everything, both sizes. Karasavas, haven’t you got those men, yet? I want the lift tube working and every apartment checked for a comconsole. If they haven’t got one find them one. Ask Wally to send a medical team out here. Tell them to start at the top floor and work down. After that, clear this kitchen area and main room. Anything personal, any toys you can find, even the yellow duck from the bathroom. Any files, personal records, that kind of thing. Photos. All the photos you can find. Bring that packaging and the note. What the hell time is it?”

“1130 hours, My Lord Auditor.”

“Shit. Ten more minutes then we’re out of here.”

“May I suggest you take Steggy and Mademoiselle Vorfolse to the ground car and direct operations from there?”

Ivan brushed him off. “I want that comconsole. Lindquist! What have you got for me?”

"Next level down, My Lord. It’s an old civilian model. No security.”

“Has it got a financial chit printer?”

“I believe it does, sir, and a code reader.”

“Lead me to it.”

As Ivan barged into the apartment an old man leapt to attention. He had to calm down. Nobody here needed to be more frightened than they actually were already.

I beg your pardon…”?

“Nilesa, sir. Yeoman Nilesa.”

“I need to borrow your comconsole Nilesa.”

What the startled veteran thought of a Captain in his best dress greens wearing an Auditor’s chain and carrying a battered stegosaurus remained unsaid. What he thought of him logging in to an Imperial Revenue account to print hundred mark chits until the machine ran hot was accompanied by a few swear words.

Karasavas called from the door. “1140 hours, My Lord. The engineers are here.”
Ivan logged out, retrieved his seal and folded two of the chits into Nilesa's hand. "The Emperor thanks you for your Service, Yeoman, and I thank you for letting me borrow your comconsole."

He needed to press on. Forward momentum and all that. “Karasavas. You stay here. That’s an order, Major.” He thrust the bundle of chits at him.

“Make sure these get to the people that need them in a fair and orderly manner. But get that lift tube working. Get the— Oh, you know what you have to do as well as I do. Where’s Mademoiselle Vorfolse?”

“On her way down to the ground car. Accardi’s with her.”

Ivan took off running for the stairs, Steggy carefully restrained by his Auditor’s chain. He caught up with them just as they reached the entry lobby. Accardi carried the last of the evidence bags and Valeraine held some Holocubes.

“In the car and step on it, please. We have to be in the air by 1200.”

Valeraine looked at him. “They will wait for you, you know.”

He’d forgotten about this Auditor’s thing, but he wasn’t going to admit he was that much of an idiot.

“It would be very rude of me to keep your mother waiting.”

They headed for the Flyerport this time. Wally was already there with Madame Vorfolse ensconced across the back-facing three seats. Wally had fastened his patient in right and tight, using the nifty little gadget that converted the courier to an evacuation ambulance in case of need. The doctor climbed into the first vacant seat on the front-facing row, followed by Valeraine. Ivan saluted the honour guard one more time and settled back. It was pretty cool to leave all the luggage transfers to someone else.

He’d calmed down just slightly by now. He’d better smile for Wally, and not let him see just how Marie’s living standards had upset him.

Once the courier had cleared New Sheffield and hit cruise speed, Ivan sat back. He tossed his cap on the floor and loosened his collar. Wally leaned past Valeraine to look at him.

“Had a nice, stress-free morning, have we?” he inquired.

“Mostly.” He really didn’t feel like talking.

Valeraine, who hadn’t said two words to him since she’d seen the state of her room at the District Residence, broke the brief silence. “I think My Lord Auditor has had a very useful morning, and I have had an education.”

“Oh”, Wally inquired, “anything you can share?”

Ivan risked a look. He saw her lips twitch.

“Um, Mademoiselle Vorfolse, did I say something inappropriate? I can’t…um…exactly remember just now. I most sincerely apologise if I did.”

“My friends call me ‘Raine’, My Lord Auditor, and I thought what you said was highly appropriate. I wish I’d thought of it myself but I’ve led rather a less colourful life than you, I would
Ivan wasn’t sure if he should ask. “What did I call him?”

The twitch in her lips escaped into the broadest grin and her eyes started watering.

Wally looked at the two of them. “Come on, out with it.”

Valeraine tried to compose herself. “Please don’t be shocked, doctor, but I do believe the Emperor’s Voice called the late, unlamented, Count Vorclarence, a ‘shitspitting scrote.’”
Do you want to hold Steggy?

“Please don’t ever tell my mother I said that in front of you,” Ivan begged, once Wally had stopped laughing. “She doesn’t approve of vulgarity.”

Raine giggled. “My Lord Auditor Vorpatril, Emperor Gregor’s Voice, is scared of his mother.”

She laid her hand on top of his where it rested on his knee. She leaned over to whisper, “Your secret is safe with me.”

He froze.

She smelled divine. The whole length of her body radiated heat next to him. He felt his heart rate kick into overdrive. No stress Wally? Yer, right. If ever he’d had a ‘come on’ signal this was it. All he had to do was turn his head an inch or two, lean over—Oh gods.

He picked up her hand and briefly kissed the prettiest knuckles he’d ever seen, and, burningly conscious of Wally’s gaze fixed on him, gently but firmly put her hand back on her own knee. He probably wasn’t going to need the flip out prop it was fitted with…

“Please pardon me. Duty calls. Reports to write, people to talk to. Would you like to hold Steggy?”

Wally sat back. Ivan watched him relax. Actually, he could see his shoulders heaving. Once he’d had his moment of fun he good naturedly started talking to Raine about her opinions on fast couriers. After one disgusted look, Raine turned her back and gave the doctor all her attention.

Ivan closed his eyes and counted backwards from one hundred. It seriously did not work.

After an excruciating flight back to Vorbarr Sultana the transfer to the ImpSec ground car went quickly. An unobtrusive escort slipped in behind them and a rather more ostentatious Municipal Guard vehicle, lights flashing and siren blaring, cleared the streets to Vorkosigan House.

“How the other half lives,” Raine commented, watching the buildings flashing by. “This isn’t exactly inconspicuous.”

“This is a first for me, too,” Ivan told her. “I think I could get used to it, though. You don’t have to worry about being conspicuous. Nobody can see in. It’s a one-way canopy.”

He recognized the guard detailed to the entrance gate at the house. Corporal Kosti, who had had the greatest fortune in his choice of progenitors. They were whisked through with the briefest, but thorough, checks and pulled up at the porte-cochere to find Pym waiting to pop the canopy and hand them out.

“Lord Vorkosigan’s compliments, My Lord Auditor. I’m ordered to extend to you the courtesies he would himself enjoy.”

He said it with a straight face, too. Ivan gave him a look. “Where’s the key to the wine cellar, Pym?”

That got a flicker out of him. “Almost the same courtesies, My Lord.”
“Ha! I thought so. Let’s get the ladies settled.”

Raine hopped out and turned to supervise her mother. Aceline took two steps and swayed dangerously.

“Maman!” Raine made a grab. Wally steadied her from behind, but he was half in and half out of the ground car and off balance. Both Pym and Ivan leapt forward. He had to try and get used to this armsman business.

“You take her, Pym. You know where you’re going.”

“Yes, My Lord, that would be best, seeing as how you’re taking care of Steggy.”

The armsman scooped Madame Vorfolse up in his arms as if she weighed no more than a few bags of shopping and led the way inside. Ivan had very rarely used the lift tube at the back of the entry hall, but was happy to take Raine’s arm and follow behind. Wally brought his medical bag with him.

The room was small but comfortable, with an ensuite bathroom. Pym carefully laid Aceline on the bed, slipped off her boots and found a light rug to cover her feet.

Admiral Waleska took a few quick readings but didn’t see the need for anything more than a half dose of synergine.

Pym showed Raine to the adjacent room and then the pair of them left the ladies to get settled. Pym tugged at his tunic to readjust the set and then produced a wristcom from his pocket.

“This is your duty armsman call, my lord. You can speak to the duty man at any time. If you press this red recessed button we all come running with big sticks, but that’s only the three of us at the moment.”

Ivan had seen the armory at Vorkosigan House when Miles and Gregor had played with him there as boys. The armory had some very big sticks with very big teeth. He’d be sure not to do that.

“Also, My Lord Auditor, General Allegre will be calling at 1600 hours. May I show you to your room or would you prefer some refreshment in the library while you wait for the general?”

Ivan could think of several pressing engagements that would see him well out of the house at 1600 hours, but instead he sighed. That was the old Ivan. This was the new Ivan who had sworn an oath to Gregor just that morning. Besides, who knew what Ma Kosti would think suitable for a Lord Auditor? It wasn’t hard to make up his mind.

“The library, Pym, and ask Mademoiselle Vorfolse and Admiral Waleska to join me there.’

Pym shook his head slightly. “I regret, my lord, that Mademoiselle Vorfolse has been asked to remain in her room until General Allegre has had the chance to talk to her.”

“What? Are you joking, Pym? …No, you’re not, are you? Please make sure the ladies get some suitable refreshments and I will wait for General Allegre. That’s two black marks and he’d better not get to three.”

Pym stood even straighter than he had a second before. “Please don’t threaten the Head of Imperial Security in Vorkosigan House, My Lord Auditor. I shall have to report it if you do.”

Was he taking a lend? Pulling his leg? Ivan looked at him dubiously. No, perhaps not. He looked
deadly serious, with the emphasis on the **deadly**.

“If General Allegre gets to three I’ll know that I’m the one making the mistakes and I will have to adjust my attitude accordingly.”

How could anyone not say a word and yet say ‘Coward’ at the top of his voice? Ivan sighed. This armsman thing was tricky. “Is the secure comconsole available in the library, Pym?”

“Yes, my lord, and there’s one in your guest suite as well.”

Would you please ask Ma Kosti very nicely if I might have some refreshments downstairs in the library? I’m under doctor’s strict orders and I haven’t had lunch. He’s sure to ask me.”

“Certainly, my lord.”

Aha! So, Pym did the capital letter thing, just like Gregor. It was capitals when he was in trouble and ordinary titles otherwise. He was learning.

Perhaps his first call should have been reporting in, but instead he punched in the code for his mother’s apartment. After a very brief pause Simon Illyan answered.

“Simon! Hello! I wonder if there’s a little girl there I could talk to?”

Simon smiled. It was still quite unnerving to see him smile in that way. “I’ll just go and get her. She’s been jumping about all day.”

Marie appeared very shortly, sitting on Papi Simon’s knee. Her red ribbons were shaking with excitement. “My Ivan! Did you get him? Did you get Steggy?”

Ivan grinned and held him up. He thought Marie was going to come right through the screen. She squealed. Boy, that was loud.

“Steggy! You did get him, you did, you did!”

“I certainly did, honey, and I’ll tell Papi and Mamie and you all about it when I get there.”

His gaze flickered for a moment or two to Simon, who gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“The trouble is, I’m still working for the Emperor. Would you like to wait until I can get there, or will I send a very tall man in a shiny brown uniform around there to give it to you?”

Two could play this armsman one-upmanship.

“Oh, could you send the man, please, My Ivan? I want to see Steggy sooooo bad. This much bad.” She held her arms up as high as she could.

Ivan wanted to be there to see her face, but this wasn’t about him, was it? This was about her. He pressed the armsman’s call Pym had given him.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Pym, I need to send Steggy round to my mother’s place.”

There was the slightest pause. “Roic is just coming on duty, my lord. I’ll send him up.”

It was going to take some thinking about to get the better of Pym.
He was glad he’d warned Marie it was going to be a tall man. Miles did like them on the large side, didn’t he? Roic towered over Ivan’s six feet one. He didn’t quite have Pym’s impassivity down pat as yet. There was the slightest flicker of dismay as he took the stuffed toy. He probably hadn’t been briefed about this sort of errand when he’d agreed to take the job.

“I want you to give this to Marie and no one else. Into her hands only, and let me know what she says. Oh, and you might have to watch out for your knees.”

“Very well, my lord.” Roic had regained his equanimity. “I’ll report back.”

Ivan had barely sat down again when Ma Kosti herself pushed a little trolley into the Library. She’d dressed herself up in her very best frilly lace apron.

“Ma Kosti! I didn’t mean for you to come all this way yourself, but something smells delicious. I missed lunch.”

He stood up and took a peek under one of the covers. She bobbed him a little curtsey.

“I wanted to come and see you myself, my lord. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” Ivan tried out his very best ‘be nice to Ma Kosti’ smile. “You’re one of my very favourite people. What did you need to speak to me about?”

She hesitated, and then reached up to take his head in her hands and kiss him on the cheek. “There. I saw the holovids. I was so proud of you for what you did saving our Emperor. I’m that sorry you got hurt. If there’s anything at all you’d like while you’re here, you be sure and let me know. Have you got any favourites?”

“Oh, Ma Kosti, thank you! I’m so touched.”

She would have done exactly the same for one of her own boys. He didn’t think anyone else had said thank you, yet, well maybe not counting the Imperial Gold Star, of course. He gave her just a little hug and kissed her right back. She blushed bright red and held a hand to her cheek. He hadn’t meant to embarrass her.

“I think I can safely say anything you make is just fine with me, Ma Kosti, but I always steal a spiced peach tart when I get the chance. And thank you!”

She made him sit down while she fussed with a plate and a napkin, serving him a heaped pile of pastries, tiny sandwiches with the crusts cut off and sweet little cakes. Before she left she poured him a hot tea. “You just let Pym know if you’d like anything else. He’s taken the refreshments up for the ladies and the Emperor’s doctor.”

She left him to it and he ate in solitary splendour. Miles was one lucky dog. He’d just finished his second plate of pastries when Pym buzzed his wristcom.

“General Allegre has arrived, my lord.”

All good things must come to an end. Ivan sighed. “Bring him right in, Pym. Please ask him if he’d like any refreshments.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Ivan stood, nervously pacing over to the comconsole. What was he going to say to Guy Allegre? He’d walked back to the chairs again by the time Allegre entered the room The general took three
paces in and stood to attention, an ominous black case carried under his left arm. “Reporting, My Lord Auditor.”

Was he going to salute? That was so wrong! A man of General Allegre’s reputation and position to be deferring to him? Ivan dived across the room and took him by the hand.

“General, come in, sir! Won’t you please just call me Vorpatril, or Ivan, or whatever you wish? You’ll always be a superior officer to me. Won’t you take a seat, and can I get you a tea or a coffee?”

Allegre relaxed. “No, thank you my lord. We’d best get on with things as soon as possible.”

Ivan shrugged. He’d done his best to mend fences, but Allegre was still going to call him ‘my lord.’ He contemplated the interviews to come. He really, really wasn’t going to enjoy this. “I suppose so, sir. Have there been any developments since I saw you this morning?”

“It looks more and more certain that Vorclarence was plotting something more serious than just the bomb plot, bad as that was. We’re struggling to find out exactly what, though.”

It was awkward. Ivan somehow felt disloyal to Raine and her mother, but his true loyalty lay elsewhere. He made up his mind. He had to speak. “There’s something the ladies aren’t telling me. They didn’t want to come to Vorbarr Sultana because they actually fear for their lives. There’s someone they’re terrified of. Also, Mademoiselle Vorfolse was very anxious about something hidden in her mother’s jewellery box. At this stage I don’t know what it is. What else can I tell you? Oh, yes. Valeraine Vorfolse was afraid of Vorclarence on a more personal level, too. I don’t know what he intended, attempted or threatened to do there.”

Allegre tipped his head to one side, considering. “Interesting. We’ll find out. Do you wish to witness the interrogations?”

“That’s the last thing I want to do, but I’ve done worse, after all.”

Allegre sighed. “Yes. Haroche.”

Ivan had been a fly on the wall and pseudo-ImpSec heavy for that Imperial interview. “It’s possible I can help, and I do know not to interrupt or ask questions myself. If you don’t object, General, I’ll accompany you.”

There were three ImpSec men in the entry hall and one on each of the floor levels up to the third floor, where there were two stationed either end of the passage leading to the bedrooms. Ivan called Admiral Waleska out from Madame Vorfolse’s room and sent him off with Pym to wait. The doctor stopped for a moment to confer with General Allegre. “Absolute minimum dose, please, General, and call me the second you’re done. I’m worried about her.”

Allegre nodded a trifle impatiently, Ivan thought. There was a look in his eyes that meant business. Business in the Emperor’s name, no matter what the cost.

Aceline Vorfolse lay on top of the bed still. She turned an apprehensive look towards them but the doctor had obviously explained the procedure, and probably its inevitability. She made no objections as Allegre turned on his recording equipment, asked for consent, applied the test patch and then the fast-penta hypospray itself.

“Please count backwards from ten, Madame.”

He pulled over a chair and sat close to the head of the bed. Ivan stayed standing near the door, just
on the edge of her vision, making himself as unobtrusive as possible. They went through all the preliminary questions smoothly and gently, and then Allegre started on some more personal subjects.

"Why are you living in Vandeville, Madame? That’s not in your home District."
She smiled at him. “The Count thought it best. He could protect us there, he said. No one would bother us. He’s lent us a small house he owns down there, as long as we maintain it ourselves.”

_The old skinflint!_ Ivan felt a spurt of indignation. That’s exactly the sort of thing the miserly pinchfist _would_ do. He wouldn’t spend a mark more than he had to on a distant relation, and a female one at that.

Allegre continued. “Protection? Why did you need protection?”

“Oh, because Count Vorhalas is going to kill us when he finds us, of course.”

_Vorhalas?_ What, it was _Vorhalas_ they were afraid of? For Dorca’s sake, why?

“You mean Count Vorhalas?” Allegre was making sure.

“Yes.”

“Why do you think Count Vorhalas wants to kill you?”

“Oh, that’s because my Valery killed his son, at the Space Communication Centre. He sent me a message. He told me…”

She was weeping, now. Allegre handed her a clean handkerchief.

“What did your husband tell you, Madame?”

“He said… He said he loved me, and he was so very sorry, heartbroken, that he would never see his child, but Commander Vorhalas had to be stopped before all his men were killed for no good reason. Valery…”

She stopped to wipe her eyes. "Valery knew there was only one honourable way out. He thought the boy Emperor was dead, you see, and Vordarian the best option to replace him. When he learned that Gregor was alive, he… he knew he had been betrayed.”

Ivan swallowed hard. How could Allegre keep all the emotion out of his voice and face as he went on?

“So Valery Vorfolse, your husband, killed Commander Evon Vorhalas, and then?”

“Then he surrendered the Centre and…and…killed himself.”

She covered her face with the handkerchief. The general gave her a moment or two and then continued.

“Please tell me what is in your jewellery case, Madame, that your daughter was so anxious to retrieve.”

“It’s the recording of his message.”

“And this is why Count Vorhalas wants to kill you both?”
“Yes, of course. It’s a blood matter. For revenge.”

Ivan couldn’t picture the Count doing any such thing, but Aceline was obviously convinced about it.

“Count Vorfolse lets us know what’s happening. He keeps an eye on Vorhalas. He told me it’s still not safe in the capital, to stay away at all cost.”

*The old bastard! Keeping things easy for him,* he meant. What a shriveled up turd.

Allegre moved on. “How did you find yourself in New Sheffield?”

“Countess Vorclarence sent an armsman with an invitation. She’s looking for a wife for Lord Brian. I didn’t realise what the plan was. I thought Vorclarence would be strong enough to protect us from Vorhalas, but…” Her voice trailed off.

“But what, Madame?”

“He thought my husband was loyal to Vordarian. He didn’t know what had really happened, what he’d done.”

“Will your daughter marry Lord Brian? Did she consent?”

Aceline laughed again. “Oh, no, she hated the man, and his mother. She said she wasn’t going to be a poor relation all her life.”

“I see. And what do you know about Count Vorclarence’s plan to kill the Emperor?”

Ivan held his breath. There was silence in the room.

“Vorclarence tried to kill the Emperor? I didn’t know that. He told us Vorhalas had tried to kill the Emperor because he was marrying a traitorous Komarran. We had to go with him and hide for safety, as he couldn’t protect us from Vorhalas or ImpSec. I thought he was going to send us home. We went to the ground car garage but he locked us in the cellars instead.”

It was almost impossible for Ivan to remain silent. He bit the inside of his mouth hard and clenched his fists.

“Why do you think the Vorclarences chose your daughter?” Allegre was looking for confirmation.

“He has been looking for people who were friends with Count Vordarian or Evon Vorhalas. Did you know his youngest daughter is going to marry Kurt Voranson? The Voransons hate the Vorkosigans, especially the Regent.”

*Well,* that was new information. The Voransons!

The general continued for maybe ten more minutes. Eventually he administered the antagonist and called on his wristcom for the doctor to return.

“You rest now, Madame. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

While they waited for the doctor Allegre found the jewellery box and extracted the data disk. Once they were back out in the corridor Ivan finally broke.

“When I find that rat Vorfolse he’ll be eating through a straw for a month!” He paced up and down. “What do you think about the Vorhalas angle?”
General Allegre shook his head. “I find it incredible, but unfortunately it’s not immediately pertinent to our investigation. I won’t be pursuing it as a priority.”

He summoned one of the guards and handed over the disk. “Three copies, please. The data is thirty years old, so enhance and repair as best you can. The original may be returned to Madame Vorfolse immediately. Order a full check on the Voranson family. That’s a priority.”

When he’d finished giving his orders Ivan pressed the matter.

“We can’t let her go on thinking Vorhalas wants to kill her, surely?”

“Perhaps he does, perhaps he doesn’t. I can’t spare any men to deal with what I see as a private matter, but I don’t see anything to preclude a Lord Auditor making inquiries of a personal nature to the Count.”

“What, me go and beard the lion in his den?” Oh gods, was Allegre crazy?

“We must move along. We need to continue with Mademoiselle Vorfolse and the Voranson connection. There may be something of substance there.”

If Aceline had been apprehensive, Ivan could see immediately that Valeraine was a seething morass of fury. She looked at him with her eyes narrowed.

“What have you done to my mother? I heard her crying! Why can’t I go to her? You told me I wasn’t a prisoner!”

It dawned on him then just why General Allegre had been given the job of head of ImpSec. He could almost outSimon Simon when he put his mind to it. He neither raised his voice nor obviously threatened in any way, but the implacable, deadly serious voice halted any further outburst Raine planned to make.

“For the good of the Imperium and in the name of Emperor Gregor Vorbarra I require you to answer certain questions, Mademoiselle. Do you consent to the use of fast-penta?”

“No! I won’t be subjected to such a—“

Two guards marched into the room before she’d even finished speaking. Ivan certainly hadn’t seen Allegre signal. In seconds Valeraine was confined to an upright chair and her left arm bared and placed on a small table.

“Your refusal is so noted.” Allegre’s voice was as cold as deep space. Ivan had to try.

“Raine! Please reconsider. Nobody is fooling around here. It’s so much better for you if you cooperate. I really don’t want to see you humiliated...General, surely we don’t need these two guards?”

“We’re wasting time. You may hold her arm if you think that will make a difference.”

“Raine, please,” Ivan begged. She’d been badly frightened, he could see. Her breath came in quick gasps and her eyes looked like a trapped animal.

“Very well. I consent. You can let me go.”

At a nod from Allegre the guards slackened their hold and withdrew. Raine rubbed her wrists. Oh gods, her sore wrists. They’d taken no notice of the bandages. Ivan did the only thing he could
think of. He sat on the side of the bed next to the chair and held her other hand as the test patch was applied. She gave him one last glare of loathing before the hypospray went to work. She might be hating him, but she clutched at his hand as Allegre asked the neutral questions. Most of them were the same as he’d asked her mother.

Yes, she was Valeraine Amelie Vorfolse, her mother was Aceline and her father was Valery Vorfolse. When it came to her occupation, it was a bit unusual.

“I worked in a library for several years, but now I write fiction for ladies.”

Allegre concentrated on what Vor Clarence wanted from her. She actually spat on the floor. Pym wouldn’t be happy.

“That pig wanted me to have as many boys as I could with his son. He’d bought three replicators, you know. They were at the hospital. I hope they weren’t cooked when the fire started.”

He wanted to turn her into a breeding factory? No wonder she spat.

“Were you aware that the Count had a plan to murder the Emperor?”

“No, it was Count Vorhalas who wanted to murder the Emperor. He told us.”

“Did you believe him?”

“Yes. Vorhalas wanted to murder us, so we believed him.”

“Did you plan to murder the Emperor?”

She looked surprised. “No, of course not.”

“Did you or people you know plan to replace the Emperor with Lord Vorpatril?”

The snake! He just wouldn’t let that go, would he?

“No, I hadn’t met Lord Vorpatril before he freed us from the dungeon. He was very brave, and he had these beautiful brown eyes when he took his helmet off—"

“Stop! Did you hear of any plans to make Lord Vorpatril Emperor?”

“No.”

“Do you—”

There was a knock at the door. Furious, Allegre whirled around to see a worried looking captain enter.

“Please may I have a word, General? There’s a very urgent level one security video call from New Sheffield. Lieutenant Anton Vorberg. He’s most insistent.”

Ivan started moving. “Vorberg? He’s got news? Come on General, this has to be important.”

The two of them hurried out, leaving the captain to administer the antagonist. They ran down the stairs to the library. Vorberg appeared on the comconsole screen. He looked green. He was in a lightflyer and it looked like Karasavas was flying.

“General Allegre, sir! My Lord Auditor! Thank gods we found you. Major Karasavas ordered me
to tell you in person what I found.”

“Get on with it man,” Allegre barked.

Vorberg pulled himself together.

“Sir, I am transmitting by security alpha a holovid I discovered among the Count’s effects. I’m requesting a Bio-security Alert Level Five. I suggest you evacuate the Emperor.”

Allegre bellowed to his lieutenant. “Get Admiral Waleska down here. Alert ImpMil and HQ.”

Vorberg went on. “The recording is of clinical trials. Oh, gods, they used it on women and children, too.”

He actually stopped to vomit. Desperate, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’ve found here what we think is possibly an antidote, but we tore the residence apart looking for the vector. We found nothing. We’re scrambling to get this to ImpMil for analysis, and we’re bringing all the data disks and codes Lord Vorpatril gave me this morning. Sir, we think the vector may be at Vor Clarence House.”

“Surely that was the first place to be searched?” Ivan asked.

White around the mouth, Allegre looked at him. “Only for explosives and data disks, things like that. We weren’t looking for biologicals.”

He snapped more instructions into his wristcom. “We have to get over there.”

Ivan slapped his own screamer. “Pym!”

“Car on the way, my lord. Armsman Jankowski has your bio-suits at the front door.”

How had he known? Never mind, half the house must have heard him shout. Ivan ripped off his tunic and boots, tossing his Auditor’s chain on top of the pile. He had his shirt off in the doorway and was unfastening his trousers as he reached the hall.

Who would have known? Jankowski had opened a whole false wall at one side of the front door. There were shelves packed with all sorts of emergency items, including a range of bio-suits and spare air canisters. Never in his worst drink-induced nightmares had Ivan envisaged himself standing stark bollock naked in Miles’ hallway, but it only took seconds to shed the rest of his clothes, drop his wristcom and drag on the soft absorbent underlinings and then the bio-suit itself. Allegre was right behind him as Admiral Waleska shot out of the lift tube running. Pym was also stripping.

“Armsman, what the hell are you doing?” Miles would fucking murder him if he got one of his men killed.

Pym was in his suit with the hood pulled up before he answered, with just his face visor unsealed. “Lord Vorkosigan’s orders, my lord,” he explained. “It’s only the wine cellar that’s off limits.”

It was too much for Ivan. “You can’t, Pym. Think of Ma Pym, and Aurie and Arthur.”

The armsman’s face turned as grim as Ivan had ever seen it. “I am thinking of them, my lord.”

In the seconds while they were waiting for the car Ivan snatched up his wristcom again and sent off a warning to Simon Illyan. He didn’t mention the bio-hazard alert. All Simon needed to do was
Vorclarence House was a four-storied mansion designed in an ancient Italianate style with pale bricks and white marble facings. It was an opulent dwelling, some hundred years younger than Vorkosigan House, built in the time of Dorca’s reign. It was fronted by a stylish porte-cochere reaching two levels, with four fluted columns holding the roof. The ground car screeched to a halt underneath. One bio-hazard vehicle had preceded them and the squad was busy setting up a perimeter. Other vehicles pulled in behind and men started pouring out.

Before they entered the building Admiral Waleska called the squad to attention. The genial, laughing Wally was gone. This man was all steely professional.

“Take a look at the holovid Lieutenant Vorberg sent through and vomit now, if you have to. Don’t seal your visors until you do. My best estimate is a water born vector, so look in the first instance for liquid canisters, probably heat controlled and pressure sealed. Do not move anything. Call for backup immediately if you see anything at all suspicious.”

Among others, there was a little girl in the holovid, probably the same sort of age as Marie but with reddish gold hair. Ivan watched the time lapse with utter, stark horror. He didn’t vomit. He saved all his energy for the rage.

Allegre had connected him into the command report loop. An anonymous voice broke the silence. “VB1 and VB2 onboard shuttle Valkyrie outward bound for the Prince Serg.”

Gregor was going to hate that. Ivan hadn’t heard the code VB2 before, but that must be Laisa, of course. She might not stop until she got to Komarr.

“Pym, with me.”

They sealed their visors and adjusted the life support.

On the first sweep they found nothing. Ivan and Pym reached the library. Something nagged at him. Two things nagged at him. He keyed the general’s com. “Sir, the Kanzian incident. Has that Jacksonian pirate been traced? What if that wasn’t its first run?”

“I have someone on that already, my lord. It’s an obvious connection.”

Good, so Allegre didn’t need Ivan to do his thinking for him. Probably just as well. But…but there was still something.

“The sabotage in New Sheffield; the hospital and the water treatment plant. We thought it was random. Do you think those trials were carried out there and Vorclarence torched the evidence?”

Allegre was quick to acknowledge the possibility. “Highly likely. No doubt the water plant was trialing the delivery system. We’ll get the wreckage fully analyzed. But right now we’ve got to find this vector. Thanks, Vorpatril.”

Ivan didn’t know whether to feel better or worse that Allegre had accepted his theory. At least he’d thought of something new, but if he was right Vorclarence was blacker-hearted than the most evil of Jacksonian barons ever born.

Pym and Ivan took a five-minute break. The suits were good, but with too much effort they sweated up before the de-humidifiers could counterbalance. The library was a bit of a joke of a name, he
thought, looking round. Most of the tall, glass-fronted cabinets held booze, not books. They all stood open after the day they’d been first searched and the array of bottles was clearly visible. The really beautiful furniture was made out of ancient oak and walnut, with elegant carved handles and gilt locks.

Ivan leapt to his feet. “The keys! The keys Vor Clarence had in his pocket.”

It looked like a whiskey bottle. Something about the colour was the tiniest bit murky. Ivan contemplated the evil thing as he waited for the back up. Screw it into a water inlet valve in the Vorbarr Sultana water treatment plant, run like hell to New Sheffield and use the antidote there. That would probably do it.

Pym found another bottle a few cabinets away. They didn’t find any more.

Roic came for them, carrying four neat sets of freshly cleaned and pressed clothing and boots. Ivan practically scrubbed his skin off in the decontamination shower, then was blasted dry by the hot air fans. Guiltily he took back the Auditor’s chain he had so cavalierly tossed away, and went to thank the search squad. He shook every man by the hand. Nobody was smiling. Nobody was congratulating themselves on a job well done. ImpMil had sent over a posse of psych’s. They were going to be needed.

Pym, Wally and Ivan were driven home in silence. Roic glanced in his rear monitor once or twice and then started talking. “I didn’t have the time to report earlier, my lord, as you had already left when I got back. Mission accomplished. You didn’t need to warn me about my knees. It was the ear defenders you should have mentioned. She’s all tucked up in bed and fast asleep. You’d need a grav tractor to pry Steggy out of her arms.”

Ivan smiled. Wally smiled. And good gods, Pym smiled.

Now was his chance. “Pym, when we get back we’re going to need two, make that three bottles of the finest. Roic is on duty. You’re going to join us. We’ll see if we can get General Allegre over as well, plus Vorberg and Karasavas. Could you let Ma Kosti know? Nicely?”

It was time to relax.

Jankowski met them at the door. There was a look on his face.

“Oh, gods,” Ivan moaned. “What the hell is it now?”

“Mademoiselle Vorfolse has requested your presence several times, my lord, once she got over the fast-penta. I’d take a stunner with you.”

“Or a couple of big brave armsmen?”

Pym looked him in the eye. “We don’t generally interfere in the family’s private domestic…er…differences of opinion. Only if you press your screamer. I’ll be organizing your refreshments. Maple Mead?”

“You think it will be that bad?”

Jankowski nodded. “Oh, yes. I’ll check the first aid kit.”

Ivan turned to Roic.
“Happy to stand outside the door for you, my lord.”

“Wally?”

“Not me. I’ll go and sit with Aceline. She might get worried otherwise.”

Ivan took a deep breath. “I’m beginning to think you’re a howling hypocrite, Rear Admiral Waleska. You seem mightily attached to Madame Vorfolse. ‘Aceline’?”

To his surprise, Wally turned slightly pink. “You’re out of order, Captain.”

But I hit the nail right on the head, didn’t I?

Ivan took the lift tube. He was going to have to conserve his energy. Squaring up somewhat nervously, he tapped on her door. Raine opened it. Seconds later, it being two hundred years old and of the old-fashioned hinged variety, she slammed it again in his face.

“Go away. I never want to see you again.”

He sighed, and waited. Thirty seconds later she wrenched open the door again and hauled him into her room.

“Where is it? Someone took it. You have no right!”

“Raine, I—”

“Don’t you dare call me Raine. Only my friends are allowed to call me Raine.”

She waved a finger under his nose. This was going to get bad in a hurry. He held up a hand.

“Just wait.” He crossed to the dressing table and took his Auditor’s chain off.

“If you hit me when I’m wearing that it’s treason and they’ll chain you to a stake in the Great Square and let you starve to death.”

“Don’t you lie to me, Ivan Vorpatril—”

“That’s Ivan Xav Vorpatril. It’s got more of a ring to it.”

She swelled. It was quite a sight.

“She swelled. It was quite a sight.

“Don’t you lie to me, Ivan Xav Vorpatril. That’s only for Counts and their heirs. And right now, I’d be happy to swing for you. Where the hell is my mother’s holovid? It’s all we’ve…she’s got left of her husband!”

Ivan looked at the tears in her eyes. “And it’s the only time you’ve ever seen your Da.”

“You leave my Da out of this. You’re not fit to mention his name. I trusted you!”

He tried to take hold of her hands. She was having none of that.

“Let go of me! Don’t you dare touch me!”

“Mademoiselle Vorfolse, General Allegre has custody of your holovid. He is making enhanced copies so that the original may be preserved. One will be needed for evidence and the original will
be returned as soon as possible, with a copy.”

“And don’t talk to me in that soothing voice. You’re just gutter slime. I thought you were—I thought you were—” her voice broke.

Wally and his advice could take a wormhole jump. Ivan stepped forward and took Raine into his arms. Her head nestled just at the top of his shoulder, against his neck.

“Ow!” He staggered backwards. “Shit, that hurts.” He doubled over, wheezing, clutching his groin.

Raine lowered her knee. “When I want your comfort I’ll ask for it.”

The floor looked like a very good place. Ivan crumpled. Oh, gods. If Miles didn’t have kids Prince Xav’s line had ended right then and there. His eyes watered as he fought for breath.

“Ivan?”

He was still on the sick list. He was supposed to be avoiding stress. All he could do was groan. "unnggh"

“Ivan, I’m sorry. I’ve really hurt you.” She dropped on her knees beside him.

Somewhere through the tears he could see her dark eyes. His tears or her tears, he couldn’t tell.

He sucked in a breath, and another. He felt her hand, light and soft, on his hair. There was nothing romantic about this situation. “It…it could have been…worse,” he managed to get out. “At least you didn’t…use your…Vorfemme knife.”

“Well, I feel like having your balls for breakfast, but perhaps not quite like that.”

Ivan whimpered. “No one’s getting near my balls ever again.”

Valeraine tugged on his arm.

“Come on, get up. Sit on the chair. I’ll get you a glass of water.”

He crawled over and pulled himself up onto the chair. His head hung between his knees.

“Ohhhh, ohh shit.”

There was a tap on the door.

“If that’s Roic tell him to piss off. He’s too bloody late.”

Oh, he shouldn’t have mentioned piss. It would probably come out sideways, if it came out at all. And blood. He definitely shouldn’t have mentioned blood.

Valeraine wiped her eyes and opened the door a crack. She looked out and then looked up. “You would be Roic?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

The Lord Auditor told me to tell you to piss off. You’re too late. Actually, he said you’re too bloody late.”

“Does he need the first aid kit, or would the doctor be better?”
“I think just an ice pack, Roic.”

“Very well, Miss. I’ll be right back.”

Pym sent one up in the lift tube. Roic handed it in through a crack in the door. “Pym says the Maple Mead makes a very good anaesthetic. If my lord can make it as far as the library it’s set out there. Major Karasavas and Lieutenant Vorberg are on their way. General Allegre sends his sincere regrets. He’s waiting for the Emperor to return.”

Ivan finally dared to try and stand up. He clutched the ice pack like a lifesaver. “I’ll leave you now, Mademoiselle. I’m glad I could explain things to your satisfaction. Would you mind passing me my chain and seal? The door is in the other direction.”

Valeraine slipped it over his head and arranged it on his shoulders. Her hands slid down a little to linger on his chest. “I really am sorry, Ivan, and you can call me Raine.”

He looked down at her, so close. His head tipped forwards to rest against hers. “You’ll excuse me I’m sure if I make a strategic retreat. Roic will look after you.”

It was a long way to the library.

When Vorberg and Karasavas arrived, Roic showed them in.

“Pardon me if I don’t stand up,” Ivan told them. “Come over here and shake my hand. I’ve had a misfortune.”

Wally, standing behind the couch where Ivan lay reclined, a glass of maple mead in his hand, wiggled his eyebrows.

“It was actually a Miss Vorfolse, and I can assure you, having seen it, she didn’t miss.”

“You can laugh,” Ivan moaned. “You don’t have to go to a funeral tomorrow. Two hours in a lightflyer. You’d better give me those other painkillers back, doc.”

Wally took Vorberg to one side, with one of the bottles of maple mead, traditional Barrayaran stress counseling in action, but at least Wally would know what to say. They were not any of them ever going to forget that holovid. Pym tried to get up and serve Karasavas, but he waved him away.

“I’m not Vor. I’m capable of pouring a drink for myself, and one for you, too.” He handed Pym a glass and took a sip of his own. “Better than Ouzo, but that’s not saying much.”

They none of them said very much. Pym lurched to his feet early. “Thank you very much, my lord. I really appreciated your company tonight. I’m going to talk to my wife. House blacks tomorrow?”

“Yes, that would be appropriate.” Ivan struggled to his feet and held out his hand. “And Pym, I was truly honoured by your loyalty this afternoon. The Vorkosigans are a very lucky family.”

Pym shook his hand. “Thank you, my lord. It was also my honour. Your father would have been very proud of you today. I think you’ll do well.”

Ivan finally crawled into his guest suite for the first time that day. Wally had stopped laughing and given him some topical bruise ointment. After a cold shower all he wanted was his bed.

The comconsole chimed. It was Gregor. Ivan could tell by the look on his face he had seen the holovid. They just looked at each other for a few moments.
“Are you alright, Ivan? That’s a hell of a job your people have done.”

“Karasavas and Vorberg. A greekie and a rookie. They make one kick-ass team, don’t they? I’m so proud of them, Gregor. I’m humbled. You must be so much more humbled every time.”

“Good men and women die for me, Ivan. Sometimes I hate this job.”

“Sire, today Ma Kosti came up from her kitchen and kissed me on the cheek. She wanted to thank me for saving her Emperor. She loves you.” He lowered his voice just a little. “We all do.”

Gregor managed a tired smile. He should smile more often, Ivan thought. It suited him.

“About tomorrow, sire. I’ll understand if Gerard feels like he should stay with you.”

“Don’t worry, Ivan. The arrangements are standing. Bring your armsmen to the Residence at 0700. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, sire.”

Bed. He needed his bed. But shit. One more thing to do. He punched up a code on the comconsole. Just as he thought there would be no answer the familiar figure came into view.

“By, I need your help.”
There was a tap on the door and a merry, “Good morning, My Lord Auditor.” Ivan opened one eye. It was Jankowski with a tray of breakfast pastries, coffee and painkillers.

“How may I help you dress?”

Ivan held out his hand. Jankowski put one painkiller into it, followed by the coffee. He laid the tray down on the bedside table and went off to run the shower. Ivan risked a look under the sheets. It was not a pretty sight. Hastily he dropped them again.

Jankowski came back in from the bathroom, far too cheerful for anyone in their right mind at this time of day. “I read the label, my lord. You need to eat something. Your uniform is ready for you on the stand, and Pym looked out one of the old general’s mourning brassards for you, so everything is as it ought to be.”

He was going to have to move sometime. Ivan rolled out of bed and staggered to the shower, shedding his pyjama pants along the way. It wasn’t quite so painful this morning and thank the gods all the plumbing worked correctly. That was a big relief in more ways than one.

Jankowski was still waiting in the bedroom when he left the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. Ivan hadn’t had anyone dress him since he was five years old. “I can manage, thank you, Jankowski. I’ll see the others downstairs shortly—oh, and before you go, Byerly Vorrutyer will be coming in this morning to do some babysitting. I promised him a free lunch in return. The ladies are allowed downstairs, but not out of the house and I think General Allegre would prefer it if they didn’t use the comconsoles just yet. Holovids are OK, of course. You know the drill. Hopefully ImpSec will return the missing recording this morning.” She’ll have me spitted if they don’t.

“I’ll see to it, my lord.” Jankowski handed him a plate of pastries and a fresh cup of coffee. Nothing like a gentle hint, was there?

The lift tube came in handy again when Ivan went down at 0625. Somebody had done a wonderful job with his uniform and his boots gleamed. The broad black band around his left arm added just the right respectful note. Even his Auditor’s chain had had a polish.

Pym and Roic were equally impeccable. There was something special about House Blacks. The sight of them made little hairs stand up on the back of his neck. He nodded a greeting. “Roic, weren’t you on duty all night? Are you going to be OK with today?”

“I’ll be fine, my lord. It’s not the first time I’ve pulled a double shift.”

Ivan wasn’t sure if he was taking liberties with his borrowed armsmen. Of course they wouldn’t complain. “You can probably get a couple of hour’s nap on the way, I suppose. It should be an uneventful trip. No bad guys to worry about, after all.”

Pym opened the door for them to where the ground car was already waiting. It didn’t take long to get to the Residence. They needed to do was find Gerard and board their transport. There was a slight discussion over stunners with the guard at reception, but Gerard arrived to waive them through. In no time they reached the rooftop flyer park. Ivan had seen that flyer before. The window tint was turned to maximum and the whole machine gleamed in the early morning sun. It looked like a sleek black bird roosting on a perch. Gregor’s new toy was waiting for them.
He took a startled look at the armsman. “Gregor knows about this, doesn’t he? He wasn’t too happy last time we borrowed it.”

Gerard popped the rear canopy and ushered them in to the luxurious seats. “Everything is in order, My Lord Auditor. All we need to do is enjoy the trip. Please remember to buckle in.”

The lightflyer shot up like an arrow into the dawn sky and executed a neat barrel roll over Vorhartung Castle, followed by a full loop pulling at least three g. What the hell? After he recovered from the shock Ivan took one look at the full squadron of stingers marshaling in escort and turned back to Gerard.

“I forgot to ask,” he said mildly, “but who the hell let Gregor fly this thing?”

He should have known. He did know. Gerard never left his Imperial Master’s side. Thank the gods the passenger seats were fitted with four point harnesses and not six point harnesses. It would have been an excruciating trip otherwise. Ivan shook his head. “Enjoy the ride, Roic. It doesn’t look like you’re going to have much chance of a sleep.”

On their arrival in New Sheffield Ivan saw that Karasavas, Vorberg, Waleska and a squad of Engineers and ImpSec personnel had lined up in full dress order. Those poor sods couldn’t have had any sleep at all. On consideration, it served them right because they must have known what was going on and not one of the rats had told him.

Gerard hopped out quickly and moved to stand in front of the pilot’s cabin. As Gregor climbed down he swiftly adjusted his uniform for him and whipped out a comb. Inside thirty seconds the Emperor appeared as impassive and immaculate as he ever did. Ivan was close enough to see the look in his eye, though. It was something he would treasure. As they marched over to inspect the guard he whispered out of the side of his mouth.

“Good present?”

He could have sworn he heard the Emperor say something along the lines of ‘fucking awesome.’

A small group of eight made up the Imperial contingent at the funeral. As the family mourners made their way to the graveside they passed by Ivan, Vorberg, Karasavas and Waleska on one side of the aisle and the three armsmen on the other. There was a rippling gasp of amazement and shock when they saw who stood beside the coffin. A very discreet ImpSec cordon closed around the graveyard and two flyers circled overhead as the service commenced.

Just before Armsman Walton’s widow came forward to light the offering the Emperor said a few words. “We offer our condolences to all of the Walton family, Madame Walton in particular. Please understand We never forget the sacrifices made in loyalty to the Imperium. Thank you, Armsman Walton.”

They watched in silence as the flames took hold in the brazier and scented smoke wafted into the air.

They didn’t linger afterwards, just a few handshakes and private words of condolence to the main mourners, and then they left them in peace to recover from the shock.

Gregor explained the itinerary for the rest of the morning. “While I’m here I want to see the hospital, what’s happened at the water treatment plant and we’re going to stop by that apartment tower of yours, Ivan, where We spent all that money. I want to let my subjects know that I haven’t
completely forgotten them and perhaps find out what else needs to be done.”

Like Ivan, he stood in grim disbelief in Marie’s apartment. By the end of the tour he wasn’t a happy man. While they’d been inspecting the building a large crowd had gathered in the road outside. As they came out again, a spokesperson stepped forward. Ivan recognized him. Yeoman Nilesa.

“Sire, we would like to thank you for visiting us. Most of us here thought we’d been forgotten. Captain Vorpatril…well, he understood what we needed and by the gods he’s seen to it that we’re getting it. We’d like to thank him and Your Majesty very much.”

Gregor used that trick of his that made every person in the crowd think he was speaking to them personally. He didn’t raise his voice by much, but every word was clear. “We apologise for the wrong that has been done to you and the people like you in New Sheffield and this District. We would like to assure you all that the person We appoint as your new Count will have your welfare and the welfare of your children as his top priority. This will never happen again.”

They dropped Admiral Waleska back to the hospital and said goodbye to Karasavas and Vorberg at the Flyerport. Gregor shook their hands. “We owe you a very great debt, gentlemen. Think about what you would like to do for your future assignments and let Us know. It’s the usual reward for a job well done.”

Karasavas was quite clear. “There’s a lot of unfinished work here, sire. I’d like to see it through, and be available to advise the new Count.”

Ivan knew exactly what that meant. *He wanted to be on the spot to kick ass if the new guy lets them down.*

Vorberg looked more undecided. “I would have liked to stay with My Lord Auditor Vorpatril, sire, but as he’s going back to Ops that’s not a choice I can make. If Major Karasavas will have me I’d prefer to stay here, too.”

“Not ship duty, or an embassy on Earth, say, or Beta colony?”

“My brother says courier duty is not all it’s cracked up to be. He’s happy with his desk job. I’d like it here just fine, for now.”

“Very well.” Gregor nodded. “We’ll bear that in mind, gentlemen, but the exigencies of the service sometimes dictate otherwise. Let’s just see what happens.”

The armsmen were waiting by the flyer. Gerard took care of his master’s cap and gloves and Gregor climbed into the pilot’s cabin. He had a visitor. Ivan was buckled into the co-pilot’s seat.

“If I ask very nicely, will you let me have a go on the way home? Let’s see what this baby can really do.”

“Let you touch my lovely new lightflyer? You have got to be joking!”

“Aww go on, please, please, please, please, please.”

“I wouldn’t let you fly a…a…kite! You’re the worst driver I’ve ever seen.”

Gerard shut the canopy and left them to it.

The Emperor was a spoilsport. He let Ivan have a whole five minutes flying straight and level at
altitude, with only one measly barrel roll allowed. As they neared Vorbarr Sultana his mood sobered. Ivan watched the weight of three worlds settle back on his shoulders. Gregor locked in to the local traffic control network and gave his call sign. He glanced over.

“What do you say we fly right on past and never stop?”

Ivan considered the question seriously. “You might never see Laisa again. Is it so bad? This whole Vorclarence thing has to be a huge weight off your mind.”

Gregor sighed. “It’s not off my mind yet. There are scores to settle. When that is done with, we still have the Komarr Soletta affair. Pierre Vorrutyer’s death is causing headaches as there’s a challenge to the inheritance and apparently we have a Ghem Lord’s bastard offspring to deal with, as well.”

“I’d forgotten about Pierre. I asked Byerly Vorrutyer round to Vorkosigan House to look after the ladies but he never mentioned it.”

Gregor looked at him strangely. “Byerly Vorrutyer? Why did you ask him, of all people?”

“He’s amusing when he wants to be, he likes spending other people’s money and the Vorfolses have been living in Vandeville for thirty years. I thought By might, you know, give them a touch of town smarts, tell them about fashion, that kind of thing. Which reminds me. Is Old Vorhalas in town, do you know?”

“Yes, he is. He was at the meeting I had with Miles. Is this about the so-called death threats?”

“Allereg briefed you already? Yes, I owe it to them to get that sorted out. I don’t want them running back to Vandeville the minute we let them out.”

“Any particular reason why you want them to hang around?”

They’ve had a rotten time and I wanted them to enjoy themselves.”

“And Mademoiselle Vorfolse is a looker, by all accounts.”

Ivan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Time to change the subject. “Mademoiselle Vorfolse is a bit of a doer, as well as a looker. Cross her at your peril. I found that out the hard way. But what’s this about a Ghem Lord?”

"It looks nasty. Apparently René Vorbretten’s great-grandfather the count wasn’t his great-grandfather after all. Someone from the replicator centre leaked his gene scan.”

“René? That’s bad. He’s a great guy.”

“And it’s Donna Vorrutyer who has lodged a counter-claim to Richars. She’s disappeared. No one knows where but the rumour is either Beta Colony or Jackson’s Whole and a clone is involved.”

Donna! Ivan had very fond memories of Donna, but a clone? That would have taken an awful lot of foresight, not to mention cash. None of the Vorrutyers ever had any cash. “It’s just one damned thing after another, isn’t it?”

Gregor brought the flyer in to land. “Always. I have tomorrow, and then...” His whole mien changed. A grim chill permeated the cabin. "I'm angry, Ivan. I don't know the whole story yet. Allegre is presenting his findings. I've called an emergency joint sitting of Our Councils. After the funeral.”
Ivan had errands to run and chores to do. He sent Pym and Roic back to Vorkosigan House to get some well-earned rest, then stopped by ImpSec, dashed into a couple of shops, scaring the wits out of one poor proprietor before remembering to take off his chain of office and finally ended up at his mother’s apartment. This was no chore. This was sheer pleasure. Marie squealed when she saw him. Just in time Ivan managed to stop her throwing herself at him and swept her up above his head instead. He tossed her into the air and did it again when she came down.

“How’s my sweetheart? Do you want to show me Steggy? I’ve got something for you.”

She raced off and returned with Steggy under her arm. No wonder he looked a bit battered. She had a chokehold round his neck. “That nice man brought him last night, My Ivan, just like you said he would. He was really big.”

“That was Roic. He said you were very happy.”

“I was. What did you bring me?”

They sat down in the big chair in her room. There was just space for them to squash side by side, which Ivan thought a much better option than having her sit in his lap. “I’ve got two things, sweetheart. The first one is a new dress.”

“I got a new dress to see the Emperor, but it got lost.”

"I know it did. Mamie bought you some more, but this is special. It’s a white dress.” He opened up the bag and showed it to her. “You remember in a day or two we’re going to have a very special day to say goodbye to your Ma?” he asked her gently.

She went very still for a moment. “Yes. I don’t want to.”

Time for another hug. She burrowed her nose in just under his ear.

“Nobody wants to, honey, but there’s nothing we can do. Anyway, grown ups usually wear black, like your black ribbons, but I don’t want you to do that, so I bought this white dress for you instead. You only have to wear it for that one day if you don’t like it.”

Her hair tickled his nose. “Oh, I’ll like it, My Ivan, because you bought it for me.”

“The other thing is much more fun. I saw all your drawings when I went to get Steggy. Look what I bought for you.”

From the other bag he pulled out a pad of real drawing paper and a large box of colouring wands. She gasped. “Ooooh, how beautiful!”

“Now mind, you only draw on the paper, not on any of Mamie’s walls, or floors, or furniture, or anything like that. Why don’t you draw me a picture now, while I make some calls?”

He found her a spot in the kitchen where she wouldn’t be in the way, and tore a sheet off the pad for her. He watched for a few moments as she opened the box to choose a colour. Her little tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth as she concentrated.

“Be right back, Marie.”

She didn’t hear him go.
Ivan’s first call was to Vorkosigan House. Pym answered and transferred him through to Byerly.

“By! How have you been getting along with the ladies?”

“Oh, they’re wonderful. No trouble at all. Raine has been looking at a lot of new outfits.”

“By…” Ivan hissed a warning. “I told you one new outfit. I’m not made of money. And only the one. Nothing for you or your next door neighbour’s donkey.”

“Well, Raine told me to tell you that she didn’t need your charity thank you very much My Lord Auditor for the thought and she’ll talk to you about your kind offer when next she sees you.”

“That sounds ominous.”

By simpered. “I’d be very, very afraid if I was you.”

“Well, tell her from me I’m on my way with she knows what, and I should be there in a couple of hours. That should turn her up sweet.”

“And I’ve invited some friends around for supper, to meet them.”

“You did what? You invited your friends? Does Pym know about this?”

“Oh, don’t panic. It’s only the Koudelka girls minus Kareen, so that makes a whole three. Raine’s going to need some friends in town.”

“That had better be all there are. I have to run, By. I’ll see you soon.”

He cut the com. Trust By to pull a stunt like that. What part of subtle did he not get? It had been a bad idea to ask for By’s help. It was always a bad idea to get within fifty feet of the little schemer.

The next call was a lot more formal. He talked to an armsman and shamelessly made use of his Auditorial status to wangle himself an appointment. He’d better get over to Vorhalas House before he lost his nerve.

Marie was still drawing when he went back to say goodbye. There was a very obvious likeness of Papi Simon, complete with his thinning brown hair, Ivan and Marie sitting down to eat soup.

“I have to run, sweetie. Is Ma McIver here?”

“Yes, she’s doing some laundry. I’ll be fine, My Ivan. Don’t worry.”

One of the maids was working at a bench nearby. “That’s right, don’t you worry, my lord. We’ll look after her.”

He gave Marie one last kiss. “See you soon, darling.”

Vorhalas House. It wasn’t somewhere he dropped in every day. Count Vorhalas sat behind his desk in his study, an upright, elderly gentleman with a piercing gaze and a no-nonsense attitude. He rose briefly to shake Ivan’s hand.

“Vorpatril. Take a seat. What can I do for you, My Lord Auditor?”

Ivan hadn’t worn his chain. He didn’t think it would be appreciated. Count Vorhalas had a poor opinion of him and the last thing he would take was a fribble like him coming the lord over him.
Straight dealing was the only way to go here.

“Count Vorhalas, sir, during the investigations into the Vorclarence affair some information has come to light relating directly to your family. Vorclarence also made allegations about your involvement in the assassination attempt. We know these to be completely spurious, but what we don’t know is apart from the two witnesses concerned who else he may have told.”

The old man’s breath hissed inwards. He became very still. “Go on.”

Ivan didn’t want to hurt the man, but he’d lived with the worst hurt for thirty years. “A recording has come to light regarding the death of Commander Evon Vorhalas. I’d like you to see it.”

“You’re sure it’s genuine?”

“Yes, Count, and the testimony supporting it was obtained under fast-penta questioning administered by General Allegre.”

The Count’s expression hardened. “And why isn’t Allegre himself here to tell me about this?”

“He judged it a private matter, not relevant to the investigation at hand. There is no, and never could be, any doubt about your loyalty. That closed the matter as far as he was concerned.”

“Very well. Show me this recording.”

“It was made by Lieutenant Valery Vorfolse and sent to his wife, Madame Aceline Vorfolse.”

Ivan had seen it once, at ImpSec HQ, but it was no less harrowing the second time.

Count Vorhalas remained quiet for several minutes. At last he spoke. “I am not aware of this Madame Vorfolse. Do you know her?”

She has spent the last thirty years hiding in fear of your revenge, sir.”

“What?” That shocked him. “Why would she think any such thing?”

“Because, sir, Count Vorfolse has told her at least once a year ever since that you are determined to kill her and her child. He has hidden her away in Vandeville for reasons of his own.”

“And how did this come to light during the Vorclarence investigation?”

Count Vorclarence, unaware of the true situation thought Valery supported Vordarian, and that allegiance would make Valeraine Vorfolse a suitable match for his son.”

“There’s something you wish me to do, isn’t there?” The old man was no fool.

“I’d like you to tell Madame Vorfolse that she has nothing to fear from you, sir. There is, however, a problem. She’s presently under house detention at Vorkosigan House.”

The temperature dropped in the room, Ivan would swear.

“I haven’t set foot there for thirty years.”

“No, sir, I’m aware, but I feel your sense of justice would allow you to make an exception, just this once.”

“That lunatic Vorfolse has a lot to answer for.”
Ivan nodded. “I couldn’t agree more, sir.”

Vorhalas thought for a few moments and then stabbed a button on his wristcom. “Pallis, bring the ground car to the front door.”

They looked at each other with grave respect. Ivan reached out.

“May I shake your hand, sir?”

Vorhalas nodded. “And I am quite happy to shake yours, Vorpatril. I may have misjudged you.”

Ivan grinned. “No sir, I don’t think you did. But I’ve changed.”
Corporal Kosti had seen a few strange things manning the guard post outside Vorkosigan House. Usually Lord Vorkosigan was responsible for them, but not this time. He called the duty armsman on the com.

“Count Vorhalas’ ground car approaching the main doors, Jankowski.”

There was a short silence.

“Confirm Count Vorhalas?”

“No question. Lord Vorpatril is with him.”

“I’ll inform Pym.”

Ivan ushered Vorhalas into the broad entrance hall. Pym and Jankowski flanked the doors at rigid attention. The old Count glanced around, remembering what, Ivan wondered.

“Are the ladies in the library, Pym?” he asked and received an affirmative reply. “Count Vorhalas has something he wishes to say to them. I’ll take him on through. I’d appreciate it if you could bring some refreshments.”

“Immediately, my lord.”

Vorhalas took his time crossing the black and white paved tiles. What stories had he been told, or made it his business to find out, about what had gone on here? Ivan hadn’t paid a lot of attention to the history his lady mother had mentioned from time to time, but he knew enough. There was no hurry. It was highly unlikely Vorhalas would be back, after all. Let him make what memories he wanted.

Byerly Vorrutyer took one glance and leapt to his feet as the two of them entered the library. Startled by his attitude Raine looked up from the leather-bound volume they’d been admiring. She looked from Ivan to his companion and back again, clearly puzzled. It wasn’t until Madame Vorfolse jerked upright and let out a half-shriek, half-moaning wail that she realized something was wrong.

Ivan strode across the room to take Aceline’s hand. “Madame Vorfolse, please don’t be afraid. I’ve brought Count Vorhalas here to talk to you.”

“Vorhalas?” Raine leapt to her feet and rushed to stand in front of her mother. “Don’t you hurt her!”

The Count looked quite taken aback for a moment or two. He recovered quickly. “You’ve been reading too many novels, gel! Vorrutyer, you bring that chair over here then you can sit back in your corner until I have need of you. Not there, boy, not there! Can’t you see that’s too close? These ladies are afraid of me. Yes, that’s right. That will do nicely.”

Ivan watched Byerly scuttle over to a small side chair and do his best to blend into the scenery.
There was no other word for it.

“Lord Vorpatril, if you please, introduce me to the ladies. Where are your manners, lad?”

When he spoke like that they all jumped. Even Raine subsided and sat beside her mother on the couch.

Thank you mamère! Ivan silently blessed his mother as he performed introductions that would have graced the Winterfair ball.

When Aceline did not extend her hand the Count bowed gracefully, first to the mother and then to the daughter. He settled himself on the chair and looked pointedly at Ivan, who rushed to sit himself.

Pym’s timing was perfect. He entered the room with a small drinks trolley. He wore white gloves and had a snowy napkin draped across his arm. Almost reverently he wrapped the napkin part way round a bottle and presented it label up to the Count. Ivan couldn’t see what it was, but he could guess. What did puzzle him though, was the lack of any of Ma Kosti’s lavish delicacies. Instead there was a bowl of spiced ogorki and some wafer thin slices of dried ham.

Vorhalas looked at the bottle, back up at Pym and down to the bottle again. “One of the old general’s best, eh? Vorkosigan, father and son, always could pick their people. Yes, I’ll take a glass. Don’t mind if I do.”

There was a short pause while everyone was served, Pym taking pity on Byerly and offering him a small glass, too.

“Now then, Madame, you tell me what sort of claptrap that total moron Vorfolse has been filling your ears with this past thirty years.”

It was Raine, and not Aceline who told the story as her mother was still hardly coherent.

Vorhalas listened without interruption. He had the knack of paying perfect attention. Finally, Raine ran out of anything to say.

The Count placed his glass down on the side table Pym had provided. He spoke quite softly, with none of his usual brusque manner.

“Madame, your husband granted my House the most inestimable favour by his actions. Evon was already lost to us. He had committed treason in this very place. He was a condemned man. And when a Count’s heir commits treason—” He stopped to take a sip of his wine. Even at a distance of thirty years there was a bright shine in his eyes. Raine finished for him.

She whispered, “The penalty is death by exposure in the Great Square.”

“To have been able to spare my dear wife that agony, when she had already had to endure—you see how it is. His death was a soldier’s death, at the last, however futile the cause.”

There was a profound silence. At last Aceline held out her hand. The Count rose from his chair and kissed it.

He looked around. “Vorrutyer, over here, please. And you, Vorpatril, stand here.” He still had hold of Aceline’s hand.

“You’re my witnesses. Madame and Mademoiselle Vorfolse I swear to you on my name as
Vorhalas that no harm will come to you at my hand. I offer you the protection of my House.”

Aceline pulled herself together. She stood, looked the Count in his eyes and curtsied. Raine rushed to follow. “My Lord Count, I thank you for the honour.”

“Right. That’s done. Let’s not waste that bottle, eh?”

He stayed another half hour, listening to stories of Valery and Evon, snacking on cucumbers and ham, occasionally putting in a comment of his own. Greatly daring, Ivan invited him to stay for dinner.

He sighed. “No, my boy, I’ll not sit at table in this House without its Master present, and I cannot sit at table with him. But you must bring the ladies to Vorhalas House. I’ve no quarrels with Vorpatrils. You can bring Vorrutyer as well, I suppose. He can make himself useful. I’ll send word.”

He bowed to the ladies and Ivan walked him out. Pym, Jankowski and Roic all lined the door as he left. With a nod, he acknowledged their presence. Straight backed and determined as ever he shook hands in farewell. Ivan opened the ground car’s canopy for him.

“This has been such an honour this evening, My Lord Count.”

“It has been somewhat unexpected for me, I must say. I found it quite enlightening. Goodnight, Vorpatril.”

“Goodnight, sir.” Ivan watched the ground car pull away into the night. Back in the hall he let out a great sigh of relief.

“Pym, you are a magician. How did you know about the cucumbers? He hasn’t been here for thirty years!”

Pym tapped his nose. “I got the Count’s armsman down in the kitchen quick smart. Ma Kosti was a bit put out but I reminded her that the Koudelkas are coming for supper. She soon came round. And she fed the armsman.”

Ivan grinned. “Oh, and Pym, are you going to tell Miles about that bottle, or shall I?”

“It will go in the cellar report, my lord, if Lord Vorkosigan chooses to read it.”

Ivan clapped him on the shoulder. “I’d better get back before that sneak By finishes it. Thank you, Pym. Just thank you.”

Pym bowed. “My pleasure, my lord.”

By Vorrutyer had indeed poured himself another glass of the Vorkosigan red, but he only sipped at it in reverence. It took him a little while to speak.

“I thought Mad Yuri’s ghost would walk here long before Vorhalas would set foot in the place. Can you actually believe what just happened?”

Ivan looked at him warily. “By, I know gossip is your business—”

Vorrutyer shook his head. “No, Ivan, not this time. Not a word, unless I’m directly asked by someone I can’t say no to.”
Raine came over to them. Looking at her jogged his memory and he hastily reached into his pocket for the data disc and a copy. “Here you go. Apologies for the delay.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I’m going to take maman upstairs as I think she’d like to be alone. Can you let me know when your guests get here? I’d really like to meet them.”

By smiled at Ivan. “One less for the bottle. When it’s empty can I have it? It will go nicely in my trophy cabinet.”

“You don’t have a trophy cabinet, By.”

By sipped again. “For this, I’ll buy a trophy cabinet.”

Ivan offered his arm to Madame Vorfolse as far as the lift tube, watched the pair ascend and then rushed back to the library to guard the bottle. The two of them sat opposite each other, feet up on low stools, and marveled.
Raine returned downstairs about forty minutes later. Ivan and Byerly had finished off the bottle and true to his word By had stashed the empty where Pym hopefully wouldn’t find it.

“...Speaking of Pym,” Ivan said to By, “I believe you wanted to ask him about those cucumbers. Now would be a good time to go and find him.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” By responded, “I’m really quite happy here, and what on old Earth itself would I do with a cucumber, Ivan? I would have thought that was more your thing.”

“You’ll find out what you can do with a cucumber, Vorrutyer, if you’re not careful, and I might just forget to tell you when the invitation comes through from Vorhalas House.”

By leapt to his feet. “Oh, that cucumber. I remember now. Yes, I’m sure Pym will be most helpful. I’ll just go and find him, shall I?”

Raine watched him go. “Well, that was subtle. I’m glad he can take a gentle hint.”

Ivan indicated a chair. “I needed to talk to you in private. I think I might have upset you today.”

“Ohhh, you mean the ‘shall we buy a dress for the poor relation’ thing?”

He nodded. “Yes, that thing. I’m sorry. I helped you pack, remember, and it didn’t look to me like you would have anything suitable for socializing in Vorbarr Sultana. I don’t know what your circumstances are but it can’t be easy for two women to make a living. You said you were a librarian, and your mother obviously isn’t well enough to work, so I just thought, well, I wanted to take you out to dinner once things were settled—”

“And what? You didn’t want to be ashamed of me?”

“No! Nothing like that. I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable, or be obliged to say no, or, oh, never mind. I’ve done the wrong thing. I’m sorry and will you please forgive me?”

She stopped teasing. “You’re very sweet, you know, Ivan. It was really kind of you to worry about me. It’s quite true I’ve got nothing suitable to wear, but I can buy my own clothes. By is going to take me shopping.”

“By is? What about me? I can take you shopping.”

“Don’t you have lots of Lord Auditor reports to write, and that sort of thing? I heard you groaning about them to that nice lieutenant.”

“Vorberg? Yes, you’re right. I’d forgotten about them. Blast and Damnation. Plus there’s Madame Watson’s funeral. That’s coming up the day after tomorrow. Shit, I can’t go shopping just yet.”

“You be careful of that language or I’ll tell your mother on you.”

Ivan looked at Raine with his best sad face. “I’ve already had an Emperor rat on me to mamère. I don’t think you can do much worse—I nearly forgot!” He completely changed track. “Those goons
yesterday. I was so sorry about that.”

He crossed over and knelt beside her chair. “They hurt your wrists. They weren’t nearly better yet.” He picked up the hand that had received the most damage and ran his fingers over the half-healed lacerations.

“I’m glad I blew Vorclarence to bits.” He sounded quite vicious, even to his own ears.

Raine’s breathing wasn’t quite even. “Are you? I’m jealous. I wanted to do the same thing. Boys have all the fun.”

Ivan kissed her wrist, and then the back of her hand, moving up to her knuckles and then her fingertips. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Girls can have fun, too.”

“Ivan’s just in here.” By swung the library door open. “Ivan, where’s your manners? The Koudelka sisters are here!”

Shit! He jumped up. Had they seen? By certainly had. Nothing to do but make the best of it. He held out his hand to help Raine to her feet.

“Now, if it’s shopping you had in mind, here are the best three guides you’ll ever need, and when their sister gets back from Beta Colony it’s a whole shopping squad. Come and meet them.”

Raine’s dark beauty contrasted sharply with the tall and blonde Koudelka girls. Ivan studiously ignored the arch looks from Delia and Martya. It would be just like them to blab. In fact, he wasn’t going to give them the chance.

“Valeraine Vorfolse, may I introduce Delia Koudelka? She refused to marry me and is going to marry a Komarran ImpSec commodore instead. What chance did a poor lowly captain like me ever have? This is Martya Koudelka. She refused to marry me, too, and on the same day, if you can believe that. And this is Olivia Koudelka, I haven’t asked but she’ll just say no, so I don’t think I will ask her. What can I get you ladies to drink? The usual?”

Raine burst out laughing. “Do you make a habit of asking girls to marry you?”

By howled with laughter. Delia giggled, Martya snorted and Olivia hid her mouth with her hand.

Raine looked around at them all. “What did I say?”

Delia linked arms. “Let’s just go powder our noses while the boys are getting the drinks ready and we’ll tell you all about Ivan.”

He was left standing alone with By. “Vorrutyer, what have you done to me? I’m doomed.”

It was a total mystery to Ivan just what it was about powder rooms but the girls all came out ten minutes later the best of friends. Raine wiggled her eyebrows at him as he handed her a drink. Was it going to be ‘let’s score points off that idiot Ivan’ time again?

“It wasn’t me, I didn’t do it and you can’t make me say otherwise. It’s all lies as I’m just an innocent bystander.”

“So you didn’t save the Emperor’s life and rescue a little girl, then?”

“Oh, that. Yes, I did that.” *Ma Kosti* hadn’t made fun of that. It was important to *her*.

“Who wants supper? Pym told me there’s a buffet in the dining room.”
Speaking of Ma Kosti, she had outdone herself for a simple supper, obviously still mourning the lost opportunity with Count Vorhalas. Delia looked at the spread in awe.

“Ma Kosti is famous, Raine. You can see why. Miles found her.”

“How’s Miles?” Raine asked. “Is he one of the Vorkosigans?”

Now that was more like it. Who’s Miles? Ivan was ready to kiss the ground at her feet.

“Lord Auditor Miles Vorkosigan, the Count’s heir. It was his idea you stay here rather than in ImpSec detention. I don’t normally live here, myself, you know. I’m just a guest like you.”

Raine pointed out the obvious. “Not quite like me. You can walk outside the front door.”

That was a bit of a dampener. Martya changed the subject as they all descended on the food to fill up their plates.

“Do you have a job, Raine? I’m looking for one at the moment.”

Raine shrugged. “I write books. They’ve done quite well just recently.”

“Do you use another name? We read a lot of books, don’t we girls?” Martya looked at her sisters. “I’m sure we’d have heard of Valeraine Vorfolse.”

“I have a pseudonym. My publishers just call me ‘A Barrayaran Lady.’”

Martya dropped her plate. Delia looked at Olivia with her eyes popping out of her head. Olivia turned bright red. The three of them screamed.

“No! What, really? Truly? A Barrayaran Lady? Does Ivan know, or By?”

“Ivan doesn’t know what?” he asked, immediately suspicious.

“You’re number one on the Terran best sellers list! And Beta! Kareen sent us the book disks from Beta. They’re even going to open some sort of themed attraction there, aren’t they, on the Orb? I can’t believe we get to meet ‘A Barrayaran Lady’ and Kareen doesn’t. She’ll be so jealous!”

“Does Ivan know what?” Ivan repeated, a little louder. This wasn’t going to go well. He could just tell. He was getting really pissed off with this sort of thing.

Olivia chimed in. “We just have to tell Laisa. She’s read every one of your books. She’d love to meet you, too. It was homework for coming to live on Barrayar, she said. I think she was a bit disappointed when Gregor wasn’t…er…didn’t act just like the hero.”

“Will somebody please tell me what is going on,” Ivan demanded. The lot of them could just go take a wormhole jump to hell.

Delia managed to calm down. “Raine writes books,” she explained.

“I know that.”

“She writes books for ladies.”

“I know that too.” Ivan was beyond exasperated. “What’s so special about the books Raine writes for ladies?”
“She’s really, really famous, except not really. It’s *A Barrayaran Lady* that’s famous.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake! Famous for what?”

Sweet, meek and gentle Olivia told him. “She writes books about the adventures of Lord Vordagger the Long.”

Delia burst into laughter again. “You missed out the best bit.” She put on a really fruity voice. “Lord Vordagger the Long. He of the silver tongue.”

“What?” Ivan looked at By in horror.

“Lord... Vordagger... the Long?” By could hardly force the words out.

“Don’t forget his silver tongue,” Martya was just about rolling on the carpet.

Delia was turning purple. “Laisa said that Gregor doesn’t have a silver tongue, but he’s got quite a nice ordinary one.”

*Laisa Toscane talked to Delia Koudelka about the Emperor’s sex life? And Delia repeated it? Dear gods, wasn’t that treason or something?*

“You write Porn?” Ivan needed a chair. Waleska was toast the next time he saw him. That lecture he’d given him, like an outraged father. ‘She’s lived in a small South Continent town for nearly thirty years. Never been anywhere. I doubt very much she knows how to play your games. She’d be no match for one of your Vor charm offensives yada yada yada’. And she wrote bestselling porn. Ye gods.

Olivia took offence. ‘It’s not ‘porn’. Only sleazy old men and adolescent boys read ‘porn’. Valeraine writes erotic literature, or is that exotic literature? It’s erotic and exotic. When Lord Vordagger the Long met that Cetagandan haut in the Celestial Garden that was pretty exotic. I bet Countess Cordelia has read every one.”

Ivan drew up what dignity he could muster. “I have it on very good authority from my mother that Countess Cordelia is perhaps not the best role model for innocent young Barrayaran girls to follow.”

“Bwawahahaha.” Martya and Delia were weeping with laughter.

Delia choked out, “I bet your mother has read every one as well!”

Martya spluttered, “You ask her.”

Delia shook her head. “No, you ask her.”

“Let’s get Olivia to ask her.”

The most horrendous image of Simon Illyan and his mother leapt unbidden out of nowhere. Ivan could feel the blood draining from his head.

“Oh, help! Look at your face! I’m going to wet myself. Quick, it’s powder room time again.” Martya made a dash. Delia followed her. Olivia was too busy holding her stomach to run, but she staggered quite well.

Ivan looked at Raine.
Raine looked at Ivan.

By helped himself to the devilled oysters.

Raine smiled. “Well, that went well. Shall we have some supper? You were saying something about girls having fun, earlier?”

They did manage to calm down after a while. They even managed to have a civilized conversation or two. Delia and Martya ripped all of By’s fashion advice to shreds in the nicest possible way. Raine told them all, in the nicest possible way, to go take a wormhole jump as she didn’t need advice about what to wear, just where to get it. When they got started on cool and warm colours Ivan just rolled his eyes.

“So what colour does one wear when one is red hot?” he inquired. “I think that would suit Raine the best.”

*Ha! That shut them up.*

It shut them up a bit more when he scuppered their plans to all go shopping the next day, too. He reached across the table to take Raine’s hand. “Raine, we have to wait for General Allegre to give you the all clear. I’m sorry.”

She looked crestfallen. “That’s alright. I’d just forgotten—”

“No, it’s not alright. He’s very cautious at the moment, with all the things that have gone on. There are too many loose ends so he can’t afford to miss anything, but I’ll have another word to him. You won’t be leaving town any time soon, will you?”

He hated to see that look on her face.

Olivia had been thinking. “What if we three go and get some things on approval, and bring them all back here for you to try on? We could still have fun that way. All you need to do is write a list and give us your measurements, or even better, we can take a body scan. Anything you don’t like we could take back. We’ll just send the bill to Miles.”

Ivan gaped. “You can’t do that! He’d kill me. He hasn’t even *met* Raine.”

“Gotcha.”

Olivia was growing up—not.

Raine shook her head. “No, Miles doesn’t have to pay for me. I’ll be right back.”

It didn’t take her long to shoot up the lift tube and back down again with a credit chit. “This should do it. Buy whatever looks right.”

Olivia whooped. “You might be sorry you said that. You don’t know how much we’re going to spend!”

Raine winked. “Theme resort on Beta, don’t forget. I get ten percent.”

At last he sent them all home in Miles’ ground car, with Byerly as escort. By hadn’t forgotten his trophy. He could sniff the dregs or something when he was desperate. Ivan’s head *hurt.* Thank the gods Kareen hadn’t been here as well. The noise would have been unbearable. Perhaps he needed...
another one of Wally’s tablets.

Raine stood just inside the door to wave them off, smiling happily. He hadn’t seen her do much smiling. It looked good on her. Since it was a very short trip to the Koudelka’s house Ivan just waited in the hall for Roic to return and set the security shields for the night. Once the old place was all tucked up the big armsman set off on his rounds and the house sank into a peaceful stillness.

Raine held out her hand. “Want to watch a holovid with me?”

There was an invitation a man couldn’t refuse, under normal circumstances. This was anything but normal, though. What the hell. He could behave himself when he had to. “Why not? Let’s go see what Miles’ taste is like.”

There was a viewer in the library. They ran through the index. After the thirty-fifth galactic fleet battle vid, they had a pretty good idea of what Miles’ taste was like.

Raine got up to switch it off. “We could just talk.”

“Talking is good. You could come over here and talk, if you like.” Ivan held out his arm. “Talking is all I’m good for right now.”

Raine snuggled in to the crook of his arm. “I really must have hurt you yesterday. I have a really bad temper. I’m sorry I did that. It was just a reflex. At least you didn’t chuck me in a dungeon.”

“You got Vorclarence with that move? Good for you. Yes, I was pretty sorry, too, but that’s not the reason.”

“What then?”

“Conflict of interest. I’m in charge of this investigation, theoretically.”

“You have the most beautiful brown eyes.”

“Thank you. Don’t change the subject. Like I said—”

“What’s the matter, Ivan? Do you think I won’t respect you in the morning?”

Very funny. Too close for comfort, though. “You may as well join the club on that one.”

“Oh.” She craned her neck to try and look at his expression. “You think people don’t respect you?”

“You tell me. No, I’ll tell you. I’m just good old Ivan the idiot. I’m trying to do my best here. You saw the way those girls talked to me, no, talked at me. They don’t mean anything, deep down. It’s habit with them, now. They think it’s hilarious, I’m sure. It’s the same thing with Miles. Shit, it’s the same thing with Gregor, except he’s allowed to because I work for him. I’m sitting here telling you I can’t do this and you’re just ignoring me because it’s not what you want. You want something? Good old Ivan, he’ll do it. Well, not this time. Would you like to sit here and talk, or not?”

“I’m sorry, Ivan.” Raine found his hand. “From the way they talked I got the impression you were in the habit of never turning down an opportunity.”

“Perhaps I was like that, once. Well, to be strictly honest I was a lot like that, once. But I don’t want a quick shag any more, and certainly not with you.”
“Ouch!”

Ivan lifted their joined hands and kissed her palm. “Sorry. That came out all wrong. You would be very special to me.”

“You want the deep and meaningfuls? No sex before marriage? It’s a bit late for that, surely? I wouldn’t expect you to marry me, for heaven’s sake!”

He pulled his hand away. “There you go again. I’m going to bed. My bed. Well, the count owns the bed, actually. But I’m not going to end up in the bed you’re sleeping in. For all I know you’re just after fodder for your next adventure.”

Well, that was mature.

“I’m sorry, Raine. I shouldn’t have said that. Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning if you’re up and about.”

“Yes, I suppose you will. It’s not like I’ve got anywhere else to be. Goodnight, My Lord Auditor.”
One easy way to cheer up

Pym came in with the coffee in the morning. Ivan pulled the pillow over his head and groaned. Compared to the last week, he really had nothing to do today. Nobody was trying to blow him up, or shoot at him, or shove him in a tight space underground, or have him die a sickening, writhing death with blood seeping out of every orifice. He didn’t have to go to another funeral until tomorrow. All he had to do was write about a hundred reports and read another five hundred.

Nobody was going to be talking to him, either.

He swallowed his painkiller and his coffee. Life still sucked. “Sod this. Pym, I’m going for a run.” He jumped out of bed and headed for the shower. There was one sure-fire cure for misery. Ten minutes later, dressed in his old workout gear, he took off at an extended jog for his mother’s apartment. A bit of fresh air should clear his head. Jankowski had drawn the short straw, easing into a long lope beside him.

It was still breakfast time when they arrived at Lady Alys’ apartment. Ivan sent Jankowski home with the fare for an autocab.

“Where’s my Miss Sunshine this morning?” he asked, coming up behind Marie in her chair and tickling her.

“My Ivan!” She whirled around and a spoonful of groats and syrup landed in the middle of his sweatshirt. “Oops!”

“Oh, did you say ‘Oops?’” He tossed her in the air. More groats landed on his head.

“Ivan! Stop that! She’ll be sick.”

Still holding the giggling Marie Ivan crossed round the table with the firm intention of kissing his mother good morning. She held up both hands in horror.

“Ivan Xav Vorpatril, don’t you dare! I’m due at the Residence in forty minutes.”

“Aw, mamère, you’re no fun. Is she, Marie?” He tickled the little girl again. “Let’s get you cleaned up, and me cleaned up and go and see some really pretty pictures. Or would you like to go to the zoo, and see the horses and the pterodactyls and the hexapods?”

“We could do both?”

“No, honey, I only have time for one. We’ll save the other one for another day. What would you like to do?”

“Let’s go see the pictures, My Ivan.”

“Okey dokey. You go with Ma McIver and I’ll go this way and I’ll see you in ten minutes.”

He had turned to head for the bathroom when his mother stopped him. “Ivan, I wanted to talk to you about Marie.”

He’d been neglecting Marie. Was he going to be in for a lecture? “Sure, mamère. Can I de-groat first?”
She shuddered a little at the sight. “Perhaps that would be a good idea.”

The hair was easy to fix and the sweats went into the laundry. Ivan found some casual pants and a polo shirt and was back out in five minutes flat.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you if Marie could live here. We love her so much, and she’s settled in so well, and you—you—”

He could feel his whole day sliding down the toilet. “I’m an irresponsible idiot.”

“Oh, no, Ivan. No, you’re not. You’re wonderful with that little girl. You just have such a small apartment. There’s no room for Marie and Ma McIver and everything she should have. You could decorate your spare room for her and she could come over any time you were free. What if you got posted somewhere? We’d never see her.”

“And what would I do if I got posted somewhere? I’d never see her.”

Marie came barreling into the room, all ready for a huge treat.

Lady Alys kissed her goodbye. “We’ll discuss it later. Think about it, Ivan, please.”

He’d rather give her something else to think about. “Don’t forget to call Madame Vorfolse. She’s up and about now. The transfusion Doctor Waleska gave her is doing its job at last.”

Lady Alys was far too old a hand to be distracted like that. “Yes, I must do that, but we have to talk again.”

No, it wasn’t going to ruin his day, and no, his mother was not going to take custody of Marie without a fight. If it came right down to it though, a court would probably rule in favour of mamère. Barrayaran custody laws meant girls went with their mothers, or in this case, female guardian. Shit.

The Imperial Art Gallery was sited one street back from the Great Square. There were three floors of paintings of famous battles and Mad Counts and Emperors, but in one of the side wings there was an exhibition of Old Earth and Old Escobaran landscapes. Ivan couldn’t drag Marie away. She stood rapt in front of a genuine reproduction garden landscape from Old Earth. Ivan read out the title for her; *Pathway in Monet’s Garden in Giverny.* It was only when she noticed another genuine reproduction Monet, *The Japanese (yellow) Bridge* that he could move her at all.

“Oh, My Ivan! They are so beautiful! Look at all the colours!”

Yes, she’d never seen much colour in her little life, had she, unless it was shades of dirty grey. “I’ve just had a wonderful idea, Marie,” he said. “Would you like to go and see some real flowers? There’s a park we could go to. We could have an ice cream.”

“I saw some ice cream, once. It was pink. My Ma was going to get me some pink ice cream for my birthday.”

“Well you can have some pink ice cream today, sweetheart, but only a small one. Ice cream isn’t very healthy.” He bent down to whisper in her ear, “but it tastes fantastic.”

It only cost a few marks to buy a booklet of miniature reproductions of the flower paintings. Marie clutched the bag with a death-grip, scared of losing her treasure. The ice creams were three marks
each, which was a diabolical mark-up, Ivan thought, but less than twenty marks and Marie’s whole world was filled with wonder. *If only it was that easy to wave a magic wand over his own life.* They sat on a bench near a display of Terran hollyhocks, some of them twice Marie’s size, licking ice cream.

“You are such a treasure, Marie. You’ve made me feel a whole lot better today. I was pretty unhappy this morning.”

Marie climbed up on the bench and wrapped her arms round Ivan’s head. One ear got a sticky strawberry kiss and the other had the remains of the cone squished into it. “Don’t be unhappy, My Ivan. I love you.”

Only three hours late for work Ivan sat down in front of Miles’ secure comconsole and brought up the latest ImpSec reports. Karasavas and Vorberg must have been working like slaves down in New Sheffield. Admiral Waleska had sent a few through, too. In total there were forty-three of them. He sighed.

Karasavas deserved another medal. Each report had a summary paragraph first up. Important facts, people and damage reports were highlighted, and each was accompanied by prioritized recommendations. All Ivan really had to do was bullet point each first paragraph into his main report and link to the expanded version in his footnotes. It was a work of art when he finished. The recommendations formed another appendix.

Not all the reports needed action. Some were short biographies of local functionaries and identities. One with a highlight was a name he recognized. Karasavas had included a personal note. *Yeoman Nilesa. Service Record includes General Vorkraft at Sergency base. Transferred to Fleet service area and assigned to prisoner of war reception duties just before Escobar invasion. He mentions cooking stew for Commander Naismith and Captain Vorkosigan.*

Ivan flipped that one onto a tight-beam message to Tante Cordelia. They’d be coming home soon. She might want to meet up with him.

One final thing he had to do that morning was talk to General Allegre. He put through a contact request and in about twenty minutes the comconsole chimed. Allegre looked a lot less harried than he had done the last time Ivan had seen him. He didn’t look too intimidating, either. In fact, Allegre was never going to be as intimidating as he was before Ivan had seen him stark naked scrambling into a bio-suit liner.

“Good morning, General. I’m finalising reports on the New Sheffield incident. I’d like to have your permission to allow Madame and Mademoiselle Vorfolse to be released from home detention here. There are no links to subversive activity that we’ve been able to find.”

“Very well, Vorpatril, I’ll send through permission directly. By the way, I do have a very curious report of Count Vorhalas visiting Vorkosigan House I wanted to ask you about.”

“Oh yes, that sir. Just before the news of the bio-hazard alert you may remember telling me the death threats were a private matter. I sorted them out to both parties’ satisfaction.”

“You got Count Vorhalas to visit Vorkosigan House?”

“Yes, General, that’s right. We drank a bottle of best Vorkosigan Red and he ate pickled cucumbers.”
“You’re wasted, Vorpatril. We should transfer you to the Diplomatic Corps.”

Ivan laughed. “No, thank you, sir. I’m happy at Ops.”

“I’ll be including this in my morning briefing with the Emperor. He may have some questions for you.”

“Very well, sir. I’ll be seeing His Majesty tomorrow.”

Allegre nodded farewell and cut the com. That left him with a bit of a dilemma. In fact, he had no idea what to do. He went in search of Pym and ran him to ground in the kitchen.

“Ah, Pym, there you are! Good afternoon, Ma Kosti. Thank you for that wonderful supper last night, and I’m sorry about Count Vorhalas.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, my lord. He went off happy, Pym tells me.”

“He went off satisfied. I don’t think he’s ever going to be happy.”

She shook her head. “Poor man. Satisfied with cucumbers. Now what can I get for you, my lord? Some chicken salad?”

_Huh?_

“Have the ladies had lunch, Ma Kosti?”

“Yes, my lord, an hour ago.”

He felt a stab of disappointment. “Anything will be fine, thank you. Chicken salad sounds wonderful.”

“Were you looking for me, my lord?” Pym asked. “All you need to do is press your wristcom and ask for me.”

_You idiot, Ivan._ “I need to get used to that, don’t I?”

“Yes, my lord. Now, what was it you needed to see me about?”

“The ladies, Pym. General Allegre is sending through a release order, so they’ll be free to go.”

“I’m sure they’ll be very happy to hear that.”

“Yes, but go where? The Koudelkas are out shopping for Mademoiselle Valeraine and expect her to be here when they get back.”

“Ah, I see the problem. I don’t think Lord Vorkosigan would throw them out on the street. I’m sure they are welcome to stay for a few more days until they can make plans.”

“Would you let them know, please, Pym?”

The armsman gave him a look. That wasn’t going to work.

“No?”

Pym leaned over to whisper. “No. You’re going to have to talk to her sometime.”

“It’s that obvious?”
“Oh yes, my lord. Classic. Right down to the morning run.”

There was a pause. Having made his point Pym turned to other matters.

“Tomorrow, my lord, the ground car will be at the front for you at 0930. House blacks. We have your Vorpatril blacks here for you. We pick up Lady Alys, Captain Illyan and Miss Marie at 1000. In place 1030, Emperor arrives 1045, service commences 1100. Reception is at the Residence 1200. At your command following that.”

Ma Kosti interrupted. “Now you go on up to the small salon, my lord, and I’ll serve your lunch there.”

‘Chicken salad’ was such a misnomer that Ivan didn’t bear to think what he’d get if he’d asked for cheese on toast. Succulent, roasted chicken with pieces of a soft moist golden yellow fruit, little curved nuts, green, red and yellow vegetables made a rainbow of colours on his plate. It tasted even better than it looked and that surely was impossible.

When he’d eaten as much as he possibly could and answered every comconsole message there was no way he could put it off any longer. He went in search of Raine. It was a bit odd that he couldn’t find her. Not in her room or her mother’s room, not in any of the small salons and not in the library. Perplexed, he finally remembered to call Pym on his wristcom.

“The ladies are in the ballroom my lord. All six of them, seven if you count my Aurie who was also invited and I think very kind of them.”

“The ballroom? How much shopping did they do?”

“Enough, my lord. The ground car made two trips to get it all home.”

Good gods, if Miles’ battlewagon wasn’t big enough to get it all home in one go he didn’t really want to think about it.

They’d gone to a bit of trouble in the ballroom, or Pym and Jankowski had. The red carpet normally used for the front steps on Gala evenings was laid down the centre of the room. The screens usually shielding the servers’ entrance to the kitchens had been pulled over to hide a makeshift dressing area, and Ivan caught just a glimpse of the sturdy metal racks used in the cloakrooms, with a variety of garments and accessories. Several of the gold upholstered spindle leg chairs were drawn up alongside the carpet.

A youngish lady, maybe about sixteen or seventeen years old leapt to her feet when he entered. Madame Vorfolse, Madame Koudelka, Delia and Martya sat in eager anticipation.

“You must be Aurie,” Ivan smiled at the young girl. Please sit down. Don’t mind me.”

She dropped him a short curtsey. “Thank you my lord. This is so exciting. Miss Koudelka and Miss Martya and Miss Olivia have been to Estelle’s.”

His dear lady mother shopped at Estelle’s. That was probably his entire year’s salary on those racks behind the screen.

Ivan crossed over to greet Drou Kouldelka with a kiss and a hug. She was one of his favourite people and he hadn’t seen her for ages.

“Ivan! You look well.” She kissed him back. “I was so afraid for you both when I saw the vids. Kou was sure you must have been seriously hurt. We’re so glad you’re recovering.”
“Check this out, Tante.” He parted his hair to show her the crescent-moon shaped wound behind his left ear. “And I had nobody to kiss it better.”

She promptly obliged.

Was it a Vor thing, not to hug your children? Tante Drou was really good with hugs, just like Tante Cordelia. He always lined up for a hug when she came home. Run a mile from the advice if you hadn’t died of horror or embarrassment first, but the hugs were always worth it. He was going to hug Marie every single day. She’d know exactly how much she was loved.

Delia looked a bit conscious stricken. “I never even asked you how you were last night, Ivan. I’m sorry, I don’t know how I could have forgotten, when we all saw those vids and cried for you.”

There was no use holding grudges. “Oh, that’s alright, Delia. Everyone was more concerned about Gregor. Hell, I was more concerned about Gregor, and Marie, the little girl.”

He gave her a hug too, for old times’ sake, and besides, hugging any of the Koudelkas was good fun. Well, maybe not Kou. Martya just gave him a ‘don’t you dare’ look.

Olivia stuck her head round the screen. “Oh, Ivan, that is you. We thought it might have been Pym back for something. Are you joining us? It should be quite a show.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Ivan found himself another chair and sat next to Aurie. “How’s school?” he asked to be sociable.

She pulled a face. “Five space maths. Total nightmare.”

“They teach that in High School now?” He was shocked. “I struggled with that at the Academy.”

Olivia appeared again. “Shhh. We’re starting. Ladies and Gentleman, sit back and enjoy our showing of the Vorkosigan House Midsummer range.”

Raine appeared in her first outfit, a traditional High Vor flared skirt and embroidered bolero jacket over a high-necked blouse. It was a dark cream colour with gold and yellow embroidery. She sashayed down the red carpet, hand on hip and pointing her toes. She saw Ivan watching her with his mouth open and gave him a saucy wink.

“Keep it or toss it?” she inquired.

“Oh, I’d keep that one, but I wouldn’t mind a bit if you decided to toss it right now.”

“She can’t toss that one, my lord,” Aurie broke in. “She looks fantastic.”

*Oops. Behave yourself, Ivan. No corrupting minors.*

Olivia came out next while Raine changed, and then Raine in a Komarran outfit, loose, wide trousers and a short, boxy jacket in amber. By the time he’d seen about fifteen outfits Ivan started to feel a bit boggled.

Olivia returned wearing an elegant white evening dress with a beige lace overskirt.

“Mama, Raine bought this one for me. We all got one, even Kareen.”

Drou looked shocked. “Olivia, you can’t do that! That’s far too generous. It will have to go back.”

Raine stuck her head round the screen this time. All Ivan could see was skin. Did she have nothing
on behind there?

“It’s absolutely my pleasure, Madame Koudelka,” she said. “I haven’t had this much fun in years, and what’s the point of having money if you can’t spend it on the things you really want to do?”

Drou didn’t have anything more to say just then, but Ivan just bet she’d have plenty to say once they’d got home.

Olivia looked stunning. It would be a crime to make her take that one back.

After a parade up and down and a twirl or two Olivia announced, “And now for our pièce de résistance, That Barrayaran Lady herself, Mademoiselle Valeraine Vorfolse in her Komarran tribute to our Empress to be!”

Raine walked out in the most stunning deep red pants and jacket suit with a low cut shimmering gold blouse underneath. Orange, gold and amber flames licked up from the ankles and wrists to dance like fire around her. She stopped in front of Ivan. “Is this red hot enough for you?”

Ohhhhh gods was he in trouble. Resolutions went out the window in a flash. His mouth felt dry, his blood rushed somewhere he hoped desperately young Aurie sitting beside him didn’t notice and he drew in a rapid, raggedy, catching breath. Raine was watching his expression for a reaction and he saw the exact moment her eyes flared with an answer to the desire he could no longer hide.

Time for action. He stood up, took her hand and twirled her around like a dance floor move, only stopping when Raine stood between him and the others. Hiding in plain sight, he thought it was called.

He leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Witch! Have you got any idea what I want to do with you?”

She leaned back slightly to press against him. “No, but I can guess it’s probably a lot like what I want to be doing with you.”
Drou Koudelka broke the spell. “I take it that one’s your favourite, Ivan?”

He looked around at the sound of the voice and stepped back a pace. He needed a few deep breaths. _Where was he? Oh, the ballroom. Vorkosigan House. Six women watching him._

“I didn’t see a single one I thought should go back, but this one is drop dead gorgeous, isn’t it? Anyway, the reason I came in an hour and a half ago was to tell Madame Vorfolse and Raine that General Allegre has released you both from house detention. You’re invited to stay here for a few days while you decide what you want to do and where you want to go. I think all the girls would love you to stay in town, Raine, at least for a while. There are going to be lots of social activities with the Council of Counts session starting soon, and the wedding of course. Plus we have that invitation to Vorhalas House.”

He finally ran out of breath.

“What?” Martya leapt up from her chair. “You got invited to _Vorhalas House_ and didn’t tell us? How could _that_ possibly happen?”

Raine didn’t seem to get what the fuss was about. “Count Vorhalas came to see us yesterday afternoon and invited Maman, me, Ivan and Byerly Vorrutyer to dinner.”

Drou looked like she’d been hit with a poleaxe. She actually turned white. “That’s impossible. He hasn’t been here in over thirty years. Not since Carl was executed.”

“Well, Ivan even invited him to stay to dinner but he said he couldn’t do that. He told us we should go to his house, instead. Didn’t he, Maman?”

Aceline nodded in agreement. “He did. He was very gracious. It’s the first time I’ve ever met him. So if it’s really all right, Ivan, yes, we would like to stay here for a few more days. I think we’ll be staying in Vorbarr Sultana now that…well, now that we can stay if we want to. We need to look around for an apartment.”

“My lady mother would be the best person to talk to about that,” Ivan told her. “She knows all the best places to live. She’d like to call, Madame Vorfolse, now that you’re feeling better. I spoke to her this morning. I might bring her back after the funeral if that’s convenient for you.”

Raine snorted. “Now that we’re not suspected assassins, you mean?”

Trust her to take him up the wrong way.

“That as well. Do you need some help tidying up in here?”

Aurie, who had been sitting in awestruck wonder from the first moment, jumped up to volunteer. “Oh, let me. I’d love to pack everything up.”

Raine shook her head. “You can come and watch, Aurie, but Olivia and Martya know where everything goes. I know what you _can_ do, though.”
Raine went behind the screen and came back with a pretty red and gold scarf. “You can have this. It’s really going to suit your coloring.”

Aurie blushed deep scarlet. “Oh, ma’am, I couldn’t take anything that beautiful. It must be very expensive.”

Nonsense. All the girls got something pretty, so we can’t leave you out, can we? I’d really like you to have it.”

Aurie took the scarf and held it up. “Oh, it’s so gorgeous. I’ll have to ask my Da and my Ma, but even if they say no, thank you very much for the thought. I love it!”

She fled to show her Da, completely forgetting she was going to help tidy up.

Ivan pressed his wristcom. “I’ll have a quick word to Pym.” He waited for the armsman’s response. “Pym, when Aurie gets to you, just say yes. Don’t break her heart.”

There was a pause. “If you say so, my lord, I know I can trust you. It’s not wise to say yes in advance, as that sort of thing can be dangerous, especially with youngsters.”

When Ivan moved to escort Madame Vorfolse and Drou to the library for some refreshments, Raine held him back for a moment. “I think all the girls would love you to stay in town?” What was that supposed to mean? You want to get rid of me?”

He’d said that, hadn’t he, gabbling nervously trying to get control of himself. He ventured a smile. “I would love you to stay in town, Raine, but once you’re out and about you’ll have the choice of more Vor than you can poke a stick at.”

“So I can check out my options? Or you can get rid of me?”

She flounced off in something very nearly approaching a huff; going to get changed again while the others packed and sorted the wardrobe. A bit of space was probably a good idea. He’d nearly lost the plot with her just then. He had to get this assignment wound up and that chain returned to Gregor. He might even talk to him tomorrow, after the funeral. There couldn’t be anything left that he needed to do, surely? Karasavas had everything well under control. Ivan invited Drou and the girls to stay to dinner, but she refused for them all, as they were going out to dinner with Kou that evening with some old friends.

There wouldn’t be anyone to buffer him from the wrath to come.

Dinner was a bit of a frosty affair, to put it mildly. Aceline tried her best with lots of unexceptional conversation starters. Ivan’s manners and his mother’s training wouldn’t let him be unresponsive, but he knew he was poor company. Raine never said a word directly to him, saving her charm for her mother and armsman Jankowski who served the meal. They didn’t linger over dessert, as it was all too awkward. Miles would just be loving this if he were a fly on the wall. This would have been one of the most uncomfortable dinners Vorkosigan House had ever seen! He’d be rolling under the table with laughter at the hash Ivan was making of things, kidding him about his charm or lack thereof. He just couldn’t let this go on.

As they got up from the table he ventured one last try. “Raine, could I talk to you, please?”

She frowned at him. “We already did that.”

“Please.” He hazarded taking her hand, staying well clear of that lethal knee just in case.
She looked from their hands to his face and back again. “Maman, would you excuse us, please? Ivan would like to talk to me.”

Aceline smiled at them. “Of course. I’ll see you upstairs.”

“Let’s sit down.” Ivan towed her off to the small salon near the library. He called up the lights, not too bright, not too intimate. Should he sit next to her on the sofa, or separately in the armchairs?

_For fuck’s sake, what was wrong with him?_ He hadn’t been this useless with a girl since he was fifteen years old down at Vorkosigan Surleau. He chose the sofa, angling to lean back against the arm where he could see her profile, or she could choose to turn and look him full in the face.

“I’ve made you angry, and I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to make things right with you, Raine. I so need things to be right between us.”

He kissed the hand he still held. When she made no answer for the moment, he went on. “What is it you want from me?”

She did turn to look at him, then, her expression closed, but was that sadness? What had he done to make her sad?

“Ivan, what I want is that valiant heart who squeezed himself down a chimney into a dungeon to rescue me, even though closed spaces under ground terrify him. I want the man who would give me his jacket when he was cold himself. I want the man who would risk his own life to save my mother, but wanted me out of danger first. I want _you_, Ivan, but you’re too scared of me to do _anything_. And you know _you_ want _me_.”

His body was trembling. He could feel it. “I’m not scared of _you_, Raine, well maybe just a little bit. Another knee like that and I’d be good to no one. I’m scared of _me_.”

She looked confused. “That doesn’t make sense. I don’t know _what_ to think of you. You’re not the man those Koudelka girls warned me about, the consummate Vor around town, light-hearted and flippant and love-you-and-leave you at a breath of commitment.”

“I used to be all of that, you know. Just two weeks ago I was all of that. But you, you’ve changed everything in my life. You leave me breathless. You leave me without the use of my wits. I open my mouth and all the wrong things come out. You are gorgeous; you have such strength. You’re clever and so generous. I think…I’m probably not good enough for you, and I’ve never thought that way about myself before. You…and this _kills_ me to say it, you have no idea…you’d make a marvelous wife for my cousin Miles. If you married him you’d be a countess someday. Hell, you deserve better than a countess, even. You’re magnificent enough to be an empress!”

He stopped, looking down at his feet. “I want the very best for you, I want you to have everything you ever wanted but I’m just middle of the road mediocre Ivan.”

“I see. So you’re not good enough and I should marry your cousin Miles and live in this house and be a countess one day? Too bad the Emperor is taken? How about Byerly Vorrutyer? Is he better than you are, too?”

“Shit, no.” Startled, Ivan looked back into her face. She was laughing at him again. “By is…By is, well he’s just By. But I promise you, you _can_ do better than that.”

“OK, so I have to go out there and find someone better than you. Can I please have something to compare ‘them’ with?”
Now what?

“What would that be?”

Raine slid over and put an arm around his waist. “You can at least kiss me, you idiot.”

That he could do. With his free hand he reached up to run his knuckles down her hairline, past her ear and along the line of her jaw. He tipped her head up, just a little, and then reached his hand around to cradle her cheek in his palm. He eased his fingers round to the back of her head in another smooth caress and bent down to touch his lips to hers. She tasted of everything wonderful. She tasted of soft, precious warmth and he wanted more. He wanted to sink into the absence of thinking, to just do, and be there with her.

She made a soft, strangled noise deep in her throat and leaned into his kiss. Her arm around his waist tightened with urgency to bring him closer.

Some magician waved a wand as he was somehow lying on the couch with her on top of him, feeling her curves along the whole length of his body. He broke the kiss at last to nestle her head into his shoulder. There was no breath in his body. He sucked in a ragged lungful of air and then another.

Oh shit, was he done for!

To hell with Miles. He could find his own countess. And if that Byerly Vorrutyer tried one wrong move by the gods he’d wish he’d never been born!

What had happened to her hair? Had he taken the pins out without even noticing or caring? He raked his fingers through the falls of silk as they tumbled over her shoulders. It smelled of summer.

“Raine.” He kissed her ear, sliding just the very tip of his tongue along the curving length.

She turned her head back to face him, her mouth finding his again. At last they broke away.

“That should give you a bit of a base line to work from,” he whispered. “What do you think?”

“Think?” She pulled back a bit to look down into his eyes. “You expect me to think after that? What I think, Ivan Xav, is that Martya was right and you’ve had a bit of practice. You could open the Vorpatril School of Kissing.”

Everything was suddenly all right again. He laughed, burying his face into her hair again before responding. “One of my many talents. Honed in the Celestial Garden, don’t you know? You’re not so bad yourself, just by the way.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“You’ve actually been to the Celestial Garden? I’ll have to pick your brains. Not now, though. I don’t have any brains right at the minute. Or bones, come to that.”

Raine lay back down again and snuggled herself in to him. The movement was torture. Ivan felt a sweat break out. Down, boy.

“So have we done enough talking? We could just lie here and enjoy the view.”

It was her turn to lick his ear and take a little, nibbling bite at the lobe. “We could do something else entirely?”

How was he supposed to withstand that?

“Play Tacti-Go? Watch a vid?”
She heaved a deep, deep sigh. “You’re a man of iron, Ivan. I know. I can feel it.”

They lay a while longer. Ivan confined himself to just a gentle, sweeping caress or two along the curve of her back, stopping just short of the flare of her buttock. No sense torturing himself with *that*, even if it would be the sweetest torture known to man.

He took her upstairs eventually, leaving her at her bedroom door.

Cold shower time. Long, cold, cold shower time.
The curator of the Imperial Museum at Vorhartung Castle woke in terror. Barely visible in the pre-dawn gleam of silver light three massive men dressed all in black loomed over his bed. The first reached down to wrench him from the covers with one powerful fist to the neck of his nightshirt. “Come with me,” he said, “and bring your keys.”

The curator knew that voice...

Pym didn’t have the painkillers on the tray with his wake up cup of coffee. He set the tray on the bedside table and handed Ivan the cup. “Fancy a run this morning, my lord?”

Ivan couldn’t see anything in his bland features, but he obviously knew just exactly what had gone on last night. Security cameras in the salon? Probably. Well, Pym was the one who’d advised him to talk to her. He couldn’t be surprised at the outcome. Ivan stretched. “No, Pym, I don’t think so. I left my workout gear at m’mother’s apartment. Other things to do this morning, anyway.”

“As you wish, my lord. I’ll run your shower for you. Your house blacks are ready. I’ve included a few extra handkerchiefs.”

He hadn’t even thought of handkerchiefs himself, yet. Of course he’d need an extra one or two. Armsmen just seemed to have that intuition, either that or the most impressive handbook ever devised.

Ivan hummed to himself a little as he slapped on the depilatory cream and soaped up. It might be grim, later, but right at the moment all that filled his head was memories of last night. Some days were better than others, after all. By 0900 he ventured out of his room to see if Raine was awake yet. The doors were all closed still, with no sign of maids about. Perhaps she was still asleep. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He tapped softly at her door. If she were still asleep that wouldn’t wake her up.

Raine opened the door a few inches, and then pulled it back further when she saw it was him. She wore a scarlet silk dressing gown crossed over at the front and tied with a loose belt, leaving a generous view of her cleavage. Her glorious hair rippled down over her shoulders, still alluringly mussed from her night’s sleep. She took a good look at him, up and down his well-tailored Vorpatril black house uniform. Her eyes widened. She fanned herself with her hand. “Phew. Good morning! Has anyone ever told you you’re a looker, Ivan Vorpatril? Definite eye-candy material. Do you want to come in?”

“I’d love to come in,” he stayed where he was, “but I’m leaving in less than half an hour for Madame Watson’s funeral. I didn’t want to go without saying goodbye.”

She pouted. “Spoilsport. Just a kiss, then?”

He put his hands on her waist. “I think a kiss would be wonderful.”

The satin clung to her shape like a second skin. He pulled her closer, groaning at the feel of her
softly yielding breasts against his chest. Heaven itself couldn’t be much better than this. He didn’t say much else until his wristcom beeped. “Damn. Gotta go. See you when I get back? What have you got planned?”

Raine had been breathing quite heavily. She sighed as he pulled away. “Oh, I don’t know. I might invite By around for a comparison test, or I might just do some work. I’ve got a new book in the pipeline. It’s due out soon. What do you think?”

He turned her around and steered her firmly back into her bedroom. “Work. Lots and lots of work.”

All three Vorkosigan armsmen were lined up this time in their black uniforms, immaculate, imposing and intimidating. Roic and Jankowski slid into the driver’s cabin and Pym sat in the rear with Ivan. Promptly at 0930 the ground car passed out of the gates and into the morning traffic.

Christos had organized a space for them to park outside Lady Alys’s building. Ivan hopped out with Pym to go and find Marie. She was ready for him, sitting very still and quiet in her rocking chair, wearing her white dress and bolero, but with black ribbons in her hair. His mother’s touch, that one. Ivan would have let her wear any colour she wanted. He just hoped these weren’t the same ones she’d worn before.

Marie held a drawing in her hand. She was very careful not to crumple it when he went down on one knee to wrap his arms around her. “Mamie said I should make something special for Ma, to burn for her offering. What do you think, My Ivan? Ma liked colours, too.”

Ivan looked at her version of Monet’s Garden. The perspective was a bit off and some of the blobs were a bit the wrong size, but the colours were all there and it was definitely recognizable as a copy. She’d done a brilliant job. Ivan showed it to Pym. He had a hard job talking. “What do you think, Pym?”

“That’s just wonderful, Miss Marie. Your Ma is very proud of her little girl today. May I hold it while Lord Ivan carries you? I think he’d like a big hug this morning.”

Simon and Lady Alys came to join them. Simon wore a neat black suit and carried a large bag. His mother wore a black dress with black and grey embroidery on the jacket. They only exchanged subdued greetings and didn’t linger for social niceties. It was a somber group who all fitted into the ground car. Christos, guarding Simon’s bag, sat in the front with Roic and Jankowski, Pym and Simon Illyan in the backward facing seats and Ivan and his mother in the forward facing ones with Marie between them.

The drive to the Imperial Service Cemetery gates was lined with guardsmen, all presenting to the salute as the chief mourners drove past. It was a nice touch. Ivan pointed out the soldiers to Marie. They didn’t have their big terrifying hats on, just their regular dress greens with neat caps. Had Gregor thought of that one, or had Lady Alys passed the word not to scare Marie?

There were a few faces he recognized already waiting at the graveside as they arrived. Admiral Waleska was there for one, with some of the other staff from the infirmary, and also a detachment from the Kanzian, including her captain, Commodore Vorkalloner. They all shook hands, gravely bowing over Marie’s tiny fingers. She looked up at them all and started to tremble. Ivan picked her up and sat her on his hip. “Here you go, sweetheart. You can see better here while we all wait for the Emperor, and I’ve got you safe and sound. Once he gets here we can start.”

At one point Admiral Waleska stood directly behind Ivan. In the short lull while they were all
being settled he leaned back and whispered. “I’ve got a bit of a bone to pick with you. I’ll speak to you later.”

There were people there from New Sheffield. Ivan suspected Karasavas at work on that one. There were three families he didn’t recognize, possibly from the other apartments on her floor. Marie knew them. She relaxed again, smiling and waving at an old man she pointed out as Barnie.

The coffin sat on a bier beside the open grave, the hole covered by a green carpet of artificial grass that would roll back for the interment. Simon, Lady Alys, Ivan and Marie all sat down to wait for the signal that Gregor had arrived, leaving the first chair vacant for the Emperor.

They didn’t have very long to wait. Pym, Roic and Jankowski took three paces back as the Vorbarra armsmen marched in. Ivan, Alys and Simon rose to their feet. Simon and Ivan bowed; Alys curtsied as he walked past. Dressed in his Vorbarra House blacks at first glance he looked very similar to Ivan, if leaner. Marie looked from him to Ivan and back again. She pulled on Ivan’s hand. “Who’s that man, My Ivan?”

“That’s Emperor Gregor, Marie. You saw him in the hospital, remember?” Trying to get her to relax, he gave her a wink. Her eyes widened in fear. What an idiot. Last time he did that to her all hell broke loose seconds after. “Don’t worry, honey, everything is fine. You’re safe. We’ll look after you.”

Gregor heard what Ivan said and saw her distress. Arriving at his seat, he leaned down to take her other hand. “You hang on to us, sweetie. We’ve got you, Marie. You’re safe with us.”

The ceremony was quite brief. Gregor only said a few words. “We gather here today to say farewell to Madame Anna Watson. She lived an exemplary life as a wife and mother, sacrificed her husband in the service of the Imperium and herself met her death as another innocent bystander as Our enemies constantly seek to do evil. We promise that her child, Marie, will be raised with love as she herself would have wished. And we further promise Marie, and the other innocents of Barayar, that We will protect them," his voice sank to a menacing whisper, "and avenge them.”

As the coffin was lowered into the ground Marie just watched in utter silence. Gerard came forward with the brazier. He set it up a short distance in front of Marie, adding some oak and apple wood shavings from Vorclarence district. Ivan took the small knife Gerard offered him and knelt down beside Marie. “Can you do this yourself, sweetheart, or would you like me to cut some of your hair?”

She took the knife from him, holding it carefully. “No, My Ivan, I had a practice with Papi Simon yesterday. I can do it.”

She carefully sliced a small black curl. Handle first, she offered the knife to Gregor. Gravely he cut an offering and added his hair to the brazier, handing off the knife to Ivan, Alys, Simon and Admiral Waleska, who was the witness to Anna’s death.

Pym stepped forward with the picture. Marie looked at it for a second or two and then added it to the top of the little pile. Gerard lit a taper and handed it to Marie. With Ivan’s hand on top of hers and Gregor’s hand holding them both, they lit the flames. The scent of the apple wood drifted over them. As her painting flared and burned yellow and scarlet Marie’s tears began to fall.

Gregor was quicker than Ivan with his handkerchief. “Don’t cry, precious,” he said, his own voice strangely husky. He picked her up for the briefest of hugs before handing her over to Ivan. The two men stood shoulder to shoulder until the flames at last died away. “Let’s get her out of this,” Gregor said. “You come with me. Simon and Alys can follow in the Vorkosigan vehicle.”
When the three of them reached the Imperial ground car Gerard ushered them in and then dimmed the glass to full opacity as they drew away out of the cemetery grounds past the spectators and the press. The crowds were disappointed.

“Vultures,” Gregor spat out.

Marie hadn’t stopped crying. Ivan dug out one of his own clean hankies and replaced Gregor’s damp one. She tried to talk through her hiccupping sobs. “My picture… my picture. It’s all burned up.”

Little darling. She could cry for her picture. She had held in most of the emotion about her mother. That was too painful for her.

Gregor spoke to his armsman. “Go direct to the private entrance, Gerard. We’ll take her up to my apartment. Laisa’s there.” He turned to Ivan and shrugged. “We can wash her face and give her a cold drink. I don’t think there’s anything else we can really do, unless we get Waleska to give her a sedative.”

Gerard had been listening to a conversation on his wrist com. He talked to them on the intercom. “Captain Illyan requests you wait for him, Your Majesty. He says he has Steggy with him.”

“Steggy! Of course.” Ivan breathed a sigh of relief. “You haven’t met Steggy, have you, Gregor? Simon is still one very smart man. Thank goodness somebody thought about Steggy.”

With Laisa to give her a big cuddle, her face and hands washed and her hair combed out again, Steggy clutched fiercely under one arm, Marie at last calmed down. She still had the odd hiccup in her breath. Laisa joined them as they headed into the small reception. Ivan set Marie down on her feet. She looked around. “Can I go talk to Barnie, My Ivan? He lives next to our apartment. Ma cooks dinner for him sometimes.”

“Sure, honey. Off you go. We’ll be there shortly.”

Gregor and Ivan did the rounds, spending most of their time with the overawed New Sheffield contingent. After bowing to the Emperor, Barnie gave Ivan a not-so-friendly scrutiny. He obviously wasn’t too impressed. “I hope you’re going to look after my little girl. You’d better see she goes to a good school. Her Ma would have wanted that. You mind you keep her safe. I’ve heard what some of you Vor get up to with young girls.”

Gregor gave Ivan a look and moved on, leaving him to his fate. How to answer this one? He’d been accused of being lazy, feckless, unambitious, stupid, a fool, a drunkard, a womanizer and an idiot, but he couldn’t ever remember being accused of being a pedophile before. Still, this man only had Vorclarence’s behaviour as a benchmark. From everything else he’d seen Ivan wouldn’t have put that past him, either.

“I’ll introduce you to my mother, Lady Alys, sir. Marie is currently living with her until all the arrangements are finalized. You can rest assured we’re all taking the greatest care of her. Her welfare is our chief concern.”

“Hmpf.” He was slightly mollified. “Thank you. I’ll see what she looks like. She’d better not be an old Vor dragon. Take me to her and let me see. I’d look after Marie myself; her Ma was a lovely woman, but I’m too old. She needs a proper father and a mother. You married?”

Ivan shook his head. “Not yet, sir. I am working on it, though.”

Barnie looked him up and down. “I can believe that.”
Finally guests began to leave. One of Gregor’s aides took the visitors back to the guesthouse where they were staying overnight. Commodore Vorkalloner and his men departed, leaving only Ivan’s party and the Infirmary staff. Ivan had a few words to Wally. “You’ll be pleased to hear Madame Vorfolse is looking very much better. Almost back to her old self, Raine tells me.”

Waleska looked slightly guarded. “Thank you. I spoke to her this morning. I hoped to call at Vorkosigan House this evening, to sign off on my treatment. I’m going back to New Sheffield with the visitors in the morning to finish the handover to the permanent crew. I’ll be moving back to town.” He paused. “And if Aceline is amenable, I hope to make her a closer acquaintance, once I’m not responsible for her treatment.”

“Aha! I knew it!” Ivan took Wally by the arm and turned him away from the remaining guests. “Do you have any idea what Raine does for a living? Warning me to be careful of her tender feelings? You go take a look in any bookshop for ‘A Barrayaran Lady’. Come round for dinner tonight and tell me what you find out. You may be in for a bit of a surprise.”

Gregor was making his farewells to Marie. Ivan stopped to hurry over. “Gregor! Don’t go yet. I wanted to see you about returning that damned Auditor’s chain. I want to get back behind my nice safe desk before anything else has me working my butt off again. I need a rest.”

Gregor gave him a look. “Sorry, Ivan. That report you sent in was excellent, and gives Us exactly what we need to know about New Sheffield so We can brief the new count. But you know what they say about a job well done?”

“I’m not going to like this, am I? I’m going to get another job. But it was Karasavas who did all the work, and Vorberg. They deserve the credit. I just want a quiet life.”

Gregor wasn’t going to be dissuaded. “No, you’re the man for the job. I haven’t told Waleska yet, either. I’m sending you both out tomorrow to tour Rotherhall and Prestwich. Hopefully they’re not in as bad a state as New Sheffield. Their facilities are intact, at least, but I need a briefing before the new session at Vorhartung Castle. The replacement count is the first item on the agenda and he needs to know what he’s getting himself into. It’s only a month away and I want no loose ends left before the wedding. I happen to know your mother is going to be needing your help quite soon on that, so I want this done now. There’s no time to spare.”

“Tomorrow? I can’t go tomorrow, Gregor! I’ve been invited to take Raine, Mademoiselle Vorfolse that is, sorry, to visit Count Vorhalas and his wife at Vorhalas House!”

Gregor's eyes turned as cold and hard as steel. “Can’t be done, Ivan. We apologise if We've ruined your social calendar but our priorities seem to differ, don’t they? I'm leaving here now to go to the emergency sitting of the Council of Counts and Ministers. Marie's mother and father have been murdered. You saw that holovid. You saw what that dog-begotten family had planned for Barrayar. Bio-weapons. On Our planet.”

The rage simmered. Gregor was seething. What sort of iron will had allowed him to comfort Marie so tenderly a scant hour ago? Ivan felt like crawling into a corner. All he'd been thinking of was Byerly Vorruuyer getting Raine all to himself, leading her on his arm up the stairs to dinner with Count Vorhalas, and who knew what else after that, while he was buried in the backwaters of Vorclarence district. Gregor...Gregor had the hot light of murder in his eyes.

He stood to attention. “At your command, sire.”

*I'm sorry, Marie. Just when you need me, I'm leaving again.*
The grumbling and muttering in the Council Chamber at Vorhartung Castle died away as the Guardian of the Speaker’s Circle marched out, whey-faced and silent. The room was packed for this emergency joint sitting. There were only three vacant benches, those of Vorkosigan, Vorrutyer and Vorclarence. The ministers fitted in behind and between, with Prime Minister Racozy well to the front.

The Guardian gave three blows with the butt of his spear. “Sergeant at arms! Clear the chamber of those not on the Muster Roll, and seal the doors!”

There had only been a scattering of hopeful spectators in the visitors’ gallery, but these were soon ushered out. Ministers’ aides and self-appointed confidential advisers who’d thought to remain were persuaded to change their minds by the looming menace of the Council officers.

In a dead silence that made it unnecessary for the Guardian to call them to order again, nearly a hundred men awaited their Emperor. The door behind the dais opened. In pairs, unarmed, a file four deep of the Vorbarra arsmen marched out and fanned around the camp stool in a double rank, offset so that the rear rank stood behind the shoulders of the two men in front of him. There was a gasp, and then shocked silence at the sight of them. They did not wear their ceremonial liveries but a dull, dappled black combat dress, with no insignia, alike and yet unalike those that Imperial shock troops wore.

A short pause, and then the Emperor of three worlds strode out, his remaining four arsmen behind him. He did not sit on the campstool, but rather stood at the front edge of the raised area, where everyone could see. Gregor Vorbarra wore the same dress; there was nothing to distinguish him from his men, apart from the aura of incandescent rage that charged the air around him. Armsman Gerard, standing slightly behind his right shoulder, carried an ancient lance, its pennon of black silk and tarnished silver tissue tattered and stained. Two more of his men carried a cryosealed casket.

There were no polite preambles. His voice reached to the far ends of the room, and yet he did not shout. “War has been declared on the subjects of the Barrayaran Imperium, a war so foul and base no man here could imagine in the deepest reaches of his spirit. In this casket lies the death of Barrayar. I do not expect you to take my word for this. My Lord Guardian, play the recording.”

On the huge holovid screen behind the campstool, with the sound turned high and the colour vivid, the recording taken from Vorclarence’s pocket was played to the room. The child's pitiful cries whispered away to silence. He waited a full three minutes before he spoke again. “There is one door still open to this chamber. If any man is not ready to fight at my side against this traitorous evil and banish it forever, he must now walk past me and leave.”

There was not a sound to be heard or the faintest flutter of movement. He nodded. “Very well. I have my score of men. Who else is with me?”

To the utter astonishment of many, Count Henri Vorvolk strode on to the dais. He plucked the lance from Gerard’s hand. With only a flicker of amazement the arsmen stepped back two paces. Count Vorvolk took his place. He addressed the room at large. “You may be limited to a score of arsmen, sire, but your Counts are with you.” He rammed the butt of the lance into the ground so hard it bounced upwards again.

Prime Minister Racozy displaced the arsmen at Gregor’s left hand side. “Your Ministers will fight this evil, sire.”
Count Vorhalas stepped forwards. They followed, the whole muster roll of Counts and Ministers, to stand behind him.

Gregor took Dorca’s lance from Henri’s hand. With three running paces down the room he launched it toward the king post of the magnificent hammerbeam ceiling of the chamber. It flew straight and true, plunging into the ancient oak with such force that the shaft vibrated for long, long seconds afterwards.

"Let any man who thinks I will not hold my people safe, that I will suffer treason to walk abroad in this land, see this and remember my vengeance."

Gerard let out a mighty shout. “Vorbarra!”

The roar reverberated, echoing through the chamber. Vorbarra! Vorbarra! Vorbarra!

The bills passed swiftly after that. Gregor and Henri stood side by side as the Council chamber cleared. For once, the ministers and Counts departed in awed and respectful silence. Henri dared to put an arm on Gregor’s shoulder. "That’s probably the first and last time in my entire life that I’m going to do something like that, you do realise," he confessed ruefully. "Miles will be so pissed he missed it."

"We don’t need Miles Vorkosigan to keep Our Imperium safe, Count," Gregor snapped. A few seconds later, when the chamber was clear, he sank down on the campstool. "Dear God, Henri, imagine if I’d missed."
Playing Skittles in Rotherhall

Sunk in gloom, Lord Auditor Ivan Vorpatril nursed his headache as he sat in a rattling rust bucket shuttle he’d seen before and thought he’d seen the back of. Rear Admiral Waleska sat next to him, obviously not in any better frame of mind. They hadn’t said two words to each other in an hour. Ivan idly contemplated cutting his own throat as he thought of the change of fortunes twenty-six hours could bring.

After the funeral he’d done a circuit in the ground car, dropping his mother, Simon, Wally and the two spare armmen back at Vorkosigan House. Christos had accompanied him back to the apartment where he’d broken the news of his leaving to Marie and sat with her in his arms until she’d cried herself to sleep. Whether it was his leaving her or the whole shattering day he had no idea. It was just as bad either way.

He’d finally got back to Vorkosigan House in time for dinner to find Lady Alys, Wally and Simon invited to stay. Raine had excitedly shown him her invitation to Vorhalas house, written on real paper and sealed with a seal dagger. Old Vorhalas hadn’t used blood but it was very close to it. The look on her face when he’d told her he couldn’t go spoke volumes. That was all the speaking she’d done for the rest of the night. Then his mother had heard what was up and renewed her attack about leaving Marie with *her* permanently. The only one who’d been at all decent about the whole thing was old Vorhalas himself when he’d called to explain. Duty was everything to Vorhalas and an Emperor’s command was just that, in his book.

“So why are you so grumpy?” He asked Wally when the silence stretched out just too far.

Wally sighed. “The Emperor refused my resignation again. He’s promoting me to Vice Admiral instead and no more mentions of resignation allowed until after the wedding. *Everything* is postponed until *after the wedding*. I’m even going to get an invitation, he said. Personal physician and all that.”

“I’d have thought that was good news,” Ivan countered. “Congratulations! Vice Admiral! And just imagine the clout you’ll have being able to invite a partner. Aceline wouldn’t be getting in to see the show, otherwise.”

*Now there was a thought. Byerly Vorrutyer wouldn’t be getting an invitation to the wedding either, surely?*

“Aceline was too busy talking thirteen to the dozen with your lady mother to even notice I was there. She certainly didn’t notice when I left. And neither did you, sitting in the corner with that bottle of wine.”

Ivan winced. “Don’t remind me.”

“Traditional Vor remedies *do not work*. And what did I tell you about drinking?”

“I’m blaming no one but myself for *this* headache. All my other headaches I blame fairly and squarely on that louse Vorclarence.”

The New Sheffield contingent, now that the funeral was over, had decided to enjoy themselves.
The shuttle pilot, in answer to a request, no doubt, circled the city three times before landing, allowing anyone who wanted it a good view of his or her home. All Ivan wanted was a good view of a vomit bag. He managed to hang on, but only just. Doing the Emperor’s Voice business he shook hands with each of them as they left the shuttle. The deference was nice for a while, until it came to Barnie.

“You mind what I said, My Lord Auditor. You look after that lass!”

Karasavas and Vorberg were there to welcome him back. The lieutenant looked well, although there were new lines on his face that might never go away. Fighting for the safety of the Imperium meant something personal to him now, not just a line on a recruiting poster. After a snappy-for-ImpSec salute he mangled Ivan’s hand in obvious delight to see him.

Karasavas was slightly more restrained, but nevertheless welcoming. “My Lord Auditor, Admiral, good to see you both again. I have an itinerary sketched out, depending on what we uncover at each location. I think you could say the schedule is elastic.”

“I think you could say we can do whatever we damn well please.” Ivan flicked his chain. “This little ‘open sesame’ is going to open every cupboard with a skeleton in it in this whole rotten District. If Gregor wants to know what the problems are I’m damn well going to find them. If I don’t do a good enough job he’s only going to send me back again until it’s finished. What have we got for transport?”

Karasavas pointed to it. “The six-seater lightflyer, my lord, and we’ll commandeering district ground transport from the various municipal guards. They don’t actually know we’re coming.”

“Let’s keep it that way.” Ivan stamped off to the lightflyer. Anger had started to replace his self-pity. “I feel like kicking butt.”

Rotherhall was twenty minutes away by flyer. They only took two guards with them with a full squad on backup if needed. Karasavas piloted their craft at a low level and minimum speed to get a good look at the layout of the place while Vorberg read to him from some sort of ImpSec gazetteer. “Rotherhall, Vorclarence district. Current population estimated at sixty thousand people and declining. Population at the end of the Time of Isolation was over one hundred and twenty thousand. Main industries were blacksmithing, brewing, jewellery making, farm machinery manufacture and linen textiles.”

*Cheap galactic imports had ruined Rotherhall, in other words.*

“Oh, and one more thing, my lord,” Vorberg continued, “how’s your local English?”


Vorberg and Karasavas exchanged glances. Karasavas laughed. “You may need a translator. Vorberg here didn’t even realise it was English to start with. There are quite a few colloquialisms that may surprise you. Some of it sounds like Shakespeare, though. Lots of thees and thous.”

“’Appen,” Vorberg said rather cryptically.

“That would be ‘belike’ in the Dendarii backwoods, would it?” Wally asked.

“’Appen most of the swear words are still the same then, if they speak like Shakespeare,” Ivan said, “which is a shame because I feel like I need some new ones.”

Karasavas landed on the cobblestones of the main square, causing quite a stir. There was what
could be called a Town Hall on the southern side. Leaving one guard with the flyer the rest of them set off to find the town officials. There was one district banner flapping idly on a flagstaff, and no Imperial standard. Inside the building there was no portrait of Gregor, either, only a younger and thinner Vorclarence staring down on them from the wall behind the enquiry desk.

“That’s the first thing that can change,” Ivan pointed. “Vorberg, get that down. Find a standard and download the official shot of Gregor if you have to.” He waited with arms folded while Vorberg hopped up on a chair and took down the picture. The young woman sitting behind the reception desk gaped at him and then rushed to a locker in the corner of the room to extract a portrait of Gregor taken when he obtained his majority. She handed it to Vorberg who hung it carefully and then tossed Vorclarence into the rubbish bin.

The young woman looked like she wanted to pass out, but she held her ground. “My Lord Auditor,” she bobbed a curtsey, “there’s an Imperial Standard in the Speaker’s office.”

“Please show lieutenant Vorberg the way,” Ivan asked her. “I’ll come with you, too. Where is the Speaker?”

“I don’t know, my lord. He left just as you landed.”

“Did he, now? Who else is in charge?”

She shook her head. “The deputy left last week. There’s the bookkeeper, Master Nadejda. He should be here, somewhere.”

They made a little ceremony of raising Gregor's banner. Ivan, Wally, Karasavas and Accardi stood to attention while Vorberg and Lindquist removed the mustard and orange district banner and replaced it with the black and silver Vorbarran rose and olive leaf. That should send the message loud and clear, even to those who couldn’t read.

Ivan returned to the Speaker’s office and sat behind the desk. There was a working comconsole and various antique ledgers lining the walls. He used his seal to log into the machine. “Here you go, Karasavas, see what you can find. And you, Miss…?”


“Well, Miss Beck, go fetch your Master Nadejda. Tell him to bring his financial records and talk to Major Karasavas. Lindquist here can go with you, in case he needs persuading. Thank you for your help, I appreciate it.”

She returned in five minutes. "The major is talking to Master Nadejda. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Ivan shook his head. "No, thank you. Please stay at your desk for now in case we have any questions."

“Yes, my lord. Would you like some tea?”

Yes, he would like some tea, and some painkillers. Or maybe one painkiller. Wally was watching him.

“Thank you, I think tea would be an excellent idea. Oh, and yes, there is another thing. Please arrange accommodation for six. We’ll be staying here a few days.”

“Yes, my lord. On the square, here? The Count stays at The Black Sheep, if that would suit. It has
comfortable beds.”

“That will do fine. Tell Lindquist and he’ll see the baggage taken over.”

She wanted to say something else. Ivan watched her trying to make up her mind whether to speak or not. “Yes, Miss Beck? Out with it. I don’t bite.”

She twisted her fingers. “Will you be paying for the accommodation, my lord? Mrs Williams, she’s the landlady, she’ll have to go buy food for your dinners, you see. I don’t know how she’ll manage for six.”

Were things as tight as that round here? Or did Vor Clarence make a habit of taking without paying? Ivan reached into his pocket and brought out a credit chit. “Tell her to get what she needs, but I’ll want a strict accounting. I presume she does the cooking?”

A beautiful smile broke across her face. “Best cook in town, my lord. I’ll run and tell her right away, if I may?”

“Tea first, and then go.”

“I nearly forgot t’brew! You must be dry. I’ll bring it directly.” Miss Beck had been doing so beautifully with her standard Barrayaran English, but her relief had sent it all out the window.

The tea looked like tar water. Ivan could see he was going to have to get used to that. He sent Jenny Beck off to arrange their accommodation and watched her race across the square. Was that the last he’d see of his credit chit? He hoped not. Anyway, he needed to get a move on while there was still daylight.

The Municipal Guard commandant didn’t inspire Ivan with much confidence. There was something shifty about the man. First stop was to look at the charge book and inspect the cells. The two didn’t add up. “There appear to be eight prisoners held here without charge, Commandant,” he pointed out. “Would you care to explain?”

The commandant wouldn’t look him in the eyes. “Count’s orders, my lord. Known dissidents and trouble makers.”

“Have they had a trial?”

“No, my lord.”

“That’s wrong. Get them out and line them up. I want to speak to them.”

They were all men, and they looked terrible. One fellow, maybe three inches taller than Ivan, with obvious bruises to his face, swayed where he stood.

“Admiral Waleska, I think we need you here.”

Ivan addressed the prisoners. “Admiral Waleska is a doctor. He’ll be documenting your condition for my official report. There may well still be charges outstanding against you, but you will be treated with respect until your cases, if any, are decided. Are any of you going to give him any trouble?”

“Was Admiral Waleska at the Komarr revolt, my lord?” the tall man asked. “I remember him
aboard the old *Ezar.*"

“Captain Waleska then, and you all called me Dr Wally.” Waleska stepped forward to take his arm and lead him to a chair. “Let me get a look at you.”

“Accardi!” Ivan shouted. “Take this man to a cell.” He pointed to the commandant. “Charged with inhumane treatment of prisoners. I should pass him over to Lord Auditor Vorkosigan when he gets back. He’ll know what to do with him.”

He glowered at the rest of the guard contingent. “And if I hear *any* more reports of false arrest or maltreatment you’ll answer to me. Do I make myself clear?”

He’d obviously made himself very clear. He got Vorberg to make a note, anyway. Mentally he dusted off his hands. Good. Where to, now? The hospitals of course, the schools and maybe if there was time the guildhall, if they had such a thing here.

By the time he’d finished for the day he felt like he’d done a good day’s work.

Rotherhall looked like the town that time forgot. *The Black Sheep* must have been doing a roaring trade during the Time of Isolation. In fact, every building lining the Town Square dated back well over two hundred years, by the looks. There were no buildings over four storeys to be seen anywhere and they were all made of stone or ancient brick.

His room at the top of a broad oak staircase contained a four-poster bed with a feather mattress, mullioned windows in a gothic style and creaking floorboards. Ivan took great care to check the fireplace for hidden panels, as this had been the bedroom the Count had used. All he needed was Mad Yuri’s ghost to come creeping out of the wainscoting. As it was he’d probably never get a wink of sleep. At least the place had running hot water to fill a bath. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a bath instead of a shower. Probably not since he’d put away his rubber ducky for good. There was something relaxing about a bath, it had to be said.

Vorberg, born and bred in Vorbarr Sultana had never see anything like the bedrooms, the wooden panelling or the lack of modern amenities. He kept looking around and marvelling. He’d only visited the library at Vorkosigan House, after all. He’d never had to *stay* there or cope with the drains.

Dinner was set for the six of them together in another oak-lined room. Mrs Williams was no Ma Kosti but the food was tasty and wholesome, traditional roast meat with vegetables and gravy. There was a magnificent apple pie for dessert.

Vorberg looked dubiously at his tankard of ale. “Do you think they have wine cellars here?”

Karasavas shook his head. “Probably not. Beer’s the drink of choice. Five different brews at least, as far as I can tell. I think the beer cellars might be something to see. Why don’t you ask to look around them?”

Ivan shuddered. He could think of few things worse. “You can tell us all about it, Vorberg. Take a vid, even. I’m staying right here.”

It was more than an hour before Vorberg came back. “It’s fantastic down there! Did you know there are *eight* different sizes of barrels? The biggest one’s a tun, Mrs Williams tells me. She doesn’t have any of those. I’d have to go to the brewery to see one. There’s a cooper still working here, and with the brewery they’re about the only businesses still surviving in town. Everybody has to drink beer after all. They use all the old traditional methods, too. It sounds like something out of
Smothered in his feather mattress that night, Ivan had a very good idea. He thought it over for quite some time before he at last drifted off. He was woken quite early from a fascinating dream by Vorberg knocking on his door. Slightly disoriented he snatched up the stunner on his bedside table and raced over to open it. What the hell had happened now?

Vorberg appeared quite taken aback to be looking down the wrong end of a weapon. His instinct was to duck and roll and press his screamer. Not surprisingly, the commotion brought Karasavas on the scene, and he wasn’t carrying a stunner. He meant business.

“What? Who? Where is it?” He didn’t look too happy.

“I don’t know, ask Vorberg!” Ivan didn’t feel too happy, either.

“Vorberg, you idiot! What the hell did you think you were doing?” Karasavas holstered his nerve disruptor.

Ivan rather wished he’d thought of that line himself. It would have made a pleasant change to be on the other end for once. Vorberg scrambled to his feet.

“Sorry, I just wanted to let Lord Vorpatril know that I’d moved the flyer. It’s market day today and they set up early. We were causing a problem.”

“We were? What the hell time is it, anyway?” Ivan hadn’t realised just how early it was.

“0600 hours, My Lord. You should see the market, though. They have horses and chickens and food—”

“Vorberg, it’s a market. Haven’t you ever seen one before?” Karasavas cut off his enthusiasm without compunction.

Vorberg shook his head. “No, actually, I haven’t.”

“Good gods! You city boys…Well go and enjoy the damn thing and be on duty at 0800 hours like a sensible person.”

It looked like Karasavas didn’t do mornings unless he had to. Ivan pretty much agreed with him. Now that he was awake, though, the noise of the market penetrated the antique single glaze non-weather sealed windows quite efficiently. It sounded as if they had cows and sheep down there, as well as horses. Ivan wandered over to look out over the square. It was a really colourful affair, with tents and awnings set up to protect the produce, and pens erected near the Town Hall for animals. He snapped a few holos for his report.

The Imperial standard was getting some attention. Lindquist must have been up at dawn to raise it, as they’d taken it down at sunset the previous night. Ivan watched as three men, local farmers by the look of it, clapped each other on the back and shook hands all round. Interesting…

Well, he was up and about anyway. Going back to bed wouldn’t work. It took him ten minutes to depilate, wash and don his dress greens and Auditor’s chain. Time to mingle. He made sure to slip his stunner onto his belt, just in case.

Gregor must feel like this all the time. All through the market place the crowds parted for him, men, women and children stepping back and bowing or curtsying as he strolled along. Most of them had smiles on their faces. Not one of them dared speak to him, other than to return a ‘good
morning’. He’d just reached the corner where the produce stalls finished and the sheep pens began when there was the sound of raised voices behind him. Instantly on the alert he whirled around, stunner in his hand, to see a group of three boys running at full pelt away from an irate farmer.

“Stop, thieves!”

The first one saw Ivan and desperately tried to change direction. The second one, looking over his shoulder at the retribution following him, cannoned into his friend’s back. The third one tripped over the pair of them and clattered down among them in a chaotic mass of flailing arms and legs sliding along the cobblestones. The result was inevitable.

Oh, shit.

Ivan just wasn’t quite quick enough. He went right and he should have gone left. Two of the little devils missed him but the third thumped into his ankles. Skittled was a pretty good term for it. The sheep weren’t very impressed and neither was Ivan when a cloven hoof landed fair and square in his midriff. His breath whistled out like a rusty tea kettle rupturing.

His first coherent thought was that Karasavas was going to be pissed at being hauled out of his bed again. His second thought was that his stunner had disappeared.

“My Lord! My Lord Auditor!” Vorberg came racing across the square, scattering the crowd in his panic. Accardi and Lindquist, disruptors at the ready, came charging in answer to the urgency in Vorberg's voice. Alarm spread as people tried to run from the threatened attack.

Ivan lay on his back looking up at a sheep looking down at him. For once a very deep hole seemed like an excellent idea.
Karasavas with his best ImpSec face on. Accardi and Lindquist fully armed and looking very dangerous. Three terrified boys. Six terrified parents. One very uneasy farmer and Ivan hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

He sat behind the Speaker’s desk in the Town Hall with the troublemakers lined up before him. Vorberg had run in two minutes previously with the missing stunner, found under some hay in a cow pen. Thank the gods it was under the hay and not some of the other contents of that cow pen. Ivan only smelled slightly of sheep. All things considered, it could have been much worse. The greatest injury had been to his dignity.

There was a roomful of witnesses in the reception area giving statements to Vorberg, and as they had all marched in Ivan had seen half the town in the square, silently and anxiously waiting for the outcome of his judgement. Assauling an Imperial Auditor was a treasonable offence. It was quite sobering for him to realise just how much power that chain actually gave him.

He sighed. “Tell me the story. One at a time. You.” He pointed to the farmer.

“M’lord, these three devils allus cause trouble. There’s nowt can be done wi’em. Stole eggs off me today, they did.”

Ivan looked at the boys. “Is this true?”

One of them looked up. “Yessir.”

He was promptly cuffed across the back of his head from behind by his father. “Say, ‘yes, m’lord’. This here is the Imperial Auditor. He can order your ears cut off.”

Ivan winced. “I don’t think we’d do that today, would we, Major Karasavas?”

“Too much paperwork, My Lord,” Karasavas replied, straight-faced. “Maybe a finger.”

Ivan coughed. “So you admit you stole eggs from Farmer…?”

“Eccles, m’lord”

“Farmer Eccles. Do you wish to press charges?”

“No, m’lord, as long as it doesn’t happen agen.”

“Thank you, Farmer Eccles, for your kindness. I don’t think we need keep you.”

“No, m’lord. Thank’ee m’lord. Good morning to thee.” He hurried out of the room, breathing a sigh of relief.

Ivan looked at the parents “Do any of you wish to speak?”

One of the mothers stepped forward. She curtsied. “Please, m’lord, they’re good lads. They won’t do it again. There’s just no work for them to be had. They get up to mischief. Please don’t hurt them.”
She really was terrified of him. She was actually shaking. It was Karasavas who answered. Perhaps he remembered Mrs Walton, who had fainted from fear of him.

“My Lord Auditor won’t hurt the boys, ma’am, much as he’d like to give them a clip round the ear. It was an accident.”

She burst into tears. “Oh, thank’ee sir, and thee m’lord.”

Something had to be done. Ivan remembered a few of his own escapades when he was what? Fourteen? Fifteen? He’d been a shocker. “They can’t be behaving like this. What if I’d been an old woman? Sent flying like that, it could have been serious. In fact, come with me. All of you.”

In the outer office he collected Vorberg. “Send these people home, lieutenant. We’re going to the cooperage. North of the main square, wasn’t it?”

He strode through the crowds, followed by the three families, and then by the two guards. Vorberg brought up the rear. There was a general sigh from the crowd as he marched right past the old whipping post, still standing in the centre of the square, together with two sets of stocks. By the time they arrived at the cooperage there was a small posse following them, all eager to see what was going to happen. It was all rather like a child’s fairy story.

It was a fascinating place, the cooperage, smelling of oak shavings and steamed wood. The proprietor came out to meet them. Ivan looked at the sign hanging over the office door. “Mr Sinclair, is it? I’m Lord Auditor Vorpatril.” He shook the man’s hand. “I have three volunteers here for you who’d like to do something useful for a change. Put them to work. Forty hours each, and no slacking allowed. If any of them look promising let me know and we might talk about indentures. How long is your normal apprenticeship here?”

“Three years, my lord, but I can’t afford t’pay three apprentices. There’s lads looking for work every day. We’re only just holding our own here. The fees for lodgin’ even one apprenticeship would cripple me.”

“There are no fees, not any more. The District will be paying the apprentice wages, if you agree to indenture them. That depends on how well they do in this trial.”

“No fees? Nowt? And you’ll be paying t’wages?” Sinclair couldn’t believe his ears.

“Not me personally, the wages will come out of District funds.” Ivan crossed his fingers behind his back. The new count had better honour his promises or he might well be paying personally. He couldn’t disappoint the lads like that once they’d got a start.

“Put it on the list to check, please, Vorberg. That should be in about four or five days, shouldn’t it, depending on how hard they work?”

He looked at the boys and then at his chrono. “Forty hours. Starting now. First and last chance. Understand?”

They understood. They fled into the factory like a Cetagandan death squad was after them.

Ivan looked around. “Now, where can I get breakfast round here? And not eggs, if you please.”

He stayed another week in Rotherhall. As usual, Karasavas and Vorberg did the heavy lifting, sorting through the financial records and unravelling all the cosy little extortion schemes and rorts. Accardi and Lindquist were tremendously useful as well, physically inspecting warehouses and storerooms and making themselves available for a quiet word or two with locals. Word soon got
around and the pair of them received quite a few tip-offs for the best places to look.

Years of resentment and helplessness would take a long time to remedy, but the scent of change was in the air. Everywhere he went someone would want to shake his hand or tip his hat or curtsy to him. Miles probably took all this kind of thing for granted. Like a lot of things, Ivan was coming to realise, he’d never given it a thought before.

On his part, Ivan mostly made himself available to talk to people. He didn’t accept private invitations to dinners or lunches, usually just turning up at one of the local taverns to eat at midday, reserving dinner as a debrief time for the team. Wally never appeared except at dinner and Ivan left the hospital and medical services to his very capable skills to investigate.

When the Speaker finally turned up again after his sudden ‘illness’ Ivan kept the talking short. Karasavas looming with his fast-penta kit helped considerably with that one. He made the man call up his personal financial records and account for every last mark. The apprentice fund was ready and waiting for any dubious spare cash. Voluntary donations saved any need to get nasty, much to Karasavas’ apparent regret. By the end of that session, and the one with Master Nadejda, there was probably enough in there to pay for two years wages at least if not the whole apprenticeship. Miss Beck brought in tea and biscuits without even asking after Vorberg escorted the former Speaker off the premises.

One interview Ivan did enjoy was with Marcus Fox. Wally had arranged it and sent the man in. He turned out to be the tall prisoner Ivan had set free on his first day. He looked a lot better with clean clothes and a meal or three inside him. The man stood at rigid attention in front of Ivan’s desk, eyes front with his thumbs down the seams of his trousers.

“Stand easy, Fox. In fact, pull up that chair. Tell me what I need to know.”

Fox relaxed. He looked like an intelligent man, and an honest one. He met Ivan’s gaze fearlessly. “Former master sergeant in ship security, my lord, starting on the old Ezar, where I met Dr Wally, and worked my way up. I was assigned the Sergyar sector for a few years and then finished up on the Kanzian. I can’t tell you much about that one as it’s classified. There was an incident and some good men lost their lives. My twenty was up, so I retired. Vorclarence District had changed while I was gone.”

“You must have known Master Sergeant Thomas Watson, then?”

Fox’s face turned bleak. “I did indeed, sir. He was a very good friend. How would you know him?”

“I’m Imperial guardian to his daughter, Marie. She lives with my family in Vorbarr Sultana. Her mother was killed in the bombing in the square.”

That stunned him. “Anna’s dead? I hadn’t heard. I was in that damned jail for near on two weeks. I only just found out Vorclarence was dead and about the assassination attempt when Dr Wally told me. But little Marie, she’s alright?”

“She’s doing well. She was hurt in the bombing, nearly died, in fact, but I think she’ll be fine eventually. I’m going to make it my business to see that she’s well taken care of.” Ivan paused to think, recalling that god-awful shambles. They weren’t pleasant memories. “Her mother died right in front of me.”

Fox looked at him. “I can see she’ll be in good hands, my lord. I’m very glad to hear it. Tom used to talk about Anna and his little Marie often. It almost made me wish I’d found a good woman, but it would have been a hard life, married to a ship duty man.”
Ivan pulled himself together. “Now, tell me how you ended up in that jail in the first place.”

“A couple of those so-called guards were roughing up an old man in the market square. He hadn’t done anything, just didn’t have a place to sleep. I took what you might call an exception to what they were doing. I’d been to New Sheffield, didn’t much like it there, wandered through Prestwich, liked it even less and ended up here. It was my first day in town, no job and nowhere to call home as yet. I ended up stunned and in the cells. I wasn’t charged, but I wasn’t going to pay the bribe they wanted to get out of there. They thought they might persuade me. It wasn’t long after that you came along.”

Wally had sent along a copy of the man’s service record. Ivan made up his mind. “There’s a job going, if you would like it?”

Fox stared at him, suspicious. “Working for who?”

“Working for me, initially, and then the new count, if the appointment is confirmed. I can’t promise anything permanent.”

“I see. What job would this be, my lord?”

“Commandant of the Rotherhall Municipal Guard.”

Fox didn’t jump at the offer. If Ivan had had any doubts about the man, they disappeared.

“It’s a job that badly needs doing well, that’s for sure. I don’t know that I’m the man you want. I’m not sure I’ll be staying here, permanently. I might be looking for something with a bit more variety, but thank you very much for the offer. I appreciate your trust, my lord.”

Ivan wanted this man, and more like him. “Can you give me six months? These people here need a good man badly. That should be enough time to reorganise things, weed out the undesirables and appoint some decent men as troopers. There are plenty of people looking for honest work. Men just like you. I can get you some ImpSec help to start with.”

Fox gave him a wry smile. “I should think it would be the other way round, with ImpSec, but yes, my lord, all right. I can promise you six months. Good people shouldn’t be walking the streets in fear.”

Ivan jumped up and came round the desk to clap him on the shoulder and shake his hand. “Excellent. This calls for a drink. ’Appen we should do it now, because there’s no drinking on duty. They do a good pie at The Miller’s Sack, apparently. Accardi told me about it yesterday. You’ll like Accardi. You’ve met him before. He’s the man who put the former holder of your new position in your cells.”

There was a lot of job satisfaction in his new role, but at the end of the day Ivan was still in Rotherhall and Marie and Raine were still in Vorbarr Sultana. It was incredible to believe, but The Black Sheep didn’t have comconsoles in the guest rooms. They didn’t even have a public unit in the lobby. There was one in the library, next to the Town Hall on the main square, one in the Speaker’s office and one in the bookkeeper’s office. It was a bit hard to say anything he wanted to say in the bustle of bodies, financial investigations and reports flowing in and out.

Marie was always available and eager to see him early in the morning. She’d got over her weeping fit. Ivan hadn’t realised just how much debt he owed to Simon Illyan, but it became clearer and clearer to him how much Simon and Marie were bonding together. Lady Alys was ramping up for
the tremendous effort of getting the Imperial wedding arrangements perfect. There was Ma McIver for Marie’s physical needs, but Simon was the one who took her for walks, or to the park to fly a kite, who read her stories and talked about her Ma. Simon, though, wouldn’t take any thanks. They had a conversation about it.

“Ivan,” Simon said, in the end, “don’t you realise, Marie is the one who is healing me? I had nearly forty years of seeing the worst in people. Thank the gods I can’t remember all of it. What I can remember is bad enough. When I’ve had a good day with Marie, I can sleep. Your dear mother rescued me, and Marie is like…I don’t know, she’s like—”

“Like the sun in the sky? Like the leaves on a tree?”

Simon nodded before he cut the com. “Yes, Ivan, just like that. You do understand.”

Marie wouldn’t go to the zoo with Simon. She’d gone back to the Art Gallery with him, but not the zoo.

“Because, My Ivan, me and you are going to go to the zoo, to see the horses and the terothingies and the hexapods, just like you said, when you come home.”

Raine, on the other hand, was much harder to track down. They’d left Vorkosigan House and moved into an apartment. Ivan had found the comconsole code after a bit of string-pulling with his mother, but too many of his messages went unanswered. He didn’t think she was avoiding him, precisely, but she just wasn’t there. Aceline quite often took his calls, and he didn’t think she was lying, when she told him Raine was out with Delia, Martya and Olivia, or having dinner with friends. Ivan ground his teeth at that one. Friends, indeed, Byerly Vorrutyer. He could just imagine.

When he did get to actually talk to her it was even worse. There was something brittle about Raine. She wasn’t happy, he could tell. She told him all about the dinner at Vorhalas House, and what he’d missed. She told him how kind By had been. Kind? By Vorrutyer? In a pig’s eye.

He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss it all better. He wanted her to take him in her arms and kiss him all better. He just wanted her. She probably wanted to knee him where it hurt again. She was disappointed in him.

What he really wanted to say was, “Raine, I love you.”

The last remaining loose end in Rotherhall was the appointment of a temporary Speaker. In the end Karasavas called in an administrator from ImpSec HQ. It wasn’t ideal, but Ivan had confidence in him to do a good job, even if it was just as a stopgap measure. It was a big appointment and one both the community and the new count needed to be happy with. It was with some regret they loaded up the lightflyer and headed off to Prestwich. Watching the fond farewells, Ivan suspected trooper Lindquist and Jenny Beck had quite enjoyed their week. Well, he was glad for them. He was. Really.

Prestwich loomed on the horizon. Vorberg dug out his hand viewer and called up the entry.

“Prestwich. Vorclarence District. Current population estimated at eighty five thousand people and declining. Population at the end of the Time of Isolation was over one hundred and sixty thousand. Main industries were specialist steel metal working, brewing, copper smithing, and traditional embroidered textiles.”

“Like Rotherhall only bigger.” Wally looked out of the cockpit window. “Bigger and uglier, by the
looks. There’s a river, though. That might be a bonus.”

Ivan had a plan or two for Rotherhall, if he could find some investment, but Prestwich looked like a much bigger problem. What all these people needed was work. What did they have that couldn’t be made more cheaply elsewhere? What was unique about the place?

Well, it was bloody ugly, for a start. The golden stone and red brick of Rotherhall gave way to cheap grey synthacrete in Prestwich. There were apartment towers, like the grim place Marie had escaped. There were acres of rusted, abandoned factories along the north side of the river. If Wally set up a depression clinic here the queues would be out the doors and round the block. How did they keep themselves sane?

Word had travelled about the Lord Auditor’s flying circus. They were greeted in the main square by the Speaker and his council. There was an Imperial Standard flying at the Town Hall. There were happy townsfolk strolling the streets arm in arm.

Ivan’s bullshit alarm sounded loudly in his ears. He’d go along with being handled for a little while, but nobody was going to pull the wool over his eyes. He declined the invitation to a civic banquet that night, and in the hotel they were taken to did a four-way swap of rooms with the major, the admiral and the lieutenant. Was that just a flicker of consternation in the eyes of the manager who’d brought them upstairs? *Hah*, he’d been right. They were up to something, here, or had something to hide, or both. He let Karasavas take a very long look at the rooms they were taken to. ImpSec’s finest didn’t let him down.

“Bugged, my lord. Vorberg has the best room now and the worst bugs. There’s even a vid pick up in the bathroom.”

“Can you track the pick-up point?”

“Probably the Town Hall. Do you fancy a little stroll over there? I’ll get Lindquist and Accardi. What say we kick some butt?”

Ivan hadn’t really seen Karasavas at his best. He thought he might enjoy the show. They even brought Wally along to hold the coats. It took the major five minutes flat to line up the District staff under the watchful eye of Accardi, seal all the comconsoles in the three storey Town Hall, power down the lift tube and turn off the climate control. He waited by the emergency exit while Vorberg ran a power and life signs trace.

“At least six people in what looks to be a sub-basement, Major,” Vorberg reported. It’s got to be getting pretty uncomfortable down there with that equipment they’ve got running.”

It was a bit of an anti-climax in the end. They came out one by one, hands up. There was an extra level not indicated in the lift tube console. Once the power was connected again and the systems running Ivan, Wally, Vorberg and Karasavas went for a little poke around. The Speaker of Prestwich wasn’t too interested in gouging marks here and there from licence applications. He was running a blackmail racket from the Town Hall basement. In fact, it was quite a little enterprise. It wasn’t just blackmail. There was an illegal betting racket, call girls and boys and drugs. Lots of drugs. Is that how the locals kept themselves sane? Wally took some samples to find out what they were dealing with. Karasavas called in his stand-by squad from New Sheffield and they were there within the hour. *Gregor was going to love this one.*

It had taken two hours from landing to the start of the clear up. Totally disgusted, Ivan found an unbugged comconsole to call Marie and cheer himself up.
Surely there had to be some good people in Prestwich. Ivan spent the next two days trying to find them. There was a lot more work for Wally to do, organising drug treatment facilities and flying in more relief teams from the capital, dealing with family violence leading from the drug taking and all the general health and welfare checks a demoralised population needed. The Municipal Guard were the usual corrupt bullies with a few good men trying to swim upstream. Ivan promoted Accardi acting-sergeant and put him in charge until something could be worked out there.

At last he stumbled upon an oasis of peace and calm at a local textile factory. It had seen better days along with everywhere else and several of the workbenches were empty. There were about thirty ladies occupied with embroidering costumes, mostly bolero jackets like his mother wore. Ivan had never stopped to consider where they’d come from. He’d begun to expect the fear his presence produced and this place was no different. The sound of talking hushed and they looked at him with huge eyes from their pale faces.

“May I see what work you’re doing?”

An older lady took her courage in her hands. “We’re finishing these orders for a ladies wear shop in Vorbarr Sultana, my lord,” she said. “We’ve had some work lately with the wedding coming up. I don’t know what we’ll be doing, after.”

“There’ll be a new count soon, have you heard? Do you do the work for armsmen’s uniforms and suchlike?”

She went to a cupboard and brought out a sample book. “This is what we can do, my lord. See, here’s the symbol of the district. The oak leaf and acorn.”

It was very fine work. It was such a shame they were struggling. “And I suppose there’s no work for the young girls these days? No orders coming in?”

She shook her head, sadly. “We all teach the girls at home. Some could get jobs, if we had the orders. The girls do the simple work, see, like the edges of the collars, and then one does the leaves and another the acorns. They’ve been passed down through the generations. This here is Molly acorn, and over there is Rachel oakleaf. They get their nicknames when they start to do the good work.”

“What work is there for the men in the town, do you know? Is there anyone I can see?”

Another woman, finally trusting he wasn’t going to murder them all, spoke up. “You should go and see Mr Wilkins, over by the iron bridge. His factory still makes swords. They made the sword for the Emperor, they did.”

Strolling through the Wilkins manufactory an hour later, Ivan had his second good idea.
“You want what?” Gregor looked a trifle confused for a moment.

Ivan leaned forward a little. “I want a warrant.”

“Is this something I’m going to regret? Who do you want the warrant for?”

“Not a death warrant! You didn’t regret that lightflyer, did you? That needed an Imperial warrant for the crest on the panel. No, I’m not buying you another lightflyer for a wedding present, but I do need a warrant to have this made. Come on, Gregor, have I ever—”

“Yes, yes you have!” He sounded accusing. “There was that Betan wonder cream you bought me for my thirtieth birthday, and that little something you brought me back from the Celestial Garden, too.”

Ivan thought a moment. He grinned. “I suppose I have, at that. But you enjoyed them, you know you did. It’s nothing like that. This is serious. I’ll even show it to m’mother first, if you like.”

“Well, in that case, if I have your word, yes, you can have the warrant.”

“Word as Vorpatril. Thank you, you won’t regret it. Now, have you got the honeymoon planned, yet?”

“Oh, no you don’t. I’m not letting you anywhere near my honeymoon plans!”

“I’ve found the perfect place! Four poster feather beds two feet thick, no comconsoles in the whole building, the biggest bath you ever saw—”

“Save it for your own honeymoon, Ivan. Mine is well planned.”

“No chance of that with me stuck down here and—” He broke off. There was just no chance of a honeymoon for him anywhere in the near future. Best not think about that.

“So when do I get to come back to Vorbarr Sultana? My chair must be getting really cold at Ops.”

“I was meaning to talk to you about that—”

“No, Gregor! I don’t want another job. Haven’t I been punished enough? I need to get back to the capital!” He really needed to curb that habit he’d acquired of interrupting the Emperor. Fortunately Gregor didn’t seem to mind. This time.

“It’s not a punishment. You’re doing me a great favour. You have one more week to finalise your report down there, come back and present it to me, take two days leave and then you report to the Residence Social Secretary for Aide de Camp duties. Miles still isn’t back and I need you to fill in for him until he gets here.”

“My mother? My mother? My mother? You want me to work for my mother? You would never be so cruel. I’ve bled for you. I would still bleed for you. You can’t do this to me!”
“It’s done. Unless you can find more work to do in New Sheffield, of course, but that report needs to be on my desk by Friday week at the latest. The Council of Counts meets on the Monday after. Goodnight, Ivan.”

He couldn’t remember when he’d suffered such a heavy blow. Surely Raine would be there to talk to him tonight? He needed her sympathy. Just the sound of her voice would do.

The comconsole connection timed out. Ivan sat at his desk, head in hands. It was too late to talk to Marie. Beer wouldn’t touch the edges. He hated to say it but he needed maple mead. 

He had nine days to make the best of things. Once he had the warrant he needed he went back to have a serious talk with Mr Wilkins. The numbers mentioned made him blink a little bit, but this was for Gregor and it had to be the best. Wilkins even had what he needed in the files, back from when they made the sword, the last major order the factory had had, fifteen years ago. They’d been staggering along on bits and bobs ever since. If they left it much longer Mr Wilkins’ best craftsmen would have retired or died, and all that skill would have been lost. He grasped at Ivan’s order like a drowning man grasping at a straw.

Ivan’s second order costed out a lot cheaper if he went ahead with it. He arranged for samples to be supplied before any major tooling up began. This one wasn’t his decision after all, and it might all come to nothing. It was worth chasing, for everyone’s sake. He’d need the ladies in the textile factory for this as well. It only took them a day to come up with what he wanted, as the design was fairly simple.

Ivan’s team circled back through Rotherhall for one last visit, to check up on the Municipal Guard and the work at the Town Hall. Ivan even popped in to see his three apprentices. Mr Sinclair had nothing but praise for them.

“The factory hasn’t been this clean in two years, my lord. I couldn’t ask for better. You can tell they’re good lads. They got their week’s wages t’other day and the first thing young Jim bought was a bunch of flowers for his mother.”

Ivan solemnly shook their hands. “No more pinching eggs?”

There was a chorus of ‘No, m’lord. Never.’

Marcus Fox, over at the Municipal Guard, had things screwed down tight. He’d employed two new guards who’d had service training and got rid of five who’d never seen a day of training in their lives. “And you can’t even tell the difference, my lord,” he told Ivan. “Well, you can, actually, for the better. Patrols go out in twos, not fours, and come back as sober as they left. We even had someone come and ask for help, the other day, who didn’t bring a hundred marks with him. We were happy to oblige the gentleman. We’ll get there.”

Ivan glanced at the charge book. “Three prisoners in the cells?”

“Aye, m’lord. Just the three, and they’ve all been fed their breakfast.”

Gregor wasn’t wrong when he’d estimated a week for the report. Even with the huge contributions from Karasavas and Wally the task was enormous. Gregor wasn’t going to find fault with it, though. After the final proof-reading late on that last night together the three of them sat back and put their feet up. Ivan summed it up.
“So, Wally and I leave tomorrow. Major Karasavas, Imperial Security should be damned proud of you. I know a lot of this work had nothing to do with your normal duties. Some of it was strictly District level but you’ve done a magnificent job.”

Karasavas acknowledged the praise. “Thank you, my lord. We live to serve. And the least member of the Imperium deserves as much service as the greatest, after all.” He paused for a moment. “I doubt there’d be too many ImpSec men who have seen what we’ve seen these past weeks. I could do with some leave.”

Ivan nodded. “This,” he flicked his chain, “gets handed back and I get two days leave. I’m going to the zoo. Then if I can survive the next few weeks working for my mother I’ll finally get back to my nice captain’s job in Ops and I am never, ever again, going to say to Gregor ‘I want in.’ That was a fatal mistake and my doctor should have stopped me from making it. I wasn’t right in the head.”

Wally didn’t take the bait. “What do you mean ‘wasn’t’? Still not, as far as I’m concerned. Take a tablet and three days’ bed rest. If people actually listened to me there wouldn’t have been any problem. I’m off to bed. See you on the shuttle tomorrow, Ivan. I get two whole weeks off. I’m going to enjoy every minute.”

Rather to Ivan’s delighted surprise the transport the next morning turned out to be their six-seater flyer. It would cut at least forty minutes off their travel time back to Vorbarr Sultana. He could get back to Vorkosigan House, shower, change, pack and have his report on Gregor’s desk with time to spare to track down Raine and persuade her to go to dinner with him. That’s if Gregor didn’t keep him kicking his heels, that was. There surely couldn’t be anything to raise much comment about, unless his recommendation for the paint factory was commented on. That was a bit left field, he had to admit, but it was about seventh on his list of recommendations. Perhaps it would slip through unnoticed.

As New Sheffield faded into the distance he felt a slight twang of…what? Wistfulness? Sorry the place was being left to its fate? Farewell to new friends? It was hard to tell. Ivan soon shrugged it off. He was going home, and Raine was there.

Gregor ceremoniously accepted the return of Ivan’s chain of office and then sent him to wait in an interview room while he took the time to read the report. At least he provided coffee and pastries. It took over an hour before Ivan was called into Gregor’s office again. Thankfully he wasn’t carpeted this time. They sat in the armchairs by the window.

“Tell me what you thought of being an Auditor,” Gregor asked him.

Ivan had to think about it. “That much responsibility is quite awesome. I’ve never had anyone physically terrified of me before. It wasn’t a nice feeling. On the other hand, being able to change someone’s life for the better, well, that was special. People wanted to shake my hand and say thankyou. When we just marched in and smashed that Speaker in Prestwich, and affected so many lives just like that,” Ivan clicked his fingers, “That was good. I’ve done a fair bit of thinking these past few weeks. I’ll be glad to sit back.”

“I’ve had separate reports, you know, from Major Karasavas to Guy Allegre, and Admiral Waleska to me personally.”

“They are great men, you know, Gregor. Karasavas is all you could want in a really good officer.”

“Aren’t you interested in what they said about you?”

Ivan shrugged. “I know they’ll be honest and factual. You probably know all about me, warts and
all. Was there anything you didn’t know already?”

Gregor actually smiled. Smiled as in the smile reached his eyes. “You know what, Ivan, I think there was. I’d suspected it, but didn’t know for sure. Karasavas said he’d want you to have his back in a tight situation. Vorberg worships the ground you walk on, and Admiral Waleska said your reputation landed very far from the truth.”

Ivan felt himself go warm inside. “I thought Wally considered me a lost cause.”

“By no means. But tell me, Ivan, what on three planets do you want a paint factory for?”

“Oh, that. What the district desperately needs is meaningful employment. If there was a paint factory, that would employ people. With the paint we could employ more people to paint all those goddamned grey tower blocks every colour of the rainbow, and that would make everybody in Prestwich cheer up. You saw New Sheffield. Prestwich is three times worse. It’s like living inside an airlock there. People need light in their lives… I thought it would be a good idea.”

“I see. Well. Let me think about it. You go and have a break, Captain Vorpatril.”

Ivan jumped up and snapped to attention. “That’s all I need to hear, sire. Everything back to normal.”

“Yes, everything back to normal,…for now.”

It felt really strange to be walking back into his own apartment. The cleaning service had been in. There was wine and beer in his refrigerator and a stack of messages on his comconsole. They were his first priority. Most of them were party invitations, reminders to pay bills and the odd girl calling for a date. There was only one from Raine. He called it up instantly. She looked tired, and there were lines of strain around her eyes.

“Hi, Ivan, sorry I missed you. Maman is going back to Vandeville in a few days to pack up the house, as we won’t be living there again. I think she’s leaving on Wednesday. I…I need a break too. I have to think about things. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, at least a few weeks. I thought about waiting until you got back, but I feel this is best this way, as I can’t think at all while you’re around. I need a clean break. Don’t sit around waiting for me. Goodbye, Ivan. Thank you for saving us.”

He ran it twice. He ran it again. Nothing changed, no matter how many times he ran it. Raine had gone. She’d left him.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, in front of the comconsole. Night fell over the city unnoticed. He got up eventually, staggering like an old man or some invalid just out of bed. Ivan hadn’t unpacked his bags. He picked them back up again and left.

He woke up the next morning to a bundle of joy leaping into his bed, screaming her head off. Two bony knees thunked into his ribcage. At least somebody loved him. “Oof! Marie, what are you doing?”

“My Ivan! You came home! You did! You did!”

“Yes, I did, darling, but it’s very early. You’re going to wake everyone. How did you even know I
was here? You were fast asleep when I came in last night.”

“I look every day, My Ivan, because you said you’d come back soon.”

Ma McIver tapped on the door. “Oh, my lord, I’m so sorry. She’d been so excited at you coming back. Marie, you come back out here right now! His lordship has been working very hard. He needs to sleep, and you need to get your nightdress off and your clothes on!”

“Oh, I won’t. I don’t want to. I want to talk to My Ivan.”

Ivan sat up in the bed. “What’s this? Are you talking back to Ma McIver? She won’t help you put your going to the zoo clothes on if you give her cheek like that. I’m surprised at you, Marie. Off you go and mind you say sorry.”

He gave her a kiss and lifted her down to the floor. “Quick smick. Off you go.”

Her bottom lip came out in a pout. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, you do. And I have to get rid of my hairy chin and find my zoo clothes. I can’t do that with young ladies in my bedroom.”

She trailed off, as slowly as she dared, dragging Steggy across the floor behind her. Ma McIver gave him an embarrassed smile of thanks and closed the door once she was out.

Ivan stopped smiling as soon as she was gone. For a minute he’d forgotten. Heartache hit him like a bucket of cold water. The last time he’d felt this bad he’d thought Miles had died. Raine wasn’t dead. She’d just left him. Broken up. Split. Ditched him, Given him the flick.

Aceline was still in town though. Perhaps she could tell him something, let him know how Raine had been thinking. Perhaps Raine had even left another message! Ivan was half way through his shower before he remembered. He was going to the zoo.

Watching animatronic pterodactyls swoop on helpless prey wouldn’t have been his first choice for the day, but Marie loved it. She was a bloodthirsty little thing, not caring a bit for the poor fish that were being ripped to pieces. The hexapods scared her, though. Her absolute favourite was the butterfly house. There was magic in her face, watching the brightly coloured jewels flit around. When one landed on Ivan’s head her gurgling torrents of laughter even brought a smile to his own face. After that, the horses were a bit of a let down. Ivan could just remember old Count Piotr’s beautiful horses at Vorkosigan Surleau, and he thought they were a bit of a let down, too, sad and dispirited in the corner of their pen.

Marie tugged at his hand. “Ice cream?”

Ivan nodded. “Ice cream.”

There were all the colours of the rainbow of ice cream, but Marie still chose pink. Ivan thought he might have blue. It turned out to be bubblegum flavour. That would be right. Life really sucked.

By mid-afternoon he’d taken Marie home, changed out of his sticky outfit, plucked up the courage and rung the door chime at the security gate for the apartment his mother had found for the Vorfoleses.

He was a bit taken aback when a man’s voice answered. He was even more taken aback when he realised he recognised it. “Wally? Is that you?”
“Come on up, Ivan. We’re just having a glass of wine.” The buzzer sounded on the door release.

Talk about awkward. Ivan felt like a blind dog in a meat shop. The last thing he wanted to do was queer Wally’s pitch but he really was desperate to find out about Raine. Aceline was pleased to see him, so it couldn’t have been some calumny from By Vorrutyer that had sent Raine running. Wally was just a tad less welcoming. Ivan had never seen him out of uniform. The admiral was a pretty snappy dresser.

He declined the offer of a glass of wine. “No, thank you, Madame. Raine had left me a message when I got back yesterday. Has she gone somewhere? I really need to find her. It’s very important.”

“Oh,” Aceline shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “Didn’t she tell you? I told her she was being a coward. I’m very sorry, Ivan, but Raine has gone to Beta Colony. She left two days ago.”
“Ivan?”

He felt a gentle touch on his hair. He sat up, blinking and confused. This was his mother’s dining room, and he’d fallen asleep on the table. He was in trouble.

“Ivan, what’s wrong?”

His mother didn’t sound angry. She sounded concerned. He blinked again, focusing his eyes on her face. She wore a red satin robe, and her hair—he’d never seen her hair like that, flowing down across her shoulders, all the way down to her hips. *His mother looked beautiful.*

“I’m not drunk, mamère. I wouldn’t do that in your house.”

A ghost of a smile flitted across her features. That gentle hand still stroked his hair. “It has been known, but you’re right. Not for a long time. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing you can fix, mamère. Raine has left me and gone to Beta Colony. I was going to ask her to marry me.”

“You were as serious as that?”

He nodded. “I was deadly serious, for the first time in my life. I… I feel like something’s missing, and I can never get it back.”

She looked right through him then, her eyes and her thoughts far, far away. *She knew exactly how he felt.* Only Padma never came back, and he’d been murdered right in front of her eyes.

“How did you do it, mamère? How could you ever have gone on like that? I’m just… lost.”

“Oh, I was lost, for a long time I was lost. Kou needed me to be strong at first, and then Cordelia needed me. She couldn’t have organised a mothers’ society tea party, back then. And I was angry, so angry. Padma… well, never mind. I’m Vor, Ivan. Vor means duty. I had a duty to you. I had more than a duty to you. You were everything I had left to love. All you can do is go on.”

She paused, thinking, and slid an arm around his shoulders. “Never let them see you with your heart on your sleeve, Ivan. Those wolves out there will be howling with delight at the thought of the tables being turned on you. Laugh it off. Come home and cry on my shoulder if you need to. But never,” her tone turned quite vicious, “never give them the satisfaction.”

Easier said than done. “I don’t have a duty to do, not an important one. I just have my desk at Ops.”

She took hold of both his shoulders and made him look at her. “Well you make it the best damned desk in Ops then, don’t you? And besides, you’re forgetting. Not only are you reporting to me on Monday morning, when I was thirty years old I had a five year old child to take care of. Sound familiar?”

That brought a smile to his lips. “How could I forget? I have the bruises to prove it.” Greatly daring, he slid his arms round her waist and hugged her close. For a few moments she held him
tight, then kissed the top of his head.

“Right. It’s 0300. You might have the day off tomorrow, but I have the Vorbarr Sultana Garden Society to afternoon tea at the Residence. I’m proud of you, Ivan, but go to bed.”

Monday morning, bright and early. Ivan had breakfast with his mother and Marie, and managed to avoid any groat splatters on his undress greens. He kissed her goodbye after Ma McIver had her all cleaned up. She clung on to his leg for a few moments, but when he promised he’d see her tonight, he wasn’t going away, she let him go. He travelled with his mother in the ground car with Christos driving. They got out at the entrance steps, as usual. Ivan straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath. He’d been stuck in a cellar with a homicidal maniac. He could do this.

Countess Vorinnis nearly made him change his mind. His mother hadn’t mentioned her reinforcements. Sneaky woman, his mother. She’d have never got him inside the door if she had. If just one of them pinched his cheek he was out of there. Ivan, dear he could stand, just. By the time morning coffee came around he was beginning to doubt even that.

Lady Alys looked up from her comconsole. “Ivan, dear, your cousin Miles is back. Gregor has just sent word. He’d like you to meet a few people in his office at 1100 hours. You run along and don’t keep them waiting.”

Anything to get out of here. He was wearing his undress greens, not his dress greens as was proper to wait on the Emperor, but he wasn’t going to let that worry him. Even the thought of his runty cousin didn’t daunt him as Ivan practically ran to Gregor’s secretary’s office. He was over his aversion to the place by now, once he’d realised there were actually worse places he could be. It wasn’t long before he was called in.

Gregor sat with a group of men over on the leather couches. Miles was there. He looked even more shocking than usual, grey-faced and was that bandages? It was, on both wrists. Couldn’t the maniac do anything without getting himself hurt again?

“Ivan, come in and take a seat. You know everybody, of course?”

Ivan looked round. His danger meter flicked to red. Gregor, Miles, General Allegre, Prime Minister Racozy, and no less than four Counts: Vorhalas, Vormoncrief, Vorsmythe and Vorbretten. He wasn’t going to like this.

Gregor poured him a coffee personally. There wasn’t any place to go past red, but his danger meter was screaming at him, now. Ivan sipped his coffee. Gregor offered him a pastry. He shook his head. Coffee would do fine. “We’ve been going over your report on the Vor Clarence district, Ivan. I think we’ve all agreed it’s very comprehensive. The Imperium rarely interferes in District affairs, but this is one of those times. It’s a great grief to us all what has been going on down there.”

Ivan nodded. “I was really shocked. I suppose I’ve only really known men like Count Vorkosigan, and you, sirs,” he nodded to Count Vorhalas and the others, “and my own Count Vorpatril, of course. All men of honour and decency. It never entered my head that any Vor could disregard his oaths so flagrantly and so treasonably.”

Gregor indicated his committee. “We met some time ago, to consider options. There were a few stipulations made about the type and character of the man we need to replace Vor Clarence. Count Vorbretten nominated someone who fulfilled all of them.”
“That’s good to hear, sire. I can’t imagine it was an easy task. Did you want me to go over my report with him?”

Gregor shook his head slightly. “Ivan, the man we chose is in this room.”

Ivan blinked. “Prime Minister Racozy? That’s an excellent choice, sire. Congratulations Prime Minister!”

Racozy just shook his head. “Not me, Vorpatril. I have enough on my plate.”

“But, but…General Allegre, did Gregor accept your resignation after all? I thought he’d refused it! You’re going to be the new count?”

Allegre didn’t even bother to shake his head. Ivan looked at Miles. There was an expression of unholy glee in his eyes.

Ivan’s empty coffee cup and saucer hit the carpet. He couldn’t think of a single word to say. He could feel blood draining from his extremities and his hands started shaking. They all sat watching him. At last he mustered up a coherent thought from somewhere.

“No, you can’t do this. I’m not good enough. Those people deserve so much better.”

Vormoncrief glowered at him. “My thoughts exactly.”

It wasn’t unanimous then. Perhaps there was still hope. “Surely there’s someone else?”

Gregor produced a flimsie. “We considered several people. Lord Vorbohn the younger.”

“Too old,” Miles interjected.

“Lord Vortala the younger,” Gregor continued.

“Far too valuable where he is now,” General Allegre said. “We’d never replace that experience and training.”

“Sigur Vorbretten,” Rene shifted uneasily in his seat and Gregor went on, “but until other matters are settled he can’t be considered and didn’t meet all of the requirements anyway.”

Gregor dropped the flimsie. “Come back this time tomorrow with a better option, Ivan, and We may possibly consider him, but We assure you We are very well pleased with this choice. You’ll need to think about a name, and We would wish you to choose a different house livery. We want to make a completely new start. Why don’t you go with Miles and take a look round Vorclarence House? We know you were there quite recently, but under somewhat different circumstances. We want this matter settled promptly and presented to the Council of Counts in seven days. We are proposing a bill on the Komarr Soletta Array and that will need a great deal of discussion.”

Ivan opened his mouth and shut it again.

Gregor took a good look at him. “Don’t try and say anything now. Go with Miles, sleep on it and come back here tomorrow. 1100 hours. And don’t tell your mother just yet. We’ll let her know you’re doing some business for Us.”

*Don’t tell your mother?* He’d have to be able to speak to tell his mother anything. He couldn’t even walk. Miles had to pull him to his feet and push him out of the room. They were in the ground car, on the way to Vorclarence House before he uttered another word.
“You knew about this, you twelve-toed bastard.”

There was even a ballroom at Vorclarence House. Not quite on the grand scale of Vorkosigan House, but the place was a hundred years younger. Miles sucked in a breath of envy when he saw the bathrooms in the armsmen’s quarters. There were two lift tubes. The wine cellar was empty, as were the liquor cabinets in the library. Miles scratched his head at that, but Ivan smiled grimly to himself. He’d find out, soon enough. Ivan just wandered. His whole apartment would fit in the master bedroom with half the space left over. What the hell would he do with all of this? Fill it full of little Lord Ivans? Chance would be a fine thing.

Miles sat him down in a study. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“It’s preposterous. I’d be stepping into a dead man’s shoes, a man I caused to be dead in the first place.”

“Did he deserve to be dead?”

“Yes, and the whole verminous family with him.”

“Well then, you did the District a favour, didn’t you? And now you need to do it another favour; finish what you started. You can do it, Ivan. I know you can. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Ivan let himself be drawn in by the fervour in Miles’ grey eyes. It was always the same with Miles. He was irresistible. Well, maybe not this time.

“I can’t, Miles. I know nothing. Your father is a great man. You grew up learning this stuff with the air you breathed. Bothari, Pym, old Esterhazy, even. They taught you from day one.”

“We’ll help you, Ivan. We’ll all help you. The Count my father is coming back for the wedding. He’ll be here any day soon. I’ll ask him if I can lend you an armsman. Pym, even, to help you out.”

“And what might Pym have to say about that? They’re people, Miles, not chess pieces.”

“I’d ask him first, of course I would. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“No, I wouldn’t take Pym. Have you been home at all, yet?”

“Only to drop my bags and change. It was early. Roic was still on duty. I haven’t seen Pym yet.”

A tiny spark lit for a moment, and with it, an idea. “Ask him to show you the cellar book, when you do see him. I can’t decide this just yet, Miles. I know you’d be supportive, but that might not be enough. I’m going to go for a walk. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ivan walked for hours. He passed the Great Square where all this had started. He called in at Ops HQ and stood in his old office until his temporary replacement quailed under his stare and retreated to the coffee machine. He crossed the bridge and walked by Vorhartung castle, where all the banners were flying now the Council of Counts had assembled for the session. There were one or two missing, of course. It was early evening when he finished up on an almost familiar doorstep. When the armsman answered he asked if Count Vorhalas was at home to visitors.

It was very different, this time, sitting across the desk from the Count. The old man looked at him and sent for some wine. “You’ll take a drink with me, Vorpatril. I can see you have questions.”
They waited until the armsman had poured two glasses of a deep ruby wine and closed the door behind him.

“Sir,” Ivan began, “how can you even think I can do this job?”

Vorhalas sipped his wine. “I was very sceptical at first, but then I began to see some things, and hear some things. You never knew your father, did you?”

“No sir, I only know of him by what my mother tells me, and sometimes the Viceroy, when he’s on planet. I can never be a man like him.”

“Well, you can thank whatever gods you pray to that you’re nothing like Padma Vorpatril! I knew him. He was only a year or two older than my Evon. They were very alike.”

He saw Ivan bristling up. “No, not like that, man. Padma would never have looked twice at Vordarian. The one true thing about him was his honour. Aral Vorkosigan carried him on his shoulders from the day he was born. Padma was a weak man. Army mad, like all of them then and now, but you can’t change me of my opinion that he achieved his rank because of who he was, not how he was. He’d avoid confrontation, never stick his head up, handsome devil, best dancer you ever saw. He was well on his way to drinking himself to death. Remind you of anyone?”

Ivan hadn’t known what he wanted, when he’d come here to see Vorhalas, but this wasn’t it. He could only nod.

“Exactly. And that was my opinion of you, until you changed it for me. You have true steel in you, Vorpatril. You see something is wrong and you set about changing it. You have true Vor in you, too, and for all the fancy talk and hero worship I can tell you to your face you didn’t get it from your father. Your lady mother was worth five of Padma any day of the week. And still is.”

Ivan set down his glass of wine unfinished. “You truly think I can do this?”

He was late home for dinner. He could hear the howls of a full-blown tantrum the minute Christos opened the door for him. He could tell by the man’s harried expression it must have been going for some time.

“Shit. I broke my promise.”

“I don’t think she’ll be going to sleep until you do see her, my lord. Quite insistent, she’s been.” Christos took his cap and shut the door behind him. “Now would be good.”

Ivan unbuttoned and stripped off his tunic. Shirts could be washed a lot more easily, and this was likely to end up messy. Marie lay on the floor in her bedroom. Steggy had been hurled into a corner. Her hair was tumbled and her face was red, and her eyes were screwed up so much she didn’t see him come in. Ma McIver let out a long breath when she saw him. Ivan motioned her out of the room.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You go and take the rest of the night off. I’ll be here.”

She dropped a little curtsey. “Thank you, my lord. I really appreciate that.”

Ivan poured a small glass of water, sat in the armchair and waited. After a series of unintelligible howls Marie started on her mantra again.
“I want *My Ivan!*”

“I’m right here, sweetheart.”

“I want—” She looked up at last “Oh! My Ivan! You’re here!”

“I said I would be, didn’t I? I would always let you know if I had to break my word.”

“You said you’d be here for my dinner.”

Ivan tipped his head on one side. “Did I, or are you making that up?”

She scrambled up to her feet and ran to pick up Steggy. She buried her face in Steggy’s back plates.

“What did I say, princess?”

She looked at him. Her lip trembled. “You said you’d be here tonight.”

He opened his arms. “Come here and have a drink of water, you silly goose.”

Her face one bright smile, Marie launched herself. Ivan gave her the drink of water, dug out his handkerchief and wiped her face. “Now, you need to listen to me. Can you do that?”

She sniffed a bit, wiped her nose on his shirt and said, “yes, My Ivan. I can listen.”

“I know you’re very worried when you think I’m not coming back. I will *always* come back for you, Marie. My word as Vorpatril, even though you don’t know what that means, yet. Sometimes I might have to go away, if the Emperor tells me to, but I will never forget you. Papi Simon, Mamie Alys, Ma McIver, Christos and I will never let you be scared, or lost, or hungry, or lonely ever again. All you have to do is tell one of us. It won’t always be me here. Do you understand?”

She nodded. “But I like you the best, My Ivan. You and Papi Simon.”

He tickled her. “You little tinker. Don’t you say that to anybody else. That’s our secret. Have you had your bath tonight? Do you want me to read you a story?”

“Ma McIver put me in the bath. She didn’t brush my hair though, ’cos I wouldn’t let her.”

“That’s not very nice to poor Ma McIver. You’ll have to say sorry to her in the morning. Fetch your brush and I’ll do your hair, then one story and then bed. No arguments.”

The world had changed on its axis around Ivan. He’d lost the woman he loved, Gregor had run mad and Miles with him, and old Vorhalas thought he could make a count. *But perhaps he could build a paint factory.* He brushed Marie’s hair and considered it.
Not a wink of sleep. Ivan looked at his face in the bathroom mirror. There was a pile of scribbled on flimsies by his bedside table. His head was stuffed with what if and why not and more than quite a few why me? He was surprised there wasn’t a furrow in the carpet. All he wanted to do was curl up in a quiet corner with Raine in his arms and forget all about the world. He could not do this.

He really should wear his parade dress this morning, but that had had a few holes in it the last time he’d seen it. He had his swords and his boots. That would cause a bit of a stir, if he fronted up to the Residence in just those. Ivan giggled. He was close to hysterical. Deep breath time.

Perhaps Wally could help him. He coded in his personal contact, and waited. Was it going to time out? Switch to record mode? At last the admiral answered. Ivan had woken him up. “I’m on leave, Vorpatril,” he growled. “This had better be good.”

“I’m in trouble, Wally. I need your help.”

His attitude softened. “OK, that’s good. I mean, that’s bad, but it’s good enough to wake me up. Do you need me to meet you?”

“I’d really appreciate it. Coffee? I have to see the Emperor at 1100 hours.”

“0930 hours on the Grand Square, or do you want me to see me in my office?”

“I don’t think a pill is going to help me this time. Meet you at Shoko’s?”

“OK, and don’t worry, Ivan. Nothing’s so bad that there isn’t a solution. See you then.”

His mother gave him one of her looks at the breakfast table. “What’s wrong, Ivan?”

Marie looked at him anxiously. “Are you sick? Don’t be sick. Would you like Steggy?”

She was so sweet. This wasn’t fair on her. “No, honey, I’m not sick. Emperor Gregor has asked me to do something and I think it might be too difficult for me. I have to talk to him today about it. I might be late back tonight, so you have your dinner and do what Ma McIver tells you, OK? I’ll see you when I can but it might be tomorrow, or even the next day.”

She pouted a bit and sighed. “I understand, My Ivan.”

He ruffled her hair. “Good girl.”

His mother was still giving him the look.

“What is it, mamère?”

“Spit and polish dress greens, you haven’t eaten a thing and you can’t sit still for a minute. This isn’t about Raine, is it? What has Gregor asked you to do that’s so difficult? I know he’s preoccupied at the moment, we all are, but you’ve just returned from Vor Clarence District. I hope he’s not sending you back when I really need your help. Countess Vorinnis is quite taken with you, as is Lady Mary and the calligraphy team. I don’t suppose you want me to say anything to Gregor,
though.”

*Oh, ye gods, what a nightmare* that would be... “No, mamère. Please don’t.”

He escaped in time to walk to the Square. He still hadn’t got things settled in his head, but the fresh air didn’t really help at all. Wally was there ahead of him, but not by much. He’d just had time to order the coffee. He watched Ivan through narrowed eyes as he approached, assessing. After they shook hands and the coffee arrived, Wally sat back “So, talk to me. I thought this was going to be about Raine, but I can see it’s not.”

*Raine.* Even to hear her name was like a knife in his heart. “There is nothing I can do about Raine. Is there any news?”

“No, Ivan. Aceline would surely tell you if there was. She can’t have got to Beta yet.”

“I suppose not. *Why* did she do it, Wally? Did I frighten her so much?”

“Oh, I think she was scared of her own feelings, Ivan, reading between the lines. I wouldn’t despair just yet.”

Ivan sipped his coffee. “Gregor wants to make me the new Count. I’ve got enough to despair about already, thank you very much.”

Wally’s coffee was half way to his mouth. He slapped it back down into the saucer with enough force to make it spill. “Good gods. What did you say to him?”

He pointed to his chrono. “I haven’t said anything until 1100 hours. I have to give him my decision then.”

“Right.” Wally dug out a flimsy from his pocket and divided it into two lengthways. “Pros and cons.”

“I tried that last night, about eight times. I even tossed a ten mark piece.”

Wally crumpled up the flimsy. “OK, look at it this way. Ivan, who else is going to care that young Jim took home a bunch of flowers for his mother with his first week’s wages?”

Ivan just stared at the admiral. “It’s that simple?”

Wally nodded. “It’s that simple. You’ll do a good job. Don’t doubt yourself.”

“I can’t do any worse a job than that loon Vorfolse, can I?”

Wally grinned. He clapped Ivan on the back. “Hell, no! I wish I was going to be around to see the fun, but I’m going to Vandeville tomorrow. I’ll be gone for ten days, providing an escort and moral support.”

“You old dog.” Ivan wiggled his eyebrows and gave him a cheerful leer. “It’s immoral support you’ve got in mind. Shit, Wally, if things had turned out differently you could have ended up being my father-in-law.”

“My son-in-law the count. Has a ring to it, doesn’t it?” The smile died away from Wally’s face. “It would be my great honour, Ivan. If I had had a son, I could not have wished for better. You have a good heart. See it stays that way. Good luck.”

Ivan watched him walk away across the Square. “I think the honour might well have been mine as
well, Admiral.”

Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril squared his shoulders and marched smartly into the Imperial Residence.

Promptly at 1100 hours Ivan kept marching, right into Gregor’s office. Count Vormoncrief glowered at him. Gregor indicated the seething Count. “Good morning, Ivan. Before you give us your answer, the Count would like to ask you a question or two.”

*It wasn’t going to be easy, was it?* “Yes, my lord Count? What can I do for you?”

“Vorpatril. Tell me this. It’s very convenient that *you* are the one who…er…thwarted justice running its course with the late Count. Did you have this in mind all along? When *did* the Emperor first mention his plan to you?”

Ivan blinked at Vormoncrief. *Say what?* “Sir, I think you’ve confused me with my cousin. Do you honestly think I would be cunning or conniving enough to devise a plan like that? The first inkling I had of this was yesterday.”

“This smacks to me of nepotism. I can’t see why else—” Vormoncrief pulled up short, obviously stopping himself saying more than he should. He shook his head in frustration. “It’s your decision, sire. I’ll say no more. With your permission, I’ll withdraw.”

Gregor went so far as to open the door for the Count. “I’ll see you in the Council Chamber.”

Miles looked thoughtfully at the closed door. “That was strange.”

Rene Vorbretten spoke up. “He just thought twice about bringing up the subject of nepotism. It’s a bit too close to home.”

Miles looked confused, as if he knew he was missing something, but let it pass as Gregor had started to speak. “So what’s it to be, Ivan?”

*No turning back now.* “At your command, sire. I accept.”

Vorhalas was the first to shake his hand. “You’ll do, my boy. Don’t listen to all the poppycock your cousin spouts, mind you. Make your own mind up about matters.”

He bowed to the Emperor and took his leave. Allegre and Racozy didn’t linger, either, except for Allegre giving Ivan a data pack regarding his new security arrangements.

“It will be quite some time before you can appoint your own armsmen, so I’ve taken the liberty of arranging a temporary ImpSec squad for you, with the Emperor’s permission and the peculiar nature of your relationship. I’ve recalled a promising young lieutenant to the capital. Karasavas will continue in New Sheffield for the present, of course.”

Ivan shook his hand. “Thank you very much, sir. That was very good of you.”

Allegre returned the handshake. “Congratulations, my lord Count.”

Vorsmythe and Vorbretten joined the exit with handshakes and a bow. Up close, Ivan was startled to see just how strained Rene Vorbretten looked. The man was desperately worried.

Miles waited until the door closed again. “Well done, Ivan. Very well done indeed.”
Gregor ordered in refreshments. “So, Ivan, have you thought about a name?”

“I have, sire. I’ll always be Ivan Vorpatril, but I thought I’d name the District after one of the greatest people I know.”

Miles helped himself to a pastry. “I had a wonderful idea for a sigil for you, Ivan. How about a bleeding heart with a dagger through it? A Vor dagger. Preferably a long one.”

Ivan glowered at him. “You can mock all you like. It’s all under control. I don’t need your help, thank you very much, coz. Who have you been talking to? Let me guess. Tall and blonde.”

“Got it in one. Martya called me last night. I talked to Pym, too, like you suggested.” He looked very cross.

Ivan had to have some wins. This one was very sweet. “Let me have another guess how the conversation went. You come screaming up out of the wine cellar and pin Pym against the wall…”

Gregor coughed at the very idea of the ludicrous picture that would present.

“…and snarl at him and say, ‘you gave Vorpatril a bottle of the Dendarii Ranges Red? The one my Grandfather the Count laid down?’ And Pym says to you, ‘no, my lord, I gave it to Count Vorhalas.’”

Gregor actually laughed out loud at the expression on Miles’ face.

“It was something like that, yes. I didn’t snarl, though.”

“Let’s get back to work.” The Emperor glanced at his chrono. “Ivan, I’m going to give you the name of my tailor. Do not pass it on, on pain of my severe displeasure. He’s been warned to be ready to make a House uniform for you. Have you decided on a livery?”

“I thought I’d just run it past the Guardian and clear it with him, and surprise you all. When did you want me to take my oath and who can I tell?”

“We need to talk to Falco Vorpatril first, but the sooner the better. We’ll aim for next Monday. The Soletta bill won’t be ready for discussion before then. You can tell close family, if you like. I won’t be at all surprised if it leaks, though. Vormancrief was never discreet.”

Ivan did some quick calculations in his head. “That should give me enough time. I need to talk to some ladies I know.”

“My secretary will send you the appointment time with Falco. It will be today, hopefully.”

Ivan was used to wrangling budgets, but he wasn’t a total magician. “Before I go, there’s one thing we haven’t mentioned.”

Gregor had already turned his mind to the Soletta problem. “Oh, what’s that?”

“How I’m going to pay for all of this?”

Gregor snapped his fingers. “Sorry, Ivan. I did forget to tell you, didn’t I? The confiscated bank accounts are all being transferred to your name as we speak. I think the figure mentioned was three million marks, give or take.”

Ivan heard Miles squeak. Or was that a hiss? Anyway, it sounded good. Once he got his own breath back and stopped his eyes watering he managed to squeak out himself, “I might need a good
accountant.”

“Talk to Gerard. He’s got a few things for you.”

Ivan staggered out of the Residence under a mountain of data cases. He called up an autocab and dumped them all at Vorclarence House. The palm reader on the front door had already been reset, or so the surprisingly cheerful ImpSec guard on the front gate told him. Gregor must have been sure of his man. He sat down for the next hour to draw up a spread sheet. He added a couple of flow charts for good measure, and then started a few wheels in motion down in the, no, his District. Good god.

The adrenalin ran out a little after mid-afternoon. He needed a break. Ivan walked out of his new front door and immediately picked up a discreet shadow. Plain clothes, of course, but the haircut gave him away. Ivan just had to grin and bear it. He’d always had an outer perimeter, just nothing quite as up front and personal like this. No doubt he’d get to meet the man sooner or later.

The elegant shop front had a brass plaque to one side of the front door. Alexandre. Gregor’s card acted like a magic talisman.

Monsieur Alexandre himself deigned to conduct the measuring scan and the choice of fabrics. He sighed a little over the House uniform. “Are you quite sure, my lord? There’s scope for your personality to shine, here. And you really insist I supply without decoration? It’s most unusual.”

“I’m sure, that’s exactly what I want. All my work will be done in the District. I mean to start as I plan to go on. When can you have this delivered?”

Alexandre looked pained. “The Emperor’s request was ‘with all despatch’. Tomorrow afternoon, my lord, at Vorclarence House.”

"I'm not in such a hurry for these, but I'd like three civilian suits, same colour. Next week will do for those. I'll leave the style to your discretion, but I like the way you dress the Emperor."

Alexandre only choked a little bit.

Ivan had just walked out the front door again when his wristcom chimed. Time to go see Falco.

He really was starting to feel like a yo-yo, going in and out the gates of the Imperial Residence like this. The guards all knew him by sight, but that didn’t stop them scanning him meticulously every time. He knew his own way to Gregor’s office perfectly well, but that didn’t stop his escort, either.

Gregor explained quite succinctly. Ivan watched the expression on the old Count’s face as it slipped from polite attention to amazement, utter shock, disbelief and then calculation. No one could claim Falco was slow on the uptake.

“To say I’m astonished is to make an understatement. I take it you wish me to release Ivan from any District loyalty he owes me as his Count?”

The Emperor nodded “If you please, Count Vorpatril. Ivan’s hands will be placed directly between Ours, now. He cannot serve two masters.”

“It remains to be seen if he can serve one, but you must know your own business, your Imperial Majesty. I never had much ambition for the boy.”

Ouch Ivan bristled a bit. True, Falco had never had much sympathy for him, but he didn’t have to go and talk to Gregor like that. The formality was soon completed.
Ivan asked him a question. “Before you go, Count, I have a request, if I may.”

“What’s that, boy?”

*There he went again.* “I would like to retain Vorpatril as part of my name. It’s my heritage, and though my allegiance is no longer to the Vorpatril District I would like to acknowledge its influence on me.”

Falco measured him up. “As long as you don’t disgrace it, you have my permission to acknowledge your heritage any way you wish.”

Ivan gave him a tight smile. “I won’t disgrace it, sir.”

“And don’t go voting on anything before you’ve talked to me.”

That was going too far. Even Gregor stiffened. Ivan tried not to snap. “I will, of course, be voting where my conscience leads me, and most definitely for the good of my own District and the Imperium first. I’ll take all the advice I need, sir. You can be sure of that.”

“Oh, ho, it’s like that is it? Don’t poker up, boy. It’s good not to sit in anyone’s pocket. You remember that when that cousin of yours comes calling. You might do, after all, Ivan. Good luck. Remember me to your mother.” Falco shook his hand, took his farewells from the Emperor and left.

Gregor checked his chrono. “Time for a drink.” He pressed a button and Gerard appeared with a bottle and two glasses. They both sank into the armchairs. The first glass hardly touched the sides. Gregor smiled at him. “Busy day?”

“You’re used to it. I’m not. I’ve never worked so hard in my life. Is it always like this?”

“Gregor refilled his glass for him. “I do have some excellent news for you, though. Major Vorinnis was successfully cryorevived today. His prognosis is first class.”

“What a relief! When can he have visitors?”

“Ivan didn’t know when he’d been so glad about anything. “Oh, that is excellent, sire. What a relief! When can he have visitors?”

“He’s over at ImpMil. It wasn’t something we could do here in the infirmary. He saw his wife today and I called in for exactly two minutes. Maybe by Friday, but just give them a call first.”

Ivan made a note. “I need a secretary. My social life just got a whole more complicated. I can’t afford to forget anything.”

Gregor laughed again. “Well, you can’t have my social secretary. She’s taken.”

Ivan sighed. “I need to go talk to m’mother, don’t I?”

“I think what you need to do is go home and get a good night’s sleep. Or go to the park and fly a kite. I suggest you try and keep up appearances for now. Just keep doing what you’re doing for your mother, and don’t worry. Anyone asks you anything hairy just tell them We’ve forbidden you to discuss it. We have Our uses, sometimes.”

He was weary. If he went back to his mother’s apartment now he’d been in time to see Marie off to
bed. It sounded like a plan. Ivan pulled himself to his feet.

“Thanks, Gregor, and for what it’s worth, you know I’ll do my best not to let you down, don’t you?”

Gregor showed him out. “You won’t let me down, Ivan. I have no fear of that.”
Christos came to Ivan’s rescue again the next day. Ivan really needed his spread sheet and flow chart. He had about twenty irons in the fire all at once. There was no way he could get out to the Flyerport and do his mother’s errands for her at the same time. Christos picked up his party and delivered them to Vor Clarence House, where Ivan had just squeezed in the time to greet them and explain the plan. He moved them into the vacant armsmen’s quarters for the time being and called in a catering and cleaning service to look after them. Hopefully by the time he returned they’d have got rid of their overawed expressions and be ready to work. There were a couple of banquet tables set up in the ballroom ready to go.

He still hadn’t plucked up the courage to tell his mother. He’d opened his mouth to do it several times, but something else always came out. Enough dithering. He marched back to the Residence and into her office.

“Ivan, dear! Just the person I wanted. I need this little task list delivered to your cousin Miles. Could you pop over to Vorkosigan House for me? Hurry, now, there’s a good boy.”

She hadn’t even looked him in the eye. Frustrated, Ivan folded. He’d tell her later. “Yes, mamère. Right away.”

Pym didn’t want to let him in the door. It was really strange. Ivan couldn’t understand it. Perhaps Pym really had got into trouble with Miles over the bottle of Dendarii Ranges red? There was no way he was going to go back and tell his mother he’d been scared off by one of Miles’ armsmen. He’d only have to come back again, anyway. Ivan saw his chance and brushed past into the hallway and up the stairs to Miles’ suite. What was it that Pym was burbling about? A landscaper? Too bad. He had things to do as well. Ivan opened the door and all became clear.

Oho! Miles had found himself a widow.

The more Ivan thought about it, the more he decided Miles deserved everything he got. He’d thought it hilarious to make fun of his relationship with Raine with that crack about his sigil. Imagine his face if anybody had made jokes about or denigrated his precious Maple Leaf and Mountains. He’d strangle them with his bare hands!

He really had to stop thinking about Raine, though. He only had so much thinking he could do, after all, and there were plenty of other headaches besetting him at the moment. No, he had to pretend it had never happened, somehow. Carry on as normal. There was still Olivia Koudelka he could talk to, and hadn’t Kareen come home, as well, or even Cassie Vorgorov—no, wait, she’d got engaged to that lucky sod Vortashpula, hadn’t she? What had his mother said, apart from the I told you so, when that had happened? Oh, yes, just the other night. Don’t wear your heart on your sleeve. After all, if being a Count couldn’t attract him a mate what the hell use was it anyway? He’d just find himself another girl.

In the end, it wasn’t until the Friday he managed to catch his mother alone. He’d been to see Vorinnis that morning, and told him the story of what had happened and what had happened since.
Nobody had explained anything to the man. Why didn’t Barrayarans just sit down and talk to people, for heaven’s sake? Vorinnis had died for his Emperor. Ivan just took hold of his hand and told him everything. It was something they would always share. A couple of centimetres either way and their roles could so easily have been reversed.

In a very sombre mood Ivan walked into his mother’s office, shut the door and flipped the switch to ‘do not disturb.’ She looked up, very annoyed. “Ivan, I’m really busy. Can’t this wait?”

He shook his head. “No, mamère, it can’t, and I hope you can clear your schedule on Monday morning, too.” He extracted the tickets he’d been given for the Council session and laid them on the table. “I’d like you to come to Vorhartung Castle.”

“What in the world for? Darling, you do realise what we still have left to organise, don’t you—”

“Mamère, Gregor is going to take my oath as Count.”

That shut her up. That absolutely gobsmacked her, if anything so crude could ever be said about his mother. She gaped at him. “What—what did you just say?”

“I said, Gregor is going to take my oath as Count, and I would like you and Simon to be there for me. I would appreciate it very much.”

Perhaps he should get her a glass of water or something. It was very unnerving when her eyes started to fill with tears. “Oh, Ivan! Is that what was troubling you so much the other day? And I was so annoyed at Gregor for…for…” She couldn’t finish. She took a deep, deep, breath. “I’m so very happy for you, my darling, that Gregor should have so much faith in you. I thought I was the only one who knew what you were capable of, but obviously I was wrong.”

“That remains to be seen, but I’m going to give it a damned good try.”

She smiled through her tears. “But…but…are you giving up your name? There can’t be two Counts Vorpatril.”

“Falco knows all about it, and so will you, if you’re able to come on Monday.”

“Of course I’ll be there on Monday. I could never miss something like that. Oh, Ivan, I don’t know what to say, or what to do, even. Give me a kiss!”

Once he escaped, he smiled a bit. That had gone better than he’d expected.

Ivan moved a few of his things over to his new home, enough that he could sleep there. He even hired a temporary valet, houseman and cook from an agency his mother often used. There were the beginnings of new life in the place now, with his ImpSec detachment, the workers from New Sheffield and the household staff. It was less like a tomb and more like a—well, not a home, exactly, but at least a house.

He was at the house when Anton Vorberg arrived from New Sheffield. The lieutenant could hardly contain his excitement. “My lord! This is…is…just incredible. Who would have thought?”

“Well, Count Vormoncrief thought, but he was wrong. Certainly not me. Certainly not when we were stuck in that blasted dungeon. It’s so good to see you, Vorberg. I need a few friends around me at the minute. How are your ribs these days?”
“Fine, sir, just fine.”

“You are now officially my head of security until I get a chance to find myself some armsmen. I’ll show you where you’ll be staying and you can get yourself oriented. No one has tried to blow us up, yet, you’ll be glad to hear.”

“I’ll make very sure of that, sir. I’ll check all the perimeters and start looking for the escape routes. How many have you found so far?”

“I haven’t even looked, Vorberg. That’s your job. I’m delivering a hundred invitations to HQ tomorrow. All individually hand calligraphed. They’re working 26 hours a day seven days a week over at the Residence. It’s a madhouse!”

While he was there he popped into the ballroom. The ladies were working like bees round a hive. Ivan felt guilty about it, but they seemed to be thriving on the challenge. They were confident they’d be ready.

“It’s such a change, my lord,” one of the bolder ones told him. You have no idea how sick we were of that burnt orange. We took pride, but this is tasteful, if you know what I mean.”

Ivan rather thought he did.

It was as he left Ops HQ the next afternoon that he ran into Alexi Vormoncrief. Vormoncriefs in general weren’t exactly flavour of the month with Ivan, but it was Alexi’s uncle he wasn’t too happy with, after all, not the nephew. The man looked too self-satisfied to be true, but if he was buying drinks who was Ivan to pour cold water on the idea? And ha! Who did he spot inside the tavern? The very man he’d wanted to have words to for weeks now. By Vorrutyer had been avoiding him. He wasn’t going to wriggle out of this one.

Ivan couldn’t believe his ears. Alexi Vormoncrief was sending a baba? Ooooh shit. What had he done? If Miles ever found out about this he was dead meat.

He waited until Vormoncrief went off to the head before saying anything to By. “What the hell did you say to Raine? She took off like a scalded cat when my back was turned.”

By held his hands up in mock surrender. “Not one thing, Ivan. I was even pleading your case. She certainly never gave me a second glance. I can’t help you there. But it looks to me like you have other, more urgent problems at the moment.”

Ivan sighed. “Yes, yes I do. You don’t know the half of it, By.”

“Did you know my cousin Donna is on her way back from Beta? I think she has quite fond memories of you. You might be able to help her.”

Ivan’s danger meter clicked on. Immediately suspicious, he tried to work out why By was asking for his help. But Donna—. Ivan remembered Donna. If anyone was going to make him forget Raine, Donna would. He heard himself agreeing to meet her.

Monday morning came around far too soon. Ivan had warned Marie he was going to be away and moved into Vorclarence House for the night. He took a four-hour sleep timer and it worked, sort of. He dozed off and on, but woke for good well before dawn. He had his checklist and he knew
what he had to do, right down to 0700-0720 wash hair and depilate.

He’d chosen black boots to wear as uniform, rather than brown. They gave an added cachet to the whole costume. As his valet buttoned up the tunic Ivan took the time to look at himself in the mirror. Molly and Rachel had done a magnificent job. The valet seemed to agree.

“My lord, I can’t remember when I’ve seen so fine a turn out! If I may say so, your physique must set off any clothes to distinction, but this! The tailoring, and the workmanship! You’d match the Emperor himself.”

Ivan grinned at the valet. Some of his old cheerful self-confidence came roaring back. It had been sadly missing, lately. “Thank you. That’s rather the effect I’d hoped for.”

Molly and Rachel and all the women had got up early to see him. They had a large package with them to go in the ground car Ivan had hired. No driving himself today.

They looked like they were all going to burst into tears. “Oh, my lord,” Rachel gasped. “We’re fit to burst with pride. Just look at you!”

Ivan went down the line and kissed every one of them on the cheek. “Not a bad advertisement for the district, am I? Thank you so much. Don’t forget some of the ceremony is going to be broadcast.”

“Oh, we’ll be watching, my lord”, Molly told him “We wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

The Lord Guardian had a distinct taste for the theatrical, Ivan decided. After he relieved Ivan of his package the man smuggled him off into a small antechamber just outside the main doors and gave him the door code. No one had seen them. He whispered. Why he was whispering Ivan had no idea, but it all added to the drama. “Don’t let anyone in until you see me tap the spear and call you forth. There’s a monitor just here, as you can see. Your two nominated counts will come for you and escort you up to the dais. As you take your oath,” he tapped the package, “this will be taken care of. Is everything understood?”

“Yes, my lord Guardian. You’ve made everything perfectly straightforward.” Ivan could feel a sick excitement start to take hold, or was it stark terror? He’d made himself eat—0800 spiced bread and there were only three items left on his checklist.

0930 Do not panic, 0950 check for footstool, 1000 Ceremony begins. He sat down to wait. There was a large mirror along one side of the room. Ivan could only guess it was for witnesses to make sure they looked respectable before entering the chamber. The footstool was there just as he’d requested.

By 0955, it looked like every bench in the room had been filled, bar two. The Vorrutyer desk still lay vacant as well. Old Vorfolse was there, Vormuir, Vormoncrief, of course, Vortalas, Vorhals, and yes, there was Vorkosigan. When the camera panned to the gallery, Ivan could see it too, was full. There were mamère and Simon, Marie in a bright pink dress between them. The Koudelkas were there, too. That had been an exercise, getting them to come along without giving the game away. Ivan suspected someone had dropped a word in Kou’s ear. He wore his parade red and blues.

There were astonished cries from the visitors’ gallery and lots of finger pointing as the guests filtered in. This was the first occasion those not on either Council had seen Dorca’s lance. The buzz of speculation grew to a not-quite decorous hum. There were going to be lots of questions after the session.
The Guardian tapped his spear butt for silence and Gregor came onto the dais from his small office behind the camp stool. He took his place and an expectant hush fell over the crowd. Ivan stood up, straightened his tunic and unlocked the door.

“If it please your Imperial Majesty,” the Guardian announced, “your newest Count awaits your pleasure.”

Gregor nodded and spoke in a firm, clear voice. “Call him forth, my lord Guardian.”

The guardian thumped his spear butt onto the plank three loud times. “Emperor Gregor calls forth Lord Ivan Xav Vorpatril, Count Voralys.”

There was a gasp around the room, followed by an astonished murmur. Ivan wished he could see his mother’s face. The noise swelled as the shocked crowd watched Gregor himself descend from the dais, meet up with Miles and march to the back of the hall. The double doors were flung open for them. They disappeared from the vid and seconds later appeared in the flesh in the antechamber. A holovid photographer lurked behind them.

Gregor smiled. Ivan could have sworn Miles had tears in his eyes. Before he could say a word Ivan hoisted him up onto the footstool and the three of themselves looked at their reflections in the mirror.


“I couldn’t change that. It means too much to so many people.”

Gregor shook his hand. “Well done, Ivan. Very well done indeed.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house as Ivan made his oath. Well, maybe not Count Vormoncrief, but even Old Vorhalas could be seen blinking away his emotion. As Ivan placed his hands between Gregor’s the vids cut away to show the Voralys banner unfurled in all its glory, every last stitch of the Oak leaf and Acorn hand worked by the ladies of Prestwich.

Miles stepped forward again to lead Ivan to the speaker’s circle. He kept his speech brief.

“Your Imperial Majesty, Counts, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for this immense honour you have bestowed on me here today. I was further given the privilege of choosing a new name for my District and I told his Imperial Majesty I would name it for one of the greatest people I have ever known. Mamère,” he paused to look up into the gallery, “you are true Vor. I thank you.”

There was silence as Miles led him to his bench. Ivan heaved one huge sigh of relief and smiled tremulously at his cousin.
There was chaos on the floor of the chamber. Every man and his dog wanted to shake Ivan’s hand. Even with his superior height he couldn’t see who he was looking for through the crowd. He spotted Kou at last, distinctive in his red and blue, his head topping most of the others present. With Kou on one side and Simon on the other, team Koudelka running interference, his mother walked towards him. Simon carried Marie in his arms, or the crowd would have swamped her. The bystanders fell silent and moved backwards slightly to give them room. Miles hopped up on the Voralys bench to see past the others.

Lady Alys curtsied gracefully, her face serene. “My lord Count.”

Ivan lifted her completely off her feet, whirled her round and set her down again. He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand. “My Lady Alys…Mamère.”

Drou, Delia, Martya, Olivia and Kareen smothered him before he could get up. Marie had had enough of waiting. She wriggled until Papi Simon put her down and then dived in between their legs. Ivan struggled back to his feet and hoisted her high up above his head. “What do you think of your Ivan now, Marie?”

“You’re very pretty, My Ivan. All sparkles.”

“Pretty is as pretty does.”

Ivan whipped his head around to see Count Vormoncrief regarding the scene in front of him with a sour look on his face.

“Gregor is going to regret this. What a lightweight.”

Ivan had never liked Vormoncrief. He was rigid, stuffy, ultra-conservative and bigoted. Before he could say anything, though, his cousin spoke up.

“Ivan might surprise you yet, Count.”

“I doubt it, Vorkosigan. I doubt it very much.” Vormoncrief stomped off, disgusted.

Miles finally threaded his way through the thinning crowd. He clapped Ivan on the shoulder. “Lunch at my house?”

“Ivan shook his head. “No, lunch at my house. There are some ladies there who need to party.”

Martya Koudelka pricked up her ears. “Ooh, are we all invited? I’ve never been to Vorcl—Voralys House. I’m dying to see what it’s like.”

Ivan smiled at her. He was a better man now. He didn’t blurt out the first thought that came into his head. Martya saw the look. She blushed a little and broke their eye contact.

“Yes, everyone’s invited.” Ivan held out his arm for his mother and his other hand for Marie.

_Missed your chance at being a Countess, didn’t you, Martya?_
Half way out of the chamber he had a thought. “We might have to stop by the wine store on the way back.”

“Leave that to me.” Miles pressed his wristcom. “I’ll get Roic to bring some bottles over. I might even tell him to pick up a couple of the Dendarii Ranges red.”

The catering company he’d hired had done a good job while he was gone. The worktables had vanished from the ballroom and a buffet lunch waited for them, set out against one wall. It was no match for a Ma Kosti spread, but then nobody in Vorbarr Sultana was a match for Ma Kosti. While his guests were all indulging their curiosity and checking out the rooms on the ground floor, Ivan looked around. He couldn’t see his ladies. Vorberg was still in the hall, settling down from the conniptions he’d had trying to scan in all of Ivan’s guests. He asked him where they were.

“I think they’ve gone up to their quarters, my lord. They watched the broadcast and cried bucketloads of tears. Shall I fetch them?”

“No, you stay here. Roic is still on his way with the extra wine. I think Lord Vorkosigan had to roust him out of bed. I’ll go up.”

Ivan headed for the lift tube. He was soon banging on doors in the armsmen’s quarters. “Molly? Rachel? Where are you? The party’s started!”

Rachel poked her head out of her room. She looked horrified. “Oh, my lord, we couldn’t come downstairs with all your friends! Lieutenant Vorberg told us Lady Alys and Lord Vorkosigan were coming.”

Ivan put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “I’ve been practising, Rachel. See how you like this… Don’t be daft. There’s nowt wrong wi’thee! …Now,” he raised his voice, “All of you, get your a—backsides out here and down to that ballroom. Count’s orders. Come and meet my mother.”

*And that was his first order as Count.*

As Ivan ushered them all into the ballroom he caught Drou’s eye and in seconds team Koudelka swung into action, finding the ladies plates of food and drinks. Once Drou discovered they’d done the exquisite embroidery on Ivan’s House uniform they were ready to make them friends for life.

Now there was a sight to see. A room full of sixteen or so women and only seven men, counting Miles’ armsmen who were included among the guests.

Ivan sighed over what-might-have-beens before he introduced his mother to Molly and Rachel. “You should come straight to the District, mamère,” he said, “and cut out the middlewoman. I’d love to know what mark-up *Estelle* puts on her embroidery.”

Molly bobbed a curtsey to Lady Alys. “Actually, my lady, we recognised that red gown you wore at Winterfair. That was District embroidery. We do work for some of the best modistes in the capital.”

“I Indeed,” Alys gave her son a *look*. “I should get my orders in before you’re swamped. I’m sure there couldn’t have been a finer advert for your skill than Count Voralys.”

Miles wandered over with a glass for Ivan and raised his own in a silent toast. “You know the old saying, Ivan,” he remarked, “After the Imperial Parade…”

“…Somebody has to shovel the horseshit,” Ivan finished for him. “I’ve got another one for you I
heard in Rotherhall. ‘Life’s not all beer and skittles.’ I’m aware, Miles. It won’t always be like this.”

“So, about the Soletta Array vote. It’s coming up soon.”

“So you’ll need to convince me it’s good for my District, won’t you? I’m not going to vote just on your say so, Vorkosigan.”

Miles looked distinctly miffed.

Yes! Vorp—Voralys 1 Vorkosigan 0

“So you’re going to have to do some thinking, are you, Voralys? Find your brains? I know that might be a bit hard for you, but it’s got to be for the good of the Imperium and not just your own self-interest. You normally do you thinking with your gonads.”

Voralys 1 Vorkosigan 1

“Actually, Vorkosigan, I have been doing some thinking about increasing tourist trade to Voralys District. There are some points I want to discuss with you that may well benefit your own District, too. There’s a distinct shortage of decent wine—”

There was a sudden stir among the ImpSec guards round the room. They both saw it at the same time and the game of scoring points was forgotten as they scanned the exits. Miles had his stunner out in a flash. Ivan hadn’t carried his that morning, a mistake he was never going to repeat. They were both having the same thought, Ivan could tell. How do we protect all of these women, even if five of them were Koudelkas.

They’d reached the doors into the hallway by now. They both relaxed with a sigh as they saw the grim, black-uniformed armsmen filing into the house. Vorberg didn’t look relaxed. He looked like a Kshatriyan goat caught in a ground car’s driving lights.

Ivan murmured into his ear. “Man up, Anton. It’s only the Emperor.”

“And Dr Toscane,” Vorberg whispered back.

Satisfied the rooms were cleared Gerard ushered in his Imperial Master, who had Laisa on his arm.

“Ivan! I know you couldn’t have seen me in the gallery past all those gigantic Barrayarans, but I thought you looked superb this morning. Congratulations!” She stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

Gregor shook his hand. “I know we weren’t invited, but I wouldn’t have missed this for anything. We have to have some perks, after all.”

“You’re always invited, sire, and you, Laisa, of course. I just didn’t think you could spare the time.”

“We couldn’t but I found I could.”

There he went again with that split personality stuff, the royal We versus the Count Vorbarra I. It did Ivan’s head in, sometimes.

“Miles will find you a drink while I introduce you to the ladies who did this embroidery, sire.” Ivan pointed to the oak leaves and acorns on his cuffs and collar. “Can you believe they did this and the
It was only temporary. Ivan knew that. Miles would get back at him, and probably in spades, but this victory was *sweet*.

Laisa circled back to talk to him again “So, Ivan, what are your plans now?”

He sighed. “Everything is ATW. My mother owns me, body and soul, until ATW. I put my Imperial uniform back on tomorrow and play messenger boy again. At least I should have enough clout to get in the front door of most places without having to wait in line. After that, I’ll be going down to my District. There’s a sh—whole heap of work needs to be done down there, starting yesterday.”

Laisa wrinkled up her nose in that cute perplexed way she had when she was trying to deal with one of the more mystifying Barrayaran cultural mores. Gregor came up behind her and slipped an arm round her waist. “*After the wedding*. Nobody dares to put a foot wrong for fear of disrupting General Alys’ plans. Everything else is on hold until ATW. I’m afraid you’ve forgotten something, though, Ivan. Your commission.”

Ivan felt the floor buckle under him. He *had* forgotten. He’d automatically resigned his commission, hadn't he? How could he have not realised what he'd done? He'd have to think about that later. Best not to cry in front of the Emperor.

He desperately tried to think of a way to deflect the conversation. “Actually, I do have an invitation to Vorkosigan House. Miles is having a dinner and I have even met the guest of honour, sire. He’s being very Milesish over her. I think he’s smitten.”

“Is this Lord Auditor Vorthys’ niece? I’ve heard about her. Do you think she’ll do for Miles?”

“It’s very hard to say, sire. I would have thought it’s rather will Miles do for *her*. She’s a widow.”

Gregor’s face closed. “Yes, I know. It happened recently.”

“Like that, is it?” Ivan changed the subject. “Your wedding present is nearly finished. I should have it next week.”

“You’re being very mysterious about this present, Ivan.”

“It will be worth it. I promise.”

Gerard made a signal. Gregor sighed. “We have to go, Ivan. Thank you for a wonderful day.”

Ivan took the proffered hand. “It meant the world to me, sire.”

After the guests left and the ladies retired to their rooms to pack, Ivan changed out of his house uniform, handing it over to his valet to be lovingly cared for, and into some old ship knits. He snagged a leftover bottle of wine from the remains of the buffet before the caterers cleaned up and then wandered into the library. He and Pym had sat in here, such a very short time ago, exhausted from the effort of working in biohazard suits.

Ivan tipped him a silent toast. “Where do I find twenty like you, Pym?”
He took a long swallow from his glass. “And where do I find me a countess?”

He looked through his wine at the table lamp behind it. The swirling shades and highlights reminded him of the Komarran outfit Raine had worn in the ballroom at Vorkosigan House. Surely she’d come home soon? He wanted her.

Ivan finished his glass. He’d go and call Marie to say goodnight before he finished the bottle and then he’d check with By Vorrutyer what time he needed to get to the shuttleport. *Worry about problems you can solve, Ivan.* Yes, like what sort of flowers would Lady Donna like best?

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Ivan had thought he was a changed man. All grown up now, ready to face his responsibilities and make commitments. Stand by his promises, keep off the booze and the loose women. *Shit,* was he wrong! All he wanted to do was run like a rabbit. He wanted *nothing* to do with this. He stood in the Vorbarr Sultana shuttleport and wished a hole would open and swallow him up. He’d rather be back in that dungeon with no hope of rescue. This is what he got for having anything to do with that devious rat Byerly Vorrutyer. The Vorrutyers were stark raving mad, the whole lot of them.

What on three worlds had Donna *done* to herself? Oh, gods, he could see where this was heading, and he couldn’t leave it to Miles and his politically minded friends to work out, either. *He’d* have to help decide. He had a *vote* in the Council of Counts, now. *He* must have been the one who was stark, raving mad, never mind the Vorrutyers.

*Shit, shit, shit. Up to his ears in shit. Dipped in shit and hung out to dry.*

They wouldn’t let him run away. Donna—no, Dono, or whatever the hell it was now laughed like a rusty drain when By introduced him as Count Voralys. By took one arm and Dono-whatever the other and marched him off to the car.

Ivan mourned. He really did. That gorgeous, voluptuous woman could have been a Countess in her own right if only she’d waited. By the look of that well-fitting tunic it was all gone forever. He’d had dreams about Donna’s breasts, and her…her…well, those dreams were smoke, now, weren’t they? He had to get away somehow…

*Oh, bloody hell.* She was going to take off her clothes. He did not want to see what she’d done to herself, or at least what those damned to five hells Betan weirdos had done to her. He felt like clapping his hands across his eyes like some virginal Vor bud confronted by a flasher.

*Too late.* There he was, um…warts and all. *I wouldn’t be bragging about that.*

“I’m still growing, Ivan.” Dono had read his thoughts. Give me another three months. I had to get back, though. *Time was running out.*”

Ivan suddenly thought about what the Emperor would say. “You’ve let Gregor know about this, haven’t you?”

He should have kept his bloody mouth *shut.* Now look what he’d done. They wanted him to tell *Gregor.*

*No chance in hell.* “You’ll have to tell him yourself.”

They weren’t going to let him go until he’d promised to get them an interview.

Count Vorfolse was a coward and a recluse. Ivan could quite see how he’d turned out that way.
Stick your neck out and you get your head knocked off.

“OK. I’ll try.”

So he scraped through the interview with Gregor on a wing and a prayer. He didn’t even have to hint he was voting for the Soletta Array, although he’d kept that up his sleeve for an emergency. It felt a lot like blackmail, doing something like that. It wasn’t a good way to start and he wasn’t going to do that again. He’d end up just like the rest of the weasels on the Council of Counts. It was much better to stick to his original modus operandi. Say nothing, only speak when spoken to, keep his head down and don’t attract any unwanted attention. He should just be one of the innocent bystanders and keep it that way.

And then…then Dono tricked him into taking him to Miles’ dinner at Vorkosigan House. Dono might just deflect Miles’ attention from him, though. He didn’t want him looking too closely into what he’d done. But this was it. No more favours. Not another one. Enough was enough.
After the Imperial Parade

It hadn’t been a terrible nightmare after all. It was all too true. Lord Dono met Ivan in good time to stroll through the early summer evening for the dinner at Vorkosigan House. He wore a neat black suit, piped with a grey trim, a respectful mourning outfit for his brother Pierre. Ivan wore one of his new dark blue civilian suits. It still seemed very strange to him. He’d just taken that career of his and thrown it away without even a first thought, never mind a second one. His friends, his old drinking places, that tavern outside Ops HQ where he’d met Alexi Vormoncrief and By… Well maybe he wouldn’t miss that place. Colonel Ushakov hadn’t spoken to him yet. He probably owed the man an apology. It was supposed to be a temporary leave of absence he’d granted Ivan.

There was nothing mournful about the gleam in Dono’s eye. He looked like he’d been practising his swagger, making fearless eye contact with anyone walking in the opposite direction. His armsman Szabo shadowed them as well as Ivan’s ImpSec ghost. Close to the walls of the Vorkosigan House grounds Dono gave Ivan a wicked grin, tinged with a hint of malice, and slipped his hand under Ivan’s left elbow. “Just like old times, isn’t it, Ivan dear?”

Ivan leapt as if he’d been shot. He stopped abruptly and flung off the hand. “Don’t you do that. Don’t you dare do that! It’s bad enough you tricked me into bringing you in the first place. I’m not walking a step further until you promise to behave yourself.”

Dono pouted, just for a second. Ivan boggled at the site of a grown man with a thick black beard pouting at him. In a flash it was gone. Dono straightened himself up and strode ahead.

“Come along, Ivan. We’re going to be late.”

Oh, ye gods, Pym!

Ivan hadn’t thought this through, had he? What was he going to say to Pym?

The armsman looked at him in vague distrust. “This is not Lady Donna Vorrutyer, my lord.”

There wasn’t any point in trying to pull the wool over Pym’s eyes. He didn’t want to, anyway. “Yes, Pym, yes it is. Just back from Beta Colony.”

Pym blinked once. He took a good look at Ivan’s companion. “Is that the way you wish to be announced, my lord?”

“Lord Dono, if you please, Pym, is it? Thank you, Pym, for your discretion.”

Pym bowed slightly. “This way, if you please, Lord Dono.”

Pym had his breaking point, after all. Ivan heard the slightly elevated tone of Pym’s announcement as he ushered them through the door. “Count Voralys. Lord Dono Vorrutyer.”

Ivan tried to duck right and disappear. It didn’t work. He saw Miles come to an instant alert. Everything moved downhill from there.

Oh, dear God, those bugs! How Miles had kept his temper over the disgusting, vile things he had
no idea. Pym’s face was a study. And then that fool idiot Burgos was lame-brained enough to cause an uproar twice! Poor Kareen. Poor Kareen for having such atrocious taste in men to start with, but for Burgos to actually blab like that in front of Drou and Kou! It was just not done on Barrayar. Who knew what the social conventions were on Escobar, but Ivan was pretty sure that was about as bad a foul-up as a man could do to another man and his partner anywhere.

The only good thing about any of it was that nobody blamed him. He was to blame, though, for seating Simon in between Miles and Ekaterin. He’d really landed Simon in it up to his neck there. Why had he had such a stupid, ill-advised, senseless idea? Mark, of course. Hadn’t he seen enough of him on Earth? He’d been led astray by a clone. It sounded like a harmless prank, the way Mark described it, when he’d sidled up to him when they were nibbling the hors d’oeuvres. It should have been an excellent scheme to get him away from Lord Dono.

He’d meant no harm. Some sort of Count, he was! If Miles were thinking about him at all he’d probably be dropping the o round about now and adding an adjective to it as well. But nobody could blame him for those bugs, or the utter fool Miles had made of himself.

This was not his fault.

And then, holy shit, Tante Cordelia and Uncle Aral had turned up. Count Aral Vorkosigan. Count Aral Vorkosigan, his peer. In a pig’s eye was he ever a peer of Aral Vorkosigan, the greatest man in Barrayaran history. He’d see him for the fraud he was. That idiot Ivan.

Ivan reverted to type. He bolted. Racing into the kitchen he found Roic. “Roic! Let me out! The Count and Countess have arrived. I’m really not needed right now.”

Not totally wise to the ways of the house just yet, Roic did exactly that.

Voralys House would be the first place the death squad looked. Three pissed off armsmen would make mincemeat of him. His own apartment was no better. Once he’d stopped blaming himself Miles would be after his blood, his hide, his heart and, if he could get it, his soul. Ivan hailed an autocab. With any luck he could beat Simon and his mother back to her apartment and they might never even know he was there…

Lay low. Just lay low.

It might have worked if Marie hadn’t screamed the place down the next morning, thrilled to see him. He couldn’t be cross with the little princess, bless her heart, but that really sprang his cover. Mamère was not amused. Once Ma McIver had taken Marie away to clean breakfast off her face she took him to task.

“Ivan, I trust you are not coming to look upon my home as a convenient hotel. You are, of course, always welcome here, but this smacks of—”

“Cowardice, mamère. Pure cowardice. I admit it. Discretion was most definitely the better part of valour last night.”

“Whatever possessed your cousin to act so foolishly?”

He shrugged. “Who knows, with Miles? He’s made his own bed, and I have other problems.”

“Yes, just where your own bed is, being one of them.”

Touché Trust her.
“Obviously, I have to give up my apartment. With your permission, Marie could stay here until after the wedding. By then I should have a wonderful nursery, well, maybe not nursery, but child’s apartment, set up at Voralys House. There can’t be any argument there’s enough space for her there. There’s even a huge back garden with all sorts of plants and places to play. Lots of colours and outside recreation for her.”

A fleeting look of…not sorrow…chagrin, maybe…flitted across Lady Alys’ face. “She’s so good for Simon. I really want her to remain with us.”

Ivan inhaled sharply. “Did you hear what you just said? You want her to stay with you because she’s good for Simon? You could buy Simon a dog, you know.”

“Ivan! That’s not what I meant, at all.”

Mamère was seriously pissed. Well, eat shit mamère, because he was, too. “Gregor gave us this charge to act in Marie’s best interests, not ours. I intend to do just that.”

She was doing the pucker up the lips trick. It wasn’t going to work on him this time. “You forget who you’re talking to, Ivan. Don’t raise your voice. I’m your mother.”

“You think I could forget that, Mama? What chance do I ever have to forget that?”

 “…My Ivan, I’m sorry if I was bad.”

Ivan’s head whipped round. Marie stood in the doorway, clutching Steggy so fiercely her little knuckles showed white. Her lips were trembling and her eyes filled with tears ready to spill. Ohhhhh, shit shit shit!

He shook his head once at his mother and raised a finger in warning before he dived out of his chair to snatch up his little sweetheart. “You’re not bad, Marie. Nobody is cross with you.” He pressed her head into his neck and splayed out his hand across her curls. “Don’t be sad, Marie. Don’t be sad. We love you so much.”

He felt lower than the rats in the Imperial stables. “Here, come and sit with us. See, Mamie Alys isn’t cross with you, are you, Mamie?”

“No, of course not, Marie.” She went on in the sweetest, gentlest voice, “it’s not you I’m cross with at all.”

Ivan smiled just as sweetly back at his mother. “Voralys House is enormous. There are four floors in the place. Maybe you and Simon could come and live with me there? He would always be welcome in any home of mine.”

Oh, festering shit, what had he just gone and done now? Invited his mother to live with him? He’d tried for the first eighteen years of his life to get away from his mother…

He needed Wally to refer him to a good psych.

Lady Alys was taken aback. She took a deep breath. She almost looked as if she was considering it. Ivan tried to calm down, too.

“We really can’t be making decisions until after the wedding. Simon and I would like to take another holiday then, down to the southern continent. I thought we might take Marie with us for that at least. She’s never seen the sea, have you, dear? Aceline Vorfolse recommended Vandevelle. Apparently it has a beautiful climate.”
“You could use the house Madame Vorfolse lived in. She’s down there right now, packing it up. I’m sure the Count would be delighted to rent it out again. That might just work, as long as Marie agrees, as I really must get down to the district after the wedding.”

“I mentioned it last night, when we were still having civilised conversations, and Madame Vorsoisson told us that she was brought up in Vandeville, too. She was a Vorvayne then. It’s not a very big town. I wonder if she knew Raine? They appear to be very close to the same age. Or we might even make contact with some of her Vorvayne family.”

Now there was a thought. If they were friends, they might still be in touch!

No, that would have to wait. Ivan was going nowhere near that widow until Miles calmed down.

“I’ll go and get my things. I won’t impose on you any more. After work tonight, I’ll go back to my apartment, sleep there for a few nights and that will give me the chance to pack. I’ll just get a service in to move everything over to Voralys House. It will all fit in the one room there.”

“Very well, if that’s your choice. Oh, and Ivan, dear…”

Oh frigging hell, what was coming now?

“…has Colonel Vortala contacted you yet?”

What? Oh, keep it normal in front of Marie, of course.

“Vortala? No, mamère, he hasn’t. What does he want me to do this time?”

“We still have five Districts who haven’t nominated their choice of produce for the wedding booths. Yours is one of them. Most of the sites have been allocated as well. Everything has to be vetted and security cleared, and he tells me extra precautions will need to be taken for anything from your district, for reasons he won’t go into. I’m afraid you’ll be on the old parade ground near the south gates.”

As far away from the Residence itself as it was physically possible to get, in other words.

“So we’re pariahs.”

“No, dear, just late.”

Add it to the list. “I’ll see to it, mamère. Can you think of anything you’re short of, off hand?”

“With over two thousand people I have no doubt drinks will always be popular, especially if it’s a warm day.”

“I’m sure we can do something along those lines. I’ll talk to some people.”

He couldn’t get any peace anywhere, of course. Between running around for his mother and constantly sending messages back and forth to Vorberg and Karasavas and the hundred and one best friends he’d suddenly acquired, all wanting his vote or his endorsement or his money, he was run ragged. His lists and his spread sheets weren’t helping him much at the minute.

That first night, on his own in his old apartment, Ivan sat with his head in his hands. He had a bottle on the table beside him, but Wally was right. After one glass, he knew the old Vor remedy just was not going to be of any use to him. Nothing would have changed, except he’d have a
hangover. He must be growing up, as that wouldn’t have stopped him not so long ago. He sat for a long time. Finally, with a sigh, he pulled a flimsy and a stylus towards him. What did he need to do? What did he need to do first? What could he do tomorrow? What went into the too hard basket to be dealt with after the fucking wedding?

He wasn’t going to be able to do this. He just wasn’t. Gregor had made a horrible, horrible mistake. He crumpled the flimsy in a despairing fist and threw it at the wall. It fluttered in the air for a moment and fell to the ground. The bottle made a much more satisfying crash.

As dawn broke he picked up the flimsy and mopped up the mess. He sighed and smoothed the flimsy out to read what he had written the night before. One of his first jobs was to contact Sinclair, down in Rotherhall, and set things in motion with him. Fortunately, Sinclair had a contact and Ivan had met him before. Farmer Eccles. And Farmer Eccles knew exactly where to get what he wanted, and he was supremely honoured to be asked to organise it. Rotherhall and Prestwich were going to be represented, so what could he do for New Sheffield? There was a file somewhere, with what was proscribed and what was permissible, right down to the size of the typeface and the type of materials. Well, he always could cross a t and dot an i when it came to procurement. His maths might be a bit dodgy, though. Karasavas could check that for him, in the morning.

He’d only been at his apartment for a couple of days when the doorbell chimed at an ungodly hour of the morning. Who the hell had tracked him down here?

Oh, shit. Byerly Vorrutyer.
It wasn’t Ivan’s fault if his cousin didn’t pick up his comconsole messages. He tried twice, in between placating Vor dragons and dodging his mother. She was beyond placating. They were on speaking terms again, just, but it was purely for business matters. With less than a month to go before the wedding, tempers were fraying and egos were fragile. Nobody considered Ivan’s temper, or his ego, he reflected in rueful dismay. The respects due to his new standing were perfunctory, to say the least, especially from people like Countess Vorinnis, who’d known him forever. The fact that she’d had to excuse him from running errands to go and do something like voting in the Council of Counts for the Komarr Soletta repairs didn’t increase his standing in her eyes one jot.

Ivan worried about Miles. It niggled at him. There was an enormous cloud hanging over him and it was just feasible Miles would blame him for its existence. He had made that crack about creating your own widows, after all. It wasn’t something he’d ever repeat to anyone else, but if Miles was in one of his more manic moods he might act first and analyse things afterwards. He could still let loose that death squad of armsmen.

At the end of his shift Ivan squared his shoulders and headed off to Vorkosigan House. Miles had his own worries; he didn’t need Ivan to act as if his pet budgie had just died. He was going to need cheering up. Ivan took one look at him and realised he was going to need serious cheering up. He must be close to death’s door if he even refused to have a drink with him. This was bad.

It turned out he was too late of course, because Miles knew all about the murder theory. Well, Ivan knew how that felt, to be accused of a murder. Come to think of it though, he actually had killed Vorclarence. It wasn’t quite the same sort of analogy Miles would appreciate, or find useful. Best not mention that. Miles couldn’t give a flying fig about how anyone else but himself felt, anyway.

So how to help him? Did he really want to help him, now that he knew Miles wasn’t blaming him? Ivan considered. He was family, after all. As long as he didn’t have to stick his neck out too much, he’d do what he could.

He felt quite peeved when Miles didn’t actually want his help. Sod it, then. The dwarf could work his own problems out and Ivan would get started on the list he had in his pocket. He didn’t see Miles offering to help him with that little lot, not like a cousin would do who cared about anything past his own nose. He’d just go home and have a drink with Vorberg, if he was off duty.

There was a visitor waiting for him at Voralys House. He’d been waiting there all day for him. Vorberg apologised. “He absolutely forbade me to disturb you, my lord. He was perfectly happy to wait on your convenience. I’ve taken the liberty of offering him a room in the armsmen’s quarters, as he won’t get home tonight. He’s from Prestwich.”

‘Prestwich?’ Ivan cheered up immediately. “Is it Wilkins? I wasn’t sure if he’d bring it himself. Come on, Vorberg, you can see this too. Can you bring him to the study in ten minutes?”

Ivan dashed up to his room and changed. The under-utilised valet would have fussed but Ivan just left him his suit to deal with and hurried back down in some more comfortable clothes.
Wilkins came into the study with not one but two presentation boxes in his arms. They were enclosed in some sort of calfskin or similar slipcovers. Ivan was puzzled, momentarily, but perhaps Wilkins had made him a choice of styles or something. He waited for the man to put them tenderly on his desk before shaking hands. Wilkins beamed at him.

“My lord Count, may I congratulate you on your recent appointment? I think I can speak for everyone I know when I tell you how delighted we are with the Emperor’s choice. There is happy rejoicing in Prestwich at the news. We hope to see you there very soon.”

That was nice to know. Ivan should have returned to the district before this, as he knew fine well. It was just impossible until after the wedding.

Vorberg hovered in the corner, looking more expectant than curious.

Oh, he’d know what was in here. He’d have had to scan them.

“So, Mr Wilkins, how did it go?”

The man beamed with pleasure. “I think you’ll be happy, my lord. We had…er…disagreements in the factory. I think you could even call it an old-fashioned punch-up among the old hands as to who actually got the honour of working on this. There was only one way to solve it. I’ll show you in a minute. But first…”

He donned a pair of white gloves and like some sort of magician flourished a white cloth to cover a section of the desk. With reverence, he drew the first box out of its cover. The Vorbarra sigil was silver metal inlaid into the polished oak surface. He handed Ivan a second pair of gloves.

“You open it, my lord.”

Ivan lifted the lid. Set on a bed of black velvet, in its own black velvet sheath embroidered in silver with a repeat of the Vorbarra sigil, sat a magnificent seal dagger.

Ivan caught his breath.

Wilkins urged him to take it out. “Go on, look at the blade.”

Superbly balanced in his hand, the dagger whispered out of its sheath. The sheath itself was lined with soft black leather suede, while the locket at the throat, as with the chape, was finely worked silver metal with an engraving of the arms on each side. Ivan barely glanced at it, magnificent though it was. His eyes were on the blade.

Vorberg moved closer to peer over Wilkins’ shoulder as Ivan tilted the blade back and forth to catch the reflections. The three of them stood in awed silence.

Ivan thought to look at the seal at last, inset into the pommel. Carved into the solid black onyx it was perfection itself.

Ivan whistled in appreciation. Very carefully he returned the dagger to its sheath and closed the box. “I…I’m stunned. I’ve never seen anything as fine as this, even at Seigling’s. It’s absolutely magnificent! Gregor will be…dumbfounded.” Gobsmacked didn’t seem quite dignified enough to describe how the Emperor would feel about this beautiful gift.

Wilkins coloured up with pleasure. “Thank you, my lord. Your commission was an honour my company was delighted to receive.”
He carefully replaced the presentation box in its slipcase, paused for a moment then cleared his throat. “As I told you earlier, my lord Count, there was a serious dispute over the crafting of this seal dagger. The resolution was to make another one. I hope you like this even more.”

Wilkinds drew the second box out of its cover. It had the new Voralys silver metal sigil inlaid in the wood. Ivan inhaled sharply. Shock washed over him. He made no move to open it.

“As with the first dagger, we’ve used platinum for all the fittings and inlays, so that there will never be any question of tarnish. This is a gift for you my lord, if you will be pleased to accept it.”

Ivan plucked up the courage and opened the lid. The dark, midnight blue velvet held an unspeakable treasure. No one had ever given him a gift as beautiful or magnificent as this. Again, the dagger whispered out of its sheath. The seal was carved in a dark sapphire.

“I can’t accept this! It’s far too good for me!”

“If a Wilkins’ seal dagger is good enough for Emperor Gregor Vorbarra, then a Wilkins’ seal dagger is good enough for Count Voralys,” Wilkins said, firmly. He relented, and winked. “Besides, we had to practice. We haven’t made one of these in nearly twenty-five years. You would never have seen it if it hadn’t turned out well.”

“But how did you get this done in such a short time? I only made my oath a few days ago.”

Ivan had to swallow hard. He was totally humbled.

“The only difficulty was the sapphire, really, as the patterns are the same. The box and sheath took longer than the dagger.”

Ivan had a sudden thought. “Don’t you move! Vorberg, wait right here with Mr Wilkins.”

He darted out of the room to use the comconsole in the library, as he didn’t want Wilkins to be disappointed if this didn’t work out. He dragged out a code card from his wallet and swiped it through the slot. It was probably the second time in his life he had ever used it.

Gregor’s gatekeeper appeared. “Count Voralys? I’ll put you through to the Emperor.”

Gregor was in his private apartment. Thankfully, this time he appeared to be on his own. “Ivan? Is something wrong?”

“I need ten minutes of your time, Gregor. Five if you must. Your wedding present arrived. You have to see it, sire. I’d like you to meet the man who made it, if you can. He’s only here tonight. We can be there in twenty minutes.”

Gregor looked slightly pained. “I’m having dinner with Laisa tonight, Ivan. Just me…and Laisa.”

“She’ll want to see it too. Please, Gregor.”

He glanced at his chrono. “It had better be good, Ivan. Be here in twenty minutes. If you’re here in twenty-five minutes you’ll be too late.”

Poor Wilkins didn’t know what hit him. He was dragged into a ground car still wearing his white gloves. Clutching the box he sat totally mystified until the car drew up at the sentry box at the Residence gates.

He paled to a chalk white. “We’re not—”
“Oh, yes we are.” Ruthlessly Ivan dragged him through security and chivvied their escort to hurry him to Gregor’s apartment. Laisa was already there.

Gregor greeted Mr Wilkins at his impassive best. He wasn’t happy at the interruption.

Ivan flipped him the white gloves he’d been wearing. “Sire, in honour of your wedding the people of Voralys district would like to present you with this token.”

If looks could kill Ivan would have been stretched flat on the expensive carpet. “Ivan, there’s a protocol for District gifts. I thought this was from you personally. If I receive this here I should do it for the fifty nine other districts, including my own!”

“Yes, yes, but they’re not going to be a gift like this. Go on, open it. We won’t tell, will we, Mr Wilkins?”

Reluctantly, Gregor complied. He opened the box and blinked. His chin dropped. “Ivan—” he stopped, lost for words.

Ivan slipped his hand through Mr Wilkins’ arm and backed him out of the apartment. “That went well. We should go find a drink.”

They returned to Voralys House after sharing a fine dinner at one of Ivan’s favourite restaurants and a drive to see the lights of Vorhartung Castle and the old bridge. After seeing Wilkins off to bed with the promise of a ground car to take him to the flyerport in the morning Ivan checked his messages just before he turned in himself. There was one from Simon Illyan.

“Hello Ivan, sorry to have missed you. I’m just letting you know we’re home again. Marie is fine. The doctor said it’s an ear infection and nothing to worry about.”

What the hell?

He punched the reply button and waited impatiently as the chimes sounded. Finally his mother answered. “Mamère, what’s happened to Marie? Why did nobody tell me?”

She had the grace to look guilty. “Oh, Ivan, I am sorry dear. Simon let me know Marie wasn’t feeling well. I told him I’d pass the message on and I didn’t see you again before you left. It was nothing serious, just a fever. Simon shouldn’t have worried you.”

“Shouldn’t have worried me? Are you for real? Shouldn’t have worried me? He should have told me first! What doctor did he take her to—no, never mind. I’m coming round there. I’ll talk to Simon myself.”

“Ivan, we’re all in bed. Simon isn’t here; he’s at his own apartment tonight. Marie is asleep. It’s far too late to be worrying us now.”

“Like hell. I’m coming round there and I’ll be bringing Marie home with me. She’ll be better off here. I’ll hire a nurse.”

Lady Alys shook her head. “You’re being ridiculous. It’s only an ear infection, for heaven’s sake. She’ll be fine.”

“I said, I’m coming round.”
His mother became more agitated than he could ever remember. “And I’m telling you, Christos will not be letting you in! I will not have Marie disturbed. You’re not welcome here at this hour.”

Ivan couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. A pulse started to beat in his ears. He’d been angry with his mother before, but he’d never been this enraged.

“How dare you, mamère? How dare you say that to me! If you don’t let me in I’ll be calling the Municipal Guard and if that doesn’t work I’ll call Gregor. You’ve gone too far!”

He cut the connection.

“Vorberg!” His shout didn’t bring any response. Ivan hit his screamer. Inside ten seconds there was a scramble on the upper floor. Shirtless and shoeless Vorberg threw himself down the stairs, nerve disruptor in hand.

“My lord! Where are you? Ivan! What’s happened?”

“Get dressed, and hurry up. I want a ground car. Now!”

He was still spitting mad five minutes later when he jumped into the ground car.

“What else hasn’t she bothered to tell me? She’s gone too far, Vorberg. I will not stand for this.”

Vorberg was still recovering from his alarm. “Who has, my lord? What’s happened?”

“My mother!”

“Your…mother? This is a domestic dispute, my lord? Nobody’s threatened you, or tried to harm you?”

“Oh, she’s done both, Vorberg. She’s trying to take my daughter away from me.”

“I…see…other than your personal safety, is there any reason why you wanted me to come along, my lord?”

“You’re going to get me in there, Vorberg.”

The lieutenant paled. “My lord! I can’t do that! It’s not an ImpSec matter.”

Ivan growled at him. “You’re my stand-in armsman, until I can get down to the District and swear some men. You’ll do what you’re told.”

Vorberg winced. “My lord, please…please don’t ask me to do that!”

The ground car turned into the street. Ivan didn’t bother to answer. At this time of night there was no traffic and the car pulled to a halt directly outside the main entrance. There was a man standing there. In the dark it was hard to make him out. Ivan didn’t really care who it was; he wasn’t going to be getting in the way. He popped the canopy.

“If that’s Christos he’s going to be sorry.” Ivan leapt out with Vorberg following close on his heels.

“You’re not going to make me commit a serious crime, are you, Count Voralys?”

It was Simon Illyan.

He stood in front of the door, arms folded, physically much smaller, slighter and older than Ivan.
Vorberg slammed to attention. “Captain Illyan, sir!”

Simon nodded. “Good evening, lieutenant. Please give us some space.”

Ivan stood directly in front of him. “Get out of my way, Simon.”

“Or what?” Simon spoke very softly. “You really think you could hurt me?”

“Why would I want to hurt you?” Ivan had never seen Simon quite like this.

“You’re going to have to before I let you up there in this mood.”

“What mood would that be? You have no say in this. It’s between me and my mother.”

Simon reached out, faltered, and then folded his arms again. “I’m the cause of this. This is the second time this week I’ve been the cause—I’m asking you very nicely to talk to me, first. We can sit in the foyer. I can’t let you and your mother become estranged over me. Please, Ivan.”

It was only a few months ago Ivan had sat beside this man’s bed in the ImpSec medical centre, watching his neural chip malfunction. His anger collapsed like a balloon deflating. “Hell, Simon. What’s happening to me?”

Simon Illyan did reach out this time. He took Ivan by the arm and led him to a padded bench in the foyer of the building. “I’m sorry, Ivan, really I am. I should have contacted you first. It’s just… your mother…I’ve come to rely on her, Ivan. I find it hard to not think of her first.”

“That’s no excuse for her not telling me, though, is it? She treats me like I’m fifteen years old all over again.”

Ivan wanted to bang his head against a wall somewhere, or kick something, hard. Not Simon, though. “I’m so frustrated. What does she want from me?”

Simon sighed. “Twenty years of having to make all the decisions, do all the thinking, and planning, and scheming, to keep you both safe, keep you away from those who wanted to manipulate you, eliminate you…”

“Like Vordrozda, you mean?”

“Yes, and others. There were others. We hoped you’d never find out about most of them, of course. Miles Vorkosigan would never have been accepted as Emperor, if anything had happened to Gregor. You were, still are for a while, at least, the logical choice of heir until Gregor and Laisa—well you know the story. She’s had to be so strong, and doesn’t know how to take a backward step. Try and forgive her, Ivan. I’ll talk to her.”

Weary beyond imagining, Ivan closed his eyes and sighed. “Marie is not negotiable. Tell her that, Simon. I can’t talk to her now. Just…tell her. If I’m forced to make a choice it won’t be my mother I chose.”
Eyes closed, slumped in the ground car on the way back to Voralys House, Ivan became aware of tension in the air around him. He opened one eye to see Vorberg sitting bolt upright, his fists clenched and a little muscle working in his jaw.

_Oh shit_

“Talk to me, Anton.”

Vorberg turned his head. His expression was bleak. He opened and closed his hands a few times, and swallowed. “My lord, I shall have to ask General Allegre to reassign me. I find I’m not able to do this job impartially. There’s a major conflict I can’t resolve.”

“I’m sorry I ordered you to break into my mother’s apartment. I know I shouldn’t have done that.” Curiosity prompted him to go on. “Could you have, though?”

“Physically? Two minutes, max. Morally? No. But that wasn’t the problem.”

Ivan waited, quietly and attentively, not breaking the eye contact.

“When you hit that screamer, my first thought was that my friend was in trouble.”

Ivan nodded. “Yes, you called me Ivan.”

“That’s wrong. That’s not professional. That will get you killed, and me killed.”

“It hasn’t happened yet. Give yourself a break. You’re what? Twenty one standard?”

“Twenty two, my lord. Old enough.”

“Did you hear what I called you, two minutes ago?”

He nodded. "I did, my lord. You called me Anton.”

“It takes an officer a long time to feel confident enough in their trust with a subordinate to address him by his first name. It’s taken us what? Five weeks? Six?”

“Something like that.”

“I’m not in your chain of command any more. I’m not even an officer any more. We can have a good working relationship. You can apply for a transfer if that’s what you really want, but I would be very unhappy to see you go. I want you to stay. You’re just about the only friend I can call on, right now. Friends watch each other’s backs. Talk to me in the morning, though; don’t give me an answer now. We both need to get some sleep.”

Vorberg looked at his chrono. “That’s just what I was about to do, when you pressed that damned screamer. I’ll be putting in for the overtime.”

“On ImpSec’s budget? Good luck with that one!”

When they stood in the front hallway. Ivan held out his hand. “Goodnight, Vorberg. You take it
easy. No more screamers unless there’s a Cetagandan under the bed.”

The lieutenant nodded. He smiled, briefly. “Goodnight, Count. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ivan took his new seal dagger to bed with him. *Just in case there were Cetagandans under the bed.*

His comconsole chimed early the next morning. It was that particular chime. Déjà vu rushed over Ivan in a torrent. He should just pretend he was still asleep. Not for the Emperor of three worlds, he shouldn’t. He scrambled over to answer. “Good morning, sire.”

“Ivan.” Gregor looked happy. He even looked a little…smug. So what did Gregor have to look smug about? Ivan couldn’t keep the grin off his own face.

“Dinner went well, did it, sire?”

“It did, Ivan. Laisa was impressed. She hadn’t seen what she called a Vor dagger…er…up close and personal like that. I even let her hold it.”

Ivan had to bite his lips. Hard. “Did she put the white gloves on?”

“Eventually.” Gregor reverted to his normal straight face. “Anyway, I didn’t get the chance to thank you last night. That’s the most magnificent gift. I didn’t know they still made things like that in your District. I thought they all came from Darkoi.”

“Hah! Wilkins told me all about Darkoi last night. He had a quaint expression for Darkoi workmanship. Something to do with ‘all talk and no trousers.’ Better not let on to Vorlakial, though. He won’t be happy he’s got serious competition. Oh, and did you know, the swordstick was made in Prestwich?”

“What swordstick?”

“The swordstick. Kou’s swordstick. Wilkins told me at dinner.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Why didn’t I know that?”

“Because nobody had publicised the place properly. The seal dagger was going to be a personal gift, you know. I had that intention when I commissioned it, but when I saw it last night, I couldn’t take the credit. I hope you enjoy it very much. It’s given with love and respect and every wish for your future happiness. Especially in the heir department. Lots of heirs. Plenty. I’m glad you’re on the job.”


*Next.* The smile faded from Ivan’s face. He punched in the number of his mother’s apartment. Simon Illyan answered the call.

“Good morning, Simon. How is Marie today? Should I come over?”

“She’s much better. I’m sure she’d love you to come over, but there’s nothing your mother needs to consult you about, apart from the unfortunate mistake yesterday. I believe she left early for a working breakfast. Shall I get Marie for you?”

*Mamère not speaking to me, eh? Suits me just fine.* “Yes, please, I’d love to speak to her.”

Marie didn’t look sick. She looked her normal, cheerful self. Her smile lit up her whole face when she saw Ivan. “My Ivan! Hello. I’ve been drawing you pictures.”
“That’s good, darling, because I have lots of places here we can put pictures. Are you better? I heard you were sick, yesterday.”

She nodded. “I was. Papi Simon took to me to see Dr Wally at the ’firmary but he wasn’t there so we saw Dr…Dr—” Ivan heard a whisper. “Dr Danko, Papi says. We saw Dr Danko. He gave me a shot.”

“Were you brave?”

“Oh yes. Papi said I was tough.”

“Papi Simon would know tough when he sees it. He’s tougher than I am. Do you want me to come visit you? I can be a bit late for work today.”

“Steggy says yes, My Ivan. I’ll go wait by the door for you.” She started to scramble off the chair. Ivan had to stop her.

“No, wait! You have your breakfast first. I’ll be there at 0830. Don’t wait for me before that. You can tell Christos I’m coming, though.”

“I will, My Ivan. I’ll see you soon.”

Next Ivan went looking for Vorberg. He found him in the kitchen, having breakfast. Ivan grabbed a coffee and sat beside him. “Glad to see you’ve got your undress greens on. That doesn’t look like you mean to resign today.”

Vorberg shrugged. “On consideration, General Allegre would not be a happy man if I dumped this on him now. If I am going to do it I’d better wait until—”

“After the wedding” Ivan finished it for him. “This whole city is going to grind to a stop soon, with everything that is waiting until after the wedding. But that’s good. I’m glad you’re staying. I might be home early if I get the sack this morning. I’ll let you know.”

He stood up to go get ready to head out and see Marie. Vorberg shook his head. “She won’t do that.”

Ivan stopped to look at him. “Have you met my mother, Vorberg?” He didn’t wait for the answer.

He arrived at the front door to his mother’s apartment at 0828. Christos opened it and stepped smartly out of the way. Marie cannoned into Ivan’s knees and hugged them tight.

“Hey, I need to walk, princess. Up you come.” Ivan gave Marie a cuddle and a tickle and Christos a long, appraising look. Christos regarded him back. Surprisingly, he was the one to speak.

“Welcome, my lord. It’s always good to see you.”

So, who’d been talking to Christos? Simon, probably.

He relaxed. Christos was a friend, but he was his mother’s man. No doubt which side of the fence he would fall if push came to shove.

Simon showed him the doctor’s report and told him about the visit. It was all quite minor and fairly routine. Ivan had overreacted and said so. Simon smiled wryly. “Alys told me I was overreacting, too. We’ve neither of us had children, Ivan. Overreacting is far better than making a mistake the other way.”
Ivan gave him an answering grin. “Not always. I nearly made a fatal mistake last night, didn’t I? You would have taken me out in five seconds flat.”

A faint glimmer of the old Simon Illlyan flickered in the back of his eyes. “Three, probably. And that would have made your mother very sad.”

“Just tell me, next time, Simon, please?”

Simon looked rueful. “I will. So, what’s in store for you today?”

“More errands, I suppose. I’ll see if Countess Vorinnis wants me to walk the poodle.” He tried not to sound bitter. “Poodle walking beats some of the jobs.”

“You know they shouldn’t be doing that to you. You’re a Count, now.”

“I broke Countess Vorinnis’ window when I was thirteen and I had to walk her poodle for a month to pay for it. She’s never forgotten, even if it is a different damn poodle. At least this one doesn’t bite.”

“Alys and I were at Vorinnis House last night. Cordelia and Aral were there, too. They hadn’t heard the rumours about Miles. I must have just dropped her off not long before you called, because I hadn’t even taken my shoes off when she let me know what had happened. Somewhat upset, she was.”

Ivan took a sharp breath. “If I’d known you’d been out last night and just left her to Ma McIver I’d have been even more upset!”

“She loves her very much, you know. I’m always hearing about Ma McIver this and Ma McIver that. It’s not just a commercial arrangement. Marie is really well taken care of, but she’ll always be your daughter. We need to work out the best arrangement for her, not for me.”

“Did mamère tell you I invited the both of you to live at Voralys House? *After the frigging wedding*, of course.”

“Did you? No, I didn’t know about that. Is that what you would really want?”

“I want everyone to be happy. It’s a huge house. We need never see each other, and there would always be someone there for Marie. Even armsmen, once I get a chance to look for them.”

He stopped and looked at Simon. “You might be able to help me, there. Miles’ best men are ex-ImpSec.”

They broke off as Marie ran in with some of her drawings. There was one from the infirmary. The hypospray Dr. Danko held was big enough to immunise a whole platoon. Ivan sneaked in one quick story and then he really had to run off to the salt mines at the Residence.

Lady Mary Vorville smiled at him. “Ivan, dear, your mother is at a meeting. She asked me to pass on this letter for Lord Vorkosigan, if you would be so kind as to take it yourself and put it into his hands only.” She handed him a heavy paper envelope with his mother’s crest on it, addressed to Miles.

He studied it for a minute or two. They were up to something, but he didn’t need to know what. Probably gossip about the murder. Trust his mother to be more worried about Miles than she was about him!
Ivan tucked it into the jacket of his tunic and decided to walk. He wasn’t getting enough exercise and this would delay his return, especially if he could sweet-talk Ma Kosti into feeding him the scraps from her kitchen table.

Ivan hadn’t seen Mark since the dinner. It was good he missed him this time, too, as the ground car with Mark inside passed him on his way in. René Vorbretten was sitting with Miles.

René got up to shake Ivan by the hand and turn round a chair for him. “Ivan. I haven’t spoken to you since the investiture. That was a marvellous piece of theatre. Very impressive.”

Ivan returned the handshake. What was he implying, that it was all an act? It wasn’t an act to him.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you, but you’re very elusive.”

“Just working like the proverbial for m’mother. She’s like a swan on the lake – all serene on the surface and paddling like the devil underneath.”

“Ah, yes. I know a few people like that—”

Miles interrupted ruthlessly. “Ivan, why are you here?”

“Letter for you. I’m faster than the pigeon post.” Ivan handed it over. Before he could say anything else, Pym ushered in more people: Lord Dono, Szabo and By Vorruyte. He got up to go and leave them to it but By pressed him back into his seat.

“Hello Ivan. What brings you here?”

“Message for Miles.” Ivan nodded at the envelope. If they didn’t mind him staying he had no objection to dragging things out as long as he could. In fact he was happy just to fade into the background while Miles, Dono and René plotted their strategies. He still didn’t know why By was there, though. He’d been to dinner with Richars. He was his cousin, too. Ivan certainly didn’t have Dono’s confidence in By’s loyalty. The man needed watching. On the other hand he’d go anywhere for a free feed, or drink. What he really needed was a proper job. Let him work for a living, for a change.

He wasn’t really paying attention to the who was voting for what, until Miles came to the end of the letter.

 “…Feel free to set Ivan to any little task upon which you may find him useful…”

“What?” Ivan had to see that for himself. Miles thought it was funny. Ivan couldn’t think of any adequate words to say. He sat back in his chair, stunned. There was talk going on all around him. Ivan saw By looking at him strangely, but if Byerly Vorruyte said one word he’d find his teeth somewhere in the back of his throat. Surely his mother would never be so petty? Did she even have an inkling how hurtful something like that was?

The snacks were welcome. A strong drink would have been better, but Pym wasn’t taking any sort of a hint. He just handed Ivan coffee.

Once they started playing colouring-in Ivan’s attention wandered again. He tried to think of ways to deal with his mother. It wasn’t until he realised there was a silence in the room that he looked around. They were all staring at him.

“I didn’t do it! It’s not my fault.”
“Ivan,” Miles was looking at him with a gleam in his eye he’d seen too many times before, “do you fancy telling us how you’re going to vote?”

Dono looked right through him, remembering. Ivan squirmed.

By interrupted. “It would do us no harm for some people to think Ivan was voting the way his desk always used to vote.”

“Oh perhaps Ivan is voting the way his desk always used to vote,” Ivan snapped, nettled. That made Miles blink.

“Coz?” He actually looked just a tad uncertain. Did he think Ivan would vote conservative just to spite him? Voting wasn’t anything to play games over, as far as Ivan was concerned. René’s whole way of life was at stake here, and Dono’s District. Did they honestly think he’d vote for Sigur Vorbretten or Richars Vorrutyer? A vote for Sigur was simply an extra vote for Boriz Vormoncrief.

Ohhh… No. The realisation hit him. Miles was worried he might abstain, avoid making a decision altogether. He’d be one of the first three called on. He couldn’t lay low or wait to see which way the wind blew. He’d have to stick his neck out. Dono especially couldn’t afford any abstainers. Miles thought he would chicken out.

Ivan grabbed a pair of flimsies and a couple of the flow pens. He coloured in his desk as green on the pair of them.

Dono let out a great sigh of relief and René jumped up to shake his hand.

“Mind you don’t make me regret it,” Ivan told him.

Ivan didn’t really think much more about voting for a while. Miles lost interest in Ivan once he didn’t have to worry about his vote. Dono was a bit more careful to keep him in the loop, and René was turning into a stress-head. Ivan laughed out loud. He was worried about René becoming a stress-head? Look in your own back yard first, Ivan Vorpatril Voralys.

The day before the vote Ivan was part of the welcoming committee for the Council of Counts reception for the Komarran delegation. Mamère had found another job for him, doing the pretty with Laisa’s Aunt Anna. They got on well enough as he showed her all the glories of Vorhartung Castle, but they really clicked over the holovid pictures of Anna’s granddaughter, only a year or so older than Marie. The girls even looked similar.

Escaping at last, Ivan wandered off in search of a drink, or three.

He was sick of politics. He was sick of people like Cassie Vorgorov and Falco Vorpatril, and Miles barely acknowledged him. Count Vorhalas at least gave him the time of day. He was beginning to like the old man. It was unfair that he blamed himself for Miles’ condition. Nobody could really live someone else’s life for them, could they? Evon had chosen his own road.

Shit. Was he stupid? No, he was just an absolute idiot. The blinding knowledge staggered him. He’d been an idiot for years.

Chose your own road. It doesn’t matter what your mother wants for you, or who wants to kill you, or kill Gregor and make you Emperor, or any of the million and one other what if, could haves or any of that crap. So what did Ivan Vorpatril Voralys actually want to do?
He looked up, somewhat blindly, but at last recognised the person coming towards him. *Olivia Koudelka.* Oh, god, she was wearing the gown Raine had bought for her! She’d looked gorgeous then and she looked absolutely stunning now.

“Hello Olivia, what a pretty dress.”

“It is, isn’t it? A really lovely person bought it for me.”

“Have you heard from her?”

She shook her head. “No, not a word, but Ivan, you need to know. Her new book has just come out.”

“Has it?”

“It’s called Count Vorperil’s Dungeon.”

“Good for her. She’s chosen her own road. How would you like to be a Countess, Olivia?”

She looked at him. Her expression softened. “Oh, Ivan. I’d love to be a Countess. Just not your Countess, I’m sorry, Ivan.”

He kissed her hand. “I might make you change your mind. Are you going to Vorsmythe House?”

“Yes, we are. Would you like a lift?”
Ivan had forgotten all about Vorberg and his squad, waiting patiently for him in the foyer. There wasn’t going to be room for them to tag along.

“Vorberg, Lord Dono has four good armsmen of his own. I’m going to be quite safe. If you make your own way to Vorsmythe House, I’ll see you there.”

Vorberg didn’t look too happy. “If you insist, my lord. You’ve got the screamer if you need us. If you’re not there in twenty minutes I’m going to come looking for you.”

“Don’t do that.” Ivan tipped his head towards Olivia. “I may get delayed. I’ll call for help if it’s a dire emergency.”

The arrangements didn’t quite work out the way he’d planned, but at least he was in the monster of a ground car with Olivia. Looking across at her was almost as good as sharing a bit of body warmth. Sharing body warmth with a hulking great armsman wasn’t nearly as much fun. Getting too close to Dono wasn’t exactly a treat, either. Some of the looks he was getting were definitely on the sardonic side. What was Dono up to?

Ivan briefly thought of letting Vorberg know they were detouring to Vorfolse’s place, but they probably wouldn’t be there for long. He wouldn’t mind having a word or two to Vorfolse off his own bat. He hadn’t forgotten about him, but he was quite a way down Ivan’s ‘to do’ list. He’d better save it for another occasion. This was about Dono, tonight, not his own concerns.

He really was a miserable old screw, wasn’t he? Ivan looked at the dim hallway and the pathetic little brass plate with its pompous lettering. Dono was getting nowhere. Olivia wasn’t doing much better. He tapped Dono on the shoulder and mouthed ‘let me try.’ Dono stepped back to give him some room.

“Count Vorfolse, this is Ivan Vorpatril. I have three words to say to you that you might wish to discuss with me tomorrow, before you vote. Vorhalas, Aceline and Valeraine. I’m sure we can come to some arrangement.”

And he wasn’t going to do that sort of thing. Politics. It twisted you right up. He’d be as devious and sneaky as that cousin of his before he knew it.

Dono looked at him as if he’d gone mad, but Olivia approved. She gave him a beaming smile and a kiss on the cheek. “Nice one, Ivan.”

So when had he moved out of the neutral corner and into Dono’s? Maybe it was just Olivia’s. She seemed dead-set on getting Dono his votes.

On the way out of the lift tube the light began to dawn. Olivia had slipped her hand through Dono’s arm. No. Ivan shook off the absurd thought. It was probably just a girl thing.

There wasn’t much time for analysing relationships after that. Szabo went down in a burst of stunner fire.
Shit! He’d done it again. He wasn’t carrying his stunner. After he’d promised himself, too. There was no time to think. Olivia had dived the other way, with Dono, and the armsmen were too bloody slow to save themselves. That would never have happened with Pym.

Adrenalin kicked in. When they made a grab for Dono he made use of the distraction and snatched the armsman’s stunner. Dodging and weaving he tried his best not to provide a sitting target. Who knew what else they had, beside stunners? Vorberg would never forgive him if he ended up with holes in his nice new Count’s uniform.

Vorberg! Dear gods, Ivan, you idiot. He pressed his screamer. Vorberg would be ten minutes away, at least. He couldn’t wait for him. Risking everything, he jumped to his feet and fired. By the time Vorberg caught up with them, they were on their way to Vorpatril House. Ivan had to calm him down and give him a job to do.

“Get back to that garage and secure it for evidence. Call in help from ImpSec HQ. There’ll be some bloodstains and probably bits of Goff scattered around, too. After that, go get Vorfolse. It’s a bit convenient this happening in his parking garage. Bring him to Vorpatril House, whether he wants to come or not. Put your ImpSec hat on for that one, or tell him a Count has been attacked on his premises. That’ll shift him.”

Dono was cactus. Dono’s armsmen weren’t going to be much use to him. Olivia couldn’t think of anything else but Dono. Ivan sighed. He’d been right the first time. Another one gone. He sighed again. That left just him to do the donkeywork. So what was new?

Falco Vorpatril and Count Vorhalas didn’t need anything telling twice. Falco had medical attention organized and his armsmen mustered before Ivan could turn around. Vorhalas looked on, grim and silent as Ivan explained the events.

By the time Vorberg arrived with Vorfolse in tow, they could all see exactly what had gone on. Vorhalas had spoken to Count Vorkalloner, too. He turned up to see for himself.

Ivan took the time out to call Commodore Koudelka and let him know Olivia was safe. Kou nearly burst a blood vessel and Drou had to calm him down. Ivan quite enjoyed the conversation as Drou’s unruffled good sense came to the fore.

“Kou, you heard Ivan. He’s got this under control. You know you don’t have to worry if it’s Ivan. He’d never let anything happen to Olivia. We can trust him.”

He smiled. “Thank you, ma’am, but I think it was the other way around, actually. Olivia’s the heroine of the hour. Once this all calms down I’m going to take the lot of them back to Voralys House. We can’t be sure Vorrutyer House is safe and I have a squad of piss—very angry ImpSec men to look after us there. All we really need is a change of clothes for Olivia, if you could send that over. I’m afraid her dress was the second casualty, after Dono.”

Ivan was serious about not letting them back to Vorrutyer House. Richars was still out there somewhere, and, he realized, with a grim sense of betrayal, so was By Vorrutyer.

Szabo, when he was sufficiently recovered, could take his men and go find a change of clothes for Dono. He wasn’t letting him out of his sight until he carried him into that council chamber, if he had to.

Ivan looked down at himself. His own valet was not going to be impressed, either. At least there
were no tears. He needed this uniform to look good for the vote.

Byerly turned up at Voralys House eventually. The cool demeanour and languid air had vanished. It wasn’t until he saw for himself that Dono had survived that he in any way allowed his frantic worry to relax. Ivan wasn’t about to listen to a word he said. He let Vorberg deal with him. ImpSec would sort it out.

Sleep didn’t really enter the equation. They were running out of time, Ivan realized. Pumped full of synergine and painkillers, Dono scrubbed up quite well. Ivan’s uniform had come up okay, and coffee did for him what the synergine did for Dono. All Olivia needed was a shower and the new outfit Drou brought over. She looked like a countess. Ivan sighed. *What a waste…*

They were late. They waited for the three wise men plus one—Vorhalas, Vorpatril and Vorkalloner, with Vorfolse blustering and grumbling, and travelled in convoy to Vorhartung Castle. Two ImpSec squads and thirty assorted armsmen made sure they got there safely. Ivan could hear someone droning on as they approached the chamber, so thank gods the voting hadn’t started. Their little group drew a lot of attention as they marched in. It was sweet to see the look on Miles’ face. For once all the mayhem could not be set at his door. The runt didn’t know what had been going on and he was _not happy_ about it. Let the little git suffer. It wasn’t always about Miles Vorkosigan, after all.

René Vorbretten was suffering too, though, and that wasn’t right. Ivan strolled over to put his mind at rest. He didn’t even get to open his mouth before his cousin tried to call him an idiot. He cut him off. “Watch.”

Ivan’s desk was far over to the right hand side of the chamber, in the front rank. He could see the rest of the Counts and up into the gallery as well by turning a little sideways. There was Olivia in the back row, and that looked like Ekaterin Vorsoisson in the front. He hadn’t expected to see her. The crowd was ready for some amusement. It should prove to be an entertaining show.

They certainly got their money’s worth when Miles’ widow routed Richars. The look on the little lord’s face when she proposed was absolutely priceless; Miles Vorkosigan had surely met his match in his Ekaterin. Ivan grinned at his stunned mullet expression. The man was so lost in his own little daydreams he didn’t even pay enough attention to vote when it came to his turn.

There was a riot on the floor of the chamber after the voting. Ivan pushed his way over and stood just behind Miles as Count and Countess Vorkosigan approached with Ekaterin between them. She looked incandescent with joy as Miles took her hands. Ivan felt himself warm with pleasure. They both deserved some happiness.

“Want a leg up?” he asked.

Miles didn’t even look at him. “Shut up, Ivan.”

With that he was forgotten. Ivan blinked a couple of times. He saw Aral Vorkosigan regarding him with a level, assessing gaze and tried to smile. There was something he didn’t quite comprehend in Aral’s expression, but the old man turned away at last, pulled back to the celebration. Ivan stood there a while longer, ignored. Well, it wasn’t about him, really, was it? He’d done his bit. He turned to go, but was brought up short by a hand on his shoulder. René and Tatya Vorbretten were there to wring his hand. Tatya reached up and kissed him.

“Thank you, Ivan, thank you so much. You don’t know what this means to us. Will you come for
lunch at Vorbretten House? I think this calls for the best champagne.”

Ivan glanced over at Miles and Ekaterin. He squared his shoulders. “Sure! Why not?”

Olivia and Dono joined them, too, with Szabo. Tatya’s sister was there as well, so Ivan offered her his arm. They all just managed to squeeze into the Vorrutyer ground car. After the third bottle of champagne, Ivan rather lost count. He thought it might have been Szabo who took him home.

Once he recovered from his hangover Ivan made a start on his list. He didn’t go back to the Residence and his mother didn’t send for him. His first stop was to see Etienne Vorinnis.

The major looked better than the last time Ivan had called. Death warmed up hadn’t been an idiom then, more a statement of fact. ‘Better’ didn’t actually mean well. He still had a long road to travel, but the deep lines of terrified strain had disappeared from his wife’s face. The two men chatted over a cup of tea.

“Do you have plans to go back?” Ivan asked. Vorinnis shook his head.

“For myself, I’d go tomorrow, but I can’t put Katja through that again. I knew nothing about it, after all. She had to live the whole thing. I need to find something else to do for the next twenty years.”

“Do you want to stay in Vorbarr Sultana?”

A hunted look came into his eyes. “I don’t think I could face walking through the Great Square every day of my life. To be honest, Ivan, I don’t know how I’m going to go back there. There’s always the District. My uncle the Count would find something for me. He’s a great bloke, but…”

Ivan nodded. “Her. And don’t forget the poodle.”

“Exactly.”

“Does Gregor know about your decision?”

“I didn’t want to worry him—”

“I know, until after the wedding.”

Vorinnis grinned. “I’m probably well out of it. Gregor calls me personally every two days, you know. He hasn’t forgotten.”

“He wouldn’t. It’s Gregor we’re talking about. So, for your first point, the next time I come visit I’m going to take you to Shoko’s for a coffee. Then, when you’re well, I have a little proposition for you. There’s a job in my District.”

“I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard that you’d been appointed, you know. I laughed and laughed. But I was wrong to laugh, wasn’t I? It suits you, being a Count.”

Ivan considered. “It’s beginning to. Yes, I think it might suit me quite well. Anyway, about this job. Rotherhall needs a new town administrator. I need somebody I can trust implicitly, and it’s a really pretty town, straight out of the Time of Isolation, not too big and the people are friendly. I need someone who will be able to deal with galactics. I have plans. Katja would love it there. Later, if you feel up to it, we could discuss you being my voting deputy.”
“You honestly need someone? Gregor didn’t put you up to this?”

Ivan could see the pride and suspicion warring with a glimmer of hope.

“Word as Vorpatril. Word as Voralys, even. I have this dual personality these days. This isn’t a pity thing, Etienne, I’ll really need you. Talk to Katja. I’ll come back tomorrow to take you for that coffee and you can tell me then if you’re interested. There’s no rush as ImpSec have got a temporary man in there, but everyone’s terrified of him, apparently.”

“That’s ImpSec for you.” Vorinnis shook hands with Ivan. “Thanks, Ivan. Thank you very much.”

There was still time in the day. Ivan headed for Vorfolse House. There was some umming and ahming when he pressed the door chime, but eventually the door opened a crack. The oldest man Ivan had ever seen inspected him, then grudgingly opened the door wider for him to enter.

“Count Voralys,” he announced to Vorfolse who sat in an arm chair not two metres away from the front door.

The place was clean, Ivan had to admit, but the pervasive odour was one of boiled vegetables. Old Vorfolse probably lived on borscht when he wasn’t dining at the Emperor’s expense. The nonagenarian armsman disappeared. Ivan didn’t expect to be offered refreshments.

There was a hard-backed chair set precisely opposite Vorfolse. He gestured to it grudgingly. There was a cautious, wary expression in his eyes.

“If this is about the unfortunate events of two nights ago, Voralys, you’re wasting your time. I knew nothing about any of that. I was most offended by it all.”

“No, sir. This is about the treatment of your cousin and her daughter, and why you led them to believe Count Vorhalas wished to avenge his son’s death on them.”

Vorfolse paled. “You mentioned them the other day. What business is it of yours, sirrah?”

Ivan sucked in a deep breath and his resolution hardened. Vorfolse was not the man to intimidate him. “I am neither your inferior nor a boy, and I am making it my business, my lord Count. Either you explain or I will have ImpSec explain it to me.”

Vorfolse’s already pale face turned ashen white at the mention of ImpSec. “I’m not made of money, you know. I couldn’t just give them that house.”

“I wasn’t aware that you had, sir. Surely they only had the use of the house in Vandeville? It was retained in your name.”

“But I had to pay for it.”

He wasn’t making any sense. “So how did you pay for it?”

The old man’s gaze slid away. He wouldn’t look directly at Ivan.

“If you please, sir, or I go to ImpSec.”

He spoke at last, very quietly. “Aceline Vorfolse was granted a survivor’s pension, during the amnesty. I claimed it. I’m the male next of kin. It was my right.”
Ivan felt his jaw drop. “You stole Aceline Vorfolse’s pension?”

“I did not steal it! Widows become dependent on their husband’s family if they have no other relatives.”

“And you never gave her a cent.”

“I gave her the house to live in.”

“Which her pension paid for.”

“I’m entitled to it. I’ve supported her.”

Ivan looked at the old crook in a kind of stupefied amazement. “Starting today, that pension will be transferred to the rightful recipient. You’ll make over the deeds of the house to her, too. Otherwise I’ll lay a charge against you at the next sitting of the Council of Counts.”

“You can’t do that—”

“You watch me. Do you want me to tell Vorhalas how you used him as your bogeyman to keep the ladies away from the truth? What’s the name of your man of business? I’ll have him draw up the deeds today.”

“I will not have you interfere, you…you…Johnny-come-lately mushroom.”

“Oh, no sir. The ladies were the mushrooms. Kept in the dark and fed on your bullshit.”

Ivan went home to a lonely dinner, grimly satisfied. What was it Szabo had said, that he’d wanted the old man to steal something from his District, rather than act the way he did? Vorfolse had actually stolen enough to keep him in a reasonable state of comfort. It was his miserly spirit and not poverty that ruled his lifestyle. Now that justice was served he could sit and fester in it. Ivan was done with him.

Not quite speaking of the devil but almost, there was a message from Wally on his comconsole while he’d been out. They were back from Vandeville.
Ivan really needed a secretary to sort the wheat from the chaff on his comconsole. What he probably needed was a second code, one he could use for business. Now that he had time to breathe he could look into it. Meanwhile he took two hours to answer his correspondence, tee it up with Wally to meet them at Shoko’s on the square, and talk to Marie. The Voralys booth for the wedding, if you could call it that, was shaping up nicely. He’d been allocated the worst spot in the whole display, one he couldn’t even start to set up until after the wedding was over as it was on the parade ground where the wedding itself was to be held. The only answer to that was to make it mobile. Colonel Vortalala had had a little think about the plan, but he was Vor. There were two things traditional Vor prized above all else, even their families, sometimes. He gave Ivan the all clear.

Ivan took things slowly and easily with Etienne Vorinnis. It was no different to being shit scared of small spaces underground, after all. He got him into the ground car without incident and took him to the café the long way round. Vorinnis didn’t even have to see the square if he didn’t want to as they entered through the back door and stayed inside the building, not out under the colourful umbrellas on the square itself. They could leave the other way if he felt up to it.

Wally looked well. His holiday had done him good. His holiday or his company?

There was a moment of absolute stillness when he rose from the table and looked into Etienne Vorinnis’ eyes. There were no words. What words could you say? Wally had prepped Vorinnis for his cryofreeze. It was his skill that had literally brought the man back from the dead. If Wally had done nothing else in his entire career this was fulfillment enough.

A waitress bustled past, breaking the spell. They were all three of them blinking and clearing their throats as they sat down at the table. Ivan could not get the smile off his face. He and Wally took turns at the conversation, letting the shaky Vorinnis find his equilibrium.

The admiral fell quiet after a little while, regarding Ivan with a quizzical expression, as if he couldn’t make his mind up about something. Ivan took the bait. “OK, Wally, what is it? There’s something on your mind.”

“I thought you might have mentioned it, but perhaps you haven’t heard. Raine was at the Komarr transfer station three days ago. She’s on her way home.”

It was a strange feeling, to have your stomach drop and your heart soar at the same time. It must have left a big hole in the middle somewhere. Ivan didn’t know how to respond to the news. His palms went damp and his heart started to race.

Vorinnis spoke up. “Raine? Who’s this, Ivan? The latest girlfriend? I haven’t heard about her. Why haven’t I heard about her?”

“Valeraine Vorfolse. I met her down in New Sheffield. Her mother, Aceline, is one of Wally’s friends, too. That reminds me, Wally. I’ve got some good news for Aceline. I need to tee up a time to catch up with her.”

He’d tried to talk nonchalantly, but Wally wasn’t buying it and after a glance at the smirk on the
doctor’s face, neither was Vorinnis.

“True love not running smooth, Vorpatril? Has your famous charm deserted you?”

“No, it was Raine who deserted me. She went to Beta.” That was the simple truth.

The other two looked at each other. Vorinnis spoke first. “It’s serious?”

Wally nodded. “It’s serious. He got the bruises to prove it.”

Vorinnis raised his eyebrows. “As in groat circle serious?”

Ivan stood up. “Let’s worry about the wedding first, before anyone starts organizing mine. What do you think, Etienne? Want to go for a stroll?”

Vorinnis sighed. “I’ve got to face it sometime. Come on then. Let’s get out there.”

His list was ticking down. With only ten days to the wedding the social calendar was filled to bursting. Ivan had seen nothing of Miles, and didn’t really expect to. He was quite surprised then, when Jankowski was admitted to the front door of Voralys House. He’d come with a written invitation and was to wait for an answer. There wasn’t anything to distinguish the envelope; Ivan wasn’t going to get any inspiration from the outside. He broke the plain seal and opened it. The signature leapt out at him – Vorkosigan. Not Miles, not Cordelia and most definitely not Mark. Aral wanted to see him, at his convenience. That would be sometime close to never, but it was impossible to refuse an invitation from Aral Vorkosigan. He sent Jankowski off with his answer and spent the next four hours wracking his conscience and panicking. What the hell should he wear? It used to be a choice of dress or undress greens. That was easy. His House uniform was ultra formal. Was this a formal invitation? Probably not. Aral had spent his life dressing formally so perhaps he was sick of it.

In the end Ivan chose one of his plain blue suits. Pym greeted him with a smile and took him up two flights of stairs. They were going to the Count’s private suite. It wasn’t somewhere Ivan had seen much of. When he’d come to visit Miles it was either in his little bedroom, or lately in the suite the old Count Piotr used to use. The last time he’d been in here was when he and Duv were searching the house for Miles and he ended up dumping him in the ice bath. When his mother had brought him to Vorkosigan House in his youth it was always to the library or the public salons. And usually for a talking-to. Ivan shivered. There was only one thing worse than a talking-to by Aral, and that was one from Cordelia.

The old man rose from his chair as Pym announced him. His hair was more white than grey these days. How old was he now? Ivan tried to think. Mid seventies standard, roughly? His eyes weren’t old, though. Much of his power rested in his eyes. They were looking at him now with a mixture of what? Kindness? Sympathy? It wasn’t going to be a bollocking, whatever this was about. Ivan felt profoundly grateful for that small mercy.

“Ivan!” Aral walked up to him and smothered him in a great bear hug. As a man he was shorter and stockier, but the authority was still there, the sheer force of character and personality. After the first stunned shock Ivan gulped and hugged him right back.

“I’ve been wanting to do that since I got here.” Aral indicated a chair. “Sit, please. There’s a lot of water under the bridge since I last saw you, Count Voralys, isn’t there?”

His eyes were twinkling now. He knew exactly what Ivan had been thinking.
“Yes, can you believe it, sir? Some enormous great whirlwind just picked me up and shook me out and carried me off. I have no say in any of it. It’s like a boulder rolling down a cliff.”

Aral looked at him. The twinkle faded to be replaced by something more serious. “Oh, I think you do. From what little I’ve seen, but more from what I’ve heard, you’re a changed man. I hope you realize that. Anyway, before I do anything else, the reason why I wanted to see you was to say thank you. We saw the vids, Ivan, all of them, and read the reports, including yours. You’ve saved us all from chaos and horror and civil war twice. Gregor knows it, Cordelia, Miles and I know it, and the Counts know some of it. The Imperium is safe today because of your actions. Most importantly, Gregor is getting married next week because you kept him safe to do that. You should be proud. I’m so very proud of you.”

Well, he certainly hadn’t been expecting this! Aral Vorkosigan was proud of him?

Ivan couldn’t force words out of his constricted throat. It took him two tries. “That…um…that means a very great deal to me, sir. I never thought I could make you proud of me.”

“And that’s somewhat to the point, isn’t it? That’s where the change is. You never thought much of yourself before. Don’t you think you deserve to have someone be proud of you?”

“I didn’t really do much thinking with my brains, before, did I?”

Aral laughed. “Like any other adolescent male, you mean? You maybe carried it on a year or two too long, but we live in different times. When I was your age I’d had to be a man for nearly twenty years, and seen the worst of people and the best of people. I’d seen the very heights and depths of myself, too. You haven’t had to do any of that.”

“It must have been quite different, losing your mother instead of your father. I guess…I don’t really know, but I guess it was better to have known her than not.”

“It’s a very long time ago. I haven’t forgotten her. My father Count Piotr certainly never forgot her.”

There was a strange note in his voice. Ivan had never dared talk like this to Aral Vorkosigan before. He spoke very quietly. “Or your brother, sir?”

“No, not my brother, either. It was a great grief to us both.”

“I never had a brother to grieve for. My father was only ever an image to me, not real. I can’t imagine it.”

They sat for a few moments. Ivan couldn’t begin to guess what was going on behind those eyes. He wouldn’t have disturbed him for the world.

Aral sighed at last. “So, a Count, eh? What do you know about being a Count?”

“Not as much as I need to know, sir, and that’s for certain. I do know I’m a better man than some of the Counts out there. Vorfolse, for example. I’m learning I have to think for thousands of people, and I’m learning that my honour now extends to those who act in my name, so I’d better bloody well get my choices right.”

“Ah, yes…and their actions as well as yours will make your reputation.”

He changed the subject with bewildering speed. “Miles hurt you the other day, didn’t he?”
Ivan didn’t pretend not to know what he was talking about. “Yes, he did, but really, what else should I have expected? It was a very special moment for him and his Ekaterin. There were only the two of them in the room.”

“It’s only the people we love that can really hurt us, and infuriate us, sometimes, as well. How is your mother?”

*He cut straight to it, didn’t he?*

“I think you’ve seen her more recently than I have, sir. Perhaps you could tell *me* that.”

“You need to talk to her, Ivan.”

The wash of frustration nearly swamped him. “I can’t talk to her. She sees a naughty little boy when I try to talk to her. *Mother knows best.* She refuses to…to let go, I guess.”

“It’s probably not the best time—”

“If you’re going to say wait until *after the frigging wedding*, please don’t. We haven’t all gone into cryostasis until after the wedding.”

Aral laughed, a deep, booming chortle that set Ivan grinning as well. “Cordelia and I have managed to escape most of the frenzy. We’re not suffering from wedding fatigue, but I can imagine what it must be like. What is it you really want from her, Ivan?”

He knew now. He hadn’t known for a long time. “It’s what I want from a lot of people, actually. I want to be respected for the man *I* am and the choices *I* make. I’m not Padma. I’m not Miles. I’m not a substitute Gregor and never could be. I’m not actually an idiot, you know, not any more. And when it comes to idiotic things—”

“I don’t have to look far outside my own family, do I? The idiot boy even got himself killed.”

“He’s never given a thought to what he does to all the innocent bystanders he leaves in his wake. I do love him dearly, when I don’t want to strangle him.”

“But?”

“But I can never be like him. I have to do things my own way. Make a list, think about it, and be methodical, not spectacular.”

Aral nodded. “That’s so much more like Gregor, although I hear he managed his own bit of spectacular the other day.”

“I wasn’t there, but the story has got out. I’d ask Henri Vorvolk about it. He didn’t do so badly himself…now that’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? They’re going to leave the lance there, you know. ‘Gregor’s vengeance.’”

Ivan could change the subject as well as Aral. “Has anyone told you about Pym?”

“Only what I read in your and Guy Allegre’s reports.”

“He’s one of the bravest men I’ve ever seen. There was no way he was going to let me go looking for that bio-warfare agent without him, no matter the cost. He’s one of the cleverest, too.” Ivan broke off to look at Aral a little warily. “Did Pym let you know I invited Count Vorhalas here?”

Aral’s lip twitched, but his thoughts were far away for a second. “I did hear something about that.
It must have taken remarkable fortitude to go and ask him. I have no quarrel with Vorhalas, you know. It’s he who cannot forgive me. I would dearly love to see him here in my house.”

Ivan let out a little sigh of relief. “Well, Pym was the absolute master of that situation, too. He did your House proud.”

“And now we have to talk about your House. What help are you getting?”

“Major Karasavas is holding the fort for me down in New Sheffield. That can’t go on indefinitely. Apart from that, not a lot at the moment.”

“No armsmen?”

“No, I have an ImpSec squad on loan. I can’t just snap my fingers and swear twenty men. They have to be the right ones, and I need a range of ages and experience, otherwise they’ll all retire at the same time. You could make a fortune cloning Pym.”

“Finance? Secretarial? Administration? House staff?”

“No, no, maybe Etienne Vorinnis, and agency. I’m hamstrung until after the blessed wedding.”

Aral sighed. “I’m not an example to look up to when it comes to administering a District, you know. Both my father and I are guilty of neglect, there, but if you wish, I’ll get some advice for you. You can’t do this on your own and you shouldn’t have to. Do you want to employ only District men and women?”

“Yes as my armsmen. I’d rather place skill and suitability over an accident of birth otherwise. Like Sergyar, migrants are welcome. I suspect the old Vorclare District is over-represented on Sergyar, anyway. I would certainly appreciate your support, Uncle Aral.”

Even Aral’s moral support left Ivan feeling much better than he had in days, but there was one thing he could really help with.

“Sir, what should I do about my mother?”

Aral grinned. It transformed his whole face. “Leave that with me. Or should I say, leave that with us.” He winked. “Now, let’s have something to drink. My chief minder has deserted me and can’t object so I think we should have a bottle of the good stuff. If there is any left…”

Pym’s second sight had been working again. Aral didn’t have to ask for it.

Life looked so much brighter than it had two days ago. Ivan actually smiled at Christos when he picked up Marie for a morning at the Great Square. She’d love to see all the flags and decorations and buy a new dress, one she could pick for herself. His mother’s ideas of suitable didn’t quite match Ivan’s, but that was just too bad, wasn’t it? She could wear it to go out with him if she never got to put it on any other time.

Marie skipped along, holding his hand and giggling at all his jokes. Ivan drew quite a few startled glances. His closer friends all knew about Marie, but his relationship with her had slipped under the scanners after some of his more spectacular activities had stolen the spotlight. He scowled horribly at that witch of a reporter from Good Morning VS and gave the nod to Vorberg to keep her at arms length. That was an unaccustomed bonus to having his security team. It even helped deal with all the acquaintances of his mother who suddenly wanted to introduce their daughters and
granddaughters and nieces and second cousins twice removed to their dear Alys’ fine young son. Some of these were the same acquaintances who’d warned all their female relations to keep him at arm’s length not so long ago. Ivan drew the line at Countess Vorinnis when he saw her bearing down on him, poodle and suitable young gel both in tow. They ducked into a dress shop and out the back door. Ivan picked up Marie and ran.

She laughed and laughed. “You’re scared, My Ivan!”

He laughed back. “That poodle wants to bite me. I just want to bite some ice cream.” They settled for Shoko’s, at one of the quiet inside tables. It was quite a good spot to people watch without necessarily be noticed back. He saw Olivia Koudelka hand in hand with Count Dono, and there were Tatya and René, too. They were probably meeting for lunch. Ivan glanced at his chrono. Time to be getting Marie home. He had an appointment that afternoon, with Aceline Vorfolse.

He took a great deal of care with his appearance. Now that the ladies down in Prestwich had finished his outfit for the wedding his best Count’s House uniform had turned overnight into his second best Count’s uniform and he chose to wear that. His valet had done a great job refurbishing it after he’d rolled around on Vorfolse’s garage floor in it. He looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was a tiny bit on the severe side as he’d had it cut to look just right for the wedding. Another week and it would be perfect. He shot his shirt cuffs to just the right length past his tunic and tried out the effect. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a tiny smile on the valet’s face.

“You look perfect, my lord. Nobody could find fault.”

“ I have an appointment with a lady,” he said, and then, mostly to himself, “it’s just possible the lady’s daughter will be there.”
Aceline Vorfolse had rented an apartment very close to his mother, in the same street in fact. There was only the one door on her penthouse level and the rich parquetry floor of the entry way spoke of taste and luxury. Ivan’s heart hammered as he rang the doorbell. She knew he had arrived, as he’d had to negotiate his way past the stern security guard in the foyer. With one ImpSec guard standing by the ground car, one downstairs and Vorberg standing by the lift shaft it was quite hard to sneak up on anyone, even if he’d wanted to.

He passed the data case he carried from one hand to the other then back again, and straightened the imaginary twist to his collar. What was taking her so long? At last the door opened. Ivan blinked. Aceline bore very little resemblance to the pale and tired woman he’d last seen at Vorkosigan House. The strain had vanished from her face, her hair was sleek and luxuriously coiled at the base of her neck and she had a beaming, welcoming smile on her face.

“Ivan! Come in. How wonderful to see you.”

He took the hand she held out and kissed it, then ventured to kiss her on the cheek also. “Madame Vorfolse, it’s wonderful to see you looking so well. Aren’t the circumstances different, too?”

“Indeed. Dear Stefan tells me you’ve been appointed Count in place of that monster. I’m so happy for you.”

Stefan? Who…Admiral Waleska, of course. So Wally was actually Stefan to his nearest and dearest. Ivan suppressed a grin. Dear Stefan…

Aceline led him into a pleasant sitting area with a view over the main buildings of the city. Sun streamed in the wide picture window and a vase of roses provided the hint of scent to the air. The contrast with the stinking, dark dungeon where he’d first seen Aceline could not be more marked. They sat both facing the view with a low table between them and waited as a maid brought in tea and little savoury tartlets. She looked at him with a twinkle in her eye as she poured the tea.

“Raine should be back very shortly. She had a business meeting today but she said she was going to cut it short. I think she really wants to see you again.”

Ivan felt a tug of longing in his heart at just the mention of her name. “When did she get back? Admiral Waleska told me she was on her way, but I didn’t hear any more.”

“Just a day and a half ago. She’s been very busy. I’ve hardly seen her myself.”

He tried to keep his voice matter-of-fact. “I’d like to see Raine. We didn’t part in the best of circumstances, as you know. It was a shock, but it was her choice, to go like that. I can sort of understand it if she didn’t want a relationship but I’ve actually got a business proposition for her.”

“Don’t write her off just yet, Ivan. She acts on impulse sometimes and regrets it later. It’s wonderful the way her books have taken off, but the publishers are very demanding. All this…” Aceline waved her hand around the room, “is her doing, of course. I could never afford to live like this.”
“Well, that brings me to the purpose of my visit, essentially. You should know I made it my business to have a word with Count Vorfolse.”

“Did you? But Ivan…” Aceline reached over and grasped his hand briefly, “I really hope you don’t think you have to have an excuse to come and visit us. You’re welcome for no motive at all other than your company. You’ll always be welcome.” She passed him a plate and offered the selection of savouries. Ivan busied himself choosing one, not quite comfortable to be looking her in the eye for some reason he couldn’t quite explain, even to himself.

“That’s very kind of you. I appreciate—”

Ivan broke off as the outside door opened. He leapt to his feet and turned, heart racing again, only to have it suddenly thump into his chest as she walked in.

*Raine. She was here.*

She paused in the entry way and a faint tinge of colour washed her face. He stood and stared, soaking in the idea of her; every braid of her hair, wound in a complicated knot at the back of her head, the rapid rise and fall of her chest, emphasizing the delicious swell of her breasts, her long legs in the fashionable Komarran trousers, her beautiful, attractive face and those luminous dark eyes. She coloured even more under his gaze.

“Hello Ivan.”

He shook his head, trying to think coherently, trying to calm his chaotic emotions. He crossed the room to take hold of her hands, kissing one and then the other. She might have been pleased to see him, but then again this shy uncertainty he saw wasn’t like the Raine he’d known before. Perhaps she was just embarrassed.

“We…um…We’re just having some tea. Would you like to join us?”

She let him lead her over to the chairs. She sat down and he had to let go of her hand at last. He wanted to go on touching her, to never let go. He tried to marshall his thoughts. What could he say that wasn’t confession or blame?

“My cousin Miles Vorkosigan got engaged while you were gone, did you know? I was wondering if you might know her, as she comes from Vandeville, too. Ekaterin Vorsoisson.”

Raine looked bewildered for a second, and then made an effort to respond. “Ekaterin Vorsoiss—oh, Ekaterin Vorvayne? Yes, she married and left Vandeville. I know Ekaterin. We lost touch.” She frowned. “But she married Etienne Vorsoisson. Did she dump him? I hope so. He was bad news, I thought.”

“Not precisely. He died.”

“That would explain things.” Raine didn’t express any conventional sorrow or regrets at that news. “I’d love to catch up with Ekaterin at some point. I think she’d remember me.”

“I’ll tell her, next time I see her.” He’d be making it his business to tell Ekaterin, sooner rather than later. They sat, looking at each other. Ivan’s brain was too stupid to think of another thing to say. He just smiled like an idiot.

Aceline took pity on them. “So, Ivan, you were saying you’d talked to Count Vorfolse. Did he have an explanation? He’s made no effort to contact us.”
Ivan told them what Vorfolse had done, as gently as he could. Aceline blinked a few times, otherwise she sat as still as the ice at Winterfair, and as cold. Raine went to her, to put an arm around her shoulders and look at Ivan with murder in her eyes. “I’ll kill the bastard.”

“It’s treason to even say that, Raine. You can’t threaten violence to a sitting Count. There are ways to make his life as miserable as he made yours, and your mother’s. Here’s the first one.”

He handed over the record of the deed transfer. “And here’s the second one.” It was the code for a pension deposit account, transferred to Aceline’s name. “We’ll hit the bastard where it hurts him the most, in his pocket. He needn’t think I’ve stopped yet, either. We’ll just let him choke on these two for a while.”

“Why are you helping us with this, Ivan?” Raine asked. “We’re already very grateful to you, you know. Count Vorhalas told us what happened when you went to see him.”

Ivan shrugged his shoulders. “When something’s wrong you can’t just ignore it, or you make yourself part of that wrong, don’t you? I could do something about it, so I did.”

“I wish there was something I could do for you in return,” Aceline said. Ivan glanced from her to Raine.

“Well, there is something that Raine could possibly do, but it’s a business proposition. It doesn’t come with strings attached.”

“If it’s something in my power, of course I’ll consider it.” She looked at him a little quizzically.

Ivan opened his data case again. He took out a box and handed it to Raine. Inside was a slender, tapering dagger with an acorn pommel and a scrolling cross guard. She looked at it and burst out laughing.

Aceline frowned in puzzlement. “What is it, Raine? It doesn’t look like a Vorfemme knife, or a seal dagger.”

Raine wiped her streaming eyes. “I know exactly what it is. Oh, my goodness. Ivan, you’re a shocker. It’s a Vordagger, maman.”

“A what? Oh…” Aceline’s eyes turned round. Her face went pink and she started to giggle.

Ivan let them laugh. It was quite funny. Raine had seen the potential straight away.

“It’s legal. I checked. Anything under thirty-five centimetres long isn’t classified as a sword so anyone can own one. I thought you could sell them in different sizes and price points, at your theme hotel in the Orb, or even here in some bookstores and tourist places.”

Raine looked more closely at the dagger. “Why the acorn on the pommel?”

Ivan tapped his collar. “You can’t sell traditional seal daggers to anyone but a Count or his heir, so they were out. The acorn is one of the symbols of Voralys district. I’m hoping to attract a lot of tourists, Galactics especially, who want to meet Lord Vordagger and see what Time of Isolation Bararrayar really looked like.”

Raine looked at him. “You can do that? And who’s going to be Lord Vordagger?”

“I’ve got the perfect place and the perfect person in mind. It just needs a bit of development. I’ll be working on it after the wedding.”
“Oh, yes. The wedding. Maman is going, did you know? Admiral Waleska invited her as his partner.”

Ivan couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it before. *What an idiot.*

“Raine, would you like to go too? I was just going to partner up with Olivia Koudelka, but she’s got her own invitation, and I’m pretty sure she’s spoken for, now, anyway. I’m in the groom’s party, but you could stand with you mother and the admiral on the fourth circle and then sit with me at the dinner. If you’d like to, that is.”

He stopped, uncertain of her reaction. She tapped the dagger. “And if I don’t think this is a good idea?”

He drew in a sharp breath. “The invitation wasn’t meant to be a bribe. It’s quite a separate thing. I just thought you might like to go and I have a spare ticket. You’ll need to get security clearance but that’s happening right up until the day. I’ll clear it with Colonel Vortal. But only if you want to go.”

Raine smiled. “Who wouldn’t want to go to the Emperor’s wedding? Thank you, Ivan. I’d love to accept.”

He felt a silly grin split his face. He couldn’t help it. “That’s excellent. I’m really looking forward to it.”

He stayed a while longer. Raine looked at the dagger again, thinking. Ivan could almost see her mind working.

“They could make these cheaper on Beta, you know.” She looked doubtful.

“Not an authentic, District made version, they couldn’t, using traditional methods from the Time of Isolation, and have a warrant from that particular District’s Count.”

“That’s true. I was forgetting, Count Voralys. But do you want your name associated with my brand?”

He’d hoped she was going to say ‘with me’, but she avoided that. “I don’t see why not. You’re a roaring success, so the Koudelka girls tell me. If it’s not me it’ll be some other entrepreneur like Mark Vorkosigan, and he’d want a bigger cut than I do.”

“I suppose so. Let me think about it.” She picked up the dagger again. “May I keep this for now?”

“You can keep it permanently. If you want to see some other styles and samples I have some back at Voralys House. I just picked out what I thought was the best one.”

He had to go, eventually, so Raine saw him out. Aceline discreetly disappeared into the kitchen with some of the used plates. Ivan stopped at the doorway and took Raine’s hand. “Raine, can we talk sometime about why you left so suddenly? I was…it hurt.”

She looked apologetic. “Yes, you do deserve that. I’m sorry, Ivan. I panicked and I ran. I wasn’t in control of my feelings and I really don’t like that. I hate anyone having control over me. But I did have business on Beta. That was genuine. It was the opening of the theme hotel on the Orb. I should have told you though, or at least left some word.”

He kissed her softly on the forehead, presenting, he hoped, a non-threatening gesture of affection. “We can talk about it. I promise not to growl.”
She cupped his cheek in her free hand. “Ivan, you’re such a darling. You deserve a lot better than me.”

He brought her other hand up to his lips and kissed her palm, trailing heated breath to kiss her again at her wrist. “You let me be the judge of that.”

In the lift tube Anton Vorberg looked at Ivan with a strange expression on his face. “I can’t remember hearing you whistle before, my lord.”

Out on the street again, Ivan debated whether or not to pop in and see Marie. He had an hour or so spare before the social whirl caught up with him again, dinner and awards for the Vorbarr Sultana fire watch and he was already dressed, after all. Yes, why not?

He strolled with Vorberg the few blocks, his ImpSec guard and groundcar following discreetly behind. Wedding fever had hit the capital hard. Everywhere he looked there were banners and flowers and pictures of the Emperor and Laisa. No one living could remember the wedding of an Emperor. There would have been a few still alive who remembered Crown Prince Serg’s wedding to Kareen, but this was the biggest thing to hit Barrayar in centuries apart from the end of the Time of Isolation, invasions and civil war, of course. It was time to party. Marie would be loving the spectacle. It was just a shame the Vorbarr colours were silver and black. The shopkeepers, street vendors, office owners and householders hadn’t let that stop them, though. Every colour of the rainbow and more fluttered and billowed all around him. The excitement was tangible, and it was infectious. Even Ivan, in his glittering house uniform, received a cheer or two. The fact that it came from the tables outside a local hostelry, of course, didn’t really count. Ivan just grinned and waved back.

His mother was out, as he’d expected. She must be close to frantic by now. Even Ivan could feel sympathy for her. This was going to be the pinnacle of her career, but also the zenith of her power. After the wedding, Laisa would be the one to dictate protocol and social etiquette. Lady Alys wouldn’t be discarded, but she would have to play second fiddle instead of concertmistress from now on. It might well be interesting. As long as she didn’t turn her excess attention and energy in his direction, of course. Ivan shuddered at the very thought.

Marie dragged him into her room the second she saw him. She climbed into the rocking chair and pulled him down beside her. She had a hand reader with pictures of Vandeville to show him.

“Papi says I can go with him and Mamie for a holiday if you think that’s alright. He said I had to ask you first and he said it’s your de-decision. Can I go, please, My Ivan? I’d like to. There’s sea there, Papi says, and we can make sand castles.”

Ivan thought he was a pretty broad-minded person, really. He was over his crogglement at Count Dono. He’d met Cetagandans and seen those foul kitten trees. He’d even managed to meet the Betan ambassador with equanimity. He’d met herms before, after all, but…but—

There was no way he could ever even begin to imagine Simon Illyan, that sinister figure for the past thirty years in charge of Imperial Security, who’d calmly told Ivan he could have killed him with his bare hands in three seconds flat, sitting on the sand with Marie building sand castles. His mother certainly wouldn’t do such a thing. Marie looked so hopeful.

“You understand I can’t go too? I wouldn’t get to see you for a long time. It will be a whole month. That’s four weeks.”
She nodded. “I know. Don’t be sad, My Ivan, because I can talk to you on the comconsole. Please don’t be too sad.”

He laughed and ruffled her hair. “Oh, no, honey, you can go, if you really want to. I won’t be sad. You can bring me back some shells if you can find them.”

She jumped down and ran off. He could hear her in the distance running around looking for Simon.

He shouted after her. “Tell him I want holovids of the sandcastle building.”

Miles and Ekaterin were both at the dinner for the fire watch. He got to talk to them, briefly. Miles couldn’t keep the silly grin off his face and Ekaterin wasn’t much better. Before they were all seated they managed a few words. Miles managed to stop smiling long enough to apologise.

“The Count my father said he’d talked to you, Ivan. I’m sorry. He’s reminded me I should have been trying to support you. I’ve been too caught up with my own affairs.”

Ivan just shook his head at him. “And since when have you ever made the effort to go out of your way to think about anyone else? You can’t change your spots now, you know, apart from Ekaterin. You’ll want to think about her. If I really need help I’ll yell. Deal?”

He held out his hand. Miles shook it, still looking a tad shamefaced. “Deal.”

Ivan forgot about Miles. He turned to Ekaterin. “I was talking to an old friend of yours today, Ekaterin. She hopes to catch up with you soon. Valeraine Vorfolse.”

“Raine? Oh, my goodness. I haven’t seen Raine since my first wedding. Is she here in Vorbarr Sultana?”

Ivan nodded. “She is. I’ll be bringing her to the wedding. Hopefully we can catch up then.”

Ekaterin looked pleased. “What is she doing these days?”

Miles interrupted. “They’re seating us now, Ekaterin. I’ll tell you over dinner. She’s a writer. You might even have heard of her.”

Ivan was separated by the flow of guests moving to their places, but he did see Ekaterin stop in astonishment and turn back to look at him. He winked and blew her a kiss. Miles was just jealous. Raine was going to go to the wedding with him, and really, that’s all that he cared about.
We need to talk

Two days before the wedding, Voralys House boiled with activity. A fleet of massive lift vans lined up in the street outside. Ivan had Ma McIver bring Marie over to watch the fun and also to choose the bedroom she wanted out of the three possibilities he had in mind. The courtyard at the back of the house was spacious but the entry way was still fairly narrow so there was really only room for two of the vans to manoeuvre at a time. Marie watched from the safety of her new bedroom window, opened to look out on the courtyard below. She was out of the way there. There was too much danger of her getting crushed or stepped on in the melee.

Sinclair unloaded his vans first, using antigrav sleds to roll out massive oak barrels he called hogsheads.

“There’d be just about two hundred and fifty decent drinks in each one, my lord,” he explained to Ivan. “With three thousand guests we only need twelve of these, as I’m sure not all the ladies will drink ale or beer, nor all the men neither, think on’t. We’ve got cider and perry as well, but nobody in their right mind would drink a litre of perry straight off otherwise they wouldn’t have their right minds for too long. Proper ramsquaddled they’d be.”

He cast Ivan a sly, sideways glance. “Or drunk as a lord, as I hear they say in these parts. So, we have half measures for that. All the stocks of drink ware arrived from New Sheffield, just as you ordered.”

Ivan looked at one of the hogsheads and laid a hand on it. “How do you keep them cold? There’s nothing worse than warm beer.” Ivan didn’t know his casks but he certainly knew his beers.

“Well, in the old days we’d bury them in hessian burlap and wet sawdust, but we’ll chill them right down for two days in your cellars as your man Vorberg tell me they’re climate controlled down there, and then on the day we’ll just cheat a little bit and run the lines through some dry ice. It’ll make it look all romantic-like, with the mist.”

Once the beers, ales and ciders were safely stowed away the rest of the lift vans began to move. Marie screamed with delight and excitement as the first one opened. “My Ivan! They’re horses!”

Ivan held his finger up to his lips. “Don’t scream honey, you might scare them.”

Farmer Eccles, anxiously overseeing the delicate backing out and turning of the huge beasts, took the time to turn round and smile. “I doubt anything would scare them, my lord. They’re as gentle and docile as a pussycat. Barrayar Blacks these are. Bred true for near four hundred years.”

Farmer Eccles had never seen Zap’s offspring, obviously, but Ivan didn’t bother to correct him. Born and bred in the capital and his only contact with horses the few riding lessons he’d had down at Vorkosigan Surleau with Miles and old Count Piotr, Ivan nevertheless felt the lineage of Dorca surging in his veins. Standing nearly as tall as him at the shoulder, the magnificent animals set his Vor blood singing. They were perfect. After dispensing with a few ground cars and two lightflyers to lesser quarters, Ivan even had the original house stables available for them. Apart from the odd toss of the head or stamp of a foot they waited patiently while Farmer Eccles and his men forked a thick layer of straw over the old cobbles and set up water troughs and feed nets. There were six of
the proud beasts altogether.

“They’ll do right well here,” the farmer said. There’s room a plenty and it’s quiet. They can rest up for the day tomorrow and then work starts. It’ll take the six of us all day to turn them out. 1800 hours you wanted them at?”

“About then, barring delays. Vorberg will have all your clearances and permits. I shouldn’t think you’d have any trouble getting through the crowds. Who would argue with these beauties?”

“With the dray laden we’ll have a mass close to ten thousand kilograms. I think we’d win the arguments. Why don’t you fetch down the little miss, my lord? She might like a ride round the courtyard on old Blossom, here. Flat as a tabletop, she is.”

Marie’s eyes were as big as saucers as Ivan tossed her up onto Blossom’s back and Farmer Eccles showed her how to hang on to the mare’s mane. She was breathless with terror and delight mingled.

“Go on, milord,” Eccles urged, “you jump up behind her. Blossom could carry three of you no trouble at all.”

“I don’t mind if I do.” Ivan got a strong leg up from the farmer and swung over Blossom’s back. Horses like these would have carried knights in shining armour, two thousand years ago back on old Earth. It was a boy’s holovid adventure come true. He couldn’t really decide between himself and Marie who had the better fun. There was no way she’d be able to keep the secret, though. He’d just have to hope maybe she wouldn’t blab to anyone but Papi Simon. He didn’t want word getting round too early.

Ivan’s flowcharts were checked and treble checked to make sure nothing could go wrong. The only obstacle was the turn into the parade ground gates. Ivan took Eccles down to the square and the streets around the Residence so he could see it for himself.

“We can do it. We’ll be down to a walk with the crowds, anyway, so we just swing round to the other side of the road a hundred metres or so back, and in we’ll go. It’s a sharp right turn inside, you say?”

“Yes, but there’ll be about two hundred ImpSec guards and palace servitors to help you with that end of the trip. Do you think we’ll be able to hear you coming?”

“Oh, aye. We’ll be reight. There’s nowt to worry over. You’ll hear us.”

Eccles was right. Ivan couldn’t think of anything else to worry over. While they were there he took the farmer over to Shoko’s for a tea. As they were shown to a table past the queue of hopefuls already waiting, Ivan whispered to Eccles. “Being a Count has its uses, you know. Six weeks ago I would have been standing in the queue with the rest of them. I think it’s ImpSec looming does the trick.”

As they sat down Ivan recognised Ekaterin Vorsoisson and Professora Vorthys waiting for a table. He jumped up again and brought the pair of them over to his place.

Aunt Helen was really glad to sit down and rest her feet. It was hard to explain what Eccles was doing up in the capital without giving the game away, but Ivan just introduced him as a District delegate and left it at that. They sipped their tea and watched the passing crowds.

“How did you manage to pry Miles away?” He asked Ekaterin. “Every time I’ve seen you two together there’s not room for a flimsy between you. I’ve never seen him look so happy.”
“He has a list of engagements as long as your arm. I’m surprised you don’t either?” she said.

Ivan looked at his chrono. “I have lunch and dinner today, but they’re small affairs. I’m on Komarran minding duty. Aunt Anna has asked for me especially.”

Ekaterin smiled. “They seem to be lovely people. I wanted to speak to you after the Fire Watch dinner the other night, but we missed you in the crowd. I need to talk to you about Raine.”

“I see.” Ivan tried to think of a way of getting Ekaterin on her own. Eccles solved one problem for him by excusing himself to look round the square for a while, and Aunt Helen could take a hint. She pointed to a bookshop close by.

“I’ll wait for you in there, dear,” she said to Ekaterin. “And I’ll see you at the wedding, Ivan.”

He rose to help her with her chair and escort her over to the bookshop and then hurried back to sit beside Ekaterin. “What is it about Raine? Is there something wrong?”

“I remembered, later. It was something my mother wrote and told me about, just before she died. There was some sort of scandal, Ivan—”

She saw him stiffen, put her hand on his arm and gave it a little squeeze of reassurance. “No, nothing like that. She wasn’t the guilty party. She was betrothed, or just about to be, I believe. The man wasn’t intending to go through with the wedding. He already had a wife in Darkoi he hadn’t divorced. Poor Raine was totally blindsided, and I think there was more. Mother told me she’d really loved him. He was a real charmer, apparently. Tall, dark and handsome, and Vor, of course.”

“That’s despicable. He was no Vor, he was a twelve-toed prole, whoever he was. No, any decent prole wouldn’t behave like that, either.” Ivan fumed for a little while, then stood up and leaned over to kiss Ekaterin on the cheek. “Thank you for telling me. I’d better find my guest and take you over to the bookshop. Will we see you tomorrow?”

“Probably not, unless it’s in the evening, for dinner. Aren’t you boys all doing something with Gregor?”

“We’re not allowed to get him drunk on pain of death or mamère’s severe displeasure. I’d prefer death, myself. It’ll be a bit of a low-key day, I should think.”

He handed Ekaterin off to her aunt and rounded up Eccles. He needed to speak to Raine. Lunch with the Komarrans was tedious. Everything they ate had to come out of a vat. He did his very best charming playboy Vor act and flirted with all the unattached women, up to and including Aunt Anna, but his mind wasn’t really on the job. He really needed to speak to Raine.

She didn’t answer her comconsole the first time he tried it, or the second, but on the third try her face appeared on the screen. “Ivan.” She looked warily pleased to see him.

“I’d really like to talk to you. Can I come over?”

She didn’t want him to come. He could see the doubt and uncertainty in her face. “We can meet somewhere neutral, if you’d prefer. I promise to behave myself.”

She sighed. “Oh, Ivan, it’s not you.” She made up her mind. “Yes, you can come over. Did you want to make that now?”

“I have a dinner tonight. Wedding stuff. Now would be good if it’s not too inconvenient.”
She smiled. “See you soon.”

He got there in ten minutes and had no trouble with the security guard this time. Raine answered the door herself. Her hair was simply done today, and her long skirt and bolero in tan with yellow embroidery was a lot more traditional than the snappy Komarran outfit he’d last seen her in. She wasn’t dressed to impress today. She showed him over to the chairs by the window.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

She was half way through one herself, he noticed. “Sure, I’ll join you. Is that a Vorkosigan Estate? You must have got the taste for them from my cousin’s house.”

She nodded, poured him a drink and fussed with the little plate of smoked nuts. *What did she have to be nervous about? He wasn’t going to hurt her.*

He spoke quite softly. “Raine, are you afraid of me?”

She looked into his eyes for the first time. It took her a while to respond. “I don’t think…I don’t know, Ivan. It’s not a rational thing. I get so close, and then I just panic. I have a problem with trust. Trust and control, I suppose.”

He sipped some wine. He really, really didn’t want to mess this up. “Do you want to tell me about the man who hurt you?”

There was a sharp intake of breath. Her fingers on her wineglass clenched white. “Did Ekaterin tell you? I didn’t think she knew.”

“She doesn’t, but she knows *something* happened. You were going to be betrothed?”

“We *were* betrothed. That’s why I let him—” she broke off, gulped, and swallowed some more wine. Hastily she filled her glass again. Raine looked back at him. Her face was ashen and her hands trembled. The wine in her glass sloshed up and over the rim onto her fingers. “He wanted a virgin he could play out some sick scenario of his own with. He chained me up—” Tears welled in her eyes. She carefully put the wine glass down on the table and wrung her wine-splashed hands together.

“He hurt me, Ivan. It was bad. I don’t know if I’ll ever trust another man again.”

“He hurt me, Ivan. It was bad. I don’t know if I’ll ever trust another man again.”

“Raine—” Ivan struggled with his own emotions. He couldn’t rant and stomp up and down the room. He couldn’t go *right now* and find that piece of shit and rip his head off. He didn’t think he could even touch her. “At Vorkosigan House, you wanted—you wanted more than I was prepared to go. Or did I get my signals all wrong there?”

She tried to smile. It didn’t really work. “No, you weren’t wrong. I wanted to try. You’re such a…I don’t know. I don’t think you’ve got a dishonourable bone in your body. I knew you’d be different. You *were* different. When I kissed you I thought I could forget everything. I was wrong.”

He *ached*. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss it all better. That sure as hell wasn’t going to work. The way she’d reacted the last time he’d tried to do that became appallingly clear to him now.

“Have you talked to someone? A professional? I think you should talk to my Tante Cordelia at the very least. She’d go and slice his head off for you, no more questions asked. But she’s very kind, as well. Betan. They can deal with these things…we’d all help, if we could. You must understand that.”
She smiled through her tears and reached out to cover his hand with hers. “Yes, I know you would. I had help, lots of it. That’s how I came to start writing the books. My therapist tried to get me to imagine loving situations, ones where the woman retained control. It’s all so easy on paper, or in my mind. My experience is quite different.”

“It’s not like that, you know. Real men—” He paused in hot embarrassment, recalling some of the things he’d done as a testosterone fuelled adolescent. “Real men know about consent, and…and gentleness.” He smiled ruefully. “And anyone subjected to Tante Cordelia’s lectures on the subject learns or perishes.”

She smiled again. Ivan ventured to pass over his handkerchief.

“I still have one of yours,” she said. “I kept it on purpose.”

Ivan nodded. “I noticed. I was very glad you kept it. In that cellar, when your wrists were wired up like that, it must have been horrific for you.”

She shuddered. “Yep.” And that was all she was going to say about that incident, obviously.

He felt really inadequate to deal with such raw pain and emotion, but she’d trusted him enough to tell him. That was something, at least. “Can we go on from here together, somehow? I don’t want to give up on you, Raine. I don’t want you to run away again. I can wait, you know. As long as it takes. What is it you want?”

“What I want? I want the fairy tale. The handsome prince, riding off into the sunset, the happy ever after. A home, children.”

He cocked his head to one side and grinned at her. “The handsome prince is taken at last. The next best thing on Barrayar is a Count, though. We could work on it. I would like to do that.”

“You want me to trust you?”

He nodded. “You can, you know. I will never, ever lie to you. I’ll stop if you say no. In fact, I’ll lie back and think of Barrayar and you can have your wicked way with me. I’ll trust you. Word as Vorpatril and Voralys.”

She laughed. “Oh, Ivan you are shocking. I want to say terrible, but that was taken a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

It was his turn to laugh. “And I’ve never heard that one before, of course.” He picked up her hand and kissed it. “Friends, and maybe more?”

“Yes. And I promise to talk to you before I run.”

“That’s a start. No need to rush.”

Ivan tried to sort things out in his mind on the way down the lift tube. One thing was for sure. He was going to find that fucking piece of shit who’d hurt his Raine and rip his balls off. That was a given. Otherwise, all he could do right now was go to dinner with the Komarr delegation and flirt his socks off.

He managed a fairly early night. He even managed to get some sleep.

It was quite early though, when Vorberg knocked on his door. He didn’t even let Ivan take the time to get out of bed. “My lord, I think you need to see this.”
Vorberg flicked on the holovid to *Good Morning VS*. That damned witch of a social reporter was at it again. There were still shots of himself and Ekaterin, alone at their table at Shoko’s. She had her hand on his arm, a look of intense concentration on her face. It flicked over to him kissing her on the cheek.

“It’s barely two weeks since Ekaterin Vorsoisson’s spectacular wedding proposal at Vorhartung Castle. What is her new fiancé going to do today after this tryst at the Great Square? Being a Count hasn’t changed the way Ivan *dahling* behaves, has it? Once a playboy always a playboy, even with his own cousin’s bride to be. Tut tut, Count Voralys. What will mamère have to say?”
Vorberg waited for the explosion. When it didn’t come he looked worriedly at Ivan. “My lord, is there anything I can do?” His worry intensified when he noticed Ivan was actually smiling.

“You won’t have to do a thing, Vorberg,” Ivan said, the malicious grin deepening as he finally moved to get out of bed. “I’m going to call Pym. It’s not my honour that witch maligned this time.”

Pym had already seen the segment. “Yes, my lord Count, one of the serving maids alerted me earlier. Lord Vorkosigan hasn’t woken yet,” he told Ivan. “I didn’t want to disturb him too early as he had a therapy session last night. He is not going to be a happy man. It might be wise to stay out of the splatter zone.”

“Tell him I called with my concerns and I’ll be happy to hold his coat while he deals with it. I presume he’ll talk to Ekaterin before he talks to me, but just in case he has a meltdown first and thinks about it afterwards, let him know there’s absolutely nothing to worry about. I couldn’t split the two of them up with a plasma arc, even if I wanted to. Which I don’t.”

Pym, bless him, shook his head. “There’s no need to even mention it, my lord. Everyone here knows that already.”

Ivan was contemplating a call to Raine when his comconsole chimed its special notes. The Emperor, it seemed, was up early, too.

“Good morning, sire,” Ivan said, “yes, I’ve seen it, no, of course it’s rubbish and yes, I’m letting Miles deal with it.”

Gregor smiled briefly. “Too late for Miles to do anything. We’ve sorted it already. Press credentials have been withdrawn for all their station employees. They’re getting nowhere near Our wedding. Access is denied to any Imperial functions for six months and Our exclusive interview scheduled for later on today is cancelled. That will give me an extra eight minutes to talk to their rivals. We’ve also demanded a retraction and apology. That woman is toast. She insulted Laisa yesterday, too. We have to expect some of that kind of thing, but aiming her spite at Ekaterin is way out of line.”

Ivan felt a glow of satisfaction. Yes! Cross Gregor at your peril, witch! “Thanks, Gregor. That just proves how stupid she is. A personal visit from a trio of angry armsmen might be the final touch, though, as I’m sure Miles won’t let it rest. As long as they don’t visit me, of course. Anyway, how are you holding up? Anything I can do? Take Laisa for a coffee at Shoko’s?”

Gregor grinned. “Perhaps not today. Good of you to offer, though. I have the next fifteen hours scheduled to the minute, as you well know as you’re going to be here for four hours of that, not including the family dinner tonight. We don’t have you down as bringing a partner along. Is that right? You can still bring someone if you’d like to?”

Ivan considered. Raine might like to come. It was worth asking. “Well, maybe there is someone. My…um…relationship or lack thereof is at a bit of a delicate stage of development at the moment. If I have any relationship left after this,” he added darkly. “I haven’t talked to her yet. I’ll ask her, though. I’ll let mamère’s office know if she says yes.”

“Good luck.” The Emperor cut the com.
Ivan sighed. He tried to think what he could say to Raine. Would she believe him?

His first call timed out. He left a message for her to call him back and dived into the shower. There was no reply by the time he’d finished. He thought about calling again, but it was still early, after all. She could still be in bed. His pulse quickened at the thought.

There was lots of activity in the courtyard when he went down to the breakfast parlour. Eccles had turned the horses out and they were being walked up and down to stretch their legs. Everything else was going on as normal while he was contemplating the hurdles in his love life. It was all a bit surreal sometimes.

Vorberg came in from the hall as Ivan had just poured his first coffee of the day. “Visitor for you my lord.”

His face was very bland, but something in his voice made Ivan look past him. It was Raine. He scrambled to his feet, throwing down his napkin as he hurried to the door. It looked as if she’d been out running as she wore tight-fitting athletic gear and her face was flushed with colour. Little tendrils of hair had escaped from their tie and were stuck to the damp skin around her hairline. He scanned her expression anxiously. He could tell by the look in her eyes that she’d seen the vid. He had to remember not to reach for her. He held out just the one hand instead.

“I’m so sorry you saw that, Raine. It’s despicable. Ekaterin was with her aunt in the queue and—”

Raine put two fingers across his mouth, stilling his explanation. “Shh. I know it’s rubbish. I knew how upset you’d be. Ekaterin called me first thing. She’s distraught. It’s a horrible way to say hello again to an old friend. I had no idea what she was talking about, to start with, until I got to see it for myself. I had to put up with crap just like that on Beta. What they can’t report they just make up.”

He felt a weight lift from his chest. “You believe me?”

“Why wouldn’t I believe you? Didn’t you promise on your name’s honour you wouldn’t lie to me?”

“I did. I wasn’t sure how much store you would put on that, though.” He thought, belatedly, of his surroundings. “Here, come and sit down. Have some coffee. Or would you prefer water, or tea? Have you had any breakfast?”

She laughed. “I’m not going to sit down all hot and sweaty like this! Ekaterin caught me just as I was leaving earlier. I…I couldn’t sleep, after yesterday. I thought a run would clear my head. Then, when I realized what had happened I thought I’d come and let you know you didn’t have to worry.”

All he could think of was Pym’s interpretation of his own early morning run. He smiled.

“Thank you. I’m not worried any more. Actually, I’m really glad to see you, for two reasons. One, I’m really glad to see you and two would you like to come to a small family dinner with me tonight? Ekaterin is going, and I think the Koudelkas will be there. Pick you up at 1900?”

“Sure, why not, if you don’t think I’m intruding.”

“Excellent!” Ivan grinned with delight. “Is a hug allowed?”

“Yes, a hug’s allowed, as long as you don’t mind me in this state.”

He couldn’t think of anything better than to have Raine in his arms all hot and sweaty, but he’d
promised to behave himself. He wrapped her up with one arm round her shoulders and the other round her waist and stood there until she wanted to pull away.

“Ivan,” Raine said in a very puzzled voice, “what have you got in your courtyard?”

Miles and Ivan met up later on that day at the Emperor’s bachelor party. It was a bit of a low-key affair by Barrayaran standards as either an armsman or an ImpSec guard shadowed each guest. They were armed with heavy-duty stunners and under strict instructions not to let the Emperor get bruised where it would show, or get drunk. Colonel Vortala had lost any shred of humour these past two weeks. It would be wise not to cross him.

Ivan could tell by the heat radiating from his surface that Miles was still pissed as hell. He tried, not very successfully, to keep his temper under control for Gregor’s sake. Fortunately some bright spark called Henri had organized a game of ‘Gregor’s revenge’ down on the parade ground and they spent a good hour hurling lances at a series of smaller and smaller targets. Kou, to his everlasting amazement and delight was not the first to miss, as most people, including himself, expected. That honour fell to Dono Vorrutyer. There was a chorus from the crowd of watchers.

“So what’s the matter, Dono?”

Dono looked around. “What for?”

Henri had really got into the spirit of things. “Throwing like a girl.”

There was dead silence for a moment. Dono tipped back his head and roared with laughter.

Kou choked. “Better not let my family hear you say that, Henri.”

Miles handed Dono a shot of maple mead. “Drink it like a man. You’re playing with the big boys, now.”

Kou was next to go, of course, and then Henri. Rene Vorbretten soon fell by the wayside. At last only Gregor, Aral, Miles and Ivan remained. Betting was fast and furious, with the coaches and the hecklers equally loud.

Those of the younger generation who had never seen Aral in his prime got just a glimpse of the deadly warrior he had once been as his competitive spirit threatened to override his common sense. Neither Gregor nor Aral saw the little jerk of the head and look of complicity that passed between the cousins. Ivan and Miles both dropped out on the same go round, Ivan missing and Miles just clipping the edge of the target but not landing the shot. Miles, as Gregor’s second, called a halt.

“Last round. We’re losing drinking time. Closest to the bull wins.”

Gregor’s lance thundered into the target. He left it there as a marker as Aral lined up. Kou held the betting book, loyal to Aral to the last. The Count’s lance flew straight and true. Everyone held their breath as Gerard, brought in as official judge, measured the hits. The bystanders watched as the combatants inspected the butt and shook hands. Finally Gerard lifted Gregor’s arm in triumph. A great cheer rose from guests and guards alike as Aral slung an arm across Gregor’s shoulder and they strolled back to the waiting party.

There was no way Ivan and Miles were going to let Gregor get away with wearing his boring casual shirt all afternoon. That, at least, ImpSec couldn’t complain about. They couldn’t complain about all the guests getting traditionally drunk either, although that risked the wrath of Lady Alys
descending on anyone unfit for their duties the next day. Cordelia had smuggled some items in
from Beta for them and they dished out the least offensive of them as prizes. There was a selection
of interesting T-shirts to start with. Gregor’s read *Give him a beer, his wedding is near* in bright
green on a pink shirt. Aral’s was more subdued. *Aging like a fine wine.* Kou wasn’t so impressed.
*Aging like a ripe cheese.*

“Sire, do I have to—”

There was a chorus from the crowd. “Forfeit!”

“Damn, I’d forgotten.” Kou not only had to wear his shirt, they were all under strict instructions. It
was *Gregor* for the duration of the afternoon, or else. ‘Or else’ was, of course, a shot of maple
mead. He downed it manfully, even if his eyes watered.

“Drou is going to kill me.”

He got little sympathy.

Miles’ shirt made them all laugh. “*I’m not short I’m fun sized.*”

Ivan waited for the inevitable comment about an idiot, but to his surprise his read *In my defence, I
was left unsupervised.* He could live with that.

“What did Tante Cordelia buy for Henri?” Gregor asked. “If I have to wear this his had better be
good.”

*“It’s accrual world”* Henri heaved a huge sigh of relief. “Knowing the Vicereine’s sense of
humour I was expecting something about double entry.”

Ivan choked. Miles passed him the bottle of maple mead. Ivan felt so surprised at Henri Vorvolk he
even drank some. There had to be some reason he was such a good friend to Gregor. He was just
beginning to realize what it was.

It had been an enjoyable afternoon. They’d all seen Gregor laugh out loud at least twice. *Mission
accomplished.* Ivan felt only slightly wobbly as he waited for Vorberg and the ground car. His
sunny mood improved even further as he saw a well-known face turned away from the guard post
at the gates. *Hah! Sucks to be you, Ms Good Morning VS. Watch out Miles doesn’t see you!*

After a cold shower and a lot of cold water to drink he just had time to call Marie. He wouldn’t see
her at all tomorrow and then the next day they were scheduled to leave for Vandeville. He hoped to
get round there to say goodbye, but just in case, this might be his last opportunity. She held up a
drawing to show him.

“You and me on Blossom! That’s really good. Didn’t we have fun?”

“We did, My Ivan. Can I have another ride when we come back from Vandeville?”

*How to get round this one?* “No, I’m sorry, princess. The horses are just visiting. I tell you what
though; at my house in New Sheffield we could have a pony live there for you. That’s a small
horse you can learn to ride properly.”

“Please, My Ivan? I want a big black horse like Blossom.”

He shook his head. “I said no, Marie. Please don’t argue.”
“If I’m really good?”

“No. We can visit Blossom sometimes, if Farmer Eccles doesn’t mind, but those horses are too big to keep in the city.”

She sighed. “I understand, My Ivan.”

She sounded so hard done by he had to repress a smile. He kissed his fingers and held them up to the vid pickup. “Night night, sweetheart.”

She blew him a kiss straight back. “Night night.”

When he stopped by to collect Raine later that evening, she took his breath away. She’d chosen the flame red Komarran outfit with its shimmering gold top underneath. Desire took hold of him and shook him like a terrier with a rat, leaving him limp and helpless and…wanting.

“Raine, you look stunning. Literally.” He took her hand and kissed it.

She seemed shocked. “Ivan, you’re trembling. You’re actually trembling. I thought it was only shy young girls that did that sort of thing.”

He took a breath. “Am I? I’m surprised I’m even standing up. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” He kissed the scar on her wrist. “And the bravest. I have no idea how I’m going to survive this. I want you so much.”

Her eyebrows drew together and her lips thinned, just slightly, but enough for him to notice. He took a step back and held out his elbow. “Your chariot awaits, mademoiselle. You’ll be safe at this dinner with ten armsmen and fifty ImpSec agents watching my every move.”

She relaxed again. “Oh, are we going to Vorkosigan House?”

Ivan gave her a look. “Didn’t I tell you? No, actually, I don’t think I did. We’re not going to Vorkosigan House.”

When she realized where it was they were going he could feel her stiffen in the seat beside him. “Ivan,” she hissed. “You absolute rat! Small family dinner? How small?”

“I should think about thirty or forty. It won’t be any more.”

He handed her out of the car. She stood on the steps of the Residence, taking deep breaths until she calmed down. They passed through security and an armsman escorted them to the North wing and a small saloon just down the corridor from where Ivan had had breakfast what seemed like months ago. It was Raine’s turn to tremble on his arm. Ivan put his hand over hers and pressed reassuringly.

“You’ll know at least half of them, and you’ll fit right in with the Komarrans in that terrific outfit. Don’t be scared. Just be yourself.”

A forest of eyes turned to stare as they were announced. It only took seconds for Olivia and Martya Koudelka to rush over.

“Raine! We didn’t know you were coming! Kareen’s dying to meet you.” They hauled her off, willy-nilly. Ivan just smiled and followed more leisurely with a drink for them both. Kou hadn’t
met Raine either. He shook hands and smiled indulgently at his daughters. It was just as well he
didn’t really have anything to say. Ivan saluted him with his glass.

“Were you in disgrace when you got home, Sir?”

“Luckily, no. I think they were expecting worse. Don’t call me sir, though, or I’ll have to call you
Count all evening."

“Old habits are hard to break, and you deserve the respect, but thank you, Kou. What did the girls
think of your shirt?”

He sniffed gloomily. “Much what you’d expect. Screams of laughter and they called me
Commodore Kasseri all afternoon.”

Ivan laughed. “You know you love it. I might try and tear Raine away and introduce her to some
more people. See you at dinner, Si—Kou.”

Just as they moved off Miles and Ekaterin were announced. Ivan took Raine over to say hello.

“So this is your Raine,” Miles said. He shook her hand. “We never actually met, did we? It was a
bit like ships passing in the night.”

“Raine!” Ekaterin exclaimed with delight and clutched her hands before giving her a hug and a
kiss. For the moment Miles and Ivan were forgotten.

“Mamère hasn’t met her, either. I’ve been trying to get over there to say hello but we’ve been
waylaid twice now. Better get it over with.”

“You’re not going to the dentist, Ivan. She’ll be fine.”

“I hope so, but you never know with m’mother.”

Simon looked genuinely delighted to be introduced. Raine managed to speak without stammering
to Captain Illyan. Just like Ekaterin, she’d been brought up in awed dread of this man’s reputation,
and yet here he was, smiling and chatting like any normal person.

Lady Alys smiled graciously. Ivan watched her expression, not entirely comfortable with the way
her eyes had narrowed ever so slightly. Nobody else would have noticed, but he’d had a lifetime of
watching her deal with people. She was reserving judgment on Raine. Ivan felt the hair on the back
of his neck rise in wary defence. She’s my choice, mamère. Get used to it.

There was a stir by the door as two Vorbarra armsmen entered the room. Everyone stood back in
expectation, facing the door. Raine slipped her hand through Ivan’s arm, visibly nervous of her
first meeting with the Emperor in the flesh. Ivan bent towards her to whisper a few words of
encouragement as Gregor walked into the room. The light grasp on his elbow tightened
convulsively. He looked at her in surprised concern that instantaneously changed to alarm.

Raine’s face had turned chalk white and her eyes looked huge in her terrified face. Gregor
Vorbarra had scared her witless.
“Raine? What is it? What’s wrong?” Ivan stared in dismay at the look on her face. “Do you need some water?”

Cordelia, standing not so very far away, had seen Raine’s shocked reaction. While Gregor and Laisa were making their way round the room to greet everyone, starting with Laisa’s parents, she crossed over to talk. “Ivan, your friend doesn’t look well. May I help?”

“I don’t know what’s wrong!” He looked from Cordelia to Raine and back again. “Please Tante, see what you can do. I don’t know what’s happened. She was fine a moment ago. Raine, this is Cordelia, Countess Vorkosigan. Remember I told you about her?”

Raine had recovered some of her colour. He didn’t think she was going to faint but her eyes were still wide and frightened. He doubted she’d heard him. Cordelia put her hand on Ivan’s arm and murmured in an undervoice. “Get some water with a slice of lemon in it.” In a louder tone, but still very calm, she said, “Raine, I’m Cordelia. We’re going to sit just over there.” She indicated a small couch. “I’ll sit beside you until you feel better.”

Gently, she touched Raine’s arm, just enough to start her moving. Raine half-sat, half-fell onto the couch. Cordelia followed, still giving her space, waiting for Raine to talk. Aral wandered over, caught her eye, then turned around to stand in front of them. Ivan hurried back to hand Cordelia the water and Aral drew him over to stand beside him.

“Don’t make it look like there’s a drama. We’ll just stand here and talk about the bachelor party and my aching bones for a while.”

Cordelia fished the lemon slice out of the water. “Here, Raine, bite on this.”

Obediently Raine took the lemon and bit it. She flinched, recoiling from the taste. She blinked again and shook her head. “Yuk, that’s gross. Who…” She looked around. “Ivan? What happened?”

In one stride he was back by her side. Cordelia held up her hand. “Wait, Ivan. Let Raine touch you first. Would you like some water, Raine?”

She passed over the glass. Raine’s pallor rapidly turned to a flushing red as she regained full awareness of her surroundings. “Oh, god, I’m so embarrassed.” She jumped to her feet. “Countess Vorkosigan. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what—look at me. I’m sweating like—” She reached out to grab Ivan’s hand. She still looked close to panicking.

Cordelia tried to calm her down. “Don’t be embarrassed. I’ve seen things like this before, although it was a long time ago. You’ll be fine in one more minute. Just breathe. How about I take you to the ladies’ room and we’ll get you fixed up? Gregor will excuse us, I’m sure. I’ll let Aral explain to him.”

They slipped out of the room, if not unnoticed at least calm enough not to cause a stir. Aral waited until they were gone. “Care to tell me what the hell happened there?” he asked.
Ivan shook his head. “I have no idea, sir. She took one look at Gregor and…and freaked. She must have seen him a hundred times, in pictures and vids. There are pictures on every street corner. You can’t turn the news on without him being on it.”

“And she’s never met him before?”

“Not that I’m aware. She’s lived in Vandeville all her life. You’ve read the reports about her abduction. That was really a bad situation, but I can’t think why seeing Gregor would trigger anything to do with that. Unless—”

Ivan stopped short. Unless it wasn’t that episode. He wasn’t free to break Raine’s confidence, though.

Aral didn’t seem to notice his abrupt silence. “Here come Gregor and Laisa. Cordelia will get to the bottom of it. Leave it with her.”

Although subdued, Raine looked much her own self again when she and Cordelia came back into the room. She was even able to meet Gregor and shake his hand when the Countess introduced her. Laisa beamed with delight when they said hello. With schedules mapped out to the minute there wasn’t going to be time for an impromptu chat, but from Ivan’s point of view it certainly looked like they were talking about after the wedding. Well, if they were, it would have to be after the honeymoon, as well. Nothing was going to interrupt that.

What did strike Ivan as odd was the way Cordelia looked at Aral when both men strolled over to collect their partners as dinner was announced. What the message was, Ivan couldn’t say, but it didn’t look to be good news.

Ivan found himself seated next to Aunt Anna at dinner, with Raine on his left. Miles sat next to her, and then Ekaterin. Raine didn’t eat much, he noticed, preferring to drink instead, but other than that she seemed to have regained her composure very well.

“The Countess insisted I call her Cordelia,” she told Ivan when Aunt Anna’s attention was distracted. “You were right. She’s very easy to talk to.”

“If you think she can help you, that would be wonderful.” Ivan risked his mother’s wrath to squeeze Raine’s hand where it rested on the table. “Perhaps you’ll feel like telling me more about it when I take you home.”

She uttered a non-committal “mmm” and then said “perhaps” in a dubious tone. Ivan didn’t push. He didn’t want to scare her off any more than she already had been. He’d hoped this was going to be a nice easy introduction to his family and instead she’d been frightened half out of her wits. But why?

The evening broke up at a very early hour. Laisa and Gregor were the first to go their separate ways, of course. Cordelia and Aral lingered to bid goodnight to all the Komarran relatives. Ivan would have taken Raine away then, except he received a clear signal from Cordelia to stay right where they were. Miles and Ekaterin obviously wanted some time alone together and Miles bade farewell to his parents just as soon as the Komarrans had all departed. Raine walked over to say goodnight to Ekaterin and the Koudelkas, who were also leaving. She had hardly crossed to the other side of the room before someone spoke to him.

“Perhaps, Ivan, you would be so good as to explain to me the dreadful lapse in manners I observed earlier this evening?”
That voice could only belong to one person. Ivan turned to smile warily at his mother. “Which one would that be, mamère?”

“Mademoiselle Vorfolse sitting in the presence of the Emperor. I’ve long since given up any hope of Cordelia obeying any dictates of protocol or decorum. I could possibly have excused Mademoiselle Vorfolse if she had not had the benefit of a seasoned companion, but you, Ivan, should never have let her do that. It was most unseemly. I don’t know what our guests must have thought.”

“They probably thought she wasn’t well, mamère, just like I did and Tante Cordelia did. Don’t be so quick to judge! She knows perfectly well how to behave. You must have seen them go out, if you managed to see them sitting down. Uncle Aral didn’t have a problem with it. I’m waiting now to discuss it with them.”

Lady Alys breathed in sharply. “Ivan don’t—”

“No, mamère, don’t you start! Perhaps Simon should take you home. I’ll see you tomorrow, Goodnight.” Ivan walked off to the door and held it for her. “If you please, mamère.”

“Ivan—”

“If you please. I would like to confer with the Viceroy.” He stood there, not talking any more, just waiting.

Simon Illyan slid his arm though Alys’s. “Come along, Alys. You have a huge day tomorrow and Count Voralys needs to talk to the Viceroy, as he said. We’ll see you tomorrow, Ivan. Goodnight.”

With one last furious look at her son, Lady Alys swept through the door, head held high. Ivan closed it softly behind her.

Cordelia regarded him with admiration in her face. “Good for you. Alys needs a firm hand, you know. That was perfect.”

“I don’t wish to quarrel with my mother,” Ivan said, “but she has become quite unreasonable.”

“Perhaps you’ve become just a little less biddable,” she replied. “Anyway, I’m not concerned with Alys. What does concern me is Raine and why she suffered such a shock this evening. Shall we all sit down? Raine, would you please allow Aral to join us? I think he may have background information that would help us.”

Aral somehow made himself look like a benevolent grandda. Raine looked uncertainly from Cordelia, to Aral, and then to Ivan, who nodded encouragingly.

“If team Vorkosigan can’t help you, I doubt anybody can. Please, Raine.”

She shrugged. “Very well, although I have no idea what you can do.”

“We work from what we know to what we have to find out,” Cordelia explained. “Now, please tell us what happened tonight. As simply as you can, and there’s no rush.”

Raine clasped her hands, wringing her fingers until the knuckles turned white. “About eight years ago, I was assaulted and humiliated, raped, by a man I thought I loved and who I thought loved me. He was absolutely vile. I…I can’t talk about what he did. Anyway, when the Emperor walked in the room tonight and smiled, I didn’t see him. I saw Cez.”
Cordelia nodded. “I see, I think. But you’ve seen the Emperor in vids, and portraits, everywhere. The only difference is this time it was in real life?”

Raine shook her head. “No, it was the smile, something about the way he did it, the way his eyes looked. I’ve never seen a portrait of the Emperor smiling, have you? He’s always solemn. If he does smile in public, it doesn’t reach his eyes.” She shuddered. “Those eyes give me nightmares, smiling down at me as he…not the Emperor, you understand.”

Cordelia looked at Aral. “A clone is out of the question, if Cavilo had… there wouldn’t have been enough time.” She paused. “How old was this man, Raine? You called him Cez?”

“Yes, Cezar Vorresiak. He said he came from Vorlakial District, from Darkoi, but there was no trace of him there. He was not quite a year older than me. He said he was born just before…just before Vordarian’s Pretendership.”

“So, younger than Gregor, then. Not older?”

She shook her head. “No, I’d say he was younger. Several years younger.”

Aral jumped up to pace the room. Ivan hadn’t seen him so deep in thought, or so filled with what? In seconds he had changed from the genial white haired old man to radiating barely-dampened menace.

Cordelia looked stricken. “Aral, surely not? You can’t be thinking…”

He opened his hands. “Did we check? Did anyone check?”

“I don’t know! Henri’s dead. All his records were destroyed. Vaagen wouldn’t have had anything to do with that side of things.”

“They sent the gene scans. They were useless because we had nothing to compare them with, at that time. There might be copies filed somewhere. The ships’ logs, maybe. I’ll get Allegre on to it. Hope and pray it’s just a coincidence.”

Ivan had been watching and listening in growing impatience. “Sir, ma’am, what the hell are you talking about?”

Aral looked at Raine and Ivan. “This goes no further. Is that clearly understood? Not one word to anyone. Even Miles.” He waited for their nods.

“There were seventeen uterine replicators sent back from the Escobaran war. Only one child was ever claimed, as far as I’m aware.”

Ivan felt a growing sense of unease. “Sir, who do you think the father was?” He knew, of course. He just couldn’t bring himself to say it. His mind wouldn’t even let him think it, or the ramifications...

Cordelia had seen those eyes, once. She could see what Raine had seen. She could never forget them as they’d looked at her for fourteen years as Gregor grew up.

“Crown Prince Serg.”

“It’s too vile even to think about.” Aral shook his head. “We’re going to have to, though. If he’s out there.”
Cordelia's voice hardened. “If he’s out there, somebody knows something. They none of them should have had Vor in their names. They were all bastards, and none acknowledged. Surely they were traced, after they left the orphanage?”

Aral wiped his face with his hand. “Ivan, take Raine home. I’ll talk to Guy Allegre and start inquiries. Oh, before you do.” He paused a moment.

“Mademoiselle Vorfolse, Raine, this is a great intrusion, but I have to ask. It’s vital. Did you receive medical attention at the time? Would there be records? We would need your permission to access them.”

Well, that was a damn lie, Ivan thought. ImpSec would do what ImpSec would do, but the old man was trying to treat Raine with a modicum of dignity.

She nodded. “Yes, in Vandeville. Dr. Dahlman. You have my permission.”

“That will speed things up. Thank you very much. I am truly sorry about this. It’s going to make changes for you, and for your security. ImpSec will have to be in contact—”

“You are not going to fast-penta her over this, are you sir? I’d really need your assurance on that. I won’t let ImpSec drag all that up again.”

Aral looked at Ivan with pain in his eyes. “I can’t guarantee anything. Guy will conduct the investigation the way he sees fit, but he’s not a monster. He’s got children of his own.”

He turned to talk to Raine. “Ivan will take care of you. I have every faith in him, you know. You couldn’t ask for a better friend. You’ll be safe.”

Raine looked sick. “I know Ivan is an honourable man. Asking me to trust is harder.”

Cordelia took her hand. “Who is going to win here, Raine? You, or that sick monster? Who’s going to dictate the course of the rest of your life?”

”That’s a question I need to answer for myself. I thought I was quite strong, you know. Life mapped out. Everything under control, and then, life hands you lemons, a bit like you did.” She dredged up a smile. “You have done this before, haven’t you?”

Cordelia nodded. “Yes, but when life hands you lemons, you make sure you make someone’s paper cut really sting. And we,” she circled her index finger to include the four of them, “are going to be making a lot more than paper cuts when we find this bastard.”

Aral’s fists clenched. “And don’t forget the one who’s pulling the strings.”

The apartment was dark and silent when Raine let them in. Ivan didn’t want to leave her on her own. “Do you know when your mother will be back?” he asked as Raine turned on lights and dimmed the polarity on the picture window.

Raine shook her head. “I think she might be staying with Stefan. At least someone’s relationship is running smoothly. Those two are nuts about each other. He’s going to retire from the Imperial service and grow her roses, he said. I can’t see it, myself. They’d both be bored in a month.”

Ivan smiled, although he couldn’t imagine the doctor growing roses. “That’s good news. Wally can come and work for me. That should keep him occupied for years. I need a good District medical
officer. I need a good everything. You can come and work for me, if you like.”

“Me? What would I do?”

His surroundings faded from his perception as he looked at Raine. All he could see was her. “You could start at the top, Raine. I need a Countess. I need you. Will you please marry me?”

Raine was in the act of turning away from the window control. She stilled, looking at Ivan with an arrested expression. Even her breathing seemed to stop. “You’re so sweet. You really mean that, don’t you?” Tears welled up in her eyes. Ivan had to swallow hard.

“I have never been as serious as this in my life. I don’t just want you. I need you so badly. I want to dry your tears and…and mend your broken heart. That sounds so corny, doesn’t it? Forgive me. I can’t explain what you do to me, what you make me feel. I can’t bear to see you in so much pain. I want the right and the privilege to comfort you and keep you.”

“And if I can’t be a proper wife to you?”

“What’s a proper wife?” Ivan grinned like a lunatic. “I can’t believe this is me talking like this. If you’d seen me a year ago, you wouldn’t believe it either. Are you talking about sex? I know all about sex. If I had to choose, I’d rather choose you. There, I said it and the moons didn’t fall on me. With replicators we can still have children, have a family. I already have my daughter. You’ll have to meet Marie.”

She held up her hands. “You make it sound so easy.”

“That’s because I want it to be. I know it won’t be easy, Raine, but difficult with you is better than a lifetime of easy on my own.”

“I’m not going to say yes, but I’m not going to say no, either. Can we just…wait and see?”

“I think we can do that.” Some of Ivan’s tension left him. “Let’s get you into bed. I can sleep on the couch. I don’t want to leave you on your own tonight.”

“Sleep on the couch?” She sounded totally incredulous.

“The floor?” He didn’t much like the sound of that. Still, with a cushion or two, maybe.

She shook her head.

“The bathtub?” He’d done that once. It hadn’t been a happy experience.

Raine hesitated. “I don’t want to tease you. I know I’m being ridiculous. Can we just sleep? Can you do that?”

Could he? What torture would that be? “Well, I can’t promise not to…um…react to be sleeping with the love of my life in my arms. I can promise not to do anything about it, except maybe get up and take a very cold shower. And there’s always the couch. Good organisation always includes a plan B.”

“I’m not being fair to you.”

“You might say that to me when I wake you up at 0500. I have to go to breakfast with the groom’s party.”

Raine looked shocked. “I’d forgotten all about the wedding.”
“You’d have to be the only person in Vorbarr Sultana to do that. Come on, you can have first use of the bathroom.”

Twenty minutes later Ivan slid in between the sheets in borrowed sweatpants that reached not far below his knees. Raine lay with her back to him. Very gingerly, he slipped one arm round her waist. About five seconds later he started sweating.

*Ivan, you idiot. You bloody idiot.* How the hell had he thought he could cope with this?

Rained stirred, turning her head towards him.

“*Don’t turn over,*” he begged, his voice sounding strangled as he forced himself to speak.

“Don’t even *move.*”

He was in for a long night.
Ivan must have dozed off at last. He woke to an insistent chime from his wrist com. There was someone in his bed. His eyes flew open. Not his bed and not just someone. The scent and feel of her hair tickled his nose.

*Raine*

Right then he knew with utter certainty that this was the way he wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life. The desire to stay there and burrow in to luxuriate in her presence washed over him. She had turned in the night without him noticing. Languid and relaxed in sleep, her arm lay heavily across his chest. Her lips were only a breath away from his.

*Right place, wrong time*

Today was Gregor’s wedding day. He inched backwards, trying not to rouse her. Swiftly he changed back into his shirt, trousers and boots and slid noiselessly out of the room. There were sounds coming from the kitchen. It would be so much easier not to have to answer any questions. Slinging his tunic top over his arm Ivan raced to the door and hurried out. He let out a sigh of relief at not being detected and started to shrug into his tunic as he walked to the lift tube.

“Good morning, Count.”

“Shit! Don’t scare me like that.” Ivan hadn’t been looking. Very prim and proper in his dress greens, Lieutenant Vorberg waited by the lift tube for him. What did he think he was doing with that smile on his face?

“Have you been there all night?” Ivan asked, feeling like a delinquent adolescent facing an irate parent.

Vorberg reverted to his ImpSec look. “No, Count. I relieved the night duty guard fifteen minutes ago. Ten more minutes and I would have come looking for you. Your schedule is fairly full today.”

Ivan thought of something. “The ground car’s not still out the front, is it? I forgot to tell the driver to go home. Well, not forgot, exactly, but I didn’t know if I was going to need him or not.”

“He parked on the side street, not wishing to draw attention to the vehicle.” Vorberg’s eyes sparkled. There he was trying his hardest not to grin again. He was going to have to work on his poker face if he wanted to get anywhere in ImpSec. Ivan hadn’t really thought enough about being discreet.

“That was lucky.”

They’d reached the foyer by now. Vorberg walked ahead to scan the area and Ivan couldn’t see his face any more.

“Maybe not so lucky as some, sir.”

*Cheeky sod!* Ivan let out a big sigh. “Not me Vorberg. It’s the story of my life. I’ll just have to keep working on it.”
“Your strength lies solely in your tenacity, sir? We were taught that at the Academy. It’s a quote from an old Earth scientist.”

“Here’s one from Emperor Gregor. ’Let’s see what happens.’ But right now I need to get home. I’m due at The Residence at 0700.”

Dawn had brought a beautiful midsummer’s day and the forecast was for the good weather to continue. There was bustle everywhere and it was no different at Voralys House. Ivan snatched a few minutes with Sinclair and Eccles and watched some of the effort needed to dress just one horse for the occasion. They had six of them to turn out, the dray to load and all the hundred and one other tasks to perform. Ivan was very happy to leave them to it.

“I’ll be back before lunch, but I’ll be running. Save an ale for me, Sinclair. I’ll see if I can get the Emperor to stop by, but he might be otherwise engaged, don’t you know?”

“He won’t be engaged, he’ll be tied up in knots,” Eccles laughed. “I wish him and his lady good health and happiness.”

“And may all his troubles be little ones,” Ivan added. “At least six of ’em, I hope.”

Both he and Miles would breathe a huge sigh of relief when this day was over, he thought. He looked at his chrono and yelped. *Past time to go.*

ImpSec had solved the problems of the crowds by using air cars. Ivan was whisked off to the temporary landing area not far from the Residence gates and made it on time to be waiting as Gregor appeared. Only his family and dear friends had been invited to this meal; Henri, Miles, Aral, Simon, Kou and Ivan. Gregor hardly ate a thing. Aral couldn’t keep the smile off his face and Miles was as useless as he’d been for the past two weeks. Kou, Ivan and Henri managed to keep the conversation rolling, but it was obvious Gregor’s mind was elsewhere. There was one thing Ivan had up his sleeve to prevent the breakfast turning into a wake. He handed round three gift-boxed holocubes to Gregor, Miles and Aral and waited with anticipation to see what they would think.

It was hard to catch Gregor smiling, but the photographer had managed it. There were artistic reflection shots of Miles, Ivan and Gregor solemnly inspecting themselves in the mirror at Vorhartung Castle, but just before Miles had jumped down from his footstool Ivan had slung his arm round both his cousins’ necks and hugged them. The shot was perfect. They were all grinning like fools.

Aral was the one most affected by the picture. He could hardly bear to turn it off. His eyes were very bright as he muttered in a gruff voice. “Thank you, Ivan. This is wonderful. I can’t wait to show Cordelia.”

Promptly to the minute Lady Alys arrived to bear Gregor away to his next duty. She made no sign of noticing Ivan and he didn’t go out of his way to acknowledge her, either. He was more interested in getting a word with Aral.

Miles had no idea how to take a hint, but for once his height was an advantage as Aral looked over the top of him to shake his head at Ivan.

“Nothing to report,” he said, “But Allegre’s working on it. Among other things, of course. Carry on as normal. Let’s just enjoy the rest of the day. Miles is the only one of us who needs to get nervous, with that ridiculous speech to summon forth the bride. We’re just along for the ride.”
Miles only just then realized his father was speaking. “I beg your pardon, sir. What was that you said?”

“Count’s business,” Ivan told him condescendingly. “Nothing for a mere Count’s heir to worry about. You go back to dreaming about Ekaterin.”

“Isn’t she magnificent?” Miles was off again. Ivan just rolled his eyes at Aral.

“Does he ever stop?” he asked.

Aral shook his head. “Only for sleep or food.”

Ivan took great care with his appearance for the wedding ceremony. His new House uniform was a work of sheer artistry. The normal coloured stripe up the side of his trousers was a swirling festoon of oak leaves and acorns subtly worked into the silver band. Every buttonhole was embellished and his collar was solid embroidery. The work on his sleeves reached from the cuffs to his elbows. He had a new sword belt with the hangers for his short sword replaced to take the fittings on his seal dagger.

In a fit of retrospection Ivan drew his service sword and looked at it in contemplation for a moment or two. Today was a day for beginnings and endings. The sword was the only remnant of his uniforms he could still use from his former life in the Imperial Service. He went through a drill for old times’ sake, murmuring faintly to himself, “draw swords, two three four, carry, two three four, recover swords, slope swords, stand easy.”

His valet looked at him with an amused forbearance, tolerating his lord’s reminiscences until he should want to stop playing. Ivan took care to replace his sword before drawing the seal dagger with his left hand. The blade flashed in the light. This was more like, certainly no toy, this beauty. Ivan carefully slid it back into the sheath and shot his cuffs.

He was ready.

He took another look at the horses, careful to stand well out of the way of any horse hair or straw. He needn’t have worried. They looked cleaner and certainly shinier than he did. It was going to be a wonderful sight, fit for the Emperor’s wedding. Blossom, being the most mature and patient of the team was first finished, complete in her harness and ready to go. She stood patiently, occasionally shaking her head and sending the bell terret on her poll ringing. Eccles had even replaced the plume with a dark blue and silver one as befitted the District’s new status. The collar housing had three more bells set into it, and the martingale had five more triple bell crescents gleaming in a line down her chest. Multiply that sound by six and the whole of Vorbarr Sultana would hear them coming.

Ivan was sorry not to be there to see them turning on to the street, but Vorberg had promised faithfully to have everything recorded and ready to be shown back in the District. Everyone down there should see just what they were capable of achieving.

Raine was going to accompany Wally and Aceline to the ceremony so Ivan didn’t have to double across town through the crowds to collect her. He was dropped at the entrance gates in good time to pass through the onerous security scans and waited impatiently for the others to appear. Every single guest passing through security had a broad smile on their face, in sharp contrast to the harassed and nervous security details and scurrying servants. Ivan nodded to Count Vorhalas, splendid in his livery, and to Dono Vorrutyer and René and Tatya Vorbretten, among others. The
excitement built to a point where the air was electric with anticipation.

At last Ivan spotted Admiral Waleska, splendid in his Imperial parade dress. Even if he’d been Vor the medical service traditionally did not wear the two swords, so he wasn’t hampered in his movements apart from the beautiful women he escorted, one on each arm. Ivan sucked in a deep breath. Raine had chosen a traditional Barrayaran gown, a stunning amber satin with real amber beads sewn into the elaborate embroidery. She wore cream roses and dark orange marigolds in her hair.

“Close your mouth. You’ll catch a fly.” Ivan hadn’t even seen Miles and Ekaterin approach. All of his attention had been on Raine on the other side of the security barrier. Miles followed his gaze and whistled.

“Yes, I can see what caused that stunned mullet expression.”

Ekaterin was more polite. “Ivan, she’s magnificent.” She squeezed his arm and dared to wink.

“Don’t let her get away.”

He nodded. “I certainly don’t intend to, but it’s not my decision.”

Miles punched his arm in benevolent good humour, seeing as how he’d been the first to catch a bride. “Forward momentum, Ivan! A charm offensive is what you need. You’re good at that. Don’t give her time to think.”

They moved on and were soon lost in the gathering crowd. At last Raine, Aceline and Wally cleared security and came over to Ivan. Wally passed Raine across and then reached out to shake Ivan’s hand.

“It must be something in the air, Ivan,” he commented. “I’ve asked Aceline to marry me.” His face broke into the broadest grin. “And would you believe she said yes?”

Ivan pumped his hand up and down in delight. “That’s absolutely brilliant! Congratulations, Admiral, Madame Vorfolse. I’m sure you’re going to be wonderfully happy. You both deserve each other.” He stepped forward and kissed Aceline on the cheek.

“We’ll have to celebrate later. I’m going to be late if we don’t hurry and it’s going to take ages to get through this crowd. Let’s get you safely down to the parade ground. Everybody line up and follow me. I’m by far the biggest and the ugliest.”

It was a struggle to get the three of them to their places and Ivan had to rush back through the crowd flowing in the opposite direction to reach the wedding party. He arrived just in time to follow his mother and Countess Cordelia and slip into place only a minute or two before Gregor appeared. That had been cutting it a bit fine!

Gregor hadn’t looked comfortable at breakfast, but his nerves were beginning to show quite badly now. He looked magnificent in his parade red and blues. Ivan felt a huge rush of pride as he saw that Gregor had chosen to wear the Vorbarra seal dagger Ivan had given him. It stood out in stark elegance against his gaudy uniform, a fitting tribute to his heritage.

At last it was time. Ivan had no part in the actual ceremony apart from standing in the second circle of witnesses next to Olivia Koudelka and Simon Illyan. It took her about two minutes to start blubbing. Ivan looked at his family in the first circle. Not one of them was unmoved. Unabashed tears ran down Aral’s face. Cordelia’s eyes were bright and she swallowed convulsively. He couldn’t see Miles’ face clearly, but he too brushed at his eyes several times. Ivan really couldn’t
blame him. His own vision turned blurry more than once.

Laisa and Gregor were incandescent with joy when Miles strode forward to kick open the groat circle and kiss the bride. Everyone surged in. It took Ivan a few minutes but finally he managed to reach Gregor and enclose him in a brief but fervent hug.

“Congratulations sire. What a wonderful day for you, and for Barrayar. Don’t go inside straight away. I’ve got something coming you’ll want to see. I can guarantee Laisa will never have seen anything like it.”

Gregor beamed with elation. “I’m so happy, Ivan. You can’t imagine. I never thought——” he broke off. This was no time to be morbid. “I can thoroughly recommend matrimony. You should try it.” He looked around at the crowds. “I doubt we’ll get inside for an hour, at least.” There wasn’t time for more. Ivan passed on to Laisa, bending to kiss her on the cheek and squeeze her hands.

“Save a mazurka for me. Gregor can’t have every dance.”

Flushed and grinning madly, Laisa nodded. “Certainly, if you can pry him away. I’ll see you later, Ivan.”

He grinned back. “That’s We, now. Don’t forget the capital letter.” With an audacious wink he moved on. He had to find Raine, and get down to the South Gates. They actually weren’t all that far away. Ivan grabbed a wine waiter and towed him over to the group, snabbling a champagne each to toast the married couple and the soon-to-be-married one as well. Ivan caught Raine’s gaze over the rim of his glass and saluted her with it.

“Three’s a lucky number,” he suggested.

Raine tipped her glass back at him. “Yes, indeed. Your cousin Miles. I’d nearly forgotten.” She was teasing him.

Ivan was about to answer when there was a stir in the crowd. People who had reached the higher levels on the steps up to the Residence stopped to look back over their shoulders. In the distance, even over the hubbub of the excited melee, Ivan could hear cheering.

Gregor and Laisa were not too far away. They’d hardly moved.

“Sire! Your Imperial Majesty.” Ivan managed to catch Gregor’s eye and pointed. “Watch the South Gate.”

Colonel Vortala’s men managed to clear a path through the crowd near the gates and six burly Vorbarra armsmen eased Laisa and Gregor through to Ivan. They could hear bells over the cheering. Majestic and magnificent, the Voralys team of Barrayar Blacks swept round the turn and in through the entrance. Driving to an inch Eccles cleared the gates on either side of the dray’s huge wheels and brought the equipage to a snorting, stamping halt on the grass of the old parade ground. Blazoned along the sides of the barrels a dark blue and silver banner proclaimed ‘Voralys District Beers and Ales. Fit for an Emperor.’

Laisa could hardly believe her eyes. She clutched at Gregor’s arm and, there was no other word for it, squealed. Gregor turned to Ivan. His eyes had lit up at the sight of the horses. “They are magnificent, Ivan! Let’s go over.”

His mother wasn’t going to be happy with him disrupting her schedule, but even Colonel Vortala was already over by the dray, ostensibly scanning for any hidden dangers, notwithstanding it had been checked about five times already that day.
“Would you like a drink, sire?” Ivan inquired. “We have four Voralys district beers to choose from, two ales, cider or perry. Laisa, would you like to try the perry? I don’t think you would have had this on Komarr.”

He devoutly hoped Vorberg had kept his word and was getting all this on the holovid. The District couldn’t buy this sort of publicity.

Laisa accepted a perry and Gregor a light ale in the souvenir spun metal tumblers. Their names and the date were laser etched on each one, with a very discreet ‘Gift from the people of Voralys District’ on the back. They didn’t linger, but after shaking hands with Sinclair and Eccles they wandered off through the crowds. Ivan stayed to help keep the multitude back from the horses until Eccles could erect a picket line giving them some space to rest and chew on their nosebags. He watched for a while as Sinclair and his apprentices, who surely couldn’t begin to believe their luck, pumped out foaming drinks before he strolled back up to the Residence itself and the Vorkosigan booth.

Raine slipped her hand through his arm. “I want you for my marketing manager. That was absolutely brilliant.”

Ivan grinned at her. “It went well. I kept thinking of everything that could go wrong, but nothing did. Not just a pretty face, am I?”

When they reached the gardens proper, Raine broke away. “Maman wants me to meet some old friends of hers, from before the Pretender’s War. I’ll find you at the Vorkosigan Booth, or failing that I’m sitting next to you at dinner. Don’t go home without me.” She winked.

She definitely winked at him. How was he supposed to take that?

He caught up with Miles and Ekaterin just before they reached their own District booth, a wine bar. Mark was there to palm off some of that bug butter stuff on the unsuspecting, Ivan noticed, but what was really surprising was that people were lining up for it. Miles didn’t really notice he was there. Ivan could only laugh at him. He’d be just as goofy himself, given the right circumstances.

Kareen handed him a sample of MPVK Enterprises new ‘ambrosia’ and not wanting to depress her enthusiasm, as if he could, but anyway, he gave it a go... It was utterly blissful. It had to have been Ma Kosti. She was a certified genius, no doubt. Only a genius or a wicked witch could have charmed that vomit into something not just edible but delicious.

Kou and Drou wandered over towards them. He looked a mixture of bewildered, perplexed and totally nonplussed. Ivan heard Kareen squeal, and caught something about Olivia. Weddings definitely were contagious this week. He could have kicked himself. If only he’d thought about it he could have got huge odds on Count Dono’s engagement. Oh, well, too late now. He was mournfully waving goodbye to a substantial windfall when the happy couple themselves found the group. Ivan sighed over Olivia’s hand but he winked at her when no one else was looking. He could only imagine how lucky she was going to get.

One person he certainly wasn’t expecting to see walking around without handcuffs on was Byerly Vorrutyer. Ivan caught up with him as his cousin Dono finished what appeared to be a perfectly cordial conversation.

Huh? After what he’d tried to pull? Dono might have forgiven him but Ivan surely hadn’t. He’d have to find somewhere discreet, though, before he punched the slimy double-crosser the way he deserved.

By always could weasel himself out of any contretemps. The worm had Ivan half-believing him.
He even had Ivan feeling half sorry for him.

“You know what, By,” Ivan said, “If you’d ever done a decent day’s work in your life you wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

By looked mournful. “That’s easy for you to say. What was I supposed to do? I’d have lasted a week in the Military Academy.”

“If you really want a job I’ll give you a job. I have several openings right up your alley.”

By cocked an eyebrow. “Really, Ivan, what on three planets do you think I could do for you?”

“Let me see…Colour consultant for my paint factory, Manager of a tourist complex, Charm tourists as Lord Vordagger, choose the wines to restock my cellar or be a Count’s voice in my district. It might make you see how real people have to work for a living. Take your pick.”

By sat up. His languid pose had completely disappeared. “You’re really serious, aren’t you? You want me to pimp myself out as Lord Vordagger?”

Ivan grinned. “It could possibly come with fringe benefits but you’d just have to look the part most of the time. The Count’s Voice would be a really useful role. Better than weaseling for ImpSec, but I have no doubt you’d still do both.”

By recovered his poise. “What do you mean, weaseling for ImpSec? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come off it, By. What’s your rating? IS6?”

By shrugged. “IS8. It was IS9 before the little misunderstanding.”

Ivan could picture By as one of Illyan’s Dirty Angels. What had him choking in his wine was the unspeakably appalling realisation of whom By’s blind drop actually was…

A broken man, Ivan staggered off to find Raine.

Everyone relaxed at dinner. Ivan finally managed to put his stupefaction out of his mind and watched as Gregor and Laisa opened the ball. She was a good dancer. He took Raine onto the floor for a waltz and a mirror dance, and then the orchestra leader called out the assembly for a mazurka. Ivan caught Laisa’s eye across the room and cocked an inquiring eyebrow. She leaned over and said something to Gregor which made him laugh and beckon him over. Just in time, Ivan remembered to unclasp his sword belt and leave it at the table. Ma Vorpatril’s little boy was going to be on show to all eyes. He wasn’t going to risk ending up on his face at Laisa’s feet. He bowed and kissed her hand. There was a cheer from the room as Ivan led his Empress out onto the floor.

“Laisa, have you ever danced a mazurka in public before?” he asked.

Laisa grinned. “Is your mother going to leave anything to chance? I’ve had lessons. I don’t know if Gregor knows I’ve had lessons, though. He was always saving the planet, or something. He says if anyone can dance a mazurka you can.”

“This one’s easy. It’s a mazurka generale. The quadrille versions are a bit trickier, though.”

Half way through the dance Ivan felt a tap on his shoulder. Gregor wasn’t about to let Ivan charm Laisa too much. What to do? End up in ImpSec’s cells never to be seen again, or let the Emperor dance with his new wife? Ivan gave way with good grace.
Raine could hardly contain her amusement. “What a show off! I didn’t know you could dance like that.”

“Adventures of a miss-spent youth,” Ivan grinned. “The more misses the better. Do you care to try?”

Raine shook her head. “Not after that little effort. I’ll wait for another mirror dance or somewhere a little more private where you can teach me.”

“Having fun?” he asked softly.

“Wonderful fun. I missed you this morning, you know.”

He sighed. “I certainly didn’t want to leave. We should try that again sometime.” He kissed her hand. “Preferably sometime soon?”

Raine looked down. “I was very unfair to you last night. I shouldn’t have done that to you. I just…I wanted to see what you would do.”

“It was a test? You did have my word.”

“Yes, I did. And you can keep your word, Count Voralys. I like that in a man.”

Promptly at half past midnight Gregor and Laisa made their escape in his new lightflyer, although this time it was Gerard who took the controls. As they streaked off in the night sky the fireworks started. Raine leaned back into Ivan’s arms to watch the show from the terrace.

“I should take you home,” he murmured into her ear, “before the crawling races start.”

Raine turned and slid her hands round his neck. “The wedding’s over. That means we’ve got no excuse not to do all the things we’ve been putting off until after the wedding.”

Ever hopeful, he tightened his arms around her. “Like getting married ourselves?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t said yes, yet.”

He sighed. “I was hoping you’d forgotten that technical detail. Well then, what shall we do?”

She looked up at him. Reflections of fireworks sparkled in her eyes and the scent of the roses in her hair wafted towards him. “You could come back to my place and we can discuss it over breakfast,” she suggested.

Ivan’s heart thumped up into his throat. He bent down to kiss her softly, and then tickle her ear with the tip of his tongue. It had been a wonderful day. All of his problems faded as the fireworks boomed and sparkled overhead.

“I don’t mind if I do.”
I love you, Raine.

Chapter Notes

Optional chapter. No need to read if you don't like explicit material.

Ivan sent word to his driver to have the ground car ready for them, and another to his valet to have an overnight case delivered to Raine’s apartment. They strolled hand in hand through the Residence back to the designated exit, past quiet couples and noisy groups still bent on carousing until dawn. Once in the ground car Ivan slipped an arm around her shoulders and she leaned into his embrace, resting her head against his neck and shoulder. She sighed. “I don’t think my feet are ever going to recover.”

Ivan patted his knees. “Put your foot up here. I’ll take your shoes off.”

She swivelled around, putting up first one foot and then the other for him to undo her sandals and massage the ball of each foot with his thumbs. She sighed again, with pleasure this time. He continued to massage her feet and ankles, moving up slowly towards her calves.

“That feels good. It was such a wonderful day. They looked very happy together, didn’t they?”

Ivan couldn’t see her expression in the dim light of the passenger cabin, only illuminated by the passing street lights and shop fronts. There were still crowds all through the streets, still waving flags and banners and spilling out from restaurants and bars all over town.

“Who? The Emperor and Empress or Wally and your mother?”

“Both. I’m so happy for her, you know. She was only married to my father for less than two years, and she’s had no one since. She couldn’t risk a relationship when we were frightened for our lives.”

They pulled up outside the apartment block. Ivan slid out first and scooped up Raine before her feet could hit the ground. He twirled her round and kissed her soundly, lingering to trail his open mouth down her neck. “Grab your sandals. We’ll send this driver home to his bed. He’s had a long day, too.”

Raine hid her face in Ivan’s shoulder and poked him in the ribs. “Don’t embarrass him! Don’t embarrass me either. I’m sure you’re used to doing this sort of thing. I’m not.”

He set her down on her feet on the carpet inside the lobby and waved goodnight to the driver, who pulled away into the still-busy streets. The lobby was hushed and still. Even the security guard passed them through without saying a word. Ivan held both of Raine’s hands as they floated up the lift tube, curling them against his chest. He didn’t say a word, just looked into her eyes as he felt his pulse accelerate. This could go very badly wrong.

_He couldn’t afford this going wrong_
There was a small valise sitting discreetly next to the front door. “Toothbrush and clean hankie,” Ivan explained solemnly. “You can’t neglect your teeth.”

“What? Not a pair of black silk pyjamas? I thought they were mandatory.”

He smiled. “Well, yes, probably black silk pyjamas, too, but they are optional extras, don’t you know?” He wiggled his eyebrows just enough to be suggestive with being sleazy. He hoped.

Raine giggled as she pressed her palm to the lock and the door slid open. The apartment was deserted. Ivan unfastened his sword belt and laid it on the console table in the hall, then waved the valise around.

“I’ll just dump this in the bathroom, if I may? You wait here and I’ll be right back. Do you want a drink? We should probably talk, you know.” He raced off. There was a thump from the direction of the bathroom and he reappeared in less than no time.

“Did you throw that?” Raine hadn’t even adjusted the lights yet.

Ivan dived over the edge of the couch and landed full length before she could sit down. He rolled up on one elbow and grinned at her. “Who, me? What are you doing standing all the way over there?”

Raine put both hands on her hips. “You be careful with that magnificent tunic. All the work that went in to it and you’re treating it like a playsuit.”

“That’s very disrespectful, isn’t it?” Ivan jumped back up to his feet again. “Perhaps you’d like to help me take it off? I had to have a valet dress me this morning.”

He walked over to stand in front of her and held his arms away from his sides. The grin on his face died away, as he stood still and intent, watching her eyes. “You’re blushing, and we still have all our clothes on,” he teased.

Raine stepped forward and reached up to unhook his collar. Her hands trembled as she undid the first button. Ivan sighed and closed his eyes. With the second and third button, Raine had room to slide her hand inside his tunic, running it up and down the fine linen cambric of his shirt. She brushed up against his nipple and retreated to the next button. Ivan bit his lip.

At last the buttons were undone and she eased it off his shoulders. “Let me hang this up for you,” she said.

Ivan twitched it out of her hands. “The back of the chair is just fine.” He shucked out of his boots and socks as well. “I don’t need boots to talk. Now, how about you?” He started to ease out the flowers from her hair, one by one, taking his time to smell the fading perfume of the roses. The pins followed until at last her hair fell free in a long braid down her back. He finger-combed through the braids, loosening the plaits until the dark locks rippled freely over her shoulders.

“Isn’t that better?”

Raine wasn’t breathing very evenly. She nodded, not taking her eyes off his face,

Ivan reached behind her to test the fastenings and boning on her dress bodice. “Hmm. Have you got anything on under this? He took a step back to see her face properly and grinned wickedly. “This is a critical factor in my ability to actually talk, you understand.”

She swatted at his arm. “I don’t believe you. You’ve got everything under rigid self-control.”
He shuddered. “Don’t say rigid, or firm, even.”

It was Raine’s turn to tease. “What should I say then? Rock hard? Unbending?”

“All of the above.”

“I’m wearing a full petticoat. Will that do?”

“Oh yes, that will do very nicely.” Let me see what fiendish contraptions your dressmaker has come up with this time. I swear they do it on purpose, you know. They’re in league with the Vor dragon sisterhood of chaperones.”

Raine gave him a look. “I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Ivan took his time. He turned her around away from him and caught up her hair at her nape, coiling it loosely forward over her shoulder. With each hook unloosened he kissed the skin exposed and ran his knuckles down the lengthening sweep of her spine. Raine leaned back into him to expose the creamy line of her neck, little mews of exasperation escaping with his slow progress. At last the bodice was free and he slipped it forwards and away.

She wore a semi-sheer cream silk petticoat with a camisole top, edged in narrow silk lace with a ribbon tie under the bust. Raine turned back in his arms and unfastened her skirt herself, letting it drop to the floor.

“That’s enough undressing.”

_It wasn’t nearly enough._ Ivan concentrated on his breathing for a few moments, closing his eyes and taking in the delicate scent of her flesh. Back in control, barely, he swooped her up into his arms again and sat on the sofa with her nestled in his lap.

“So, we actually do need to talk. First up, you’re sure you want this? It’s not too late to back out.”

“He held his breath. What the hell was he going to do if she did pull the plug?

“I wouldn’t do that to you twice, Ivan. That would be horribly unfair. I want this.”

A sigh of relief gusted out of him. “Well, that’s the most important thing out of the way. Now we come to the question of who does what to whom?” He ran his hand over her silk covered breast, watching the way her eyes changed and her breathing hitched.

Raine swallowed. “What are the options, would you say?”

“Hmm. I could lie back and think of Barrayar and you could do wicked things all over my body. That would be interesting. Option two, you could lie back. Option two subclass A, I could start with your utterly delectable toes and work my way up, Option two subclass B, I could start from the top of your wonderful head and work my way down. Both option subclasses end in the same place, of course. I think I prefer Option three, we take turn and turn about.”

Raine nodded. “That sounds reasonable. I could go along with that.” Her fingers trailed around the line of his ear, crossing over to outline his mouth. He wasn’t quite finished.

“What don’t you like?”

She tensed suddenly. Ivan tightened his embrace, and murmured, “Shh. It’s all right. Just tell me.”

With a hand against his shoulder she pushed away a little. “I don’t ever want to be tied up,
restrained or coerced. I couldn’t bear that. And--"

Ivan could feel the distress building in Raine's stiffening muscles. She was going to panic. It had been going so well, but this was really important. "Just breathe honey. Take your time. You've got all the time in the world. There's nothing to be frightened of now. I've got you and you're safe. You'll always be safe with me."

She pressed her head against his shoulder again and took a deep, shuddering breath. Her tears dampened his shirt. He just held her for a while, smoothing his hand across her hair and murmuring softly who knew what. As she began to calm again he risked a little butterfly kiss on her temple and then more down her hairline to her ear.

She was ready to talk at last. "You wouldn't ever hit me, would you." It was more of a statement than a question.

Ivan shuddered at the very thought. "No, never. I might not be able to fix what's wrong but that I can safely promise you. I would never deliberately hurt you in any way."

"He did. He had something. I think it was a riding crop."

“Raine…” Ivan paused. He just had to make her see, try to get her to understand. "Raine, there's vile and perverted sexual assault, and then there's making love. One has nothing to do with the other. You're not an object for me, just to be used, and you never will be. You've experienced what the first one was like.” He paused again to look at her.

“I'd so like to show you the other."

She whispered so quietly it was hard to hear her. "I'd really like that too, Ivan."

"Come on, then." He set her on to her feet and stood up. "Let's go have a warm shower. "I'll scrub your back if you scrub mine."

"You might not want to do that, " Raine said, leading him into the bathroom. "It's not a pretty sight."

"I can't believe that. Every inch of you is pretty. " Ivan undid the buttons on his shirt cuffs and pulled the whole thing off over his head. He'd started to unfasten his trousers when Raine slipped off her petticoat and underwear and turned her back to him. Ivan froze in horror.

"Bastard! Raine…" He couldn't say anything more. Totally speechless, he stared at the crisscrossing scars across her buttocks and upper thighs. Some of them were fine white lines, but three or four must have been deep and serious wounds. She’d have been in agony.

“Dear god.” He found his voice at last. “Raine, I swear I’m going to find that monster. You don’t have to live with this though. We’ll get you to Beta and they’ll fix you right up. Didn’t your doctor suggest it?”

“It’s only in the past few weeks I’ve finally had enough money to do something about it. I did make some inquiries when I went to the Orb for the opening, but it would have taken too much time and I wanted to come home. I was missing…my mother…too much."

Ivan reached into the shower to turn the water on. He had to think of something to lighten the mood. “I’m glad you missed your mother. I missed you like half of me was gone. Have you got a shower cap somewhere? That’s a lot of hair to get wet.”
Raine pulled one out of the console drawer.

“What about some of that special face goop? Slather on and rinse off. I know you don’t put shower wash on your face.”

Raine laughed. It broke the tension the way he hoped it would. She reached for a tube and squeezed some out.

“Let me.” Taking the tube he smoothed cream over her cheeks and brow and then popped a dollop on the end of her nose, grinning at her reaction.

Raine snatched it off him. “You idiot. We’re wasting water here. You get your own goop on and I’ll do this.”

It took him five seconds to shed his remaining clothes. Just in time he remembered to brush his teeth before slapping the depilation cream on. Raine had stepped into the shower and was rinsing her face.

He spoke before touching her. “I’m right here. OK if I wash your back?”

Raine handed him a wash cloth. “Sure. Go right ahead.”

Ivan put some shower wash onto the cloth. “This smells good. What do you call this scent?”

“Escobaran moon flower.”

“Escobaran, hey? They know a thing or two, or so I hear.” He started slow spirals across her skin, moving further out and down with each sweep. Raine caught her breath as he at last reached far enough around to graze the side of her breast.

“You like that?” He murmured, feeling more than slightly breathless himself. Ivan paused just long enough to get rid of the cream from his face.

“Let me do some more.” Adding more shower wash to both hands he slid his arms round to hold one breast in his hand, gently circling the other with the cloth. She groaned. He moved closer to nuzzle at her ear with his open mouth, running his tongue round the folds and ridges as he started to move the wash cloth lower. He could feel her tremble and melt into him.

With a gasp she stood up straight. “Here. It’s my turn.”

Reluctantly he turned around, leaning his head against the shower wall. He passed over the wash cloth and his pulse skyrocketed at the first tentative sweep of the cloth across his shoulders. He had to bite his tongue to stop himself from urging her to hurry. Slow was so good, too. He turned his head a little to see their reflections in the steamed-up bathroom mirror.

“You have a very cute backside,” she commented. “but Ivan, you’ve got scars, too.” She kissed each one, counting down his back. “One, two, three, four, and your arm. That one looks bad.”

It wasn’t easy to speak. “Vorclarence’s first grenade. They’re all from marble splinters.”

“Oh…”she trailed her fingers across them again. “Well, at least that’s how I came to meet you. Some good had to come of it.” Growing bolder she reached around and lower with the cloth. Ivan slumped against the wall. His knees didn’t want to hold him up. He could feel her breasts and belly pressing against him as the cloth gently massaged his erection. It was sweet torture. He couldn’t stand much of that.
“I…I think we might be clean.”

Ivan turned off the water and stepped out of the shower to grab for a couple of towels. Hastily he wrapped one around his waist.

“Let me get you dry.” He wiped her face gently with one corner of the towel then snagged the shower cap and twitched it off. Her hair fell down her back in a cascading curtain of silk. The texture and the scent of it in his hands aroused him to another impossible pitch of sensation. He eyed the collection of bottles and tubes on the console with doubt.

“Which one of these is body lotion? Or, better yet, how about some massage oil?”

Raine picked up a small bottle and headed back to the bedroom. “This will do. Bags I go first.”

She stripped off the covers from the bed and urged him down to the sheets. “Front or back?”

“No question. It’ll have to be back. Front would be a very premature disaster.”

Ivan dropped his towel and lay face first on the bed. He moaned as Raine poured some oil onto his skin and began to work it in. Her hand swept from his shoulders to the top of his thighs with a firm pressure, working across his body. It felt like she used the knuckles of both hands either side of his spine. It felt wonderful…

“You really do have a cute butt,” she said, “even from this point of view.”

“One of my many charms,” he said as he turned his head to try and look at her.

“Yes, indeed, and if you weren’t so modest you’d be perfect.” Raine had finally worked her way down to his calves. “These feel very…taut. You’re not very relaxed,” she commented.

“No, ma’am,” he choked out. “Perhaps it’s your turn.” He rolled over, pulling her down on top of him. Her eyes were close to his. She tried to focus and gave up the attempt, snuggling down onto his chest instead. He eased out from under her until she lay on the bed in his place. He looked at her scars, then ran a soft hand over them. He could feel the tension as she flinched.

“No need to worry about these when you’re with me,” he told her, warming some oil in his hand before he started to smooth it gently over her. “I, on the other hand, would feel better if you did have all your scars taken away. Imagine lazing around a pool and people thinking I’d done this to you.”

“That would be…awkward. I haven’t lazed around a pool in years.”

“We’ll have to fix that.” Ivan had moved up, to massage her shoulders. “We can go down to the South Coast, or to Bonsanklar. Maman used to take me there when I was a boy. Sometimes we’d stay with the Koudelkas. Gregor came, one time. I bet he’s lazing round a pool right now,” Ivan stopped to think for a moment. “Or not, come to think of it. He’s probably otherwise engaged, or exhausted.”

Raine giggled. “I can’t imagine the Emperor…you know.”

“Why ever not? Why should we have all the fun?” Ivan kissed her between her shoulder blades. “Are you having fun yet? How about turning over?”

She lay still for a moment and then rolled on to her back. Lazily she stretched her arms behind her head. Ivan felt his mouth go dry. The way she looked at him, the way her skin glowed in the dim
light, the scent of her warm body, the swell of her breast against his hand all conspired to break his control. Air rushed into his lungs as he caught his breath.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” He struggled with the oil bottle to allow just a tiny drop to land at her throat, and then another on her chest, down between her breasts and finally one last drop into her navel. He lay on one side to run his free hand over her body, gently massaging the oil into her skin. On the second pass he followed his hand with his tongue, circling her nipples then sucking gently. Gradually, he worked his way lower.

“He of the silver tongue,” she murmured, her chest rising and falling with the increased tempo of her breathing. “I only imagined it before.”

Ivan paused for a moment. “You should write a ‘happy ever after’ for Lord Vordagger.”

His tongue circled again for a few moments. “He of the silver tongue meets Lady Rosegarden. She of the golden sheath.”

Raine burst out laughing. “You are dreadful!”

Ivan rolled her over again so she lay on top once more. “Sex is supposed to be fun. Are you having fun yet?”

“No, not yet.” She smiled a wicked smile at him. “I must need lots more practice.”

Ivan grabbed at her waist then started tickling. Raine screamed with laughter, trying and failing to tickle him back. Reaching between them, she took hold of him. Ivan stopped tickling.

“I surrender.” He gasped and groaned as she started to move her hand.

"I'm having fun now." She moved to sit up and settle over him, taking in his full length. His breath caught and he stopped talking, stopped thinking. He started sweating instead. All he could do was feel. Desperate to keep control, he tried to joke.

"I'll just lie back and think of Barrayar, then," he gasped.

“I bet you can't.” Raine clenched a muscle or two. He grabbed at her hips, trying to make her stop. She reached out to run her fingers through his hair and smooth his face with her palm. "You said it, Ivan. Making love, not having sex. I love you so much. Most definitely I’m having fun. And now it’s your turn.

This was Raine. This was his Raine. He felt and heard her reaction as he started to move inside her. Ivan had fun. He had more fun than he'd ever had in his life before.

Long after they sank exhausted into a tumbled, shuddering heap Ivan lay stunned and bewildered. His hand trembled as he smoothed her hair while she relaxed and drifted off to sleep in his arms. How could he never have made love before? He'd had plenty of sex. Wonderful, fun sex, but making love? What was the difference, because there was a difference, something deep and fundamental here that he hadn’t experienced before. The thought sobered him. No, it scared him. Some of the women he’d known had touched his heart, might have gone on to something deeper, but he’d always held back, shied away from commitment.

Donna.

He’d come close to loving Donna and what she’d done for him, yet when he’d been sent to Cetaganda he’d never given her much of a thought after they’d parted, except to mentally thank her
for her lessons. Had that just been lust? Surely not. He still felt a fondness for that old Donna.
They’d parted as friends, he’d thought. He could never willingly part from Raine. He wanted
nothing else. He wanted nothing else for ever. Terrifying though it was, he realised at last what it
was he wanted and needed, what some of his previous girlfriends had wanted from him and he
hadn’t been able to give. He wanted commitment. He wanted the happy ever after, the loved and
loving wife and his children growing up around him. They'd be safe, now, with Gregor married and
Miles betrothed. He could afford to hope.

Light had finally started to creep into the room as he dozed at last. Before sleep claimed him, he
whispered into her hair.

"I love you, Raine."

The End

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