Summary

For the prompt: How Cordelia's daughter's affect Barrayar or Escobar or anywhere, really.

To know Cordelia's daughters, you must also know her family. All of them, from her brother to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren yet to come.

Notes

Prompt:
How Cordelia's daughters effect Barrayar or Escobar or anywhere really
From Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan’s personal correspondence:

Our dearest Cordelia:

Thank you so much for the lovely vid of Aurelia. We watch it frequently. Simon doesn’t quite understand my fascination with infants, but she is so, so precious! She’s also definitely a Vorbarra. Aral always favored his mother, but Aurelia’s resemblance to his aunt is truly remarkable. Is it fanciful to say that Aurelia is probably the daughter Padma and I pictured when we began planning our family?

Much love, Alys & Simon

Dear Mother,

Congratulations on uncorking the new sprog! My baby sister is adorable. I look forward to holding her in a few months. As for Ekaterin, she’s flattered beyond measure that you’ve named Nile for her. So am I.

Love, Your Firstborn

Dear Grandma,

Thank you so much for the new drafting table. I’ve been doing lots of sketching. Mama especially loves the one of Nikki in his dress greens. And Uncle Gregor put the one of Cousin Dmitri on his desk!

Do you think Aurelia and Nile will let me draw them when we visit? Mama says I should sketch Helen and Nile together. She bought me some new ink that perfectly matches their hair. Helen’s a little weird about it. I think she liked being the only one in the family with your hair. Nikki says to ignore her. Don’t tell Mama or Da, but I think Nikki’s got a girlfriend. He keeps talking about this captain at work.

Love, Aral Alexander

Dear Cordelia,

Gregor and I were distraught to hear of your and Oliver’s personal losses in the Kareenburg earthquake. It is inconceivable that the power systems in reproduction centers do not have fail safes to prevent such tragedies. That will change. Gregor has assigned Lord Auditor Vorthys to lead an Imperium-wide assessment and upgrade. There is already widespread support for the necessary appropriations. Count Voreliades, whose District experiences occasional seismic activity, has personally vowed to ensure the Council of Counts passes whatever measures necessary to ensure the future of the Imperium.

And now the reason for the eyes-only communication. Gregor is planning a State Visit to Escobar after Midsummer. We’ll be making an official visit to Sergyar en route. If it’s convenient, we’d like to add a discreet family vacation on the return. The children would love to swim all day, Gregor is
anxious to explore in Oliver’s crystal boat, and I want to hug the little ones. All of them, including Everard Xav, who should have been a big brother by now.

Speaking of big brothers, Nikki – excuse me, Lieutenant Vorsoisson – is building quite a fan club since being assigned to Residence Security. At least once a month, he and the children ‘escape’ the Residence for impromptu, incognito adventures. Kareen and Pavel are convinced neither ImpSec nor the armsmen have any idea what they’re up to. Alexei and Dmitri are aware of the security perimeter, but enjoy the freedom nonetheless. Gregor won’t admit it, but he’s madly jealous. I keep reminding him that our children are reaping the sacrifices of his childhood and his drive to make Barrayar a stable, safe, modern world. And if Nikki lets them have a bit too much sugar, well, it’s worth it to see our children happy.

All our love, Laisa & Gregor

******

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Great news – MPVK has won the bid to build the new commercial vat protein facility at Gridgrad. Project specs should put us on-planet very close to Alani’s arrival. It would mean so much to Mark to see his sister born. Plus you know how much we adore Aurelia and Nile! Warning – someone commissioned some very awesome Big Sister presents from the Whole. Nothing that needs feeding, an addition to your house, or more staff. He’s learned his lesson after the petting zoo fiasco!

Love and kisses, Kareen & Mark

******

Dear Tante Cordelia,

I can’t express how much we enjoyed our visit. Duv and I so needed to get away. I don’t know how Aunt Alys balanced being Gregor’s hostess and a single mother. There are days when if not for our suite in the Residence, neither of us would ever see our children awake. Cuddling Alani and Perrin really brought back memories!

Work was waiting. The usual, plus some very special personal requests. It’s more than a year out, which gives us plenty of time to plan a gala celebration for Miles’ 50th birthday. Gregor also wants to host a 50th anniversary party for my parents. Laisa says it’s a devious plan to bring you and the girls back to Barrayar for a long visit. Oliver and the boys, too, of course. Duv says there are plenty of people in Ops and ImpSec who’d appreciate educated input on the strategic implications of recent biological discoveries. Don’t worry about transport. Gregor has promised a child-friendly yacht with plenty of room for nannies, tutors, and luggage.

Please say yes so we can get the party planning going!
Love you! Delia & Duv

******

Dear Cordelia –

Just a quick note to say everything’s in place for your visit. Your brother managed to find a huge rental apartment very close to mine with room for you, Oliver, and the children. He’s also made arrangements to watch the children while Mr. and Mrs. Jones visit the Orb. I can’t believe you haven’t been there in over 50 years!

Love, Mother

******

Hey Sis –

It was so great to see you! As much as I think you’re crazy to start the baby roller-coaster all over
again – Sarah and I like playing with our grandchildren and giving them back – there’s no denying that you and Oliver have parenting down cold. And Mother’s right, Aurelia is exactly what Miles would’ve been without the soltoxin. I can’t believe you ever worried about her verbal skills. You obviously haven’t totally retired from politics or a 6-year-old wouldn’t have been asking such pointed question when we toured the presidential mansion!

As for Miles’ birthday gala, how can you possibly be hesitating about attending? Yeah, there’ll be gossip. You’ve been the subject of Barrayaran gossip since the day you and Aral met. Why care now? So what if you’re dating a younger man? Nobody would blink if the genders were reversed. And the girls’ parentage, well, it’s none of anyone’s business. If Aurelia and Alani weren’t so obviously Vorkosigans, I’d suggest telling everyone they’re clones. Hell, it’s totally believable if you want to claim Nile’s a clone. You know your sons would back your story. I think Aral would, too, just for the pleasure of seeing gullible people’s reactions.

Regarding Aral, I hope the 10th anniversary of his passing was as benign as such things can be. Mother and I agree that traveling to Barrayar to participate in grandiose memorials would’ve been unnecessarily painful. That said, you owe it to the girls to introduce them to the planet their father spent his life defending. All of it, from the sledding hill at Vorkosigan Surleau to Winterfair in Vorbarr Sultana. Mother still talks about the Winterfair season she spent there so many years ago. She said it was absolutely magical. I’m sure the girls will think so, too.

Loads of love, John

P.S. Sarah is sending a separate letter along with a package for the children. I am NOT responsible for the contents! JMN

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

Escobar is terrific. I’m so glad I came for the conference on medical applications of newly discovered flora and fauna. Amiri’s panel was particularly interesting. I’m sure you’ll enjoy reading his paper. You also need to see the Durona clinic. You’ve always complained that Barrayaran medicine was primitive by galactic standards. After seeing the cutting edge, I agree the Empire still has a long, long way to go.

Mark and Kareen are wonderful hosts. The vids don’t do their house or Ekaterin’s gardens justice. It’s so THEM, a perfect mix of Mark’s obsession with technology and Kareen’s comfortable, welcoming style. You’ll love the newest improvements: a wonderfully-equipped playroom for little ones and a media/game room that would make teens the envy of all their friends. Olivia & Dono’s children chose the climbing apparatus in the back garden. I’m sure Aurelia, Everard, and Nile could spend hours swinging and yelling while Alani and Perrin play in the sand pit.

Da confession here. I had no idea how much I’d miss my sons. Amazing how long space tours didn’t use to bother me and now I can’t go two weeks without missing the feel of sticky arms around my neck. I miss your arms, too, but that’s a very different longing. Silly me even misses Perrin’s night terrors.

I’m a bit worried about my luggage allowance. Loads of stuff for the children, plus Escobar has some VERY interesting sex shops!

Nakedly yours, Oliver

*****

Chapter End Notes
I’ve given Gregor and Laisa 4 children. Crown Prince Alexei is a year older than Alex and Helen Vorkosigan. Prince Dmitri is the twins’ contemporary. Princess Kareen (often referred to as KareenVB), is five years younger than Dmitri, making her a year older than Taurie. Prince Pavel and Taurie are contemporaries.

Ivan and Tej have two children. Padma is Taurie and Prince Pavel’s contemporary; Irina is Selig and Simone’s.

I’ve named Cordelia’s brother/partner as John and Sarah. The three children they have in canon have arbitrarily been named J.J., Scarlett, and Clark. J.J. and his partner have Johnny. Other Naismith relatives remain unnamed.
Happy Birthday, Miles

Chapter Summary

Is it possible to surprise Miles?

Dear Cordelia –

Emperors don’t take no for an answer, do they? At least not ones with wealthy in-laws! My polite refusal of the invitation to Miles’ birthday gala was met with the offer of a Toscane ship to bring everyone to Barrayar, with whatever stops needed to refresh ourselves along the way. I guess my traveling days aren’t quite over after all! And with transportation guaranteed, John and Sarah have convinced everyone else to come, too. Is the Empire ready for five generations of Naismiths?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –

Your timing for my 50th birthday gift was as impeccable as always! Baz hid it until cake time. I was absolutely flabbergasted by the gorgeous necklace. Also honored that you would pass one of Uncle Aral’s gifts on to me instead of saving it for Aurelia or Helen. I promise to cherish it until the day I pass it to your namesake.

Our travel plans are coming together. Baz and I have arranged leave from work and the children are working hard to complete the term’s schoolwork so they can enjoy our vacation. Bel and its family are planning a short stay here on Escobar. Nicol’s been here on tour several times, but not with the children. If it’s acceptable to you, Delia has suggested we all rendezvous at Sergyar Station and travel the rest of the way together. Can your nerves handle ten children trapped on a spaceship?

Love, Elena and Baz

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan –

My wife and I are deeply honored by your invitation to visit you en route to Barrayar. Not only are we anxious to see the beauty of your developing world, the traveling break will be very welcome. After years on Graf Station, I find nonstop normal gravity far more tiring than it was during my mercenary days. I also can’t remember the last time I went sailing on water. And of course our daughters never have. They’ve never gone swimming, either, so that will be very thrilling for them!

Nicol asks if you would like us to bring extra floaters. They’re not very comfortable for adult downsiders, but visiting children enjoy them. They’re also very handy for injuries. I understand Aurelia takes after Miles when it comes to daredevil antics?

Please let us know if there’s anything you’d like us to bring from Graf Station, Jackson’s Whole, or Escobar.

Best Regards, Bel Thorne

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
I really think we’re going to pull off the surprise! At dinner this evening, Miles was bubbling with excitement that you’ll be here for Winterfair through Kou & Drou’s anniversary party. He misses you more than he’s willing to admit. I do, too. I sometimes find myself oddly jealous that Mark can pop by and see you for a day as he oversees the MPVK empire, yet my empire primarily ties me to Barrayar.

Laisa has asked what I remember of Kou and Drou’s wedding. I told her I snuck down in my pajamas and was allowed a cream cake. My wife says this time, I must wear real clothes, but can eat as much as I want. She also says this being a family party, Aurelia, Nile, and Everard Xav are welcome to eat and dance until they wear themselves out. Oh, and we’ll be doing the anniversary fireworks early in the evening so the children can enjoy them, too. I understand Perrin and Alani LOVE things that go boom. Wonder where they got that from?

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Mother –

I’ve got bad news. An aspiring university filmmaker has done a 50th anniversary ‘documentary’ about the Vordarian Pretendership. I use quotes because the damn thing centers on my replicator, Princess Kareen, and Vordarian’s head. The Professora says Da, Gregor, and Granda are barely mentioned and the vid has no historical value whatsoever. So if you haven’t told the girls about your most memorable shopping trip in the capitol, you’d better do so.

Unhappily yours, Miles

*****

(handwritten)Dear Mother,

A boy at school said quaddies are mutants and shouldn’t be allowed on-planet. He said nasty things about you, too. Can we talk?

Love, Aurelia

You were magnificent tonight, my love. I’m so glad Aurelia approached you before ignoramuses filled Everard’s and Nile’s heads with such nonsense. It would never have occurred to me to use music as the bridge to explaining why four hands can be so much better than two. No, I’d have given a dull lecture about null-gee and handholds and all the practical aspects no child cares about. Though I do think it’s time to introduce the trio to null-gee. After all, they may someday be somewhere without normal gravity. All my love, Oliver

How can you never have had sex in null-gee? If done right, it’s amazing. And if done wrong, it’s hilarious, so there’s really no such thing as bad null-gee sex. We must definitely remedy this lack in your life experience! OPJ

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –

Is there anything you or Oliver would like Father Frost to bring from Earth or, Horus-Save-Me, Jackson’s Whole? We have a week layover to see Tej’s family, show off the sprogs, and allow them to recover from jump-lag. Unfortunately, they take after Tej in that respect. So much for haut genes, right? Byerly and I enjoy twitting the Baronne about that. By and Rish were smarter than we were – Crystal’s gene-cleaning included an adjustment to her inner ear so she doesn’t get space-sick.

Padma asked last week why Grand-mère and Uncle Simon don’t have kids because he and Irina enjoy playing with Aurelia and Nile. Tej handled that one because I was too stunned to speak. Laugh all you want, but I really was hoping to stall the reproduction discussions for a while. Like
maybe a decade or two.

We hear Nikki and Anna are getting very serious. Please promise you’ll talk Ekaterin out of inviting my in-laws to the wedding, okay? I’d prefer no Arqua ever sets foot on Barrayar again.

Love, Ivan & Tej

*****

Dear Grandma –

ANNA SAID YES!!! My beautiful Komarran sweetheart said yes!

We’re planning on having a Barrayaran betrothal ceremony while you’re here. The wedding will be a (comparatively) smallish event in Equinox Dome. Details to follow. Madame Chaly is in a tizzy that her baby girl’s assignment on Barrayar is now at the Emperor’s direct discretion. Anna doesn’t care. Like you, she prefers the open air of Barrayar and Sergyar to Komarr’s domes.

I’m told Komarran weddings involve many small children. My future mother-in-law was planning on choosing all the attendants. Nyet. Simone, Taurie, KareenVB, Aurelia, and Nile are non-negotiable. Not sure yet if there’s a role for Everard, but he’s certainly got priority over Anna’s third cousins!

I really miss Granda. I know he’d love Anna. Aunt Alys says she’s a combination of you and Mama, with a touch of Admiral Quinn and Aunt Martya. And she’s a captain! For now, at least. Twenty years from now, I may be married to a general. Isn’t that a glorious picture?

Love, Nikki

*****

Dear Mother –

It looks like Father Frost brought us an early gift – a daughter-in-law! Ekaterin is over the moon with excitement. So are all the Vorvaynes and Vorbarras. The Vorsoissons, not so much. Nikki is very hurt that neither his paternal grandmother (yeah, the old bat’s still around) nor the cousin who tried to pry him away from Ekaterin’s custody have even acknowledged his messages. Gregor says I can’t have them arrested for being soulless nincompoops, but it’s still very, very tempting.

The betrothal ceremony will be here at Vorkosigan House, the weekend before Kou and Drou’s anniversary party. Please remember to bring an extra handkerchief in case I soak mine. My heart is so full of joy for our oldest son. Our son. The gift my wife brought to our marriage.

Mother, I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to understand why Da left you control of the gametes. He understood, as I did not, exactly how deep a hole the soltoxin attack left in your heart. As Ekaterin and I prepare to celebrate our son’s marriage, I rejoice that Aurelia, Nile, Alani, and the two sisters yet to be born have begun to heal you in a way that Gregor, Mark, I, and your grandchildren could not.

Love always, Lord Auditor Count Vorkosigan, aka Your Oldest Bio-Sprog

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –

Your namesake is VERY upset with Uncle Mark for stealing our houseguests. Cordy and Garnet8 have quickly become friends. Mark offered the Durona Clinic’s null-gee suite to the Thorne family in exchange for suggestions for the null-gee suites being added to MPVK Manor. Having spent years dreading being dragged back to Cockroach Central for interrogation, Baz is a touch nervous about staying there. I can’t wait! Neither can Bel, having heard so many stories. It’s promised to keep it mild around the children. I don’t believe it for a second! Also, did you know Bel and Oliver have
met? Sometimes the Nexus is very small.

See you soon!
Love, Elena & Baz

*****

Dear Sis –

J.J., Scarlett, and Clark are all more than a mite jealous that Mark is currently Mother’s favorite grandchild. Our visit to Escobar has been extraordinary. Not just the magnificent hospitality; seeing this small slice of Mark’s accomplishments has us all yearning to see more. Especially Mother. Mark introduced her to the Doctors Durona as his co-anchor (with the amazing Kareen) during his university years. Everyone treated Mother like visiting royalty, from Lily Durona on down to the lowest lab tech. I’m not sure what thrilled Mother most, everyone sharing Mark’s Grandma stories or the many references to her published medical work. Sarah especially enjoyed Lina’s reactions throughout the tour. Our granddaughter-in-law may be an up-and-coming doctor at Silica Hospital, but her first trip off-planet is certainly opening her eyes!

Now the brotherly advice you won’t like. You need to stop nagging Kareen and Mark about sequestering gametes. Not everyone’s meant to be a parent. And conversely, Mark’s also got the biggest family of all. The clones he rescued, the Naismiths and Vorkosigans, the Duronas, Elena’s children, Kareen’s nieces and nephews, he’s beloved by so very many children. Kareen seems just as happy to be an aunt, cherishing children when they’re around, but focusing on other things when they’re not. Karen’s not you or Ekaterin, Sis. And that’s okay, because in all other ways, just like Elena, Kareen is another fearless daughter of your heart.

If you disagree, you can hit me in the head with flying discs when we arrive next week. Let the young ‘uns see what we were like when we were their age. Wouldn’t it be funny to have Mother scold us?

Love, John and Sarah

*****

Dear Cordelia –

I really don’t see why you’re fussing at me. While the Admiral Vorkosigan may be a touch surplus to requirements for the size of your party, I’m not currently using my new flagship. Plus General Kanzian reluctantly agreed to your usual ImpSec detail traveling in the escort ships. Also, you’re picking up more passengers in Komarr. A few extras have been added to Miles’ party guest list. Do be nice to Anna’s family. We don’t want Nikki’s future in-laws thinking We don’t value him, do we?

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Grandma –

I’m so glad you’re arriving with Anna’s family. Mama is driving us all CRAZY worrying they won’t like Barrayar, Vorbarr Sultana, Vorkosigan House, winter, or a thousand other ridiculous things. I know why – Aunt Rosalie and Cousin Edie spilled the beans about how dreadfully Nikki’s father’s family treated her – but it’s getting absolutely ludicrous. You know how Da has the drains inspected regularly? Mama had the team back just in case. Taurie’s threatening to break a pipe just to see the reaction. Selig’s even worse, pretending to see Vorkosigan butter bugs everywhere. Never mind that it’s been at least three years since any were spotted.

I also want to discuss university plans with you. Da thinks Alex is going to the Academy because Alex is too chicken to tell anyone he’s applied to the architecture program in Solstice. I want to
attend the military academy in Vervain. Da has suggested the Women’s Auxiliary, using Anna as an example of a rising star, but I want to train in a full-fledged, unisex program like you did. Aunt Kareen says Escobar has a magnificent program, but history might suggest that Aral Vorkosigan’s granddaughter would not be welcome.

Granda’s reputation may be part of Mama’s nerves. It’s in Anna’s records that her Great-Aunt was one of the Solstice Martyrs. I’m sure Da knew, but Nikki didn’t tell Mama until after he proposed. Grandma, why are all my brothers such idiots?

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Da said to tell you that he and Uncle Ivan aren’t the only ones to slide down the banister and break something. Not our bones. Selig and I crashed into delivery men bringing back the dining room chairs. The seats are red now, to match the new drapes. Mama was furious. Da laughed. Though he did say we have to check that the foyer is clear before showing Aurelia, Nile, and Everard how it’s done. He’s also forbidden us from allowing Perrin and Alani to join us because they’re too little. Yeah, even Da sometimes has rules.

Aunt Alys has made an appointment to take me, Irina, Aurelia, Nile, and Alani to choose dresses for the Winterfair Ball. I AM SO EXCITED!

Love, Simone

*****

Dear Cordelia –

I’m sure you’ve heard that Georg is on his way to Komarr. His trip has a dual purpose: consulting on adjustments to the Soletta array and serving as the Empress’ parents’ official escort back to Barrayar. He’s thrilled to have Lieutenant Vorsoisson and Captain Chaly seconded to him for the trip. We’re all looking forward to meeting Anna’s family, as well as your own. It should be a wonderful Winterfair Season! I must confess, however, that I’m also looking forward to the New Year, when most of the guests go home and we can visit for long stretches.

Warmest regards, Helen Vorthys

*****

Dear Cordelia –

If you’d like a brass band to meet your flying circus at the shuttleport, it can certainly be arranged. It might embarrass my in-laws, but Miles would enjoy it. We’ve heard from multiple sources that the Chalys are proving to be less sophisticated about space travel than We’d hoped. We look forward to their reactions to seeing the Jewels perform for Miles’ birthday. That’s as much a gift to our daughter as to your son. Laisa’s parents took Kareen to a show in Solstice and she was absolutely captivated. Laisa has also promised that the little ones can watch the practices for the Winterfair performance. If I can, I hope to join them.

Count and Countess Vorbarra look forward to dining with you at Vorkosigan House in a few days’ time. No need to worry about the rest of your entourage. Aunt Alys has arrangements well in hand to entertain everyone until we can bring the two groups together. Simon would be the first to say that the cuisine at MPVK Manor has vastly improved since he oversaw the building.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –
Mark is looking forward to Miles’ head exploding when he realizes we’ve been on-planet longer than you have! Mama says she and Da played their part very convincingly at dinner the other night, lamenting that Mark and I weren’t arriving until today. Tej is incredulous that we’re taking the morning shuttle to the orbital Station just so Pym can send a groundcar to collect us on our ‘arrival,’ but if Miles gets it in his head to check inbound passenger manifests, he’ll find us!

My dancing shoes are ready for tonight!
Love and kisses, Kareen
*****

Dear Mother,

I know I thanked everyone profusely last night and (less drunkenly) again this morning, but I owe you something far more permanent than last night’s toasts and hugs. Thank you, Mother, for all you did to give me life. Thank you for never giving up on your quest to prove that the mutant Granda wanted to flush from the replicator would one day be worthy of assuming the title of 11th Count Vorkosigan. Thank you for always encouraging me to try, applauding my successes, and comforting me when I failed. I’m sorry, too, for all the sleepless nights, the years when I barely wrote because I was busy trying to save the Nexus in Gregor’s name. Da and Granda cast some very long shadows, didn’t they?

I gave up trying to calculate how many light-years last night’s guests traveled to celebrate my birthday. Granda never left Barrayar. Neither, really, did Da. The Great Admiral traveled to many worlds, but always representing the Imperium. Aral Vorkosigan never studied on Beta, honeymooned on Earth, or had the luxury of being anonymous on the bustling, intriguing gateway planet he fought so hard to hold. Were it up to Da, Simon, and Aunt Alys, Ivan’s and my military service would likely have been as constrained as Gregor’s. In retrospect, sending two of Gregor’s heirs apparent to Cetaganda for a State Funeral was completely, utterly insane. Yet it happened because the daughter of Miles Mark Naismith lived through losing him and became a noted explorer in her own right. I saw Oliver snickering during toasts crediting Da and Granda with my military expertise. The tactical stuff, sure, but my numerous reckless leaps into the unknown? That’s all you, Mother.

Speaking of leaps, there’s no need to give me the lecture you’ve no doubt been preparing about Alex and Helen. As much as I’d like to keep them safely stapled to my side, I won’t. Not only isn’t my side always that safe, Ekaterin and I both bear the scars of trying to meet others’ expectations. And if it means Alex improves the District structure by structure while Nikki, Anna, and Helen defend it, well, I’d vastly prefer my daughter wear the Emperor’s uniform over my mercenary one.

There’s another reason our children need to spend more time off-world. Two months ago, I’d have said my only real tie to Beta Colony was Grandma. Last night proved that’s not true. Admiral Miles Naismith didn’t have much family in the old sandbox. Miles Naismith Vorkosigan DOES. So do Mark and our sisters. Seeing Aurelia and Nile interact with their cousins is amazing. Ekaterin and I have been remiss in developing those relationships. We can and will do better.

And now, in Da’s honor:

A science explorer from Beta,
Met a soldier with oatmeal and feta.
Quite soon they’d begun
A small, feisty son
Who travelled to Komarr’s soletta.

Stop groaning! The rhymes with blue cheese were way worse!
Love always, Your grateful son Miles

*****
Winterfair on Barrayar

Chapter Summary

Man proposes, God disposes.

Dear Mother –

I hope you’re having fun in Hassadar with Miles and Ekaterin. We had a great day sledding and riding the horses. Uncle Oliver promised he’ll teach us to ice skate after Winterfair because it wouldn’t be polite to do something all our guests can’t. Lizzie and Taurie have promised to teach us how to wear snowshoes, too!

Nile doesn’t really like playing outside in the cold, but I love it! Uncle Oliver says there’s snow in Sergyar’s mountains. I’d like to visit them sometime.

Aunt Sarah has promised to read bedtime stories. See you tomorrow!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Great-Aunt Cordelia,

Thank you so much for including me in your tour of the Hassadar Hospital. The visit to the Emergency Department was particularly informative. I had no idea winter weather could result in so many different injuries!

Regards, Lina

*****

(eyes-only)Mother – By the time you wake, I’ll be halfway to the Western Coast. Suspicious explosion with heavy casualties. Chatter says it may be politically motivated. All help you can give Ekaterin would be much appreciated. Who knew hosting future in-laws could be this complicated?

Love & Thanks, Miles

*****

Dear Mother,

Does Madame Chaly EVER shut up? She makes more noise than all the children combined. It’s especially sad considering all but Perrin and Alani are better conversationalists. I know Grandma wants to spend as much time as possible with Miles’ brood, but just say the word and I’ll move her (and you) back to the Manor. The stress can’t possibly be good for either of you.

Love, Mark

*****

(handwritten)Dear Cordelia,

Thank you for all your help and support over the last few days. Without you, I might’ve started to believe I was behaving like an overbearing mother of the groom. Or worse yet, the ungracious hostess and unsupportive spouse Tien’s mother constantly accused me of being. Did they seriously expect me to discuss Miles’ whereabouts in the middle of family dinner? How can the parents of a career military officer not understand the concept of security clearances?
The vase contains a new species Lizzie and I cultivated. The Cordelia Rose will officially be
introduced at the Winterfair Ball, but we thought you’d like a preview.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother,

Are you and Oliver okay? From all reports, Ivan’s birthday dinner was an utter disaster. Ekaterin said
between soothing the children that they won’t be decapitated, orphaned, shot, or burned to death, and
fretting about the pain Anna’s horrible parents inflicted on Gregor the night before the public
memorial of his mother’s death, none of you slept. I barely slept either, between trying to wrap this
investigation and burning my own offering for Princess Kareen at dawn. Ivan said he’s never seen
Gregor this angry. Ivan’s also grateful Mark was late to the gathering because he feared Mark
might’ve snapped Madame Chaly’s neck when she asked to see the spot where Princess Kareen
died. He doesn’t know how you and Aunt Alys managed to maintain your composure when Drou
broke down.

Laisa has convinced Gregor to hold off taking any actions against the Chalys beyond barring them
from the Residence until I return and can discuss the situation with Ekaterin, Nikki, and Anna. I hope
Anna doesn’t try to do the noble thing and break the engagement. Should the subject arise, feel free
to remind Nikki that Aunt Tej is a wonderful example of someone whose happiness in marriage isn’t
dependent on proximity to her bio-family. Oh, and he’s in no danger of being sent into exile like
Uncle Ivan because Vorbarr Sultana is still standing. Physically, at any rate.

Please tell my children and younger siblings that I love them and will see them very soon. I’ll see you
and Oliver soon, too.

Your loving son, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

On behalf of my fellow Komarrans, I feel compelled to apologize for last night’s disgusting display. I
never would’ve dreamed any Imperial subject would be so brazen as to joke about lives lost during
the Pretendership in front of their Emperor. And the comment that Vordarian would probably have
been better for Komarr? Do they not understand they literally wished the guest of honor, their host,
and several other people at the table dead?

My parents suggested it might be better for the children to visit Hassadar or Vorkosigan Surleau until
the Chaly matter is sorted. General Kanzian is standing by with whatever transport and security may
be required.

As for the Chalys, I’ve heard everything from arresting them for treason to declaring them persona
non grata on Bararrayar and stripping them of their Komarran voting rights. We shall see what happens
when cooler heads prevail.

All my love, Laisa

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Do Anna’s parents think we Bararrayans are incapable of simple addition? The Solstice Massacre
occurred before either of them was born. How, then, could they have memories of meeting martyred
Aunt Leah? And listening to office workers expound on the horrors of violent death, well, I haven’t
been this close to losing my dinner on the Residence high table since I was carrying Ivan. Padma got
me away in the nick of time then. You may think me fanciful, but I felt Padma’s presence so strongly
last night. I know Padma would be proud of our son. A bit jealous, too. Padma always wanted to follow his grandfather’s footsteps into the diplomatic corps. The worlds we were going to see together!

Now the hard part. In light of last night, Simon and I won’t be attending Nikki’s betrothal ceremony. We know this will be a blow, but one benefit of retirement is we’re no longer obligated to pretend to tolerate our enemies. We didn’t repeatedly risk our lives to protect our Emperor so prole idiots could mock us to our faces.

Much love, Alys & Simon

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

It’s safe to bring your entourage back to the capitol whenever you desire. Anna’s family is on the way to the shuttleport, never to return. Her parents, at any rate. Gregor has left open the option for Anna’s brother to visit at some very future date.

Did Ekaterin mention that Anna’s parents tried to bribe numerous members of our staff to help them get off-planet before my return? Those stunts sealed Gregor’s decision to add the Chalys to ImpSec Komarr’s watchlist. Interestingly, there wasn’t a peep of protest from Duv. He didn’t even lobby for more resources, his usual reaction when, to use Ivan’s parlance, we uncover another snake in his patch.

Now to the good news. Nikki and Anna are still engaged. The less-good news is they’ve decided to turn the planned betrothal ceremony into the actual wedding. Ekaterin and I have no concerns about Anna being The One, but trying to plan a cross-cultural ceremony on little notice and without the bride’s family may prove difficult. Good thing we know some experts. We’re praying Aunt Alys will find a way to redeem the pledge to include the girls in the Komarran ceremony before Simone has an utter breakdown. Our youngest cares more about fashion and parties than all her sisters combined. Ekaterin says it’s the Princess Olivia in her. Did Alex show you the sketchbook he found in the attic? It includes Da’s parents dressed for what was probably their last Winterfair Ball. Granda’s House uniform is covered in medals. Princess Olivia’s ball gown is equally elaborate, with lace and fancy jewels. Technically, it’s very raw, but the love is so powerful. Looking at it, I can truly believe that Granda’s heart broke when she died.

Yes, I know I’m rambling. We’ll discuss in person, but the short version is another Count will be naming a new heir thanks to his idiot son paying knuckleheads to destroy a fairly new military installation in hopes the replacement base would be sited in their adjacent territory. It’s no Vorkosigan Vashnoi, but there’s some very serious environmental contamination, over a hundred dead, and scores maimed, all for greed. Gregor and I are absolutely sick about it. So is Byerly, who was instrumental in steering the investigation away from the initial suspects. You’d be amazed how much information he garners traveling with the Jewels!

I now have appointments with my seizure stimulator and my bed. God, I’m tired.

Love, Miles

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

The book Tej brought on Earth wedding traditions will save us all a mountain of problems. Having the guests sit while the bridal party walks down an aisle formed by the chairs sounds so civilized! It also glosses over the issue of Anna’s missing parents and will allow the children to participate. Anna wants Alani and Perrin to toddle down the aisle together. Time will tell if that will be adorable or unwise.
Love, Alys

Dear Cordelia,

Aurelia’s note thanking us for the bestest fireworks she’s ever seen was absolutely delightful! So was Alani’s curtsy to her Thire and watching Nile imitating the Jewels’ leaps and spins. The Jewels really are quite magical when they’re not trying to loot my Empire. Your suggestion that they dance to one of Nicol’s compositions was absolutely inspired. Security reports hearing some ignorant comments before Nicol played, but absolutely none after. Delia is a tad concerned about whispers wondering how we’ll top the entertainment next year.

Please bid your family Bon Voyage and thank them for traveling so far to be part of such special celebrations. Especially last night. I remember Father Frost bringing me gifts that first Winterfair after the Pretendership, but no ball in my smoky home or fireworks in my war-torn capitol city. Fifty years later, Vordarian’s ghost has finally been fully vanquished. Fifty years, Cordelia, with no civil wars, no galactic invasions, and Emperor Ezar’s blighted backwater is a respected military and diplomatic presence throughout the Nexus. Not a scientific, artistic, or academic one, not yet, but if Count Piotr were here, I’m certain he’d be proud of how far his beloved Barrayar has come. Perplexed, too, at how technology has given him many more grandchildren, but in time, he’d come to respect Mark’s courage and the way MPVK works with Miles to improve the District. He’d be vocal about his granddaughters being raised off-planet, but he’d love them all so very much. Yes, he’d be plotting to make eligible marriage contracts, but he’d also be protecting them ferociously in atonement for not being able to save his own daughter.

General Count Piotr Vorkosigan was justifiably proud of being a kingmaker for my grandfather and myself. Seeing Grandma Elizabeth, Uncle John, and Aunt Sarah has reminded me that the Naismiths are, too, in the very best of ways.

Happy Winterfair, Cordelia. I love you more than you’ll ever know.
Gregor, your son of the heart
Nikki’s Wedding

Chapter Summary

Snow, groats, and joy.

Dear Grandma,

Anna and I would be honored if you would agree to serve as Coach for our wedding ceremony. Da says Aunt Laisa’s aunt, as oldest female, pronounced a blessing at their Komarran marriage ceremony. There’s nothing more we’d like than your blessing on our marriage.

Love, Nikki

*****

Dear Cordelia,

I’ve secured a classroom for the children’s use while you and Oliver conduct your meetings on-campus. If you like, I can draft a few students from our education department to get some practical primary teaching experience and give your tutor a bit of a break. Also, one of my former grad students is now a curator at Vorhartung Castle. She’d be glad to conduct a guided, age-appropriate tour.

Regards, Helen Vorthys

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

Thank you for the privilege of escorting your daughters and young Master Jole around Vorhartung Castle today. Their grasp of military and political history easily exceeds that of children twice their ages. Our time running short, Miss Aurelia asked if she could write to me with additional questions. With your permission, I would be honored to maintain a correspondence.

Sincerely, Yelena Vorbelova, Curator

*****

Dear Grandma & Uncle Oliver,

If we promise to get all our schoolwork done, could you PLEASE take us to the Long Lake for the weekend? We had so much fun last time, plus it would probably be easier for Mama if we’re out of her way. Weddings are stupid.

Love, Selig

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I hope you won’t be offended if Alex, Lizzie, and I stay behind this weekend. Alex and I have a big party to attend and Mama could really use Lizzie’s help in the greenhouse. I don’t know why she’s being so stubborn about not hiring a florist for Nikki and Anna’s wedding!

Love, Helen

*****
Dear Cordelia,

I hope you’re not feeling too claustrophobic, snowed in with eight children! This last blizzard has totally paralyzed the capitol. Miles says it’ll be another few days before it’ll be safe to fly back.

Even if we weren’t preparing for a wedding, the older ones and I would probably still be hiding in the greenhouse while Miles continues to prepare treason charges against unsuspecting Lord Greedy and his accomplices. There are times the house seems to shake with his stomping. Aunt Alys says the pacing is a Vorbarra trait, but the cane adds extra emphasis in difficult cases. Sadly, it appears Lord Greedy’s siblings were also involved in the plot. I’m so glad you took our younger ones with you. They don’t know what Da’s working on and seeing him so grouchy really upsets Taurie and Simone. Luckily, these capitol cases are rare, because they take a most unpleasant toll on our family. My father and Violie don’t know it yet, but the children and I will be making a trip to the South Continent just before Gregor pronounces sentence on the conspirators. They don’t need to see traitors dying in the Great Square. No one does, really, but some crimes are just that heinous.

Now for a truth I’ve never admitted to anyone before. I swear there are days I don’t understand how you, Drou, and Aunt Alys survived the Regency with your sanity intact. Thanks to Uncle Vorthys, I knew what uncertainty I was getting when I fell in love with a Lord Auditor, but why does almost every major Imperial crisis hit at the worst possible times for the District or our personal lives? Miles has been too busy to process his own disappointment at missing Ivan’s birthday, but I’m sad they’re spending so little time together before Ivan and Tej must leave. It’s not fair to either of them. Or Gregor, who’s sitting on two other crises.

On a brighter note, Estelle’s van managed to get through before the worst of the storm hit. Everything looks wonderful! Anna will be the center of attention and the rest of us will be very elegant at both the wedding and Kou and Drou’s party. The ensemble Aunt Alys commissioned for Drou is magnificent!

Thanks for being the most amazing mother-in-law on the planet!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Hey Sis –

Home at last! The outgoing accommodations weren’t quite as spacious as the Admiral Vorkosigan, but heaps better than the normal Betan could afford. Mother made it through all the travel beautifully. She’s planning on taking it very easy for the next few weeks. Part of that time will probably be spent considering the Durona life extension treatment. Mark made a very persuasive case.

We don’t say it enough, but Dad would be so, so proud of you, Cordelia. Aral’s fingerprints are all over Barrayar, but so are yours. Not just in the District, but in society, the military, and especially the Imperial family. The Emperor married a woman just like his mother – strong, independent, and accomplished in her own right. And the way you and Oliver continue to improve and develop the planet you discovered, well, I’m proud to be related to both of you.

Loads of love, John

*****

(eyes-only) Mother – Though the weather is clearing, you and Oliver need to stay put for a few more days. Gregor wanted to delay arresting Lord Martin Vorriviere and his siblings until I finished building the case and you were safely off-planet. Unfortunately, our hand has been forced by Count Vorlemaire, who today introduced a bill in Council to build a new base in Count Vorriviere’s territory. Count Vorlemaire being Lord Robert Vorriviere’s brother-in-law, there’s still a chance Count Vorriviere is unaware of his children’s machinations. Count Vorlemaire may also be proved to
be an innocent pawn. But with two Counts about to be taken into custody for questioning, it’s best you and the little ones avoid the capitol and the likely protests. Oh, and General Kanzian is sending more personnel to watch over everyone. Just in case. Love, Miles

*****

Dear Mother,

Depending on who’s speaking, Miles is either the best or the worst thing that has ever happened to the Council of Counts. Or as Kareen jadedly puts it, new day, same debate. If you’re bored of the lake, come to Hassadar and we’ll take you to tour some of our newer ventures. I promise everyone will love the ambrosia factory. We’re up to 31 flavors, all sourced from the District. I was leery of trying to grow cocoa and coconut commercially, but Ekaterin’s greenhouses provide employment and cheaper ingredients than we could source elsewhere.

Love, Mark and Kareen

*****

(copy of handwritten note)

Dear Mark –

Thank you for all the ambrosia. It was a fun day. My favorite was maple ripple.

Love, Nile

*****

(handwritten) Dearest Cordelia,

Do not EVER let me eat so much ambrosia in one sitting again. I should’ve listened when you told me not to finish the children’s portions, but it was all so very good. And now I have the bellyache you warned the children about.

Uncomfortably yours, Oliver

*****

Dear Grandma,

Thank you for a wonderful afternoon of shopping and talking. How did you know I was feeling lonely amidst all the wedding and treason chaos? I’m so proud of Da for seeking justice for all those innocent people, but I’m also angry that stupid, greedy aristocrats had no respect for human lives other than their own. Da has described Count Vorriviere as an honorable, principled man who rules his District fairly and is well-liked by his people. If that’s true, why are his children so corrupt?

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dear Mother,

My job, hell, my life, would be a lot easier if I could answer Lizzie’s question with something as simple as free will, ambition, or greed. Luckily, Ekaterin and I are blessed with other resources. We’ve invited Duv, Dono, and the Professora to tea tomorrow. The six of us will meet in our suite and discuss many of the horrid things Counts’ heirs, real or presumptive, have done without fear of reprisal since Barrayar was first divided into Districts. We’ll try to avoid being too gory, but at 15, our daughter is old enough to understand the correlation between power and corruption. I also can’t think of a better audience for Da’s speech on the difference between honor and reputation. Between you and me, the public accusations of being Gregor’s bloodthirsty hatchet man are getting very tiresome.

Please don’t wait dinner on us.
Love, Miles
*****
(copyright of handwritten note)
Dear Anna –

Thank you for the new bracelets. My sisters and I will keep them forever as a reminder of the honor of being part of your wedding to Nikki.

Love, Aurelia, Nile, and Alani

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan –

I speak for all the Vorvayne brothers in congratulating you on overseeing a very beautiful wedding ceremony. We also thank you for supporting Ekaterin through the tumult of Nikki’s betrothal and marriage. Anna is wonderful and we’re sure she and Nikki will be very happy together.

I’d like to share an observation from our brother Will. Shakespeare asked what was in a name. In your daughter Nile’s case, an awful lot. Watching Nile follow Ekaterin spewing questions about flowers and plants was totally reminiscent of the hours our sister spent with our great aunt. Perhaps you’ve got a budding botanist to complement your future historian or sociologist? I could see Aunt Vorthys hiding smiles at Aurelia’s pointed questions about the South Continent. Aurelia reminds me of Lizzie, interested in anything and everything. She’s absolutely delightful.

Again, thank you for being such a wonderful part of our nephew’s wedding. We look forward to sharing many other such joyful events with you.

Respectfully, Hugo Vorvayne

*****

Dearest Cordelia –

With one glaring exception, our anniversary party was even better than our wedding. Fireworks, food, our daughters, their partners and children, our siblings and friends, we were surrounded by love. Except every time Mark laughed, I turned my head, expecting to see Aral. I can’t believe I never noticed before how hidden under Mark’s galactic accent is his father’s laugh!

Thank you so much for being part of our celebration. So much has changed in five decades, but no matter where you are, our friendship remains steadfast and true.

Love always, Drou and Kou
Dear Tante Cordelia,

I hope you enjoyed the leg to Komarr as much as we did. I don’t usually accompany Dono on short business trips, but couldn’t pass up the opportunity to get you, Oliver, and the children to myself for three whole days!

Last night, Dono asked if I regretted not having more children. Though I once wanted my own small army, no, I don’t. Our three are wonderful. Also, our decisions impact the future of virtually every child in our District. I believe that’s the real reason Lady Donna never had children – she was too busy helping tend everyone else’s. Funny how the fairy tales never mention how much work the heroine takes on when she marries the handsome, rich count!

My sisters tease me about being a homebody. I won’t lie, their dismissive attitude frustrates me. Kareen or Martya will brag about a new factory creating 300 jobs. I wonder if those jobs will go to parents struggling to feed their families or young people leaving their villages, never to return. I worry about the infrastructure, if there’s power, schools, decent transportation, and medical care. Especially medical care. I wish I could say Richars attacking young Donna was an anomaly, but it wasn’t. Sexual assault used to be almost as common in our District as infanticide in the Dendarii Mountains. No more, thanks to widespread education campaigns and District Courts strictly enforcing laws previously ignored. Many a rapist has been horrified to appear before their Count. Dono following Uncle Aral’s example of not shielding our children from future responsibilities has shocked numerous defense attorneys. It’s also led to some awkward meals, but we’ve been having those since the children’s classmates began teasing them about their Da really being a girl. No, Da was a man trapped in a woman’s body. Dono suspects his brother was the opposite and much of Pierre’s madness stemmed from not being able to reconcile his physical yearnings with his responsibilities to sire an heir.

You’ll be pleased to hear the rest of our trip is going very well. The terraforming equipment we purchased should make a huge difference to areas with poor soil.

Much love, Olivia and Dono

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

It’s been two weeks since we transferred your embryos to their replicators and everything is going well. As you can see from the attached vids, both girls are developing right on schedule. As always, you’re welcome to visit any time.

Regards, Dr. Tan, Kayross

*****

Dear Mother,

Do you remember teasing me about sharing multiple vids of my children in their replicators? Pot, meet kettle.

On a more serious note, we’re thrilled to hear that everything is going well and all body parts are present and accounted for. Seeing is believing, after all.
I’ve got great news. All three of your prospective nannies passed the background checks and preliminary fitness courses with flying colors. Martya suggests you give particular consideration to Yana Uszok. MPVK has decided Sergyar is ready for its own ambrosia plant. Permits and such may take some time, but Miss Uszok’s mother is first in line for the managerial job. Knowing her family would be on-planet for at least 5 years would seem to be a good deterrent to homesickness.

Things on the home front are a touch crazier than normal as Alex and Helen prepare to spread their wings. Helen has predictably vetoed Mama and Da accompanying her to the academy. Thankfully, Mark has business in the Hegen Hub and has agreed to sync his meetings with Helen’s reporting date. Kareen’s subtle manipulations never fail to impress. Ekaterin is relieved Helen will have a proper escort and Helen thinks Uncle Mark is much less intimidating than Da. Ha!

Our visit to Komarr will be a bit lengthier than the average university parents. Ekaterin has a garden commission and Gregor has asked me to assess how well the Women’s Auxiliary has been integrated into the Komarr Fleet. He’d like me to look in on the Sergyar Fleet, too. If you and Oliver are willing to keep an eye on Simone and Selig for a few days, I’ll bring them along. Lizzie and Taurie are excited to be moving up in the ranks, as it were, but Selig is grumpy that married Nikki isn’t as available as he used to be and Alex and Dmitri will soon be off to other pursuits. Perhaps if Ekaterin and I divide and conquer for a bit, all four of our younger ones will be ready to face the new school year with enthusiasm.

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia,

In case you haven’t heard, I’m the worst Da and Uncle in the Nexus. The decision to appoint Nikki head of Dmitri’s protection detail has aggrieved my younger two and sent Selig and Simone into a tizzy. The worst part is, although we love the idea, it wasn’t mine or Laisa’s! No, an analyst in Duv’s section examined the security implications of our son attending his mother’s alma mater and concluded that the best option would be to appoint someone Dmitri trusted implicitly. It makes sense. General Kanzian looked a touch pale when advised that it will be left to Nikk’s team to determine what of our son’s university hijinks merit reporting to ImpSec Komarr, but the routine details of Dmitri’s daily life will not be shared. Duv choked when Laisa added that unless poisoning is involved, we particularly do NOT want to be apprised every time our son vomits after a raucous evening with friends.

Ops is scurrying to process Anna’s transfer. The timing may be a touch nepotistic, but not the assignment. Ops Solstice has a major retiring at the end of the year. Learning a female Komarran captain with eight years of HQ experience was available has made the commanding officer very happy. It made Miles happy, too, so bonus points for my Lord Auditor’s campaign for female equality in our military ranks. Helen going to Vervain definitely has tongues wagging. Laisa’s standard reply is she clearly takes after her grandmother, the Betan ship captain. It’s a bit disappointing how many people don’t remember your military past. Of course, some of our children’s peers don’t know about my wife’s doctorate, either. Alas.

Let me close by saying that vids of your gestating daughters seem to have ignited some scientific interest in our daughter. Kareen’s been to several local rep centers and is currently reading up on the subject. Grandma Elizabeth may soon be bombarded with mail on the subject. I hope she won’t mind sharing her expertise.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,
Cadet Vorvayne has been safely delivered to her barracks. You’ll be pleased to hear that Kareen and I offered no constructive criticism at the hand-to-hand combat demonstration. The rest of the tour was very informative and the military technology was top-notch. As a bonus, our business meetings also went very well.

We enjoyed seeing Miles’ entire brood during our layover on Komarr. By now you’ll have seen the growth spurts first hand. It’s a little hard to see Selig and not be bitter for a healthy skeleton and a childhood free from non-stop surgery. That said, I’d willingly endure another thousand surgeries just to maintain the light of innocence in my brother’s children’s eyes. Their every achievement is a victory over the madmen responsible for putting their father and me through so much pain. That, and as Miles loves to remind me, we outlived the bastards.

Kareen and I plan on stopping by for a quick visit on our way to Kibou-daini. The time seems ripe for another expansion of our medical facilities there. Then back to Escobar for a bit before a trip to Beta Colony. Please have your shopping list ready!

Love, Mark & Kareen

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Komarr is excellent! I love my classes, am making friends, and am enjoying relative anonymity as hardworking Alex Vorvayne. Nikki is doing a fabulous job managing security for me and Dmitri. No one seems to suspect that several new students are actually District police seconded to ImpSec.

Nikki, Anna, and I were invited to dinner with Aunt Laisa’s parents last week. Their cook is almost as good as Ma Kosti! Anna is very busy, but loves her new job. Her family doesn’t know where she is – all correspondence is routed through Ops HQ.

We’re planning a trip to Serifosa soon. Nikki wants to meet up with some old school friends. Don’t tell Da or Mama, but we’re also going out to the Waste Heat Station where Nikki’s da died. Nikki says he needs to see it the same way Uncle Ivan visits the spot where his father died and Uncle Mark and Uncle Duv visit the Massacre Shrine. For me, the worst part of Uncle Ivan’s birthday dinner was watching Uncle Mark and Uncle Duv freeze when Anna’s mother said no one there could possibly imagine the pain of being related to one of the Martyrs. I really admire how calmly Aunt Laisa named the three Toscanes lost while her parents sputtered. Were Da there, he probably would have countered by reeling off the names of dozens of relatives vaporized when Vorkosigan Vashnoi was bombed.

Must dash – class in 20 minutes. Enjoy the attached vids and holos!

Love, Alex

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m bruised, achy, exhausted, and extremely happy. The Academy is everything I hoped it would be.

I’m sure you’ve heard my cover was blown the first week, when a picture of Hugo Vorvayne’s meeting with Pol government officials was properly captioned as industrialist Mark Vorkosigan. No harm done, really, beyond far too many questions about Da’s and Granda’s military careers. They’re heroes here, as is anyone connected with protecting the wormhole against the Cetagandans. I’m so glad you took us on a tour of the Prince Serg, Uncle Oliver. Not just for the many personal glimpses of Granda in action. When cadets get nervous before training exercises, it’s very reassuring to learn the Great Admiral never ate before battle!

We all know Da’s much, much taller in the reenactment vids. Some classmates were shocked by
footage from the actual Vervani medals ceremony. Partially Da’s stature, but his age, too. After all, Da was only a few years older than I at the time!

What’s most fascinating to me is how little my classmates know about Barrayaran history beyond the Cetagandan Invasion, Granda serving as Uncle Gregor’s regent, and the bare facts of the Hegen Hub Alliance. I guess normal families don’t discuss galactic politics over dinner? Or maybe it’s indifference to historical events that don’t affect them. Either way, it’s nice to be amidst a crowd that doesn’t automatically see me as Count Vorkosigan’s most-marriageable daughter. And when I graduate top of the class, it’ll be because I earned it.

Love, Helen
*****
Dear Tante Cordelia,

Your younger son may be the death of me! Three weeks ago, Mark announced that Pol and Vervain are thrilled with the prototype butterbugs for their ecosystems. Great, except Mark suggested trying to make a pitch to Aslund when he travels to the Hegen Hub to deliver the completed orders. Apparently there’s something tricky about Aslund’s soil and Enrique has barely left the lab. Not that he’d be much help packing for our visit, but the children would like to see their father before he takes off on an extended business trip. Plus they were looking forward to having Enrique’s undivided attention from Komarr to Sergyar. Instead, we’ll be traveling with my parents and Mark, Kareen, and Enrique will follow in the MPVK fast courier. Kareen promises they’ll arrive in ample time for the twins’ birth. She also swears that everyone will be rested and ready to help with the older ones, so you and Oliver can concentrate on the newborns.

Mama and Da send their love. They’re as excited as we are to hold babies again!

Love and kisses, Martya
*****
(handwritten)Dear Mother,

Aurelia was mean today. She called me stupid and said only you and Aunt Drou are going to Kayross to get the babies. It’s not fair! I want to see the babies born, too!

Nile

That, my love, was a very interesting dinner. Hard not to laugh when Everard said he, too, had packed a bag of baby toys to take to Kayross! I can’t believe we forgot to lay out the exact plan for the replicators to be opened here at home, just as we did with Perrin and Alani.

I thought Miss Uszok acquitted herself well. It’s good to see her getting to know the older ones before the babies arrive. We don’t want a repeat of the rough patches we had when Alani was born.

I really hope Miles wasn’t lying when he said the second set of twins is easier than the first. The six weeks between Perrin and Alani now seems huge in terms of the settling-in period. How does one hold two floppy newborns at once? Love, Me
*****
Dear Grandma,

Thank you SO much for the vid of Granda singing me and Alex to sleep when we were only a few days old. I didn’t realize that the pattern of me on his left and Alex on his right started that young. And where on the South Continent did Granda find baby blankets with parrots to match his shirt? We three look like tourists!
Love, Helen
*****
Dear Mother,

Your birthday gifts are somewhere between Komarr and Sergyar, along with offerings for all of my siblings, born and soon-to-be. Taurie, Selig, and I wanted to send you 85 individually-wrapped presents, but my chatelaine nixed our devious plan. So we’re sending 85 holos instead. Also hundreds of hugs and kisses because you are very, very loved.

Happy Birthday Mother!
Love, Miles and Ekaterin
*****

Dear Cordelia,

I’m so glad you liked the holos! I do have a small request. Miles did mean ALL his siblings. Please make sure to vid Mark’s reaction to his Big Brother present.

Mischievously yours, Ekaterin
*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Congratulations on the new sprogs! They’re very cute little blobs. I’d say they both remind me of Irina as an infant, but my wife says I have no discernment whatsoever because Kiona’s features favor you and Lujayn resembles Simone. She’s probably right. I’m just glad that five of my wife’s seven sisters are different colors. I called Pidge the wrong name once. She hasn’t forgiven me. Neither has the Baronne. Shiv thought her extended lecture on how each of the eleven children was an individual was hilarious. So did I considering that Tej, Rish, and Amiri are the only ones with minds of their own.

As amusing as it was to watch Simon and Shiv spar, in hindsight, I’d have liked to see Shiv try to snow Uncle Aral. My supercilious, proud in-laws still have no idea they’re as much under Gregor’s thumb as the lowest laundry drone on Kyril Island. Star constantly spies on other Jacksonians, fearful of losing control again. She should fear Mark, who on Gregor’s signal could squash her like the bug she is.

There’s a rumor that our ambassador to Escobar is thinking of retiring. Any chance you could drop a word in the right ears that the Vorpatrils would love the post? For all that Simon is recovering well after receiving his new kidneys, Tej and I would really like to be closer to him and Mamere. Proximity to Elena and Amiri would be bonuses. Amiri says Mamere and Simon are both excellent candidates for life extension treatment. Maybe if we’re there, they’d consider it.

I’m enclosing a bunch of vids, including Padma doing dressage and Irina’s solos from her school concert. As a special gift for the twins, Irina put together a collection of lullabies from all over Earth. It’s worth every mark we pay her instructors to hear our angel sing. That’s not just me being a proud Da – even Grandmama Moira grudgingly says she has talent. Who knows? Maybe someday Irina will be the star of the Vorbarr Sultana opera!

Love always, Ivan & Tej
*****

My dearest Cordelia,

Of course you’re tired, you have colicky twins! Don’t you remember how bad Ivan’s first few months were? My mother was so angry that Aral wouldn’t let us leave the Residence until he was certain all of Vordarian’s supporters had been neutralized, but I was so grateful to be with you two.
Aral may not have understood all the hormonal fluctuations, but he shared my grief in a way no other person did.

I’ll never forget a night when Ivan was about a month old. No matter what I tried, he wouldn’t settle. My baby was so loud, you took Gregor to your suite. Aral came trudging upstairs after an 18-hour day to be greeted with screams. Instead of running away like a sensible person, he came to the nursery and told me it was his turn. Decades later, I still don’t know where he found the energy to pace for hours, talking nonstop about Padma and how Ivan and Mamere were perfectly safe because Uncle Aral, Aunt Cordelia, Kou, Drou, and Bothari wouldn’t let anything happen to us. That’s when I realized Bothari’s night duty was as much to protect Ivan and me as it was you and Gregor. And that it would be safe to close my eyes because I wasn’t the only one willing to lay down my life for my fatherless child.

You may be late middle-aged by Betan standards, but your body’s probably in better shape to withstand colic than mine was at 24. That’s not all due to Vordarian. Perhaps if it hadn’t been drilled into me and all my peers that doctors make everything painless and easy, Padma and I wouldn’t have been so scared when I went into labor. Certainly no one ever warned me that I’d bleed for weeks afterward and that eating certain foods would make my baby uncomfortable.

One of the toughest moments as Simon adjusted to life without the chip was the day he asked if he was remembering correctly that I was much closer to my sisters before the Pretendership. He most certainly was. My anger was two-fold. While I was pregnant, they filled my head with horror stories of everything that could go wrong instead of practical, useful information. Their next misstep was to begin badgering me to start looking for another husband when Ivan was barely six months old. After watching Vordarian woo Kareen solely to grab Gregor’s empire, how could I possibly trust anyone not to use my son the same way?

A very tiny part of me envies your second chance at motherhood. Maybe if all our boys had married younger, I’d have given serious consideration to at least one more child. Selfish, I know, considering Aral was over 40 when he found you and Laisa, Ekaterin, and Tej are exactly what our boys needed. And unlike you, I have neither a Betan life expectancy nor the memories of a 40-year marriage to sustain me. I was a proper Vor lady and went to bed alone during the most difficult years of my life. Simon is my reward for my service to the Imperium. These last 20 years with him are the happiest I’ve ever been.

When you’re ready for more visitors, Uncle Simon and Aunt Alys will board a ship to Sergyar to lavish love on the miracles you and Oliver have bought forth. We’ll also change nappies, read stories, and take the children on adventures away from Mother & Da. I promise no weapons will be involved!

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Thank you so much for the vids. Watching the twins roll over put such a smile on my face. Kareen’s, too. She’s really taking an interest in things medical. Not Pavel. Like Alexei, he’s totally focused on all things military. Gregor suspects we might have a general-in-the-making. Please tell Oliver that he can expect to be buried in questions the next time they see one another.

All my love, Laisa

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Of course I’d love you to bring the children for a visit! Though I doubt I can lift anyone other than
the twins, at 9 and 7, Aurelia, Nile, and Everard are certainly old enough to bake with Grandma! I’ll even double check my cookie cutter supply to make sure I’ve got body parts, flowers, and space ships. I wonder if I still have the one shaped like Steady Freddy. Your brother used to enjoy biting his head off.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Sis –

You really shouldn’t have told Mother the Emperor once referred to your entourage as a traveling circus. Accurate, but now that’s what all her friends call it, too!

Not only was it so marvelous to see you, meeting the twins was the final push Mother needed to agree to life extension treatment. Mark and Kareen will be here in a few weeks to escort Mother to Escobar. Mark offered to send doctors to Beta, but Mother prefers to be treated on-site by the team who created the protocols. Depending on how she feels, there’s a possibility of a side trip to Sergyar. Best to warn Oliver the mother-in-law might be coming. Do you ever have the reverse problem? I don’t have the sense that Oliver’s family visits. Is that true?

Love, John & Sarah

Chapter End Notes

Recapping the Second Family:

Cordelia’s oldest daughter is Aurelia. She is three years younger than Miles and Ekaterin’s Selig and Simone. Per canon, two years later come Nile and Everard Xav Jole. I then diverge from canon with the replicator/earthquake accident. Alani Kosigan and Perrin Piotr Jole are three years younger than Nile/Everard. They are followed three years later by the last of the embryos, twins Kiona and Lujayn. All the girls are named for colors. Alani is Hawaiian for orange, Kiona is Native American for brown hills, and Lujayn is Arabic for silver.
Planning a Family Vacation

Dear Cordelia,

This proud Da can’t wait for Dmitri’s return for summer break. Top marks in all his classes for the second year in a row, plus he’s been invited to participate in an invitation-only economic summit on Escobar.

Actually, I’m very proud of Nikki, Dmitri, and Alex. Two school years gone without any problems whatsoever. That’s got to be a record for either a Vorbarra or a Vorkosigan! Especially on Komarr. Laisa and I feel it bodes well for the roles all three will play in supporting Alexei and the Imperium.

Moving on to diplomatic relations, how’d you like a luxury, all-expenses-paid trip to the Hegen Hub? The Vervani ambassador has just floated the idea of a symposium honoring the Alliance. They’ve thoughtfully suggested it take place right before your granddaughter’s graduation. Regrets that Laisa and I have a commitment on Komarr that week was met with an immediate offer to reschedule. Oh, and they’ll be inviting senior officers involved in the battle. So while you’re not specifically named, there’ll be room for you as part of Miles’ or Oliver’s party.

Our Komarr commitment being Dmitri’s and Alex’s college graduation, I’m thinking of this as an old-fashioned family vacation. You, Oliver, and the troops meet us on Komarr, we attend the boys’ graduation, then board the flagship for a leisurely trip to the Hegen Hub for another celebration mixed with some diplomacy. Grandma Elizabeth is of course included in the invitation, as are Uncle John and Aunt Sarah.

You’ll be very proud of me for foisting off a keynote speech on my wife. Doesn’t it seem logical that a proud alumna should honor her son? Should the Vervani Academy seek a speaker, I’m foisting it on Admiral Naismith. My active military career being rather short, I’m debating who should speak when Alexei graduates from the Academy next year. I’m torn between Admiral Jole and Commodore Galeni. I think the troops would enjoy Midsummer festivities, don’t you?

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I don’t know who’s more devious – Da, Uncle Gregor, or Uncle Mark. As you know, the original diplomatic symposium has been significantly expanded. And to celebrate the tariff treaties under consideration, MPVK is sponsoring an evening at the ballet for symposium attendees and their guests. The Minchenko Ballet, to be precise. Yes, my father and uncles have figured out a way for the entire Thorne family, not just Captain Bel, to attend my graduation!

I cannot wait to see Nile’s reaction to null-gee ballet. We saw them on Escobar five years ago and it was as magnificent as Mama and Da promised.

Uncle Mark has promised that I and my friends can talk to the team converting the Municipal Arena into a suitable performance space. It’ll be some tricky engineering to have the center of the arena null-gee, while maintaining normal gravity and total visibility for the attendees. A clear, resilient barrier could certainly have interesting implications for use aboard ship. Not just for brigs, but for cargo bays and the like. It is, after all, easy for an invading party to shoot out vid pick-ups.

It’s been over a month since Iara and I split. We’re still good friends, but she’s just too competitive for a relationship to work. A cadet in the class below ours has been hanging about a lot more since
the break-up. He’s very smart and incredibly handsome. We shall see.

Love, Helen

My love – whether it’s nature or nurture, Miles, Gregor, and Mark are all so undeniably your and Aral’s sons. And for all you say that Helen is most like Miles, the engineering comments remind me of General Piotr bragging about low-tech spying on the Cetas! Let’s not tell the children about the ballet. I’m not sure Nile, Alani, or Perrin will care about the engineering aspects, but Aurelia and Everard will talk our ears off. I think they should sit next to Mark, don’t you? Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It’s official – I’m going to medical school on Escobar! It was a tough decision, but the bottom line is our District needs more galactic-caliber medicine. Aunt Martya doesn’t seem to have much problem finding botanists or biologists for MPVK, but generous compensation isn’t enough to lure enough quality physicians to take Hassadar Hospital to where it should be. Maybe Count Vorkosigan putting his daughter where his mouth is will soften perceptions of Barrayar being a scientific backwater. More realistically, maybe I’ll succeed in luring a few classmates or mentors back to the District. Mama’s unhappy I’ll be far away for many years of training, but ultimately, this Vorkosigan will be returning to her namesake District.

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dear Mother & Oliver,

Would the troops like to visit Escobar when we take Lizzie to start school? As I said to Grandma, we obviously named Lizzie after the right person! I hope this doesn’t mean Taurie will suddenly change directions and decide to be a soldier. Our Taurie would gladly risk her life to save others, but she doesn’t have the heart of a warrior. The few stories Da told of his sister sound like my daughter – the sprite running through the garden seeking fairies. I wish I’d asked more about my lost aunt when Da reminisced about sliding down the banister with his brother or stealing Granda’s swords for fencing practice. Did he say more about her to you?

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Who’d have thought I’d be planning to tour the Nexus at the tender age of 122? I swear, I don’t feel a day over 100 since I began treatment. Mark is lobbying John and Sarah to start treatment now. You and Oliver should consider it, too. I wish I’d had more of the years when I could keep up with Miles, Elli, Mark, and the rest!

Unlike Lily Durona, I don’t want to live forever. Your father’s been waiting a long time for me to join him. But of all people, I know he’ll understand wanting to hang on long enough for our youngest granddaughters to remember their only surviving grandparent. It may sound self-centered, but the volume of correspondence from Aurelia, Nile, and Everard tells me the relationship is valued. I swear, I don’t understand Oliver’s mother. How hard is it to answer your grandsons’ letters?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother,

When will you and Uncle Oliver be home from Gridgrad? Everard and me had a fight. He says Alex and Helen aren’t my cousins. And Aurelia agreed!
Love, Nile
******
My dearest daughter,

After reading your letter several times, I’ve come to understand why you don’t want to consider the life extension treatment for yourself. You’re correct, outliving Aral was very different from the accident that took your father. And if Miles and Gregor are determined not to set the precedent of Barrayar’s leaders retaining power for longer than their natural lifespans, it follows why you fear extending your own.

I continue to feel, however, that Oliver should consider the treatment. Not just for the children’s sake, or yours, but for all the scientific contributions he has yet to make. If Oliver continues to publish at his current rate, external research grants will soon be pouring into Sergyar’s underfunded university system. Aral was a leader in both war and peace. Oliver has the potential to follow that example. We all know that someday, the Imperial fleet will have an Admiral Jole spacecraft. Wouldn’t it be nice if there were a Professor Oliver Jole School of the Sciences, too?

Hug and kiss all my grandchildren and tell them Grandma can’t wait to visit Komarr and the Hegen Hub with them!

Love, Mother
******

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

In our last correspondence, Miss Aurelia requested that I accompany your party to the Hegen Hub Symposium. While I am very flattered, I hesitate to presume that I might be included in a galactic conference based upon a child’s invitation.

Sincerely, Yelena Vorbelova
******

Dear Cordelia –

For variety, today I’m the worst husband in the Imperium. Laisa is very annoyed that Alexei won’t be attending his brother’s graduation. Her head understands why every male with credible claim to the camp stool can’t simultaneously be off-planet, but her mother’s heart resents not having all her children together on such an auspicious day. Plus the woman who was giving speeches all over the Nexus before I met her is nervous about a simple commencement address!

I briefly considered recalling Ivan to Barrayar while the Vorbarras and Vorkosigans go a-sailing, but it might raise other issues. I don’t want the Cetas getting any ideas about making trouble while we’re far away. I also don’t want the Escobaran thinking we’re not fully committed to the diplomatic relationship. Ambassador and Lady Vorpatril are doing a fantastic job keeping everything running smoothly. Their predecessors were excellent diplomats, but administration was clearly not their forte. If the rest of the diplomatic corps were as efficient as Ivan and Tej, ImpSec and Ops could both reduce their overall budgets substantially!

Miss Vorbelova is welcome to join our traveling circus. Given the artifacts and documents that team routinely handles, her security clearance is higher than most of your household staff. Her movements may be somewhat restricted aboard ship, but no more so than the other tutors, nannies, and historians joining us.

Love, Gregor & beautiful, disgruntled Laisa
******

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
Lots to cover. First, the security stuff. For a variety of reasons, we think it best that none of the children other than Aurelia, Nile, and Everard do any exploring on Komarr. If you don’t want them staying aboard ship, the ultra-secure Toscane vacation estate on the far outskirts of Solstice is available. I know this will disappoint Perrin and Alani, but the freedom of Port Nightingale and the reverence in which you’re held on Sergyar is so very different from the bustle and danger of Solstice. There will, as always, be some protests while the Emperor is on-planet. Lord Auditor Vorkosigan also presents his own set of security challenges, especially in a crowded event like a graduation. So really, the fewer children, the better.

Now to work. With Prince Dmitri opting to continue his studies in London, Anna and I are being reassigned. I will not be going to Earth. No, my new assignment is personal security for the Viceroy of Sergyar. Not only that, Anna’s gotten a plum spot in Ops-Gridgrad. The only bad part is we’ll be separated for several months. Anna’s being transferred about six weeks before my charges graduate. Mama is disappointed Anna won’t be joining our family vacation. So are my sisters. Selig expects me to spend all my free time running war sims with him and Da.

Anna will be bringing our future children with her to Sergyar. Due to the rarity of Vorzohn’s Dystrophy, we used the clinic here to screen our gametes. All necessary gene-cleaning has been done and healthy embryos are on ice. We’ve contacted the rep center in Gridgrad and they’ll handle everything when Anna arrives.

With reliable staff being at a premium on Sergyar, we’ll definitely need help finding childcare. Anna will live on-base for several months, but our goal is to find a house near the viceregal palace with space for a live-in nanny. And yes, we can afford it – we’ve been living very frugally so we’d be prepared for whatever came next.

Love, Nikki & Anna

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Though disappointed Nikki and Anna aren’t returning with Alex, I’m thrilled they’ve both gotten magnificent promotions. Miles also pointed out that being attached to the viceroy’s staff means the Imperium will pay for an annual visit home.

You can probably expect to hear from Taurie in the near term. She’s a bit anxious right now. Not only does she really miss Lizzie, she’s got it into her head that she should already know what she wants to be when she grows up. Miles suggested a year on Beta Colony, but she says the tunnels are too claustrophobic. Other suggestions like changing schools, adjusting her course load, or shadowing her parents when we handle District business have all been rejected.

I’m not sure if the main problem is Barrayar or her siblings. The downside of attending a private school with excellent security is there’s very little diversity in the student population. Far too many of Taurie’s classmates are obsessed with making good marriages after graduation. And of our four older children, Helen’s the only one who’s actually studying what they claimed to want at 15. Yes, Nikki attended the Academy, but not as a pilot, Alex didn’t, and until the acceptances were all in, Lizzie didn’t know which science she’d pursue.

I always expected middle child syndrome to hit when Alex and Helen were teens, not when the middle child was the oldest left at home.

As always, all wisdom is much appreciated.
Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma,
Can I come live with you?

I swear, the next girl asking to be introduced to Alexei, Dmitri, Alex, or any other count’s heir will be knocked unconscious. Do they really think any of them is interested in giggling schoolgirls with curfews?

Aunt Vorthys says there are waves of students, that some class years are very academic and others aren’t. I seem to be trapped with a bunch of idiots. Most are very bright, but they don’t care about ANYTHING other than shopping and boys. Teachers are mentioning university less and less because very few seem interested.

I feel like I’m living a double life. Here’s Da working himself to death trying to expand opportunities for everyone, especially smart women, and at school, I’m surrounded by dozens of smart, affluent girls obsessed with selling themselves for a title. Do you know how exhausting it is to flip from Time of Isolation thinking to discussing Mama’s work on other planets or pending Council legislation?

I know I sound whiny, but right now, I don’t feel there’s much for me on Barrayar. Most girls I know in the District are as dopey as my classmates. Or worse, they want to use me to get jobs for relatives or influence Da in some way. I’m sick of it.

HELP!
Love, Taurie

*****

Dear Mother,

You’re right, Escobar is a much better option than Sergyar. Taurie was shocked when we explained that a Gridgrad school isn’t commutable from Port Nightingale. And that living with Nikki and Anna isn’t an option because their home won’t have round-the-clock security like yours or ours, even if they did have room for her.

Ivan and Tej have invited Taurie to live with them and attend Padma and Irina’s school. La Escuela Internacional sounds wonderful, but Ekaterin and I feel the boarding option is preferable, at least initially. Study groups and such may help get our oh-so-bright daughter back on track academically. Plus we don’t want to drop her in the middle of the diplomatic whirl when she’s trying to escape Vor obligations and pressure at home. If she wants to get away from school, she can always get a weekend pass. Lizzie and her friends seem to rotate cadging meals from Elena, Ivan, Mark, and the Duronas. Taurie will be free to do the same.

Now I’m going to be a meddling son. It sounds like there’s a geographic educational gap that you and Oliver will need to address. Tutors are all well and good, but I suspect my younger siblings will need the stimulation of strongly academic classmates just as much as I did. If this works out, Taurie may be but the first of the young Vorkosigan woman to spread their wings outside the Empire.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

I really wish Ekaterin and Miles had mentioned Taurie’s struggles sooner. Sadly, I’ve been in her shoes. It’s hard to see value in yourself when your family is rushing around fulfilling their destiny and you don’t yet know what yours is.

Ivan Xav often says my public persona matches what he remembers of yours during his childhood. While I officially don’t do much beyond raising our children and hosting events, behind the scenes, I’m managing our personal portfolio, overseeing most of the embassy’s spending, and averting
diplomatic incidents with surprising frequency. I suspect it all sounds familiar, albeit on a much smaller scale than you were handling. Or Laisa. Do all those giggling girls think being an empress or countess carries no responsibility?

What we like best about La Escuela is the balance. Outside interests like Irina’s singing and Padma’s riding are encouraged, but not at the expense of their studies. There are plenty of clubs and planned activities, with more added as interest dictates. Irina started an Italian club to help learn arias. If Taurie wants to start a gardening club or a poetry society, I’m sure she’ll find willing members.

Ivan Xav says to mention we bought another horse. Lizzie rides her often; Taurie will be welcome to join her uncle on his meanderings. Riding’s not as popular as it is on Earth, but enough people do it that Ambassador Vorpatril’s not the oddity he’d be on places like the Whole.

Love, Tej & Ivan Xav

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Words can’t really express how excited we are to welcome another of Miles’ daughters next term. And not just because Count Vorkosigan has just sworn in his first armswoman. I do wonder how my father would’ve reacted to a sister-in-arms. I suspect his respect for Drou would be warring with his sense of right and proper.

Once Taurie is settled, we want you to bring the troops for a visit. Yes, Miles and I are trying to force your hand a bit, but we don’t want your girls to experience the frustration Taurie and I faced, of not fitting in with our peers’ narrow worldview. Baz and I chose to settle here because Escobar is what Sergyar will likely be in a century or two – a planet with sound infrastructure whose citizens are valued for their own achievements, not accidents of birth. Isn’t democracy wonderful?

We expect to see lots of vids of the graduation ceremonies. Miles tried convincing us to come, but I put my military service behind me a long time ago. No regrets, either. It’s rather nice to go to work without worrying about being shot at!

Love always, Elena and Baz
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver –

Anna’s only been gone for 10 days and I miss her terribly! I hope you’re taking good care of my wife. Ops had her working almost to the minute she caught her shuttle. And with me drowning in security plans for graduation, we certainly didn’t see each other as much as we’d have liked. Alex has no sympathy, reminding me how often Da disappears on little-to-no notice. Dmitri’s no better, countering there are days when Uncle Gregor doesn’t make it back his quarters other than to shower and change clothes. I really hate it when the youngsters are right!

Fair warning, part of our travel time to the Hegen Hub will be spent deciphering stacks of information about Sergyar Security. I can’t decide if the major I’m replacing doesn’t realize I’ve been all over Gridgrad or if they’ve totally managed to cock up procedures since you stepped down. Mama will NOT be happy when she learns that part of her exquisite garden was destroyed installing new vid pick-ups.

Love, Nikki

My marks are on cock up. Viceroy Vorthorpe is very good at his job, but his wife’s anxiety has likely allowed ImpSec to run wild. Aral would be so angry at the waste of money that could better be budgeted elsewhere. Love, Me

*****

Hey Sis -

We’re all packed and ready to begin what Johnny and Lina have dubbed ‘Grandma’s Galactic Adventures.’ Mother can’t wait to reach Escobar and hug Lizzie! The difference between my mother and my wife – Sarah doesn’t like long stretches aboard ship, while Mother plans to fill almost every waking moment with her offspring! I’m in the middle. I think you got most of Father’s wanderlust. I enjoy the journeys, but I also like sleeping in a bed that’s not moving.

See you soon! Love, John & Sarah

*****

Dear Mother –

There is no way in hell I’m spending weeks trapped on a spaceship with Gregor and Laisa. Do you have any idea how much more work they’d foist on us? Kareen says yes, you do, but that’s not my point. Besides, we have meetings scheduled on either side of the symposium. We’ll meet on Komarr, let everyone gawk at me and Miles, then take our ship ahead of you to Vervain. I promise you’ll see plenty of us.

Love, Mark and Kareen

My love, he has a point. After all the time and money Mark has invested in this symposium, he doesn’t need to be saddled with the mop up. Protests to the contrary, Miles enjoys it. Mark doesn’t.

Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia –

You may add two to the flying circus. With Kou needing some complicated nerve repairs, Delia and Duv are staying on Komarr and I’ll be assisting Laisa in hosting the many diplomatic events on the Hegen Hub itinerary. Simon claims he’ll be amusing himself with the children, but I suspect he’ll sit
in on a meeting or twenty.

Much love, Alys & Simon

*****

Dear Grandma & Uncle Oliver –

Attached is my school report on the Solstice Massacre. Da said it’s really good and you should read it before we go to the Shrine. Mama had to order new House uniforms for the trip because I grew again. Aunt Laisa says I have to stop growing because everybody except Da and Uncle Mark are way taller than her. It’s silly.

Love, Selig

*****

Dear Mother & Oliver –

I don’t care that his teacher hated our son’s report. Selig invested a lot of effort researching individual Martyrs. Duv and I both learned from a child’s paper. And hopefully, our military-mad son has taken the first step to understanding that every name on a war memorial represents a unique life snuffed out.

Love, Admiral Miles Naismith (Ret.)

My love, this is the type of father I aspire to be. I had no idea how to prepare child-ren for an official ceremony with such sinister undertones. Now I do. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother –

Is it rude to say that except for Aunt Laisa’s family, I really don’t like Komarr? People were so rude to Miles and Uncle Gregor. And the domes are weird. All the outside shouldn’t be the same. Even Grandma said it was boring not to see any wind or sandstorms.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Thanks for the vid of Alex’s graduation. I loved seeing Aunt Laisa dressed as Dr. Toscane Vorbarra. Don’t repeat this, but academic robes don’t flatter her. They don’t really flatter anybody, though. I’m so glad we get to wear uniforms to ours!

My favorite part of her speech was when the camera panned to Uncle Gregor. He looked so happy and proud. For a moment, the Nexus saw the real Gregor Vorbarra, not his public statesman façade.

Tegid is very nervous. For some reason, me mentioning that Da can only order him executed if he’s on Imperial soil was not reassuring. I was only trying to forewarn him before Nikki or Alex played the ‘Da speaks in the Emperor’s Voice’ card. You know they will. They’ve been waiting YEARS to torment my boyfriend!

On a more serious note, I have no idea where our relationship is going. We plan to try the long-distance thing for a while, and see where we stand when I’m through training on Barrayar and Tegid graduates next year. It might work. We’ll see.

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –
Mama asked me to relay that Da is doing extremely well post-surgery. She’s exhausted from sleeping at the hospital instead of the comfy bed in the embassy. We’re doing some sightseeing. The children loved seeing where their Da went to school and eating ice cream in his favorite park. We’re having dinner with a cousin on Duv’s mother’s side tomorrow. She’s promised to bring some family pictures.

Love you! Delia & Duv

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –

It’s a good thing we came ahead. The main arena’s ready for the ballet. Dressing rooms and hallways to and from the performing area aren’t. Mark is LIVID.

On the positive side, everything is progressing well for the actual symposium. Oh, and Helen’s boyfriend is very nice. Tegid looked a bit skeptical when Mark introduced me as his muscle, so when I shook his hand, I flipped him on his back. I’m not sure who laughed harder, Mark or Helen. Mark also behaved himself and didn’t take on a 6’ tall cadet. We’ll save that aggression for the contractors.

Love & kisses, Kareen & Mark

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I just wanted to thank you for all the time you’re spending helping Nikki prepare for his new assignment. He’s so nervous about upsetting his new bosses. He also doesn’t believe Miles that when it comes to security matters, a mere captain can at times outrank a viceroy.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

(handwritten)What a marvelous day, my love! I could feel Aral beaming throughout, proud of Helen and another Vorkosigan leading the charge to change Barrayar for the better. And the huge family photo, full of uniforms and smiles and love, probably has no peer since before the Cetas destroyed Vorkosigan Vashnoi. I recall Count Piotr reminiscing once about his oldest brother’s wedding. He said you couldn’t make a misstep on the dance floor without touching an aunt or cousin. The ghosts in his eyes were chilling. In that moment, I saw why his troops and liege people so loved the ornery old goat you and Aral could never please. Even if he’d lived to see all nine of his grandchildren, it would never be enough to fill that cavernous hole in Count Piotr’s heart. Love, Oliver

*****

Dear Mother–

Of course Aurelia and Everard want to see the battle reenactment instead of the zoo! I told you they would! Virtually all the inappropriate bits were omitted in the planning, so no worries there. Alex and Nikki can meet you all at the shuttlepad and escort the children to the conference center.

You were wise to remain on board the Admiral Vorkosigan. The hotel is never quiet – I’ve never seen so many drunken, corpulent admirals! – and tracking Lujayn and Kiona would be a nightmare. Elli and Bel are disappointed I’m not wearing a Dendarii uniform for the entire symposium. Not only do I need to be Count Vorkosigan, Grandma’s right, I can’t maintain a Betan persona the way I used to.

I passed Mark in a hallway yesterday. The gleam in his eye confirmed things are going well on the economic side. If tomorrow goes as expected, your sons will be wearing the same satisfied expressions at Gregor and Laisa’s reception. Wait until you see the embassy gardens. They’re some of Ekaterin’s best work yet!
Wearily yours, Captain Miles Vorkosigan (Ret.)

*****

Dearest Cordelia –

Yes, I totally agree with Miles that Everard and Aurelia should join us tomorrow. They’re both ready to see exactly why they’re riding in a ship named for Aral. And yes, I’m ready to handle the aftermath. I’m not sure about poor Miss Vorbelova. Duv would be the first to say that his military experience made him a much better historian. I doubt Miss Vorbelova has slept since we left the ship. I may not be a professor of history, but I can certainly tell when a student’s understanding has passed a new threshold. It’s fun to watch.

Love, Oliver

P.S. I am neither drunken nor corpulent, thank you! Though I’m certainly one of the few retired senior officers other than Simon and Miles whose middle hasn’t expanded significantly since their service days. And before we forget to mention it, Simon and Helen took out a clumsy Ceta spy yesterday. The Vervani military is a tad embarrassed not to have noticed they’d been infiltrated. No harm done. OPJ

*****

Dear Cordelia –

Since I barely saw you tonight and I’m determined to wait up for my husband, may I brag about your grandchildren? Miles, Oliver, and Gregor all agree Alex was outstanding playing Aral in the reenactment. Nikki and Helen will have to enjoy the vids because both were busy protecting their Empress, cousins, and baby brother. Selig has been absolutely outstanding about following orders without question or complaint. He even attended Uncle Mark’s trade presentation and asked intelligent questions! The ambassador’s wife says her children could learn from mine when it comes to manners and deportment. Sadly, she’s correct. Lizzie, Taurie, and Simone have been polite and gracious through every engagement on our diplomatic calendar, no matter how dull or condescending the company.

Princess Kareen charms everyone she meets. All four girls were outstanding at yesterday’s obligatory visit to a children’s hospital. Our guides didn’t expect complex science questions from KareenVB and Lizzie. Or that Simone and Taurie expected to play with the sick children as they do at Hassadar Hospital. The toys and games we distributed were a great success. It’s entirely their victory because Gregor and Laisa delegated choosing the gifts to the ones presenting them.

It’s a good thing Aunt Alys is here because even with all the advance planning, the embassy was ill-prepared for tonight’s reception. Let’s just say this ambassador’s wife is no Tej. Maybe it’s better I was standing in for Laisa on many diplomatic visits because nothing frustrates her more than visible incompetence. Seeing it has eliminated my last doubt that Taurie needs different classmates.

Mark has promised that he and Kareen will take sleeptimers tonight so nobody falls asleep during the ballet. It’s going to be magnificent!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

(handwritten)Dear Mother –

We want to take dance lessons when we get home. Captain Thorne says it’s great exercise and every new world needs the arts. Did you know one of the original settlers of Graf Station was a music teacher?

Love, Nile & Alani
Dear Tante Cordelia,

Not to worry, we’ll find a dance teacher. Do you care what nationality? I seem to remember that a friend of Lady Vorlynkin is a dance instructor on Kibou-daini. Are there enough children in Port Nightingale to support a small studio? That might be a more attractive emigration option than becoming a private tutor.

Love and kisses, Kareen & Mark

*****

Dear Mother,

Ekaterin is still reeling from the news that we’re about to become grandparents! Though the first year will be a blur, I think they’re wise to have twins when they know they’ll be in one place, close to family, for the first few years. Plus the twins will always have each other as their parents’ careers take them all over the Empire.

I wonder if Taurie would’ve done better as a twin, but sticking to our original plan of three sets of twins just wasn’t physically feasible. It’s cruelly ironic that restoring a thousand Ceta babies to their parents fundamentally changed the Vorkosigan and Thorne families. I’d have liked my children to have a herm friend as well as quaddie ones. I certainly never imagined that Bel and I would both need canes well before the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Hegen Hub!

Wow, I’m getting maudlin and I haven’t even had any maple mead! Is this what impending grandparenthood does?

Love, your delighted son & daughter-in-law

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

I’m pleased to inform you that Miss Yoko Tamika’s immigration application has been approved. It is our hope that as her studio flourishes, she may consider expanding to other cities.

Sincerely, Viceroy Vorthorpe

*****

Dear Mother,

Did you know that contraceptive implants aren’t always 100% effective? Yes, that means exactly what you think it does. The fetus was transferred to a replicator last week. Kareen has bounced back quickly from the surgery. The entire Durona staff is happily monitoring your healthy granddaughter’s progress.

We’d love you, Oliver, and the troops to be here when we crack the bottle. Let’s make this a birthday to remember!

Love, Mark & Kareen

*****

Dearest Cordelia,
Who could have guessed when Princess Kareen introduced us that we’d one day share a grandchild? Needless to say, Kou and I are thrilled! Kareen has invited us to be there when our granddaughter is born. May I cry on your shoulder?

Love, Drou & Kou

Dear Mother,

Isn’t it nice that my grandchildren will have a playmate? I’m glad Mark shared the news by letter because our reactions weren’t what one might’ve wished. My wife and I laughed for over an hour. My drinks session with Duv and Dono was similarly irreverent. We all look forward to Mr. Plans-Everything learning to love chaos.

Love, your evil son & his equally evil cohorts

Dear Sis –

Okay, I take back everything I said about Mark never being a parent. He made a quick stop here the other day and he was glowing as he showed off the baby vids. I’ll let him tell you the name they’ve chosen, but it’s absolutely beautiful.

Love, John & Sarah

Dear Grandma,

This is probably rude, but are you done having children? I ask because that would truly drive Anna over the edge. She’s a bit befuddled that after being together for over 20 years, Uncle Mark and Aunt Kareen are having a baby weeks after ours. I think it’s hilarious. Anna probably would too, if her stupid brother hadn’t told their parents about our babies. Idiot also told them we’re in Gridgrad. I’ve asked that their passports be flagged because Madame Chaly is telling everyone she knows that Anna’s invited her to move to Sergyar and take care of the babies.

Let us know the next time you’ll be in Gridgrad. You have permission to visit the rep center whenever, but we’d like you to see a model of the house we’re building.

Love, Nikki and Anna

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Did Gregor tell you what he sent to Mark and Kareen in the diplomatic pouch as a congratulations-on-your-baby gift? A bag of groats! Vid is attached of them opening the box. I haven’t laughed so hard in years.

Love, Ivan

Dear Mother,

I remember Da telling stories of future counts arriving shortly after their parents’ marriage. Despite my not being a count, Kareen and I are about to be that cliché. Our plan is to wed in the late morning, host a lavish lunch, then go to the clinic and welcome Lady Mila Elizabeth Vorkosigan. Yes, that’s correct. In acknowledgment of my royal grandmother and services to the Imperium, Gregor is gifting me the hereditary title of Lord Vorkosigan as a wedding present. Should she choose, Lady Mila may pass the title to her firstborn regardless of gender. I’m not sure it will mean much to a child on Escobar, but as Laisa said, it’s nice to have options.
Love, Mark & soon-to-be Lady Kareen

****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

On behalf of my husband and sisters, we’d love to accept your invitation to visit on our way home from Escobar. We’ll be leaving Duv, Enrique, and all the children behind. I believe Miles and Ekaterin are planning to do the same. Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon are staying behind, too. Delia doesn’t think her new deputy is quite ready to handle everything. You did hear Delia fired several members of her staff for loafing while she and Duv were on Komarr, right? In retrospect, I should’ve been the one to stay with Da for his surgery, but with Duv needing to be part of the State Visit part of the trip, it seemed more logical for Delia to go.

My husband raised an interesting point. Our trip to Kareen’s wedding will be Team Koudelka’s first joint trip off-planet. Will Barrayar survive without us?

Much love, Olivia and Dono

****

Dear Cordelia,

Of course I’ll be attending Mark’s wedding. What a silly question! Escobar is such an easy trip, especially by fast courier.

As much as it’s not in my self-interest, I think you and Oliver should leave the little ones home. It’s going to be a long, exciting day. Best to not have your attention divided. And if you have room for one little old lady, I think I’m up to accompanying you back to Sergyar afterwards.

Love, Mother

****

Dear Grandma,

Why are Mama and Da being so mean about not letting us come with them to see all the babies? Alex promises we’ll have fun while they’re away, but it’s not fair that they get to go on vacation and we have to stay home and go to school!

Love, Simone

****

Dear Mother,

As you predicted, the whining continued to the moment we left for the shuttleport. We’ve got three arsmen with us, which is rather a surplus when traveling by military courier. I’m hoping Orlov likes Sergyar because I’m thinking of seconding him to you and the girls. He’s a 20-year man, his wife is a nurse, and their only child is very interested in marine biology.

Most of our baggage will follow with Team Koudelka. The yacht I borrowed from Lord Auditor Vorgustafson’s brother is very spacious and almost as well armed as a military vessel. Our journey to Escobar should be very pleasant. And yes, I have a full physical booked at the Durona clinic. Their neural specialists love exploring my brain! My last note from Raven Durona said they’ve been seeing some seizure syndrome in Kibou-daini revivals, so the more information they can gather, the better we can all be treated. Can’t argue with that.

I’m not looking forward to the business part of my trip to Gridgrad. While you and Ekaterin are helping change diapers, I’ll be following up issues Nikki raised about overtime and such. Intelligence doesn’t seem to support the oversized security budget. Not when there’s a huge military base nearby and what little kidnapping on-planet is mostly tied to custody disputes or elopements. It seems
Vicereine Vorthorpe’s highly successful stint at the Eta Ceta embassy may have left her with an overdeveloped fear of the external environment. We shall see.

I’d ask if you and Oliver are ready to become great-grandparents, but I think we all know the answer! Thank you both for continuing to show your newest grand-daughter what unconditional love and support look like. Nikki says Anna was shocked he didn’t simply rubber-stamp Ekaterin’s garden plans without soliciting her input. I can’t imagine being so emotionally downtrodden that I’d allow plants I don’t like in my front garden, yet it seems that’s the story of Anna’s childhood – Mama’s wants trump everyone else’s. Ekaterin says it’s Tien all over again.

I look forward to a few days of sailing and playing with my sibs before the bottles are uncorked. I’m expecting some interrogation, too. Aurelia doesn’t understand how anyone could’ve seen me and Da together and not known we were related. Maybe the make-up people should’ve darkened my hair when they whitened Alex’s?

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

The Vorsoisson-Chaly family is absolutely beautiful! Thank you for augmenting the initial vids from Nikki. I’m very glad you supported Ekaterin when she insisted that Daniel and Dyana be retested for Vorzohn’s Dystrophy. I’d probably have done the same after the nightmare Nikki’s father put them through.

In case Miles hasn’t mentioned it – we understand he’s very busy in Gridgrad! – Anna’s parents were arrested trying to leave Komarr under aliases. Simon enjoyed watching the interrogation footage Duv sent over. I hope the Chalys enjoy Equinox because they’re never leaving. That decision came straight from Gregor. He feels these people present a credible risk both to Laisa’s family and to Princess Kareen when she enters Solstice University next term. Simon and Duv agree.

I’m pleased to hear Miss Tamika’s studio is doing well. Not only is vid of the children dancing totally adorable, the grace of movement they’re learning will serve your girls well later on. Do you remember Aral and Simon praising how much intelligence I gathered on the dance floor? Princess Kareen is highly adept at subtly coaxing young men to reveal more than they should. Yes, the swarm of devious tricksters wooing her purse has begun. Gregor was decidedly uncomfortable at the crowds his daughter drew at the Winterfair Ball. At least until Cadet Vorkosigan reminded him that his little girl has military-grade training in hand-to-hand combat!

Though they may complain otherwise, Selig and Simone are just fine. They visit the Residence frequently and have spent several nights with us. They’ve also visited Lord Auditor Vorthys and the Professora.

Team Koudelka should almost be to Sergyar by now. We look forward to vids of the many happy events ahead!

Much love, Alys & Simon

*****

Dear Grandma,

Uncle Ivan says you and Uncle Oliver have agreed to speak at our school about biology on Sergyar. Please include slides of exploding radials and hexapeds!

Love, Taurie

*****
Dear Mother,

It’s a good thing I’m scheduled to get my head examined because I was sure I’d mentioned the Chalys’ arrest! Can I blame it on jump lag, work stress, and the exhilaration of acquiring a new title? I haven’t made anyone cry in a long while, so Vicereine Vorthorpe’s floods of tears about the dangers they face were decidedly uncomfortable. The Viceroy and I had a long talk afterwards and he agrees it’s time for the Emperor to start looking for a replacement. That will screw up succession planning, considering Gregor wanted his favored candidate to gain another five or so years of diplomatic experience before taking the reins.

I hope you’re ready to rendezvous in orbit tomorrow. Kou says they’re enjoying the voyage and looking forward to four more passengers.

Love, Granda Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia,

I don’t suppose I could cajole you or Oliver to sign on for a short stint as Viceroy? I’m only half joking. I’m very disappointed to be looking for a new viceroy less than three years after sending the Vorthorpes to Gridgrad. I’d appreciate any ideas you might have. Duv and Vorbingham on the Sergyar desk both recommend a civilian, but with the waves of diplomatic retirements over the last decade, the potential pool is shallower than I’d like. Any thoughts?

Love, Gregor

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

On behalf of the entire school, we’d like to express our appreciation for your excellent presentation. You and Professor Jole painted such an interesting picture, several students have approached our Science department asking if we could add a Sergyar program to our list of summer academic excursions. As you can see from the enclosed brochure, our rotating summer curriculum includes many excursions to other worlds, so visiting a neighboring planet would not be considered unusual. Our goal is always a mix of tourism, glimpses behind the scenes, and hands-on learning. Tailoring our programs often requires far more preparation and permits than a simple tour, which is why I’m hoping to impose on you for a few contacts so we could begin to assess the viability of such a program.

Sincerely yours, Señor Rodrigo Ameida, Headmaster, La Escuela Internacional

(handwritten) My love, it’s an excellent idea. There’s so much to explore and our grad students need experience leading field expeditions. If Aurelia wants to tag along, I’m certain she could hold her own against secondary students! Love, Oliver

*****

Dear Grandma,

While the wedding vids were great, you, Grandma Elizabeth, and Aunt Drou holding hands while they opened my cousin’s replicator has got to be one of the best holos I’ve ever seen! And that strawberry blonde fuzz on Mila’s head is so precious!

Things here are pretty good. Now that it’s drawing to a close, I can say that while there were some rough patches, I and my female peers in the first integrated infantry training class have more than held our own. It absolutely helps to be tall when slogging through winter maneuvers with kilos of equipment, though. One girl about Aunt Laisa’s height was getting very discouraged until I shared some of Da’s early experiences. She’s getting her own squad upon graduation.
As for me, Ensign Vorkosigan will be a junior navigator on one of commercial escort conveys running between Komarr and the Hegen Hub. Tegid is delighted, because he’s being assigned to the largest cargo transshipment station. We should see each other frequently enough to calm the whispers that any woman wanting to serve Barrayar must be a lesbian. The outdated sexual attitudes are so tiresome!

Love, Helen

Chapter End Notes

The next generation begins roughly three years after Cordelia's youngest daughters, Kiona and Lujayn are born. Nikki and Anna's twins, Daniel and Dyana, are Cordelia's first great-grandchildren. To make things more complicated, Mark and Kareen's Mila Elizabeth is Daniel and Dyana's contemporary, yet Mila is a full generation younger than than her cousins, Miles' and Ekaterin's brood.
Ivan & Tej

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Your suggestion of Feodor Vorgustafson was excellent for Sergyar, if not my workload. Lord Feodor has done a stellar job in several tricky assignments as Ninth Auditor. My proud colleague jokes that perhaps someday, my younger brother will follow in his brother’s footsteps.

In other news, Tej’s grandmother passed yesterday. I suspect there’ll be huge sighs of relief in the Celestial Garden when it becomes public knowledge. As far as we know, Moira was the last living member of the Cetagandan invasion force. Or as Udine calls it, the Ninth Satrapy. Those insufferable women should be grateful Bararray took Komarr. If not, Udine wouldn’t have met Shiv and become a baronne.

Ensign Vorkosigan has promised to send you copies of her formal portrait, dual swords and all. I must confess to scaring more than a few base officials when they received official notice that I’d be Gregor’s representative for the oathtaking. It was inspiring and humbling to welcome the next Vorkosigan into their Emperors’ service. Unsettling, too, to acknowledge that my little girl is officially all grown up.

Love, Helen’s proud Da
****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I knew I was right to be suspicious when Gregor requested I escort Taurie home for summer break! Leaving Tej and the sprogs was also wise because the fleet’s new fast couriers are drastically cutting the sailing time between jumps. My family would’ve been miserable.

I have served my Emperor faithfully for over 36 years; my wife, over 20. Our reward for this dedication is a posting to the 8th circle of hell. Not Jackson’s Whole, which would be the 9th circle. No, our Emperor is sending us to Eta Ceta IV.

I have no doubt that Tej will be tremendous, once she gets over the shock of leaving Padma and Irina behind. Even if they weren’t doing magnificently in school, there’s no way I’d subject them to guaranteed bullying. The few Ceta children they’ve met so far are almost as condescending and nasty as certain of my in-laws.

My in-laws are another reason I’m dreading the post. Before Escobar, no one but the Jewels deigned to visit. The Baron and Baronne have also never left the Whole together to visit their beloved Amiri. But guess who wanted her ashes scattered on Rho Ceta? And guess who’ll postpone the trip as soon as they hear Tej and I will soon have a spacious embassy capable of housing every blasted one of them?

My letter to Tej is going out with this one. Don’t be surprised if she contacts you for advice.

Love, Ambassador and Lady Vorpatril

Does this assignment mean what I think it does? Is Gregor trying to toughen up Ivan and Tej for a potential posting to Chaos Colony? Other than the obnoxious in-laws, it sounds delightful. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Ivan Xav and I have agreed not to tell the children about the new assignment until we can do it
together. They know something’s in the works, but are being as patient as possible until their Da returns.

It took several days for Ivan Xav’s words to sink in. He’s right – Padma and Irina can’t possibly attend school on Eta Ceta. Not when every word, every movement, every gesture will be judged in the worst possible light. We chose a diplomatic career in part so our children would never know the emotional abuse I endured from Erik, Pidge, and Star. It would be supremely unfair to risk the confidence and self-esteem we’ve so carefully nurtured through four assignments of growing complexity. But is separation the best decision for our family?

Rationally, I know Padma and Irina would be safe and happy as boarding students on Escobar. All the arguments we gave Miles and Ekaterin about sending Taurie here remain true, with the added benefit that our children have many friends. Amiri and his family love them madly. Kareen’s decision to remain on-planet for Mila’s first year is also a plus. Taurie and Lizzie have rooms at what Ivan Xav has sarcastically dubbed Vorkosigan Pribyl. I’m sure Padma and Irina would, too.

Ivan Xav’s successor is one of The Gregor’s Academy classmates. We’ve met Ambassador and Lady Voranthis many times. I’d trust with them anyone’s children but mine. How can I, the overprotective mother who’s never spent more than a night or two apart from her children, possibly go to another planet without them?

Ivan Xav has told me that Miles first left Barrayar at 15. Padma’s older than that, Irina would have her brother, and there are many other trusted, loving adults here. And realistically, Padma is only a year away from returning to Barrayar to enter the Academy. The fact that we have so little time left before our son leaves to pursue a destiny I don’t want for him probably colors my view. Yet having witnessed Amiri’s struggles to break free from the Baronne, Dada, and House Cordonah, how can I possibly deny Padma the freedom to make his own choices?

I knew when I decided not to return to the Whole with my family that my husband’s first loyalty was to The Gregor. Having been raised as Jacksonian royalty and survived a coup that could’ve killed us all, I understood the pressures, fears, and love cementing that loyalty. The last thing I want is for any world to suffer through that upheaval. But of all the ways Ivan Xav could serve The Gregor, why must it be a world that is so inhospitable to our family?

Love, Tej

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Thank you for responding so quickly. Thank you even more for your honesty that loving Vorbarra descendants is as much a commitment to political chaos as Empress Laisa marrying The Gregor. Perhaps more, because I’m certain that if they thought it was even remotely feasible, Pidge and Star would have no qualms about wiping out every Vorbarra and Vorkosigan standing between Ivan Xav and the camp stool he never wanted. I’m also sure Pidge has devoted countless hours devising fruitless plans to bring Padma to power with her as his Regent.

I think I needed to hear how Eta Ceta is the greatest test AND the greatest gift in the diplomatic service. This assignment IS a testament to how much The Gregor trusts Ivan Xav to manage the Empire’s trickiest diplomatic relationship. It will be difficult, but I’m confident that together, Ivan Xav and I can serve The Gregor well.

Ivan Xav will be home tomorrow. I hope the children and his secretary can hold off long enough for him to eat, shower, and change clothes before battering him with demands. This should be one of our easier transitions in terms of packing. Cryofreezing Padma’s horse to come here cost more than moving all the rest of our possessions. We will not do that again. Padma doesn’t know it yet, but a
clone foal is thriving at the Long Lake. If Padma decides against the Academy, Miles should be able to make quite a Deal for such good equine bloodlines.

Is there any chance that you and Oliver could bring the troops for a short visit before we leave? You’d of course be welcome to visit us at any time on Eta Ceta, but I’m not sure The Gregor wants you setting foot on Cetagandan soil.

Love, Tej

She’s got that one right – no way Gregor will risk you falling into enemy hands. If you want, we could certainly squeeze a trip to Escobar between the secondary science program and the beginning of next term. Plus I’m sure the troops want to meet their niece! Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

What a silly question – our home is open to you at any time! Mark will be here the beginning of your visit. After he leaves, we can decorate Padma and Irina’s suite. Dormitory rooms being fairly small, we’ve collectively decided that the bulk of their belongings will be coming here, to be swapped out as needed. Construction on Irina’s music studio is underway. I’ll confess to not knowing exactly how many tutors visit the embassy every week! It’s well worth it. Irina’s voice has matured tremendously this past school year. And if classical music truly stimulates babies’ brains, your granddaughter will be the brightest girl on the planet. No lullabies for Mila – she likes soaring arias, piano, and harp. Mila loves Nicol’s recordings so much, we’ve asked her to record some other songs for our spoiled darling.

Ekaterin got a good laugh when I described Mark’s reaction to my feeble attempt to put a bow in Mila’s too-fine hair. Your sons are very alike – Miles also tossed baby hair ornaments into the incinerator!

Love & kisses, Kareen, Mark, & Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother,

The holos of my sisters’ hair accessories was downright frightening! I’d ask how many ribbons Alani has, but I really don’t want to know.

Serious question – is it possible to spoil a baby by holding her too much? I don’t need a therapist to know I’m trying to compensate for all the physical affection I didn’t get, but I don’t want to jeopardize my precious Mila growing up to be a strong, independent woman.

Kareen says my viewpoint is skewed by time spent with the Duronas. Even those who’ve had children with partners seem convinced their offspring will be scientists. I don’t want Mila to feel she has to follow in anyone’s footsteps. The beauty of an inherited, district-less title is that unlike Alex, Mila’s only obligation is to herself.

Love, Mark

*****

Dear Mother,

I’m having so much fun at Lake Serena! The students are all very nice. They’ve told me a lot about La Escuela Internacional and it sounds very interesting. Could you please take me to see it when we visit Padma and Irina?

So far, I’ve identified three new species of woodland creatures.
Love, Aurelia

Dear Cordelia,

Despite being tired, sunburnt, and covered in insect bites, I’m loving this excursion. The group is split between hikers and boaters. Both are making new discoveries at a breakneck pace. I do wish some of the boys weren’t so casual about urinating on trees, but it’s more fear of predators than prudishness. I can’t help but laugh imagining how Aral would’ve taken the news that one sleepy boy’s scent led to the discovery of a new nocturnal rodent. His scream sent them scurrying; the grad student who went out the next night and laid traps before loosing a stream captured several critters for further study.

Aurelia is having the time of her life, soaking up knowledge like a sponge. The grad student in her cabin says she gets along extremely well with the other girls. I get my morning and evening hugs, but other than that, she’s very independent and scrupulously following all rules and directions. She’s also been a great ambassador for Sergyar, teaching the other kids about the planet’s history and geography.

If we do this again – which I think we will – I’ll want a spot closer to home. I miss you all terribly!

Love, Oliver

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

You and your daughter would be very welcome to tour our school next month. Our students and chaperones were all very impressed with Miss Aurelia’s maturity, friendliness, and academic prowess. I must caution, however, that not only are all places full for the coming year, we do not accept boarding students younger than 12. We will, however, be accepting external applications for the following year shortly after the beginning of term.

Sincerely yours, Señor Rodrigo Ameida, Headmaster, La Escuela Internacional

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you so much for a wonderful visit. You two were incredible at the reception introducing Ambassador and Lady Voranthis. For people who claim to be enjoying retirement from Imperial service, you’ve certainly kept up on galactic affairs! Together, you, Miles, and Mark did wonders to curb rumors that my reassignment denotes a diminished diplomatic interest in a planet we once tried to conquer.

It’s also not hyperbole to say all three of your granddaughters turned heads. Mila, well, adorable sprog who didn’t scream while the string quartet played. Lizzie, so coolly professional with an egalitarian confidence that reminds me so much of you and Elena. And Taurie, who’s changed so much from the confused girl who arrived a year ago. Tej and I will miss seeing her blossom during her last year of school. I pity the lordlings of Vorbarr Sultana when Lady Taura finally takes her rightful place in society. They won’t know what hit them.

I always blamed Mamere’s overprotectiveness on me being an only child. As a parent, I finally understand how hard it is to trust your children to someone else. My head knows Padma and Irina will continue to thrive and how lucky we were to be together for so long. My heart, however, wants to ride with my son on quiet mornings and do afternoon paperwork against the background of my daughter’s singing. Yes, Tej and I will be very busy on Eta Ceta, but it won’t be the same. The most important chapter of our lives is closing prematurely. And it hurts.
I’ll leave Miles to disclose more details of our very serious conversation about my distrust of most of Tej’s family. He promises we have nothing to fear and that he and Gregor will manage the situation. After calling me an idiot for thinking Mark and Kareen would allow an Arqua to harm a hair on my children’s heads, of course.

Much love, Ivan & Tej
Dear Mother,

Your sons are being dispatched to Jackson’s Whole for some tidying up. Intelligence indicates the Terrible Trio of Star, Pidge, and Erik is taking House Cordonah down some very unsavory paths. The children will be told that Uncle Mark’s making a quick trip to Barrayar and I’m meeting with the Dendarii. That part’s true. Imperial troops throughout the Hegen Hub are on notice. If they’re needed, the Crown Prince will be co-commanding the flagship as proof Gregor expects House Cordonah to honor their part of the Deal that restored their House. As part of our discourse, Mark is debating showing Tej’s parents vids of what really happened to Baron Ryoval. Gregor says it’s entirely up to him.

Please do not worry about our loved ones on Escobar. Vorkosigan Pribyl is a fortress and ImpSec electronically monitors the children’s whereabouts at all times. Even Lizzie’s and Mila’s.

Looking at her descendants, I now understand why Lady Moira was culled from the haut. The Baronne may be very proud of her Jewels, but Enrique says anyone with galactic genetic training and a well-equipped lab could duplicate their appearance. He also says the musical and acrobatic abilities are easy to enhance given the haut lineage. I doubt it’s quite that simple, but even adjusting for appearance and talent, time has highlighted rampant personality flaws. Shiv is inherently a violent man, but he’s also an honorable pirate capable of great love. How did three of his genetically enhanced bio-children wind up such awful, selfish people? Why is Rish the only one of the Jewels to have a lasting outside relationship? And why, if the Terrible Trio were such great catches, did no man, woman, or herm want them?

That last is Laisa’s observation. Our Empress makes a very valid point. Da claimed women of childbearing age spent decades throwing themselves at Granda from the time Princess Olivia was killed. If all I wanted from marriage was an heir or two, I’d have found many young, beautiful, dull woman to warm my bed in exchange for a title. Who’s to inherit House Cordonah? Not Byerly’s child. Or Ivan’s. Are Shiv and Udine taking the future on Amiri’s offspring? The ones who make Enrique seem only moderately interested in research in comparison?

As you can see, a lot of thought has been given to the Whole. Barrayar needs to be proactive in protecting its interests before Ivan faces a diplomatic crisis that would inflame the Nexus. You didn’t think this was an arbitrary posting, did you?

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia,

You’re the only one in the Nexus who can still scold me like a child and I love you for it. You’re absolutely right, I’ve just heaped way too much on unsuspecting Lady Kareen. Grandmere Alys and Granda Simon will be leaving for Escobar tomorrow by fast courier. I’ll be advising Ambassador Voranthis, but with orders not to alert his Security team. Hopefully, they’ll know the minute Simon hits the orbital station. If he makes it all the way to Vorkosigan Pribyl before being spotted, Miles will be auditing embassy security on his way home. Padma and Irina’s safety is too important for ImpSec to be asleep at the switch.

I’m pleased to report Alexei is taking this potential crisis as seriously as anyone could possibly wish. Regardless of how everything plays out, the Hegen Hub escort duty assignment has served its purpose for him, militarily and diplomatically. The Crown Prince popping up in that sector has
cemented our commitment to the trade agreements. Time to let other worlds get to know our marvelous son. And for Horus’ sake, please feed him and make sure he gets some sun after his transfer to Sergyar Fleet. Laisa worries he’s too thin and pale. The first is the Vorbarra genes; the second is hilarious coming from someone raised in a dome.

We’ll keep you updated as events unfold. Hopefully, Shiv and Udine are smarter than the immature threesome clinging to Mama and Dada.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

(eyes only)Dear Mother,

Thank you for suggesting Kareen might need reinforcements if things turn ugly on the Whole. It might, given how the legitimate investment House Cordonah made in the cryo business after Erik was defrosted has gone terribly, horribly wrong.

About four months ago, Baron Fell sent one of his key employees to the Duronas for cryo-revival and organ replacement after a nasty stabbing. House Cordonah handled the emergency prep. Except there wasn’t any. All they did was hasten the man’s death by disconnecting life support and freezing his body. We started making some discreet inquiries of our competitors and this isn’t an isolated case. One of the worst, but so far, if House Cordonah freezes you, you’re not revivable.

We doubt the Baron and Baronne are involved in this heinous business. Not only do Erik, Star, and Pidge manage the subsidiary, the Baron and Baronne tried to sue the Earth clinic that failed to revive a family friend suffering from treatable liver cancer. Raven Durona turned green when he read the report. Enough said.

Miles has long suspected the Arquas adopted their expatriate friend’s business model and that many of the cryo-corpse being sent off-world were kidnapping victims. Heaven knows kidnapping is a huge business line on the Whole. But if you’re being paid for a live body, sooner or later word will spread that you’re delivering corpses. That’s not good for business. It’s also grounds for your enemies to ally to get rid of you. Certain alliances might be in Barrayar’s interest. House Prestene using House Cordonah as a stepping stone to subsuming House Fell and controlling wormholes to Cetaganda, Earth, and the Hegen Hub is not.

Miles’ Auditor’s chain won’t scare any of the Arquas. Admiral Quinn aiming laser cannons on Cordonah Station should. And given Elli’s personal experience with emergency cryo-freezing, I wouldn’t want to cross her on this one.

Love, Mark

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve arrived safe and sound at Vorkosigan Pribyl. Some handsome young men in dress greens greeted us at the orbital station. Apparently orbital control alerts them whenever an Imperial ship crosses into Escobaran space. Good for them.

Padma, Irina, and Taurie don’t know we’re here. They’re due to visit this weekend, so unless the security alert level changes, we’ll leave them at school and spend the next two days recuperating and snuggling Mila. Enjoy the holo of her snoozing on Simon’s shoulder. They fell asleep listening to his favorite Chopin etude.

Much love, Alys & Simon

*****
Dear Grandma & Uncle Oliver,

Did you know Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon were coming to visit? Padma and Irina are buying the story that they miss them. It’s true, but Uncle Mark isn’t like Da, disappearing on no notice. Especially not when his schedule had him going to Earth and Orient IV, not Barrayar. And Da wouldn’t visit Admiral Quinn without Mama unless he needed armed back-up. So I’m guessing they’re together doing something dangerous and Uncle Simon is here to keep an eye on us.

I’ll play along because a visit from Aunt Alys is a rare treat, but really, somebody needs to think up better cover stories. I’m not an idiot.

Love, Taurie

P.S. You’ll be pleased to hear I took no prisoners on midterm exams. Padma’s irked I topped him in advanced math. He got me in physics, though. I’m much better at the natural sciences. TVK

*****

Dear Grandma & Uncle Oliver,

I can’t believe Taurie figured out that Da and Uncle Mark are up to no good before I did! Not too worried, not with Admiral Quinn guarding their backs. Someday, I’ll get Da to tell the truth about their relationship. She’s definitely Da’s type, plus the way she looks at him sometimes, it’s obvious they weren’t just colleagues.

It’s actually marvelous that they’re still friends. All my break-ups have been very messy. Not that I’m planning on breaking up with Vasco any time soon. He’s good fun, plus he’s also planning to apply for a residency on Beta Colony. I’ve invited him to meet Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon. Poor guy doesn’t know what he’s in for!

Love, Lizzie

*****

(eyes only)Dear Mother,

To no one’s surprise, Baron and Baronne Cordonah didn’t knew much about the mechanics of cryo-revival. Good thing Mark brought an expert!

Tej’s parents weren’t prepared for me to strip so Elli could describe the prep and Dr. Raven could explain everything it took to revive me. Dr. Raven then offered to revive anyone of their choice frozen in the last year. Over Erik and Pidge’s protests, they picked a man due to be shipped to Pol under an extradition warrant.

While Raven worked, Mark, Elli, and I discussed the current political situation on the Whole with our hosts. We took turns steering the conversation back on course whenever anyone tried changing the subject. Pidge and Star do enjoy hearing themselves talk. And Erik, well, he’s even oilier than Ivan and By have described.

Pidge predictably threatened to have Raven charged with murder when the revival of a healthy man under 40 failed. Raven calmly offered to revive another client of the Baronne’s choosing. With an audience.

Mark and I did not take kindly to our sleep being interrupted by his ship being fired upon. The attack was efficiently cut short by Dendarii ships moored near Fell Station. Stupidity points awarded to those assuming mercenary admirals travel alone. Sarcasm points to Mark for wearing his House uniform when remarking to our hosts that vids describe in detail how the Dendarii got their name!
Pidge’s attempt to hold Admiral Quinn financially responsible for the minor damage to Cordonah Station was about as successful as Lujayn and Kiona begging for third helpings of banana ambrosia. Good thing Roic always packs a fast penta kit. Pidge was absolutely horrified at how quickly her parents agreed to allow us to question her brother after I stated that the alternative was Admiral Quinn opening fire on every single one of their properties on-planet. She kept spewing laws about personal autonomy and acts of war until her father finally ordered her to be quiet.

Erik snapped like a twig when asked about the attack on our ship. As we suspected, it was his idea. Star, however, did the actual hiring. That earned her a fast penta dose and opened the door to questions about the cryo business. Pidge under fast penta was even more illuminating. Yes, the Terrible Trio purposely cut corners on the cryo business. They’ve been socking away money at House Dyne for another coup. The master plan was to blame Shiv and Udine for the contract breaches and grab control of House Cordonah before they were all too old to enjoy it. And yes, matricide and patricide via faulty cyro freeze were part of the plan.

Shiv and Udine were far more merciful than expected. Mark wanted an internal team to cryo freeze the Terrible Trio, but agreed to Raven doing it. Much money was spent on proper supplies before three cryo crypts were dispatched to Escobar.

Mark and I spent Raven’s work time negotiating. Watching him easily outmaneuver two of the biggest shysters in the Nexus was delightful. Officially, MPVK bought House Cordonah’s cryo business. Without any liabilities, which means it’ll cost them millions for Mark to save their asses. They’ll also be paying and housing the external personnel needed to bring the business up to galactic standards and verify every client is viable. How many of those staff will have Horus Eyes tucked away in their dresser drawers is unknown at this time, but I’m confident that Gregor would rather send ImpSec analysts and operatives to Jackson’s Whole than warships.

Lest anyone get any ideas about reneging on Mark’s Deal, Elli is leaving significant firepower behind. So crisis averted, at least for now.

Love, your exhausted older son

*****

Dear Mother,

Miles promised to update you on what happened while we were together, so I’ll jump to what happened after he left. Well, one point first. My brother and I are definitely past our prime when it comes to actual battles. Getting shot at resulted in Miles having to induce a seizure and me having a panic attack after he was settled. Raven was masterful in his handling of both.

Baron Fell was very gracious at the meeting Shiv and Udine requested to apologize for the loss of his employee and assure him that systemic problems were being addressed. The compensation package he demanded was enormous, but cheap in terms of maintaining the two Houses’ alliance. He also granted the Dendarii unfettered access to the Hegen Hub wormhole. Shiv was visibly perturbed to learn that Admiral Quinn is one of House Fell’s most loyal customers and the weapons that damaged his station likely came from his fellow baron.

Lily’s life extension treatment bought Baron Fell almost two decades, but he’s clearly winding down. The day after our group meeting, he invited me back to discuss divesting certain less profitable parts of his holdings. I played coy, but nothing would please Gregor more than to get his hooks into another Great House.

Pidge would be very distressed to learn how much her parents are paying the Dendarii to protect them from their children’s mistakes. Elli made the most of an incredible opportunity. Good for her.
Dear Tante Cordelia,

I’ll deny saying it, but Miles and Mark deserve medals for preventing all-out war in this sector. Intelligence suggests the Cetas knew about problems in House Cordonah’s cryo business long before we did. They’re also prepared to support House Prestene’s expansion ambitions. Their intelligence seems to be faulty, however, when it comes to knowing who visited Cordonah Station. Miles traveling on Dendarii ships seems to have successfully masked his presence. It’s certainly consistent with Shiv’s claim that Mark brought the cryo problems to their attention.

Tej is coping far better than I expected. She’s horrified at her siblings’ greed and stupidity, but relieved her parents didn’t commit justifiable infanticide. I admire their restraint and Mark’s subtlety in persuading Shiv and Udine to send the cryo freezers to Escobar. As they enter their third fight to retain House Cordonah, I wouldn’t put it past Shiv (or Byerly) to pull the plugs in a burst of anger.

The Jewels have been called home, as have Amiri and Tej. My wife’s not leaving Eta Ceta. Amiri’s considering it, but not as his parents’ puppet. Mark has offered him Head of Research for the new company formed from his Jacksonian acquisitions. The Cetas aren’t happy to see MPVK expanding in that direction. Much of the seedier side of Mark’s reputation has preceded him. I consider this a very good thing considering my children are widely known to be under his protection. I’m also very pleased with how well Taurie’s armswoman monitors both girls. Tell me, is it reasonable to request Miles second Armswoman Varga to Aurelia next year?

One silver lining – none of my in-laws will be leaving the Whole any time soon. So no houseguests other than ones WE invite. Mamere and Simon are planning on visiting Eta Ceta after Padma’s graduation. That should be interesting!

Love, Ivan & Tej
**Simone & Alexei**

Dear Cordelia,

Of course Armswoman Varga is being assigned to Aurelia when she starts school! A count with four daughters and five sisters looked long and hard for a suitable candidate from his District. Gregor and Laisa finessed the issue with Princess Kareen by co-opting female ImpSec officers. There are days when 20 armsmen seems barely enough, but then I wonder how Count Vormuir ensured all his daughters’ safety. I suspect many of their nannies had extensive military training!

I hope you’re not offended that we’re going directly to Escobar for the graduation and visiting Sergyar afterward. Anna’s miffed, but we’re trying to leave Selig and Simone alone for as little time as possible. Juggling these different school schedules is getting harder, not easier!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma,

It’s not fair that Selig and I don’t get to go to Escobar! I wanted to see Irina and Mila and Selig wanted to ride Padma’s horse before they sell it. Da says we can’t skip final exams because if we do, no university will take us. That’s ridiculous. The Imperial University takes everybody!

Love, Simone

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Duv turned purple when I relayed Simone’s disparaging comment about his alma mater’s admissions policy. I found the attitude disturbing, too. Yes, 14 is a tough age, but as I said to Ekaterin, I know many parents, including counts and countesses, whose children weren’t accepted. The Vor prefix is no longer an automatic admission ticket. It isn’t an automatic admission into the Academy, either. Prince Pavel worked diligently with tutors to get his math skills up to snuff. I wonder what the trouble he and Lord Padma will get into together!

Love you! Delia

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Our little social butterfly has just had her wings clipped. Selig’s last progress report was excellent. Simone’s was not. All but one teacher commented on her lack of effort. I was told it’s entirely my fault for joyriding the Nexus with Admiral Quinn instead of staying home to help with homework. I did not appreciate being accused of evading my many responsibilities and being unfaithful to my beautiful wife. Neither did Ekaterin. I haven’t seen her so angry since the night she barreled into Da trying to escape me. Selig, who was lurking in the library anteroom, prudently fled lest he get caught in the backlash. Wise lad.

Conventional wisdom says the youngest get away with more because the parents are more experienced, more relaxed, or just plain tired. Unless, of course, your father was an only child of the planet’s most powerful couple and your mother has many older brothers. We’ve never had to be strict disciplinarians because our children inherited our drive to do our best. Well, six out of seven have. And the baby has just learned that slacking and insulting her parents doesn’t end well.

There was no yelling. No, my wife’s voice was as cold as a wah-wah on Kyril Island as she
explained that swearing an Auditor’s oath meant my first loyalty was not to my family or District, but to my Emperor. And that no bratty teen could claim her imaginary needs trumped the Imperium’s very real ones. There was more, but the upshot is that unless Simone’s grades drastically improve, she’ll spend her summer break in Hassadar with daily tutors and our crankiest armsmen. Not everyone enjoys teenage girls. Including myself, sometimes. Hang on, Mother. The rough part of the ride is only beginning.

Love, the worst parents in the Imperium

****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I had the extreme displeasure of disciplining one of my younger subjects today. Lady Simone’s armsmen were requested and required to deliver her to my office. Miles and Ekaterin were not present. My wife was. My beloved Komarran is the angriest of us all. Logical, I suppose – not being raised with the concept of Vor sacrifice, Laisa still marvels at all the men and women willing to lay down their lives to protect Us and Our Empire. For the most privileged girl presently on-planet to mock her parents’ sacrifices and loyal service is simply not acceptable.

I suspect you and Aral might accuse me of overstepping, given how zealously you guarded your roles as my guardians, but I’ve imposed an additional punishment on Simone. Her house arrest will be lifted weekly for her to assist combat veterans rehabilitating from serious injury. Perhaps seeing the blood and bone others have laid down in My service will teach her to appreciate the paragons under her roof.

Love, Gregor the Mean & Empress Laisa The Fierce

****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

You may credit our daughter with dubbing her father Gregor the Mean. It was on the back of a tantrum at not being able to attend a birthday party. We got a very sincere apology when the news channels reported that the city’s entire bubble car system had been shut down due to a poison gas attack that took 27 lives.

Gregor didn’t reveal what occurred on Jackson’s Whole other than that Admiral Quinn earned yet another medal for meritorious service to the Imperium. That got Simone’s attention. Gregor’s plan to review her grades going forward sparked downright fear. As it should. We all know Simone’s never performed anywhere near her abilities. It’s so different from watching our Pavel struggle to master 5-space math and earn his place at the Academy. It’s a good thing our youngest doesn’t aspire to command his own battle cruiser because he doesn’t have the innate technical ability for split-second calculations like Miles, Helen, or Aurelia.

Gregor’s team is working on arrangements for a visit to Komarr and Sergyar. All reports indicate Viceroy Vorgustafson has settled in extremely well, but it never hurts to demonstrate that the Emperor’s paying attention. Plus we miss everyone!

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

What’s the maximum amount of hungry, tired junior officers you’re willing to host on our next shore leave? I have several friends I’d like you to meet. Nobody too outrageous or likely to spook my little cousins, but this deployment has been very intense and we all need some pampering. Especially my friend Katya, whose da died last month. Important lesson there about the emotional cost of deployment. For all the condolence letters I’ve written, the funerals and memorials I’ve attended, I’ve
never really supported a grieving person after the crowds go home. Being trapped on a ship with absolutely no privacy doesn’t help. ImpSec objected when I offered Katya my cabin for a few days so she could be alone. They got over it.

Love, Alexei

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

At today’s lesson, Alani insisted that her cousin will be attending our next recital. It’s very awkward, but I must ask if Prince Alexei is aware of this commitment. Also, would such an honored visitor require major changes to our security plan?

Very truly yours, Yoko Tamika

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia,

Of course Katya and I are attending! Alani and Lujayn invited us very prettily. I also know exactly what to expect from a rural dance school. While you all were attending college graduations a few years back, I was juggling a small mountain of District appearances that included ribbon cuttings, sports tournaments, tap shoes, and pink tutus. The little ones always wear pink. Why is that?

Love, Alexei

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m writing you from Aunt and Uncle Vorthys’ home. Selig and I fled here a few hours ago to escape the guaranteed explosion from today’s progress reports. Selig had top marks. Simone purposely failed three subjects. Three! My sister better hope this doesn’t trigger one of Da’s spontaneous seizures. If it does, there won’t be anything left for Uncle Gregor to toss into a dungeon.

You should start prepping everyone that Simone’s not visiting this year. Likely neither am I. I’d planned to chaperone Selig and Simone on the outbound flight, but Hassadar doesn’t deserve the fury she’d release unsupervised. It’ll be okay. I’ll work on my thesis, convene some court sessions, and tie my sister to her bed at night. I love holding court. So does Uncle Dono. I’ve probably learned almost as much about handling District matters from him as from Mama, Da, and Aunt Laisa.

Love, Alex and Selig

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Contrary to public expectations, Simone still lives. It was a close thing.

Do not fret, all your grandsons will be together on one planet. Alex’s offer to forego the trip was noble, but unnecessary. Simone isn’t going to Hassadar. She and her entourage will visit the Vorruytner dower house. I don’t think you’ve seen it since Dono and Olivia rehabbed it as a guesthouse. It’s lovely. Simone’s tutors and chaperones will be free to enjoy the estate’s many amenities while our daughter remains in seclusion. It’s actually a far better idea from a security perspective because Dono’s armsmen will assist ours in thwarting escape attempts.

Alex truly deserves a vacation. He’s been so busy with school and District matters, he hasn’t been off-planet in almost two years. Plus there’s the little matter of not having met his niece and nephew yet. Ekaterin’s still annoyed that the change in viceroy’s meant there was no annual report visit last Winterfair. I don’t blame her.
Love, your youngest Barrayaran granddaughter’s jailers
*****

Dear Mother & Oliver,

I’m forwarding this solely for amusement. Simone thought she was so sly, sending it from a school comconsole. She clearly doesn’t understand how my seal works.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan
---

Dear Grandma,

You have to help me. Mama and Da are barbaric. Other than school and visiting that creepy military hospital, I’m trapped in Vorkosigan House. Da’s got an armsman outside my bedroom door. I’m not allowed to enter any room that has a comconsole without an escort. I had a school report due last week. They made me write it using books from the library! I can’t communicate with any of my friends, my birthday party’s been canceled, everyone’s going to Sergyar without me, AND they’re sending me off to the middle of nowhere for the entire summer. Uncle Dono’s estate is soooo boring! They don’t have any horses, the pond is too small for sailing, and the closest town is at least 10 kilometers away. It’s awful.

Please, Grandma, you have to tell Da and Mama they can’t leave me behind. Also, I think I want to go to Taurie’s school with Aurelia and Irina next year. I simply can’t live on Barrayar another minute!

Love, Simone

My love, I fear Simone doesn’t understand how many things work in the real world, not just her Da’s seal. Even with the family connections, she’s not La Escuela material. Love, Me
*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Is it okay to hit a girl with self-defense training? Mama, Aunt Alys, and Alex say no. Da, Uncle Simon, and Helen say yes.

I’m sorry to be such a bad brother, but I just can’t take any more of Simone. She whines nonstop, she’s still not doing her schoolwork, and I can’t even have a friend over without her harassing us unmercifully. She was so mad I locked my bedroom door this afternoon to keep her out that she was kicking and screaming like a banshee. She didn’t stop until Armsman Kasun threatened to stun her.

Mama and Da totally believe me about Simone’s behavior, but it doesn’t really matter because she saves her worst fits for when both of them aren’t home. I’m so tired of being Simone’s target. I don’t deserve to be punished because my twin is an idiot. She’s even threatened to destroy my birthday party. I’m not sure I even want it anymore, but Da says we can’t cancel because this is a rare window to get his hands on tactical equipment from a battleship that’s about to be decommissioned. And Helen’s spent months creating battle sims for us.

I’ve attached some vids and my latest school paper. I didn’t need to do any research on the comconsole because what could anyone say about Titus Andronicus that wasn’t in our library?

Love, Selig
*****

Dear Cordelia,

Of course Simone is receiving therapy! It’s not helping much. We’ve scheduled a full physical
because the therapist thinks some of it could be hormonal. And no, she’s not being sexist. Looking at the armsmen’s logs, there’s a definite pattern to the worst behavior. As much as I hate the idea of giving a contraceptive implant to an immature 14-year-old, we’ll do it if it’ll improve her quality of life. Notice I said we. Miles is reluctantly on board. When it comes to our daughters and S-E-X, he’s far more Barrayaran than I am. Miles deluding himself that Helen’s first two girlfriends were platonic was oddly endearing.

Another point we’ve agreed on. Even if an implant curbs Simone’s awful behavior, she’s still spending her break studying at Dono and Olivia’s. At this point, she’s too far behind to really catch up.

I’m glad you were amused about the school papers. We weren’t. Simone got the lowest passing grade on her analysis of Romeo & Juliet. Our fault because we wouldn’t let her watch a vid. I really hope none of your girls falls into this whirl-pool after puberty. I feel terrible thinking I missed something that should’ve been so obvious, but Simone’s never complained of difficult menses the way Lizzie did.

Laisa has offered us a lifeline to help reduce some of the tension between Selig and Simone. She’s suggested Simone spend weekday afternoons doing her homework under the supervision of one of Gregor’s secretaries. That was her parents’ favored punishment because going to work with Da is no fun when you can’t play on the fancy equipment or collect treats from everyone. She said it was also successful on the rare occasions her children were squabbling and with Pavel being the only child left at home, he frequently brings his schoolwork to one of his parents’ office suites. What do you think?

Wearily yours, Ekaterin

Love, I obviously need to start brushing up on my human anatomy before Everard needs deodorant. Here’s an odd question for you. Do the haut even have menses? Hell, do they even have functional uterus? Who can we ask? Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Yes, the haut have uteri. They’re theoretically functional, but it hasn’t been tested in centuries. I’ve had two menses, one at puberty and one after the egg retrieval. I can’t believe we haven’t discussed taking Irina for an implant after her first menses. Ivan Xav was totally supportive of minimizing the adverse effects of teenage hormonal fluctuations. Did it cost her a few centimeters in height? Possibly, but there was really no need for Irina to tower over her father and her musical studies were far more important to her than acne, headaches, and cramps.

This is a conversation you must have with Aurelia if you haven’t already. Irina says the reduced privacy in dorms can make dealing with menstrual accidents difficult and/or embarrassing. Ivan Xav blushed at her description of the teasing a classmate received for soiling her school uniform in the middle of class.

I continue to receive letters beseeching me to return to the Whole. Rish says Dada and the Baronne want to sell me into an alliance with Baron Fell’s heir, a healthy man over 80 with three ex-wives and four children older than I. Ivan Xav and I have been happily married for over 20 years and my parents still think they own me. I can’t even be angry anymore. I’m just sad my only value to them is as a geisha.

Everyone is furious The Gregor ordered my siblings’ cryo freezers transferred from Escobar to Barrayar. It was a wise move. Dada and the Baronne being blindsided by Miles and Mark’s revelations is proof they’re not as sharp as they once were. Rish reports that everything is in such
turmoil, they were considering reviving Pidge. Bad, bad idea. Everyone would be better off if my parents sold House Cordonah to the highest bidder and retired to Earth. There are several Great Houses that would be a good fit, but probably lack the capital to make a viable bid.

Padma is very pleased Grandma Elizabeth is attending his graduation. He and Irina adore her. Your mother is so warm and approachable – everything the Baronne and my late grandmother were not. It took all of us almost getting killed for Grandmama to show any physical affection. Having met more haut women since arriving on Eta Ceta, I’m now convinced it was them specifically, not every haut.

Less than two months until we see our children!

Love, Tej & Ivan Xav

*****

Dear Mother & Oliver,

Many ImpSec analysts are swotting away trying to determine the best way to purchase House Cordonah. I think they’ll eventually conclude what Laisa already has. The easiest way for Barrayar to stabilize the Whole is for a certain conglomerate to become a mostly-silent backer of an existing house’s bid. Said conglomerate would need a silent backer and Imperial permission to launder that sizeable investment through its accounts. Neither is an insurmountable obstacle, particularly if Prince Dmitri joins MPVK when he receives his doctorate.

Things are calmer here since Simone received her implant. Selig’s birthday party was a huge success. Ekaterin eventually dragged me off to bed. Selig and many of his friends napped in a corner of the ballroom, then returned to the fray. We fought most of the Imperium’s most famous space battles. Helen even created a sim based on my recent Whole adventures to teach the concept of using alliances to smuggle ships and personnel into position. I suspect most of the top tier of Selig’s future Academy class was fighting in our ballroom. At times, I could clearly feel Da or Granda perched on my shoulder. Too bad Gregor won’t let us keep the equipment, but if we did, Selig, Pavel, and I would never sleep. Pavel isn’t a great tactician, but he’s unquestionably a leader. He’ll do us all proud at the Academy.

As for Simone, she got a cake and a family lunch that included three of her friends. It wasn’t the ball she wanted, but it was pleasant. Ekaterin says if she behaves, we’ll resurrect the Old Earth tradition of something called a Sweet 16 next year.

The vacation packing has begun!

Love, the best Da in Vorbarr Sultana and his longsuffering wife
Summits and Schemes

Dear Mother,

Could you please bring some cases of cider? If you don’t, Miles will insist on toasting Padma and Taurie with maple mead. You’ll also need potent potables for running through Jackson’s Whole scenarios with Ivan, Tej, and Count Vorbarra.

Love, Mark

Dear Cordelia,

If the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muhammad must come to the mountain. In this case, an Emperor must meet His ambassador at the halfway point. Watch the news for an announcement that Dr. Toscane Vorbarra will be speaking at the City University of Nuevo Valencia commencement.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

Dear Mother,

And we’re off! So nice of Gregor and Laisa to give us a lift. Not sure Simon thinks so – we’ve had to give him the good jumpsick meds. I don’t envy our hosts turning around and speeding back to Pavel’s graduation, but the change in plans means they’ll bring Alex and Selig directly to Sergyar. Ekaterin and I both brought more cases of work than clothes. Working vacations are better than no vacations, right?

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

To: Vicereine Vorkosigan and Professor Jole
From: Armsman Orlov

The children’s stomach ailment has been traced to contamination at the local dairy. Dr. Botkin has prescribed the appropriate meds and everyone is bouncing back. He recommends keeping everyone out of school until next week. ImpSec will be sending you a separate report. They’re wasting a lot of resources trying to prove that an innocent farmer jeopardized his business as an act of domestic terrorism.

My love, is it terrible to be grateful we missed the vomit and diarrhea? I don’t miss the diaper phase!

Love, Me

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m never drinking milk again. Neither are my friends. Practically everyone in Port Nightingale was sick except for kids with dairy allergies. Kiona projectile vomited into Nanny Yana’s hair. Gross! And I think we broke one of the clothes washers.

Nile overheard Lieutenant Vormyshkin telling someone that Cousin Alexei can’t come to our recital because it’s not safe. Alani is heartbroken. Miss Tamika will be very upset, too, because we practiced a special song in his honor.

ImpSec better not say Grandma Elizabeth, Miles and Ekaterin can’t visit or I swear we’ll all go on
strike and not do any security drills or listen to anything they say.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother,

Please come home. ImpSec is mean.

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Grandma & Uncle Oliver,

Not to worry, Viceroy Vorgustafson called off the dogs. He has even less patience with ImpSec CYA than you do! He did admire Aurelia’s civil disobedience plan. It’s a good lesson to less-experienced personnel that guarding children is nowhere near the same as adults and you need to be prepared for your brain to jump in all directions to follow theirs. Herding Pavel at Everard’s age was quite a challenge!

Love, Nikki

*****

Dear Mother,

Can you get two more tickets to the recital? Ekaterin finished her meetings early and if we hop the next shuttle, we should just make it.

Love, Miles

*****

My love, Perrin says he doesn’t want to take dance classes anymore because he ruined the whole show by falling during his big tap solo. The boys and I are drowning our sorrows in coconut ambrosia and popcorn. We’ll see you all tomorrow. Love, Oliver

*****

Dear Mother,

I’m off to the Whole tomorrow for meetings with six different Great Houses. The idea is to create a bidding war to confuse Shiv and Udine into guessing which buyer might be linked to Barrayar. Sure, it’ll cost more, but if Laïsa and I do this right, we could wind up with enough bio technology to position MPVK for a serious run at House Bharaputra. The Durona life extension has put a dent in their clone-brain transplant business, but not enough to shut it down entirely.

Wish me luck!

Love, Mark

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

You won’t like the news Anna and I received today. The chief security officer on Eta Ceta has put in for retirement. It’s a massive promotion for me. Implications for my wife are unclear. Neither of us envisioned being posted outside the Empire. Anna’s commanding officer assured her they’re working on new orders and we won’t be separated. He also recommended we rent the house out rather than selling it. We’ll be provided quarters on Eta Ceta, so it might make sense if we can find a reliable tenant. Maybe Uncle Oliver knows a professor needing more space?

Uncle Ivan says that because the twins are so young, the Imperium will foot the bill for a nanny to accompany us. He also promised a hazard pay stipend. It’ll have to be hefty because I doubt our present nanny will be interested.
I’m not looking forward to telling Mama that we’re taking the twins so far away. She was really looking forward to us coming home for Winterfair.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Olivia and Dono have taken custody of Simone. They also reviewed Selig’s packing and reminded him to include shoes! And because Simone passed everything for the year, Olivia has authority to allow limited treats as her tutors indicate.

Mila really misses her Da. Instead of pining at home, we’re going a-traveling. Our presence has been requested and required on Sergyar. May I rely on your paranoid ImpSec officers to guard my daughter while I perform a few surprise inspections? I may ask Miles to accompany me to the plascrete factory. Never hurts to remind the team that quality control is our highest priority. Did you hear that Plas-Dan was sued for the fatal tunnel collapse in Count Vorfolse’s district?

Packing for Mila is far more difficult than packing for myself. I keep reminding myself that you or Nikki will know where to get anything I’ve forgotten and other worlds have disposable diapers. I told Mark we need to look into producing baby products. As fast as Sergyar is growing, there must be plenty of demand, right?

Love and kisses, Kareen & Mila

My love, how’s this for a new company slogan? MPVK wraps you in comfort from birth to death?

Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Simon, Padma, and I are leaving Eta Ceta a bit earlier than planned. Simon isn’t feeling quite himself and the doctors here say he needs a new liver. The Duronas have begun growing a replacement organ and promise to have him fixed up in no time. The children are very concerned. So am I, if only because Simon doesn’t handle surgery well. It’ll be nice to have our grandson with us as support.

Poor Tej is quite upset that her family has disowned her for not rushing to them in their hour of need. A need they created themselves through lax oversight, Simon keeps muttering. It hurts us all to see her pain.

We’ll keep you informed.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Granda had surgery today. Dr. Jacinta said he was a model patient and should feel like a new man in a few months. Grandmere hasn’t slept in days, but has promised to go home with Aunt Kareen as soon as Granda wakes up. Uncle Miles and I will stay at the clinic overnight.

Love, Padma

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Simon was startled to wake up with a new stomach and esophagus, but decades at ImpSec had taken their toll. Dr. Jacinta was very proactive in anticipating the need. She said the stomach could’ve waited another 5-10 years, but why undergo another surgery when he was there now? And at least
he woke up from this one coherent!

Per Ivan’s orders, Aunt Alys is having a comprehensive physical tomorrow. He doesn’t want any more medical surprises while trapped on Eta Ceta!

Padma has been spectacular, very mature and poised even when Aunt Alys was cracking from stress. Kareen is a star, as always. She’s got everything arranged for Simon’s recuperation. Padma and I will stay a few more days before I whisk him off to the Academy.

Love, Nurse Miles

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Is Aurelia all packed for school? Irina is torn, looking forward to seeing her friends and tutors, but reluctant to leave us. She’s enjoying the novelty of Eta Ceta and the wonderful appreciation of the arts. Several people who dismiss the Jewels as more show than substance have praised her voice. Irina missed the underlying Ceta disparagement in the choice of wording. Tej and I did not. Neither did our staff, who’ve risen to the challenge of teenagers with a perfect mix of care and caution

We’re hearing whispers that the Cetas are putting together a war chest to go after House Cordonah. I’ve recommended someone advise the Baron and Baronne that if they accept a Ceta bid, the first casualties of the resulting war will be Pidge, Star, and Erik. You know, the good children. Unlike my wife and Amiri, the most ungrateful children ever created. The mass amnesia about Tej’s role in securing the funds to retake House Cordonah would be very concerning if I weren’t confident that ImpSec has a clear picture of the goings on.

We hope the jumpsick meds we’ve had synthesized to Irina’s biochemistry will ease her trip to school. Tej’s formulation isn’t perfect, but was a vast improvement. Padma reports that his work perfectly. He’s also totally in love with his new horse. I’m very glad we did that. We also can’t wait to see Nikki, Anna, and the twins.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thank God you sent Armswoman Varga and Armsman Kulick on vacation to Eta Ceta. Both distinguished themselves protecting Lady Irina from an attempted hijacking. Byerly got the staff away before the Dendarii obliterated the Cordonah downside vacation villa from orbit. So no loss of life, but a huge message to whichever idiot masterminded this scheme to drag a child into an adult conflict.

I’ve sent messages to Mark and Kareen so they know to expect our beautiful songbird to arrive in less than perfect condition.

Love, Irina’s concerned Uncle Miles

*****

(eyes only)Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

This was not the job transition Anna and I expected! Our ship crossed into Ceta space shortly before Irina’s ship passed out of it. We were still hours away from Rho Ceta when the first secured transmission came through. I was copied into everything for the 2+ days it took to reach Eta Ceta. Outgoing Colonel Vorchenko tried dumping everything in my lap the second we arrived at the embassy. Nyet. Bastard was too busy doing his personal packing to spend any time pondering Lord Auditor Vorkosigan’s first question: how did the Arquas know Irina’s itinerary?
Colonel Vorchenko resisted answering any of my initial questions because my lower rank was an insult to the chain of command. That caca may work on fresh-faced ensigns; Ambassador Vorpatril promptly appointed Colonel Chaly to serve as my co-interrogator. I wish you could’ve seen Vorchenko’s face when Anna insisted on testing to see if he was still allergic to fast-penta. He wasn’t, thanks to skipping boosters for decades. Other than determining that he disliked Lady Vorpatril on ethnic and work ethic grounds, Vorchenko was clean. Captain Vorminski was not. The Vorthorpes were apparently ignorant that he’d been supplementing his pay for over a decade by alerting House Cordonah to all Barrayaran travel in and out of Eta Ceta. Idiot didn’t think twice that maybe the Arquas might be interested in Irina.

The Dendarii are transporting Vorminski home to face treason charges. Vorchenko is staying here in Vorminski’s role until a replacement arrives. As a sop to Madame Vorchenko, they’re keeping their present quarters. We’re bunking in the embassy and will be for some time. The security chief’s quarters are overdue for a rehab, being too small for a family of four and massively unsafe for toddlers. We don’t mind. Aunt Tej spoils us rotten and the house staff gladly helps our nanny while we’re working. Our double stroller gets strange looks when we’re out and about. In a society that guards the genome so closely, twins are apparently quite rare.

Anna’s task force is gaining momentum. I’ll let her explain later on. Enjoy the vid. I’m not sure I’d call pounding on pots music, but there’s definitely percussion!

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana
*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,

Ruby is dead. Shiv shot her as a mercy kill after I threatened to do it with my bare hands. He had no choice after Byerly and I laid out every detail of Ruby’s plan to sell a teenage girl into marriage with a man Mother’s age. Shiv and Udine gasped when Ruby confirmed that given Tej’s disloyalty, it was only right her daughter take her place. Good to know they have some faint scruples when it comes to peddling their own underage flesh. Bad to receive more evidence that the supposed heads of House Cordonah have no clue what’s happening under their noses.

Sad little Jet has multiple injuries as a result of trying to jump me as I was leaving. When I was done, I said he should count himself lucky Ivan’s on Eta Ceta because Irina’s father wants Cordonah Station bombed out of existence. Obviously, I’d prefer not because my subsidiary is already very profitable and we’d have to build a new station to protect the Earth wormhole. Maybe wiping it out with a bio-weapon to preserve the infrastructure and send a lesson to the Nexus not to mess with us?

Love, Mark
*****
(eyes only)Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

If ever there were a time and a place for bio-weapons, this would be it. It’s a totally Jacksonian solution to a Jacksonian problem. Still, I’m trying a little diplomacy first. Lord Auditor Vorgustafson is on his way to Cordonah Station to present Our offer. If they sell everything to House Jain and retire peacefully to Kibou-daini, in 10 years, We’ll forward three cryo freezers. If not, We’ll support House Jain taking over by force and those freezers are emptied and rehabbed for other occupants.

I didn’t plan to harm Lady Tej’s siblings, but the kidnap attempt on Lady Irina left me no choice. Those three lives are nothing compared to the lives that could be lost if House Cordonah must be taken by force.

Thank you so much for the reports on how Lady Irina is processing developments. Drou, Laisa, and Ekaterin have their hands full stopping Simon and Aunt Alys from ignoring medical advice and
rushing back to Escobar. Simon continues to recover, but as you know, organ replacement is a marathon, not a sprint.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Mother,

I’m with Mark on the bio-weapons issue. The Arquas are clearly just as evil as their rivals. It’s probably why Gregor sent one of my colleagues to the Whole – he knows I have no objectivity when it comes to family. I also might harbor some resentment that Erik tried to kill me on my last visit. Jet is lucky he didn’t attack me because Roic or Vinkovic would’ve killed him on the spot without a second thought.

How is Oliver holding up in Port Nightingale? One on six are tough odds!

Simone got a charming letter from Aurelia. She said she loves school, but misses her sisters. Also, Mila is adorable and Irina’s taking a break from singing lessons.

Simone seems to be buckling down in the new term. Selig’s asked for a tutor in navigation and tactical maneuvers. Playing on real equipment has sparked an early interest in how it all really works. I think we’ll enjoy doing homework together!

As for my day job, all that legislative work I did over the summer paid off. After much grumbling, the Council of Counts approved my education proposal. Debate continues on more funding for Sergyar immigration, but I feel we’re making progress. So is my wife, who is about to undertake a major updating of the municipal parks in Count Vorbretton’s capitol city.

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

*****

My love,

I swear everything here is fine. We miss you horribly, but Irina needs you far more than we do. I’m still having trouble processing that the goal of the kidnapping was selling a child into sexual slavery. I’m so glad you didn’t share all the gory details with Irina. She’ll need to know eventually, as will Padma, but not now.

And to think the arrogant Arquas call Barrayarans primitive!

As you can see from the attached vid, Perrin and Alani are missing more teeth. Thank Horus Nanny Yana emptied their pockets!

Love always, Oliver

*****

Dear Mother,

When are you coming home? I miss your hugs and bedtime stories. We’re bored of Uncle Oliver’s soldier stories.

Give Irina a kiss and tell her to get better soon!

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The cost of buying a Great House alliance has risen drastically since last House Cordonah was in
play, but the buyers are still very satisfied with the result. Being Lord Auditor Vorgustafson’s sidekick was an absolute pleasure. Thankfully, there was no actual kicking, just intense negotiating that brought us in well under budget. We even threw in free transport to Kibou-daini! Admiral Quinn assures us that the Arquas’ possessions will all be thoroughly screened and anything more lethal than a stunner or kitchen equipment will be confiscated.

Rish and Byerly aren’t going to Kibou-daini. They’re accompanying me to Escobar, where they’ll settle at least until Irina graduates. After that, they’ll be free to go wherever they wish with Gregor’s thanks.

I’m really looking forward to being home for a while. I miss my wife and daughter. I want to look in Irina’s eyes as I tell her that she is and will always be safe. That’s not me being bombastic. Lord Auditor Vorgustafson drove the point home over and over throughout negotiations that an attack on the Emperor’s family was an attack on the Empire and the Arquas’ usefulness to Barrayar was at an end.

Looking forward to seeing you.
Love, Mark
School Projects

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Kareen has begun preparations for Winterfair. She and Mark are planning on having the entire house and all the bushes and trees outlined in lights. They’re also constructing bonfire pits and will be setting off fireworks at midnight. Irina said the Embassy always hosts a ball, but it’s not nearly as elaborate because most Escobarans celebrate Christmas, not Winterfair. Kareen says their guest list will also be very different from the Embassy’s and there’ll be separate rooms set up with activities for different age groups. I’ve met some of the adult Duronas, but Irina promises there are lots of children of all ages for everyone to play with.

I’m really enjoying dance lessons with Irina’s Aunt Rish. I think she knows every dance style in the Nexus. Don’t misunderstand, I love Miss Tamika, but I prefer learning lots of dances over practicing the same number with other people. Plus I don’t think people bring their ballet shoes to school dances!

The school science expo will be held after Christmas break. Lizzie’s going to help Irina do something with plants. Lizzie offered to help me, too, but said she’s the wrong niece to help build a miniature laser cannon. Lizzie also warned me that the school will be upset if I build a weapon, so I want to try constructing a robotic suit instead. Is it okay if I ask Alexei for some information?

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver –

Just wanted to warn you that I won’t be spending Winterfair at Vorkosigan Pribyl. Ambassador Voranthis has kindly arranged my passage home. I’ll be spending more time traveling than on Barrayar, but if I get a residency on Beta Colony, this will be my last chance to spend the holiday with Mama and Da for several years.

Don’t think this means you won’t be seeing me on Sergyar. With your permission, I’d like to bring Vasco to visit during next term’s mid-semester break. I’m hoping Alexei will be on-planet during our visit. We saw him and Katya a few weeks ago at an Embassy thing. I’m glad Vasco had previously met my almost-brother because he was more intimidated by Crown Prince Alexei Vorbarra than he was by scary Uncle Simon. Uncle Baz says citizens from democracies are unduly impressed and intimidated by royalty. Especially ones who project authority far beyond their years in public. Did Aunt Kareen send you vid of Alexei giving Mila horsey rides? So cute!

Alexei and Katya are playing it very cool, but they’ve definitely moved beyond mere friendship. I’m glad. Katya’s good for him. There’ll be a lot of disappointed Vor mothers if the Crown Prince marries a prole, but my almost-brother’s happiness is light-years more important than some stuffy traditional notion of propriety.

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

How was I supposed to know that asking Alexei about current military equipment might get him court-martialed? It’s not like I wanted to build a spy satellite!

Mark spoke to Uncle Amiri about visiting the Clinic for a demonstration of their medical robots.
Mark says there’s almost as much high-tech equipment at the Clinic as there is on a spaceship. I know he’s exaggerating, but trying to invent a surgical instrument might be interesting. Especially if it uses lasers!

Aunt Elena has promised to take me and Irina shopping for Winterfair gifts for Kareen and Mark. We want to get them something very special.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thank God Aurelia took the medical instrument bait. Unlike Barrayar, weapons development is not considered an appropriate subject for Escobar schoolchildren!

Amiri is delighted with Aurelia’s interest and enthusiasm. We’ve arranged a tour with the company that provides most of the Clinic’s replicator equipment. Amiri has suggested Aurelia try building one. He said it’ll be good practice with circuits and working to the ‘clean room’ standards of sensitive electronics. If she gets it built quickly, techs can supervise her breeding at least one batch of lab mice. Not as exciting as lasers, but much safer!

We have a special surprise for you. Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon are coming for Winterfair. Dr. Jacinta has consulted with her counterparts on Barrayar and approved the travel. Apparently Simon is a MUCH better patient than Da, Miles, or I. Or maybe he’s just scared of Aunt Alys, but either way, they’re coming. High-level negotiations are ongoing at the Academy to see if we can also have Padma. If so, he’ll travel by fast courier, not the leisurely ship booked for his grandparents.

Kareen and Elena can describe it better, but we’re starting to get concerned about Irina. Some days she’s fine; others, she’s overly quiet. Rish and Amiri monitor Irina’s medical stuff carefully – Rish even does joint therapy with her! – but we’d all really hoped more of the shock of the attempted hijacking would’ve worn off by now. After all, if the ship hadn’t gone to high-alert status, none of the passengers would’ve known a thing about the incompetent space pirates trying to intercept that small convoy. The Dendarii escort certainly earned those medals!

You’ll find Rish and Byerly very different. Rish has such guilt over Ruby’s actions. Jet’s, too, as if she somehow should’ve stopped them. By hates his forced retirement and being separated from their daughter. The Bolshoi Ballet was very pleased to welcome Crystal Vorrutyer! Kareen hopes our Winterfair celebration will jolt By out of his malaise and that our other visitors will likewise help Irina.

Mila calls Rish AnBoo. By is UnBoo. It’s hilariously adorable.

Love, Mark, Kareen, & Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Space math question: if one fast courier leaves Escobar for Barrayar and another leaves Barrayar for Escobar, what do you get?

Answer: happy relatives. Lizzie is almost home and Padma is speeding toward you. Thanks to his exceedingly high end-of-term test results, the Academy Commandant reluctantly gave Cadet Patril permission to report back a few days late from Winterfair break. Gregor and I are particularly proud of how hard Padma worked to earn that privilege. Some of Ivan’s and my former classmates are now instructors. Let’s just say their expectations started far lower than they should and adjust upward every time Padma distinguishes himself on group-wide evaluations.
Aurelia’s last letter was full of information about her science project. Selig is now clamoring to build a replicator, too. Ekaterin is discouraging this idea because knowing our son, he’ll hoodwink Uncle Enrique into gengineering rodents with Vorkosigan crests. Cats bringing us liveried butterbugs was bad enough; we do not want our pets gifting us with half-dead crested mice!

Taurie, Helen, and Tegid arrive in two days. To answer your unasked, burning question, now that Alex has a suite upstairs, Tegid will be sleeping in his old room. He and Helen are free to use the connecting door as long as they’re discreet.

We’re being conservative parents because there’s a huge scandal brewing related to Count Vorfolse’s son and Count Vorkalloner’s granddaughter. How the hell did one of Alex’s contemporaries impregnate a girl Simone’s age? The lovers want to marry. Gregor has temporarily blocked any betrothal. He used the excuse of Lady Augusta’s age, but it’s really concern that a younger son entrapped an innocent girl to get his hands on what’s rumored to be an exorbitant dowry. I’ve never been so grateful for the Ninth Auditor position. Gregor has tasked Vorbarr Sultana’s top legal ethicist with interviewing all parties and formulating a recommendation.

Father Frost tucked a few extra goodies into Padma’s luggage. Enjoy!

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

My dearest Cordelia – I agree with our Emperor. There’s something very unsettling about a grown man chasing a 15-year-old. Given the straits the Vorfolse district is still in decades after the Pretendership, it’s not surprising they’d seek heiresses to fill the coffers. I’m sure, however, there had to be some available who were of legal age! And then there’s Miles’ question of how. Where were Lady Augusta’s armsmen while this canoodling was going on? Love, your boy-toy

****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Count and Lord Vorkalloner were equally concerned as to why Lady Augusta’s armsmen didn’t protect her from this cad. Short answer – they were bribed to look the other way. Five, including the commander, have been dismissed from Count Vorkalloner’s service in disgrace. Two armsmen have also been struck from Count Vorfolse’s. Lord Oleg Vorfolse has been charged with rape of an underage female. Lady Augusta is recuperating on her grandfather’s estate. The pregnancy was medically terminated after extensive testing concluded the fetus wasn’t viable. Blame likely attaches to Lord Oleg for introducing Lady Augusta to several illegal pharmaceuticals whose primary side effect is increased libido.

Thankfully, Simone and Selig have but a passing acquaintance with Lady Augusta. Lady Augusta’s parents sought to protect her virtue by sending her to an all-girls’ school long on social graces and short on reproductive education. That poor child had no idea what was happening to her body because babies come from replicators. The school’s not entirely responsible, though. Surely Lord and Lady Vorkalloner should’ve noticed their petite daughter gaining 7 kilos?

Count Vorfolse has spent most of the six years since he inherited the title from his reclusive uncle working valiantly to improve his neglected District. He rarely comes to the capitol, leaving most legislative matters to his oldest son. Alex thinks very highly of Lord and Lady Vorfolse. The couple met at university and were betrothed before the flu epidemic that swept through the Vorfolse and Vorkalloner districts seven years ago, taking the current Count’s wife, daughter, older brother, and nephew. By all reports, those losses were responsible for Lord Oleg’s transition from studious son of a mid-level bureaucrat to hedonistic town clown determined to wring every mark he could from his father’s District. Maybe it was grief. Or maybe he’s just a predator. That’s what the prosecution will argue at his trial. If Lord Oleg has any shred of decency left, which he probably doesn’t, he’ll take the honorable way out before Lady Augusta’s reputation is any more besmirched.
Changing topics. How are you enjoying your visit to Vorkosigan Pribyl? Kareen sent some holos, but we’d love to see more. Please send as much as you can to Ivan and Tej, too. Ivan’s last letter said Tej is very concerned by reports of Irina’s listlessness. He’s hoping Padma’s visit will cheer Irina. By now, Padma knows that Mark held on to his horse. Have he and Irina gone riding together? Did it help?

Have packages from Eta Ceta hit Escobar yet? I’m not sure when Anna finds time to shop, what with coordinating a task force liaising with other major worlds’ fleet operations to share best practices, but everything she and Nikki snuck into the diplomatic pouch was totally wonderful. If only they could’ve sent themselves!

Happy Winterfair!
Love, Miles, Ekaterin, and all but one of our children

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver, –

We fear this package may arrive a bit late. Aunt Tej kept reminding us to get everything sent out—we love her shipping clerk tales!—but we’ve been horrendously busy. Anna’s been off-planet and Vorchenko is completely useless. If not for the Winterfair Ball, I’d probably be better off without him. Madame Vorchenko is a pain in the rump, too. Yes, we ALL know you wanted to be home by Winterfair. If only your husband had overseen his staff properly, none of us would be in this position!

Daniel and Dyana are handling the uproar like champions. The new nanny is working out well and they both love Aunt Tej. Uncle Ivan’s height seems to scare them a bit when they’re tired; otherwise, they seem to like him fine. They’re very curious about Ceta face paint. All cosmetics are being stored well out of reach!

Happy Winterfair!
Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Kareen did herself proud hosting her first full Winterfair celebration! Everything looked marvelous, from the food and decorations to my beautifully-dressed grandchildren. Seeing them all dance with Rish was marvelous! It was nice to see Rish and Byerly with Irina and Padma, too. Padma looks so handsome in uniform! Byerly looks drained. Has he had a comprehensive physical recently?

Lina can’t believe Aurelia has constructed a working replicator. The vid she sent of the gestating mice looked great. They’ve probably been born by now. Any issues?

Oliver, has Cordelia told you of her childhood pets? John was content with a single bird. His sister’s room was a maze of cages with everything from mice to snakes. Their father used to joke about the entire food chain being represented. To a point. I’ve eaten real snake. I doubt my daughter has tried it, not even from a vat.

Lizzie says she and Vasco have updated their residency applications with the most recent grades. I’m hoping they’re both accepted. I want to talk shop with them!

Love, Mother

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Simon and I are reluctantly packing our bags. Irina doesn’t want us to go. She was very bubbly over
the break, but has regressed since school resumed. Simon sat in on her singing lessons this week and it’s clear the full effort’s not there. We’ve written to Ivan and Tej, but will not hear back before we leave.

Please tell Elizabeth she’s a very good diagnostician. Simon and I dragged Byerly to the Clinic last week. To no one’s surprise, his medications weren’t keeping up with the Vorrutyer heart ailment. Rish is nervous about the upcoming transplant. So is Irina. Simon promised Byerly that he’ll feel like a new man within weeks.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia –

Aurelia has found my breaking point – pink mice! They look soft and pretty, but the squeaks and nail scratching make my skin crawl. Thankfully, all her work was done in one of the Clinic labs. It’s also all been recorded, so there’s no doubt that she did everything herself. Mark and Amiri are SO proud of her! As am I. A replicator and two healthy litters of mice, one white and one gengineered pink, is NOT a normal science project for a 12-year-old!

Everything will be judged at tomorrow’s Science Expo. We’re not expecting Irina to win any ribbons, but her hybrid hydroponic flowers are very pretty. At least hers bloomed. The friends who ignored Lizzie’s guidance have green stems. Thanks to Ekaterin, I doubt there’s anyone in Lizzie’s class with a better grasp of botany. We’ve had some very interesting discussions about manufacturing homeopathic medications. It’s on the back burner for now due to our investments in the Whole and our prototype baby goods operation in Hassadar, but after that, who knows?

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, & Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I won the Science Expo!!! Okay, not all of it, just the Lower School, but the judges were very, very impressed. There were other mice, but those came from a purchased kit with a ready-made replicator and frozen embryos. Lots of people watched my vid, not just the judges and family. Kareen didn’t realize that I created my own embryos from a pair of fertile mice and both litters are genetically identical other than color. Lizzie and Vasco said my surgical technique was better than some of their classmates. I think they were just being nice, but it was fun to hear.

Irina was disappointed Uncle By couldn’t come, but he’s having surgery tomorrow. Aunt Rish applauded like crazy when Irina was awarded the third-place ribbon for her grade. So did everyone else. Lots of people tried growing things, but Irina’s were the only ones that came out the way they were supposed to. She was so happy, she was singing. Uncle Amiri took a vid of Irina dancing with Mila, both of them wearing crowns of her flowers. I missed it because I was watching them judge the upper grades. Lots of robots and drones. I’ll probably try that next year.

Enjoy the vids and holos!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Just a quick note to say that Uncle Byerly is doing great. Dr. Jacinta allowed me to scrub in. It’s a good thing Aunt Alys dragged him to the Clinic when she did because it was the most diseased heart I’ve seen in a living patient. Dr. Jacinta says she’s replaced worse, but usually those patients had at least one infarction.
Today convinced me that I really am destined to become a surgeon. Despite knowing how important the patient was to many people I love, from the moment I entered the operating theater, all I could think of was the procedure.

Uncle Dono and Aunt Olivia arrived last night. We didn’t tell Aunt Rish, Irina, or Aurelia because they weren’t certain they’d arrive before surgery. Traveling by fast courier doesn’t agree with Aunt Olivia, but she sucked it up the same way Mama would if Da needed to be with Uncle Ivan. Uncle Dono cried with relief when we came to tell everyone Uncle By was fine. So did Uncle Amiri. He’s been a great support to Aunt Rish. Da says Uncle Amiri used to hate Uncle By, but they’ve grown a lot closer over the years. I guess there’s hope for Tegid, then. I know what Helen sees in him, but Taurie and I find him rather insipid. We fear he’s one of those guys who peaks at the Academy and stumbles along after that.

Mama would say I’m rambling like Da does when he’s tired. It’s been an intense two days. But a medal, a ribbon, and a new heart – I’d call it damn good ones!

Love, Lizzie

Damn good ones, indeed! Too bad Aurelia’s passion isn’t the sciences because Mark has all the resources she’d need to keep exploring that gift. Should we consider finding a robotics tutor from the City University? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We really enjoy Dono and Olivia’s visits. Olivia is so quietly brilliant and Dono brings all the good gossip that Miles conveniently forgets to pass on. Like Lord Vorkalloner stupidly challenging Count Vorfolse to a duel to reclaim his daughter’s lost honor. Hasn’t that man been through enough, inheriting a bankrupt district and losing his wife and two of his four children? Yes, two – did Miles mention that Lord Oleg was found dead in his cell just before Dono and Olivia lifted off?

I hope Count Vorfolse will be pleased that the four of us had a lengthy discussion last night about what MPVK might be able to do in and for his District. Miles and Martya are so focused on our District, they sometimes forget that setting up operations elsewhere won’t cannibalize hometown profits or opportunities. Like building a hydroponics operation near a river and an inter-district rail line. Surely Count Vorfolse’s people like to eat? Some jobs might also halt the exodus over the border into Vorkalloner’s District. No reason people can’t be working the timber and ore deposits on Vorfolse’s land rather than Vorkalloner’s. Especially if those jobs come with better medical care and reasonably priced, on-site childcare. Dono says unlike his late great-uncle, Lord Vorfolse tends to vote a Centrist agenda. It’s therefore very likely that they’d be open to more modern business practices.

Byerly is home recuperating with Rish. He looks ten times better already. Irina and Aurelia wanted to bake cookies for him, but he’s still on a very bland diet.

I’m sad to report that finding a robotics instructor for Aurelia won’t be easy. It appears most engineering grad students are exclusively tied to their professors’ government grants. Proprietary technology seems to be an issue for the first few non-university contacts we’ve sourced. Don’t worry, we’ll keep trying.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

WE DID IT!!! Vasco and I were accepted to residency programs at Silica Hospital! Vasco’s family is somewhat disappointed. So are the Duronas, but I’m not averse to a surgical fellowship with them after I master all the basic skills. Uncle Mark and Aunt Kareen talk so fondly of their years in Silica, I want to experience it, too.

I’ll be writing to Grandma Elizabeth next, but please give it a few days for the news to reach her before you start plotting with Aunt Sarah to introduce us to millions of people our age. We don’t need a huge welcome party.

Love, Lizzie

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Is it okay that I’m a bit sad that Lizzie and Vasco are going to Beta Colony? It’s been so nice to have Lizzie as our big sister. Irina’s really upset. She cried at school today and said everyone’s leaving her.

I know Aunt Elena was supposed to take us to see Grandma Elizabeth over our spring break, but it might be better if we came home. Is that possible?

Love, Aurelia

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve just had a very disturbing letter from Headmaster Almeida. He says that although Irina continues to do well academically, she’s become very depressed and withdrawn. We obviously underestimated how much emotional support she was getting from Padma and Taurie last school year. And with Lizzie going off to Silica soon, we worry that our songbird will become even more melancholy.

Mamere has suggested sending Irina to Vorbarr Sultana for her last two years of secondary school. There are plenty of pros to the argument: the Old Town School has excellent security; Simone and Selig; plentiful music tutors; proximity to Padma and Pavel; the security of being under Gregor’s direct protection, far away from Ceta or Whole politics; her close bond with Mamere and especially Simon, who’d happily listen to our darling sing scales 10 hours a day. The cons: she’d be even further away from us; we have no idea if Rish and By would relocate; and Aurelia.

Your oldest daughter is a big concern. Moving Irina means Aurelia would be the only one of our girls left on Escobar other than little Mila. It could be argued it would only be for a year, assuming you’re planning on sending Nile and Everard to La Escuela, but a school year is a very long time when you’re 12 or 13.

Komarr isn’t really an option for Irina due to the much shorter day-cycle. Laisa feels Irina wouldn’t be able to effectively juggle schoolwork, school activities, and her music lessons. Remote learning has also been suggested, but given the hours devoted to music, we fear that would leave Irina with no friends her own age.

Mamere and Miles will argue you should send Aurelia to Barrayar. We’re not sure it would be best
for either girl. We also don’t want Irina used as an excuse to usurp your parental right to make decisions for your child. Feel free to remind Mamere how poorly she received advice from her father and sisters regarding my education.

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts.
Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We don’t envy you or Ivan and Tej the decisions ahead. I’m not sure there’s a perfect solution for either Irina or Aurelia. Despite La Escuela’s many strengths, it’s not the haven we imagined. Not given external events.

The Arquas were sent to Kibou-daini because it’s a cul-de-sac planet and Mark’s investments serve as cover for a sizeable intelligence network. Udine and Shiv’s retirement is over. We’re not exactly sure what they’re planning, but they’ve begun putting out feelers to kidnap Rish, Tej, Irina, and three cyro freezers reposing in the bowels of the Negri Building. So far, Ambassador Vorlynkin’s team has done an admirable job containing the grenade Gregor stored in his backyard, but all it would take is one small slip for our family to be in danger. If that happens, our ability to act on Escobar would be far more limited than it is within the Empire.

Or to put it another way, we wouldn’t send Simone to Escobar next year even if La Escuela was a perfect fit. It’s far too easy to distract a rebellious teen who thinks her Da and uncles are afraid of shadows. Guilty as charged, because we know exactly what evil lurks there.

If you don’t want to consider the posh, secure Old Town School here in Vorbarr Sultana, there are some great schools on Komarr. It would be very easy to expand KareenVB’s security team’s remit to include my siblings. Taurie says Dmitri and Alex broke them in well because they’re unobtrusive, yet hyper-vigilant.

Lest you think we’re trying to evade responsibility, my seven sibs are welcome here anytime, whether it be for a week, month, or decade. After all, didn’t generations of Vorkosigans foster with relatives before the Imperial Academy was created?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Kareen and I vote to send the children to Barrayar. Not because we’re tired of responsibility – nothing could be further from the truth! – but for their safety. Several Houses are taking advantage of House Jain’s growing pains to try to muscle in on former Cordonah territory. The bribes being offered to recruit parts of their intelligence network include demonstrations of strength and loyalty. Cordonah rivals have been traced back to kidnappings or prison breaks on at least 10 worlds. Nothing on Escobar or Kibou-daini yet, but it’s not a chance worth taking.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Hey Sis –

Add Sarah’s and my votes to the send Aurelia to Barrayar pile. The small tidbits you’ve shared with Mother have us all concerned for her and Irina’s safety. We’d lobby for Aurelia to come here with Lizzie, except I’m not sure how safe Silica is these days. Lina treated two bystanders shot in the kidnapping of the Marilac ambassador’s husband. It’s been over a week with no word. If a grown man isn’t safe on public transport, teenage girls aren’t, either.
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

If Gregor and I could build you a school on Sergyar that could provide your children with everything they need, we’d do it in a heartbeat. But we can’t. It’s nothing to do with money and everything to do with the fact that right now, they don’t have many true intellectual peers. Sergyar has many bright children, but how many have ever been off-planet or seen a real ballet? And of that handful, how many have parents who’d send their children to a boarding school far away from them?

Every time I get frustrated with the state of education or the arts on Sergyar, my loving husband reminds me that the atmosphere on Komarr won’t be breathable for another 300 years. Within that context, Sergyar’s development is proceeding at a blistering pace. Just not fast enough for the potential geniuses in our midst. Indeed, you’d probably be hard-pressed to find peers for Aurelia in many of Barrayar’s more rural districts. You certainly won’t find access to military-grade science anywhere but here in Vorbarr Sultana.

Three of the sharpest minds in the Imperium were sent to oversee development of an uncharted world. It’s no surprise that their children’s minds far outpace their peers. Perrin reminds me of a young Dmitri. Alexei agrees. He also says Everard is a cross between him and Pavel, looking to the stars at a young age. If Everard’s talents develop the way our sons’ did, that young man will belong at the Academy. To date, only a handful of Sergyarans have graduated because most who apply don’t have the requisite skills to succeed. Being a big fish in a small pond is easy; keeping up with all the other big fish is not.

Were Ivan and Tej still our ambassadors to Escobar, we’d have fewer reservations about your children attending school there. Fewer, not none. Gregor and I have tremendous faith in Ambassador Voranthis. That said, the attempt to kidnap Irina really shook them. Ambassadors aren’t accustomed to dealing with issues related to unaccompanied minor children. Certainly not ones related to the Emperor.

That’s really the crux of the matter. Regardless of the surname, Lord Padma Xav Vorpatril’s and Count Aral Xav Vorkosigan’s descendants will never be truly safe until Gregor and I are grandparents many times over. Until then, their safety is best guaranteed within the Empire.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

My love, I fear our Empress is correct on all counts. When we agreed to settle on Sergyar, we didn’t factor in the possibility that our future children’s intellect would outstrip the resources available on this brave new world. Or that Jackson’s Whole could repeatedly send rumbles through the Nexus. Escobar is wonderful. So is La Escuela Internacional. But when it comes to safety, our needs exceed what they can provide. Let’s write to Ivan and Tej and see where they stand. Love, Oliver

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Irina wants to live with Mamere and Simon. After weighing it all, we reluctantly agree. On one condition, she visits Eta Ceta before going to Barrayar. Irina fears the journey, despite our promise to transport her on an Imperial courier. We’re scared, too, but the future darling of the opera world cannot be afraid to travel.

Love, Ivan and Tej

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
Much to Da’s displeasure, this daughter of an Imperial Auditor can be bribed. Not with money, but another stamp in my passport. Rather than traveling back to Beta Colony with Grandma Elizabeth, Vasco and I will be escorting Irina to Eta Ceta. Aunt Tej has promised to show us all kinds of marvelous sights. Uncle Ivan says we can have anything at his disposal as long as we get his daughter there in one piece. He’s already contacted Uncle Amiri to have a supply of tranquilizers ready. Might have to give some to Vasco, who’s only been off-planet twice.

Any chance you could bring all the troops to my graduation? It’ll be my last chance to see them for a while, plus I want Vasco’s family to meet as much of ours as possible. Don’t tell Da, but I think Señora Cortez believes there’s some horrible mutation lurking in the Naismith genes. She’s a nice woman, but very gullible.

Love, Lizzie

My love, this is going to be FUN! Do you think Miles and Mark would let me call them Son? Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia,

John, Sarah, and I are looking forward to seeing everyone at Lizzie’s graduation. Any chance you could stay a few extra days while we have treatments at the Clinic?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you so much for everything you did to make Lizzie’s graduation special. Having all the little ones there helped make up for her missing siblings. I must admit, it was entertaining watching Vasco’s family trying to slot everyone into categories. It might’ve been less confusing if Uncle John hadn’t (incorrectly) persisted in addressing you, me, and Kareen as Lady Vorkosigan. Sadly, not all of my husband’s inappropriate sense of humor comes from the Vorkosigan side.

Speaking of inappropriate, Miles asked me to relay that he agrees with Mark’s assessment that the eye-level view of Señora Cortez is vastly disappointing. Surely they have corsetieres on Escobar?

Simone and Selig had superb end-of-year reports. We’re looking forward to spending most of the summer in the District. Oh, and Rene and Tatya Vorbretton’s oldest just got engaged, so we can also look forward to a betrothal ceremony!

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Thank you for the loan of Armswoman Varga and Armsman Kulick. Everyone arrived safely yesterday. I’ve cleared my calendar as best I could. I’ve even managed an invitation to a concert at the Celestial Garden. I’m looking forward to showing Lizzie all the many spots where Miles found trouble.

Love, Ivan & Tej

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Vasco and I are safely arrived at Grandma Elizabeth’s after a wonderful visit to Eta Ceta. We were wined and dined extravagantly. We were also presented to Emperor Giaja and Empress Rian! Not
that we saw the Empress inside her float bubble, but she spoke to us and said she saw both my parents in my features. Vasco was totally flabbergasted. The Emperor laughed and said if only my hair were longer, I might pass for the Empress’ daughter. I strongly suspect my sneaky Da saw inside the bubble. Uncle Ivan would neither confirm or deny, which means I’m right.

Grandma wants us to stay with her indefinitely, but I really think we need our own apartment. It wouldn’t be so bad if we were on a normal schedule, but Grandma sleeps so lightly, I’m afraid of waking her as we work rotating shifts.

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Don’t worry about transport. I’m sending my ship to pick up Irina from Eta Ceta. She’ll spend a few days packing up stuff here before all we set sail for Sergyar. Kareen and I promise to deliver Aurelia safely to Miles and Ekaterin. We’ve got lots of work – not counting what Gregor and Laisa throw at us! – so we’ll be on Barrayar at least a month. Then we jump around for a while, out to the Zoave Twilight. I promise we’ll be back in plenty of time to relay everyone to Barrayar for Winterfair.

Enjoy the enclosed vid. The language spigot is wide open and the funniest sentences are popping out!

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver –

I’m sorry to be so remiss in sending vids, but between Anna’s traveling and guests at the embassy, I’ve been very busy.

I didn’t realize how much I missed Lizzie until the time came to let her go! We had a wonderful visit. I’m glad Vasco is studying pediatrics because he’s a natural. Not just with our terrible toddlers, but teens, too. Vasco spent a lot of time teaching Irina calming techniques for the voyage. It really helped.

Work is challenging. Lots of rumors thanks to shrapnel from the Whole. The sole reason this job isn’t impossible is because this ambassador and his wife LISTEN. To me, to briefings, to party gossip. Both are excellent at filtering the wheat from the chaff and adjusting their behavior accordingly. Such a contrast to the Vorthorpes, who worried about everything. I can’t decide if it’s the results of many years in Ops or proximity to the Emperor and Empress, but whichever, I like it.

Love Nikki, Anna, and the twin terrors

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m settling in. Ekaterin gave me Lizzie’s old room so I’m right next to Simone. I’m a little nervous about school starting. So is Irina. Simone says we have nothing to worry about and lots of her friends have younger siblings. Selig’s, too.

Big news – I’ll be sharing Selig’s navigation tutor! We’ve been spending a lot of time playing war games. Some of Selig’s friends groused about the baby cousin until I trounced them. It’s even more fun than playing with Everard and Uncle Oliver because nobody expects me to win. Selig and Miles just laugh.

Aunt Alys took us shopping for school uniforms and a bunch of other stuff she says Irina and I will
need because Vorbarr Sultana gets much colder than Nuevo Valencia. Don’t worry, Ekaterin made sure we got some casual things, too, because the styles on Escobar are totally different and she wants us to fit in with our new friends. Ekaterin also took us all for school physicals. Mine and Irina’s were very long because they tested for every alien pathogen they could think of.

I love, love, love the new swimming pool! It’s so much nicer than the one at the La Escuela, plus we can use it whenever we want. Armswoman Varga was a bit shocked the first time Miles joined us. I guess she’d never seen his scars before. Simone says Miles doesn’t swim with anybody but family. Mark, either.

Miles and Mark are both different here on Barrayar. Even at home, Miles has to be Count Vorkosigan most of the time. Mark is way more formal. Kareen and Mila can get him to laugh, but everyone else has to work for a smile. Maybe because he’s been so busy since we arrived? Breakfast is the only meal we’re guaranteed to see him, and that’s only because Kareen refuses to feed Mila in their suite. Kareen says she doesn’t want to attract bugs. Neither does Ekaterin. Selig says we can take snacks into the game room, but not our bedrooms.

Please tell everyone to write. I love getting mail!
Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I really wish you’d given me this baby sister 50 years ago. Ekaterin says she’s me without the hyperactivity and more interest in clothes. Aunt Alys and Drou concur. Gregor loves watching us finish each other’s sentences. He also says she wouldn’t have been free to be Aurelia in the Barrayar of our childhood. That’s sadly true.

Kou says Da will be very proud to see his daughter be among the first females to graduate from the Academy. Yes, you heard it here first. The Imperial Academy is about to begin accepting applications from women for next year’s cadet class. I’m not sure if Aurelia will want to apply or if she’d be better off studying engineering. Uncle Vorthys thinks she could be one of those genius students who comes along once a decade to set the discipline on fire.

The first week of school went well. Aurelia’s classes are scattered across many levels. The only things she tested slightly below grade level were history and languages. No problems with English and French; her formal Russian and Greek are lacking. Nothing some tutoring won’t fix. Her off-the-charts testing in math and sciences allowed her entrance into some of the secondary school clubs. Selig says she’ll soon to be the pet of the tech set. Nothing more. Your grandson is standing firm that Aurelia isn’t allowed to date.

Irina tested on or slightly above grade level on everything except languages, where she demonstrated university-level fluidity in all eight languages the school offers. She and Simone have joined the drama club together. They share a few classes and eat lunch together daily. They’re going out this weekend with a gaggle of girls. Aunt Alys is nervous. Simon says Irina will be perfectly safe with my armsmen.

Armswoman Varga continues to impress, both with the girls and integrating herself into the main corps. She’s relearning Vorbarr Sultana from the girls’ perspective, the residential areas where their classmates live and the shopping areas where teens congregate. Farkas is also rotating her through other details. She met the expected resistance from some of the crusty armsmen at Vorhartung, but is doing well elsewhere. Henri Vorvolk plans to add an armswoman when his current commander retires. Dono does, too. He’s wanted to do so for a long time, but was reluctant to be the first to break yet another gender barrier.
Delia promises this will be an especially sparkly Winterfair season. We’re a touch nervous as to what that might entail.

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I love having another girl here! I guess I missed Lizzie, Taurie, and KareenVB more than I thought. Selig says it’s as if Helen were younger than us instead of older because Aurelia likes doing stuff with us together and separately. A few of my friends were afraid Aurelia would want to tag along with me everywhere like their little sisters do, but it’s not like that. The only bad thing is how Mama constantly points out that Aurelia’s room is much neater than mine. Aurelia says if I were the oldest instead of the youngest, I’d put my things away, too. Alex agrees. Mama confirmed that Nikki learned to put his spaceship models away when Alex and Helen started walking because otherwise they’d chew on them. I don’t remember trying to eat some of Alex’s drawing pencils, but he and Da swear I did.

Selig and I need some help on our Winterfair gift for Aurelia. We want to make a vid of her favorite places on Sergyar for when she gets a little homesick. Aunt Alys suggested we contact some of Aurelia’s friends and ask them to send vid of places they like. Da says he’ll pay all the postage, but we need to know who to contact.

Love, Simone
Transfer Issues

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Enclosed are Aurelia’s first progress reports. As you can see, she’s excelling at everything except Greek. She’ll get there. Other reports were also fantastic across the board. Aurelia’s study ethic has clearly rubbed off on Simone! Selig, too – the two of them spend hours together doing all kinds of robotics projects.

Ekaterin’s been away on the South Continent for over a week, helping nurse her father and stepmother through pneumonia. Selig and Simone want to visit, but Ekaterin insists we hold off until Sasha and Violie are stronger. I suspect we’ll be spending many more weekends with them. If they got this sick during their Spring, what will happen when their weather turns?

I’ve saved the best for last. Lieutenant Vorkosigan’s been reassigned from convoy escort to a fast courier based in Barrayar orbit! She’ll even be home for Winterfair!

Love, Miles

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

I had no idea how much Simon would enjoy receiving school progress reports! The praise was extremely well deserved. So was the reward. Simon and Irina will be attending the dress rehearsal of the new production of Aida. They’re both looking forward to meeting the performers and petting the animals. I’d prefer no camels drool or spit on me, thank you very much.

Padma is working very hard. He was here for a few days last week. We fed him well and sent him back to the Academy with plenty of provisions for his friends. He’s very pleased you’re bringing the troops to visit. So are we, of course, but it’s very hard for our grandchildren to be away from Ivan and Tej for Winterfair. Tej writes them almost every day, but it’s not the same as hugging them in person.

I’m very much looking forward to the Winterfair Ball. Watch the mail for your invitation to welcome the New Year with the Silica Ballet performing their famous Seasons. They’ll be staying on-planet for about a month. Every performance was sold out within an hour of the tickets going on sale. Let me know if you want to take the children to see The Nutcracker. Falco is always very accommodating about lending me his box for matinee performances.

Miles says he mentioned that Sasha and Violie are ill. I’m afraid their prognosis is not good. I promise that things at Vorkosigan House are running smoothly without Ekaterin. Olivia and Dono are in town for the legislative session and she’s helping keep an eye on everyone. It’s lovely to see Irina and Aurelia growing closer to Delia and Olivia. They’ll never replace Kareen, but it’s another link to the familiar.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Thank you so much for the credit chit for the new laser. Selig and I are setting up a workshop in the sub-basement. Helen has promised to help when she gets leave.

We’re going to the South Continent next weekend. I know I met Ekaterin’s parents at Nikki’s
wedding, but I don’t really remember them. Simone says it’s okay and her uncles will take us sightseeing. Miles showed me holos so I’ll know which Vorvayne is which. He says his in-laws are all very nice and promises we’ll have fun. I hope so. Ekaterin looks very tired on our vid calls.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

It’s sweet of you to be concerned, but I’m fine. Da and Violie are almost recovered. More important, they’ve finally agreed to hiring a live-in housekeeper. My sisters-in-law screened a bunch of candidates and we’re hoping Violie will make a decision by the end of the week. I may not return home with Miles and the children, but I promise it won’t be much longer. Work is piling up, in the District and my business, plus I’m behind on my holiday plans. Thank God for Olivia. She took Simone to the doctor the other day. Nothing too serious, just bad bruising from a collision in phys ed class, but if Varga hadn’t reported it, Simone would never have told Miles that her ribs and breasts were swollen and sore. My poor baby! She’s doing better now, thanks to lots of ice, heat packs, and a few meals on trays. Miles also coaxed her into the hot tub last night. He said it helped both of them.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

(expanded transit)Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Today was a very bad day. Don’t worry, we’re all safe.

On Sergyar or Escobar, Irina’s skin color is nothing unusual. It is in Vorbarr Sultana. Some horrible girl in the drama club was so upset Irina got the lead role in their next show, she called Irina some very nasty names. In Greek, which most people didn’t understand, but of course Irina did. Selig and I were in the computer lab and could hear her crying all the way from the auditorium. Or maybe that was Kulick’s wristcom. I’m glad we had some evacuation drills because being rushed out of school was very scary. Miles beat us home. Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon arrived at Vorkosigan House minutes after we did. They’re all staying over because Irina fell asleep after she finished crying and throwing up. It was awful.

I’ve never seen Miles or Uncle Simon look so scary. Ekaterin says not to worry, none of us are in trouble, and everyone is very proud of how well we followed the armsmen’s orders and comforted Simone all the way home.

Aunt Alys said we can sleep late tomorrow because we’re not going to school. She also said not to worry about the math test because Miles outranks our teacher and Selig and I can study together. Ekaterin said it’s okay for me to sleep in Simone’s room tonight and we’ll talk more tomorrow. And that Irina definitely got the part because she’s the best one, not because Porgy and Bess is about black people.

I’ll write more tomorrow.

Love, Aurelia

*****

(expanded transit)Dear Mother and Oliver,

As school crises go, it could have been a lot worse. Everyone was physically safe at all times. Varga and Kulick could not have handled everything better. The children were also extraordinary. Selig was ahead of Kulick to the auditorium and helped get Irina to the groundcar while Simone led Aurelia. The pairs are supposed to be the other way, but Irina was in a justifiable state of collapse.
Aurelia’s letter is fairly accurate. Let me assure you that Simon and I aren’t angry that a teenage girl insulted a classmate. That would be a massive overreaction, even for level-headed me. No, we’re upset because there is an ENORMOUS leak at ImpSec. How else could a 16-year-old accuse her classmate’s grandparents of wanting to sell her into slavery because that’s all niggers are good for?

I’m not sure what part of Irina’s monitoring recording was more chilling, Athena Vorstamos’ ease with such disgusting, outdated racial slurs or how much classified information she divulged in less than 30 seconds. Captain Vorstamos has a lot to answer for. He has the fast-penta allergy; his wife and children do not. We’ll be interviewing them tomorrow. All five of them, including the boy Aurelia’s age. I’m sure the parents will protest, but it won’t matter because I have authorization from Count Voreliades to question his liege-people. Gregor read him into the situation and he’s absolutely horrified. Gregor insisted on handling it personally because his friend Ambassador Voranthis is Countess Voreliades’ nephew.

Multiple messages are en route to Ivan and Tej. Gregor’s also alerted Mark and Kareen. Ekaterin and Aunt Alys will write soon. I just wanted to reassure you that Aurelia handled everything like a champion and we’ll keep a close eye on her.

Love, Miles, Ekaterin, Selig, Simone, and our loyal retainers

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Things are very tense at the Residence. Gregor is usually very patient and waits for information to come to him. Not today. No, he wanted to march into the Negri Building and confront Captain Vorstamos. Gregor was reluctantly persuaded to wait until Miles concluded his investigation on the condition that he chair the meeting wherein the captain learns of his fate. It won’t be pretty for the captain, several colleagues, and the superior officers who gave these nitwits high-level security clearances with no regard for previous protocol violations. No ImpSec analyst should be spewing details of their work at the dinner table, yet all three Vorstamos children know more about certain Imperial issues than some counts!

Ekaterin and Aunt Alys brought the children over for tea. Sadly, Simone’s Greek is better than anyone suspected and she understood all of her classmate’s filth. Of course Simone shared it with Selig, but privately. Gregor gave Aurelia a sanitized version that focused on Komarr’s ethnic diversity vis-à-vis Barrayar and how certain repercussions of the Time of Isolation are still being felt. Aurelia was shocked at the estimate that more than 90% of Barrayar’s population, including Miss Vorstamos, has never left the planet’s surface. All four of the children’s mouths dropped open when Aunt Alys said she’d never been off-planet until after Ivan entered the Academy. I can remember what must’ve been Gregor’s first visit to Komarr. He was about 7 and looked so small next to the scary Regent Vorkosigan.

Aunt Alys took Irina for an emergency session with her counselor this morning. A few sessions might also be beneficial for Aurelia. Not having seen you two in your former careers, Aurelia’s definition of security breaches seems limited to physical issues. At her age, I understood the concept of proprietary company information, but the idea of my peers knowing government or military secrets would’ve seemed preposterous. As you know, that was a great adjustment for me when Gregor and I started our family. I rather envy the parents who only had to field awkward questions about strangers’ body parts, not the day’s alert level.

All our love, Laisa & Gregor

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,
I scared my daughter today. Correction: I likely scared everyone around me. Let’s just say I didn’t take the Irina news well. We’re confident Miles and Gregor will punish Captain Vorstamos appropriately. Kareen and I want to deal with his wife. If children learn what they live, the Vorstamos home is clearly full of racist bullshit. Even being raised on the Whole, I never heard the word nigger until I reached Earth. Kareen figured it out from the slavery context, but had never heard it, either.

The Emperor has requested we rearrange our travel plans to allow for an immediate visit to Eta Ceta. As my wife put it, Ivan and Tej need hugs.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Uncle Gregor decided we don’t have to go to school for the rest of the week. He also promised that we won’t see Athena Vorstamos or her brothers because they’ve all been suspended while Miles investigates how they knew that someone tried to kidnap Irina last year. Selig and Simone are mad they didn’t even know, but some stupid classmates did. Uncle Simon says he and Miles were so angry because very few people in Vorbarr Sultana know about stuff that happens outside the Empire and our classmates certainly shouldn’t know these private things.

Miles has promised that next week, we’ll have tea with Professora Vorthys and Uncle Duv so they can tell us about Barrayar’s history of arranged marriages. I’m not sure if they’ll invite Miss Vorbelova. If not, I can always ask her questions at our next tutoring session. And before I forget, could you please bring a fossil for her Winterfair gift? She’s never been to Sergyar, so I think she’d like that.

Because we’re not going to school, Ekaterin is taking us to the South Continent for a few days. Not to see her family, but to Uncle Simon’s favorite resort. Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon plan to sit under a beach umbrella and read while the rest of us swim and soak up lots of sun. Irina loves hot weather, so it should cheer her up.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Our Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

In case you haven’t heard, we’re off to the South Continent tomorrow. Irina’s therapist recommended a change of scenery while Miles and Gregor sort things out. Our poor granddaughter is very fragile right now. We fear this wasn’t the first time Miss Vorstamos was rude, merely the first time she was stupid enough to say anything vile in front of an armsman. That’s not a critique of Varga, Kulick, or any of the others. If Gregor’s daughter was allowed to use the school lavatory unsupervised, surely we didn’t expect Ivan’s to need that extra layer of protection!

We’ve dissuaded Padma from requesting emergency leave on the grounds that it would give credence to the rumors. He’s as upset as any older brother would be. Interestingly, considering how little they saw each other when Padma was small, our grandson’s furious expression is almost an exact duplicate of Gregor’s. We’re not the only ones who noticed. In a quick vid call assuring us that he’s keeping an eye on his cousin, Pavel noted that Padma looks just like his Da when he’s angry!

I promise Aurelia’s getting plenty of attention and we’ll alert you if she shows any issues other than the general shock and concern for Irina. As for Selig and Simone, they’re both stupendous. What a difference a few years makes!

Much love, Alys and Simon
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I thought you might enjoy seeing the children frolic in the surf. We’re all having a lovely time, even Simon, who wanted to stay behind and help disembowel Captain Vorstamos. No need. The Emperor will bring the hammer down tomorrow. Miles persuaded him to wait for the weekend so fewer staff will witness events firsthand.

Nikki sent a short note confirming everything’s under control on Eta Ceta. Miles said if he didn’t have access to the official report, he’d be annoyed at the terse correspondence. I wonder where Nikki learned that writing style?

Love, Ekaterin

My love, Aral would be so pleased Miles is FINALLY learning what it feels like to worry about children when they’re many light years away! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I really rue the days Allegre and Desplains took their hard-earned retirements. Two major security fails in just over a year hints at much more malfeasance to uncover. Colonel Chaly’s security task force is about to see their mandate expand significantly. Every embassy and consulate, no matter how small or distant, will be audited by her team. I want the fear of Horus put in everyone from ambassadors to clerks accepting bribes as small as free meals. And before you ask, Colonel Chaly is not being relocated. Although her primary reporting line remains through Ops, she now also has a dotted reporting line to Ambassador Vorpatril. I can’t think of anyone better than Ivan and Tej to review the task force’s findings.

It’s a good thing you’re bringing the troops to Barrayar for Winterfair because Lord Auditor Vorkosigan won’t be leaving the planet for some time. He and a to-be-determined Ninth Auditor are about to rip ImpSec apart. We hope the problem is limited to one section in Galactic Affairs. Many people will be surprised tomorrow to learn that Commodore Paretsky has retired and General Galeni is their new boss. We are confident Commodore Vorberg will do an excellent job as the new Head of Komarran Affairs. Unlike Paretsky, who was clearly promoted beyond his abilities when General Kanzian succeeded Allegre. Although We didn’t accept Kanzian’s resignation yesterday, replacing him remains a possibility as the investigation unfolds. I sincerely hope the proud Kanzian family history will remain untarnished.

And now to the meeting. So far, eight men and two women have faced Our wrath. All were dishonorably discharged from Our service. At least four, including Captain Vorstamos, will face courts martial. They’re in cells. Of more interest to you, the rest of the Vorstamos family has returned to a town in Count Voreliades’ District. The municipal guard there has been tasked with monitoring them.

My formidable wife will be tomorrow’s guest speaker at the Old Town School’s morning assembly. She’ll discuss how difficult it is to move to a new world and the responsibilities our subjects bear to welcome everyone to Barrayar, regardless of their birthplace, citizenship, or appearance. We expect the outlying areas to be slower to acclimate to galactic norms. One of the most exclusive schools in Our capitol city, however, will NOT be a breeding ground for bigotry and hatred.

Much love, Gregor the Grumpy and Empress Laisa the Wise

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
I guess the water washed off my sunscreen because my left shoulder is itchy and peeling. We had lots of fun at the beach. We even went fishing! Irina thought touching bait was disgusting, but I loved the whole experience. Plus the chef at the resort cooked our catch for dinner. It was delicious!

School today was very intense. Aunt Laisa lectured everyone about bigotry. I couldn’t believe some of the stories she told from when she first came to Barrayar and people insulted her for being Komarran. A girl in the grade above me cried and said she’s been bullied for being Komarran, too. Selig’s friend Hussein said Athena Vorstamos and some of her friends have been calling him nasty names since he moved here from Earth three years ago. Hussein is very handsome, with chocolate brown skin and nice muscles. He’s also very smart.

I took my math test and the history one I missed. Irina’s taking her missed tests tomorrow. She had a hard day. She said lots of people apologized for Athena being mean, but some blamed her for their friends moving away. I hope she doesn’t drop out of the show. They rehearsed one of the main numbers today and she sounds SO good with the boy playing the lead. Like Athena, he’s in his last year. Maybe that’s why Athena was so mad not to get the lead.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Mark’s ship has reached Ceta space and should be with us in about two days. I’m very glad Gregor sent the cavalry because my wife is falling apart.

I’m not sure when I became colorblind to people’s skin. Likely my rotation on Earth, when I passed a pantheon of beautiful women every single day. Yes, it’s shallow that a randy young officer focused on his preferred gender, but by the time I left London, skin was just another descriptor like hair or eye color.

If I thought about my wife’s skin before meeting her parents, it was only in the context of ‘Thank God it’s not blue.’ Or red or green or yellow. What the *bleep* was the Baronne thinking? This is where By would acerbically insert, “She wasn’t. The Baronne only cared about competing with the Star Crèche, not how her offspring would function as adults when they weren’t on display like zoo animals.” To which Miles would add, “There’s a reason gengineered oddities aren’t often copied. Even the ones with souls, like Sergeant Taura.” And they’d both be right.

I stupidly thought there was no worse peer bullying than Miles endured throughout our childhood and Academy days. Then I met my wife’s siblings. Rish was a bit condescending, but no more than many older sisters I know. But the rest of the oh-so-superior-genetically-enhanced-part-haut tribe were simply bullying bastards. Especially the Jewels, which is wildly ironic considering they lack the advantage of Shiv’s superior intelligence in their genetic mix. Sadly, the Baronne’s considerable intelligence is eclipsed by her false haut superiority. Moira’s brainwashing renders Udine totally incapable of comprehending that lowly naturals have been outwitting her and Shiv since long before the first overthrow of House Cordonah.

I never expected our personable, intelligent, talented sprogs to experience anything negative in school other the usual new student awkwardness. Especially not on Barrayar, where my name and title carry so much weight. Not, apparently, to jealous teenagers. You have no idea how much I regret accepting this post. I’d love to tell Gregor to find someone else because Irina needs us more than he does. Which we know isn’t true, it just feels that way. Especially to Tej, who hasn’t stopped crying in days, other than to say that we should’ve given the sprogs Mamere’s beautiful skin when the gametes were gene-cleaned. I’d no more have agreed to that than to sprogs who were lavender or charcoal gray. If I wanted offspring who look like the majority of people in Vorbarr Sultana, I
wouldn’t have followed our Emperor’s example and married a gorgeous off-worlder.

Believe it or not, I’m totally sober right now. I don’t think booze will help.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother,

Thanks for forwarding Ivan’s letter. Yes, he totally sounded like Da on a very bad day. Except Da wouldn’t have been sober. I admire that Ivan, who greatly enjoys recreational drinking, doesn’t use it as a crutch the way Da and I would when things didn’t go our way. The downside of the Auditor’s chain: the times I most want to drink to oblivion are often when I need to be most alert. And by the end of the crisis, I’ve usually had a seizure or two, making drinking even less appealing.

Duv and I had a quick lunch today. General Galeni’s reassignment has put the fear of Horus in his new section. My appearance had most analysts looking like they were clenching their butt cheeks to prevent anything staining their undershorts. And because I’m an evil, evil man, while Ninth Auditor Vanzin’s most secure data analysis team starts pulling apart the Galactic Affairs back-up files, I’ll be reviewing Komarran Affairs. Then Sergyar and Domestic Affairs, leaving the bozos at Galactic Affairs for last. Partially to stress them, but also to give Colonel Chaly’s team time to gather some intelligence from the sector Captain Vorstamos’ team was covering.

Varga and Kulick report that the rest of the school week was uneventful. Aurelia seems to be settling down a bit quicker than Simone. Not sure if it’s because Simone and Irina are together more or if Aurelia is taking comfort from being under Selig’s wing. I’m very proud of how responsible our son is being, making sure he knows everyone’s whereabouts at all times and cancelling some of his plans to entertain Aurelia. They really enjoy being together. The initial politeness is gone and they’re calling each other names when they aggravate each other. But only at home – in public, their behavior is dignified and perfect.

I’ll keep you posted if we uncover anything vital at ImpSec. In exchange, I expect you to advise us if Mark or Ivan says anything we should know. Nikki says things are very bad. They’d have to be for Tej to shriek at Daniel for being too loud.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan and his wonderful wife
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Maybe leaving Aurelia and Selig together so much was a mistake. The good news: their robot’s mechanical arm does work remotely. The bad: the test circle they decided to cut out of the basement wall cut the main power to most of the house. It was a fairly quick fix once the cause of the problem was established, but there were a few tense moments when ImpSec was certain we’d been attacked. Miles said I’m to ask you about the time he, Elena, and Ivan found a chest of old weapons in the attic. As far as he’s concerned, no fire means no punishment required beyond a long, boring lecture about the dangers of lasers. Uncle Vorthys agreed. He’s anxious to see the prototype. Aunt Vorthys says with his help, they’ll probably collapse an entire wall in the name of science. I fear she’s right.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia,

While I don’t advocate wanton residential destruction, Aurelia and Selig’s robot is remarkably sophisticated for a first attempt. I’d like to see them working in somewhat safer surroundings. Can we discuss while you’re on-planet?

Regards, Georg Vorthys

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m so glad you didn’t protest Gregor sending the Admiral Vorkosigan to bring you and the troops home for Winterfair. Everyone’s looking forward to seeing Prince Alexei and meeting Miss Entsky. I sincerely hope Miss Entsky and Princess Kareen get along. If not, it’ll make the joint fitting for their ball gowns most awkward!

Ivan said Mark and Kareen left Eta Ceta a few days ago. Depending on how long they spend on Jackson’s Whole, they may arrive before you. I really wish they weren’t taking Mila anywhere near that depraved planet, but needs must.

Irina is looking forward to seeing everyone. In addition to school play rehearsals, she’s been practicing an aria to sing at the Ball. She sounds like an angel.

Much love, Alys & Simon

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

As much as I love Beta Colony, the thought of not celebrating Winterfair with family has me incredibly homesick. We’re going to the Embassy ball, but it won’t be the same. Vasco is homesick, too. Grandma Elizabeth and Aunt Sarah plan to cook a traditional Christmas dinner, but the lack of a real tree to decorate is a problem. I wanted to get an artificial one, but Vasco said it wouldn’t be the same without pine needles making a mess. I’m sure I can find mistletoe. Kissing is good, right?

Work is going well. I assisted in a tricky kidney resection yesterday and a partial bowel removal today. I’m a little dismayed at how cavalier some of my fellow residents are about replacing organs. Yes, the technology is amazing, but growing replacements takes time the patient doesn’t always have.
I avoid discussing the economics of organ replacement because Betans dismiss every world without universal free health care as primitive. It’s an admirable goal, but I doubt the average Barrayaran would trade unlimited medical services for restrictions on family size. Most Betans are aghast that I’m one of seven planned children. I’ve heard many insults about my parents’ total disregard for our family’s resource consumption. I usually respond that where I come from, breathable air is free and we’ve got an entire, underpopulated planet waiting if Barrayar gets too crowded. Vasco choked the day an idiot insisted their government should sue to recover Sergyar because a Betan found it first. I asked if every undiscovered planet comes supplied with modern weapons caches and walked away.

Lina and Johnny just received their second child permit. They decided on another girl so the two can share a room. This is my Vor privilege showing, but I find Silica rather claustrophobic in that respect. My cousins can afford a bigger place, but it’s impossible to find more than two bedrooms anywhere near the hospital. We were very lucky to find a spacious apartment, but I HATE sharing a bathroom!

Happy Winterfair!
Love Lizzie & Vasco

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’ve left the Whole and are almost to the Hegen Hub. I cannot wait to stretch out on our bed in Vorkosigan House. I know I shouldn’t complain, but Kareen and I are so. damn. tired. Eta Ceta was stressful, the Whole is a viper pit, and our daughter is tired of being cooped up on a spaceship. Unless the snow is over Mila’s head, Kareen says we’re opening the groundcar canopy and letting her run around in circles until she wears herself out. She says it worked on Miles.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Per your request, we’ve arranged for you to tour three schools in Hassadar, one in Weienovya, two in Vorbarr Sultana, and the Academy prep Gregor and Alexei attended. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Looking forward to discussing schools and many other topics with you!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Weienovya is an interesting place. The school seems very good. Everard hasn’t said much. He’s ready to return to Hassadar tonight, but I want us to see more of the city first. Don’t worry, we’ll arrive in plenty of time for our next appointment.

Love, Oliver & Everard

*****

Dear Cordelia & Oliver,

How are the tours going? When can we expect to see you back in Vorbarr Sultana? Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila arrived yesterday. We’re told Lady Mila’s parents slept until lunchtime while she cavorted in the snow with her cousins. We’ve invited them for tea. I promise we won’t talk much business. I’d say none, but any discussion of Ivan and Tej by definition includes diplomatic considerations.

I wish we could give them more time to recuperate from their travels, but Miss Entsky returns tomorrow from visiting her family and we don’t want to appear ungracious by excluding her from a family tea. And yes, we like her very much.
Love, Gregor & Laisa  
*****  
Dearest Cordelia,

I hope he’s accepted because Everard’s heart is set on Academy Prep. Given how they rolled out the red carpet, I’m not worried. I was Admiral Jole’d to death. Like Aurelia, Everard needs tutoring in Russian and Greek, but his other admissions testing was outstanding. Which means it’s time to find places for the rest of us.

Love, Oliver  
*****  
Dear Mother,

Nile says she loves the school in Hassadar and we’re all moving there. What IS she talking about? You always said you’re never leaving Sergyar and I love Vorbarr Sultana. I certainly don’t want to change schools again!

Love, Aurelia  
*****  
Hey Sis –

I hope you’re enjoying your vacation. Or is it a scouting expedition? Everard and Nile both wrote Mother that you’re moving to Hassadar. Didn’t you swear never to live on Barrayar again? And what exactly would you do there?

Love, John and Sarah  
*****  
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Your upcoming move sounds exciting and terrifying! I wish I could claim to be surprised, but I’m not. Lizzie’s much more forthcoming than you ever were when it comes to explaining the personal implications of Miles’ investigations. Learning of the blabbermouths in Galactic Affairs only confirms that you and the children will be safer under the Emperor’s direct protection. And if we promise to meet on Sergyar every summer, perhaps the distance won’t seem so far.

Love, Mother  
*****  
Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re ecstatic you’re relocating to Hassadar. Loose lips at ImpSec combined with the malfeasance Anna’s task force is uncovering on far-flung planets have us very concerned for you and the sprogs. The Arqua obsession with reuniting their family has ignited innumerable kidnapping plots. Prince Dmitri’s security team has tripled since Shiv put bounties on him and Mark. Ironically, Anna feels we’re very safe here. Not only is Nikki an excellent Head of Security, the Cetas fear widespread diplomatic reprisals should anything happen to us.

We’re not the only ones wanting the Arquas to stay put on Kibou-daini. Multiple counterparts here on Eta Ceta have confirmed the astronomical bounty on Udine’s head. Shiv’s, too, but there’s widespread concern that with nothing better to do, Udine has resumed manipulating her genome in nefarious ways. Grandmama really shouldn’t have blown up the Barrayaran gene survey library. Frankly, I’m still surprised Moira and Udine weren’t assassinated as retribution for revealing the rapaciousness of the Ceta invaders. Shiv’s plan had many more holes than his unfortunate choice of accomplice. Even if they’d managed to smuggle everything off Barrayar, the sudden glut of historical objects would’ve attracted Ceta attention.
Our Winterfair Ball was very well attended. Many not-subtle questions about Duv’s new assignment. While distressed by the reason for the transfer, it’s a wise move. Anna’s team has already uncovered a discouraging amount of corruption. Nothing directly traceable to the Negri Building as yet, but I fear Lord Auditor Vanzin’s company will be busy analyzing ImpSec’s correspondence for a very long time.

Thanks for all the vids and holos from your trip. Tej particularly loved the images of Padma and Irina dancing with Mamere and Simon at the Ball. We wonder when Padma will stop growing! We were also intrigued by how comfortable Alexei’s Katya looked dancing with her Emperor. I’d have expected a young officer from the South Continent to be far more nervous. Tej says that’s my Vor snobbishness showing, but she didn’t see how awkward Ekaterin’s family was at her wedding.

I’m sure Nikki and Anna sent vid of our Winterfair celebration, but on the theory that you can’t ever get enough of the sprogs, here’s some more. The twins were much more excited about Father Frost this year. And for a little sprog, Dyana proved to be quite dexterous when ripping open her gifts!

Love, Ivan & Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Ekaterin’s back on the South Continent. Her father took a bad fall. If the worst comes to pass, it will be up to Aurelia as to whether she prefers to accompany us to the funeral. If not, she’ll be perfectly safe here at home with Farkas and Varga.

Helen is due back in port in two days. That will help. Selig and Simone are very anxious. Sasha adores all his grandchildren, but definitely has a soft spot for our babies. Maybe because they’re the only ones who never knew a second granda?

According to Alex, renovations in Hassadar are running slightly ahead of schedule. I wish you’d both stop stressing about living under one of my roofs. Granda built a palace worthy of Princess Olivia in his new capitol city, but without her to turn it into a home, it’s never been anything more than a very secure diplomatic space. Until now, it’s never needed to be. This is your chance, Mother. Together, you and Alex will make Hassadar House the showplace it was mean to be. Fill it with noise and toys and everything else it needs for the 12th Count Vorkosigan to call it home.

Love, Miles

My love, Miles is very wise. I never fully understood why Aral so loved the Long Lake and Vorkosigan House, but was indifferent to equally-beautiful Hassadar House. Alex may regret having us when he slips on a toy in the middle of the night, but hopefully by the time you and I retire back to Sergyar, he’ll have his own family to make the halls ring with laughter. Love, Me
Dear Grandma,

Da asked me to let you know that Granda Sasha passed this morning. Da flew south yesterday. Alex and I will fly down with Selig, Simone, and Aurelia after supper. No point them missing classes when Alex has a seminar this afternoon, plus their mourning clothes won’t be ready for a few more hours. I’m so glad Aunt Alys insisted Selig try on his black House uniform because he’d outgrown it again.

Da says Mama is trying to take care of the practical things and everyone else. He also said that Aunt and Uncle Vorthys are despondent. Hard to image that Uncle Vorthys knew Granda Sasha for almost 70 years!

Taurie’s on a fast courier. She’ll meet us in Vandeville tomorrow.

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Ekaterin is very sad. She’s trying to hide it, but we can all tell. Grandma Violie – that’s what she asked me to call her – is very sad, too. She and Granda Sasha were married for a very long time – over 35 years!

The funeral was yesterday. We woke at dawn today to burn an offering for Ekaterin’s mother. Uncle and Aunt Vorthys were there, too. Miles took us out for breakfast after. Uncle Vorthys told stories about his sister and about Ekaterin as a little girl. He had holos, too. Taurie looks just like her mother as a teenager!

We’re flying home tomorrow afternoon. Miles wants to make sure Uncle and Aunt Vorthys are rested for the trip. Most everyone else left last night.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Grandma,

Thanks so much for the condolences. I really appreciate you sharing so many memories of Granda Sasha. It’s still hard to believe that he won’t be waiting for us on our next visit home. Or that there’ll be no more letters. No matter where I was, he wrote at least once a month. Granda’s always been my escape valve, my trusted correspondent when my Da was being a jerk or the pressures of going from being an only child to sharing Mama got to be too much.

Not that any child ever does, but I didn’t appreciate Granda Sasha and Grandma Violie as much as I should’ve after we returned from Komarr. Vorbarr Sultana was so much more interesting than a small town in the South Continent, especially after Lord Vorkosigan started courting Mama. Uncle Vorthys and Granda Aral also seemed to understand me far better than Granda Sasha. I now know that them teaching me the difference between immutable and bendable rules doesn’t mean Granda Sasha’s love was any less fierce for him not being the role model I needed at the time. Ironically, a man who barely left the South Continent encouraged me and my siblings to go wherever our dreams led us. His only request was that we represent Barrayar with honor. I’d like to think we all continue to do so.
Uncle Ivan says if Anna’s task force continues as they’ve begun, my wife will be the first Komarran woman to make General and one of the few peacetime officers to reach that rank before 40. As for me, a promotion to Colonel is finally in the works. General Galeni personally confirmed the rumor that Commodore Paretsky never finished reviewing last year’s personnel evaluations. He never finished the paperwork for Captain Vorminski’s treason charges, either. Paretsky had been lying to the Emperor for over a year that they were busy building an airtight case. I knew I should’ve listened to Uncle Ivan and had the Dendarii push Vorminski out an airlock! This last will probably be the end of General Kanzian’s distinguished career. Surely prosecuting a senior officer who colluded to kidnap a member of the Emperor’s family should’ve been a priority for the Head of ImpSec?

Please let us know when Grandma Elizabeth will be visiting Sergyar. Anna’s planning a combined task force conference/family vacation in Silica and we want to make sure Grandma’s on-planet!

Love, Nikki

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

We’d be honored to escort Aurelia to Port Nightingale at the end of term. We’ll even help everyone pack!

We know this will be a difficult transition, but honestly, it’s for the best. Hassadar is an easy trip from the capitol, plus there are so many resources for the children. You’ll be bringing important knowledge to Hassadar, too. We expect Professor Jole’s marine biology classes to fill very quickly. MPVK’s Board of Directors will also benefit from Vicereine Vorkosigan’s vast experience running a small planet!

Love, Drou & Kou

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Do not worry about overpacking. We have a big plascrete order going to Komarr around Midsummer. We’ll simply send a bigger freighter. With luck, the Toscanes will fill the hold with cargo that needs transport from Komarr to Barrayar.

I’m not sure if I’ll be able to participate in all the sorting, but Kareen and Mila will be there to help throughout. Or to be more accurate, one will help while the other distracts Drou and Kou from overdoing. Resource allocation is entirely up to you.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Selfish question. Are you planning on leaving both residences empty most of the year? If not, I’d like to rent one. It’s virtually impossible for Katya and me to find any privacy in Gridgrad. I realize everyone on Barrayar is anxiously awaiting an announcement, but we’re nowhere near that point yet.

Love, Alexei

My love, if you’re agreeable, I’d like to rent my house to Prince Alexei. ImpSec would be reliable caretakers and the rent would help cover school tuition. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

I just got a letter from Alani. She doesn’t want to move to Barrayar. Worse yet, she blames me for
having to leave our house and Miss Tamika!

I know the move won’t be easy, but I think everyone will grow to love Barrayar as much as I do. Hassadar is such a pretty city and Alex is putting his heart into updating Hassadar House. We’ll have an entire floor just for us! My room will be purple and gold. We’re thinking pink or orange for Alani, but Ekaterin said everyone can have whatever they want as long as you and Uncle Oliver okay it.

Roic said Hassadar has a bunch of dance schools and his nieces had lots of recitals. Plus all the ambrosia and candy from Mark’s new factory. The maple crunch bars are SO good! Ma Kosti made maple crunch frosting for Ekaterin’s birthday cake. Miles says MPVK should expand to baking supplies because they’d make a fortune.

School is good. The Upper School has a lot of year-end projects. Uncle Vorthys says Selig and I are guaranteed to earn high marks for our physics experiments. Aunt Vorthys and Miss Vorbelova are also pleased with my paper on transportation during the Time of Isolation. I’m sending it and my Shakespeare one. Miles says Lady Macbeth reminds him of several countesses with far more ambition than their husbands. Getting it all done should leave me plenty of time to study for my language finals. How many people in the Nexus speak Greek, anyway?

Love, Aurelia

My love, Alani’s not the only one making a fuss. Perrin is, too. I think it’s less about the move and more about the increased security and being separated from Everard. Hopefully, officially living under one roof will help. As for us, I’m so glad Alex didn’t question the request for a suite with separate bedrooms. Does he know Professor Zorin collaborates on more than our scientific research?

Love, Me ******

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Considering he and Helen are both bi-sexual, we’re fairly certain Alex won’t care what you do as long as you’re discreet. We expect that discretion to run both ways. Living with your parents isn’t at all restricting when there’s a suite at MPVK Manor permanently reserved for family use. Alex ‘studies’ there frequently.

Regarding dating, Hussein asked Aurelia to the school prom. Selig says it’s okay because they’re all going in a group. If he approves, who are we to argue? Selig has asked another girl from the robotics club. Simone and Irina are being escorted by boys from drama club. Irina has been seeing Lord Stijn Vorparadijs for several weeks. He’s a baritone, younger son of the current count, and great-great-nephew to the late Lord Auditor. Simone is going with Jules Valentine. He’s a bright lad, also related to the late Lord Auditor Admiral Valentine, who hopes to attend the Academy and command his own ship. His father served aboard the Prince Serg before being transferred to Ops. Jules is far more suitable than Simone’s last crush, a boy whose older brother was part of Lord Oleg Vorfolse’s wild circle.

Speaking of Lord Oleg, there’s news of Lady Augusta Vorkalloner. Her parents were on the verge of announcing her engagement to Sigur Vorbretton’s eldest when Tatya got wind of the alliance. René put a stop to the outright sale of a 16-year-old. He and Dono, with Gregor’s explicit support, are introducing legislation that no Count’s female offspring may be betrothed/wed before 18 without the express permission of the Emperor or Council of Counts. It’s rumored Count Vorkalloner may disinherit his oldest in favor of his middle son, but oddsmakers feel it unlikely. I suspect Gregor would endorse the switch because a man willing to throw away his underage daughter is unlikely to serve his liege-people well.

Have you heard from Nikki and Anna? They sent adorable vids of the twins’ third birthday. It was
nice to see Tej smile.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

******

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Mila’s third birthday was rambunctious and delightful. Rish made a spectacular cake. She also helped entertain and corral children running in all directions. Mostly Duronas, but also some from Mila’s nursery program. Mila loves going to school every morning. Mark and I enjoy the long naps every afternoon!

Byerly seems to enjoy working part-time at the embassy. As you can see from the birthday vid, the new heart has made a world of difference. Not just to his health, but his outlook, too. He and Rish miss Irina and Crystal, but like being settled in one place for more than a few months at a time. They’d probably be safer within the Empire, but proximity to Amiri is too important to Rish’s mental health. For all I used to complain about Team Koudelka being seen as interchangeable, we weren’t brainwashed into blind allegiance. Yes, we faithfully serve our Emperor, but not without conscience or free will to make lives independent of one another.

We’re sorry to hear the younger ones aren’t enthusiastic about the move. The transition will be complicated, but ultimately, it’ll be better for everyone to be on the same planet. And who knows where we’ll be in a few years? Mark and I love being nomads, but if our years as foster parents have taught us anything, it’s that our daughter will need a stable base when she reaches proper school age. Perhaps it’s Escobar, but maybe it should be elsewhere.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

******

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Aurelia is very disappointed with her final grades. Ekaterin and I aren’t. Quite the opposite, in fact. Aurelia refuses to believe that most Barrayarans’ language proficiency is District-specific and very few, including Gregor and myself, are truly quadrilingual. And when it comes to languages, comparing yourself to Irina is like me or Mark expecting to outsprint Ivan. Not that I didn’t try at Aurelia’s age! And like me and Mark, she’s obsessing on the few things she didn’t do perfectly instead of everything she did. Because outscoring students three years older in math and physics means nothing compared to above-average grades in Greek and Russian!

My lovely wife has convinced Aurelia to pack lightly due to the space constraints of a fast courier. Everything’s ready for them to lift off in the morning.

Love, your oldest daughter’s very proud guardians

******

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ve left Komarr and the course is laid in for Sergyar. My crewmates are enjoying our VIPs. Our jump-pilot’s grandfather was at Tanery Base with Granda. Captain Cooper was shocked to meet two of his granda’s heroes. Aurelia hangs on every word. Despite how much Aunt Alys hates discussing the Pretendership, maybe you should consider allowing Uncle Duv to interview you all for the family archives. Surely your perspective now differs from the accounts everyone gave at the time?

I’m looking forward to shore leave on your shore. This spacer needs to soak up some sun. Put me on afternoon babysitting and the evening packing shifts, please.

Love, Helen
Something else to put on your to-do list, my love! Preserve the complete truth so your grandchildren’s grandchildren will know you all did far more than cut off someone’s head and burn down the Residence. Love, Me

*****

(expedited transit)Dear Mother and Oliver,

Karen, Mila, and Grandma Elizabeth should be with you in a matter of hours. I’m glad they’re safely away because our Embassy has just gotten credible intelligence of another plot to hijack Irina. Byerly and I are packed and ready to travel wherever Gregor chooses to send us. Don’t be surprised if Helen’s shore leave is canceled.

Love, Mark

*****

(expedited transit)Dear Mother and Oliver,

Expect more company. Irina and Padma have been rerouted. Their ship was about eight hours behind Aurelia. The two ships have been ordered to adjust velocity so they reach Sergyar Station together. From there the entourage will go to Gridgrad Base. Further transport to Port Nightingale will be handled by ImpSec-Sergyar.

It’s a good thing Port Nightingale has an inn. Besides the increased ImpSec presence, Gregor has ordered Mark, Rish, and Byerly to Irina and Padma’s side.

Love, Ivan’s very, very, very angry cousins

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’ll see you in about six hours. Please have a bed ready for Rish. Anxiety + superfast courier = miserably ill. Byerly’s not looking so great, either.

Love, Mark

*****

(expedited transit)Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Once again, we’re in your debt for tending our sprogs. Nikki reports their ship is less than a day from Ceta space. If anyone’s going to make a move, it should be very soon. I’m not sure which outcome I desire. Which is worse – being overcautious, or receiving proof the Arquas are still a clear and present danger? My wife hopes her family has given up. Mamere, Simon, and I aren’t convinced.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

One of my Academy instructors was fond of saying that insanity is doing the same thing over and over, but expecting different results. By this standard, the Arquas are insane.

The Dendarii reported two ships belonging to a Jacksonian mercenary fleet idling a few hours from Ceta space. Not only is this economically wasteful, they were lurking on a direct trajectory to the route Imperial couriers take from Komarr. Sure enough, the first courier to pass that way in over a week was stopped and boarded. Men were making their way to Lady Irina’s cabin when the Dendarii fried their ships’ engines with a new, frightfully expensive, short-range weapon. Kudos to Kulick and Varga for maintaining the fiction that the two soldiers smuggled aboard at Sergyar Station were Irina and Padma. The quartet played their part beautifully, neutralizing the boarding party while the Dendarii did some boarding of their own.
I’m happy to report the courier crew was uninjured apart from stunner headaches, random gashes, and one broken wrist. The ship required minor repairs consistent with the orders not to injure anyone while seizing their prey. These weren’t very intelligent kidnappers. Under interrogation, not a one admitted to wondering why the crew of a military vessel didn’t make any attempt to protect themselves or their ship. Or why the ship didn’t drop speed to a catchable range before the approach to Rho Ceta. Yes, mercenaries attacked an Imperial courier inside Ceta space!

Miles is beside himself with glee that a nebulous plan to make the Arquas a Ceta problem actually succeeded. Ambassador Vorpatril has filed all kinds of diplomatic protests about the safety of Our ships and subjects. He’s also filed personal protests with Us about not advising him of steps taken to protect the ship theoretically carrying his children, but he and Nikki needed plausible deniability.

The Ceta ambassador has requested an audience. If they’re willing to guarantee Irina and Padma’s safety, We’ll consider letting them continue their journey.

How’s the packing going? Do not rush – the Admiral Vorkosigan is at your disposal whenever you’re ready. Alexei says Sergyar Fleet is enjoying the opportunity to train with the flagship.

Love, Gregor the Proud, Grumpy, & Tired

*****

(eyes only)Dear Mother and Oliver,

Duv was awoken in the middle of the night by an urgent communication from Kibou-daini. Police have two men in custody in connection with a suspicious explosion that killed over 50 people in a wealthy Northbridge suburb. Among the dead are Shiv, Udine, Topaz, Emerald, Pearl, Jet, and four members of their staff.

No one’s sure if it was Cetas or Jacksonians. If not for the death of so many other innocents, I probably wouldn’t care. But given these are Lady Vorpatril’s relatives, we’ll probably pursue official enquiries anyway. Hopefully I won’t have to travel.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

The Northbridge explosion has been traced back to Baron Fell’s oldest grandson. Are you aware said grandson met with an unfortunate accident? Officially, a prototype nerve disrupter misfired. Rumor is Baron Fell was holding it at the time.

Tej and I have decided to honor Amiri’s request to hold a memorial service. We’re writing to the sprogs separately, advising them to meet us on Escobar. We will not force Irina or Padma to attend the memorial, though I hope they can find it in themselves to attend for their mother’s sake. Tej’s emotions run the gamut from grief at what should’ve been to relief that Gregor doesn’t have her family’s blood on his hands. At least not yet. The fate of three cryo crypts is yet to be decided.

In case you’re thinking of attending the memorial, please don’t. Not only would it be a security nightmare, your presence would confer an honor the Arqua clan does not deserve. Help convincing Mamere and Simon to stay home would also be appreciated. They’d never admit it, but travel by fast courier really drains them. We also think Crystal is coming, which would be a wonderful treat for everyone.

I hope Padma brought his dress greens. We’re not wearing House blacks for this.

Love, Ivan and Tej
Ah, the nuances of Vor dress! Miles and Dono would approve, I’m sure. Kou and Byerly certainly did! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The freighter left Escobar a few hours ago. The Admiral Vorkosigan is due in this evening. Byerly and I will accompany Irina and Padma to the orbital station. We’re sorry to see them go, but once Ivan and Tej left for Eta Ceta, both seem eager to return to Barrayar. I’ll return Grandma Elizabeth to Beta Colony next week. I’ve got some business, plus I promised Ekaterin that I’d check in on Lizzie and Vasco.

You’ll be pleased to hear we’ve entered the hide-the-flimsies stage of parenthood. Yesterday, Mila asked Irina to sing her favorite aria. She then dug through a pile of sheet music to find it. At a minimum, our daughter can read the word garden!

Love, Mark, Kareen, & the brilliant Lady Mila

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

By the time you get this, you should be halfway to Komarr. Ivan and Tej are safely back on Eta Ceta. Ivan says the pile of work is enormous and he’s not sure Nikki and Anna slept the entire time they were gone.

The one advantage of the long trip to Eta Ceta was my son had time to write a comprehensive letter about the memorial and his family’s visit to Escobar. Rish is far more upset than Tej. After all, Rish is mourning six people while Tej is really only mourning her Dada. Harsh, but Tej is smart enough to know that the idea of selling her to Baron Fell’s son was Udine’s. Shiv wouldn’t have any qualms about killing my son if his daughter was unhappy, but he wouldn’t have risked his Deal with Gregor and eliminated the barrier to an alliance with House Fell without Tej’s consent. As for her siblings, Tej has been mourning their loss since Ruby tried to kidnap Irina two years ago. Ivan feels that Ruby was merely the point person for an inane plan hatched in collusion with the four other Jewels. Simon agrees.

Ivan was very relieved when his niece broached a question that nagged at him for years. If House Cordonah was serious about an alliance with House Fell, why not offer up the older granddaughter? After all, Crystal and Irina are equally beautiful. Crystal’s also far more accomplished thanks to the five years’ difference in age. Crystal said she probably would’ve agreed had Baron Fell made a ballet company part of the Deal, but no one ever claimed she had any responsibility to the family other than honing her dance ability. Disgusting, isn’t it, how the Baronne valued her gengineered offspring over the ones with pure hearts and souls?

Tej sent us some vid of the twins. They’re growing like weeds! We miss them! Gregor promises to bring them home for a visit, but the timeframe keeps moving.

Much love, Alys and Simon
Dear Mother and Oliver,

Farkas has everything arranged to meet your flying circus. Your rooms at Vorkosigan House are waiting. Taurie and KareenVB want to see everyone before they return to Komarr for the new term. Ekaterin has made all sorts of appointments for pre-school physicals and clothing fittings. She’s a bit horrified at how much Everard’s uniforms cost, given how quickly he’s likely to outgrow them.

Alex assures us everything you requested is in place at Hassadar House, including a very talented cook. Armsman Kasun, your new security chief, has hired a team to unload your household goods when the freighter finally rumbles into orbit. His wife would be a good option for personal assistant. She’s a graduate of Hassadar University, worked at the Imperial Science Institute, and has above-average security clearance. She’s also very patient and loves children, having raised four of them.

Be warned: Gregor and Laisa want to grill you about Alexei and Katya. Their son is being decidedly close-mouthed. Wonder where he learned that?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma,

How is the unpacking going? Do you think you’ll be ready for a visit this weekend? I promise Selig and I will help. Mama, too. Da will probably stay behind. He’s been stuck in meetings with Lord Auditor Vanzin all week. That’s never good.

Love, Simone & Selig

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

If you’re up for it, I’d love to visit. Otherwise, I’ll take Selig and Simone to the Long Lake. We need to escape Miles and the city heat and humidity. The ImpSec investigation is winding down, which means he’s crazed trying to condense over eight months’ worth of work into succinct recommendations.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

You’re being ridiculous, saying no one needs an invitation to Hassadar House. At a minimum, you need prior notice for security and hospitality arrangements when anyone comes to handle District business. Ekaterin and I also don’t want Simone, Selig, and Irina assuming they’re included every time Aurelia and/or Everard fly home for a weekend. You’ve got enough on your plate settling into a new city, juggling new jobs, and preparing six children for new schools.

We also urge you to refuse when Martya suggests you host company parties. We prefer to keep District events separate from my brother’s business.

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

As usual, your son makes very good points, my love. Holiday visits are very different from having to entertain teenagers while juggling five sets of homework, sports, dance lessons, and language tutors. After years on Sergyar, I can’t believe how rusty my Russian’s gotten! I also want to keep part of
most weekends free for us to enjoy our new city as a family. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

The first week of school was exciting, tiring, and fun. My roommate and I get along great. Lambros really has my back. During wrestling practice, he and I took down almost everyone who made fun of my accent. He also promised to help me with languages in exchange for science help. Can you believe Lambros has never seen an ocean? Or been swimming anywhere other than a pool? Though I guess that part’s not unusual for city kids, because he’s not the only one.

It’s easy to tell kids from military families because they act all superior. Lambros was very nervous about them. No need, because they don’t seem to know much more than keeping their uniforms neat and following orders. Nile has way better survival and mechanical skills. Lambros is dying to meet Aurelia and Nile. He can’t believe they aren’t girly-girls like his four sisters. Wait until he meets Helen!

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The first week of school flew by. There are a bunch of new students in my year. Ekaterin says it’s okay to invite some next weekend for back-to-school vid night. Hanging out with Selig and Simone’s friends last year was fun, but this will be great because Irina and I will have friends there, too!

Hussein was glad to see me. It was nice, but a little weird. Maybe because every-one in my science and math classes is fretting about university applications. Uncle Vorthys says not to worry because I’ll be taking some university classes next year, too. Selig and I had our first workshop session with him today. We’re building a lightflyer. Uncle Vorthys says almost anyone can learn to fly a spaceship, but no one truly understands how all the component systems fit together until they’ve actually gotten their hands dirty. I guess that explains why you’ve both taught us to notice the second anything mechanical sounds the slightest bit off. Also why Miles is always so curious about the details most people don’t even notice!

Stijn and Irina got detention for kissing in the hall. Irina’s mad Varga didn’t warn her the headmaster was walking toward them. Simone hasn’t stopped giggling. She and Jules are way more discreet. I like Jules. He’s like Padma – nice, smart, and very focused. Though Simone says she wants to attend Solstice University, she’s thinking of applying to the Imperial University, too. I’d like that better.

Helen is due back in port at the end of the week. She offered to take me and Irina to watch the weekend gymkhana at Everard’s school. Is that okay?

Love, Aurelia

Sounds like Aurelia is more interested in socializing with her peers than Selig’s. That’s good, right? I fear Count Piotr’s genes are emerging and Everard may soon request a horse. Does Miles have any spares? Love, Me

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Yitzy and I have decided the best part of academic conferences is that nobody thinks twice about colleagues from the same department having adjoining rooms. New Evias University is very impressive. So is the group they’ve assembled. If we can scrape together the funding, there’s plenty of interest in a summer marine biology program based out of Port Nightingale. Got any ideas of
pockets to pick?

Yitzy’s going directly home to Hassadar. I’m planning on stopping to see Everard on my way south. Anything I need to pick up from Aurelia or Vorkosigan House?

Love, Professors Jole & Zorin

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Greetings from Silica! I’ve barely seen my wife since we arrived three days ago, but there are compensations. The twins LOVE meeting people they know from holos and vids. Grandma Elizabeth’s friends are elated to meet little people and hear stories of distant worlds. And Lizzie hasn’t stopped hugging us!

My children thought lunch at a hospital cafeteria was haute cuisine. The respect with which Lizzie is addressed as Dr. Vorvayne was astonishing given she’s less than halfway through her residency. As for Vasco, the number of females throwing themselves at Dr. Cortez would be funny if he weren’t living with my sister!

We understand Lords Auditor Vorkosigan and Vanzin have closed their case against the Galactic Affairs Alpha Sector and a dozen people have received life sentences. Anna’s conference is focused on the Gamma Sector. Though the charges will be less severe, more courts martial are imminent. Initial reports from the Delta Sector also show improprieties. Although he deserved it, I’m rather glad General Galeni wasn’t promoted to ImpSec Chief when Kanzian left. I’m not sure how much he sleeps considering Anna and I get messages from him timestamped at all hours. And having worked with now-General Brodeur at the Residence, I’m confident he understands the Empire better than just about anyone else in the Negri Building.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Hey Sis –

Nikki and Anna’s visit was a delight from beginning to end. I’m sure Mother sent vid of the twins playing with all our kiddos. Well, all but one. We now have another great-granddaughter. Johnny and Lina welcomed Bella Elizabeth yesterday. Bella was over a month early due to placenta issues. Vasco was there when they cracked the bottle. He says she’s small, but medically perfect. I foresee some house calls because Lina is very nervous about making sure Bella feeds well.

Mother is tired after company, but is otherwise fine and healthy. Please make sure the children remember to write. Misspelled missives delight her.

Love, John and Sarah

*****

Dear Cordelia,

I hate to be a meddling grandmother, but Alani sounded miserably unhappy in her last letter. Seems we all underestimated how hard it would be for Alani to be in a different school building from Nile and not to share classes with Perrin. As Mark and Taurie would confirm, it’s hard to be an introvert in a family of extroverts!

I’m confident that somewhere in Alani’s school or dance studio, there are some little girls who’ll develop into friends. In the meantime, is there a minor festival you could use as an excuse for the children to throw a party? Or maybe use your influence to get an advance copy of a kid vid and screen it in the ballroom. Surely a new vid, candy, popcorn, and ambrosia would be an attractive
bribe to hang out with the new kids? You could even split it up and host Lujayn and Kiona’s peers in the morning and Perrin, Alani, and Nile’s in the afternoon. I’m sure Oliver and Yitzy could find some students to help chaperone.

Bella is growing, though more slowly than anyone would like. Her tummy is so small, it’s hard to get her to eat. Vasco recommending changing her formula and she seems to be doing better. He’s been incredibly supportive, especially it comes to reassuring Johnny that Dad won’t break his little peanut!

I’m afraid you’ve given your niece ideas. Scarlett’s partner James only ever wanted one child. Now that their son is a happily paired father, Scarlett wants another baby. As she’ll be giving up a well-paid job to raise the baby, she also wants to serve as her grandsons’ daycare. I fear a union of over 30 years may crumble over this. John, Sarah, and I are staying out of it. You should, too.

Love, Mother

Dear Cordelia,

There are six new children’s vids being released around Winterfair. I’ve attached promo clips. Decide which you want and my secretary will take care of it.

I don’t recommend serving ambrosia in a ballroom. It makes a hellacious mess on parquet floors. It took two days for the staff to clean after Dmitri’s 12th birthday.

All my love, Laisa

Dear Aunt Cordelia,

I really need your help and guidance. I’m about to turn 60, which means it’s time for my once-a-decade life assessment. Parts are very good. I have Grandma, my parents, my brothers, my son, and two adorable grandchildren. I love my partner. James and I have had a wonderful life together, but lately, I’ve come to feel it’s not enough. I’m bored of my job. I’m bored of volunteering for politicians who make empty promises. I’m tired of eating dinner alone because James is stuck at work. And most of all, I regret never having a daughter. We can certainly afford another child. For the last decade, my entire salary and a healthy chunk of James’ have gone into retirement accounts. So what if I take a break for five or six years? We’ll still have a sound financial cushion.

James says he’d rather spend money on vacations to other worlds and a baby is out of the question. What can I do to change his mind?

Love, Scarlett

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We just got the oddest letter from Scarlett. She assumes that as parents to a large family, we’re automatic supporters of unfettered reproduction. Uh, no, we’re not. Nikki was an only child because Tien rightfully (if stupidly) refused to risk another case of Vorzohn’s Dystrophy. And they weren’t living on a world obsessed with not overtaxing planetary resources. Even if Scarlett somehow convinced James to apply for another child permit, I’m sure his hesitation at the interview would result in the petition being denied. As it should be. Even here on backward Barrayar, most fathers have a say in their family size.

Studies show that not only does practically every single person in the service (and many married ones) avail themselves of the military’s free contraceptive implants, most encourage their families and
friends back home to seek medical advice. I’m not sure how deeply you’ve gotten into MPVK’s financials yet, but you’ll see medical costs are steep for most new facilities, but decrease as the workforce stabilizes. Many qualified applicants request contraceptives when undergoing their pre-employment medical exams. Vision correction is a big start-up cost, too.

Ekaterin suggests inviting Scarlett and James for Winterfair. We doubt they’ll come, but if they do, we’ll show them all the things adults with disposable income enjoy. It would be a much cheaper excursion if they travel with Mark and Kareen from Escobar. And a long trip with Mila might cure Scarlett of wanting to start over!

Love, the parents looking forward to their youngest’s finishing secondary school

My love, it seems Scarlett doesn’t understand the two yes, one no method of parental decisions. Or all the political reasons why Miles had to remain an only child until the Vorkosigan and Vorbarra successions were secure. Or that us choosing to have children as single parents is very different from what she’s describing. At the risk of sounding Betan, it sounds like Scarlett could use some therapy to delve into why she’s so unhappy with the status quo. Boredom is a TERRIBLE reason to have a child. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m sure the vid day was exhausting, but it looks like everyone had a good time. Alani wrote that she has playdates scheduled with two girls from Perrin’s class and the sister of Nile’s classmate. Well done!

Everard’s last letter was full of stories about his riding and fencing lessons. Given his fathers’ coordination, I suspect he’ll be very good at fencing. I watched some vid and it looks like a very interesting sport.

Aurelia’s most recent letter was all about the lightflyer. It looks like they’re making good progress. I’m pleased she and Selig seem to be splitting the work evenly. I’m sure if my husband had undertaken such a project with our children, John would’ve been lucky to do 10% of the construction!

Bella has finally reached the very low end of the growth curve. She’s so cute and cuddly. Alert, too, just very tiny.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My brother is a brilliant, evil man. Scarlett and James are joining us for Winterfair. So are Rish and Byerly. I’ll be shocked if Scarlett still wants another child by the time our ship reaches Barrayar orbit. By plans on regaling them with false tales of Crystal being motion-sick on anything that moved, even buses and trains. And we all know how bored Mila gets after a few days aboard ship. We expect this trip to be even worse because our daughter will be missing her friends from school.

Don’t get me wrong, Kareen and I love Scarlett. She and James were so kind to us during our student years. It took a while for my other cousins to warm up to the killer dwarf, but Scarlett accepted me unconditionally from the first. And being an accountant, James helped me through my initial exam panic attacks, assuring me I knew the material because he’d quizzed me on it.

James wanting to travel isn’t new. He loved hearing Admiral Naismith’s adventures and maintains a correspondence with Admiral Quinn. But coming from what Tej would call a grubber background, a
single-income home without many frills, he’s always been concerned about having financial security. Scarlett wanting to quit her job would be as much a trigger for James as being force-fed would be for me.

We’re looking forward to hearing your thoughts before the MPVK Board Meeting,

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Do you have room for one more this Winterfair? Kareen suggested I travel with Scarlett and James. It’s tempting. I want to see all the changes to Hassadar House, plus how often are Miles and Ekaterin’s children all home at the same time?

Love, Mother

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ll be very upset if you ruin the surprise and tell Mama we’ll be home for Winter-fair! Anna’s been summoned to review her task force’s findings with all the powers that be. So yes, Da knows. Because we’ll be gone for months, two seasoned ImpSec officers have been seconded to Eta Ceta. We’ve already reviewed every-thing for the Ball and I’m confident Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej will be in good hands.

What Da doesn’t know is Lizzie will be with us. Her main professor is taking a 3-month medical sabbatical. She won’t have a minute off the rest of the year, but Lizzie doesn’t care because we’ll all be together for the twins’ first visit home.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Nikki tells me the cat’s out of the bag. Is there anything you want from here that you’d prefer Grandma Elizabeth doesn’t know about? If so, order it and have it sent to my apartment.

I really wish Vasco could come with us, but his schedule is grueling. He’s also keeping a very close eye on Bella. Not only are premature births from replicators rare, getting her to eat was initially very difficult. I wish I could send Bella’s records to KareenVB. Vasco suspects the team monitoring the replicator missed signs of problems weeks before cracking the bottle early became necessary.

I heard from Taurie last week. She loves all her higher-level business courses. Not sure if she’ll want to work for Da or MPVK, but she’d be an asset for either.

Back to work! Heart/lung transplant this afternoon.

Love, Lizzie

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Sorry I haven’t written lately, but I’ve been busy. Classes are demanding, I’ve met a very nice young man who works for Toscane Industries, and I really wish there were more hours in the day. I know I sound exactly like Da, but Komarr’s shorter day-cycle is really an issue. I haven’t yet decided if I want to take a graduate degree, but if so, it’ll be on a world with more daylight!

KareenVB is dating a resident she met at the hospital. At the risk of sounding nasty, he makes Uncle
Enrique seem worldly and outgoing. It’s fine when they’re discussing lab work – I’m beginning to feel I know enough to open a rep center! – but the Imperium’s Princess requires a socially-adept partner. It’s a major factor as to why Alexei hasn’t proposed to Katya yet. Katya has poise and lovely manners, but is more comfortable in fatigues than ball gowns. Kareen loves reminding her brother that a certain former vicereine successfully made the transition.

I’m looking forward to Winterfair with Mila, Lujayn, and Kiona. It’s so much more fun with kiddos who believe Farkas really is Father Frost!

Love, Taurie
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Grandma, Scarlett, and James arrived yesterday. Grandma has an appointment with the Duronas tomorrow. Assuming everything’s clear, we’ll depart after supper. We’ve found Mila does better when she wakes up aboard ship. Rish says Crystal was the same. We’re all hoping the lure of new pajamas will get Mila into them!

James and Kareen had a full day of sightseeing. Scarlett accompanied them in the morning, but insisted on going home after lunch because she was tired. Grandma says she was very disappointed to find Mila asleep. Scarlett tried arguing that Mila should skip school tomorrow to get ready for the trip. Kareen shot that down. Not only is Mila very wary of our guests, my wife and I have things to do while Mila is in school. My cousin doesn’t seem to understand that we don’t have a bunch of colleagues who can take over our responsibilities for months at a time.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

We’re almost to Komarr and I’m about to lose my mind. Scarlett constantly tries to undermine our parenting. No, Mila’s not allowed on the bridge or in the officer’s quarters. No, she may not skip her morning lessons. No, she may not have candy every day. No, you may not play with her beautiful hair. Yes, she must nap after lunch. No, you may not change her music. No, you may not sit and stare at our daughter like a zoo exhibit while she sleeps. No, you may not wake her because you’re bored. Yes, she must eat vegetables. No, you DON’T know better than we do what our child will eat. Mila loves spicy salsa and real chicken drumsticks. Just because you exclusively eat vat protein doesn’t mean the rest of us do.

Grandma’s spending a lot of time in her cabin reading. She’s taught Mila a bunch of (clean) Betan songs. After Mila’s abed, James, Mark, and By sing the dirty ones.

Love and kisses, Karen, Mark, and incredibly cranky Lady Mila

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I thought it a bit odd when Miles suggested we go to the military shuttleport to meet Helen, but she’s been away for months, so we went. Helen was the first one off the shuttle. Nikki, Anna, and the twins were next. Miles grinned like an idiot while I cried. He confessed to knowing they were coming. But a few minutes later, Miles was as shocked as I to see Lizzie disembark. Helen and Nikki were smirking at our reaction. So was Anna, who looked totally exhausted. She’s got dozens of meetings lined up over the next few weeks. I don’t care because ALL OUR CHILDREN WILL BE HOME FOR WINTERFAIR!!!!

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

Won’t it be wonderful having all our children and grandchildren together? Should we think about hiring a professional holographer? I’d love to see images of everyone lined up on the grand staircase.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
If you can wait until after the Ball, we’d be glad to lend you our official holographer for an afternoon. Consider it an anniversary gift for Miles and Ekaterin.

Alexei’s ship is due in two days. He and Miss Entsky stopped at Komarr to pick up my parents, Kareen, and Taurie. Miss Entsky is going home for a few days, but will be returning in plenty of time for the Ball. She’s bringing her mother. I’m nervous.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Vorkosigan House is filling up! I’m sad that Daniel and Dyana didn’t remember me, but Nikki says it’s to be expected. Seeing them with Mila is so cute! I can’t wait for our school break so we can play all day. Grandma’s dying to see our lightflyer, but Miles said she had to wait until you arrive so we can go together.

Who’s picking up Everard? Uncle Simon suggested that Padma save everyone a trip and sign him out when he and Pavel finish their exams. I don’t think I knew that Everard’s school is only three kilometers from the Military Academy.

Irina is so glad to see Aunt Rish and Uncle By. I am, too. It’s funny how Aunt Rish seems so much more blue here on Barrayar. Some of that is sadness. It’s obvious she really misses her parents and the other Jewels. Stupid gas leak!

Cousin Scarlett is acting weird. She’s constantly trying to separate Mila from Dyana and Daniel. It’s like she wants to be Mila’s favorite grown-up, which won’t ever happen, no matter how much Scarlett looks like you. Cousin James is much more interested in me, Selig, and Simone. He’s been helping us write up our notes on the lightflyer project and college applications. James is great at breaking down big projects into slices so they don’t seem so intimidating. We like it!

Did Aunt Laisa write to you? She said we kids can have our own Winterfair party upstairs in the Residence so we can see the fireworks and bonfires. Cousin Scarlett is pouty because Kareen and Anna decided that Mila and the twins are too little to be roaming the Residence and will stay at Vorkosigan House. Please don’t say that Lujayn and Kiona are too young. You know how much they love fireworks!

Love, Aurelia

I wonder, my love, if Scarlett will try to smother Lujayn and Kiona? If so, she’ll be in for a rude surprise when our independent misses refuse to be coddled! Sounds like James is rather like I was before becoming a parent – nervous around anyone not old enough to hold up their end of the conversation. Definitely not someone anxious to be a father again! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

It looks like Mila may have a bit of a green thumb! Lizzie set up a simple project for us to do with the little ones. Daniel mostly tried to make mud and Dyana wanted to pluck every flower she saw, but Mila successfully potted spider plant babies and helped choose flowers for a beautiful arrangement to welcome Taurie home. Mila’s sense of color is most impressive. So is her reading. As we wandered about, she successfully sounded out most of the plant names.

I know the children don’t finish school until next week, but I’m impatient to see them. Would it be too distracting for someone to fly me down for the weekend?
Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Ekaterin and I will fly Grandma down tomorrow. I guess I forgot to mention to her that we were going anyway for the annual party at the District offices. Grandma can either return with us or catch a ride with Mark and Kareen later in the week. My brother’s got meetings with Martya and all the factory managers. Which hopefully you knew, considering they’re hoping Nanny Yana can give their nanny some pointers on good places to take Mila.

Love, Count and Countess Vorkosigan

P.S. Please remind Mark to bring back plenty of maple crunch and coconut delight bars. Father Frost plans on distributing sweets! MNVK

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re confident this will be one of the best Winterfest celebrations in years! If only Dmitri, Ivan, and Tej could be here, it would be perfect!

Has Delia spilt the beans about this year’s entertainment? The Bolshoi Ballet arrives from the Hegen Hub next week. Simon and I can’t wait to see By and Rish’s faces when they’re reunited with their daughter!

It’s shaping up to be a very quiet summer, with you off to Sergyar, Irina and Padma to Eta Ceta, and Gregor and Laisa doing all those State Visits on the back of Kareen’s and Dmitri’s graduations. It doesn’t seem possible that both are about to become Dr. Vorbarra, does it? Weren’t they small children just six months ago?

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Just a heads-up that Anna is extremely annoyed at how Scarlett is trying to smother the twins. If I needed help caring for our children while Anna’s working, I’d use my big boy words and ask! That said, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to take Aurelia and Everard with me to the Long Lake for a day or two. We all want to play in the snow without facing a million questions about frostbite and being warm enough.

Love, Nikki

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’d forgotten how much I love sledding! Nikki cajoled me into accompanying him to the Long Lake so we could each sled with one of the twins. It was wonderful fun. It was also great to have some private time with Aurelia and Everard. Don’t get me wrong, I relish the holiday circus at Vorkosigan House, but sometimes it’s nice to be a smaller group, especially when you haven’t seen people in a while. I’m not the only one who’s changed. I love Everard’s squeaky voice and talking boys with Aurelia. I cherish the time I had with Irina and Aurelia on Escobar. So does Vasco. He may not totally comprehend our convoluted web of family connections, but he loves spending time with all the young ‘uns. I have many reasons to love that man, but his extraordinary care of little Bella melts my heart.

Love, Lizzie
My love, I suspect one of the 11th Count Vorkosigan’s daughters will never be in play in the Vorbarr Sultana marriage mart! Not sure about the 10th’s. I can definitely see Kiona and Lujayn conspiring to test potential suitors! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Just a heads up that Helen is in a state. Instead of boarding his transport to Barrayar yesterday, Tegid sent a vid breaking up with her. I can understand his reasoning – they haven’t seen much of each other lately – but his timing stinks. Helen often trains with the armsmen. This morning, she broke Mishkov’s nose. Which would be bad enough without Miles, Nikki, and Anna being proud of her!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Every now and then, I regret being raised by people with integrity and ethics. Seeing Helen so miserable makes me feel so helpless. I’d love to order someone to slay her dragon, but killing a Vervani citizen would be a diplomatic nightmare. I’ve therefore ordered Alexei to ensure he and his friends keep Helen entertained during the Ball. We don’t want her sulking in the corner when she should be enjoying the festivities. And no, our son isn’t planning any grand announcements. Alexei says he can’t possibly propose to a woman Dmitri’s only met twice.

Looking forward to dinner with you in a few days!

Love, Count and Countess Vorbarra

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you so much for all the holos and vids of our sprogs enjoying Winterfair. Watching Irina sing while Crystal danced brought tears to our eyes.

Please don’t tell Irina, but we’re working on a plan to attend her graduation. The Aslund ambassador is being reassigned to Marilac. We’re hoping he’ll agree to stand-in on Eta Ceta between the two posts. Give him a taste of a more challenging assignment, without the pressure of permanency.

I’m sure you’ve heard that Irina’s audition for the Imperial Music Academy went extremely well. We still want her to audition for Komarr’s Music Institute and several lesser music colleges on Barrayar. The college in René Vorbretton’s District has produced many fine opera singers. So has the one in Henri Vorvolk’s District.

We’ll keep you apprised of our plans.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

How big a flyer should I send for the Board meeting? Will it be just you two and Martya, or will you be bringing the children along, too? Please let know as soon as possible because space at MPVK Manor is tight. Many Komarran tourists spent lots of money to see snow and real fireworks. The Manor manager is ecstatic!

Love, Mark

*****

Dear Cordelia,
Have you had a chance to look over the timber proposal in the Vorfolse District? I fear the projections are far too optimistic if the sawmill is located so far from the timber ridge. Better to plan to store processed lumber than have to close a mill because logs couldn’t reach the processing site.

With Oliver staying behind, would you mind sharing a suite with me? Not that we’ll be in it much – Mark has quite a long agenda for us to wade through!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

I hope you’re making good progress setting MPVK’s course for the next year. Has Mark let any of you leave the conference room?

As we promised Martya, Enrique dined with us last night. Yitzy loved meeting a truly absent-minded professor! Enrique was awkward around the children, but came to life once they were in bed. Apparently the Imperial Science Institute successfully reverse-engineered the mycoborer shortly after the Cockroach Central disaster, but gave up trying to, pardon the pun, get the bugs out of the original design. 19 months ago, Gregor finally agreed to release the specs to MPVK. Et voila! Enrique’s prototype borer-strips work in all kinds of soil conditions, from mud and medium rocks to frozen ground. The strip creates a straight line about a meter deep. For a basement, you’d lay a strip the exact width of the house. Precise measurement is critical because the Borgos-borer pushes waste product to the ends of the strip, building side walls as it goes. Can you imagine what a boon this would be to rural areas without heavy earth-moving equipment? Hell, it might make a lot of that equipment obsolete. Why tear up your lawn to build a pool when a team can just bring in a reel of borer-strip and a bucket of ammonia?

Enrique thinks the borer-strips will work on any planet with breathable atmosphere. He’s not sure how well it’ll work in Komarr’s domes, but says it would probably aid the terraforming efforts substantially with only minor tweaks.

MPVK will make a bloody fortune from this!

Love, Oliver and Yitzy

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Safely home at last. I’m very grateful for everyone’s hospitality. I also appreciate Helen being assigned to the Betan courier run. Her captain and crewmates treated us extremely well. I enjoyed meeting real ImpSec couriers and hearing their stories. Few knew that was Miles’ cover for his covert ops work.

It was also good for Scarlett to see the depth of the Imperium’s esteem for you. The captain was part of Aral’s funeral cortege. He said your dignity and the on-going appreciation you expressed to the crew was astounding given how everyone aboard ship was grieving, too. He also said he knows where the Emperor learned his manners and any child would be lucky and proud to have you for a mother.

I was very dismayed to learn how little Scarlett knew about the Escobar War, the Pretendership, and Aral’s Regency. Yes, she was very young when you left Beta Colony, but it’s not like John and Sarah never mentioned you! And considering J.J.’s vid collection of the Vorkosigan escapades is almost as vast as Miles’, it’s disconcerting that James knows more of the family history than Scarlett does.

I doubt James will surrender on the baby issue after being reminded how grimy and sticky small
children are. Scarlett also wasn’t a very hands-on parent the first go-round. She took care of their son’s physical needs and read stories every night, but she’d never purposely let him get dirty exploring his environment or exercising his imagination. Ekaterin doesn’t stress over dirt getting tracked in from the greenhouse or yard. Granted, she has a staff to clean it up, but she also did all the laundry after the unfortunate vomiting incident in my apartment some years ago.

Scarlett wants a baby girl who’d love tea parties and never get dirty. Unfortunately, genetic screening couldn’t guarantee she wouldn’t get an Amazon like you or our magnificent Helen. I adore Helen’s many facets: the graceful beauty in a ball gown; the fierce warrior in hand-to-hand combat; the loving child/sister/aunt/grandchild; the crisp, knowledgeable officer. Tegid is an idiot. Then again, Helen would probably be better off with an Imperial officer who shares her loyalty to the Empire. I have a very good feeling about the Crown Prince and Miss Entsky. She may not have Vor ancestry, but her willingness to lay down blood and bone in Gregor’s service bodes well for an intelligent empress who’d serve the Imperium well.

Love, Mother

*****
Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Bad news – Lambros broke his leg. They had to operate and now he’s not allowed to do anything but classes and rest for weeks. I was wondering if maybe we could come home this weekend? Playing video games and eating good food would really cheer him up. Plus we could start our science projects.

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Sorry, but I can’t travel this weekend. Selig and I are meeting with Uncle Vorthys, plus it’s my friend’s birthday. How about next weekend?

Love, Aurelia

There you have it, my love, the Vorkosigan independence rearing its unruly head. Though Alani would prefer two sibling weekends, so let’s just do that. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

IT FLIES!!! Mishkov took our lightflyer for a test run. He said it handles well, but the engine needs some calibration. We also need to adjust the brakes because they’re too responsive and whiplash is bad. Do not worry, Miles won’t let us fly as passengers until armsmen have recorded 20+ hours of problem-free flying and tested its responsiveness in the Dendarii Gorge. Alex laughed and said we’re much too young to go anywhere near the Gorge. Ekaterin agreed. Is the Gorge unsafe?

Love, Aurelia

My love, I’d classify the Gorge as vomit-inducing. Do you remember how upset Aral was when I sullied the interior of a brand-new lightflyer? Love, Me

*****

Dear Aunt Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

While I know it’s rude to invite myself somewhere, I’m too upset to care. I just found out that Padma can’t accompany me to Eta Ceta because he and Pavel will be doing drills all summer! I really can’t fly all the way to Eta Ceta by myself. I also want to get away from Vorbarr Sultana because I really need to rest my voice in preparation for fall classes. Which is all a very long way of asking: would you mind if I spent part of my summer break with you on Sergyar? I promise to help babysit, especially while Uncle Oliver is away teaching his La Escuela course.

Love, Irina

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Of course we knew Padma won’t have the summer off. It’s part of why we started the machinations to attend Irina’s graduation! If you’re agreeable to a visit, we’ll plan a brief layover in Sergyar and drop Irina on your doorstep.

Irina’s disappointed not to have heard from the Imperial Music Academy. She’s been accepted to three other Barrayaran music colleges and the Imperial University. Mamere and Simon are taking her
to Solstice next week for her audition.

We’re taking the longer way home via Mu Ceta and the Hegen Hub so we can meet with Gregor. By fall, we’ll have been on Eta Ceta for four years. It would be nice to know if he has plans to move us closer anytime soon. After all, in two years, I’ll be a twice-twenty years man. I’m not ready to retire, but the prospect of a desk job in Vorbarr Sultana, near our children, Mamere, and Simon, sounds VERY appealing.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Irina’s audition went so splendidly, she was offered a place in the Solstice Music Academy a few hours later. We’re incredibly proud of her.

Seeing Taurie and KareenVB was lovely. Our Princess is debating residency options. Solstice Hospital wants her to stay. She’s giving it serious consideration, but for the wrong reason. Frankly, her young man is a bore with virtually no social graces. Also, the best reproductive medicine program on Komarr is in Green Park Dome. Laisa has family there and it’s not a long trip to Solstice.

As luck would have it, we could have saved ourselves a trip. I’m thrilled to report that the acceptance for the Imperial Music Academy arrived as we were packing to return home. Now comes the question of where our granddaughter will live. Call me paranoid, but I don’t feel most student housing is particularly safe.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Aunt Alys had a lot to say about our daughter’s boyfriend. Other than his medical acumen, virtually none of it was good. Simon concisely summed him up as a blithering idiot hell-bent on exploiting Toscane Industries for research grants. Needless to say, Gregor wasn’t happy. We plan to push for Kareen to accept the residency at Green Park Hospital. The Emperor and Crown Prince also plan to scare the scammer away by intimidation when we’re on-planet for Kareen’s graduation.

Simon has promised to keep an eye on Pavel while we’re touring the Nexus. Though we regret how seldom we’ve seen Dmitri, we’re extremely proud of him finishing his doctorate. My parents pointed out that I completed mine faster, but unlike Dmitri and Alex, I wasn’t juggling diplomatic or District responsibilities. They’re tremendously excited to be joining our expedition, not having been to Earth in decades. We expect them to be the proudest grandparents in London!

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Irina’s not the only one racking up acceptances! Selig and Simone were accepted to Hassadar University, Solstice University, and Vorbarr Sultana University. Though Simone’s done much better recently, I suspect VSU took her name into account. No matter, she’s thrilled. And with Selig and Jules both having been accepted to the Academy, it seems very likely Simone will stay here in Vorbarr Sultana.

Simon has suggested that Irina, Simone, and Varga share an apartment in Aunt Alys’ building. We think it’s an interesting idea. Lizzie had a very nice flat in Nuevo Valencia and Taurie will be keeping the flat she shares with KareenVB for another year. We want Simone to enjoy her university
years in relative safety. And given the security already in place for Aunt Alys, Simon, and Irina, expanding the remit shouldn’t prove overly onerous on ImpSec. Your thoughts?

We look forward to Nikki’s reaction to learning Selig’s following him to the Academy. Helen’s, too, though God knows when the message will reach her. Last we heard, she was heading out near Graf Station. She’s also having a lot of one-night stands in various ports. On the positive side, at least she’s not making my mistake of fraternizing with subordinates. I just wish her motivation was something healthier than trying to convince herself that she’s desirable. Been there, done that, still remember the heartache when it didn’t work.

To our shock, Alex plans on bringing a date to his siblings’ graduation. No further details have been provided. Feel free to interrogate him as you wish.

Love, the very proud and relieved Count and Countess Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Did you hear the news, that Selig is going to the Academy next year? I’m really excited because a new program has been announced that Academy cadets will be mentoring Academy prep candidates. Lambros and I want to request Selig as our Big Brother. Doesn’t that sound like fun?

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My lovely wife and I have been invited to attend Princess Kareen’s graduation. We’d love to go, subject to one of you chaperoning the children. Ekaterin would be gone about 10 days, returning with Taurie. I’d be gone about three weeks, due to our Emperor’s request that I sit in on his meeting with Ambassador Vorpatril. If you can’t do it, I’ll just take a fast courier directly to the Hegen Hub.

Love, Miles & Ekaterin

My love, there’s no way Yitzy or I could leave Hassadar – we’ll still be grading finals when the Emperor sets sail for Komarr. That said, I’m positive Princess Kareen wants Miles and Ekaterin at her graduation. If you go to Vorbarr Sultana, I’m sure that among Nanny Yana, the Kasuns, and the rest of the staff, we can manage without you while Ekaterin takes a well-deserved vacation. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

Thank you for being so accommodating. I’m likely being paranoid considering we’ve left Simone and Selig with Alex before, but never when Gregor and Laisa weren’t on-planet. And having attended Alexei’s and Dmitri’s college graduations, it would seem shabby to skip Kareen’s. Even if fast couriers aren’t the most comfortable transport, especially compared to the Admiral Vorkosigan, I’m certain Ekaterin and Taurie will appreciate a few days together before we put our daughter to work in the District Offices. Kulick will be relieving Kasun while you’re away. Both deserve a quiet posting for a few months after the tumult of this school year!

Love, your grateful older son

*****

Dear Mother,

I don’t think I want to go to university. Uncle Oliver has been grading papers for DAYS! He and Professor Zorin are very grumpy. They got really mad at Perrin for reading a student’s paper. I don’t
know why, because Perrin said it was very good.

Kiona and Lujayn are driving Nanny Yana crazy asking for candy and ambrosia. Nile and I are enjoying the tropical fruit Aunt Martya brought. I LOVE pineapple!

Love, Alani

****

Dearest Cordelia,

Yes, we’re grumpy, and yes, the paper was excellent. That’s because it was 90% plagiarized. The student and his parents are making a huge fuss because their precious boy needs to pass my class to graduate and a zero on a term paper worth 40% of your grade makes that impossible. The administration is standing behind me, which is gratifying, but the series of meetings has been grueling.

Everard is very excited you’re going to his gymkhana. Hug him for me!

Love, Oliver & Yitzy

****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Aunt Alys,

Another of our children has completed a great achievement. Laisa was also fabulous delivering the commencement address. You’ll be pleased she urged the new graduates to apply their skills throughout the Empire. News of an emigration stipend for those seeking to relocate to Sergyar was enthusiastically applauded.

I’ve attached holos and vid of Kareen enjoying her graduation day. I’d like you both to review the clip of her with one of the young Toscane cousins. For a few very heartstopping moments, I was transported back to my young childhood. Time has so blurred my memories of my mother that I don’t really see her in my daughter. Until today. Tell me, am I right, or am I being fanciful?

Love, Gregor

****

My dearest Cordelia,

How do we tell Gregor that his daughter has always been a healthier reincarnation of his martyred mother? Yes, Princess Kareen’s eyes are shaped like Laisa’s and she has many Komarran manners, but virtually everything else is our late friend.

We may’ve done Gregor a disservice by not retrieving his parents’ wedding portrait from the archives where his grandfather banished it. THAT was the Lady Kareen who took Emperor Ezar’s court by storm at her debut, not the overly-thin, abused woman she was by the time I made mine. The only time I ever saw the Crown Princess at a healthy weight was when she was carrying Gregor, and that was due to the Emperor’s physicians watching her every move, fearing another miscarriage. I don’t know exactly how many there were. My older sister claimed it was three, but given how careful Padma became the moment we confirmed I was carrying Ivan, I suspect Serg bragged about him and Ges making his wife bleed.

Maybe the answer is to send vid of his parents’ betrothal? What do you think?

Much love, Alys

****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Aunt Alys,

It took the archivists some time to locate everything, but the vids and holos you requested have been
sent to Miles. Your idea of the Emperor viewing them with his cousins was brilliant. Some vids include Captain Lord Padma Vorpatril and Admiral Lord Aral Vorkosigan. Uncle Aral looks so young! It’s also uncanny how Ivan moves EXACTLY like his father.

Love, Delia

*****

Dear Cordelia,

We’re expected to make orbit in time for breakfast. Thank you for allowing me this vacation. The voyage to Komarr was a delightful opportunity to spend time with Alexei, Kareen’s graduation was astoundingly meaningful, the State Visit went smoothly, and despite the cramped accommodations, I’m enjoying the quiet time with Taurie. All of us shed tears when Dr. Vorbarra and her class took the Hippocratic Oath. Somehow, an Oath taken within the Empire was even more moving than Lizzie and Vasco taking theirs. I’ll say it before you can: Barrayarans!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Aunt Alys,

I did wonder at the slight delay of your response, but, as usual, it was perfect. Miles, Ivan, and I were wide-eyed at some of the images. I remember Mama as beautiful, but the mother I loved was a shadow of the woman she was before my father. Mama was her gorgeous namesake, charming and full of life.

I understand why my grandfather ordered these images suppressed. It was a kindness to Mama and Aral, for them not to live surrounded by images of the madman who did his best to destroy them. In retrospect, never questioning why my social secretary researched every Imperial wedding going back centuries, but never showed me vid of my parents’, was a sign I wasn’t ready to contemplate who Mama was before. It may be too late, but if you can think of any contemporaries who’d still remember Mama, I’d like to speak to them upon our return.

Ambassador Vorpatril and Lord Auditor Vorkosigan will tell you more in person, but I’ve promised to find the ambassador a new post within the Empire within the next two years. Where exactly is yet to be determined, though I swore on my word as Vorbarra that it won’t be Kyril Island, the Black Escarpment, or anyplace with extraordinary seismic activity. Earthquakes make Lady Vorpatril nervous.

Laisa, Alexei, and Kareen send their love. Though counting the days until we clear the Whole and take that last wormhole jump to Earth, we’re enjoying family time. My father-in-law is almost as good at Tacti-go as Miles at Tacti-go. So far, he’s won my Empire several times over. He’s also lost a pretend fortune to his grandchildren at poker. Alexei plays cards aboard ship, but how did Kareen learn to be so ruthless?

Love always, Gregor the Proud and Happy

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Greetings from Komarr! We’ve got a brief layover waiting for a ship to bring us the rest of the way. The Imperial Counselor and his wife are very gracious hosts.

The five of us went to the Massacre Shrine this morning. It’s very beautiful. Even though he’d been before, Ivan Xav got very emotional. Miles was calmer, reminding us that ultimately, Counselor Galen’s untimely death brought us Mark and our beloved Mila. I had no idea how many Komarrans continue to sue The Gregor for reparations. The Counselor, who plans to step down in four years,
Ivan Xav asked The Gregor about my siblings. He was assured the cryo crypts remain secure and their shares of our parents’ estate has been invested on their behalves. The Gregor did not set a release date. I didn’t expect him to.

Miles promises we’ll see you all at the weekend. I can’t wait!

Love, Tej and Ivan Xav

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Be thankful you missed the squeals when Irina saw her parents. I think they heard her in the lobby. A very happy reunion, which will only get better when we see you!

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

What do you mean, I can’t attend Selig and Simone’s graduation? It’s less than an hour by groundcar. Why can’t I take my stupid tests next week?

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Oliver and Mother,

To Ekaterin’s and my amusement, Everard has written grievance letters to almost everyone in our household except the cleaners. Okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but his persistence reminds me of someone. Granda? Da? Simone? Helen? Or maybe, could it be me or Mark? Sorry, Oliver, but this is what we adolescent Vorkosigans are really like! Didn’t Mother warn you?

Would it help Everard to know that Padma had to get a special dispensation from the Academy Commandant to attend his sister’s mid-week graduation ceremony? Or that Prince Pavel’s request to accompany him was denied? Or that Helen is on her way to Vega Station and will completely miss the ceremony and celebration?

Don’t get me wrong, Academy Prep was an excellent choice for Everard. You are, however, seeing why Gregor and I didn’t send our sons there. Our children’s lives were already limited by so many security considerations, we didn’t want to add military routine and discipline to the mix until we were sure that was what they wanted. Yes, I could order Pavel excused from troop exercises and Everard’s tests rescheduled, but it would be an egregious misuse of my Seal. Also a bad lesson that the Rules only apply to everyone else. I’m ashamed to say it took Captain Illyan taking my Horus Eyes for it to sink in that exceptions and forgiveness weren’t forever available to Aral Vorkosigan’s baby boy. They won’t automatically be extended to Admiral Jole’s baby boys, either. Best to learn that earlier than I did.

Love, Miles

So I guess asking that Perrin and the girls be excused from school for a day trip to Vorbarr Sultana is out of the question? My love, Miles is absolutely right. When it comes to second-guessing the children’s teachers, I must think like an admiral, not a parent. It is, however, hard to say no. Love,
Oliver

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia,

Other than some grumbling about missing graduation, today was uneventful. Nile and I reviewed her math study guide for tomorrow’s exam while Ma Kasun practiced verb conjugations with Perrin and Alani. Martya and Enrique brought Greekie food and more pineapple, so supper was easy.

While Martya read bedtime stories, Enrique and I discussed aquatic micro-organisms. Having passed the Boros-borer project to the commercial production team, he’s returning to his abandoned terraforming research. Enrique is convinced bio-engineered micro-organisms could stimulate Komarr’s bogs to produce much more oxygen. So far, no luck using Barrayaran freshwater samples, so he asked for us to provide some from Sergyar. Which we can certainly do, but I suspect the solution might be closer to hand, in the algae and seaweed of Barrayar’s oceans.

Martya has forbidden Enrique from analyzing any new samples until next week, for fear he’ll forget their trip to Vorbarr Sultana. She’s looking forward to seeing everyone at the party. Besides wanting a turn in Aurelia’s lightflyer, I’m anxious to meet the mysterious Ambassador and Lady Vorpatril. They sound fascinating.

Love, Yitzy

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We thought you’d enjoy this note. Everard’s friend has nice manners.

Love, your tired hosts

---

Dear Count and Countess Vorkosigan,

Thank you for including me in Selig and Simone’s graduation celebration. Your front hallway is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. I had a wonderful time.

Sincerely, Lambros Savalas

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

So kind of General Brodeur to approve you, Ivan, and Tej using an Imperial cruiser to Sergyar. We’re very sorry to have missed what looked to have been a fantastic graduation celebration, but at least we’ll see the majority of the Vorpatrils in Port Nightingale. And don’t worry about accommodations. With Alexei touring the Nexus, he’s given leave for us, Rish, and By to use Oliver’s house.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re in Earth orbit, 36 hours ahead of schedule. Dmitri and three friends came upside to meet his family and share this bonus time with no official obligations. As you’ll see from the attached holo, one friend is female. Dmitri and Lady Charlotte Montagu walked aboard the flagship hand-in-hand. Lady Charlotte is highly intelligent and as self-possessed as might be expected from the daughter of an Earl. Gregor says she’s probably a 60th cousin to Counts Vorsmythe and Vorcarlyle.

To our surprise, soon-to-be Dr. Montagu has accepted a job far away from her family. The light in Dmitri’s eye as Lady Charlotte described the privately-held corporation with huge cryo freezing and revival businesses on Escobar, Jackson’s Whole, and Kibou-daini was positively Miles-like. How do
you think Mark will react when he learns he was manipulated into hiring our son’s girlfriend?

Dmitri’s other two friends were embarrassed to learn his parents aren’t usually addressed as Mr. and Mrs. Vorbarra. Gregor’s eyes crossed when told our son explained away his security detail as necessary because his mother is one of those Toscanes. Several armsmen almost fainted. My parents haven’t stopped chuckling.

Part of me looks forward to disembarking; the other wants to remain in orbit where I’m daughter, wife, and mother, not Empress Laisa. Dmitri’s friends were surprised and disappointed the Barrayaran Crown Jewels don’t include any actual crowns. My maid did pack several tiaras for the formal events, but it’s hardly the same thing.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

My love, though I don’t think the daughter of an Earth Earl is the same as the daughter of a Barrayaran Count, it’s amazing how Emperor Dorca’s male offspring continue to be attracted to the brightest and strongest women the Nexus has to offer. I look forward to meeting Doctor Lady Charlotte Montagu! Love, Me

Excuse me, love, but I’m absolutely certain Lady Alys was never a simple Vor bud, indistinguishable from the rest. Nor was Ekaterin. And I swear I’d have counted myself lucky to have Lady Kareen or Katya Entsky under my command. Love, Me
Summering on Sergyar

Dear Tante Cordelia,

We’re thrilled you’ll be cutting the ribbon on the new MPVK building! Any chance you could bring Kiona and Lujayn? Kareen says they’re wonderful travelers and Cordy’s prospective niece would enjoy playmates. Our daughter is very nervous at meeting her partner’s family for the first time. So, frankly, am I. My mother has promised not to say anything about my father, but it’ll still be very awkward.

Love, Elena and Baz

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Vasco has kindly agreed to accompany me on the journey to Escobar. Not having seen his family in two years, Mark’s offer to buy his ticket was much appreciated. Sadly, I doubt Lizzie will miss either of us; poor girl practically lives at the hospital.

Little Bella has yet another respiratory ailment. They’re trying to boost her immune system, but she’s too young for many of the therapies that help older children. It’s stressful, yet remembering Miles’ infancy, it’s hard not to roll my eyes when Lina and Johnny worry that Bella’s not as agile as her older sister was. She’ll get there.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

While it’s a little embarrassing when someone calls your boss for a favor, I’m very glad Uncle Gregor threw his weight around. Four days off and I feel like a new woman! A very desirable one, thanks to the attention KareenVB and I received at State functions. Sometimes being part of the Emperor’s entourage is fun! As Alexei and Dmitri will attest. When did my almost-brothers become such flirts?

Speaking of flirting, what did you think of Alex’s date? Mama said Miss Ledecka was very nice. Is she really just a friend from his Solstice days, or is there back-story? Dmitri lied and said he didn’t remember her. Aunt Laisa says if it gets more serious, Imperial pressure will be applied to Nikki and Anna to spill their guts.

I miss Vasco, but I’m glad he and Grandma Elizabeth are both enjoying Escobar. Aunt Elena said the first meeting with Goncalo’s family went smoothly. I like him. Hopefully, you do, too. And that if there’s a wedding, they’ll schedule it during one of my breaks. Aunt Elena’s not one for big parties, but Cordy definitely is!

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

You don’t have to threaten us with a request and require for info about Ramona Ledecka! There’s little to tell. She’s the younger sister of a student Dmitri dated. Alex (and his then-partner Viktor!) gallantly ignored Ramona’s obvious crush. The Ledeckas are an oligarch family. Not as prominent as the Toscanes, but Dmitri’s grandparents were comfortable with him dating Carolina Ledecka. I think both sisters were in the business program, but I wouldn’t swear to it. Did Ramona say whether
she was visiting Barrayar or living there? Inquiring minds want to know!

The twins are thriving. Thanks in part to Aunt Tej, they’re both reading. We’ve also got them enrolled in gymnastics and swimming (vid attached). They like nursery school, though given the diverse nature of the ex-patriot community, their accents are very muddled. More Galactic than Mila’s faintly Latin lilt, with some distinct Komarran, Barrayaran, Jacksonian, and Betan expressions tossed in. In case Lizzie didn’t mention it, Dr. Vorvayne’s Betan accent is virtually perfect.

A very important Imperial courier is arriving tomorrow. Some of Anna’s team is coming to her for face-to-face meetings. Ambassador Vorpatril has secured permission for the crew to have shore leave, which means we’ll get to see Helen! I’m sure she’s got lots of stories about her travels. All my sister has said so far is she’s looking forward to dining on something better than rat bars and reddi-meals. Not to worry, Aunt Tej and the embassy cook have big plans.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Dear Mother,

We need to talk when you get back from Escobar. I’m not having as much fun at sleep-away camp as you promised. The girls I knew are acting weird and the new ones lose interest when they find out we’re going back to Barrayar soon.

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Mother,

Of course Nile and I are having fun! Nile loves tromping through the woods collecting plants with her botany buddies and I’m enjoying all the excursions my group does. The new amusement park outside Gridgrad is terrific. I’d love it if we could all go there together before we return to Barrayar.

I can see why Alani’s not as happy as we are. Our groups are more geographically diverse than hers, plus many remember living somewhere other than Sergyar. The littler ones were almost all born here and can’t imagine why anyone would leave. Irina faced that problem, too, when she decided to transfer after being at La Escuela for years. I’m so glad Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej came to visit. I miss them.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Your menfolk are doing fine, sailing, playing war games, and eating at odd hours. We enjoyed camp visiting day. I was curious if the boys would want to go to camp next year, but both said they’re enjoying spending time with Da and their friends. I’ve also gotten good prep work in for next term, but at a more leisurely pace.

I miss Yitzy, but I’m also glad he stayed behind. He was overdue to spend time with his family, plus he needed a break from answering childish questions. After decades on Komarr and Sergyar, Yitzy had a much more difficult time transitioning back to Barrayaran students than I did. I’ve seen so many soldiers who had to learn basic academics just to perform their assigned duties, students with poor science backgrounds didn’t surprise me the way they did Yitzy. I remember how proud Aral was when Harra Csurik graduated from Hassadar Teacher’s College, saying she’d successfully crammed over a decade’s worth of learning into three years. Sadly, some of our students last year weren’t nearly as motivated. A few knew far less science than Kiona or Lujayn, which is very discouraging.
The holos of the MPVK Building dedication were very impressive. You and your mother looked so proud!

Love, Oliver, Everard, and Perrin

P.S. Everard and Perrin would appreciate surprises from their favorite hobby shop. Yitzy and I would appreciate surprises from our favorite adult shop. OPJ

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Do you have a return date set yet? Even with Taurie living here and people visiting regularly – Selig and Simone love traumatizing unsuspecting drivers with their new licenses! – Hassadar House seems far too empty. Why, I haven’t tripped over anything in months. I have, however, put the quiet time to good use. The first draft of my thesis is finally DONE! And that’s with spending weekends with Ramona. She loves her job in the Imperial Accounting Office. Da says Count Vorvolk speaks very highly of her. I appreciate Da pretending not to have run a complete background check on my girlfriend no later than the day after they met.

With luck, I’ll receive my doctorate before Winterfair. It’ll be followed by a Grand Tour of sorts. At a minimum, I’ll visit Escobar, Beta Colony, Eta Ceta, and Earth. After that, who knows? I hear Tau Ceti and Lairouba have great architecture. And no, Ramona won’t be accompanying me. Alex Vorvayne and a to-be-determined armsman are venturing out on our own.

Love, Alex

*****

(eyes only)Dear Mother,

FYI - there was a needler shooting just outside our embassy in Silica. The suspect is in custody. He claims the target was the Ceta ambassador, but if so, why did the entire Ceta party escape unharmed, while three uniformed Barrayaran officers were shot? One’s dead, one’s in critical condition, and the third was cryo frozen.

We suspect the true goal was a diplomatic incident while Gregor was far away. Unless I hear otherwise, I’m staying in Vorbarr Sultana to assist Prime Minister Xenos and Prince Pavel in keeping things calm. General Brodeur has ordered extra security on both sides of the Komarr wormhole, just in case this is an internal plot of some sort. Needless to say, your security is being radically increased, too.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’re out of Ceta space and pushing hard for Beta Colony. One of Anna’s team’s spouses was one of the Barrayarans shot outside our embassy. He’ll need cryo revival. I’ve already contacted Uncle Mark and asked if any of the Duronas are available to assist. I know Betan medicine is great, but considering I wouldn’t exist but for the Duronas, I want my fellow officer to have the best we can offer him.

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I’m rather glad ImpSec will be providing your passage back to Barrayar because it allowed me to send Rowan and Verbena Durona to Silica in my ship. Lizzie and Gregor seconded Helen’s
emotional request for medical back-up because Major Miramas’ damage is worse than most Betan surgeons have ever seen. The major has a very long road to recovery ahead of him, but Rowan feels that if multiple teams work together, his chances are decent. Unlike his poor colleague, who sustained severe brain damage and will likely need care for the rest of his life. I’m sure Gregor’s stomach is churning as badly about this as Da’s ever did.

Dr. Montagu is proving to be a very wise hire. She passed the ‘watch an emergency cryo freeze and a very messy revival’ tests with flying colors. We instituted those protocols after Miles’ Kibou-daini adventures because we didn’t want our business inadvertently mimicking the soulless, bloodsucking conglomerates like WhiteChrys. And yes, this is why I was so upset about the Arqua cryo death scheme. No MPVK employee is allowed to forget that underlying those electricity and preservation solution costs are real people whose futures depend on us doing our jobs properly.

Unfortunately, Dr. Vorbarra’s official start date has been delayed. His father has requested and required him to remain with the flagship during this potential crisis. Depending on how things develop, it may make more sense for Martya to introduce Dmitri to MPVK’s Barrayaran-based interests. He could then return to Escobar with us after Winterfest. It'll be interesting to see if he comes up with any major recommendations for the annual board meeting.

We’ve enrolled Mila in judo. Isn’t her uniform and ponytail one of the cutest things you’ve ever seen? It’s obviously genetic. Da + Drou = child who needs to hear most instructions only once to learn new moves. Mila loves practicing with us. New motto: the family that spars together will never be vanquished!

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Mama swears you’ll be back before the new term begins. I’d really love it if you two could join Mama and Da in accompanying me to the Academy for orientation. I’m very excited to become Cadet Kosigan, but It’s a bit daunting, too.

Love, Selig

My love, it’s a good thing I’m not required to supervise new student orientation, or we’d be stuck! I can spare a day to be Admiral Jole (Ret.), but will have to return to Hassadar quickly to make sure I’m ready for the new term. I think we should leave the children in Hassadar. Ekaterin will be so busy getting three children off to university, she won’t need more underfoot. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I think we’re getting our dates mixed up – I’ll be in Solstice shortly after you leave Sergyar. If you like, I can meet you at the orbital station for hugs and a meal before you set sail for Barrayar.

Love, Taurie

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Looks like we’ll be gone longer than expected. A State visit to the Celestial Garden has been added to our schedule. Any policy issues you think we should raise beyond: please rein in your affiliates in the Whole so they stop trying to murder Our subjects? Please assure Lady Irina that her parents are in no danger and the feeble plot to sow discord in our relationship with the Cetas was quickly unraveled.
My children and I watched part of Major Stavros Miramas’ revival. I say part because it took something like 50 hours of surgery. His head was luckily spared, which augurs well for his brain, but his torso and upper thighs will be even more scarred than Miles’. Laisa or Helen spent much of that time with Major Marie Miramas. We ordered Helen’s ship back to Eta Ceta with a replacement navigator due to the close bond she’d formed with our wounded hero’s wife. Major Marie needs all the support she can get, what with less than two months to go before the birth of their first child. Dr. Cortez has agreed to serve as the infant’s pediatrician.

The other two soldiers have not been forgotten. ImpMil is sending teams to evaluate Soldier Gavras, make the necessary arrangements to transport him back to Kareenburg safely, and arrange care once he’s home. Soldier Dupont’s casket is already en route back to Barrayar. Pavel and Miles will represent Us at the funeral; circumstances permitting, we’d appreciate if you two could also attend.

I’ll close by saying our Lizzie is both an amazing doctor and a wonderful human being. She’s been a dependable, strong resource for everyone, as has the Naismith clan. Grandma Elizabeth brought fresh-baked cookies while Major Stavros was in surgery. It may’ve been the first time Helen and Major Marie ate since leaving Eta Ceta. Clark’s girlfriend has offered to help Major Marie find a reliable nanny. Dr. Lina and Lizzie have promised to help arrange post-surgery in-home nursing care.

Love, Gregor, Laisa, Alexei, Dmitri, & Kareen

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Your rooms at Vorkosigan House and Hassadar House are ready and waiting. Aunt Alys is champing at the bit to see Irina and complete decorating the most luxurious college apartment in Vorbarr Sultana. Ekaterin convinced Aunt Alys that students do not need fresh flowers delivered daily, but was less successful regarding practical items like glassware and furnishings. Simone rightly fears breakage.

Soldier Dupont’s funeral will be held the day before Selig reports to the Academy. Being that it’ll be on the Southern Continent, Pavel, Alex, and I will fly down the night before. If you can make it work, great, but no recriminations if you can’t. Pavel has been absolutely outstanding balancing training and Vorbarr obligations. He’s also an excellent role model for Selig, both militarily and as the younger brother who may occasionally have to assume District responsibilities. And if Pavel’s a tad nervous about representing the Vorbarras at a funeral, Alex will be there to give him a brotherly pep talk. Alex’s idea, not ours or Pavel’s. Good lad!

We’re all anxious to see your flying circus. Armswoman Lukin has been studying holos so she’ll recognize all your girls. Don’t worry, Varga will remain Aurelia’s primary guard. Lukin is being assigned to Simone and Irina. She’s young enough to pass as a university student, but has many years of martial arts training. I’m sure Esterhazy would be very proud that his granddaughter has joined our service!

Ekaterin and I are going down to Vorkosigan Surleau for a few days. I want to swim in the Long Lake before it gets too cold to benefit my sore muscles.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

My love, I can’t work in a trip to the South Continent. Why don’t you plan on taking Aurelia to Vorbarr Sultana? I’m sure she and Simone would enjoy a day together while you’re paying your respects to Soldier Dupont and his family. Love, Me
A New School Year

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Please don’t worry about me, I’m doing fine. So, thankfully, is Major Stavros. His determination to be on his feet before the baby arrives is downright heroic.

With the Embassy having lost three people, I’ve been temporarily reassigned as a junior military attaché until my ship returns from Eta Ceta. To my surprise, I rather like the work. I’m sure most of the smaller embassies are very dull, but this one is a constant beehive of activity. No wonder Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej enjoy their jobs!

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Thank you for all your help curbing Mamere’s decorating bonanza. Irina was rather overwhelmed by the proposed furnishings, but feared hurting her grandmother’s feelings. The holos show a comfortable student apartment, not rooms worthy of entertaining the Council of Counts! No one would dare spill wine or beer on Mamere’s sofa; back in our Academy days, the lounge furniture survived far worse.

My wife jokes that we may be the only ambassadors not panicking at the prospect of an impromptu State visit. We’ll be hosting a ball and several other events, but our staff is well up to the task, especially with Colonel Chaly’s staff available to backstop soon-to-be Colonel Voroissen’s. Another upside of the visit – Gregor will preside over Nikki’s promotion ceremony. Tej will probably cry. I might, too.

Padma says Pavel was very shaken by Soldier Dupont’s funeral. He is, too. Our boys know people die wearing the Emperor’s uniform, but never one who died specifically because of his uniform. Tej and I feel it’s a valuable lesson that the Emperor’s service is far more than dress swords, exploring the Nexus, and protecting government leaders and their families. Gregor once told Tej’s family that lives were the coin by which Barrayar pays for his mistakes. Except this latest attack is yet one more consequence of the series of mistakes Shiv and Udine made decades ago that resulted in them losing House Cordonah to House Prestene.

Because I know Anna and Nikki have been far too busy to write, I’m enclosing some holos of the twins. They’re both such devilish charmers! Please share with Miles and Ekaterin. Miles and I have been in contact, but it’s all been official business.

Love, Ivan, Tej, Daniel and Dyana

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

School is so different without Selig, Simone, Irina, and Hussein! Not bad, just different. My friends welcomed me back, plus I frequently see Irina or Simone when I go to the university for my math classes. They’ve invited me to spend next weekend in their apartment. Please say that’s okay.

Has Nile said anything about our conversation last week? She mentioned that she’s a little disappointed in how much her school focuses on physical sciences and she’d rather be doing more biology and botany. My school has a big greenhouse. Not as nice as Ekaterin’s, of course, but Irina enjoyed studying hydroponics there.
This may sound weird, but Vorbarr Sultana is also different without Uncle Gregor and Aunt Laisa. Miles is working very hard on legislative stuff and another auditorial investigation, but there’s a different energy when the Imperial standard flies over the Residence. Plus I miss tea with Aunt Laisa. She may not always understand the mechanics of our projects, but she asks such good questions about how our inventions could be adapted for wider use. Like if our robot laser could be used in conjunction with Uncle Enrique’s borer tape to break up rocks too big for the microbes to absorb. We’re planning to make that our fall robotics club project.

Uncle Oliver, how’s the new term going? Are your students smarter this year?

Love, Aurelia

My love, Aurelia’s raised a valid point about the Vorkosigan District focus on physical sciences. Yes, the Empire and District need new technology, but our students also need to understand the environment so we can continue to terraform and feed our growing population more efficiently. Yitzy and Enrique are close to a breakthrough on the bog project, but there’s so much more that could be done to modernize production in the more remote regions in the District. Love, Me

Yes, my love, I fully understand how far the District’s come since you first set foot on this backward planet. I’m suggesting the next round of educational improvements include an upgraded science curriculum. This medium-term endeavor would also benefit the medical community. In the near-term, if Nile’s not happy with her program, we should probably talk to Miles and Ekaterin about the possibility of her transferring to Old Town’s Upper School next year. Love, Me

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Meetings with Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja and Empress the haut Rian Degtiar went well. At a private family dinner with their two sons, Empress Rian abandoned her float bubble. She’s unquestionably one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met. Gracious and intelligent, too, but in a totally different way from my gorgeous wife. To quote Dmitri, living trapped in the perfect bubble of the Celestial Garden has stunted the Royal Family’s understanding of universal values like service and helping those less fortunate. Kareen added that as feudal as most of the Nexus regards our government structure, the Emperor also being Count Vorbarra means our head of state is as responsible to his District population as any other planetary official down to the lowest local Speaker. We all doubt Emperor Fletchir understands Eta Ceta’s local government structure, much less that of the other Satrapies.

Our official holographer documented Colonel Vorsoisson’s promotion ceremony. He also captured General Chaly’s shock when she, too, was promoted. We have asked Nikki and Anna to hold off notifying anyone other than Ekaterin and Miles for several months. That’s the estimate to get Nikki’s
replacement to Eta Ceta and find space within the Empire to relocate Anna’s task force. Although there appears to be no direct link to the attack on our Betan Embassy, in retrospect, having the task force meet on Eta Ceta could’ve been a problem if the incident had escalated into a diplomatic confrontation. Some very valuable, time-sensitive info could’ve been lost if Barrayaran communications and travel were blocked.

We’re planning a very brief stop at Beta Colony to wave the flag, check on Major Miramas, and pick up Lieutenant Vorkosigan. We’re very interested in her thoughts as to adjustments our military services need to make to accommodate married couples. The Majors Miramas are surely not the sole example we’ll be seeing of an injured soldier whose spouse’s work is also of critical importance to the Imperium.

On a lighter note, Kareen was quite the social success on Eta Ceta. Her brothers disliked most of the male attention, but were very proud of her prowess when discussing genetic manipulation and replicator technology. Amusing considering women have been throwing themselves at Alexei the entire trip. It’s good Katya’s not with us because it’s all far more blatant than when I was an eligible bachelor.

Love, Gregor, Laisa, and 3/4 of our amazing children

 *****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve just dropped our sons at Sergyar Station and are on our way to Komarr to drop my parents and our tardy daughter. Kareen’s professors are dismayed she’ll be months behind the rest of her class. We’re not worried, not with the studying she’s been doing. My mother’s tired of traveling; my father enjoyed what he called the bonus trip to Eta Ceta and a chance to spoil Dyana and Daniel. Gregor loves how my parents claim all Vorkosigan offspring as their nieces and nephews. Our sons insisted on including Grandma and Grandpa in the meetings with Helen regarding dual career military couples. As Dmitri pointed out, this is an issue most large organizations face when employees meet their partners on the job. Our multi-generational discussions were one of the highlights of this long return flight.

You and the children are requested and required to come for an overnight visit the first weekend after we land. I hope Yitzhak won’t mind being excluded, but some of the discussion will be far above his security clearance.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

Let’s see, my love, you and Aral met at work, Aral and I met at work, Yitzy and I met at work – I’d say this isn’t a new issue for the Imperium! Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Ekaterin says we’re staying over at the Residence this weekend. I was supposed to attend a party, but I’d much rather see Uncle Gregor and Aunt Laisa! Don’t worry, I told my friends I was going to Hassadar to see Alani. She says her wrist is almost healed already, but she has to wear a splint and sling for a week. Also that some of the hospital nurses recognized her. Maybe sparring with Perrin is a bad idea?

Love, Aurelia

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It’s a good thing we didn’t sell the house in Gridgrad! General Chaly’s task force is being relocated
to the base. I’m getting a nice assignment, too – Head of ImpSec-Sergyar’s Security Operations. The next time you have problems with your detail, you’ll be complaining to me. I owe a lot to Viceroy and Lady Vorgustafson. My new commander says they praised me to the skies.

Packing has begun. Helen is on the courier bringing my replacement. Hopefully, she’ll spend some off-duty hours helping entertain the dynamic duo. They’re very sad to be leaving Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej. Aunt Tej is unhappy, too. I really hope Ops is working on finding their replacement because she’s had enough of Eta Ceta.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Gridgrad’s not as good as Vorbar Sultana, but we’ll gladly take it! Nikki tends to focus on Anna’s stupendous achievements, while downplaying his own professional victories. Eta Ceta wasn’t a nepotistic assignment. Nikki’s predecessor would’ve happily finished his twice-twenty there if Ambassador and Lady Vorpatril weren’t so damn demanding. Having read Ivan’s early reports, I’m certain the late Captain Vorminski’s remaining tenure on Eta Ceta would’ve been short even if he hadn’t sold out Irina. Yes, ex-patriate assignments pay more, but not nearly as much as he and his family were spending. And that doesn’t include the money stashed at House Dyne. Vorminski’s widow was very distressed to discover a bank outside the Empire had honored Lord Auditor Vorgustafson’s warrant seizing the account. Her trip to the Whole to claim her husband’s ill-gotten gains validated the Emperor’s decision to rescind all Imperial benefits that might ordinarily be due to her or her children. Commodore Paretsky was very lucky not to lose his pension, too.

Before the Beta incident, Nikki and Anna were scheduled to remain on Eta Ceta for at least two more years. General Galeni hand-picked Ivan’s new Security Chief. I promise Ivan and Tej will be in excellent hands with Colonel Tuomonen.

Ekaterin is contemplating a trip to Sergyar after Winterfair. I won’t be able to get away, so Aurelia and I will have to entertain each other for a few months. That will be fun. Ekaterin hopes to travel with Mark and Kareen. She was somewhat miffed by Alex’s rightful grumbling that no one sets off on a Grand Tour with his mother!

Love, Granda Miles and Grandma Ekaterin

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Why is nothing ever easy? Less than a week before Nikki and Anna were scheduled to depart, a young lady approached me begging for asylum. Not just any young lady. No, young Vesta Rond refused to suffer the fate of her distant cousin Moira and be culled from the haut. Tej noted at the time that haut Vesta Rond spoke extensively to Princess Kareen about reproductive science. KareenVB has confirmed that her knowledge is extraordinary by galactic standards. Obviously not up to Star Crèche norms, or they wouldn’t be offering her as a prize to a ghem-general thrice her age.

As much as the Imperium could use more scientists, I wasn’t interested in jumping into a guaranteed diplomatic morass until the haut Vesta Rond played her trump card. Since Miles was called up to the Star Crèche, they’ve done a hell of a lot of experimenting on his sample. They’ve also improved the antidote to the poison that almost killed him and Bel. We wouldn’t dare administer the concoction until the Duronas and ImpMil clear it, but strengthening injured vascular systems is research we must have. Haut Vesta swore the formulation has wider applications than just Miles and Bel, plus she’s smuggled out other similar medical research.
Gregor approved the request as soon as his daughter confirmed our émigré’s potential usefulness. That left getting her out. I blame Nikki for what came next. I doubt any haut woman has ever dressed like a Barrayaran nanny before, but it proved to be a good cover for getting her off the planet. Tej and I, however, are left with the real nanny, who will need to be smuggled onto the next Imperial courier. The poor girl misses Daniel and Dyana, hates being confined to quarters, and is scared to death of both Colonel Tuomonen and the Cetas.

I leave it to you two, Mamere, and Simon to convince your stubborn older son that healing prior damage isn’t life extension treatment and he has a duty to ensure he stays healthy enough for us both to play with our grandchildren-yet-to-come.

Love, Ivan and Tej

My love, I’m astounded an haut woman would choose abandoning her home world to avoid a drop in social status. I hope she understands there’ll be no hiding inside float bubbles when in the presence of inferiors like ourselves. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Doctor Lora Albu (née the haut Vesta Rond) is the most breathtakingly beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Yes, I’m in lust, but as Nikki and Anna keep reminding me, Dr. Albu is forbidden fruit until her loyalty to the Imperium can be assured.

I believe Dr. Albu’s desire to escape Ceta strictures is sincere. She suggested cutting and dyeing her long, glossy brown hair to the nanny’s mid-back length black before being smuggled out of the Embassy. She is polite to the crew and seems content wearing ship knits and baggy fatigues. Dr. Albu has Da’s problem – regulation gender-based clothing doesn’t fit due to her height (or his lack thereof).

Apparently few ordinary Cetas realize that Colonel Vorsoisson is my brother. Dr. Albu’s eyes popped when she spotted my name tag aboard ship (I was sent topside immediately after she approached Uncle Ivan). She said this was the second time a Vorkosigan had saved her. So yes, Mama and Da’s heroic efforts to thwart that crazy Ba are remembered and appreciated. And if Dr. Albu really can help stabilize Da and Captain Thorne, well, this nerve-wracking trip will have been worth it.

We didn’t punch the engines until we left Ceta space. Since then, however, we’ve been going almost twice the Admiral Vorkosigan’s normal cruising speed. Daniel and Dyana are miserably jump-sick, plus they miss their nanny, who’ll be at least a month behind us. My crew-mates have been wonderful about helping with the twins, especially with Nikki and Anna not feeling that well, either. Vasco would be very pleased at how hard the med team is working to refresh their pediatrics knowledge and formulate remedies for our smallest, cutest, grumpiest passengers.

Unlike most voyages, where flying is left to my commanding officer, General Chaly and Colonel Vorsoisson are most definitely in charge of getting our surprise passenger safely to Sergyar. I don’t know what’ll happen to her after that. I suspect nobody else does, either!

One advantage of our breakneck speed is it widens the margin of error for me to arrive home before Alex’s graduation. Despite Nikki and Lizzie not being there, I’m really looking forward to Winterfair. Can you believe I haven’t been home in almost a year? Most of my crew is terribly homesick. Care packages when we visit my far-flung relatives are much appreciated!

I’ve attached some holos to share until I see everyone in person.

Love, Helen
I’d say Helen has great taste, except you’d have to be half dead not to find Dr. Albu desirable. I wonder what great service that middle-aged ghem-general provided to his Emperor. Also how angry the general is that his prize has fled. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Duv and Miles were correct, Colonel Tuomonen was a wonderful choice to succeed Nikki. This certainly wasn’t the first time I’ve granted asylum, but it’s usually in conjunction with a marriage or not wanting to return to a home world. I’ve never smuggled two people out from the middle of a multi-planet empire. Luckily, my new security chief does have experience with smuggling and changing identities on the fly, having served four horrible years on the Whole. We had to sedate the twins’ nanny to hide her in a shipping container full of toys, but the ruse worked for the few hours it took to transfer three bins from the embassy to the orbital station. And because those transfers were planned – the next courier will transport the last of everyone’s possessions to Sergyar – it didn’t raise any suspicion. Best of all, the subterfuge of the haut Vesta Rond traveling with friends to Rho Ceta to begin wedding plans has successfully diverted attention away from Eta Ceta.

I’m debating sending Tej alone to Padma’s graduation. I certainly can’t leave Eta Ceta for that long, but it would be terribly shabby for neither parent to be there. Plus it would be nice if she could see Rish and Amiri.

Thank you for supporting Irina and Simone that Mamere shouldn’t enter their apartment without invitation. University students (and their brothers) need privacy. We understand Selig’s girlfriend was petrified to hear Mamere’s voice before breakfast! Miles and Alex were no damn help, telling Selig to take his dates to the Manor. We’re sure Padma does so on occasion, but the girls’ spare bedroom is for their guests and we’d much prefer Selig accompany the girls home from their friend’s party than dump them in an auto-cab and disappear to the Manor.

Padma writes that Everard and Lambros are wonderful Little Cadet Brothers. He’s particularly impressed with how meticulously Lambros notices subtle details in insignia or protocols. For a boy not raised with regular security drills, his external awareness is reportedly spectacular. That will serve him well in a military career!

Lastly, the group picture of the sprogs at Everard’s gymkhana was marvelous. Kiona and Lujayn have lost so many teeth! Why was Aurelia’s arm bandaged? Did she and Miles blow up something?

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

We wanted you to hear it from us first, before the formalities kick in and my parents are forced to inform the Nexus. We’re engaged! I proposed on the beach in Port Nightingale, on a moonlit night full of stars. For now, Katya is wearing a simple Claddagh ring I purchased on Earth. We’ll visit the vault for her to choose an ancestral ring when we return home for Winterfair.

Now for the timing. We’re planning on a smallish (by Vorbarrar standards) betrothal ceremony before the Winterfair ball, to be followed by a Midsummer wedding. I need to speak to Alex, but it may be best for him not to cut his Grand Tour short. As much as I want him to be there, we can’t have all my paternal male relatives on one side of the wormhole. Yes, Uncle Ivan is off-world, but if something horrific happened, he could all too easily be trapped on Eta Ceta.

I hate treating relatives like chess pieces, but as Da frequently reminds us, being Vorbarrar often has its disadvantages. I fear my fiancée and I will be transferred to desk jobs in Vorbarr Sultana until after the wedding. Afterward, who knows?
Love, Alexei and Katya

Alexei has chosen wisely, my love. Lt. Commander Entsky will be a magnificent princess/future countess. My evil side is looking forward to the wailing in social circles and the Council of Counts over the Crown Prince marrying a prole. I’m sure Miles and Dono are, too! Love, Me

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

Estelle has kindly made time to provide all your girls with gowns for the betrothal, but you need to bring them to her next week for fittings. If their schools protest, tell them the Emperor requests and requires them to have tea at the Residence. Laisa promises plenty of cream cakes and fruit tarts as reward for surviving fittings.

Much love, Alys

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Sadly, I won’t make it to Alexei’s wedding. It’s just too far. It looks like Vasco and I will, however, be able to attend Cordy and Goncalo’s. Aunt Elena and Uncle Baz are thrilled Uncle Mark and Aunt Kareen offered Vorkosigan Pribyl as a venue. A summer reception in Mama’s gardens will be absolutely beautiful! Goncalo’s family wants them to get married in a church. Cordy agreed, on the condition that Mila be her flower girl. Not only will Mila be adorable, it was the incentive we needed to coax Grandma Elizabeth to come with us.

It finally seems to be sinking in to Vasco’s parents that ours is a serious relationship and their son isn’t pining for Escobar. Not the way I miss Barrayar, at any rate. Having Helen stationed here for weeks was such a gift! I’m happy to report that Major Stavros continues to make great strides in his recovery and little Laisa Miramas is thriving. To Vasco’s chagrin, Bella is not. Her immune system is so fragile, she continues to run frequent fevers. And that’s with Lina showering before she leaves the hospital and again when she gets home.

I’m looking forward to explanations as to why Nikki and Anna didn’t stop for their promised brief visit on the way to Sergyar and why Daniel and Dyana’s nanny didn’t travel with them. Her courier made a stop for supplies. Is Da up to something?

Love, Lizzie

My love, I do adore how few clandestine machinations get past Dr. Vorvayne! It'll be fascinating when/if she and Dr. Albu meet! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Having passed the intense screening on Gridgrad Base, including a personal interrogation by General Galeni, Dr. Albu has been cleared to travel to Barrayar. She’ll be kept under house arrest in René’s District while the Science Institute boffins take their turn interrogating her. If she proves trustworthy, there are enough part-Cetas there to make a cover story somewhat believable.

Some interesting tidbits from Duv’s interrogation. The insult in the proposed match to a randy ghem-general wasn’t simply one of caste. The Star Crèche is embarrassed that whomever designed Dr. Albu and at least five score of her age-mates unilaterally decided they should all be homosexual. A shocking number of Dr. Albu’s contemporaries have met with fatal accidents, been forced into undesirable alliances, or both. Dr. Albu’s favorite cousin died of sepsis from a minor fencing injury less than a month after his heir arrived on the annual Rho Ceta baby transport. She therefore rightly feared being repeatedly raped before being discarded once her childless husband-to-be got his heir(s).
She also finds Lieutenant Vorkosigan very attractive. We won’t be revealing that to Helen until after Dr. Albu’s fate is decided. No sense pining for unattainable targets.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It’s good to be back on Sergyar! Lt. Cmdrs. Vorbarra and Entsky kindly brought a squad of friends to help the day we moved back into our house. It needed some minor repairs and painting, but nothing too drastic considering when we left, the twins were still sharing a room. Mama can tweak the gardens when she visits.

Some of our helpers were clearly intimidated to see my wife’s personal side. All the corruption her task force has uncovered has led to her being known as the hanging General! And to end her stint in Eta Ceta by bringing home a prisoner, well, the rumor mills are spinning wildly. Alexei tried diffusing some tension by sharing stories of my days as his personal security. Many were stunned at the ‘normal’ things we did like flying to Hassadar to see the newest vid in a theater, going to the outskirts of Vorbarra Sultana for ice cream clad in rumpled play clothes, or a day fishing and swimming in the Long Lake without a dozen Vorbarra armmen. Anna laughed when I said my parents’ house staff usually tripled for those visits. Alexei admitted he and Dmitri recognized many of them as ImpSec, but were too amused to see officers gardening and cleaning to spill the beans to Kareen and Pavel.

The best part of military assistants is they’re efficient and coordinated. Two were with the twins at all times as we unloaded all nine cargo bins, plus the household items we’d put into storage. In about six hours, our house looked like a home again and we moved on to barbecuing, relaxing, and drinking. Nothing like cold cider and wine on your own patio! That’s when we started discussing weddings. Alexei wanted our memories of his parents’. Other than everyone dressing up and how imposing you and Granda looked relative to Aunt Laisa’s parents, the District food booths and the fireworks are my most vivid memories. That and the bride arriving on horseback. Anna said both the Barrayaran and Komarran wedding days were holidays in Equinox. She watched vids of both ceremonies, never imagining she’d ever meet the bride and groom, much less invite them to her own wedding.

Work is going well. Anna was an integral part of Dr. Albu’s time here. She’s also staffed her new office and is planning a trip to Barrayar and the Hegen Hub. Mama has suggested Anna bring the twins for Winterfair. I’d miss them, but it might make sense given how busy I’ll be while the Viceroy is away making his annual report. I’ve gone from knowing every item on the Viceroy’s agenda to tracking every VIP and major gathering on the entire planet. It’s a bit intimidating. It does explain, though, why most of the higher-ups at headquarters have gone gray!

Our nanny has given notice. Not to worry, my predecessor’s child minder is glad of a new job. Uncle Oliver probably knows Yulia’s husband, our chief ground-based mechanic. They’re from Kayburg and moved to Gridgrad when the base opened.

The twins are attending a wonderful half-day pre-school program. They’ll transition to a full-day next year with the rest of the class. So far, so good.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

Ah, the many sides of Alexei Vorbarra – Crown Prince one minute, stevedore the next! I like how he finessed the situation, recruiting reliable friends who weren’t in either Anna’s or Nikki’s chain of command to help get them settled in. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
Would it be okay if I took two university classes next term? I’m handling my math class easily, plus I’ve already finished most of the year’s work in my regular astronomy class. Uncle Vorthys suggested I might like Intro to Astrophysics. The Department Head teaches the intro class once every six or seven years, so this is a rare opportunity to learn from one of the field’s most revered experts.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We dined with my aunt and uncle last night. Uncle Vorthys is extremely confident that Aurelia will be able to handle the work. He also said that unlike many experts who can only communicate with peers, Professor Muenster is an excellent teacher who’s inspired many a student to learn more about a very tricky subject. And it’s not like Miles and Helen couldn’t help her study. Gregor has already decreed that Lieutenant Vorkosigan is being limited to shorter voyages until after Midsummer. We suspect she’ll be transporting a lot of VIPs related to the wedding!

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

My dissertation defense was easier than I could have ever dreamed possible. Mark your calendars for the graduation/party! Please remind Professor Zorin, too.

Love, Alex

Being questioned by three scientists clearly prepared Alex well for his oral exams! I’m so proud of our part in helping the architect Aral would’ve been if he’d been born in a time of peace. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’ve managed to convince all my professors to let me take my finals early so I can get home in time for Alex’s graduation. KareenVB won’t be so lucky. She’s so busy, she’ll barely make it home for the Betrothal/Ball. ImpSec has cleared my boyfriend to catch a ride home with her. I think you’ll like Zane. He’s interesting.

Love, Taurie

*****

Dear Mother,

Ekaterin, Irina, Simone, Helen, and I went for another dress fitting today. Thank you for allowing me to order a more grown-up style. I feel like a princess!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re underway at last. Dmitri doesn’t know we’re bringing Dr. Montagu. Delia does, so no worries about security/protocol/seating arrangements. Mila is SO excited about wearing her new party dress to the almost-wedding. It was very kind of Alexei and Katya to extend her an invitation. Mila’s also thrilled we’re stopping at Sergyar to pick up Anna and the twins. Maybe playmates will make the long trip more interesting for her. I hope so, because we adults all have a lot of work to do.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, & Lady Mila

*****
Dear Cordelia,

I’m guilty of watching you for most of Alex’s graduation ceremony. You were so beautiful, beaming with pride as your grandson added a new achievement to House Vorkosigan’s storied history. I’m lucky to know him. And you, of course.

Love, Yitzy
Changes in the Air

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you for all the holos and vid from Alex’s celebration. I find it hard to believe that the chubby, naked toddler I met on my first visit to Vorkosigan House is now Doctor Lord Alex Vorkosigan! Where has the time gone?

Alys and Simon are already planning Padma’s graduation celebration. The last message from The Gregor asked us to be patient while various departments work to find a way for us to visit Barrayar for the graduation and wedding. Nothing would make us happier. Ivan Xav won’t admit it, but he doesn’t want to miss the first Vorbarra wedding in almost 30 years. So we’ll see.

Colonel Tuomonen is sweeping the embassy for bugs several times a day. Virtually every invitee plans to attend our Winterfair Ball. Yes, we’ll officially be celebrating the Crown Prince’s betrothal, but with the haut Vesta Rond declared missing, Cetas are investigating every embassy and corporation with private transport. Agents are rumored to be combing Beta Colony, Earth, and the Whole. A team’s even been sent to Illyrica! Ivan Xav and I liked Illyrica. It’s a pleasant place.

Happy Winterfair!
Love, Tej and Ivan Xav

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

With Aurelia and Everard in Hassadar, Taurie and Simone have been pressed into service to help watch Daniel and Dyana. They’re energetic scoundrels! Anna is doing well keeping to her schedule and getting home for playtime and dinner every night, but that will change after Winterfair. In contrast, Ekaterin and I will have more time to spoil our grandchildren after Alexei’s betrothal. I’m not sure who’s more nervous, Laisa or Delia. Madame Entsky is fairly relaxed, agreeing to most of the proposed arrangements. The only issue was the star points. Katya wants her paternal aunt, not her uncle, representing her late father on the wedding circle. Her mother backed her on this, adding that her brother-in-law is an idiotic misogynist who opposed Katya entering military service. Joke’s on him, isn’t it?

Dr. Montagu has visited several times. Dmitri clearly shares his father’s taste in women. Ekaterin and I agree she’d be a welcome addition to House Vorbarra as well as the huge asset she is to MPVK. Mark was very lucky to have hired her.

Did Alex tell you Miss Ledecka has postponed her visit home to accompany him to the Betrothal/Ball? We suspect her parents told her not to waste an opportunity to mingle with la crème de la crème of Barrayaran society. Our son has also been invited to visit Casa Ledecka at the beginning of his Grand Tour. Laisa, Dmitri, and Alex are very amused at the pretentious renaming of a Solstice high-rise building.

We get the impression Miss Ledecka is none too happy about Alex and Plotkin’s upcoming travels. I roamed the Nexus for over a decade; it seems only fair the next Count Vorkosigan gets a chance to explore on his own before assuming the responsibilities that await. It doesn’t mean Alex won’t be able to take an extended honeymoon later on; we just want him to enjoy being free to do as he pleases. And hopefully, Plotkin will earn himself the permanent role of Alex’s personal armsman.

The house is decorated, your rooms are ready, and we can’t wait for everyone to return to Vorbarr Sultana so the celebrations may begin in earnest!
Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Every time I think I’m done reading the materials for the MPVK annual meeting, Mark or Martya sends more. Dmitri and Dr. Montagu have some excellent ideas, but dumping them all at once is mind-numbing. What’s your bet for how many days we’ll be cooped up at MPVK Manor?

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

Gregor has requested and required the entire family to assemble at the Residence tomorrow at 11 sharp for official holos. Dress greens for active duty. House uniforms, suits, and semi-formal attire for everyone else. Laisa says the girls should all wear their Winterfair luncheon dresses, not their ballgowns, if that helps.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia,

Sorry for the slight deception, but how else could we ensure Helen would show up in uniform for her promotion ceremony? Gregor wanted to promote her at our Betan Embassy, but Alexei urged him to wait until Pavel, Miles, and Alex could be there. After all, Lt. Commander in under six years is a massive accomplishment!

I’m sure the Vorkosigan laundry will get all the stains out of the little ones’ party clothes before Miles and Ekaterin’s anniversary celebration. Delia and I are looking forward to someone else hosting a celebratory occasion!

All our love, Laisa, Gregor, and our scheming, proud children

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I love parties with my cousins! Can we have a kid party when Alexei and Katya get married?

Love, Mila

What do you mean, Miles also wrote like this before five? What are Mark and Kareen in for? Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Yesterday was absolutely magnificent. I’m not sure I ever pictured seeing Gregor’s children betrothed. Simon says he expected to be underground long before any of them reached their majority. The Duronas’ hard work has brought us so many unexpected blessings! And as madly in love as Gregor and Laisa were, the love and respect Alexei and Katya have for each other is so much deeper because their long friendship has seen each other through many highs and lows. Commander Katya Entsky may not have been born Vor, but she is more a lady than many who were.

And our girls, Cordelia, all so accomplished and fearless in a way so few of our generation were allowed to be. The way the major-domo introduced General Anna Chaly, Lt. Commander Lady Helen Vorkosigan, and Princess and Doctor Kareen Vorbarra truly gave me shivers. I was also glad to see that Irina’s singing brought many, not just family, to tears. The good kind, not the ones when
Emperor Ezar’s courtiers graced us with their limited talents. Padma and Aral were notorious for hiding in a salon during these performances. Count Piotr often joined the drinking.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Mother,

Anna left yesterday for the Hegen Hub. The twins are sad, though Mila and her nanny are trying their best to cheer them up. I’m helping, too. My university courses not starting until next week means I can come home for lunch and a swim most days. Varga likes the break, plus the food is much better than at school!

The next time you’re in Vorbarr Sultana, I’d like to schedule a meeting with my student adviser. I’m wondering if I could graduate a year early if I did some online classes over the summer. I know you’re not a fan of younger students going off to university, but I fear I’m outgrowing my peers. Or worse, being seen as a resource rather than a friend. Everyone in robotics club expects me to do all the hard stuff or help with their other homework. It’s definitely not as much fun as it used to be.

Love, Aurelia

My love, Yitzy and I think Aurelia graduating in three years is a very viable idea. When it comes to schoolwork, she’s easily as mature as our freshmen. If she finds a true mentor in one of her part-time classes to augment the attention from Georg and Helen Vorthys, she’ll probably do very well. You may want to insist that Aurelia lives at Vorkosigan House for her first year. Surely Nile will protest her going off on her own, plus the only truly safe option is living with Simone and Irina, and Aurelia’s a little young for their social circle. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The house is much quieter with Taurie and Alex off to Komarr, Helen flying hither and yon, and Ekaterin and the twins off to Sergyar. My wife’s still in transit and her well-tended plants seem lonely, like they want someone to sit and chat with them.

Mark was anxious to get home. Not that I blame him. Time will pass quickly before they return for THE wedding. I’m so glad they’re coming. Delia and Duv are working so hard to pull this off. A surprising number of worlds are sending senior delegations, which makes the Komarr wormhole an even higher-value target.

Simone and Irina are doing a magnificent job of staying in contact with Aurelia and making sure she has company when I have work obligations. We’re all looking forward to Nile transferring to Old Town School next year. Not only will the plants appreciate her, I’m not used to the house being this empty. How can I thrive on chaos when there are so few people around to create it?

Love, Miles

You son the adrenaline junkie never fails to amuse! I am forever grateful Everard doesn’t seem to require nearly as much stimulation as his big brother! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I thought university was supposed to be difficult? I know it’s an intro class, but Astrophysics seems easy after all the math, astronomy, and navigation Selig and I did together. I love Professor Muenster. He’s so approachable and unpretentious, with a knack for breaking major concepts into bite-sized pieces. (He reminds me a bit of Cousin James!) I’m already looking forward to taking more classes
with him.

Would it be okay if Nile came to visit for the weekend? A friend’s family is holding a huge, all-day party to celebrate her mother’s birthday. I think Nile would enjoy mingling with some of her future classmates.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Gridgrad has certainly grown since I was here last! Daniel and Dyana were thrilled to see Nikki. I can’t say ‘and sleep in their own beds’ because they’ve mostly been crawling into their Da’s. The house looks lovely and Nanny Yulia is wonderful. I’m pleased to say most of my parks and gardens are thriving, so I haven’t had as much work as I feared. We’re going to Port Nightingale next weekend. I’m looking forward to building sandcastles with my grandchildren!

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors, but let me make it official: in roughly six weeks, Tej and I are being replaced. Ambassador and Lady Vorgibson are looking forward to leaving the 9th circle of hell and being assigned to a real planet. Can’t say I blame them, considering how much I hated our training assignment on Orient Station. And compared to how turbulent the Whole has been over the past few years, Eta Ceta has to look pretty good to them!

Gregor has been vague about our next assignment, saying only that he wants us to enjoy a sabbatical with our family and the many pre-wedding events. One quid pro quo – Padma will not be attending Alexei’s wedding. Where he’ll be sent is yet to be determined, but it’ll definitely be on the other side of the wormhole. It’s a small price to pay for all of us being together for his graduation. Good thing my parade red and blues still fit! Speaking of, can you or Miles take Padma to Sieglings to be measured for his sword set? Uncle Aral taking me and Miles for ours was such a special moment for us all. I remember feeling so grown up!

Love, Ivan and Tej

If you don’t mind, my love, I’d like the two of us to take Padma. The change in regulations that all officers, not just Vor, were authorized to wear sword sets was one of the most significant in the Imperial Services’ modernization. Plus Miles already got to take Helen for her swords. Let us have a turn! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Given the news that Ambassador Vorpatril will soon be leaving Eta Ceta, Alex has opted to skip Beta Colony and go directly there from Escobar. Grandma Elizabeth is annoyed. Vasco and I are, too, but not as much because this is probably Alex’s sole opportunity to enter the Ceta Empire safely. Alex has promised to absolutely, positively be here in ample time to travel with us to Cordy’s wedding. Aunt Elena will be furious if he reneges. So will Mama and Da. Even if every Vorkosigan, Naismith, Vorbarra, and Vorpatril showed up, we’d be dwarfed by Goncalo’s huge family. It’s a good thing Vorkosigan Pribyl is large!

Work is hectic. Vasco is studying retroviruses. My new block is vascular surgery, so lots of operating on limbs, not torsos. Next comes neurosurgery, followed by cryonics. Depending on how that goes, I may accept Dr. Verbena’s offer to spend three months at the Durona Clinic after we finish here. I
think Vasco would enjoy a longer stay on Escobar before we move to Hassadar. Yes, he’s definitely returning with me. Uncle Gregor has already promised to ratify his paperwork.

You’d have enjoyed the subtle sales job the Vorbarras conducted here. Most of the hospital was shocked by a Head of State and his family spending more than an obligatory 30-minute visit spewing platitudes. It’s led to many questions about the Empire and the medical opportunities available. Da has sent job postings from the Science Institute, major hospitals, and rep centers on all three planets. There’s definitely some interest! And that doesn’t count our friends, who (subject to help defraying transportation costs) may be willing to take jobs on Barrayar.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Per the missive I just got from the Residence, you’ve been disinvited from Sieglings. I’ve been invited to accompany the Emperor, Prince Pavel, Lord Padma, and their four Little Cadet Brothers for a bit of shopping. I wonder if Pavel’s Little Brothers will be as excited as Everard and Lambros?

Love, Oliver

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Lambros and I can’t wait to go sword shopping with Padma and Prince Pavel! Do you think they’ll let us see the swordsticks? Miles says they stock lots of them.

Am I an idiot for not realizing until now that two of the highest-ranking cadets at the Academy have non-Vor Little Brothers? Prince Pavel’s Little Brothers are very nervous about meeting the Emperor. They don’t believe me or Lambros that he’s very nice. Or that the Empress is a normal mother who bakes excellent cookies.

Love, Everard

My love, should I be amused or embarrassed that of all the wonderful things that could be said of Empress Laisa, my son praised her baking? Or are cookies a universal symbol of love transcending nationality, education, and career? Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Eta Ceta’s capitol city is absolutely beautiful. The attention to detail on everything from buildings to traffic signs is exquisite. Most of it’s also boring as hell.

The Imperial University is a perfect example of a long-lasting institution whose buildings reflect the architecture and aesthetics of the period they were built. Some are gorgeous; the concrete monstrosities of Emperor Yuri’s era are not, yet they somehow form a cohesive whole. Eta Ceta’s celebrated institutions of higher learning look like they sprang up together within the last decade. That’s because the construction of a new building triggers a massive renovation of the entire campus so everything matches. It’s both bizarre and extremely wasteful.

Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej have been careful to show me the best and worst of Eta Ceta. Things aren’t so shiny and wonderful on the outskirts of major cities, where the working classes live. Like many parts of Barrayar, the military is seen as a path to a better life. The difference being we don’t start wars simply to give our troops something better to do than rebelling and wresting power from the ghem or haut.
A lot of Cetas must’ve watched the Hegen Hub reenactment. I’ve been asked many times about my non-existent military career. I usually smile and reply that my twin sister and younger brother are carrying that torch. Bragging that my sister-in-law is the first female Komarran general in the Imperial Service is guaranteed to garner grimaces, especially among the sexist military ghem. Mentioning my girlfriend hasn’t stopped people from throwing themselves at me. Four were among the Rho Ceta babies Mama and Da rescued. Two were male, which Uncle Ivan found ridiculously amusing. He must know something well above my security clearance!

The only surprise in Colonel Tuomonen knowing Da was he also knew Mama. Mama obviously made quite an impression during her trip to the Celestial Garden because numerous people have mentioned her poise and grace, including the Emperor and Empress. And while many people mention my resemblance to Granda Aral, it was unsettling AND less than diplomatic for a geneticist in a float bubble to tell me I look almost exactly like Da would’ve, were it not for the soltoxin.

Plotkin and I will be leaving on the cruiser bringing the new ambassador. They’ll take us to Jackson’s Whole, where we’ll find commercial transport to Earth. We’ll be there for some time considering we’ll be visiting every continent!

Love, Alex

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Today was probably the best fatherly time Gregor and I have ever shared. I’m so glad he included the Little Brothers! All four clearly saw themselves eight years hence, preparing to graduate and take oath to the man adjusting his son’s belt, debating sword hilts with Padma, and effortlessly tossing his dagger squarely in the middle of the target. Our party also spent time on Sieglings’ range, shooting everything from arrows to stunners. Everard wants to practice over the summer. I agreed to the arrows, but said I had to discuss anything else with you first. Do you think Perrin and Alani are old enough to handle knives, pistols, and stunners?

Love, Oliver

Or we could take them to the range at the Long Lake. I forgot about it! Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Yesterday, we completed the official handover of the Embassy to the Vorgibsons. Tej smiled like the sun throughout the reception. She showed holos of Padma trying on dress swords to justify her excitement at going home. Lady Vorgibson sincerely admired our handsome son. Not only is her husband a 20-year man, their sons are both serving officers. In fact, Captain Vorgibson commands the convoy bringing us home. We left Eta Ceta orbit about five hours ago. The itinerary calls for short layovers in Beta Colony, Escobar, Sergyar, and Komarr to allow Tej to relax between jumps. Lizzie and Grandma Elizabeth know we’re coming for hugs and cookies. Yes, it sounds a mite juvenile, but after years of watching our backs every second, we’re both in need of some pampering. I doubt either of us will truly draw a deep breath until we’re out of Ceta space. Though it’s odd not knowing our next assignment, it’ll also be wonderful being able to decompress without feeling guilty about not studying for the next post. Tej is really looking forward to the graduation and wedding chaos. I have no idea how many letters she and Mamere have exchanged about Padma and Pavel’s party.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother,
Would it be possible for you to fly up to Vorbarr Sultana day after tomorrow? Helen arrives in port
tomorrow night and I’d like to discuss my astrophysics project with you two. And Miles, of course.
We could do it by comconsole, but I have so many calculations and drawings, I think it’ll be easier to
review in person.

Love, Aurelia

This certainly sounds mysterious, my love! Go, have a good time, take Everard some baked goods.
You don’t think Aurelia’s found a wormhole, do you? Love, Me

My love, I was only joking about a wormhole. You are too, right? Right? Love, Me

What do you mean you’re deadly serious? Your teenage daughter thinks she found another viable
exit from Bararrayar? Surely Home Fleet still scans regularly for new anomalies that might become
wormholes? Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

A team from the Imperial Science Institute has been assigned to work with Aurelia and Professor
Muenster to test her theory. I’m very glad Aurelia was astute enough to approach you first so this
information doesn’t leak throughout the university and into the public realm. Unless the prospective
wormhole proves large and stable enough for commercial traffic, it will remain a military secret.

Love, Gregor

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Gregor, Helen, and I are still in shock that Aurelia’s first university project may fundamentally
change the Empire. Georg Vorthys feels there’s a better than even chance the anomaly Aurelia
spotted will discharge within two days’ journey of the wormhole the Rene Magritte used to approach
Sergyar. Six decades later, Captain Naismith’s wormhole is still usable for small ships. Like, say, the
courageous three couriers that jumped in both directions last week. Their data has been forwarded to Dr. Yuell at
Solstice University. Since Georg and I first consulted with him regarding the Soletta disaster, Dr.
Yuell has become a prominent expert in stabilizing and enlarging wormholes. There may very well
be a free trip to Bararrayar in his future!

Ekaterin plans on giving Nile Alex’s old room. Call us overcautious, but we prefer the underage
ones be on the same floor with us. Surely sharing a bathroom with Helen won’t be an issue
considering how rarely Helen is home?

In other scientific news, it appears Dr. Albu’s serums perform as promised. René swears there are
now far fewer feral small mammals in his District! The whole team is being sent to Escobar for the
next round of testing. If Amiri’s team clears the protocols, Bel has agreed to be the first live subject.
The last few years have not been kind and it can only handle gravity for very short periods. Please
warn the troops that the entire Thorne family will be in float chairs for Cordy’s wedding.

Now the important question: how many berths to reserve for the trip to Komarr for Taurie’s
graduation? It’s fine if the answer is none due to school obligations. KareenVB, Simone, Helen, and
Irina are the only guaranteed attendees so far. No one’s sure If Ivan and Tej will arrive in time and
Simon and Aunt Alys are staying behind to oversee plans for Padma and Pavel’s graduation party.

Ekaterin is actively dreading the next Imperial crisis that will prevent me, Gregor, and ImpSec from
enjoying all the happy events ahead of us. I swear we’ve all done everything we can to minimize
potential problems, but she’s correct. Something will happen. Hopefully, there’ll be no casualties.
Love, Miles & Ekaterin

My love, this is one of the missives we can’t simply forward to Yitzy in its entirety. The average Barrayaran sees only joy in the run-up to Alexei and Katya’s wedding. Even the most intelligent segment of the Imperium is hopelessly ignorant of the many evil plots ImpSec foils daily. Simon, Gregor, and Miles would say that means General Brodeur and his sector chiefs are doing their jobs properly! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma,

Mama and I are flying to Komarr for Taurie’s graduation. We’ll see you there!

Love, Mila

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Mark is sending us ahead to celebrate with Taurie and begin looking for a house. With Mila about to start primary school, we’ve decided to move our main base to Barrayar for the school year, returning to Escobar each summer.

We’ll discuss more, but the decision reflects many variables, including wanting Mila closer to family and further away from Jackson’s Whole. Our thriving businesses are drawing attention from less reputable Houses. The new Durona Life Extension Institute hasn’t yet eliminated the clone-brain-transfer business, but it’s made a serious economic dent. Almost two decades of patient data shows treatment improves brain function along with physical health. Neural improvements we’ve noted in family members aren’t just optimism, they’re consistent with thousands of other clients. Mark can tell you more, but researchers are focusing on a smaller niche of the treatment for those who don’t want to extend their life expectancy, but wish to remain mentally sharp. That research may very well intersect with Dr. Albu’s, given that vascular issues often lead to mental changes.

Mila and I also need a bunch of this season’s most elaborate Barrayaran finery for the many celebrations ahead. Will you and the girls join me, Mama, and Olivia in choosing gowns? Mark is very insistent he wants his mother and sisters to shine!

Love and Kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

First, huzzah for our granddaughter moving to Barrayar! The clothing is also a very generous offer, my love. Didn’t Alys say you need at least ten ensembles? Getting Perrin to be still for suit fittings will be a challenge. Besides the different seasons, he doesn’t believe me that his Winterfair dress clothes will no longer fit! Love, Me

My love, sending the boys suit shopping with Alys and Simon is a brilliant, evil idea! Everard wants to wear his cadet uniform everywhere, but maybe he’ll believe Alys when she says it’s inappropriate for the wedding. As for me, I either must lose two kilos or have my uniform pants let out. I’m also hoping one of the armsmen can give my swords a polish. Miles always looks so shiny! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej left last night. We had a wonderful, albeit brief visit. Even with jump-lag, they look so much more relaxed since leaving Eta Ceta. Both feel my last post was wonderful training for this one. After tracking Imperial subjects on eight hostile planets, focusing on only one often seems restful in contrast. Not always, given that many VIPs are convinced my team worries unnecessarily about their welfare, but if our children can understand the need to wear trackers, why can’t major industrialists vacationing on a planet with hazardous flora and fauna?
My wife and I were kindly invited to the Vorpatrils’ dinner with Viceroy and Lady Vorgustafson. Anna’s face fell when the Viceroy said he was hoping to be replaced by Winterfair. I doubt things have been as congenial between the Viceroy’s Palace and Sergyar Fleet since you two retired. Admiral Vorpipes and General Jones are extremely talented and well-respected by officers and enlisted alike. Anna rightly fears a new Viceroy may try to flex his muscles by delving into every single group operating on the base. I’m more than willing to bore people by explaining the smallest details of what my team does. My wife is not. Not when discussing open investigations could put her people’s lives at risk.

Got any educated guesses as to who the new Viceroy might be?

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

My love, I’m sticking with my guess from five years ago. His time on Eta Ceta has greatly expanded Ivan’s experience base. Vorpatril for Viceroy! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

I really don’t like it when we’re on different planets. When we’re in Hassadar/ Vorbarr Sultana or Gridgrad/Port Nightingale, we can at least use the comconsole.

School is fine. I just found out that one of my friends will be moving to VS over the summer, so we’ll have each other as back-up while we adjust to our new schools. Uncle Oliver is in a bad mood. He finished all his grading, so that’s not it. I don’t know if Professor Zorin had problems with his students, but he hasn’t been over in a week. Perrin’s grumpy because Professor Zorin was supposed to go to the Long Lake with us and help us dissect fish. Uncle Oliver is very good at knife throwing – we had lots of fun on the range! – but his dissection skills lag Professor Zorin’s.

We received a letter from Grandma Elizabeth yesterday. We’re all so excited she’ll be at Cordy’s wedding! Uncle John and Aunt Sarah might come, too. That would be terrific. Uncle John has such good jokes and Aunt Sarah tells great bedtime stories. Not that I need stories, but I love how hers and Aunt Laisa’s are totally different from anyone here on Barrayar. And you know how much we all loved the fairy tales Dmitri kept sending from Earth!

It looks like Taurie’s graduation and celebratory dinner was lots of fun. Thanks for the holos. Is Zane coming to her party at Vorkosigan House, or will he skip it in favor of Alexei and Katya’s wedding? I like Zane. He’s serious, but very nice.

Aunt Alys has booked us dress fittings next week. Alani says big skirts are stupid. Aunt Martya says not to worry, that Aunt Olivia once knocked out some bad guys wearing a ballgown and the bigger the skirt, the easier it is to hide a stunner or Vorfemme knife. That makes sense. Do Helen and Anna wear stunners to balls?

Love, Nile

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Not much gets past our Nile, does it? Yes, Yitzy is in a snit. His mother chose finals week to nag him about grandchildren. While I could’ve been more diplomatic in my wording, my lack of support for the idea really aggravated him. Six years ago, I might’ve been amenable to another child. But now, with Aurelia being on the cusp of university, Lujayn and Kiona maturing so nicely, and seeing myself as a grandfather to Mila, Daniel, and Dyana, how would babies fit in our lives? Call me James, but I feel just as blindsided as when Scarlett suddenly wanted to start over.
The worst part is I know Yitzy would be a wonderful parent. He’s amazing with our troops and all the other extended family. But with 70 looming, I’m enjoying shooting arrows, fishing, sailing, and teaching sparring moves, not worrying about diapers and midnight feedings, choking on Tacti-go pieces, or toddlers overboard!!

Your sons are another major factor. They’re so supportive of our unconventional family, physically, emotionally, and financially. I fear Yitzy expects his child(ren) would receive the same benefits. Totally unreasonable, plus it highlights Yitzy’s obliviousness that my fair sons look far more like Alex than they do me.

On the plus side, no students complained to the dean about their final grades and the kiddos are all wriggling with excitement at the prospect of seeing Kareen and Mila. Alani fancies herself a real estate agent, scanning the comconsole for houses for sale in downtown Hassadar. I dare not tell her Mark and Kareen might choose to settle in Vorbar Sultana to be closer to Drou and Kou.

All my love, Oliver

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

I have no idea if Yitzy plans on asking either of us to participate or if he’d use donor eggs. The conversation didn’t get that far because I was so astounded to be discussing anything so serious when we were buried in end-of-term work. Upon further reflection, I want no part of the process. While I’ll always regret the children we lost in the Kayburg earthquake, I feel no need to replace them. I suspect it will be a major plank of Yitzy’s argument, that if we had love for nine potential children 16 years ago, we should still have it now. I can’t speak for you, but I do not.

You’re correct, living accommodations are another major concern. I like that Yitzy has his own home, just as I always did before we returned to Barrayar. I’ve come to realize maintaining separate homes wasn’t simply a legacy of discretion to protect Aral, but a reflection of my need for privacy and proof of financial independence. Not that a parent ever gets total privacy, but a cradle in our sitting room would confirm to our children that Professor Zorin isn’t sleeping in his assigned chamber.

This isn’t about never wanting to hear another child scream in the night. I look forward to Mila or yet-to-be-born Vorkosigans or Vorbarras disturbing our sleep. I just want those nights to be the exception, not the norm.

Can you please tell Helen to punch the engines because I need you home?
All my love, Oliver
A Very Bad Day in Vorbarr Sultana

To: Farkas, Kasun, Varga, Lukin, Orlov, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, KK Vorkosigan, AVorpatril, SIlyan, TVorpatril, NEVorsoisson
From: Vorkosigan

Emergency Protocol C.
Multiple car bombs detonated around Vorbarr Sultana.
Gregor, Alexei, Ivan & I secure at Vorhartung.
---

From: SIlyan

Alys, Tej, Irina, Simone, & I secure. Lukin whereabouts unknown.
---

From: Kasun

Countess Cordelia secure. Entrances between HHouse & District Offices sealed. Municipal Guard dispatched to retrieve children & Professor Jole.
---

From: Farkas

Countess Ekaterin, Lady Kareen, Lady Taura, and Lady Mila secure. Varga & Miss Aurelia have left school.
---

From: Farkas

Miss Aurelia secure. Lukin com not working. Last registered in University District.
---

From: Kasun

Professor Jole & all 5 children secure. HHouse sealed awaiting further orders.
---

From: Vorkosigan

ImpSec reports 6 bombs. Locations: Great Square, Vorhartung, University District, Municipal Stadium, Ops, ImpMil. At least four more, at Star Bridge, Negri Building, Residence, and shuttleport did not reach their targets and were not detonated. Residence/Laisa secure. Academy & Academy prep also secure.

Fatalities at Vorhartung over 100. Bomb concussion crashed four lightflyers. Two counts and at least 50 armsmen dead. Four other counts grievously injured, including Count Vorpatril. All Vorkosigan/Vorbarra armsmen safe/minor injuries.
---

From: Vorkosigan

Vorthys house partially collapsed. Whereabouts of Georg and Helen Vorthys unknown. Communication in the area is completely down, but scattered reports say damage is mostly buildings because most students left campus last week.

Lord Auditor Vanzin’s whereabouts also unknown. He had a morning meeting scheduled at Ops. Early reports say the building withstood the blast, but an adjacent parking garage collapsed, worsening the carnage in the street.
Limited human injuries at the Stadium, but the section closest to the bomb has collapsed and at least one of the adjoining stables is on fire.

Bomb at ImpMil took out the physical plant, not any of the patient care areas. Limited fatalities, with back-up equipment being rushed over.

Great Square resembles a war zone, with multiple underage fatalities. Do not distress yourselves by looking.

Ivan and I are remaining here at Vorhartung. The Emperor ordered all the wounded outside be treated before anyone inside may leave. Not sure how with almost everyone’s transportation having been destroyed. There’s widespread panic because many can’t reach loved ones or rush to injured ones’ sides. It’s ugly.

****

Dear Mother.

I hope you get this. I tried vid calls, but they didn’t go through.

Mother, I’m so very scared. I know Vorkosigan House is a fortress even without the additional ImpSec squads, but the city is in chaos. Everything was calm and quiet when I left for school. Now things are BURNING and hundreds of people are DEAD. Lots of horses, too, related to the gymkhana that was supposed to be held at the Municipal Stadium this weekend.

Ekaterin swears Everard is safe at his school. I wish Miles and Everard were here.

Love, Aurelia

****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Do not worry, Lambros and I are safe. All Academy Prep students were transferred to the Imperial Academy via underground tunnel. After dumping our packs and writing home, we’ll be doing drills with our Big Brothers. Cadets are on guard duty all over campus. Please tell everyone we saw Selig and Jules and they’re fine.

All we’ve been told is some bombs went off in Vorbarr Sultana. Is everyone okay?

Love, Everard

Someone from ImpSec just told Prince Pavel that four counts died at Vorhartung Castle. No names.

IS MILES OKAY? EXJ

The Academy Commandant just came to get Cadet Rulf Halas-Ville. Only that wasn’t what he called him. Everyone within earshot, especially Lord Padma and Prince Pavel, turned white when the Commandant said, “Count Vorhalas, sir?” I know his great-uncle was responsible for poisoning Miles, but it was still very strange to watch a Cadet become a Count in front of our eyes. Love, Everard

Oh, my love, these were not the life lessons I wanted my son to learn, at least not yet. How much more tragedy must befall Lady Vorhalas-Vorville? Her brothers, husband, and son all dying long before their time. I served with then-Captain Lord Vorhalas-Vorville for about two years before his grandfather passed and he succeeded to the title. Justin was a very good man. Love, Me

****

To: Farkas, Kasun, Varga, Orlov, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, KKVorkosigan, AVorpatril, SIllyan, TVorpatril, NEVorsoisson
From: Vorkosigan
Lukin has been located. Knowing Irina & Simone were with Lady Alys, Lukin abandoned her errands to check on Lord Auditor and Professora Vorthys. She is helping ImpSec teams remove rubble from the exit end of an escape tunnel leading away from the Vorthys house. No one knows how much of the tunnel has collapsed and if Georg and Helen were able to grab breath masks as they ran.

Now for the major casualties. Counts Vorhalas, Voreliades, Vorpatril, and Vormuir are gone. Counts Vorshmythe and Vortrifrani are in surgery with uncertain prognoses. Lord Volfolse and Lord Vorbretton are also in hospital, with somewhat better outlooks. Dono contacted René and Tatyia in Brettonville. They’re hysterical. So, sadly, will be Lady Vanzin. General Higby is on his way to tell her that her husband was crushed by a slab of concrete from the Ops garage collapse.

A group calling themselves ‘Barrayarans for Democracy’ has claimed responsibility. They’re unlikely to be home-grown terrorists, not with Domestic Affairs’ increased focus on tracking/neutralizing possible insurgency cells. Regardless of motivation, they’re trapped. The Emperor has declared a State of Emergency and imposed a curfew. No one is entering or leaving Vorbarr Sultana. All roads have been closed, flyers grounded, the shuttleport closed, and public transportation halted. For now, families of the injured/deceased outside the capitol will be sent to Tannery Base.

Ivan and I will be accompanying the Emperor and Crown Prince to the Vorbarr Sultana Hospital to check on the Vorhartung casualties. Ivan will then go to Vorpatril House. I’m scheduled to meet my auditorial colleagues.

Word has been sent to Mark to scoop up Byerly and Rish and make all possible speed to Barrayar.

*****
Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I promise that Aurelia is as fine as anyone can be, given the circumstances. She’s not the only one wishing Miles was here. Ekaterin is doing her best to retain her composure, but she’s worried sick about her aunt and uncle, Lord Vorbretton, the casualties, and all their families. Mama and Da are working hard to keep everyone calm. Delia urged them to come here because it’s far safer than their house. Da was being stubborn until the Empress threatened to give the ImpSec transport team authority to stun and carry him if he didn’t cooperate.

I’ve spoken to Tej several times. She’s utterly distraught. Not only is she scared for Ivan and Padma, it’s dredging up unresolved feelings from her family’s deaths. Probably some memories of the Prestene coup as well. Aunt Alys is also horribly bereft. I’ll bet she knew almost every Vorhartung casualty personally, though her focus is of course on the late Count Vorpatril and his family. I’m very glad Ivan is with his cousins at this awful time. They need his strength. Ekaterin says the new Count Vorpatril is Padma’s age and was only recently confirmed as heir.

Aunt Alys says Simon is pacing like a caged tiger, wanting to be part of the action, but unwilling to leave his family. Simone wants to come home, but that’s unlikely for several days. Da fears other crackpots will use the explosions as an excuse to commit mayhem. I agree that any young woman exiting a luxury building like Aunt Alys’ would be an automatic target. That’s why Mama and I took Mila, Taurie, and Aurelia to the training room for some exercise. Mila was delighted when Taurie flipped Grandma. Mama and I were shocked because our Taurie has never shown much aggression when sparring. It finally registered today that we were all totally serious every time we warned her that she might someday have to defend herself. As for Aurelia, she gave me a very good workout. Oliver, you and I need to practice together. Aurelia has some slick twisting moves she said she learned from you!
Despite the warm weather, Mama requested fresh breads and stews for dinner. No one except Mila’s eaten much and we all need something substantial in our bellies.

Da’s been monitoring the news. The Emperor will address the Imperium at 2200 hours. Unless you object, we’ll leave it to Aurelia to decide if she wants to watch. Gregor will be speaking from the Residence, which means no gory pictures until the news channels begin twisting every word in their post-speech commentary.

We strongly suspect Miles will appear with Gregor. An ImpSec team collected a second change of clothes about an hour ago; the first team took clothes, toiletries, his neurotransmitter, and his auditor’s chain.

Hopefully, coms will be up tomorrow and we can have a long vid chat.
Love and kisses, Kareen, Lady Mila, and everyone else here at Vorkosigan House

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I have terrible news. The team excavating the escape tunnel from the Vorthys house has recovered three bodies: Georg, Helen, and their great-grandson. We’re told they all died quickly after an office building collapse caused a massive cave-in.

Ekaterin and the rest of the Vorthys/Vorvayne family have been notified. Gregor wanted you to know in advance of his speech. When the State funerals will occur is yet to be determined, but we promise Lord Auditors Vorthys and Vanzin will receive all the honors due them, as will the Professora and young Master Vorthys.

Love and hugs, Laisa and Gregor

*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,

Despite the entire nexus seeing me cry, I was honored to announce the deaths of my esteemed colleagues. I shall forever regret nominating Vanzin as a permanent auditor. If he’d stayed with his communications empire, maybe he’d still be alive.

The irony of Georg dying as the result of engineering failure isn’t lost on anyone. The relatively-new building that killed three of my wife’s beloved relatives was almost 2 kilometers away from the bomb site and should have been earthquake proof if built to code. The contractor will be arrested tomorrow and charged with murder and treason. The treason charge probably won’t stick, but it should help to secure justice for all 12 lives lost as a direct result of shoddy construction.

FYI, I’m home. Gregor sent me to comfort my wife and use my seizure stimulator because my levels were skyrocketing. The house is so quiet, I can hear Farkas and Lukin doing patrols. I should be sleeping, but am caught in a morass of grief and post-seizure insomnia that no sleeptimer can fix.

Lukin is running on a semi-hysteric adrenalin I recognize all too well. Like Roic and Vinkovic, she’s got many contusions and strained muscles. Emin, who flew us to Vorhartung, is in hospital overnight. He has burns from the initial impact, but most of his other injuries stem from rescue efforts. The Vorkosigan armsmen truly did our House proud today.

When last I checked, Taurie and Aurelia were cuddled together like sad puppies. Both are heartbroken at Georg and Helen’s deaths. We haven’t received a response from our oldest daughter yet, but I’m positive she, too, will be devastated by the news. Selig is totally distraught. Gregor and I discussed bringing Pavel, Padma, Selig, and Everard back to the capitol, but decided that with air traffic shut down, they’re safer at the Academy than in transit. We’ll advise you if anything changes.
A favor. Would you mind contacting Lambros’ family (and any other parents you’ve met) and assuring them the Emperor’s hand is protecting their son(s)? Direct quote from Gregor. He’s adamant that unlike the Pretendership, our military’s future leaders will NOT be dragged into combat before they’re commissioned.

I’ve written to Lizzie, Alex, and Grandma Elizabeth, but have no idea how long it will take for messages to reach them. May I task you with providing future updates? I’m due at the Residence in less than 5 hours to receive briefings and formalize a strategy for what will be a joint investigation by the three auditors currently in Vorbarr Sultana. The other two are elsewhere in the Empire, but are on notice that they and General Chaly will be tasked with following external leads.

I think I’ll be able to rest after I check Taurie and Aurelia again. Hug my sibs and tell them we love them very much. We love you two as well. But you knew that.

Sincerely, Captain Lord Auditor Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, 11th Count Vorkosigan

Aral would be so proud of Gregor and Miles today, my love. You two raised great men. Ivan ain’t too shabby, either. Now all I have to do is find Everard’s class list so we can start writing. Fairly sure I saved it to my office comconsole. Love, Me

*****

To: Vorkosigan, Farkas, Kasun, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, NEVorsoisson
From: Orlov

Port Nightingale is secure. ImpSec has sent additional resources to guard both properties and key infrastructure points. I am not aware of any attacks on Sergyar.

---

To: Vorkosigan, Farkas, Kasun, Orlov, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, KKVorkosigan, MPVorkosigan, AVorpatril, SIllyan, IXVorpatril, TVorpatril
From: NEVS

All quiet here on Sergyar. There have been no bombs, no protests, nothing but grief that our capitol city has been attacked. Daniel, Dyana, and their nanny have been moved into base housing while their parents prepare to defend the Empire.

The information time lag is distressing. As of this writing, Aunt and Uncle Vorthys’ status is unknown. We pray they and Lord Auditor Vanzin will be found safe and sound. Prayers are also sent on behalf of Count Vorpatril and his colleagues.

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m very upset that I’m reduced to writing rather than calling or visiting. ImpSec goons turned me away yesterday and again this morning, saying Hassadar House was sealed. Has my security clearance been revoked?

Love, Yitzy

Oh, my love, we’re so screwed. And not in a good way. How do we explain to Yitzy that his clearance hasn’t been revoked, it’s simply nowhere near high enough for him to be involved in matters of Imperial security?

I fear returning to Barrayar has exposed the true inequality in our relationship. Aral worried about the gap in age and rank. Valid concerns, but as his assistant, no subject was off-limits. Those early worries seem risible now considering by the end, we were as close to professional peers as a count and a prole could be. And with you and me being the junior partners in terms of our professional relationship with Yitzy, I deluded myself that the rest of the relationship was an equal one. It’s not and never will be. It can’t, because your three sons’ indispensability to the Imperium makes us indispensable, too.

I don’t understand how such a brilliant man can be so blind to the implications of yesterday’s events. Had Aral not trained Miles and Ivan to be meticulously early to key sessions like appropriation votes, they could have been amongst the dead in the Vorhartung parking area. Gregor Vorthys and Claude Vanzin weren’t just two of the most powerful men in the Imperium, they were amongst your sons’ few true intellectual peers. It’s not like Yitzy doesn’t know how important Georg and Helen are to Ekaterin, her children, and especially Aurelia. Imagining Nikki’s reaction to news of their deaths makes me want to cry yet again for these amazing friends.

I’ll close by saying I’m so incredibly disappointed that our first communication from Yitzy was about his feelings, not ours. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

We just learned that final exams/graduation are being pushed back a week for both the Academy and Academy Prep. Though we’re starting lessons again tomorrow, the extra time is for funerals. Which is good because I definitely want to honor the Vorthys. Selig and I cried together last night. Prince Pavel’s eyes are puffy and red. Padma says the prince knows dozens of people who died yesterday. Padma is very distressed about Count Anthony Vorpatril. Selig says new Count Falco Vorpatril, though technically a distant cousin, is one of Padma’s close friends.

This all just sucks so bad. I’m very glad Lambros is from a small town north of Vorbarr Sultana. So far, he doesn’t know any of the injured or killed other than people he met at Selig and Simone’s graduation party. If his parents agree, Lambros would like to attend the Vorthys’ funeral with us. One of his teachers at home was one of the Professora’s students and quoted her frequently. He said meeting her was almost like meeting Miles in terms of famous people.

So far, I’ve written to Aurelia, Ekaterin and Miles, and Helen to say how sorry I am. Which is silly, because I should’ve said it to you two first. Please forgive me for not saying what’s in my heart, that I’m sad so many people you know have been hurt. I promise that I’m doing okay and you don’t need to worry about me. Though if you could keep writing, I’d appreciate it.
Love, Everard

My love, I’m weeping at what a wonderful boy we’ve raised. At such a chaotic time, I certainly didn’t expect a young teen to recognize his parents are also hurting. Badly. The list of people injured/killed at Ops was just released. There are at least a dozen military funerals in my future.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

At the risk of being prematurely optimistic, ImpSec has unearthed what could be a crucial lead. The sooner we verify, the sooner we can loosen strictures on the capitol. We need to solve this ASAP.

Love, your exhausted, grieving son

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

I’ve started to write this letter multiple times, but have been interrupted by others or my own tears. While proud of Lukin’s initiative, Irina and Simone are devastated by her discovery. We all are. Georg and Helen were among the finest people I’ve ever known. And for a 6-year old to die with them is inconceivable.

Ivan has not yet returned from Vorpatril House. The dowager countess and her son have requested his help. Beyond the funeral, there’s plenty of work ahead training young Falco to assume his father’s responsibilities. The new head of Ivan’s family graduated from university mere weeks ago. Anthony would’ve expected his brother and voting deputy to help teach his son about District operations, except Lord Francisco succumbed to his injuries this morning. It grieves me to say that part of me is glad Falco and Maria didn’t live to see their sons die together.

The city is frighteningly quiet. It is very strange to look out the window and not see people, groundcars, or flyers. The only boats on the river appear to be official ones. Essential services like power and water seem to be running normally. Simon feels it odd that those weren’t targets. He also wonders if some of yesterday’s communication problems were an accidental consequence of fires at the Stadium.

I’ll close with something amusingly inconsequential. Our cook is perturbed that shops being closed means she can’t buy fresh greens for today’s meals. Simon is threatening to place a carton of ration bars and a case of water pouches in the middle of the dining room table and declare the problem solved.

Much love, Alys and Simon

As I’ve said before, my love, Lady Alys was never a simple Vor bud! Her strength continues to amaze. So does her son’s in the face of losing two cousins. Gregor couldn’t possibly know that stalling on giving Ivan and Tej a new assignment would leave them available to support the other proud side of Ivan’s heritage. Love, Me

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

We won’t lie, things are very dismal here. Ekaterin returned to her room after pushing breakfast around her plate and hasn’t been seen since. She’s not taking comconsole calls, either, from anyone except Miles. Kareen has taken it upon herself to respond to Ekaterin’s brothers and cousins, who are all predictably numb. We didn’t know little Grisha was with Helen and Georg because his parents and grandparents hadn’t yet returned from a weekend wedding in Bonsanklar. Somehow, and I can’t really articulate why, that makes the tragedy worse.
Mila tried and failed to cheer up Taurie and Aurelia. They’ve withdrawn to the greenhouse to start planning funeral wreaths. Kou is sitting quietly under the ferns with a reader, tapping out messages to our other daughters and being the available adult. Every now and then, Aurelia wanders over for an opinion and a hug.

With Vorbarr Sultana still closed, Olivia has gone to stay with René and Tatya. This morning’s medical report on their son was guarded due to severe leg injuries. Olivia did get Tatya to laugh by listing all the men she knows with swordsticks!

We doubt Delia has slept. Duv certainly hasn’t. With Gregor in nonstop meetings, Delia and Laisa are trying to plan the many memorials and official ceremonies yet to come. One event is absolute. Alexei and Katya WILL be getting married as planned. Whoever planned this atrocity seems to have forgotten a very crucial fact: although she appears very delicate and feminine at official engagements, the bride is first and foremost a soldier. I would not be surprised if Captain Entsky volunteered to serve on the firing squad for any non-Vor convicted of treason.

Martya says you’ve been in touch and all MPVK operations outside the capitol will resume operation as normal tomorrow. Has any decision been made about the Hassadar schools? I wonder if some exemption will be made for Vorbarr Sultana students. I doubt any of them are in the proper mindset to contemplate exams.

We’ll continue to keep you apprised of developments.
Much love, Drou & Kou

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Gregor will be making another speech at 1700 hours. Sadly, Count Vortrifrani has succumbed to his injuries. Ekaterin says Miles says everyone needs to watch.

Love and kisses, Kareen

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

If Tomas Vormuir weren’t dead, I think Gregor is angry enough to have killed him. I admired the Emperor’s dignity as he announced Vortrifrani’s death and his composure as he laid out the ridiculous plot cooked up by 17 of Vormuir’s daughters to punish him for reneging on dowry obligations. Over 1000 people are dead or injured, along with millions of marks in damage, because idiots decided to disguise one man’s death as domestic terrorism rather than simply notifying the Emperor of Vormuir’s noncompliance with an Imperial Edict.

All conspirators, including the suppliers of bomb materials in the Vormuir District, are in Imperial Custody. Trials will be held in the fall to avoid impacting Alexei’s wedding. The lag also gives time to decide if the conspirators are to be tried as Vor. I’m leaning not, mostly because I fear 17 people starving in the Great Square would lead to additional violence. That is, however, a problem for another day. And not mine. A colleague will be following up while my family mourns our losses.

The curfew on Vorbarr Sultana will be lifted in the morning. Though schools will open, everyone feels Aurelia would be better off not going. Say the word and I’ll arrange to have her flown down to Hassadar. Everard, too, if you like. I’m willing to use my seal to override regulations in this instance.

Love, Georg Vorthys’ grieving nephew and colleague

My love, I’d like to have our family together while the dust settles in the capitol. Both Aurelia and Everard have done so magnificently in school this year, I doubt missing a few days will matter. And
if it does, who cares? Not I. Love, Me
Mourning the Dead

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ll see you in about three hours. ImpSec is bringing Padma, Pavel, Everard, and Selig to the Residence. Aurelia and I will meet our heavily-escorted flight there.

Love, Kou, Aurelia, and Everard

My love, Kou wanting to hug Martya is irrelevant to my gratitude for escorting our kiddos! I also wouldn’t mind some reassuring hugs from another bereaved soldier who helped mold some we lost. As for Yitzy, I messaged that we’re remaining in isolation pending funeral arrangements. It may be cowardly, but I just don’t have the emotional energy to prop up someone who hasn’t lost anyone.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Pardon my language, but I can’t fucking believe what happened. Seventeen crazy bitches killed over 500 people, including five Counts, and maimed even more just to punish their asshole father? Who does that?

Anna choked when I described the late Vormuir’s reaction to being told he needed to fund 118 dowries. It’s one of my clear memories of that day, the others being Mama proposing, meeting you and Granda, and seeing almost-naked Roic covered in bug butter. That last still makes me giggle!

I’m not surprised Vormuir made absolutely no effort to fund the dowries. What does surprise me is the claim that this lack of financial provision ruined their lives. Nyet, fractured personalities did that. If no one would take them without a dowry, they obviously had no redeeming qualities whatsoever. As the attacks proved.

We’re absolutely heartsick over poor Grisha. How do we tell our children that their playmate is gone? They both babbled for weeks about how much fun they had over Winterfair with him and Mila. Uncle Vorthys snuck them cookies in his study, the same way he did for me. My children retold Aunt Vorthys’ stories of emperors, princesses, and treasure, never dreaming that everything she was teaching them was real. I can’t describe how much my soul hurts.

Yes, I knew that age might catch up while we were stationed away from Barrayar, but never that madwomen would take both of my beloved grandparent figures simultaneously.

Anna has officially volunteered should a firing squad be necessary. In her memo to HQ, she raised the excellent point that some male officers may refuse to participate out of some misplaced sense of chivalry. I would hope that anatomy wouldn’t sway a jury or an officer, but stranger things have happened.

World hopping as we’ve been doing, neither of us knew the deceased counts other than Count Vorpatril. I’m sad to say that I got to know many of the late armsmen during my stint guarding the royal children. We also knew more than our share of the victims at Ops. If you attend any of those services, please add our prayers to your own. The Imperium lost many, many good people for no damn reason.

Before you say it, Grandma, I know all about the stages of grief and am fully aware I’m seesawing between anger and denial. It just seems so unbelievable. And let me assure you, I’m not alone. Helen landed in Gridgrad the day after the attack and embarked on a campaign of shooting things. She had
plenty of company.

Love, Nikki, Anna, and the twin delights of our lives

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Here’s the latest update on funeral arrangements. Lord Auditor Vanzin and Lord Auditor and Professora Vorthys will lie in state at the Opera House all weekend for people to pay their respects. Lord Auditor Vanzin’s funeral will be held next Monday morning, followed by interment at the Imperial Cemetery and a reception for invited guests at the Residence. The funeral service for all three Vorthys will be Tuesday morning. Little Grisha will be interred in a private ceremony, followed by a private reception at Vorkosigan House. Wednesday morning, family and invited guests will accompany his great-grandparents’ caskets to Vandeville, for interment in the family plot. Gregor and I will host a reception afterward at a local restaurant.

There’ll be no public services for Count Vormuir, whose remains were released yesterday. Services for Counts Voreliades and Vortrifrani have not been set yet, but will take place in their respective Districts. Count Vorhalas will be remembered at Vorhalas House next Thursday, to be followed by interment in Vorhalasgrad. Ivan fears Vorpatrial House isn’t large enough to accommodate mourners for both cousins and is negotiating to rent the Opera House for either next Friday or Saturday, followed by interment in New Evias.

Attached is the most current update on military interments. Many will be held at the Imperial Cemetery.

Arrangements for deceased armsmen are being handled by their respective counts. It is our understanding that the Voreliades, Vorhalas, Vortrifrani, and Vorpatrial armsmen will be honored when their counts are laid to rest.

Other funerals will likely drag on for months. Gregor and Dono are trying to push through an emergency appropriation to cover those expenses. Pensions and other survivors’ benefits are issues for another day.

Delia remains a force of nature. She’s been ably aided by our future daughter-in-law, who approaches event planning with a military precision that will surely impress Lady Alys. Katya’s offered to fly down to Vandeville tomorrow with the ImpSec team to finalize arrangements for the Vorthys reception.

Apologies if I sound stilted or detached. Gregor and I are struggling to keep our heads above water as bad news continues to pour in. Getting ImpMil running optimally will take months and millions. Municipal Stadium also needs to be demolished. Alexei hopes the Council of Counts will approve an appropriation to commemorate his wedding. Selfishly, we’re very glad Mark is returning to Barrayar. It would be fabulous if MPVK could spearhead some of the more urgent projects.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

Insert ‘terrorism as urban renewal’ joke here, my love. Part of the cost of a new stadium could be defrayed by selling bits of the old one. Some of the equestrian statues are magnificent. Maybe we can convince Miles or Mark to buy one or two?

On a more serious note, I feel obligated to attend multiple obsequies next week. What are we to do with the younger children? I don’t want them to miss an entire week of school; nor am I comfortable leaving them at Hassadar House without a trusted adult. And practically all of them other than Yitzy will be attending services for the Vorthys family. Any ideas? Love, Me
Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Mila and I would be delighted to spend as much time as you need at Hassadar House. I’ve discussed it with Ekaterin and Miles and they agree it’s the best solution. Ekaterin laughed off my concern that her family would think I was a dreadful sister-in-law not to be supporting her. Or that I feared slighting Ivan, Delia, and Olivia, who are all shouldering such heavy burdens.

Miles will arrange flyers to bring us down and fly you, Everard, and Aurelia back. He’s also sending Varga and Vinkovic to assist Kasun with escort duties. Lukin was a more logical choice, being that she knows Hassadar extremely well, but it would almost be punishing her for her valiant efforts to save an Imperial Auditor and his wife. Were Lukin a normal citizen without combat training, she’d still be in the hospital. Emin is still there, courtesy of a very serious concussion. I’m sure other counts aren’t nearly as careful of such injuries as Miles is, but, well, seizures.

Mila has been drawing pictures by the score to try to cheer everyone up. It’s helping a little bit. So is Ekaterin sharing her aunt’s bedtime stories with us all.

Love and kisses, Kareen and Lady Mila

P.S. Mark, Byerly, and Rish transferred to Helen’s courier last night. Mark’s hoping Count Vorpatril’s service will be delayed so there’s a chance of making it. KKVK

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thank all the gods ever worshipped that the perpetrators were caught so quickly. I can’t begin to describe the terror and helplessness we all felt between Miles’ messages. Byerly especially. Even after being off-planet for most of the last quarter-century, he knows dozens of the deceased. It’s interesting. I want those maniac sisters to suffer Baron Ryoval’s death. Byerly wants to sneak up behind them and slit their throats. Rish favors ground glass and Helen wants to be part of a firing squad. She’s beyond pleased General Chaly has already stepped up.

I’m sure you’ve heard that Nikki and Helen are really suffering. I just got notes from Lizzie and Grandma. Both are frozen with shock. I’m ecstatic that the speed with which the perpetrators were caught prevented the story from exploding all over the nexus as a tale that Barrayar is ripe for revolt. Many probably don’t believe the truth of 17 half-sisters decimating a planetary capitol to mask hatred for their sire. A man who by all reports made sure his daughters were well cared for and decently educated. Not, say, undergoing repeated painful, unnecessary, medical procedures and nonstop mental and physical drills to turn them into assassins. Vormuir refused to pay anyone to take them off his hands. Boo hoo.

Although it’s odd timing, it feels right to mention this now. Lady Mila Vorkosigan does not, and will not, have a dowry. Should anything happen to me and Kareen before Mila reaches 35, the current Count Vorkosigan and Lord Vorpatril will be her joint trustees, monitoring every mark that leaves her accounts and protecting her from vultures wanting her fortune and title.

Moving on, it’s a good thing I always have a basic travel bag packed. The House uniforms and House blacks I shoved into another bag will need some attention, but at least Lord Mark Vorkosigan will be properly attired for whatever awfulness we face upon arrival. As for the rest of my wardrobe, well, I can always use new suits. Kareen’s already placed orders with my tailor. Given the rush with which we left Escobar, we’ve requested Tej order suitable garments for Rish and By. Not that Rish is wearing anything besides ship knits. Our break-neck speed isn’t good for her. Helen reads to Rish during her off-duty hours. It seems to help.
At the risk of sounding juvenile, I can’t wait to lay eyes on you and everyone else.

Love, Mark and his weary entourage

******

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ve cleared Komarr and are hurtling for home. Aunt Rish isn’t the only sick one. We’re going so fast, we haven’t seen three of our regular couriers in days. Some of that could be protecting intel. Nikki, Anna, and two other senior officers handed over packages at the orbit station under my captain’s watchful eye. Nikki and Anna getting a chance to hug Uncle Mark was a bonus. A colonel sobbing on our uncle’s shoulder was another sign to my crewmates of how much my family is suffering.

Taurie wrote that Mama called Grisha’s burial the worst thing she ever experienced. We think tomorrow will be worse, when Uncle Vorthys is laid to rest next to the grandmother none of us knew. Somehow, the Vorthys family plot didn’t seem very full the last time we lit offerings. The Vorvayne section did, with Grandma Violie completing the row. I don’t know how Mama will react to the last of her parents’ generation taking their assigned spots. Aunt Delia assured Taurie that protocol calls for the Emperor to stand next to his Auditors, so Uncle Gregor will be able to steady Mama should need be. You two had best be prepared to help Da, too.

I finally heard from Alex. He’s annoyed Da ordered him to stick to his itinerary and meet us in Nuevo Valencia for Cordy’s wedding. My twin is too sad and angry to acknowledge that had all ten planned bombs detonated perfectly, Uncle Gregor, Da, Alexei, and Aunt Laisa would be dead. Sadly, I think part of Ramona is anxious to become a countess. Alex says she writes at least twice a week. Smothery much?

Love, Helen

Like Aurelia, Helen’s often wise beyond her years. My love, I’m ashamed to say I hadn’t considered what might happen if Miles or Mark tried to keep their wives from collapsing. I suspect it wasn’t an issue at Sasha’s or Violie’s funerals because one of Ekaterin’s brothers or sons would’ve been on her other side.

We’ve long realized that Alex’s brain doesn’t work like his father’s or Helen’s, taking in facts and simultaneously envisioning multiple best- and worst-case scenarios. It isn’t necessarily a bad thing, just odd to those of us with military training. As for Miss Ledecka, I suspect some of Helen’s reaction is jealousy. Not having a date for Alexei and Katya’s wedding is clearly weighing on her.

Love, Me

******

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Thanks for arranging for Lambros and me to attend the service this morning. We were both shocked by the size of the crowd. Was Admiral Aral’s funeral like this?

Aunt Martya made sure we had a good lunch before returning to school. Uncle Enrique was oddly quiet. He didn’t even ask about our science exams. He also didn’t mention butterbugs once!

Love, Everard

My love, should we be concerned about what Enrique’s dreaming up? Or was he simply mourning the loss of two of Barrayar’s most distinguished educators? As if anything about today was simple! Miles’ and Duv’s eulogies were outstanding. So were Ekaterin’s cousin’s memories of his grandson and the way he thanked Miles for describing Georg and Helen as the loving people they truly were.
As painful as it was, the crowd needed to hear about the ripples these three senseless deaths will have for both the Vorthys family and the Imperium.

Somewhere between the eulogies and the last offering for Grisha, I came to a final decision. Despite loving Yitzy and, if he’ll have us, looking forward to working with him still, our personal relationship cannot continue. In the past week, my fundamental trust in his discretion has disappeared. Perhaps it was never there. Our children’s full names are not a secret, yet Yitzy has never once connected Perrin Piotr to Aral’s father the way he has Lujayn Olivia to his mother.

Later in the week, we’ll have to talk more about Yitzy. I just wanted to share today’s revelation while it was fresh in my mind. Love always, your Oliver

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thank you for all you did today to support my wife, children, and in-laws. I was especially impressed by Aurelia. My brothers-in-law lauded her composure and the delightful way she shared tales of working with Georg. She and Selig drew smiles describing Georg and Helen’s reaction to the laser hole in our basement wall! It even distracted Professor Muenster, whose face reminded myself of my own, post-seizure. The casualty rate in the University district keeps climbing as collapsed buildings are cleared. The university has lost over a dozen professors, scores of students, and two major buildings have been condemned as structurally unsafe.

Enjoy your evening with the Vorbarra and we’ll see you at Vorhalas House tomorrow. I promise to use my seizure stimulator after my wife falls asleep.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Just wanted to assure you that things here are fine. Nile, Perrin, Alani and I got up extra early this morning to burn offerings for Grisha and his great-grandparents. There was plenty of crying, but the emotional release was worth it. For all of us, especially Vinkovic, who knew Uncle Vorthys well through Miles’ auditorial work.

Mila loves being with Lujayn and Kiona. She quizzes them every afternoon about what they studied in school before they all go off to play. I’ve enclosed a vid of the knowledge-thirsty threesome reading stories to each other. So adorable!!!

Nile and Perrin have asked to attend the services for Count and Lord Vorpatril. I feel they could handle the main service, but not the interments. Think about it and discuss with Miles. The easiest solution is probably to bring everyone to Vorkosigan House Friday evening, but I’m not sure Ekaterin is up the chaos.

Alani and I are serious house hunters! We’ve got two strong possibilities for Mark to see, with another four showings lined up. I’m leaning toward a good-sized townhouse near the children’s school. The lot is a bit cramped, but wouldn’t be an issue if we had a weekend place near the Butterbug Ranch.

I got a long letter from Cordy this morning saying that in light of the upheaval here, we’re not obligated to host her wedding reception. Silly girl, virtually all the planning is done, the gardeners are working hard to ensure everything will be at peak beauty, and we’ll be home for at least three weeks beforehand to iron out any final details. I think Goncalo’s relatives would prefer they have a traditional, boring reception in the church hall. Sorry, but that’s not how we Vorkosigans roll!
Love and kisses, Kareen, Lady Mila, and five of your wonderful children

My love, only Kareen could keep six distinct personalities occupied so effortlessly! We were so careful not to push any of the children into attending funerals, but I’d have no objection if Nile and Perrin accompanied us. It would please Everard, plus be a good support for Irina and Padma. Surely everyone would be okay for an afternoon in Vorkosigan House with two nannies and some armsman while the rest of us journey to New Evias? Love, Me

Everard wants to go to New Evias to support his Big Cadet Brother. Lambros’ parents aren’t keen on the idea. I promised to arrange transport for him back to school. Not sure who, though. Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Drou and Kou aren’t accompanying us to New Evias because they’re attending another funeral that afternoon. Surely they’d be an acceptable escort for young Lambros? Christos is also available to serve as their driver.

Ivan is so flattered by this young cadet’s sense of honor. He and Tej have been working hard to ensure everything is as it should be. Tej, Irina, Simon, and I are flying up to New Evias tomorrow to cross-check arrangements for the post-burial reception. Francisco’s wife has pulled herself together enough to give us reams of helpful advice about District-specific customs; Anthony’s mostly stays in her suite and grieves. Call me cold, but I expect more from a dowager countess whose son needs her support. The time for retreat is after the crowds dissipate, not before.

Much love, Alys and Simon

 *****

To: Vorkosigan, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, KKVorkosigan, IXVorpatril
Cc: Farkas, BVorrutyer, HNVorkosigan
From: MPVorkosigan

The captain estimates we’ll reach the military shuttleport about 4am. Please have a car waiting. Byerly and I think it best for Rish to settle in at Vorkosigan House for at least a night, so please have a room ready. With the help of valets, coffee, Mila hugs, and long showers, By, Helen, and I will be ready to join you in honoring Count Anthony and Lord Francisco Vorpatril. Sorry to be so demanding. --- Mark

---

From: Vorkosigan

Some days, Brother, you’re a mite pushy, but you’ve never crossed the line to demanding. Especially not today, after all you, By, and Rish did to get here so swiftly. Kareen and Mila aren’t the only ones who can’t wait to see you! --- Miles

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia,

I went to Hassadar House this morning and was told no one was in residence. How could you leave without telling me? What’s going on? Where are you?

Love, Yitzy

My love, I CANNOT believe what I just read. I can forgive Yitzy for not knowing that Miles, Ivan, and Francisco Vorpatril went to school together, but not for ignoring your political responsibilities. How could he possibly miss the holos of you with all the former Viceroy’s and Imperial counselors at Lord Auditors Vanzin’s and Vorthys’ State funerals?? And it’s not like there weren’t holos of all the current and former Ministers, plus the Heads of ImpSec, Ops, and the three Fleets! Does he think
we retired military keep our uniforms current just for weddings???

I’m sorry to be taking my anger out on you, love. Not my intent. I’m just so disappointed such a smart man is proving to be so ignorant. Love always, Oliver

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

I can’t thank you and Dono enough for taking Dowager Countess Helga and Count Sven Vormuir’s unexpected appearance at the Opera House in stride. You were among the few who understood the respectful gesture it was meant to be.

In retrospect, I wish Helga had left Tomas when he started his asinine repopulation project, but she was too constrained by Barrayaran custody laws to risk leaving her boys in Tomas’ sole care. I’ll always be grateful to Falco and Maria for declaring they were too busy raising their own children to take over raising mine.

For as much as Ivan’s perceived lack of ambition before he entered the diplomatic track peeved Falco, I know he’d be proud of my son’s and grandson’s loyalty to his House. In young Count Falco’s place, I’d want to drink myself stupid just as much as he, his siblings, and cousins clearly did. I thought Padma’s steady support and gentle persuasion against public drunkenness was most impressive. Ivan is sure they all followed through after the guests left. If so, they earned their escape from reality after how nobly they honored their deceased fathers and armsmen.

I really don’t want to see any more funerals with multiple caskets for a very long time. Maybe after Count Voreliades’ service, Simon and I can escape to the beach for a few days. We need a break.

Before I forget, please tell Oliver that Everard’s poise was a credit to you both.

Much love, Alys

*****

Dearest Vicereine Vorkosigan,

I’m so sorry my obligation to attend more funerals in the capitol left you and the armsmen to deal with my mistake. Being as I brought Yitzy into our lives, it was my responsibility to dismiss him. And no, I wouldn’t have relented seeing him in person. Other than our trip to the Hegen Hub and at Everard’s school, I haven’t been Admiral Jole in a very long time. I was sure my military past was neatly ended with your diplomatic one, but these past few tumultuous weeks proved a) those chapters will never completely close and b) we can’t be involved with anyone who doesn’t understand a). I wonder if there’s another bi-sexual Barrayaran admiral somewhere in Gregor’s service, or have you truly collected the set?

I really should’ve been paying more attention to how Miles and Gregor sign their letters. Their varied signatures always reflect the men they are at that moment in time. Which means that at this moment, Professor Admiral Da Lover Co-parent Oliver Jole needs to reiterate that he loves all your many parts, now and forever.

Love always, your Oliver

P.S. You’ll probably see Mark and Kareen tomorrow. They have houses to see! OPJ
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m so glad exams are over! I feel I did well. So does Everard, who’s anxious to see everyone at graduation.

That’s not why I’m writing. I met with Professor Muenster today. He’d like to keep pressing forward on our anomaly research over the summer. I explained we have a family wedding on Escobar, but now I’m wondering if I should skip Sergyar entirely and travel directly to Nuevo Valencia with Miles and Ekaterin. I know you and my sibs would miss me, but this may be a unique opportunity to have the Professor’s full attention in a well-equipped, secure research facility. As you know, the ISI wasn’t a bomb target and everything is running fairly normally there.

I’m assuming Miles and Ekaterin wouldn’t mind looking after me after this weekend. I know it’s a big ask with all they’re going through. I never thought I’d say this, but Miles in his parade uniform is now a grim reminder of funerals. Maybe it will change seeing so many swords at the Academy graduation. I hope so.

Love, Aurelia

What a conundrum, my love! I wanted us all to be together, but the scientist in me can’t see asking Aurelia to forfeit an incredibly rare opportunity to study one-on-one with such a respected man. Maybe if we invite Simone to Sergyar with us, Lukin would be available to chaperone Aurelia while Varga is on maternity leave? Let’s talk to Miles and Ekaterin. Also Gregor. The implications of a possible second wormhole may take this decision out of our hands. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I’ll be more blunt that either of you deserve. My grieving wife needs some private time to relax before Cordy’s wedding and Aurelia and Nile begin school in the fall. We’re planning on spending a lot of time in the District, vacationing or tackling tasks Alex normally handles. If this were an ordinary extra-credit project, we’d ask that Aurelia postpone it until fall. But because it’s not, let’s see what Gregor has to say. If he wants her to keep working, we’ll find a solution. No matter what, I promise my adored little sister will be safe and loved.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The pleasure of your company, along with Aurelia, Miles, General Brodeur, and Professor Muenster, is requested and required the afternoon after Pavel’s graduation. Aunt Alys’ magnificent suggestion of hosting Pavel and Padma’s celebration on the Academy grounds drastically lessens the odds of the gardeners needing to remove vomit from the terraces and bushes. With our oldest son’s wedding approaching, our beleaguered staff does NOT need any extra work!

Let me add that accommodations for Aurelia are not a concern. There’s a room for her available at the Residence or in any of three apartments in Aunt Alys’ building.

Love, the Emperor who adores Aurelia’s kind heart and admires her brilliant brain

Sounds like the decision is not ours to make, love. I’d be totally comfortable with Aurelia living with
Alys and Simon or Ivan and Tej. Maybe not Irina, because prudish Da & overnight visitors. Go ahead and laugh! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Is it my poor memory, or was this Academy graduation much more grand than Miles and Ivan’s? I’ve done as requested and shared the holos and vids. No one can believe how much Everard has grown and how serious he looks in his school uniform! The holo of Gregor, Pavel, Ivan, and Padma was glorious, as was the complete Vorbarra family, all grinning from ear-to-ear, but my favorite was three cousins and their military offspring in parade dress. Helen and Katya capping the ends was such an important statement on how far Barrayar has come in Gregor’s lifetime. It is of course my fervent hope that Nikki and Anna will be able to attend when Selig graduates. THAT would be a picture!

I’m sorry to hear Ekaterin is still reeling from the bombings. I’m sure many are, but to lose loved ones AND know how close she came to being widowed again is a very heavy burden. I’m glad Ivan and Tej have offered to care for Aurelia while she gets a jump on next term’s work. That’s my granddaughter, always curious. She’s so like her older brothers! Your father, too, of course.

Lizzie and Vasco are busy, as always. The five of us – John and Sarah have accepted Elena’s gracious wedding invitation – are counting down the days until we board ship to Escobar. On bad days, I think it’s the only thing keeping Lizzie going. Turns out she knew many of the casualties other than relatives. Survivor’s guilt from such a distance is rare, but it’s also very real. After all, if Lizzie hadn’t come here, she might well have been at ImpMil treating the injured. One bright spot – she tells me that Lord Vorbretton is making a very strong recovery. Just like Major Miramas, a baby in a replicator is strong incentive to get back on one’s feet!

The good news is Bella is close to walking on her own, leaving baby fingerprints everywhere as she clings to furniture, people, and walls to get where she wants to go. The bad is that exercise burns calories and her intake just isn’t keeping up. Every time she puts on a kilo, she gets sick and loses whatever she’s gained.

Sarah and I are going shopping next week for church-appropriate attire for Cordy’s wedding. We’ll send you holos. We’ll expect you to send holos of Alexei and Katya’s wedding in return.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Zane arrives in less than three hours. I’m so excited! So is KareenVB – Dr. Shaw Sutherland is on the same ship. And yes, Shaw is almost as wonderful as KareenVB paints him. Unlike her last crush, I’m fairly certain everyone will approve of this super-smart, very kind, pediatric surgical resident. He can even remember which of the many Toscane cousins go with which parents, a feat that took me years!

With Vorbarr Sultana overrun with wedding fever, I thought it would be nice to show Zane some of the District. Would it be okay to bring him down to Hassadar for a few days? I also want him to see the Long Lake. Dome-Boy has never dipped a toe or a fishing line in a natural body of water, much less seen a horse. I don’t know when you two are scheduled to return to the capitol for official events, but it would be fine if you’d like us to take the kiddos with us for a day or two.

Love, Taurie

*****

Six on two. Are those fair odds, my love? I rather think they are, given the staff and armsmen, as
long as we impose an absolute prohibition on using the range. Maybe we could sneak away for a night at Bonsanklar. Love, Me

Damn it, I forgot the University Memorial Fundraiser! We’ll have to postpone our romantic weekend away until fall. Love, Me

******

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thanks for hosting Taurie and Zane. Ekaterin’s going crazy with flowers for the fundraiser. I’d offer to buy our way out of the obligation, but I’m not stupid.

Ethical question. Alex has been combining sights from his travels, his professional training, and destruction from the bombings into architectural drawings. So far, he’s sent three stadiums, two libraries, and two office buildings. To this layman, they all look damn good. Would, however, Lord Vorkosigan winning bids to rebuild the city be seen as nepotism or patronage?

Dono and René say I’m being ridiculous, that our son should submit bids as Alex Vorvayne and see what happens. For the record, both like the sketches, which are modern, but incorporate classic city architectural details. Not Cockroach Central’s horrible gargoyles, but arches, columns, brickwork, and trim that whisper of places like Vorhartung, the Residence, and the Imperial Stables. I particularly like the stadium design with motifs of events that occur there. Ekaterin says it’s a bit busy, but it’s refreshing to see new ideas over proposals to rebuild things with identical facades as a defiant gesture to those who’d destroy our way of life. Gregor has always hated the Stadium, but reiterated that it’s poor fiscal management to destroy perfectly useful venues, or he’d have built the Negri Building sooner.

Mother, save me a dance at the fundraiser?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin Vorkosigan, urban philanthropists

******

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Happy Wedding Day! We’ll want to see tons of holos and vid, not just the official ones. I really wish we could be there. Not for the glory of being the select few, but because Alexei and Katya are so special to our family.

So far, nothing concerning has popped up in the Viceroy’s absence. Plans are in place for your arrival. The twins are marking off days on the calendar. It’s cute.

Padma is an excellent houseguest. Yesterday, he went to the store, purchased all kinds of exotic ingredients, and had a scrumptious dinner ready when Anna and I got home from work. And because they ‘helped’ cook, the twins willingly ate Escobaran cuisine. It’ll be good practice for Cordy and Goncalo’s wedding!

I assume you’ve heard Professor Zorin is returning to Gridgrad University. He’s requested access to your house to retrieve personal possessions. We explained that IF you agree to a visit, it must occur when you’re in residence. Let me know how you want to play this and I’ll arrange security and distractions for the troops.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, & Dyana

I’m beginning to have more sympathy for Helen’s ‘breakups suck’ diatribe, my love. Yes, Yitzy’s probably got stuff in your house. Not mine, because we moved all personal things to yours before I rented it to the groom-to-be. I don’t think it’ll be much in terms of clothes, but there are probably
research/papers in my office.

I’m so glad Laisa arranged the ‘kid party’ upstairs. Given how little Lujayn and Kiona slept last night, I suspect they’ll sleep through dinner and wake for the fireworks. Oh, and before I forget, you look absolutely regal. Are you ready to dazzle diplomats and la crème de la crème of Barrayaran society? Love, Me

Hey Sis –

Thanks so much for the security vid of your meeting with the Cetas. I’m not sure who snorted more at the various barbs, me, Lizzie, or Mother. Our sons say it’s the best Vorkosigan adventure vid ever. Our personal favorite moments included:

a) The Empress complimenting the geneticist who paired your and Kareen’s genes to create the red highlights in Mila’s beautiful hair;
b) The Emperor’s reaction to meeting Miles and Mark at the same time;
c) Miles commenting that Vorkosigan Vashnoi no longer glows in the dark;
d) Disappointment that Alex, Lizzie, Nikki, and Anna weren’t there;
e) Pointed questions about Ambassador Vorpatril’s next assignment, how close he stands to the Vorpatril Countship, and Padma’s absence;
f) Genuine surprise that Katya’s mother, not a random male relative, led her horse to the wedding circle;
g) Insincere praise of Irina’s wonderful singing;
h) Unsubtle inquiries about Dmitri’s job and MPVK;
i) Undue interest in Princess Kareen’s matrimonial prospects;
j) The dumbfounded expressions when you corrected the Empress addressing you as Mrs. Jole;
k) Condescending questions about Aurelia’s studies; and
l) Mark showing off the Vorkosigan seal dagger from the Ceta treasure hoard.

We’re unanimous that Empress Rian is gorgeous, smitten with Miles, and over-curious about your family. We also agree it was brilliant for Gregor to protect the wormhole by inviting enemies to the wedding. Did they at least give a good gift?

As for the rest of the footage and holos, it looked like a spectacular wedding. We’ll expect more stories when we see you next month.

Love, John and Sarah

“Did they give a good gift?” My love, your brother is hilarious! But would it be tacky to ask? Love, Me

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Let me start by saying that we love having Aurelia with us. She’s polite, kind, neat, and an interesting conversationalist. She’s also incredibly hard-working. If Miles hadn’t set official hours for Lukin, Aurelia and Professor Muenster would easily work at least 12-15 hours a day. I honestly don’t understand a fraction of what she says about their work, but after growing up around Miles, I’m used to that.

I continue to spend much of my time with Count Falco. Poor lad, just hearing his name conjures up a picture of his formidable grandfather. Happily, Falco is very bright, which will help him to learn his new role quickly. He’s being assisted by his older sister, aunts, and cousins. It pains me to say it, but Anthony’s widow is utterly useless. Mamere says that’s due to Riya spending virtually all her time shopping in Vorbarr Sultana and leaving the District work to Anthony and Francisco. It’s certainly
not the example the old Count Falco and his wife set!

Falco’s youth has complicated my next assignment. Gregor, Viceroy Vorgustafson, and I had a long meeting after the wedding. Ideally, we’d hoped to accompany Padma to report to his new command at Gridgrad after Cordy’s wedding. Instead, Padma will join Sergyar Fleet and Tej and I will hitch a ride back to Bararrayar. We’ll spend a few months helping organize the Vorpatril District before Byerly steps into the role of Falco’s advisor and we begin packing. I can promise the next Viceroy has no intention of throwing his weight around or disrupting General Chaly’s task force. He and his wife will, however, commandeered a former vicereine’s beach house for an occasional vacation. They also plan on repainting the viceregal palace dining room because the shade of green Lady Vorgustafson chose is utterly vile.

Mamere and Simon send regards. They’ve rented a beach house near Kou and Drou and are enjoying relaxing in the sun. Irina and Simone are down there, too.

Love, Ivan and Tej

I hate to say I told you so, my love, but I’m looking forward to collecting the full-body massage you promised. Do you think Miles is pleased or appalled at this turn of events? I imagine Mark, Nikki, and Anna will be ecstatic! One oddity – why Byerly? I didn’t think he had much administrative experience. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Have you heard the news about Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej? Pardon me, Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril! Not only will we see them every summer, it’s nice to know Sergyar will be in safe hands when Viceroy Vorgustafson retires.

Given the importance of the passengers, we’ll be traveling aboard the Admiral Vorkosigan to Escobar. Ambassador and Lady Voranthis will be hosting an official reception for Alexei and Katya. That’ll be the end of their honeymoon. We’re dropping them and the Vorsoisson-Chaly family at Sergyar Station on the way home. Ekaterin is so excited that everyone except Selig will be there. Poor guy, he’s got to report to the Academy earlier than most university classes start.

My work with Professor Muenster is going extremely well. We’re traveling to the anomaly site next week. Helen will be my chaperone as we take measurements and conduct experiments. If all goes well, we’ll try to launch a drone or two. Those readings will be key in determining if we’ve actually found something. Professor Muenster is convinced we have. Professor Yuell is more circumspect, but part of that could be pining for home and his work trying to stabilize Komarr’s unusable wormholes. Yes, it would likely be more profitable, but not more strategic. Plus he’s got the common Komarran bias against Vorkosigans. Uncle Ivan says to ignore it and if necessary, Helen will straighten him out.

Love, Aurelia

My love, I’m almost afraid to hope they’ll be successful. Bararrayar desperately needs a back door, plus cutting a normal Sergyar trip from weeks to days without stressing the engines or passengers would be a massive security upgrade for both planets. That said, the bombing showed we also need to improve communication speed to Gridgrad. Although it might entail a ship being permanently deployed in a random bit of space, a reliable way to conduct near-real-time communication with Sergyar would absolutely earn Aurelia her first Imperial medal! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
My aunt may be the Imperium’s smartest teenager. I am not joking. Her work is meticulously thorough, with documentation to match. I detect Mama’s hand in the way Aurelia notes the tiniest details. There are moments when it’s clear that the junior member of the team, experience-wise, is also leading the charge.

The entire crew adores Aurelia and Professor Muenster. We’re used to ISI boffins, so those distractions/demands are minor. The unanimous verdict on Professor Yuell, however, is he’s a super-intelligent, self-important, condescending ass with no political sense whatsoever. My captain has had enough. Over dinner last night, after more snarky remarks about Barvyaran feudalism and nepotism, the captain looked Professor Yuell straight in the eye and said, “Please tell me that a man of your reputation understands your slurs against the Emperor could be construed as treason. Also that as an Imperial Auditor, Lt. Commander Vorkosigan’s father has the authority to order you put to death? He’s done it before, as has his mother, so perhaps you should watch what you say.” There was beautiful silence after that.

Never fear, afterward, Aurelia and I went to our cabin to discuss the single publicly-known occasion when Da ordered people killed. It was the investigation right before Selig and Simone were born, when a bunch of former soldiers accepted bribes to kill Alexei and Dmitri on the way to school. You probably remember them firing on the arrest team and Da giving the order to return fire with lethal force. Aurelia hadn’t heard the story, but had no trouble understanding the triple treason of attempting to kill two Princes and an Emperor’s Voice.

We also had a long talk about the Pretendership. Living with Mama and Da when Granda Sasha passed showed Aurelia the emotional impact of losing a parent. It also clarified what an impossible position Grandma was in, trying to rescue Da and the child emperor’s mother. Also how greedy, desperate and stupid Vordarian was!

I was honest when Aurelia asked if I’d ever killed anyone. Individually, no, but I’ve done what was necessary to protect my ship, crew, and the Emperor. There was a huge gulp when I said that had the Ceta spy Uncle Simon and I captured at the Hegen Hub symposium fought back, we’d have sent him back to his embassy in a body bag. Just as Uncle Kou, Uncle Oliver, and all the rest of Granda’s personal secretaries would’ve done (did?) to protect the Regent/Prime Minister/Viceroy.

No matter what happens on this expedition, I’m confident it’s only the first time Aurelia and I will go exploring together. I’m looking forward to more!

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Mother, Uncle Oliver, Miles, and Mark,

After Cordy’s wedding, I’d like us all to sit down and discuss the not-so-public bits of Vorkosigan history. Not everything, just the extremes illustrating the difference between murder and justifiable homicide. Without background, arguments that it’s all been the former appear to have merit. I know that’s not so and believe I’m old enough to hear more about everyone, including my supposedly-bloodthirsty Da.

It’s also time for whatever zany good luck space rituals you prefer. We’re sending drones through the anomaly in three days.

Love, Aurelia

My love, do I really have to reveal all the times I deflected personal attacks on Aral? Only a handful were fatal, but…. Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother, Oliver, and Mark,

Damn, our little sister is precocious! Da didn’t ask if I’d ever assassinated anyone until I was over 30. But considering the many things Da and I didn’t get a chance to say to one another, I’m for continuing the precedent Ekaterin and I have used since Tien died, i.e., we wait for our children to broach an awkward subject, but answer as fully as age-appropriate when they do. It’s also a long-winded way of saying none of us should volunteer specific information unless asked. Sixteen is young to learn that virtually every adult relative in the Empire except Laisa, Enrique, Taurie, and maybe Alex, has contributed to ending at least one person’s life.

I’d prefer Mother and Oliver discuss extra-couple relationships privately with their children, but if asked directly, I’ll respond honestly that I’m exclusively attracted to tall women with dark hair. No Oedipus complex for me! (Yes, that was a joke. My partners always had forceful personalities on par with Mother’s.) I won’t answer questions about my children’s sex lives because that’s not mine to share. I will, however, expect Mother to confirm that Da and Ges Vorruytier had an affair after Da’s first wife died. Knowing that single fact has allowed my children to feel far more comfortable in developing their own sexual identity.

Mark, I’d be glad to discuss anything you’d like privately before talking with our sister. Seven children’s worth of awkward questions, Dono’s tales, and decades as an Imperial Auditor have made me virtually unshockable. Let’s just say replicator technology has drastically reduced, not eliminated, paternity mishaps like René’s and far more of our generation are half-siblings than anyone wants to admit.

Love to all, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Alex’s Grand Tour has come to an end in my guest room. He and Plotkin have accomplished the goal of many adventures. Alex swears he’s been sending the full sketchbooks and holo cubes home regularly, but they still had a frightful amount to show off. John has booked a private dining room at Alex and Lizzie’s favorite Russian restaurant for our family reunion luncheon this weekend. Alex swears he and Plotkin will manage to drag all the gifts stacked in my spare closet to the restaurant. I’m just as excited as the children to see what they bought!

Lizzie and Vasco are coming to dinner tomorrow. I sincerely hope seeing Alex will cheer her up because she’s been so sad since the Vorbarr Sultana bombings. Sarah’s hoping we’ll have some energy left to go shopping after our family luncheon because Lizzie doesn’t have an outfit for Cordy’s wedding yet.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, and Miles,

Believe it or not, Kareen and I appreciate the warning that Aurelia has awkward questions. Not only is it practice for Mila’s inevitable inquiries, it’s a chance to verbalize very awful parts of my past. Most of the children know I was cloned as part of a plot to replace Miles and conquer Barrayar. I’m comfortable telling Aurelia that my training included hand-to-hand combat skills that dwarf most of the Imperium’s. Pun intended; Nikki and Alexei have yet to win a bout with me. Rather than reveal how very many people I’ve killed, I’d prefer to focus on using those skills for good, like protecting myself from the people who tried to kidnap Irina or preventing a kidnapping of two small children in Mila’s favorite park.

If asked about my sex life, all I’m saying is I fell in love with Kareen the first time I saw her and been
faithful ever since. Emotionally, at any rate – the therapy it took to undo damage from Ser Galen and Baron Ryoval is my own private hell. As for our Mila, I’m incredibly grateful our daughter was conceived naturally, as an act of love, rather than in a more clinical setting. No matter the aphrodisiacs, my psyche is far too sexually scarred to have been able to provide the requisite sample.

On to more important things. Has anyone heard results of the drone experiments?

Love, Mark, Kareen, and the inquisitive Lady Mila

******

To: Vicereine Vorkosigan and Professor Jole
From: General Chaly

I thought you might be interested in this transmission. An Imperial Courier picked up it and four others about half a day’s journey from the Rene Magritte wormhole.

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

If you’re reading this, Drone2 has successfully navigated the anomaly and trans-mitted an info beam on the assigned military frequency. No idea what happened with the other drones or if return transmissions are possible. Please write anyway.

Love, Aurelia and Helen

My love, colleagues on the planning team for next year’s summer seminar were very alarmed when I vaulted from my seat and ran for the lav. I’m shaking and my stomach is doing backflips. I guess it’s to be expected considering our 16 y.o. genius has just changed the face of Imperial communication. I must finish my meeting. Please write to her quickly and tell her how proud we are! Love, Me

******

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

IT WORKED!!! Drone2’s five transmissions all reached Sergyar in one stream. Better yet, the nine responses sent in three bursts all reached Barrayar space within four hours of being sent. FOUR HOURS!!! Gridgrad base is sending ships to locate and tag all three drones. Even though we haven’t heard from Drone1 and Drone3, Professors Muenster and Yuell are confident they’re out there somewhere.

Helen is making me take a sleeptimer, claiming I won’t sleep a wink without it. She’s probably right.

Love, Aurelia

******

Dear Mother, Oliver, and Mark,

I haven’t seen Gregor and Ivan so idiotically gleeful since Father Frost brought us remote control drones that dropped candy after several minutes of flying a steady course. Only this time, we celebrated with the finest brandy from the Residence cellars. Lots of brandy. Too much brandy. But, oh, the hangovers were worth it!

To recap, three drones were sent through the mini-wormhole at 4-hour intervals. Drone2’s messages were relayed to Sergyar within 6 hours; responses were received within four hours. One for three is quite a success.

Except it wasn’t one for three. Ships tracking the other two drones’ responder beams found them oriented in opposite directions. Drone1 pointed at Komarr and Drone3 pointed south to nowhere. Drone1 had responses from ImpSec Komarr, but was too far from the anomaly to forward them
Same for Drone3, whose messages were received by a random ship and forwarded back to Sergyar via a jump station on the standard Komarr/Sergyar route.

Our girls are due back this evening. The ISI boffins wanted to study the data in situ, but the ship has other missions, Aurelia and Helen have a wedding to attend, and many decisions must be made about the physical resources to be allotted to the project. I feel for Anna. Here she was hoping for a vacation and instead she’s been handed another major project. Thankfully, she’s as excited as we are!

Tej has started Aurelia’s packing. With luck, the Admiral Vorkosigan will leave orbit as scheduled day after tomorrow.

Love, the Three Drunken, Elated Musketeers

My love, I have a mental picture of the tipsy trio singing hours of marches. I wonder if they’ll loot the Vorkosigan cellars to continue the revelry aboard ship?

I cannot wait for this committee to finish our summer planning. Yitzy has been staring with concern since last week, badgering me with questions about if everything’s all right. Pleasantries and noncommittal responses aren’t working. I’m not sure if he thinks someone’s dying or you unilaterally gave him the boot. Love, Me
Cordy’s Wedding

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Please add a pallet of cider and another of ambrosia to your packing list. Kareen has decided a summer wedding calls for a sundae bar. The overall menu won’t be as elaborate as Alexei and Katya’s wedding, but only because the groom’s family has more pedestrian tastes. No question, however, that Team Koudelka knows how to throw a party! Elena and Baz are very concerned about the expense. I insisted this is our joint celebration of outliving the bastards who shot Miles.

Wait until you see Mila’s flower girl outfit. She looks downright regal, complete with a tiara that matches Cordy’s. I swear the jewels are all excellent fakes. I may be an indulgent father/uncle, but I’m also a practical one!

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mama and Tante Cordelia,

Whining alert!!! I know no good deed goes unpunished, but Elena and I are on the verge of putting the groom’s mother through a wall. I remember reading somewhere that asshole is not a culture. For all the many times I’ve heard Barrayarans! used as a curse, my home world has nothing on the Salazars. Having read several books and scoured Escobaran wedding planning sites, I’m convinced Goncalo’s mother, aunts, and grandmothers are making up bogus traditions (like the groom’s family provides the cake) to undermine Cordy and her family. It’s nasty.

Elena was totally cracking yesterday. I glued her back together with the reminder that the Admiral Vorkosigan arrives in a few days. Senhora Salazar may think her (very nice, polite, eligible) son is a Crown Prince, but she’s about to meet a real one. And his wedding planner. Delia would’ve sat in on the remaining planning sessions anyway, but she’s taking over dealing with the crazy people so Ekaterin, Elena, and I can focus on genuine issues like making sure the delivery trucks don’t muck up the lawn or short us on our orders. It’s a good thing I ordered everything through MPVK because our assistant has taken several calls about potential vendor cancellations. Toss up as to who’s more furious, Mark or Dmitri. I think Dmitri has it by a nose because who’d dare gainsay an order placed by the Residence?

I’m sure hugs will help. I’m so glad you’re almost here!

Love and Kisses, Kareen

Wow, my love, what idiots! Besides the arrogance of bulldozing the bride, why risk antagonizing some of the area’s most prominent businesspeople? Ones who are also trained to kill and have known connections to one of the most powerful Heads of State in the nexus? Good thing Delia’s experienced in dealing with ornery diplomats because it may take all of Team Koudelka to pull this off. Love, Me

And we thought chatting with Aurelia would be the hard part of this visit. The Salazars keep on like this, she may get to witness justifiable homicide! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m very glad we followed Miles’ suggestion and booked a hotel. Vorkosigan Pribyl is glorious chaos. Mila is bombarding people with questions about everything from tents to how the food will
stay hot. John says it’s a sign of what Mark should’ve been like as a child. Simultaneously funny and sad, I know.

Mark set up our appointments at the Clinic before the Admiral Vorkosigan arrives. There are some niggling adjustments to our meds, but we mostly got clean bills of health. I say mostly because I was told I’m not spending enough time with a sun lamp. We were also told that regular visits to places with natural sun and a breathable atmosphere is advisable for optimal treatment efficacy.

Sounds like the doctors want us to go to Sergyar next summer. How delightful that will be! We’re so proud of Ivan and Tej earning the highest couples position in Barrayar’s Diplomatic Service. Although Komarr is more important strategically, Chaos Colony is where the challenges are. Plus Port Nightingale is so beautiful and restful. Rather like the Long Lake, with fewer interruptions from the capitol.

Love, Mother

My love, your mother articulated what I’ve always thought. Komarran oligarchs handle many issues that wind up on the Viceroy’s desk. And with the development since you stepped down, Ivan and Tej are inheriting a well-run, multi-ring circus. Vorgustafson was fabulous for Sergyar, but Vorpatril will be even better. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

All the vids and holos make us sad that we couldn’t attend Cordy’s wedding, but after the bombing and our son’s wedding, we’re needed where we are.

Our favorite holos, after Lady Mila strewing flower petals and the Bothari-Jesek family portrait, were the grandmother ones. You, Miss Visconti, and Madame Hysopi flanking the bride all glowed with joy. The one of Goncalo with his avós looked rigid and uncomfortable, an apt metaphor for the family’s discomfort with him not marrying a Latina. I can hear Count Piotr growling, “They’ll get over it.” And looking across the entire day, the friends and family gathered in the beautiful church, the happy couple, the elegant, lively reception ending in extravagant fireworks, I’m sure Sergeant Bothari would’ve approved it all as right and proper.

Opinions are split on Alex’s new beard. I think it gives him a bit of gravitas. We loved seeing him and Helen together; although their talents often separate them, that twin bond is always there. As for Daniel and Dyana, it appears they have almost the same twin telepathy as Selig and Simone at that age. The Vorsoisson-Chaly family looked wonderful, so tan, happy, and relaxed. It was great to see (and hear) the Thorne family. Nicol’s artistry never fails to amaze. Unless you’re an ignorant bigot. Some of the surprised expressions in the church weren’t Christian.

We hope the embassy reception for Alexei and Katya goes smoothly. Miles and Ivan will be passing on Our official and personal condolences to the hosts over the loss of their Uncle Count Voreliades, but I ask you to assure Ambassador Voranthis that Our hand protects his grieving aunt and his cousin, the new Count Voreliades. I must say that I’m very pleased at how my other Counts have stepped up to help their new colleagues find their feet. As for Young Count Vorhalas, however, is in a tailspin, having only attained his majority and been formally confirmed as heir months before this tragedy.

ISI boffins continue to work up numbers to determine if Aurelia’s discovery is economically feasible. I’m very glad you’d already agreed to her graduating early because many are clamoring for her time. General Brodeur said so far, different teams want her at least 100 hours a week. I’m so glad Miles pushed limits on teen work hours through the Council before Vormuir could put his girls to work!
I think it’s time for me to stop rambling about my work issues. Enjoy the rest of your trip, hug everyone on our behalf, and we’ll see you soon.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

I swear, my love, I don’t know how the Emperor does it, day in and day out. He’s downright amazing! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

I really don’t understand why most of our family loves Escobar. The Duronas and Vorkosigan Pribyl are wonderful, but most people don’t seem very welcoming. Or maybe Goncalo’s family is just unpleasant?

Love, Alani

Alani has a point, my love. After all, Alexei’s grandfather did try to conquer the place. That said, Goncalo’s family is rather unkind. The troops worked hard to learn common Portuguese phrases. My crusty Academy drill sergeant distrusted earbugs, insisting we learn how to say hello, goodbye, please, and thank you in the native tongue(s) for every world we visited. That advice served me well until last week. It must be dull to live in a diverse, multi-cultural world and only spend time with people exactly like yourselves. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Simon,

Well, that wasn’t nearly as bad as I feared. I suspect Aurelia would’ve been far less understanding if she hadn’t just survived Vorbarr Sultana’s patricide bombings. The mass killing of seven of my peers, so many armsmen, and the innocents in the Great Square is the closest I’ve ever come to truly grasping the emotional rage Granda must have felt at the destruction of Vorkosigan Vashnoi. No, I’m not being dramatic. Lord Auditor Vorkosigan most often reports to the Emperor in the Residence. Count Vorkosigan and his fellow Counts report to him at Vorhartung. Beyond my childhood visits with Da, that castle has been the scene of so many of my adult highs and lows. Until it was threatened, I never realized Vorhartung is my home just as much as Vorkosigan House and the Long Lake.

It was obviously quite a revelation for Aurelia to learn that despite me being the only relative explicitly assigned to Covert Ops, I was also the only one in the room not to have taken anyone’s life (or head!) with my bare hands. I’m glad we didn’t include Nikki because part of me doesn’t want to know what circumstances forced my son to use lethal force to protect his charges. Especially not after learning Oliver and Kou killed more men defending Da than Da did outside of battle.

I’m very pleased Aurelia grasped that the bombings do not represent a massive security failure like the Vorstamos/Irina debacle. After all, the only thing remotely suspicious in the entire plot was a regular munitions delivery passed a checkpoint several hours ahead of schedule and stopped at a popular highway rest area for a meal and a nap. Vid of five ordinary groundcars amidst the hundreds of vehicles heading to the capitol was evidence after the fact, when tags were matched to traffic cam footage. How could anyone possibly enforce a blanket prohibition on groundcars and flyers going near any city’s key buildings? My colleagues are still wrestling with how 17 civilians formulated such a sophisticated, bloody plan. My gut says the munitions connection will prove to be heavily involved. But I digress.

I enjoyed the lively discussion of what is treason and how it should be punished. Mother, your insistence that proper therapy cures everything was such an amusing contrast to Mark’s kill-them-first, ask-questions-later approach. There’s a time and place for each, as Da demonstrated in trying to
wipe Bothari’s memories of the Escobar War and his swift justice after the Solstice Massacre. Simon, I appreciated you explaining how Haroche being a good man blinded by ambition factored into the decision to let him live. And how some crimes, like sharing the Imperium’s secrets, cannot be redeemed by prison sentences. Or that taking the supposedly-honorable way out in a prison cell like Oleg Vorfolse doesn’t restore the perpetrator’s honor, it protects the victim and the perpetrator’s loved ones from further shame. Also why I was so disgusted to learn of Lady Augusta Vorkalloner’s betrothal to Count Vortrifrani’s second son. Her idiot parents are probably kicking themselves, wishing they’d considered then-Lord Vorhalas-Vorville. At least that would’ve been age-appropriate; Lady Augusta’s husband is twice her age.

Speaking of, Alex just got a note from Lady Vorfolse that her husband has finally been released from the hospital. Lord Volfolse needs intensive spinal surgery if he’s to walk again. Do not be surprised, Mark, if Alex asks if any of the Duronas are available to visit Barrayar. There’s plenty of room on the Admiral Vorkosigan!

I really hope the Duronas can help Bel. It looks so frail! I suppose at times, I do, too, but not nearly to the same extent. Bel and Nicol are pleased I’m going for tests at the beginning of its treatment. I haven’t stayed in a null-gee environment in years. I suspect it will do wonders for my arthritis and our wives will have to drag us to our sleep sacks to prevent us from staying up all night reminiscing.

Love to all, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Thank you for letting me travel on Mark’s ship. The flight to Beta Colony was so much fun! Grandma and Aunt Sarah spoiled me, plus I got to spend more time with Lizzie and Vasco. We talked about a lot of stuff, especially school. Lizzie was pleased when I said Perrin and I want to stay in Hassadar for years 7 & 8 like Nile did. Lizzie’s looking forward to finishing her residency and coming home.

We helped Grandma unpack and had a big family dinner before Mark said we had to leave. I loved meeting Bella and playing with her sister Bonnie! Cousin Scarlett annoyed Mark by complaining we didn’t bring Mila. She annoyed Cousin James, too. I don’t think her grandsons like Cousin Scarlett much because they didn’t want to sit next to her or play with her. Not like their grandchildren like Cousin J.J. and Cousin Clark. I want them to visit. They’re almost as fun as Uncle John.

We’re almost back to Escobar Station. Mark says Dr. Azalea and Dr. Indigo will meet us there. I really hope they can help Alex’s friend. Lord and Lady Vorfolse were both very nice when they visited Hassadar. And their little boys are so cute!

I’ll write again soon.
Love, Alani

Sounds like the first two legs went well, my love. I hope Alani does as well when it’s just her, Mark, and two Durona surgeons. I know you said she needed a break from crowds, but I worry. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Dr. Azalea and Dr. Indigo are wonderful! When we stopped at Sergyar Station, Dr. A convinced the med team to take full-body x-rays of us. We’re comparing them section by section. I didn’t know lots of injuries leave marks on your bones. If you know where to look, you can see where Dr. Indigo and I both hurt our arms. When we get to the spine, they’ll show me Lord Vorfolse’s and how they plan to fix it so he can walk again. It’s so much more interesting than last year’s science teacher!
Love, Alani
*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

No, of course Alani’s not bothering our guests! After the usual chaos at the Clinic – we’ll be expanding again in the spring – both docs are a mite bored. An hour a day with a bright girl anxious to learn is a treat for all three. That said, it’s premature to be thinking of med school. Alani is equally interested in elementary accounting, navigation, and cooking. She seems to want to learn a little about a lot of things her relatives do. The ship’s cook adores her, as does the rest of the crew. Alani’s brownies looked a little lumpy, but were delicious. No, we’re not allowing her tons of sugar and yes, she’s getting plenty of exercise. We spar daily alongside the doctors and some of the crew. Everyone loves hearing doctors giving instructions about how to achieve more force without hurting yourself.

The best part of the day is late afternoon. Alani’s like me, enjoying being on the go, but needing recharge time, too. It started while Grandma had her daily rest, but has become a cherished ritual of me working while Alani reads, does puzzles, or watches vids with headphones. It reminds me of when Kareen and I are focused on our own work, yet aware of the other person sharing the space. It’s nice.

Now for the good news. The Admiral Vorkosigan may be large and luxurious, but I much prefer my ship’s speed. Though you had over a week’s head start due to our detour to Beta Colony, we should reach Barrayar only a day or so behind you.

Thank you for the gift of this time with my sister. It’s been wonderful.

Love, Mark (and Alani)

Well, it’s obvious Alani has found her non-parental trusted adult. Another reason to the list of why I’m glad Kareen and Mark are moving to Hassadar! Love, Me
Picking Up the Pieces

Dearest Cordelia,

I’m writing because I didn’t want to interrupt Nile’s school orientation. It will be a horrible school year for me. Despite the dean’s promises, they haven’t replaced Yitzy. Instead, they moved my classes to larger lecture halls without notifying me that I’m expected to find more teaching assistants and oversee twice as many lab sessions. And because a zoology professor is taking a sudden sabbatical for family reasons, students are begging to get into my closed classes.

Love always, your Oliver

What do you mean, you could be one of my teaching assistants? I thought you hated snotty undergrads. Love, Me

As always, you make a persuasive case, my love. But do you realize that even one class and two lab sessions will tie you to Hassadar and give you much less time for MPVK at a time when Mark is contemplating a major expansion? Love, Me

Okay, you win, I’ll speak to the dean. I don’t suppose you have a copy of your college transcripts handy, do you? Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I always knew it was only a matter of time before your lured Grandma into the fray of academia, Uncle Oliver. Lots of people here in Silica are laughing, imagining her treating recalcitrant college students like disobedient 10-year-olds. Just for curiosity, Grandma, what are the students supposed to call you? We always called our college teaching assistants by their first name. Somehow, I don’t see it.

On a more serious note, some conscientious students will be very lucky to have the pair of you as teachers. I foresee many published papers down the road from students you’ll inspire together.

Love, Lizzie & Vasco

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Though I miss everyone in Hassadar terribly, I also love the Old Town School and seeing Aurelia every day. Sometimes it’s only breakfast, the ride to school, and dinner, but it’s still nice. Professor Muenster is annoyed Miles decreed Aurelia must be home for dinner, but otherwise, she’d never get her homework done. Simone says the combination secondary/university course load is as challenging as hers, and she’s not spending hours in a research lab, too!

Ekaterin has allocated a small section of the greenhouse for me to experiment as I like. Because I’m doing hydroponics at school, I decided to try cross-pollinating tulips. Turning seeds into bulbs will be a lengthy project, but I’ve got time.

Ekaterin and Miles have declared Saturday a homework-free day. We’re going to see Everard’s gymkhana, then dinner with Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon, followed by the Vorbarr Sultana Symphony. Irina and some of her classmates will be accompanying the symphony for several numbers. Aunt Tej says it’s a Big Deal for a sophomore to be chosen. Uncle Ivan will be there, too. We barely see him because he’s busy touring the Vorpatril District with the new Count. Irina says
her father is annoyed that hardly any of the list he left for Count Vorpatril got done while we were at Cordy’s wedding. I’m sure Viceroy Vorgustafson is annoyed, too.

I’m glad you’re enjoying teaching together. Mark came for dinner last week. He said your office is covered in university stuff!

Love, Nile

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Damn right I’m annoyed! Trust me, I understand Count Falco the Younger is in mourning. We’re all in mourning. Not just for Anthony and Francisco; every day, I think about Helen, Georg, Grisha, Count Voreliades, and all the military men I knew. It’s not an excuse for Anthony’s widow to encourage her son to disregard my instructions because he needs to be by Riya’s side. Sorry, that’s not how inheriting a countship works. Dowager countesses are supposed to support their sons, or if not, get the hell out of their way. And it’s not like I’m butting in without invitation. Our Emperor requested and required me to help one of his new Counts. I swear, I almost wish I’d been assigned to Vorhalas and I’ve barely met the lad!

When I can get him to focus, young Falco shows plenty of promise. He studied business at university, he’s polite and well-spoken, supportive and kind to his younger siblings and cousins, and has traveled extensively through the District with his father. He does very well in easy public appearances like ribbon cuttings and charity events. The problem is Anthony and Francisco thought they had plenty of time to teach him the rest. Falco knows most of the local Speakers, but not what they do. He’s never held court and has only been to Vorhartung twice. Twice!!! I KNOW that’s not how my cousins were raised, which makes me wonder if Anthony purposely parented differently. Or maybe he had no time to teach these other things because he was compensating for Riya’s parental unreliability.

Gregor and I hoped that Falco could get by with one advisor. Unless we can find an industrialist or Count’s heir, I now think he’ll need two. One to coach him on the public aspects of his job, which I still think Byerly can handle, and another to advise on all the financial/economic issues Francisco handled so wonderfully. The second part of the job will be harder because when she’s not moping, Riya is trying to influence financial decisions to the benefit of her and her other children. If she’s not kept under control now, when Falco is allowed to marry for purposes of an heir, the dowager countess will make his wife’s life totally miserable.

Got any names I can put forth to Gregor to take over so I can move on to my next assignment? Tej has ordered a wonderful wardrobe and studied everything she can about her new role. As embarrassing as it will be to Ensign Vorpatril when the announcement is made, we’re ready to take on the new challenge!

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We do love how your minds work! Viceroy Vorgustafson has agreed to become Count Vorpatril’s advisor, on the condition that we find him a financial person with District experience. Mark and Miles separately both nominated Taurie. Miles also offered Taurie’s Zane for consideration, saying Count Vorpatril will probably do better with people closer to his own age. Laisa’s parents kindly sent the personnel file. Miles is spot on. Mr. Stanton’s education and experience should mesh nicely with Our objectives of ensuring the Vorpatril District continues to be as smoothly and successfully managed as it’s been for decades. So we’ll see.
Don’t think I’m not paying attention to the other four Districts with new Counts. Of the quartet, only Count Vorhalas is truly unprepared. He’s lucky, however, that his father’s brother and voting deputy is alive and well. We have great faith that Lord Vorhalas-Vorville will oversee his nephew’s District well while Count Vorhalas completes his education at the Academy. I refused multiple entreaties to release the Count from his studies with only a year to go. Even if he’s not taking up the commission, the man has earned the right to graduate with his peers.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

My love, this reminds me of Aral scrambling to find people to help run the Vorreingold District when the Count was killed in a mugging. Though Count Anthony clearly expected his brother to help his son take the reins, succession planning is still not as strong as it should be. Either in politics or academia. The dean wants me to handle another double student load next semester! Love, Me

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Well, it’s official. My father and uncle are sending me to work for one of my former classmates. Count Vorpatril and I were in the same school from years 1-10. He still seems to be the nice boy I remember, albeit far more somber. I’m not sure if it’s grief or mediocre comprehension of his District finances, but he couldn’t answer what Da would consider basic questions. I’m very glad an offer’s been made to Zane. His working knowledge of investments is much stronger than mine, plus he’s been quietly looking for a chance to leave Komarr without ruffling any feathers. He enjoys working for Toscane Industries, but says he misses me more.

What’s going on with Ramona? Alani said you heard screaming on her last visit? Is there trouble in paradise? I hope so. Like Helen, I think Ramona’s more attracted to our brother’s prospects than to him. Though I hear those prospects are bright and one of his designs is in serious contention for the new Stadium. What a brilliant way that would be to launch Alex’s architectural career!

Love, Taurie

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Adios, Ramona. Don’t let the door hit you on the backside!

That may sound bitchy, but it’s not like she didn’t know Alex is attracted to both sexes. After all, he was seeing a man when they first met. And having made no promises of fidelity for his Grand Tour, Ramona shouldn’t have been surprised to find nudes of both sexes in Alex’s vacation portfolio. If you haven’t seen them, you should. Not every subject is conventionally beautiful, but my brother always finds the feature that makes them attractive. It’s a gift.

I’ve just received new orders. After escorting the new Viceroy to Sergyar, I’m to take part in more experiments regarding Aurelia’s anomaly. My first trip through your wormhole, Grandma! After that, I’ll be escorting the Vorgustafsons back to Barrayar. Not sure if Alexei and Katya will be part of our convoy. I hope so!

Love, Helen

My love, has Aurelia mentioned anything about more experiments, or are Professor Yuell and the ISI boffins planning on cutting her and Professor Muenster out of the next stage? Pardon the pun, but it sounds fishy. Love, Me

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
Do not worry about me. I know virtually nothing about calculating optimal placement of space relays. For now, they’re working the Sergyar side. Professor Muenster insists they hold off anything Barrayar-based until after this term ends. I can’t wait to be done with linear algebra! Professor Muenster says I’ll probably have all the requirements for a mathematics degree complete my official freshman year. Ekaterin disagrees, saying I won’t graduate without courses in subjects other than math, engineering, and astrophysics. As usual, she has a point.

Lambros asked Nile to a party at his school. Everard is squicked out, but I think they’re cute together. A couple of guys in my algebra class are cute, too, but I suspect Uncle Gregor would be wildly unhappy if I seriously dated anyone 4 years older, at least while I’m underage. I’m still in touch with some of Selig’s friends from robotics. I’ll probably ask one of them to be my prom date in the spring.

When are you coming to visit next? Irina has a recital next week. It may be your last chance to see Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej. Plus Mark’s taking us all somewhere fancy for dinner to celebrate. I can’t wait!

Love, Aurelia

It’s funny, my love, how our oldest seesaws between 15 and 30. Please check with Mark, Ekaterin, and Aly. If there’s space, I’d love a weekend away from being Professor Jole. Though the professor and the teaching assistant WAS a rather creative bedtime reenactment! Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

It’s official. The Vorgustafsons have left and we’re in charge of Chaos Colony. What the hell was Gregor thinking? Maybe this really is nepotism at its finest?

It’ll be an interesting settling-in period as it becomes clear we’re neither ignorant nor gullible. My beautiful wife’s non-standard appearance has everyone rushing to comconsoles and unearthing the bunker scandal. Padma and Anna say the base is awash in gossip about my 20-year “for show” military service and anticipation that Admiral Vorpipes and General Jones will soon show me what’s what. I hope the officers are more savvy than their troops, because I was looking at long-term plans for Sergyar’s military expansion way back when I worked for General Desplains.

Nikki’s job makes a convenient excuse for him to drop by. We suspect local courts and officials were waiting for Vorgustafson to leave to drop controversial issues on his successor. Good thing I’m in practice from holding court with Count Falco to face a stack of court appeals awaiting final decision. There’s also a pile of asylum and appropriation requests. Little do these aspirants know, but part of the longer-than-usual transition was because Feodor and I were finalizing next year’s budget proposal. He’s a very good man. And with his combination of business and political acumen, he might be a formidable replacement for Lord Auditor Vanzin.

The Winterfair Ball is our excuse to limit entertaining over the next few weeks. Lots of introductory meetings, but nothing to distract the kitchen from prepping for the big party. Tej and I are thrilled that Alexei, Katya, Dmitri, and Dr. Montagu will be joining us as guests of honor. Gregor’s a bit sad we’re getting two of his sons, but Escobar to Sergyar is a much easier trip than to Barrayar. Cordy and Goncalo may come, too. Something about escaping Christmas with the overbearing in-laws. We gather the Salazars’ behavior continues to be incredibly annoying. Tej is not impressed. Neither are Elena and Baz, who are debating between visiting for Winterfair or waiting until next summer. Dmitri wants them to do both, offering free courier transport for Winterfair. Having everyone would help numb the ache of missing Irina. Mamere and Simon send us vid frequently, but it’s not the same.
Anna is thrilled with everything Helen’s team accomplished on the last mission. I’m a bit dim on the science other than the foundation has been laid to catch whatever transmissions Barrayar sends. The next round will test whether Dr. Yuell has successfully stabilized the anomaly enough to recategorize it as a wormhole. No one’s expecting it to expand enough to accommodate a ship, but reliable tightbeams and drones would be well worth the resources spent on a teenager’s term project. In case we haven’t said it enough, we’re so proud of Aurelia!

Love, Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril

My love, thinking back to when he was known as Ivan the idiot, I wonder how we all missed the light under the bushel basket. Gridgrad Base will receive a rude shock when Vorpipes and Jones quickly develop a sound working relationship with the new viceroy. You don’t climb the ranks to command a fleet and its home base without political awareness and these two fine officers have plenty of it. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

Can you be near comconsoles around 10am? That’s when Count Vorbohn, who chairs the Reconstruction Committee, will reveal the design for the new Municipal Guard Memorial Stadium. No, he didn’t choose the name – that was nominated by Count Vormuir as part of the appropriations bill.

I honestly have no idea what they’ve chosen. Neither does Gregor. I asked.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I wish I’d seen Alex scream when his design was chosen for the new stadium. Thanks for sharing the holo of his astounded face. It’s not often people catch the moment when a major dream comes true. I’m so proud!

How long do you think construction will take? Will it be finished in time for Miles’ 60th birthday? I’m not suggesting the celebration be held there, merely that I’m considering traveling to Barrayar for that magnificent milestone.

Love, Mother

Oh, my love, how much would Miles love that? Bring on the in-laws! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

Time for more comconsole viewing. The verdict in the Vormuir trial is expected this afternoon. If found guilty of treason, they’ll be offered their choice of the death penalty. I sincerely hope none opts to starve to death in the Great Square. It would be such a mockery of the many innocents who died there.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Now that Alex is the toast of Vorbarr Sultana, I’ll bet Ramona regrets being so sexually close-minded! She probably hoped her business skills/connections would be enough to win him over. While that knowledge is definitely helpful, I daresay Da, Uncle Mark, and Taurie rather have the
District’s needs covered in that respect.

I don’t know what Taurie’s said to you or Mama and Da, but Count Vorpatril’s mother is driving everyone mad. The woman has never heard of a budget and is appalled at the prospect of raising three children with a yearly allowance that would cover the operation of several couriers. The ships, not the people! Word is Uncle By wants to send her to Sergyar and make her Uncle Ivan’s problem. Zane would love that option. When I last saw him and Taurie, he was frazzled from being screamed at that the District has no obligation to support her widowed sister-in-law or continue the annuity her late husband’s sister receives. Two wills say otherwise. I feel very sorry for Uncle By and Lord Vorgustafson, who spend as much time managing Countess Riya as they do on their real assignments.

The saddest part of this is how completely Countess Riya controls, yet ignores, her children. Nile knows the younger two, says they’re sweet girls, but have become quiet and withdrawn since their father’s death. It bothers the hell out of me because even with Imperial support, secondary casualties are being left to struggle. It’s common with military deaths, after the medals, posthumous promotions, and pensions are awarded, but to see it at such a high level is disturbing.

The downside of holding a stationary position in space – too much time to think. It seems wildly unfair the perpetrators’ fate is sealed, but their many victims’ is not. I’m glad the Emperor gave those wretches a month to decide which form of capital punishment they prefer. It should be nice and cold for those choosing to create a further spectacle by dying in public. Because the Dowager Countess Vormuir and her four children haven’t been through enough at the hands of the late Count! I don’t know how well you know Countess Helga, but she’s a good friend to Uncle Dono and Aunt Olivia and a truly lovely woman. Were it not for her late husband’s Conservative political views, I could easily see her and Mama becoming friends.

Please don’t fret about me. Although the guilty verdicts hit me far harder than I expected, I promise I’ll bounce back soon.

Love, Helen

Ah, yes, the Vorkosigan regret that a single death (or even 17 of them) is more public theater than justice for mass homicide. Though you don’t believe capital punishment has a place in a civilized society, I’d argue that sometimes it does. Evon Vorhalas’ revenge for his brother’s death took a fearsome toll on you, Aral, Miles, and Mark, but Carl’s death did serve its intended purpose. There may be isolated cases in the backwoods, but in most of the Empire, dueling has been eliminated. Though personally hollow, it’s still a victory for the masses. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m very upset Aurelia will miss Winterfair due to her stupid experiments. Yes, I know they’re important, but how can she miss our favorite holiday? Miles and Helen are unsympathetic, saying they miss lots of celebrations due to their jobs. Ekaterin says being Professor Muenster’s research assistant is an incredible honor and most of Aunt and Uncle Vorthys’ key students went on to spectacular careers.

I think Aunt and Uncle Vorthys may be part of the problem. Hearing the Emperor thank his Auditors, Ministers, Viceroy’s, and Fleet Admirals at the beginning of the Winterfair, Midsummer, and Birthday balls has always been a link to Da. And while Da was never an Auditor, one less person I know on that special list seems like one less connection to the father so many other people describe so avidly.

Taurie is coming home from New Evias almost every weekend to help Ekaterin in the greenhouse.
Irina, Simone, and I are helping, too. Aunt Vorthys’ favorite color was purple. The hybrid rose Ekaterin has been developing for years was supposed to be her aunt’s Winterfair gift. Instead, it will be featured in the centerpieces at the Winterfair Ball. I’m sworn to secrecy, but Ekaterin has truly outdone herself.

Love, Nile

My love, I hate when one of our kids is hurting! And unlike other perceived slights, Nile’s are all valid. Clandestine work is taking her sister away at a very delicate time. That first year without loved ones is such an emotional roller-coaster. So is starting at a new school and relaying your (redacted) family history to a new set of peers. Especially when the circle who knew your father is dwindling rapidly. Georg had some wonderful tales from Aral’s Prime Minister days. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My university exams are done, as are papers for my two literature classes. Professor Muenster is frantically grading tests, but has promised to have his grades submitted by the time the Old Town School begins vacation. Then it’s away we go!

I’m so glad Helen’s going with us. The captain allotted her an extra 150 kilos in general supplies for treats and makings of a fancy Winterfair dinner. Professor Yuell will probably eat rat-bars. He’s not shy about showing his unhappiness that his research is subject to the constraints of a schoolgirl’s whims. Rather unfair given who discovered his prospective wormhole, isn’t it? He’s already dreaming of our telecommunications path being named the Yuell Bridge. He’s going to have a fit when the Emperor announces the name Professor Muenster and I suggested.

Winterfair gifts for everyone are wrapped and hidden in my closet. Simone, Nile, and I went shopping after my last exam. Lukin wisely brought a rucksack for small purchases. I felt sorry for our driver, who kept running the bigger packages back to the groundcar. The three of us have one important trait in common – we’re all very decisive when it comes to shopping. Miles swears it comes from you, Mother!

Are you attending Everard’s judo exhibition this weekend? Nile can’t wait to see Lambros compete! I’ll probably be ogling the boys my age.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Any chance you’ll be able to come to the judo exhibition? I know you’ve got lots of schoolwork, but it would mean a lot to me and Lambros because his parents will be there. Plus it’s been a while since I saw you!

Love, Everard

Yikes, my love, we have so much to do! You’ve made good progress, but my other assistants have barely started grading their sections’ exams and I’m bogged down in more papers than one human should reasonably be expected to read. I can, however, grade in a lightflyer, so if you traveled with Perrin, Lujayn, and Kiona, and I took Alani and my workbag, maybe we could pull off a quick day trip? Love, Me

Or we could leave Lujayn and Kiona with Kareen, take one flyer, and muzzle Perrin for the trip north. I just thought Lambros would want his parents to meet all the troops. Am I wrong? Love, Me

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

In case you’re not aware of the Vorbarr Sultana weather forecast, we’re expecting a nasty ice storm tonight. With lows reaching -20C and wind gusts up to 70kph, the four Vormuir sisters wanting to die in the Great Square will get their wish. Their audience, if any, will be small due to the vehicle embargo imposed after the evening commute. Doctors will monitor the prisoners’ and guards’ vitals from inside the warm command truck and order frequent shift changes. The entire process will be recorded and released to the media in time for morning broadcasts.

Twelve deaths by lethal injection will begin at midday. Other than required legal observers, the only witness will be the 17th conspirator. It is Our hope that after watching sixteen deaths, she’ll change her mind about a public beheading and request an injection. If not, she’ll die by the sword at midnight in the Great Square.

I used to wonder how my regent could have ordered Carl Vorhalas executed. Decades later, I now know that some crimes have no other remedy. My hand was steady as I signed 17 separate execution orders this morning. On Old Earth, they said, “May God have mercy on their souls.” Someone should, because I have none.

Love, Gregor the Righteous

My love, I can’t escape the irony that each of these varied execution styles is kinder than what the Vormuir sisters inflicted on their victims. Most of those dying by exsanguination were conscious and suffering longer than tonight’s frozen four will be. None of it will be pretty, but it will be justice. I appreciate the advance warning. Best prepare ourselves for inquisitions from the troops. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

After morning drills, our drill masters broke us into groups to discuss what was happening in Vorbarr Sultana. Some of my friends are extremely upset that four women were sent outside to freeze to death. Jacopo Vortrifrani said if the Vormuir sisters were truly as Vor as they claimed, all 17 should’ve died traitors’ deaths together. I think I agree. If women are to be full members of the military like Anna and Helen, doesn’t it follow that gender isn’t an excuse for lighter punishment?

I don’t know how I feel about public beheading. It seems unnecessarily flamboyant. Which I guess is the point, except giving the condemned the choice seems to shift the focus from crime deterrent to sympathy ploy. I suspect the four also chose death by starvation/exposure to garner public sympathy. Which might’ve worked, except nothing I’ve read about punishment for treason says the convicted will be taken outside during daylight or in good weather. And compared to the history of those who’ve died in the Great Square, these quick deaths seem oddly kinder than lingering for days or weeks being pelted by passers-by.

Every time someone argues that capital punishment is barbaric, my mind flashes to the holos of the parking areas at Vorhartung Castle and Ops. How many times have we been to those places, Da? Far, far less than Miles or Lord Auditor Vanzin, yet on any other day, any one of dozens of people we know could’ve died in those exact spots. And honestly, Aunt Cordelia, I doubt anyone who could so carelessly plot so many deaths to hide one is capable of repentance or redemption.

Love, Everard

Oh, my love, he described Emperor Ezar perfectly, didn’t he? For a boy who never used to be interested in history, he understands the nuances of Gregor’s actions far better than I expected. Must be the Vorkosigan in him. Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

School today was so strange! Lots of people were absent. Some of that could be the weather – the streets are incredibly icy – but I think many were home trying to understand today’s shocking news reports. Ekaterin is upset several channels showed time-lapsed vid of traitors freezing to death, but ignored reports of other deaths caused by the same storm. Several heroic members of the Fire Watch died battling a huge fire in the Caravanserai. And because no one was paying any attention to lessons, Varga took me home after dropping Aurelia at the ISI.

Ekaterin and I had a productive afternoon in the greenhouse. Miles laughed when he came to check on us, ordering us to bathe because we were filthy. Which we were, but it felt good to be creating beauty in the midst of tragedy. And despite hydroponics being a much more efficient way to feed people, flowers just aren’t the same without the subtle differences in soil. I love that the hues of the new roses vary slightly. Those differences, in my opinion, are part of their beauty.

Aurelia and I will call you after supper. Maybe Ekaterin will let me show you a rosebud! Love, Nile

Yup, she’s our socially conscious one, my love. I’m glad you suggested the other teaching assistants come to us. I’m in no mood to handle impassioned campus protests about the sanctity of human life from ignorant students with no idea what it means to risk your life for the Imperium. I’ll bet Miles would agree. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

The ice storm followed by a midnight execution were very nice touches. Disposing of the cremains and forbidding any funerals or offerings was even better. Well done, Uncle Gregor!

Love, Helen

Yup, she’s a Vorkosigan, too. More Count Piotr than Aral or Miles, though. I’ll bet Helen enjoyed playing with those Ceta scalps in the attic! Love, Me
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Don’t be ridiculous, come spend the night after Everard’s exhibition. We’ll feed and entertain the troops while you work and get a good night’s sleep. And maybe I’m being a little selfish, remembering the chaos of my aunt and uncle’s house at end-of-term. If you like, I can even do some data entry. I used to update Uncle Vorthy’s grading program so he could determine final grades.

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

Okay, my love, I’m convinced. It seems like a good deal for both sides – we get work done without neglecting the troops and Ekaterin works through another of those sharp, unexpected pangs of loss. What do you say? Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

It was a pleasure having lunch with you and the troops yesterday. We’re so glad Miles convinced you to stay! Seeing the Professora Rose was breathtaking. I also loved my husband’s unbridled laughter when Ekaterin confessed that instead of composting, all failed attempts had been sent to Enrique to feed his butter bugs.

Good luck with the rest of grading. We look forward to your return!

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Please don’t fret about not hearing from Aurelia. The entire team is working nonstop to help Professor Yuell turn his theoretical calculations into a stable, working link to Sergyar space. It’s slow, but from what I can follow, they’re making progress. If I didn’t fear getting my head snapped off, I’d suggest naming it the Café Crunch Bridge. Including MPVK candy in my holiday weight allocation was wise because everyone’s living on coffee and chocolate. I do force Aurelia to take sleeptimers; the rest are starting to look like strung-out Caravanserai junkies.

I’ve promised to help in the galley so we can have traditional foods like cardamom bread and three different vat roasts tomorrow. We’re also doing lots of tarts and cream cakes. Not the usual ship’s fare by any means, but this is a unique mission!

Happy Winterfair!
Love, Helen and Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Aurelia will be a few days late returning to school. Testing of the Vorthys Bridge has added over a week to their itinerary. Yes, it works, and yes, that’s the official name. Although Georg didn’t do much direct work on this project, his mentoring Aurelia led to one of the most amazing scientific discoveries of my lifetime. And with Aurelia about to become one of the youngest recipients of the Imperial Science Medal, I’d say she very clearly takes after both her parents!

Be very proud, Tante Cordelia. Once again, one of your children has fundamentally changed Bararray for the better.
Love, your oldest and proudest child, aka Gregor the Awed

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’re off to the spaceport shortly to reclaim Aurelia and Helen. We’ll try to get Aurelia to call, but give the lateness of the hour and the whirlwind of the past few weeks, we may just put both girls directly to bed.

Love, Miles, Nile, and Ekaterin (aka the hyper-vigilant homework reviewer)

*****

Dear Aunt Cordelia –

How’s the job market in Hassadar? Is there a need for an emergency physician and a very experienced lab tech?

This isn’t an idle question. Bella is 2, but is the size of the average 1-year old. Part of the problem relates to Silica’s air filtration system. Sadly, the meds that prevent recurrent respiratory infections limit her appetite and make her lethargic. Bella’s doctors feel she’d do better on a planet with a breathable environment. Grandma and Grandpa want us to settle on Escobar because it’s closer and there’s the Durona Clinic. Except they don’t specialize in pediatrics, Lina would prefer Vasco continue to manage Bella’s care, and a relocation would be easier for our Bonnie if she had built-in playmates in Lujayn and Kiona. And who knows, maybe after a few years of living in an actual HOUSE, we might consider having a third child.

You’re probably wondering why I’m contacting you first, rather than Miles or Mark. We trust you to be honest about the pros and cons of moving to Bararray. Unlike your sons or Lizzie, who paint such a rosy picture of the opportunities available in their district. Nikki and Anna are a bit more clear-eyed about the advantages being Lord Auditor Count Vorkosigan’s relatives affords them. We’re not looking for special treatment or privileges, just an honest assessment of whether our family would thrive in a modern district capitol. If the answer is yes, Lina will contact Hassadar Hospital. If she gets an offer, I’ll be a stay-at-home parent until our things are unpacked and the girls are settled into comfortable routines.

Love, Johnny, Lina, Bonnie, and Bella

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The honor of your presence is requested and required Friday evening at a dinner celebrating the men and women responsible for developing the Vorthys Bridge. Given the confidential nature of the project, Mila and the rest of the troops aren’t included. I promise there’ll be plenty of others to cheer your daughter’s medal.

This is the best part of my job!

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re planning on leaving Mila overnight at Vorruyter House. I’m sure Olivia and Dono would be glad to take the troops, too. We’ve simply told them Gregor wants to discuss Sergyar issues.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,
We had a wonderful visit with Mila and the troops. Afterward, Dono finally uttered the ‘granda’ word for the first time. I refuse to pressure our children to find partners simply for the sake of the succession. It’ll happen eventually.

We wonder why Aurelia was invited to a dinner involving Sergyar. Could she be involved in the massive overrun in the ISI’s budget last year? Unlike some of his colleagues, Dono DOES read the appropriations bills. He’s gotten almost as good as Mark as ferreting out the strange discrepancies.

Much love, Olivia and Dono

My love, we’re busted!!! What does Aurelia want to do with her medal? Should we have it framed?

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I feel like I finally have a chance to breathe now that the Vorthys Bridge is officially in ISI hands. Nile convinced me to try out for the spring school show. Despite not being blessed with strong singing voices, our dance skills made us key parts of the chorus. We’ll have to send the official vid to Miss Tamika!

Love, Aurelia & Nile

I hope this show is fun for both of them, my love. After the chaos of the past year, it’s good to see Aurelia doing some normal teen things. Who knows, maybe she’ll go to prom with someone from her school. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Thanks to Aurelia, please enjoy the same-day holos of the twins’ birthday! Despite the cool weather, the four of us had a wonderful time at the Gridgrad amusement park. We did run into people we knew, but not enough to deter us from deciding that we’ll continue to celebrate a nuclear-family excursion on or near their birthday, followed by a party with their friends later in the month. Oh, and Daniel said to tell you that they want to go to the park with the troops this summer. We could even invite Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej to improve the adult/child ratio!

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

P.S. Yes, we know this isn’t official business. But surely letters to a Lord Auditor and the former Vicereine can be excused on the children’s birthday? NEVS

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

To reduce strain on Kareen, we’ll be staying at Hassadar House for Mila’s birthday weekend. It’ll just be us and your three children. Helen’s on a mission; Selig and Simone will both be attending the Annual Academy Ball; and Taurie and Zane have an event in New Evias. Besides, Zane's still a bit wary of festivities held outside!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Kou and I can’t wait to celebrate Mila’s birthday! How did she get to be 6? Wasn’t she born about three months ago?
We’ll also be staying for a few days so Mark and Kareen can celebrate their anniversary privately. They’ve both been so busy, it sounds like they need a break!

Love always, Drou and Kou

*****

Dear Aunt Cordelia,

It’s downright scary how many things we haven’t considered in planning a potential move! You’re right, neither of us knows how to operate a groundcar or lightflyer. That’ll be an issue almost anywhere we move, so we’ll learn. We’ll also manipulate our budget to include at least one vehicle, lots of clothes, and possible school fees for Bonnie. Putting her in a private school probably makes sense, especially if we heed your advice and get an apartment until we get to know the city better.

You’re also correct that there are much more temperate locations than Hassadar. But with both of us being born and raised mostly underground, the prospect of seasons is oddly appealing. I want to feel the rain on my head and the snow beneath my feet. I want to wallow in a hot bath without a medical dispensation and try growing flowers and vegetables in actual dirt. I want to see the leaves of the famous Dendarii maples change color in the autumn and pour real maple syrup on my girls’ griddle cakes. We also want to escape the incessant, useless, well-meaning advice. Aunt Scarlett has made it her mission to unearth every research paper ever written about undersized babies and toddlers. We have the best doctors in our city treating our daughter, but my aunt is SURE she knows more than they do. It’s to the point where Lina, Lizzie, and Vasco refuse to talk to her.

As for your ultimate question, are we running away from or toward something, it’s both. We’ll miss our families and friends, but we also leave behind an environment harmful to Bella’s physical health and our emotional comfort as parents. We’re running toward a place we hope will give us professional challenges and our girls the happy, varied childhoods Lizzie and Vasco describe, with picnics, swimming, sledding, and playing in a sandbox rather than living in one. And though we plan to be just as independent in Hassadar as we are here in Silica, we want the security of knowing that if we do run into problems, we’ll have family nearby to support us.

Do we two scientists pass the immigration interview, Vicereine Vorkosigan?

Love, Johnny and Lina

*****

Hey Sis –

Just so you know, Sarah and our children are all very annoyed at you for supporting Johnny and Lina’s plan to relocate to Barrayar. Mother and I are not. We’re grateful you asked the hard questions immigrants usually ignore when planning their grand adventures. I’m sure part of you regrets they’re not interested in Sergyar, but Bella needs to be near very experienced medical care if she’s to thrive. And let’s be realistic: Miles won’t hesitate to summon any specialist Bella might need. Screw professional courtesy to Lina, if Miles calls, they’ll come. Which I guess proves that almost a century of being a devout democrat doesn’t trump wanting my great-granddaughter to jump to the head of the line if the situation warrants.

Look at it this way – Sarah and I now have a built-in excuse to beg rides from Mark every now and then!

Love, John and Sarah

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I finally think I’ve convinced Da and Mama to stop fretting about not coming to my end-of-residency recognition reception. Yes, everyone would love to see them, but Aurelia’s graduation is far more
important, and no one wants to delay efforts to stabilize Da’s health. With Dr. Amiri’s caution tempering Dr. Albu’s grandiose confidence, it took months to formulate the proper dosing of the Ceta wonder drugs for Captain Thorne’s unique physiology. Da’s dosage will take time, too.

The treatment’s not quite everything Dr. Albu promised, not with decades passing since the initial infection, but when we saw it last month, Captain Thorne looked like a middle-aged herm with premature silver hair. Quite an improvement from being mistaken for Grandma Elizabeth’s contemporary at Cordy’s wedding! The changes weren’t just cosmetic, either. It has much more energy and the jokes are sharper and more sardonic. Miss Nicol also looks years younger/less stressed.

Given how slowly Da’s treatment will progress, Vasco and I have made some career decisions. I’ve accepted a fellowship at the Durona clinic, working under Drs. Verbena and Cedar. Vasco’s been offered per diem work at El Hospital de Nuevo Valencia. This will give us a chance to spend time with Vasco’s neglected family (because everyone knows ships only go one way), de-shrine his childhood bedroom, enjoy the amenities of Vorkosigan Pribyl, enable Uncle Oliver to teach his summer bio course, and free Grandma from any misplaced need to sit by Da’s bedside instead of enjoying a summer on Sergyar with the Vorpatrils and Vorsoisson-Chalys. Daniel and Dyana look so big in the last vid Nikki sent!

We will likely be 4 to 6 months behind Johnny and Lina. In that interval, Bella’s medical care will be handled by Dr. Cameron Drake in Seligrad. Cam was a year ahead of Vasco and emigrated to Barrayar when job opportunities in Quartz proved limited. It’s an excellent pediatrician with a biting sense of humor. You’ll like it.

Uncle Mark has offered to save two apartments in the new residential tower he and Alex are constructing near the hospital. Three bedrooms, two baths with a terrace and a basement storage unit sounds great! Johnny and Lina are equally excited. We all can’t wait to see what natural Vitamin D does for Bella’s health.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

My love, how much synthetic Vitamin D does the average Betan take? We always monitored levels aboard ship, but I’ve never contemplated those who never get any direct sunlight. Could that be part of why Bella’s not growing? Love, Me

Yes, I’m invested in a toddler I’ve never met. Not only is Bella important to many of our loved ones, you and I were spoiled by having seven healthy children. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

General Brodeur and I had the misfortune to be in the same meeting today. He mentioned your summer travel arrangements. The general hasn’t recovered from the Vormuir fiasco, which is why he’d prefer you use military transport. Mark and I agree. For safety, plus if you do, Ekaterin and I can leave for Escobar shortly after Aurelia’s graduation. Mark will drop us, Kareen, and Mila in Nuevo Valencia and continue to Silica to retrieve Lizzie, Vasco, and the Johnny Naismith family.

I’d like to say I’ll be ready to fly home after only a few weeks, but we all know that’s virtually impossible. Indeed, the doctors at ImpMil would’ve preferred I left for Escobar months ago. They’re concerned about my neurotransmitter levels and how frequently I’m having to trigger seizures. No, you don’t need to look after me, Mother. That’s my wife’s and doctors’ job.

Alex and Simone look forward to helping Johnny and Lina unpack and get settled. I’m sure they’ll do a wonderful job welcoming our new District residents. We have others coming, physicians Lizzie
and Vasco have convinced to emigrate. Has Alex told you all the jokes about MPVK Tower Apartments being a doctor dorm?

I have many reasons for wanting you both away from Barrayar for several months. Some involve your children; others, mine. Nile will be lonely at school next year without her sister and will push to spend more time at Academy Prep than Everard or Lambros will be allowed. We all know Aurelia will face more intense academic pressure than most grad students the second she sets foot on campus. The political implications of Professor Yuell violating his confidentiality agreement and publishing a theoretical paper about turning an anomaly into a reliable communications conduit are frightening. Georg believed you only need to be great once, when it matters. Professor Yuell has been great many times. So have many of the ISI boffins who helped make the Vorthys Bridge a reality, yet none would dare disclose their remarkable feat without Imperial permission.

As for my own children, seeing the horrors of poor succession planning play out since the bombings has made Ekaterin and me anxious to test them. We’re sure they’ll do well running the District. Simone genuinely enjoys serving as Alex’s hostess and Taurie, Dono, Olivia, Delia, and René are available by comconsole. Farkas will remain at Vorkosigan House, but has been instructed to question all unusual/inappropriate resource use. Young Vorhalas has questioned why his armsmen don’t all live in Vorhalas House so they can be instantly available to his mother, grandmother, and siblings. It’s likely fear speaking, but still awkward. Three Vorkosigan armsmen will be taking parent leave while you’re away. Ekaterin and I look forward to meeting our new liege-people when we return.

Before you ask, yes, I’m nervous about what’s to come, but I’m also very blessed that the Duronas were able to put me back together after the needler. Although the science to combat the Ceta poison may’ve been brought to them by Dr. Albu, If anyone can do fix me again, it’s Lily Durona’s talented family.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

My love, Aral always said Vorkosigans would drop dead at someone’s feet before admitting to any weakness. Sounds like Miles has been putting his health on the back burner for far too long. I really pray the Durona team can help him. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We hope you enjoyed our school show as much as we did! It was also wonderful of you, Miles, and Ekaterin to host the cast party. It’s taken almost the entire year, but I finally feel like I’m truly part of the Old Town School. Irina says I should consider running for president of the botany club next fall. I’ll think about it.

Aurelia says part of her regrets not doing any other shows but admits to being intimidated by Irina’s talent. Who wouldn’t be? Simone is graceful on stage, too, the legacy of learning proper behavior for events at the Residence. She’s hoping to persuade Aurelia to join the University’s amateur drama club. They do small productions, nothing like the main theater department, but Simone says it’s fun.

We hope exam week won’t be as bad for you as it was last term. Aurelia’s studying hard for her two finals. She determined to make Professor Muenster proud.

Love Nile and Aurelia

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

The upperclassmen weren’t joking when they said the work gets much harder in 9th year. Lambros
and I are struggling to finish projects and study for exams.

Don’t worry about attending next weekend’s gymkhana. I decided to skip it so I can study and relax a bit. That works out better for you, right? Perrin wrote that you’ve both been working for hours every night after Lujayn and Kiona are in bed.

I really wish Professor Zorin hadn’t moved back to Sergyar. I miss him, plus it’s not fair that your dean expects you to do the work of two professors.

Love, Everard

My love, I miss Yitzy, too. I wish I could tell my son all the reasons why the move was best for everyone, but Everard’s correct, the dean’s taking advantage of me. No more. I’ve requested a meeting. If the dean can’t guarantee my department will be fully staffed by fall, I’m quitting. Not sure if I’ll return to the military as a consultant, try another university, or commute to ISI, but this can’t continue. I didn’t turn down Head of Ops so I could barely see my children three months of the year. I don’t mind the pre-semester prep, but the end of term is far too much. Everard shouldn’t be skipping gymkhanas because I’m overworked. Love, Me

Oh, don’t worry, my love, the dean will be meeting with Admiral Jole, not Dr. Jole. Just because my campus reputation is the relaxed prof doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten how to speak to an ill-performing subordinate. It sounds very arrogant, I know, but the dean seems to forget that me being untenured doesn’t he can make or break my career. Not only am I a damn fine biologist, my family and I live in the Count’s residence. This is Barrayar, dipshit. Who you know matters. Love, Me

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We University Trustees just received a resignation letter from the Dean of the School of Sciences. What did you two do to the poor man that made him accelerate his retirement by three years? Yes, that’s a rhetorical question. The president has been getting complaints for at least five years and is just as happy to promote Professora Andronova of the Chemistry Department to Acting Dean for the next school year. I’d appreciate if you try not to make Acting Dean Andronova’s job harder while Elaterin and I are off-world. She’s a brilliant, efficient, personable woman who might someday be Hassadar University President.

Love, Count Vorkosigan

My love, I think we’re in trouble. Which isn’t fair because I didn’t namedrop or threaten the man in any way. Good riddance, though. I’ve met Acting Dean Andronova several times and she is as Miles described. Perhaps we should invite her and her partner to dinner before we leave for the summer? Love, Me
Hey Sis –

We can’t believe you two ran off Oliver’s incompetent boss. Isn’t it impossible to shift entrenched academics? Either way, Mother is very proud of you both. It doesn’t sound like the man had any grasp of the students’ needs or interests.

Mother has changed her mind about traveling this summer. If Mark’s ship dropped her on Sergyar en route to taking Johnny and Lina to Barrayar, how would we get her back home? Is anyone going to Beta Colony this fall? Unfortunately, we have social obligations, including a 75th anniversary gala for a couple we met when J.J. was in preschool. Scarlett and James would gladly make the trip, but fawning over Mila and yapping about Bella in the middle of Miles’ treatment would drive everyone insane. It’s a harsh thing to say about our only daughter, but sadly true.

Here’s a nosy question. Who’ll be supervising Aurelia and Nile while Miles and Ekaterin are in Nuevo Valencia? Surely they can’t stay alone at Vorkosigan House?

Love, John and Sarah

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Don’t worry about getting Grandma Elizabeth home. Anna’s got a conference scheduled in Silica. She’ll simply requisition an additional cabin for a VIP. Done!

We’ve decided that Uncle Mark will pick me up as they pass Sergyar. Whether I’ll stay until Lizzie and Vasco arrive will depend on the intake exam and treatment plan. Mama is very worried about the increase in seizures. My layman’s opinion is that losing so many people in the bombings has taken a very severe toll since last summer. We can see the differences in vids taken since Cordy’s wedding. Uncle Vorthys was more spry at 90 than Miles is at 59. It’s concerning.

The twins cannot stop chattering about seeing everyone. Aunt Kareen will bring Mila for a visit after things are more settled at Vorkosigan Pribyl. It’s very kind of them to open it up to whoever needs accommodations, especially Lizzie and Vasco.

I can’t believe Señora Cortez’ nerve. My sister sent a long, angry, vent-vid about how living at home would help Vasco save to buy into a practice in Nuevo Valencia. Lizzie’s face was almost the color of Helen’s hair when she got to the part about them throwing Vasco a welcome home party so he can start meeting eligible women anxious to settle down and start a family with a prominent pediatrician. He’s had his fun screwing a heathen Barrayaran, but now needs to stop that nonsense and find a nice Catholic Escobaran girl. Wealthy like the heathen would be nice, but not as important as purity of soul and body. Granted, I haven’t spent much time on Escobar, but from Padma’s and Uncle Ivan’s stories, pre-marital sex is rampant, thanks to the age of consent being among the lowest in the nexus.

To Vasco’s credit, he did stand up to his parents, beginning with asking for money to cover renting a furnished apartment for several months and passage home. They pled poverty. Vasco pointed out that if he did as they wanted and broke up with his girlfriend of over six years, he could not in good conscience continue to live with her or accept a ride to Escobar with her incredibly kind, generous uncle.

Mentioning Uncle Mark revealed the real concern about the appearance of the Brothers Vorkosigan
being genetic and likely to taint males of the extremely undistinguished Cortez line. Alex and Selig were lucky to escape being horribly disfigured dwarfs. I tell you this part in confidence because it would hurt Da and Uncle Mark so much to hear their existence boiled down to ogres from a folk tale.

Sometimes I hate vids. I wanted so much to hug my sister. And no, I’m not the least bit angry with Vasco. How could I be when my wife’s parents are just as awful as his? I’m convinced Grandmother Vorsoisson said even worse things when Mama married Miles. I was so glad we were on Komarr when she finally passed. Saved me trying to pretend I cared for a nasty woman who threw me away.

I guess the crux of the matter is simple-minded dolts don’t understand that family is a choice. General Chaly won’t bother explaining that her VIP is her husband’s stepfather’s grandmother. Or that a man our children call Granda is her husband’s stepfather’s mother’s long-time partner. Because those technically-correct descriptions aren’t the truth. The truth is that love, not biology, holds our patchwork family together. Vasco understands that. Too bad his parents don’t.

Thanks for loving us as much as we love you. Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

Wow, my love, that obnoxious, greedy woman just mortally wounded two of our grandchildren. Three, when Helen finds out. Vasco’s family will be lucky to escape our warrior princess’ wrath when she learns they consider her sister to be nothing more than a convenient fuck.

I sincerely hope Vasco has as much spine as we think he does. Lina and Johnny are uprooting their entire lives based upon his promise to continue caring for their daughter. While the brilliant Dr. Drake probably can pick up the slack, it’s not the pediatrician Lina trusts implicitly. We certainly understand medical allegiance or Dr. Albu would be treating Miles at ImpMil, not the Durona Clinic. Love, Me

My love, you know perfectly well that Gregor may not order beheadings of galactics just because they’re idiots. He can’t even behead his own subjects for stupidity without proving treason or dereliction of duty. I really wouldn’t worry about Señora Cortez. I suspect your sons will begin the inevitable, well-deserved harassment campaign with suggesting Lizzie perform a free breast lift. Who knows what else they’ll think up during the trip to Escobar? And no, you don’t need any kind of breast enhancement. Your chest is lovely! Lasciviously yours, Oliver

Guilty as charged of trying to distract you, my love. You know it’s entirely up to Vasco to decide where his loyalties lie. I assume with Lizzie, given all the immigration, licensing, and employment paperwork he completed months ago. But if it’s not, if Vasco is indeed susceptible to his family’s bullshit, better to know it before reaching Hassadar, not after they’ve begun setting down roots.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

Thank you for helping me dress for prom. I enjoyed the entire prom experience, from the hairdresser and giggling with other girls to the final dance with my friend Maurice. I’m so grateful to Ekaterin for inviting Maurice into the greenhouse to choose flowers. We got so many compliments on the Cordelia and Kyril roses!

I only wish you could’ve stayed the week until graduation. Is it normal to feel so nervous? I know I’ve gotten what I can from the Old Town School, but suddenly, I’m unsure about moving on. Forget about the ISI, many professors are eyeing me speculatively. It’s more frightening than flattering. Plus I really miss Uncle and Aunt Vorthys. I looked forward to them at my graduation and taking me out for lunch the first day of the new term. It’s a Vorthys tradition that began with their own children and continued to Ekaterin, Simone, and all other nieces and nephews studying in
Vorbarr Sultana. I wanted that lunch, Mother. Not so much for the food, as part of a family tradition separate from letters and care packages. And while I know Aunt Drou and Uncle Kou will take magnificent care of me and Nile while Miles and Ekaterin are away, I feel unprepared for so much change at once.

I think this is where you tell me that a relaxing summer in Port Nightingale, swimming and reading nothing but letters and novels, will have me fighting fit in the fall. Yes, I know it worked for Irina, but she hadn’t convinced our Emperor to spend several million marks testing a teenage theory. Maybe it would’ve been better if the Vorthys bridge hadn’t worked. At least then nobody would be upset when their exaggeratedly high expectations for me don’t play out as planned.

Love, Aurelia

*****
Dear Mother,

I see it’s time for my sister and me to have The Talk about the crushing weight of Vorkosigan history on future endeavors. Believe it or not, I’ve gotten pretty good at it. Will report back afterwards.

Love, Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, 11th Count Vorkosigan

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I promise Vasco and I are very much together and plan on staying that way. Even if we weren’t, he wouldn’t return to his parents’ roof. Last summer, Vasco couldn’t wait to return to Vorkosigan Pribyl to escape the prying questions and reminders to make his bed and do his chores. No wonder the slightest messiness makes him nervous – he expects Señora Cortez to pop up and scold our poor housekeeping!

I think I’ve defused concerns about taking advantage of Aunt Kareen and Uncle Mark by staying at Vorkosigan Pribyl rent-free. Vor privilege again – he’s not used to living in such huge houses that feeding dozens of people daily is normal. Plus Mama will need our company after Aunt Kareen and Mila return to Hassadar for the new school year. That is, after all, why we’re making this interim stop on Escobar.

The department receptions were terrific. We both were recognized as top resident in our fields. Grandma and Aunt Sarah cried both times; Lina and Bonnie clapped until their palms were red. Lina jokes that Vasco is Bonnie’s favorite relative. It’s true. Vasco is tremendous at ensuring that even when Bella is very sick, Bonnie’s routine continues as normally as possible. It’s something he sees far too much of, the healthy child being expected to make sacrifices because they’re the ‘lucky’ one.

The advantage of a furnished apartment is there’s much less to pack. We’re trying to prune our wardrobes of three planets’ worth of distinctly different fashions to leave as much room as possible in the cargo hold for our relatives. The hospital consignment shop is very grateful for our contributions! Lina and Johnny are having a tough time deciding what to take. I keep reminding them that Hassadar has four seasons and they have far too many light-weight clothes. Also that no one, not even children, leaves their house in a Betan sarong. Bonnie’s not nearly as tall as Lujayn and Kiona, which means many of their outgrown clothes should fit.

I can’t believe Aurelia is graduating this weekend! Wasn’t she my living doll only a few years ago? Please hug her for us and remind her how proud we are of her.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,
Together, we hosted a fantastic graduation party. Ekaterin was so flattered by Aurelia’s request to decorate with the Professora roses. We all regret Georg and Helen never saw their exquisite, delicate beauty.

Aurelia and I had a long talk about regrets and expectations the night before you and the troops arrived. We started at my beginning, with Count Piotr wanting me gone in favor of a healthy heir worthy of the Vorkosigan name. Also how if my replicator hadn’t been rescued in time, Granda would’ve pressed for boy/girl twins. Aurelia paled when I stated that without Mother’s determination that her firstborn would live, she’d have been another Lady Augusta Vorkalloner, pressed into an underage marriage. Only her name wouldn’t have been Aurelia Kosigan, it would’ve been Empress Olivia Elizabeth Vorkosigan Vorbarra.

I explained that while she and Gregor might’ve learned to be happy together, he wouldn’t have become a strong, independent ruler. There’d be no Vorthys Bridge, no MPVK Apartment Tower, no Mila, no Selig and Simone, probably no Padma or Irina because Ivan likely wouldn’t have survived once the Vorbarra succession was secure. The heavy price Da paid for preventing Ivan’s and my deaths was never knowing his daughters. Even the great Admiral Viceroy Count Aral and General Count Piotr couldn’t replace the most grievous thing Mad Yuri took from them — the sound of multiple children’s voices echoing through Vorkosigan House. Not if Barrayar was to be stable and become a formidable, respected power in the nexus.

Aurelia’s heard of Simon’s chip, of course. I told the story from my perspective, of it being the catalyst for starting me down a new, different, safer (I thought!) career path from the one I’d been forced to abandon. I’d be a terrible ImpSec Chief, stuck in the office while others perform the derring-do. It’s my nature, as it was Da’s and Granda’s, to lead from the front, damn the consequences.

Looking back, I wish I’d been more like Nikki and Alex, who lead more quietly, but just as effectively. Oddly enough, my wife has been my strongest influence as I’ve come to realize I want my children and sisters to be rational, effective leaders able to balance risk and reward in almost all situations. If it takes 20 years for Aurelia’s next great discovery, then so be it. Or she could scrap physics entirely and take up something else. I doubt she will, but I think she understands a bit more that Da’s most important gift was breaking the Vorkosigan military mold so his daughters and grandchildren could find their own passions and be great in entirely new ways.

I did NOT tell Aurelia that Professor Yuell is so cold to her because he knows she has the potential to be far, far more influential than he. Too bad for him that the man funding the groundbreaking work on the Vorthys Bridge wouldn’t let Yuell toss the teen aside, as he does many of his students after their ideas spark his formidable intellect. Or as Georg put it, far too many geniuses are total asses.

Ekaterin and I are almost packed and are awaiting notice from Mark as to when exactly we’re leaving. Aurie Roic is accompanying us; spouses of the other three armsmen declined the invitation. Everyone’s looking forward to helping entertain Mila aboard ship. Not in a creepy way like Scarlett, but as an opportunity created by doctor’s orders for me to leave all work behind when we lift off. And you know Roic – he’s as exacting as Ekaterin when it comes to my health!

I’ll deny it if you repeat it, but I’ll be counting the days until we see Lizzie, Vasco, and Lina. Two ImpMil doctors are accompanying us, but I look forward to outside medical eyes reviewing my records. And, you know, welcoming some of our new District residents. Somehow, Bella will seem more real when I actually see her.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin
These, my love, are the words of a very scared man. I suspect he’s been lying about the severity of his seizures. Typical Miles! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m very mad at Da. He won’t let me see Daniel and Dyana when we stop at Sergyar to get Cousin Nikki. Also, Uncle Miles can’t play with me because he has a bad headache. I like Ma Roic. She’s nice.

Love, Mila

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Yes, our little lady is in a snit. We don’t blame her. Normally, we’d stop for a day or two. We were thinking of asking Anna to bring the twins up to the orbital station to eat and play for a few hours, but the doctors want us to keep going. Miles hasn’t been aboard a spaceship since Cordy’s wedding. For the first time, space travel seems to be bothering him; he’s been having seizures virtually every other day. His blood pressure has also increased. That Ceta doctor better be able to help Miles, or Mark and I will solve Gregor’s refugee problem, Arqua-style.

Love and kisses, Karen, Mark, and cranky Lady Mila

I think it’s time to ask the captain to increase the speed, my love. I’d like us to reach Port Nightingale quickly so the children are settled if you decide to go to Escobar to check on your oldest. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We’ve arrived safely. Amiri had transport waiting at the shuttleport. Miles was barely allowed to pee before the testing began. Dr. Peony had a new seizure cocktail waiting; Dr. Watson had an arthritis one. The second kicked in quickly, providing Miles some much-needed pain relief. Dr. Watson posits that pain may play a part in seizure acceleration. Drs. Peony and Raven agree; they’ve seen more seizure activity in older revives with previous injuries like bone replacements. They’re waiting a night or two to see how Miles handles new meds before moving him to null-gee. I’m very thankful Mila’s had no issues when we’ve tested her in null-gee. Call me a coward, but the thought of floating bodily fluids scares me!

Ekaterin and Nikki sent me home to get some rest and see Mila before taking off to Beta Colony tomorrow. I’m thankful for our excellent crew. The ship has been cleaned, decontaminated (no germs for Bella!), and restocked with key provisions, including tamales for Vasco and Grandma’s favorite teas. The chief steward even remembered to pull Mila’s toddler bed from storage. Bella will probably hate it as much as Mila did, but it’ll keep her safe during jumps, which is all that matters.

Nikki will write us all every day. Transmissions will come via ImpSec. It’ll be faster.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

Only three more days to Sergyar, my love. Should we ask Anna to bring the twins on-base to meet us at the shuttlepad? I think we all could use Daniel and Dyana hugs. Anna could probably use some hugs, too. Love, Me

*****

To: Vorbarra, LTVorbarra, AVorbarra, KVorbarra, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, MPVorkosigan, ENVorkosigan, AVeropatril SIllyan, IXVorpatril, TVorpatril, Farkas, AVorkosigan, HNVorkosigan, EVorkosigan, TVorkosigan, SPVorkosigan, SAVorkosigan, AChaly, ENaismith, JMNaismith, LJNaismith
From: NEVorsoisson

Day four brings good news. Da’s only seizure was induced while hooked up to equipment. Mama, Roic, and the ImpMil docs swore it was of much lesser intensity than ones over the last months. It bodes well for the pain relief theory. Da enjoys sleeping in null-gee. Mama gets irritable when her pillow floats away.

Dr. Albu is chomping at the bit to get started on her vascular meds. Drs. Peony and Raven insist that adding a third protocol to the current one would be premature. And since Dr. Peony is their neuro specialist, she gets the final word.

---

From: MPVorkosigan

My ship is in Betan orbit while everyone’s things are being transported upside. I had lunch with our ambassador and his wife. They’ve been hearing all kinds of crazy rumors that Miles has been cryo frozen again. I assured them that’s not the case and Miles is merely getting a periodic tune-up from the folks who rebuilt him. I tap-danced around Lizzie and Vasco going to Escobar by reminding them that Vasco’s family is there and dropping a heavy hint about the two families meeting. I’m sorry for being a lying clod, but the ambassador’s wife lapped it up.

We’ll take off this evening, after the girls are sleepy. I’ve assured Johnny and Lina that Miles wants to see them, Kareen has loads of different sunscreen formulations, and the girls will enjoy playing outside for the first time. There’ll be vid and holos!

---

From: Vorbarra

The variety of rumors have Us convinced that barring more serious news, Cordelia and Oliver need to stay in Port Nightingale until it’s time to take Grandma Elizabeth back to Escobar. Vorhartung, and indeed the entire city, is awash with speculation that Miles is seriously ill.

Doctors Gottlieb and Thatcher are both very impressed with how quickly the Clinic staff was able to stabilize a condition that has flummoxed them for months. Doctor Thatcher would like to stay for Miles’ entire treatment. Unless there’s an objection from the Duronas or one of you, We’re inclined to grant the request.

---

From: NEVorsoisson

Day eight. We’ve hit a slight snag. Guess who’s allergic to one of his new meds? Dr. Amiri is FURIOUS some brainiac in the lab used a Barrayaran plant extract for a patient with numerous known allergies when another, more expensive extract from Lairouba would’ve been a much more logical choice. Da was very uncomfortable for about 9 hours, but is no longer sneezing and blotchy. Unfortunately, it’ll take several days to formulate the new compound, which is necessary to wean down the seizure meds. Mama asked to meet the lab tech. He wisely declined.

---

From: EVorkosigan

We’re one day out. Uncle Mark is teasing that I’m ruining the flooring with my pacing. Bonnie and Bella are great travelers. Johnny’s a bit jump-sick.

---

From: EVorkosigan

Uncle Amiri and Dr. Albu are threatening to keep Johnny. His lab tour became a series of demos, including a faster way to brew some of Da’s new hyposprays.
Da looks much better than he did upon arrival. Effective pain meds and forced rest are really helping. He’s confined to the Clinic, but not his room. Today we had a picnic and watched Mila and Bonnie play together. The two haven’t stopped chattering. He and Mama agree they remind them of me and Taurie at their ages.

Nikki will be returning to Sergyar when Johnny and Lina leave tomorrow. Bonnie is looking forward to seeing the twins again. Everyone else is also anxious to see Anna, Grandma, Uncle Oliver, and the troops.

*****
Miles & the Clinic

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The scary part wasn’t supposed to be at the start, but when has Miles ever done as expected? Captain Thorne may well have saved his life. Without all those tests last summer, the Clinic wouldn’t have had specially-formulated seizure and pain meds waiting for Miles. And just as Simon’s chip failure was almost fatal, there likely wouldn’t have been time to customize a remedy for Miles’ accelerated seizures.

I’m confident Miles is in good hands – if I weren’t, I’d have stayed by Ekaterin’s side – and look forward to seeing you in a few days. Bonnie keeps babbling about swimming with her cousins. I agree with Lina that the beach may be a bit much for Bella, who wears her sunglasses without fail when we go outside.

I’ll be very sorry when Johnny and Lina leave for Hassadar. Traveling with them has been a marvelous experience. Despite the new job jitters, they’re more relaxed than they’ve been in years. Kareen’s suggestion of a hospital picnic was brilliant, casually forcing everyone outside. And if most of us stayed on the shaded patio, we were still breathing fresh, clean air that didn’t smell medicinal. Right now, all Bella smells is ‘outside.’ I hope Alex and Simone are prepared for thousands of questions when she begins discriminating the new sensory cues!

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I could get to like retirement. Being waited upon, visits with my children, physical therapy with lovely women, a gorgeous doctor interested in my slightest twitch. Also my oldest daughter’s, but for now, both are still suffering unrequired lust.

I want to confirm that I honored Gregor’s command not to allow Dr. Albu to treat me without one last fast penta session. The interview confirmed my experienced bullshit meter – the doctor’s desire to help me was sincere and virtually everything she told Ivan in her asylum interviews was true. Especially the fear of being raped by the ghem-general. I was, however, the first to ask if she’d ever been sexually molested. Nikki was pale and Roic had his stone-faced look when I asked several leading questions before moving on. I had no idea homo- and bi-sexuality were eliminated from the haut centuries ago. Not the ghem or lower castes, but it does explain the steely Ceta determination to rectify one geneticist’s unauthorized changes. It’s also proof the crazy, homicidal ba wasn’t working alone. To start a new utopia, the stolen baby shipment had to mimic standard sexual demographics.

I sincerely wonder what happened to the geneticist, if she was brought to some form of Ceta justice or if this was a purposeful act near the end of her life that wasn’t discovered until the kidnapped babies reached puberty. I do know all sorts of barbaric sexual reassignment therapy, including forced heterosexual relations, was visited upon the misfits in hopes of ‘curing’ them. It didn’t. But having been previously raped, it makes sense why Dr. Albu refused to allow it to happen again.

Now to my treatment. I have three linked problems: widespread arthritis from the soltoxin/bone replacements; seizures stemming from the cryo freeze; and massive vascular constriction from that deranged ba’s poison. It was disheartening to learn these weren’t separate issues, but if they hadn’t found with Bel that reducing pain made subsequent treatments more effective, I might not be here. The cycling of headaches and seizures had me so weak, circulation to my extremities was being compromised. I’m very fond of my toes, thank you very much. I’m also very lucky the ImpMil
doctors were monitoring me so carefully to prevent blood clots. Dr. Raven was very blunt that I was a prime stroke candidate when I arrived.

Ekaterin is doing better sleeping in null-gee now that Ma Roic sewed straps to her favorite pillow. I appreciate the sacrifice because I’m very restless without my beautiful wife by my side. It wouldn’t be so bad if nurses weren’t checking me regularly. Also, I tend to doze through treatments and tests. Kareen has put her foot down, insisting Ekaterin nap every afternoon in Mark’s office. Have you seen it? It’s not large, but has a very comfortable couch and what Ekaterin calls ‘his and hers’ armchairs. It’s become our refuge away from the rest of the Clinic’s hustle and bustle. Unlike the other junior surgeons, Lizzie has free access to a private bathroom. Ekaterin loves the faint rumble of our daughter talking through surgical procedures while showering. Yes, Dr. Vorvayne is unquestionably our child!

Vasco’s been by several times. He’s dissuaded his parents from visiting the Clinic. That’s good because they haunt his hospital, expecting him to drop everything and meet for lunch or coffee. Those idiots don’t realize they’re cementing their son’s resolution to move far away. Karen and Mark hosted Vasco’s parents and siblings for dinner last week. Ask Kareen to recap the occasion. We promise you’ll laugh!

Finally, my medical team has agreed you should bring the troops to visit before returning to Hassadar. I’ll even wear ship knits in their honor. Your baby boy is a wee bit bruised from being poked and prodded. His hair is also very, very short, but he walks so much better than he did at Aurelia’s graduation. This is apparently a high spot in the process. Reversing the Ceta poison will be miserable, with extended periods of extreme weakness. Bel assures me it’ll be well worth it.

Love, Miles, Ekaterin, and our hardworking armsmen and medical team

P.S. Have we heard from Lina and Johnny yet? Ekaterin says they should’ve arrived in Hassadar a few days ago. MNVK

*****
Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Katya and I had a few hours of Escobar shore leave yesterday. We spent it at the Durona Clinic. All things considered, Uncle Miles looks pretty good. Definitely more agile and less tired. Aunt Ekaterin looks worn out. So does Lizzie, but it may be related to how hard she's working. That, and Vasco’s annoying relatives.

This not being an official visit, we (and our ImpSec escort) wore fatigues with our friends’ nametags. It was so nice not to be recognized! Uncle Miles predictably asked about Katya’s engagement ring. As if retired Admiral Naismith didn’t know military personnel typically wear fancy rings on a chain when in uniform!

We’ll be passing through Escobar again next month. We promise another report.

Love, Alexei and Katya

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m happy to report that other than missing Mama and Da, things are going well in the District. We had a lovely few days with Lina, Johnny, and the girls before their apartment was ready for occupancy. Both girls were cooperative when Dr. Drake came to give them baseline physicals. One funny note – it looks like Bonnie shares many of Da’s allergies to native foliage. Dr. Drake stayed overnight. A few glasses of wine and the stories Lizzie and Vasco didn’t want us to hear came pouring out!
The decision to divide MPVK Tower Apartments into condos, rentals, and furnished rentals is literally paying off. Bidding wars for the top floor views pushed up prices for other units. We’re honoring our rental price commitment to the pool of doctors who used this address on immigration forms, but other units are being let at market rates. It bodes well for MPVK, my pocket, and the District revenue streams.

Kasun was his usual efficient self managing the Naismith possessions. The real kudos, however, go to my sister. Simone was incredible helping them unpack and shop, showing Bonnie the troops’ favorite places, and watching both girls while Lina and Johnny did adult things like open bank accounts and interview nannies.

Aunt Martya and Uncle Enrique came for dinner one night. As we’d all hoped, they offered Johnny a job. Or to be precise, Uncle Enrique looked at his wife mid-meal and said, “Martya, I need him.” Aunt Martya calmly replied, “I’ll see what I can do, love. AFTER dinner. I’m sure the girls are looking forward to ambrosia.” Simone and I barely held back our laughter because it was such a Team Koudelka response.

Simone isn’t just shining in Hassadar. I spend 2-3 days a week in the capitol on District business, legislative matters, and architectural meetings. Construction of the new Stadium is on schedule to open for the fall gymkhana season. I have other prospects in the pipeline, too. It’s been over a year, but the University is finally gathering bids to replace the two condemned buildings. Simone has hosted dinners and arranged refreshments for many meetings. She claims to be following Mama’s notes, but new dishes from my travels have quietly snuck into rotation. Ma Kosti’s Lairouban dishes are as good or better than the originals! Uncle Kou loves the different rices and flatbreads because they’re kind to his stomach.

Aunt Drou and Uncle Kou will be moving into Vorkosigan House a few days before you arrive. I predict Uncle Kou will do plenty of lounging in the greenhouse while Nile works in there. Unlike me, he likes the warm, moist heat.

Simone is a bit anxious about returning to school and leaving me on my own. Rather silly considering Grandma has hosted everyone from peasants to emperors. I promise it won’t be much more than usual. And with Uncle Oliver having a more normal student load, hopefully you two won’t be as stressed as last year.

What’s your favorite façade material for university buildings?

Love, Alex and Simone

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We need advice. Grandma Elizabeth has asked to stay here at Vorkosigan Pribyl after we take Mila and the troops back to Barrayar for the new school year. There are arguments for either side. Our driver would be at her disposal to go wherever she wanted. She could spend more time with Elena and Baz and be here when Cordy and Goncalo uncork the bottle. Our concern is she’ll exhaust herself supporting Ekaterin and making sure everything here at home runs smoothly, especially after Miles is upgraded to out-patient status.

Mark had a crazy idea. Helen seemed to enjoy her stint at our Betan Embassy. Do you think she’d hate being seconded to our embassy here for a few months? It seems manipulative to propose a post that’s in our interests, possibly not Helen’s, knowing she’d have no say in the outcome.

Love, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Lt. Cmdr. Vorkosigan enthusiastically accepted the offer of a 6-month embassy post. She’ll arrive shortly after you embark for home. Given family circumstances, Ambassador Voranthis will be flexible regarding Helen’s hours. I assured him whatever he assigns his new assistant will be completed quickly and satisfactorily.

It has been made clear to Lt. Cmdr. Vorkosigan that all Clinic staff are off-limits until her father has been released from their care. I’m still unsure if Dr. Albu should be allowed back within the Empire or encouraged to stay at the Clinic. So far, Dr. Thatcher is very impressed by Dr. Albu, which is highly encouraging.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

This summer has been very strange, at times flying by, at others crawling. I’m very glad I volunteered to assist with Academy Prep’s summer program. Meeting enthusiastic 11-year olds has been enlightening. Some will be admitted for year 7; others will never be officer material. I’m not sure when I learned to differentiate, especially with such young lads, but Da was right, it wasn’t all drills and uniforms.

Outside the military training, it was a good distraction from worrying about Da. Lady Oksana Vorreingold has been one, too. I met her at the Midsummer Ball. The Count’s granddaughter is charming, smart, and witty, with beautiful hair like Mila’s. Having been educated entirely in the Vorreingold District, the Ball was her first social event in the capitol. There’ll be more as she enters the University in a few weeks. Lest you worry, Taurie and Simone both like her. Aurelia will, too.

Lizzie says Da is doing well, with fewer seizures and far less pain. I still worry. Although it may sound ridiculously immature, I miss my Mama and Da. It’s helped tremendously in understanding the depth of Mama’s pain in losing Uncle and Aunt Vorthys, who were, in most aspects, another set of parents.

Let me close more cheerfully by saying I can’t wait to see everyone. I’ve spent most of my off-time in the District. Hassadar House seems very empty without you and the troops. From what I can see, the Naismith family is settling in well. Bonnie reminds me so much of Grandma and Nile. It’s not just the hair, it’s the nonstop questions about every weed or tree, many of which her parents can’t answer! And then there are the stables at the Long Lake. Bonnie is DYING to ride a horse!

Love, Selig

My love it’s nice to see a letter that’s not focused on Bella. It sounds like Bonnie will enjoy our fall trip to the vineyards and tasting grapes from the vine! Love, Me

*****

Dear Aunt Cordelia,

It’s been a marvelous first month! Lina has been welcomed by her new colleagues, we love our apartment, and the girls love their nanny and the great outdoors. Bonnie has learned to ride a bicycle and Bella is zooming along beside her on a tiny tricycle Simone unearthed from the barn at the Long Lake. We’re saving that trip for next summer, after Bella’s had a chance to get used to bodies of water. Both girls are signed up for fall swimming lessons. Lina and I are, too. Alex and Simone have coached us in the Hassadar House pool, but we really need formal training.

Much to Dr. Borgos’ regret, I’m not starting until after school begins. I’ve been reading his published
work and specs on some of his other inventions. The man’s a bona fide genius. A little nutty, but after working in a hospital lab with scores of demanding people every shift, being part of a small team will be a nice change.

Simone and Alex have been amazing. Not just to us, but to all the medical people Lizzie and Vasco coaxed into relocating. We think most will stay in MPVK Tower. Lord Vorkosigan’s first major project is, as they say in these parts, a valuable addition to the district. We look forward to seeing more. Also to seeing you. Bonnie has met a few children, but is nervous about starting school. We keep reminding her that she’ll have cousins in the same building.

Speaking of buildings, we’re going to be Alex’s guests at the dedication of the new Stadium. He’s nervous about the ceremony and if people will like his work. That aside, Lina and I are looking forward to our first outdoor stadium experience and seeing the military band. We think the girls will love the spectacle.

Bella sees Dr. Drake next week. With the gravity adjustment, Bella weighed about the same in her first exam as when we left Beta Colony. We’re confident we’ll see an improvement. Weeks with only mild preventive meds and no respiratory issues other than what she calls ‘nose tickles’ from weeds has been such a blessing!

Love, Johnny, Lina, Bonnie, and Bella

My love, I think that’s the first positive medical report we’ve ever gotten on Bella. Your mother will be so relieved. Now if only we could get this silly ship to go faster so we can get home. Acting Dean Andronova has asked to see us both. I hope we’re not fired. Love, Me

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver.

I don’t know why you’re surprised Oliver’s been asked to take on curriculum planning. Why wouldn’t the dean want the most organized, experienced professor she has in that role? Also, teaching two sections of the same course should be reasonable if the class size is back where it was. Asking Cordelia to serve as your senior assistant also makes sense. If she can’t wrangle the team, it can’t be done.

Nile is flourishing like the plants she lovingly tends. Ekaterin’s assistants are doing a wonderful job, but I swear, the plants have perked up since Nile and Kou returned. We’ve upgraded Kou’s corner with a reading lamp and sofa. He spends hours soaking up sunlight and warmth while the girls are in school. Evenings are mostly spent together in the library, doing homework, talking, or watching vids. Aurelia is more variable. Some days she’s happy; others, quiet or stressed. She misses Miles and Ekaterin, as we all do, but Kou and I think it’s more than that. For example, Aurelia knows she has control of her schedule, subject to telling Farkas the day before. Yet instead of having dinner on campus with other students or joining any clubs, she’s at the library, astro-physics lab, or Vorkosigan House.

When you talk next, you should ask Aurelia if having an obvious bodyguard makes her uncomfortable. If so, perhaps Farkas can switch armsmen assignments and have Lukin assigned to Aurelia. Given the security on Alys’ building, do Irina and Simone still need an armsmen while sleeping? Or can we argue that ImpSec, not Miles, should be providing female officers to protect the Viceroy’s daughter?

Let us know when we should bring the girls to Hassadar. Mila wants to see us!

Love always, Drou and Kou
Okay, this isn’t good. I hope it’s a simple bodyguard issue. I had a student crying in my office today because not doing well on the first quiz was a sure sign she’d flunk out. I checked with her other instructors and she pulled the same act on all the males. Perhaps if Miss Tears studied instead of partying and receiving two drunk and disorderly citations, her grades would be better. No wonder Roic says the Municipal Guard hates the beginning of the new school year! Love, Me

My love, I swear it was like listening to Alani cry over not getting perfect scores in math! I do love your suggestion of transferring Miss Tears to your section. Feel free to tell her she will fail this course if she does no work. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’ve thought about what you said and yes, if possible, I’d prefer to have Lukin be my afternoon/evening guard. I don’t mind 20-year men escorting me to classes, but when it comes to socializing, feeling like your da’s watching is a complete turn-off for my classmates. And with two young children, it would be unfair to ask Varga to change her schedule. Besides, Nile needs her. Varga’s different because everyone at the Old Town School knows her and treats her like a staff member.

Of all my classes, Political Science is most difficult. The material is easy enough, but most of my classmates are incredibly ignorant of Barrayar’s governmental structure. How are we supposed to get to the many reforms during Emperor Gregor’s 60-year reign when some don’t know many Counts there are and where they meet? Bonnie knew that – and much more – before she set foot on the planet!

Are you coming to Everard’s gymkhana? Can we talk then?
Love, Aurelia

Of course we’re going to Everard’s first competition in the new Stadium, my love. I spoke to the dean and the department meeting’s been moved so we can fly up Friday afternoon. Time it right and Ma Kosti will feed us! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

With the seizures and arthritis mostly under control, it’s time for the hard part. Today, Miles received a mild version of the Ceta poison. They’ll wait for it to take hold – at least a few days – before administering the new cure. Miles will be in quarantine at least a week, possibly longer. It’s time to flood his reader with letters, jokes, puzzles, vids, and holos. Thanks to the Vorthys Bridge, letters are coming through in under a day. Attachments take longer, but the more there is to entertain Miles, the easier he’ll get through this to the rehabilitation stage.

I’m so glad Grandma Elizabeth decided to stay. Vorkosigan Pribyl mostly runs itself, but the excellent staff misses Kareen and Mark’s routine. We’re at times a trial, with things like Lizzie wanting dinner after long shifts, even if it’s dawn. As opposed to Vasco, who eats by the sundial, regardless of what time he’s working. Miles and I have been eating our main meal at lunch because he’s often too tired to eat much at dinner. I’m sure you noticed Mark has lost a few kilos. Miles found them, thanks to the doctors pushing him to eat more. He’s distressed his wedding band is tight, but it won’t be by the time he rebounds from the Ceta plague.

I’m very glad Helen is here. She’s our strength AND source of comic relief. We all love her tales of odd requests the Embassy receives. Why do people think ambassadors have authority to enter into trade treaties or make military purchases? Miles’ favorite work story so far is the family begging for asylum because Da was about to be sent to prison. For tax evasion. Ivan says by the time Helen’s
rotation is up, that will seem minor in terms of audacity.

Miles doesn’t know Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril are planning a vacation. They’ll leave Sergyar once the anti-toxin takes effect. Ivan says he’ll need to drag Miles’ reluctant butt to physical therapy. It does make a good story, though we all know it’s concern driving what will be a very brief visit. But with Miles’ determination to be home by his birthday, we should have a nice, long visit over Winterfair.

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

*****

Dear Uncle Gregor, Grandma, Uncle Oliver, Uncle Mark, and Aunt Kareen,

For a change, Da’s body is reacting exactly as it should. He’s got a high fever and is sweating profusely. Only this time, the fluids aren’t simply fighting to prevent dehydration and hyperthermia. It’s hard to watch, but lab tests confirm the desired chemical reset is beginning at the cellular level. If we can keep Mama calm for another week, Drs. Raven and Albu promise things should be looking much better.

Love, Lizzie

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Now I know why no one else wanted to be Curriculum Coordinator. This is the dullest conference I’ve ever attended. And considering I’ve been to meetings focused on spaceship sanitation, that’s saying quite a bit! There are a few good ideas among the dross, but mostly it’s academics droning on and on and on. Ugh.

I’m planning on showing some of our course descriptions to Johnny and Lena to get some practical viewpoints of which science courses should be adjusted. Then I need to corral some ISI boffins and ask them the same thing. Maybe we’re doing everything right, but given how lazy the last dean was, I doubt it.

Love always, your Oliver

*****

Dear Da, Mama, Gran’Tante Cordelia, and Uncle Oliver,

Our entire crew sat unhappily in Escobaran orbit today so Katya and I could visit the Durona Clinic. Helen met us at the shuttleport. Uncle Miles was sleeping, but did wake and wave at us through the isolation wall. It’s amazing how small he seems when asleep, yet his presence fills the room the moment his eyes pop open!

Aunt Ekaterin is a zombie. Forget about leaving the Clinic, she spends almost all her time in a chair in the hallway outside Uncle Miles’ room. We were able to coax her to the cafeteria solely because Grandma Elizabeth took her place. An armsman is there every minute, but Aunt Ekaterin insists a family member must be, too.

Admiral Thatcher and Dr. Raven gave us the medical update for laypeople. They corroborated Lizzie’s last report that Uncle Miles is rebounding at the cellular level, with the added good news that his temperature is now mostly within normal ranges. Sleep is considered very beneficial. Prescription for the rest of us is love and patience because they’ve decided to keep Uncle Miles in isolation until he’s eating real food and can stay awake for longer stretches. Also, starting tomorrow, Aunt Ekaterin can wear an isolation suit and sit in the room for several hours.

We’re looking forward to reaching Gridgrad. We haven’t been home in months!
Dear Gregor, Laisa, Mamere, Simon, Tante Cordelia, and Oliver,

You may not believe me – Tej doesn’t – but I’ve seen Miles look a helluva lot worse! He’s weak and tired, but even when using a walker, you can see that he’s not as stiff. They’d like to put him back in null-gee at night, but Miles insists on waiting a few days until Ekaterin catches up on her sleep. You know it’s bad when Ekaterin allowed Grandma Elizabeth to tuck them into side-by-side hospital beds for a nap!

I can’t say enough about Grandma Elizabeth and Ma Roic. They’re working non-stop to keep everyone calm and healthy. If it were up to the arrsmen, none would ever sleep or eat anything on duty other than rat-bars. Ma Roic delivers wholesome food to the Clinic multiple times a day. The cafeteria is excellent, but to homesick Barrayarans, salsa isn’t a normal breakfast condiment. I understand because Tej rarely eats groats and is very happy with the familiar Jacksonian offerings. Most of the Clinic staff is very amused at how often she and Amiri hug each other!

We’re heading back to Chaos Colony tomorrow night, after dinner with Elena and Baz. The Bothari-Jesek-Salazar family are frequent visitors to the Clinic. Elena gave us all the giggles this afternoon when she suggested playing ‘hide from the Cetas’ in the Clinic’s sub-basements. Maybe if we were all 50 years younger.

Love, Ivan & Tej
Identity Crisis

Dear Mother,

I think you’ll want to see this exchange. Please be discreet. I don’t want Aurelia thinking I’m not a safe confidante.

Love, Miles the weak-but-improving
---

Dear Miles,

Everyone insists you’re getting better and are over the worst part of the treatment. I hope that’s true. I miss you and Ekaterin so much. Vorkosigan House seems so empty without you. I’d say quiet, except Uncle Kou’s cane thumps even more than yours. He and Aunt Drou are so kind and caring, but can’t help me with math equations or vet project ideas the way you two do.

Being a full-time University student isn’t working out the way I thought. Upper-classman call me teacher’s pet because I know most of the math and astro-physics faculty. On the opposite side, far too many of the freshman are uncomfortable that I live off-campus, have bodyguards, and understand the rhythm of university-level classes. I’m afraid revealing Uncle Oliver is a professor would make it worse.

This isn’t about Simone not introducing me to her friends and favorite activities. Alex and Farkas have assured me that I’m free to make evening plans, whether it’s friends, clubs, or the lab, but it feels weird to stay out late when Nile has entirely different rules. So far, the only real friend I’ve made is Lady Oksana Vorreingold. I know Selig genuinely likes her, but there are lots of jokes going around about a second son trying to capture an heiress before anyone else had a chance.

Mother explained to us a long time ago why she named us Kosigan. I don’t dispute that the District is yours and eventually Alex’s. Maybe on democratic Sergyar, dropping the ‘Vor’ prefix made sense. Not here on Bararrayar. If Mother wanted to separate us from Da’s legacy, she should’ve named us Naismith and encouraged you and Mark not to treat us as the full sisters we are. She wanted us to have Vor privilege without the Vor burden. Except it’s always been impossible. Normal children don’t grow up surrounded by men wearing silver eyes tracking their every move. They don’t fly in the Emperor’s flagship or have parties in the Residence’s private quarters. They certainly don’t get shared credit for astrological discoveries made under the auspices of two of the foremost scientists of this generation. Uncle Oliver is a professor, Miles. I know how these things work.

My entire life, I’ve been Lady Aurelia Vorkosigan in everything but name. I used to think it didn’t matter, but it does. Lady Oksana has her choice of friends. Weirdo Aurelia doesn’t. Lady Aurelia would, because then it would be obvious why the daughter of the Great Admiral is so good at anything starship-related. Instead, strangers assume Mother bought our component parts at a rep center and had them manipulated so my sisters and I wouldn’t be complete idiots.

I suspect if you were here, you and Ekaterin would tell me no one is happy with themselves at 17 and if I give it time, somewhere amongst the thousands of UVS students, I’ll find the ones destined to be my friends. I’m sorry to dump all of this on you when you’re not well, but I don’t feel anyone else would understand.

Love, Aurelia
---

My dearest, precious Sister,
I’m so glad you shared your feelings because of all people in the world, Ekaterin and I fully understand your inner turmoil.

At 17, I broke both legs trying to finish the obstacle course that was part of the physical fitness requirements for the Academy. For decades, I was convinced that my ancient, ill Granda’s death that night was disappointment I wasn’t enough of a Vorkosigan to carry on the great military tradition that should’ve been part of my weak, useless bones. Around that same time, far away on the South Continent, my future wife was watching her mother’s illness progress to the inevitable end.

Now compare us to where you are at 17. A college sophomore, beloved by many. Also the youngest recipient of the Imperial Science Medal. In fact, you’re the youngest Vorkosigan to win any medal other than gymkhanas and judo. If those counted, Aunt Drou, Varga, and Lukin would be considered three of ImpSec’s finest and Uncle Ivan would have his own planet. Scratch that. Uncle Ivan’s not a Viceroy because he and Padma are excellent horsemen. Not really a marketable skill now that laser weapons have replaced cavalry squads. But I digress. (Blame the meds!)

Believe it or not, I wasn’t an easy child. No one looking at a misshapen, fragile infant could know that my brain wasn’t equally impacted. Maybe some IQ points vanished with the extra half meter of height I might’ve had. It’s what I tell myself when jealousy inevitably rears its ugly head. As much as Da and I tossed medals in drawers instead of wearing them (even he didn’t have that much space on his uniform chest!), our parents’ competitiveness is always with me. And Mark. And you. And probably our sisters, though it’s a bit soon to tell with anyone except Nile, who’s close to reaching university-level knowledge in botany and horticulture.

Aurelia, you don’t need a title for people to know how special you are. In fact, I’d argue that in some ways, it could hold you back. Do you want your peers thinking your wackiest ideas will get Imperial funding because the Emperor likes you? I’m convinced there’s at least one more ship-sized wormhole out there for you and Professor Muenster to find. When you prove me right, when you receive your next medal in front of a huge audience, do you want people thinking it’s for show?

Maybe you don’t want to look for more wormholes. Do you feel we’re pushing you into a box? We’re not. You’re free to change majors or schools, as long as your degree would have purpose. I guarantee Mother’s not sending you to dance or music school because you don’t have a fraction of Crystal’s or Irina’s skills. She won’t look too kindly on culinary school either, not with all the animals real chefs butcher, cook, and serve. But if you want to focus on robotics, Russian, math, engineering, law, or history (to name a few), we’d support you wholeheartedly.

I’d like to ask you to think some more about your name before discussing it with Mother. You raise very valid points, but so would she. Among which would be: are you speaking for our sisters? Not that Alani, Lujayn, and Kiona are old enough to make such a decision. It also wouldn’t be an easy change. Adults can go from Voranything to plain Anything by petitioning their District Count. Going the other way requires the Emperor’s approval because other than birth or marriage, titles are his to grant and the Council of Counts’ to ratify.

There’s another consideration. Post-humous heirs are verified by genetic testing. Do you want the intimate details of Mother and Da sequestering gametes spread all over the Empire? Think carefully before you answer. Count Vorhalas is a young man, barely 5 years older than you. Bringing the soltoxin poisoning to light again would be incredibly painful for him and his grandmother, who lost both brothers due to Regent Vorkosigan upholding the legal penalty for dueling. Is that fair?

It’s fine if you want to write again before you speak to Mother. Wherever I am, I always have time for my family.

Much love, your (short) big brother and his (tall) wonderful wife
Oh, my love, what a mess. I’m very impressed with how Miles smoothly validated both Aurelia’s and your positions. And honestly, Aurelia made some very good points. After all, how many times have your girls been called the wrong name? Not just here in Hassadar, but everywhere? Love, Me

No, love, I’m not firmly on Aurelia’s side. I’m not on anyone’s side. At least not yet, before both sides have fully aired their grievances. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

We’re going camping with our Big Cadet Brothers this weekend! I’ve reminded Lambros to pack extra socks. His mother is sending cookies. Could you please send extra sunscreen, bug spray, and maybe some trail mix? Thanks!

Love, Everard

Reasonable requests, I think. Should we send a bottle of brandy for the drill sergeants? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Aurelia is being difficult. She says she has too much homework to go to the Long Lake for the cider festival. How can Aurelia skip this family tradition? Simone will be so disappointed if she doesn’t go. She really misses her parents, plus Irina can’t go because she has a performance and Selig will be camping with Everard. And if Aurelia doesn’t go, then Aunt Drou and Uncle Kou will miss seeing Mila.

Can you please try to change her mind?

Love, Nile

I don’t think missing a cider festival is worth the fight, my love. Perhaps Aurelia can stay with Alys and Simon? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thanks for all the magnificent holos from the cider festival. We are so jealous! Vasco says the apple orchards about an hour away hit peak ripeness in a few weeks. Ma Roic has promised to make as many fritters as our bellies can hold. Roic warned us that his wife’s fritters are delicious, but much smaller than at the festival. Grandma Elizabeth LOVED the picture of Mila and Bella sharing one.

I’m sorry Aurelia skipped one of my favorite District events, but as teen rebellions go, it’s not awful. Not like starting a mercenary fleet or abetting kidnapping Barrayaran officers. I’m fairly certain nothing my sisters will do will be anywhere near as horrible as the trouble your sons got themselves into. At least the Duronas hope not! Decades later, I’m still considered one of their most difficult revivals.

Now the good news: I’m being moved to outpatient status! I’ll still be at the Clinic 8-10 hours a day for meds and physical therapy, but I’m considered stable enough to not need constant supervision beyond that available at Vorkosigan Pribyl. You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to an uninterrupted night with my wife. And yes, we have permission. Despite a physical therapy routine that rivals the Academy’s, I haven’t had a seizure in three weeks. Three weeks!!! And the ones I’ve had have been so much shorter, more like when they first started. Oh, and I can pick up things from the floor without getting dizzy or cramping up. Yesterday, I even balanced on one foot. For about 4 seconds, but still progress!
You won’t believe this – Ekaterin was shocked! – but there’s a third bi-sexual Barrayaran admiral. Widowed Admiral Graham Thatcher was embarrassed to run into Lt. Cmdr. Vorkosigan at a gay night club last weekend. Helen thought quickly on her feet, introducing her date to Dr. Graham, a friend of her Aunt Elena. Not a lie; Admiral Thatcher has met Elena and Baz many times at the Clinic. I’m not sure what concerns the doctor more – what we may know about him or what he thinks we may not know about our daughter. We’re going to let him squirm for a while and see what happens. Hospitals are dull – I need to find amusement somewhere!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

Almost 40 years with you, my love, and you Naismiths can still make me blush with forthright discussion of the special things only mas and das do together. And don’t bother trying to analyze all the things I do that I don’t wish to see in print!

At the risk of being insensitive, could Miles ever balance on one foot? I get the sense he’s being very casual about a major medical breakthrough. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Having Miles ‘home’ at Vorkosigan Pribyl is wonderful! We get to have breakfast and dinner together most days. Therapy exhausts him, so we’ve been eating later, after he’s showered and napped. We’ve also been having lively discussions about Escobaran politics. Wonder of wonders, everyone will be home Saturday night for a special dinner with Dmitri and Charlotte. We’re having our own cider festival, with apples or cider in every course from salad to dessert. It will be quite a feast!

Ekaterin is also more relaxed now that she’s not living at the Clinic. Wednesday, she, Helen, and I are going to watch Cordy and Goncalo welcome their baby boy. Last I heard, they were still debating names. Elena and Baz are so excited! It’s a good thing we’ve got Daniel and Dyana because otherwise, Miles would be pushing Alex and Helen to go forth and procreate. Speaking of, Alex has been remarkably close-mouthed about his new girlfriend. All Alani revealed was Victoria Vorreedi is tall and has a pretty smile. Surely that’s not all there is to know about her?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

May I introduce Gualter Baz Salazar? Isn’t he the cutest little thing? Makes me want my sibs to have more babies for me to spoil.

Great news – the doctors estimate Da will be done with treatment in 3-4 weeks. They’re sending him home with a physical therapist. Having listened to Da and Uncle Mark babble, Dr. Crocus wants to see Barrayar. She’s also the advance scout to determine if a small rejuvenation clinic might be feasible in a few years.

Da and Captain Thorne aren’t their only successes. Dozens of Escobarans have undergone the one-month spa program, with impressive results. Dmitri thinks his father would find a spa program acceptable, but not life extension. The Emperor can’t prevent people from going off-world, but he can declare it unavailable within the Empire. Ambassador Voranthis and I think that’s an acceptable compromise to the inevitable Barrayaran backlash against galactic medicine. One that has some merit, seeing how Dr. Lily refuses to retire. Grandma Elizabeth wants more time WITH her family; Dr Lily wants to keep controlling hers. Can you see what a disaster that would be for Districts ruled by incompetent or fiendish counts?
Who can we get to bet against Da being assigned the task of writing new legislation on rejuvenation/life extension?

I’m sorry to miss Da’s birthday and Winterfair, but I’m enjoying this assignment. Ambassador Voranthis is tremendous at his job. My security clearance has enabled him to share far more than the average military attaché is privy to. Aurelia has no idea how dramatically the Vorthys Bridge has impacted diplomatic communication for every planet that transmits through Sergyar. The ambassador knows I was part of the crew assisting the scientists, but not who was behind the project. I’m sure he’ll figure it out when my aunt’s next viable discovery is unveiled. Before you ask, that’s where I want to be. I guess I really am more Betan Survey than Barrayaran offense. Not that I’m not prepared to serve the Emperor in whatever role he needs, but unlike Alexei, my goals have changed from wanting to captain a battle cruiser to captaining a top-secret courier vessel with advanced weaponry. Just in case.

You may erase any thoughts of meeting Constantina. We’re a fling, not a serious relationship. Besides, we already have one Escobaran in the family. Not officially, but I was consulted as to what Lizzie might like for Christmas. Señora Cortez will not be pleased. Yes, I’ve accepted that holiday invitation. VERY enthusiastically!

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Yes, I may’ve found another anomaly. I haven’t mentioned it because a) you probably don’t care and b) it probably leads directly to Ceta space.

I’m glad Mark stopped by on his way to the shuttleport. I gave him several gifts for Grandma, including astronomy books so she can understand what I’m working on. Grandma says she vaguely remembers your Survey work, but needs a refresher.

I’m studying hard for midterms. Extra time in the lab has put me a bit behind. So have play rehearsals. Simone insisted I join the cast because no one else knows as many dance styles as I do. I sent practice vids to Miss Tomiko. She liked them.

Ma Kosti is planning a feast when Miles and Ekaterin get home. Are you coming?

Love, Aurelia

We probably don’t care? Will we be there to welcome Miles and Ekaterin? Has our Aurelia been replaced by an obnoxious clone? I fear, my love, that the name issue is affecting Aurelia far more deeply than she expressed during our last talk. The question is, do we wait until Miles returns for him to mediate another conversation, or do we try to hash it out in front of a therapist? Something tells me Aurelia will resist a therapist, but I hate to add anything to Miles’ full plate. Love, Me

Going to Vorbarr Sultana to confront Aurelia is a terrible idea, love. Maybe she’ll work her way out of the sulks if we ignore them. Plus, between the curriculum conference and midterms, we all have far too much to do right now. Love, Me

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Have you truly forgotten what our girls were like at 17? All seemed to glory in accusing us of not understanding them. And while that was partly true for Kareen, Barrayar is still a tough place for adolescent girls wanting to spread their wings without being accused of being trollops or unfeminine. Surely you’ve heard the whispers about how Helen should be engaged by now?
I assure you Aurelia is perfectly polite to us, the armsmen, and staff. She and Nile squabble, but not nearly as much as our girls did. Do you remember Kou joking that Martya’s door slamming was likely weakening the foundations?

For what it’s worth, I doubt Nile cares about her surname. Not after seeing Alex and Lizzie pursue their professional credentials as Vorvaynes. It may be because her circle of friends is more diverse than Aurelia’s was at the Old Town School. Not only are fewer of them Vor, many have parents who are well-known industrialists or high-ranking members of government or the military. In fact, Nile’s latest crush is the son of the Minister of Agriculture. Farkas assures us that father and son both have impeccable reputations. Too bad Anatoly doesn’t have an older brother!

I hope Miss Vorreedi is ready to meet the parents. Alex has invited her to the big welcome home dinner. This should be interesting!

Love always, Drou and Kou

I remember Kou and Aral commiserating over Martya’s tantrums. Aral claimed it’s far more alarming when officers tantrum like teens. Hold the course, my love. Like all first-term students, Aurelia’s got lots going on besides her studies and worrying about Miles. I wonder what dramatic stunt your oldest has planned to demonstrate his improved health? Could it be equine? Have you heard anything about horses being moved from the Long Lake? Miles and Ekaterin haven’t ridden together in years. You KNOW Everard would be thrilled to ride with them! Love, Me
Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

Our two days on Sergyar were marvelous! The Viceroy and his wife welcomed us, our son squeezed us like a boa constrictor, our grandchildren are amazing, and I very much enjoyed lunching at the base with Anna and the top brass. Gregor’s idea – he wants as many people as possible to see that I’m not at death’s door.

I’m not sure if Elena had time to write, but she’s safely delivered Grandma home to Silica. I’m very grateful Elena’s schedule spared anyone else the journey. One of the few side benefits to this trip – time spent with my almost-sister and her family. Ekaterin misses Gualter already. We won’t miss Goncalo’s family. Or Vasco’s. Oblivious Señora Cortez still thinks Lizzie is flying home alone this winter.

We’re on board a very luxurious passenger vessel steaming toward Komarr. Now that I’m as cured as I’ll ever be, meals with Admiral Doctor Thatcher are much more relaxed. He’s had a fair amount of galactic training, which always leads to travel stories. Ekaterin laughed at his Barrayaran shock at his late wife buying a Betan sarong and earrings. So did Ma Roic, who wears sarongs as beach skirts. Yes, we’re positive he’s (closeted) bi-sexual. Constantina recognized him the first time she joined us for dinner at Vorkosigan Pribyl. Dr. Thatcher was stunned when our daughter wished everyone a good night and went upstairs with her girlfriend.

Grandma suggested we offer Ma Roic a position as Ma Kosti’s assistant. We’ll have to find another chef when Ma Kosti retires, but maybe reducing her workload would postpone what will be a very sad day for our tastebuds.

We’ve booked a same-day ship transfer at Komarr station. We all want to be home!

Love, Miles, Ekaterin, and our entourage

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Now that we’re certain the guest of honor will be on-planet, it’s time to plan his 60th party. No galactic guests, but Laisa and I are certain we can put together something memorable. Delia has purposely kept our schedules clear for the Saturday after Miles’ birthday. We thought a buffet, cake, and fireworks?

Love, Gregor & Laisa

My love, that sounds perfect. If the party’s at the Residence, Vorkosigan House should be quiet enough to do some schoolwork. It also takes the entertaining burden off Ekaterin, enabling her to focus on Winterfair and their anniversary celebration. The troops have done such a tremendous job convincing Bonnie that Father Frost is real, I’m really looking forward to seeing her reactions!

Now the vital question – do you want to be in Vorbarr Sultana before Miles arrives, or shall we fly up the next day? I’m inclined to the latter, but it’s up to you. Or if you prefer, you can fly up early and I can bring the troops the next day. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The look on all your faces when I greeted you by sliding down the banister will forever remain
etched in my memory. After all, someone had to show Bonnie how it’s done! I’m glad we sent Johnny and Lina directly to Hassadar so Ekaterin could have the joy of seeing the girls’ reactions to the foyer. Bella trying to pick up a bug is always our favorite part of watching little ones’ first reaction to my wife’s genius.

I think it’s safe to say that Bella’s and my health has both improved dramatically since last we saw one another. God, she’s cute. And smart. You can almost see the brain clicking as she absorbs new things. I’m absorbing new things, too. I was afraid to dream that my cane would be semi-retired. I still use it post-seizure. Out of the house, it’s more for caution than real need. I can’t tell you how wonderful it is for every joint not to hurt from the moment I open my eyes to when I shut them again. I’ll always have some pain, especially as the weather turns, but thanks to my new meds, knowing that I’ll be able to dance at my birthday party without spending the next day in agony is, without doubt, an extraordinary gift.

I’m so very grateful for everyone’s sacrifices while we were away. Despite repeated assurances from you and Alex that the District work was being handled, I expected to return to a massive stack of urgent issues. There are a few, mostly legislative matters, but nothing like I was dreading. I thank you twice, for the work you did directly, and for the behind-the-scenes coaching so Alex could act on everything being thrown at him. We are so proud of him. Which we’d be no matter what, but to hear other counts compliment how well Alex conducts himself was everything a parent could hope to hear. Even if you did spend too many dinners discussing ‘boring stuff.’ Yes, my sisters DO tell me almost everything!

Gregor and I have extensively discussed your oldest daughter. With your approval, should she so desire, he’ll approve a name change to Aurelia Vorkosigan. No title because Da is unlikely to be the only count with post-humous children. Gregor’s unwilling to set a precedent that greedy widows could exploit to claim a District away from a designated heir. As for the other girls, should you agree, he’ll offer each of them a one-time option to change their surname to Vorkosigan or Naismith before secondary school graduation. That way all educational records would be under the same name. Does that seem fair to you?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

It sounds quite fair to me, love. Also crafty, because it skates smoothly around the Aral gamete question while tying the girls more clearly to Mark, Miles, and House Vorbarra. Surely that can only be to their benefit? Love, Me

No one’s spitting on your decision, love. Aren’t you the first to champion women defining their own identity? Why would you deny that opportunity to the girls closest to your heart? Love, Me

Of course I’ll support you when you speak to Aurelia again. We don’t want her hostility hanging over Miles’ gala birthday celebration! Love, Me

*****

Dear Aunt Cordelia and Oliver,

Lina has arranged coverage and the company owner has ordered our lab closed at noon, so we’ll be ready to leave for Vorbarr Sultana once Bonnie’s out of school tomorrow. If you like, Kiona and Lujayn can travel with us so the rest of you can work. To off-worlders, Alani and Perrin’s year 7 history project sounds daunting!

Love, Johnny and his excited family

Sounds good to me, love. If Perrin and Alani don’t want to work, they can watch vids or read. And good on Mark for making sure Enrique doesn’t get caught up in a project and make us all late for
dinner. Hey, do you think Miles knows about the special party guests? I hope not! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

I swear, your scheming is rubbing off on my wife. I was thrilled to see Bel, Nicol, and Elli at the Residence! As Elli said, it was only fair that those who made my first revival possible got to celebrate the results of the second. And what a celebration it was! Just the event I wanted, lots of food, wine, and chances to mingle with my nearest and dearest. We’re a motley crew, from all worlds and backgrounds, but united nonetheless. I’m sorry Ivan and Tej couldn’t make it, but thrilled Padma’s on special assignment at Ops through Winterfair. Sometimes it IS who you know.

We weren’t sure how Bella and Bonnie would take to fireworks. Their excitement was a delight. So was Bella’s sly attempt to steal Laisa’s sparkly necklace. Like our oldest son, sky sparkles are my favorite. The huge 60 in the sky may’ve been a bit excessive, but given my mounting health problems in the last decade, I’m glad the city got to enjoy the birthday I wasn’t sure I’d reach. Without Ekaterin, Gregor, Ivan, Nikki, Anna, and all of you, I probably wouldn’t have. The decisions to grant amnesty to a Ceta woman and put her to work with the Duronas undoubtedly saved Bel’s and my lives. Thanks to Dr. Albu and an outstanding medical team, I can now dream of STANDING on my starpoint when our other children find their soulmates.

Happy birthday to me. Thanks to you four for everything you did to get me here.

Love always and forever, Miles

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve just made the second hop from Komarr. Depending on the weather – the captain says massive snow is forecast across the Vorbarr District – we and our pile of luggage and reports may get stuck at the orbital station for a bit. Never fear, we’ll arrive well before my birthday dinner. Unless someone has invited the Chalys or Salazars, in which case you may eat my, Mark’s, and Duv’s share of the cake.

Love, Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril

Remembering his 50th, that seems reasonable, my love. Ivan didn’t mention Princess Kareen or the Toscanes. Weren’t they flying in together? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

KareenVB’s third action yesterday, after hugging her parents and helping Shaw unpack, was flying to New Evias to drag Taurie and Zane back to Vorbarr Sultana. They were scheduled to arrive three days ago, but that was before the end-of-year accounting crisis hit. Zane was working to reconcile the District investment portfolio when he discovered Riya has been making trades without authorization. Profitable ones, except the gains were transferred to her private portfolio.

Gregor was livid to learn Riya’s fiddling the books. He used the excuse of probable inaccurate District tax payments to order all financials torn apart. Byerly half-expects to be beheaded in the Great Square. If anyone dies, it won’t be any of our extended family, not with Vorgustafson dubbing it a local conspiracy. He’s certain Riya has a cohort in the District offices making the trades and altering records.

A Vorbarr showing up to steal personnel normally causes great consternation. It did, but not to Vorgustafson, who sent Taurie and Zane on their way. His note to Gregor said there’s no way this will be resolved before Winterfair and he’d prefer his only trustworthy employees enjoy the season
Ma Kosti is surreptitiously force-feeding Zane, who’s been living on coffee and dread for over a week. His stomach is so bad, KareenVB prescribed heavy-duty antacids on the flight back. Emin had them waiting when our exhausted lost kiddos arrived.

Ivan certainly wasn’t expecting to be hit with this excrement when he arrived at the Residence for his first official debriefing this morning. Good thing Gregor’s office is soundproofed because Ivan was neither quiet nor polite expressing his thoughts on the situation. When he calmed down, Viceroy Vorpatriol officially petitioned the Emperor to transfer guardianship of Count Vorpatril’s younger siblings to his care. All three, including the two girls, because Riya isn’t capable of making sound decisions for their care. When asked how he’d care for them from another planet, Ivan very logically said he’d hire a responsible couple to oversee the children and Vorpatril House, with urgent guardianship issues seconded to his mother and Simon. In response to Gregor pointing out that Dowager Countess Riya lives there, Ivan snarled, “Not anymore!” and laid out plans to transfer her immediately to Bonsankler. Not the gorgeous manor house, the ramshackle dower house on a cliff that’s cool on summer days and unbearably cold in the winter.

Anthony obviously suspected his wife would be a menace. His will specifically excludes Riya from residing at the three main houses without the Count’s permission, which the Emperor has now revoked. No wonder Riya didn’t want Ivan poking his nose into District affairs. She’s probably been stealing for years.

And so the fallout from the Vormuir bombings continues. At least we have our Taurie back for Winterfair.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, who fears becoming guardian to three orphans

My love, I fear Miles is right. Alys and Simon aren’t up to supervising more teens and Vorgustafson is about to go from advisor to Imperial Auditor. Plus a deceased count’s children really need to be overseen by someone of equivalent social status. Any ideas for a couple to take on the day-to-day responsibilities? Love, Me

Byerly and Rish? That would be interesting, love, but who’d keep an eye on Count Falco? I doubt Padma wants to be his friend’s nanny. Love, Me

 *****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We hope you and the troops enjoyed Ivan’s birthday celebration as much as we did. It was very gratifying to see crowds gathered outside to watch fireworks. Maybe some of the residual bombing fears are fading. The enormous 60 in the sky was as much a memorial to Uncle Padma as to Ivan. I can’t believe the kind man who read me stories has been gone so long. And Mama, my poor Mama, who deserved far more than the Imperium gave her. We slept a few hours, then lit our offering on a cold morning. For the first time in years, all our children were with us. It seemed fitting on this anniversary that Mama could see what they’d become.

Since I refused to talk business last night, I’ll tell you that By and Rish are moving into Vorpatril House. It’s a logical assignment for a couple who raised an amazing daughter and helped prevent Richars from stealing the Vorrutyer District. That Rish’s appearance offends Dowager Countess Riya is a bonus for all concerned.

As for the District itself, MPVK is moving Dmitri and Dr. Montagu to Bararrayar for an indefinite period. Lord Mark is shifting other personnel to avoid being appointed Imperial Advisor to an immature Count with an evil mother. Appointing Dmitri gives me a bona fide financial expert who
outranks the Dowager Countess and will enjoy sifting through the financial abyss we fear is waiting. It’s also the only way we could get Taurie and Zane to stay in the frozen hell that is New Evias in winter. You know it’s bad when Taurie offered to work for young Count Vorhalas instead!

Have you told your girls that the Bolshoi Ballet is returning for Winterfair? Consider it Our gift to prima ballerina Crystal Vorrutyer’s stressed parents. Besides, watching her perform is always an absolute joy.

Love, The Vorbarra Family

I love when Gregor lets the sarcasm fly. I also have such deep regret whenever he mentions his mother. As for the troops, the next time they irritate us, we can offer to transfer them to Countess Riya’s care. That should be effective! Love, Me
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Feliz Navidad! It’s been a wonderful Christmas. Please enjoy my sneaky sister’s vid of: me opening THE gift from Vasco; the sweet, romantic proposal; his parents’ horrified expressions; and the moment they realized their lack of enthusiasm was being recorded. Helen suggested a blue gem. As you can see, the blue diamond Vasco spent most of his salary on perfectly matches my eyes! It.is.gorgeous!

Señora Cortez quickly went from distress that her son is leaving to demanding we be married in church. Fine, whatever, neither of us care. There were gasps when we said we’d show up to whatever ceremony she wants to arrange, as long as it happens on a specific day next month. Since we won’t be there for Aunt Drou and Uncle Kou’s 60th anniversary, we want to mark it by sharing the date with them.

The REAL wedding will be next fall in Hassadar, sometime after everyone returns from their summer adventures. That will give galactic guests time to assemble for what I hope will be the best bash our District’s capitol has ever seen!

I am so gloriously happy! Mama and Da are, too – Helen snuck our announcement through diplomatic channels – but are sworn to secrecy until other messages catch up to Grandma Elizabeth and my siblings. And you, of course. I want to tell my loved ones personally, so many letters are going out today and tomorrow!

Two technicalities are already decided. I’ll be known as Dr. Vorkosigan-Cortez. Our kiddos’ surnames will not be hyphenated; they’ll carry Vorkosigan as a middle name. As much as my future in-laws annoy me, our children will be raised with a blending of customs from both parents. Won’t Alex make a great Santa Claus?

Love always, Lizzie and Vasco

My love, I teared up when I read this. Did you? It’s admirable that they’re timing the ceremony to our schedules. Perhaps we can also coax Ekaterin and Alex to do whatever updates they deem required to the ballroom and main dining room over the summer? Do you think there’s any chance Nikki and Anna will come? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Professor Muenster and I had a meeting with the ISI boffins. They want to explore my latest anomaly in case it leads to Tau Ceti or Jackson’s Whole. The thought is to shoot some drones during the university’s spring break and see what happens. Helen will be back from Escobar in time to chaperone me aboard ship.

Love, Aurelia

Guess who’s mastered the ‘better to ask for forgiveness than permission’ ethos, my love? Could be worse – at least she’ll have a chaperone. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I’m sorry, I had no idea Aurelia hadn’t mentioned the ISI meeting beforehand. On one hand, she’s
showing some independence. On the other, she’s been moody since Gregor refused to hand her a title when she’s capable of earning her own. Armed research ships aren’t couriers, ready to be dispatched at a moment’s notice. If Helen weren’t a fantastic navigator, she wouldn’t be part of the expedition.

Are you as excited to welcome Lizzie and Vasco home as we are? Ekaterin’s gracious letter to Vasco’s family inviting them for a two-week stay surrounding the wedding has so far gone unanswered. Señora Cortez seems to be caught up in planning what Elena calls the church farce. Goncalo’s family priest didn’t demand Cordy convert, yet the Cortez priest expects Lizzie to spend virtually all her time studying the gospel to prepare for the sanctity of marriage. Like Dr. Vorkosigan has nothing better to do with her time! We’re looking forward to the vids of this spectacle. We’re also looking forward to seeing you at Drou and Kou’s party.

One major wedding decision has been made. Because Vasco doesn’t have House colors, family attire is to complement the Vorthys rose. Ekaterin jokes that at least Señora Cortez’ inevitable black dress won’t clash with the color scheme. Me, I’ll wear what I’m told. As, I’m sure, will Oliver, Everard, Perrin, and Miss Vorreedi.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Because an anniversary is like a wedding, Mila wants to wear her tiara from Cordy’s wedding to my parents’ party. I think it’ll look ridiculous; Mark says it’s up to our daughter. Tell me, is this a fight worth having?

Love and kisses, Kareen

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Today was laughingly pretentious. Lizzie was mostly a good sport. Señora Cortez wanted the bride to wear a yellowed family veil and a dress that covered almost as much as a pressure suit. She also expected the bride’s side of the church to be empty. I don’t know who was tending patients at the Clinic because it seemed like every Dr. Durona, including Dr. Lily, was there to see Baz proudly walk Lizzie down the aisle in a modern, modest dress that matched Cordy’s borrowed tiara and veil. It was like a Time of Isolation fairy tale, especially when the priest expected Lizzie to vow to obey her husband. Except this multi-lingual bride refused, handing over a copy of Cordy’s vows with a tart, “We can do this as modern Catholics or not at all.” Vasco’s parents’ faces crumpled when they realized they’d been outplayed.

The reception space was too small, the music was all from boring bygone eras, and the food was lacking, in quality and quantity. That’s what happens when you try to do a cheap replay of an extravagant summer wedding and ignore the bride’s guest count. No matter, the chef at Vorkosigan Pribyl had an extravagant buffet waiting for everyone invited to the after-party. We ate, danced, and drank late into the night. We hope you enjoy the vid of Baz and Vasco and their Cossack dance!

Now that the ridiculous is over, we can focus on the real wedding. Baz and I will be there when our niece says her vows. So will several of the Duronas and Amiri and his wife. Amiri says if Ivan can’t make it, he’ll pick up Tej on the way. Or maybe Ivan can convince Gregor to let him make the annual report several months early?

Love, Elena and Baz

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
I swear, if not for the Toscanes and Naismiths, I’d think every in-law from another planet was an asshole. Aunt Elena promised to give you the highlights. I’ll write more when we’re aboard Uncle Mark’s ship and can finally relax. Wrapping up my fellowship would’ve been grueling without a farcical wedding and all the associated drama. I honestly don’t care if Vasco’s family comes to our wedding. If they don’t, two of his med school professors can stand on the starpoints. Our amazingly generous wedding gift from Uncle Mark and Aunt Kareen is supplying a passenger cruiser to transport guests from Escobar. We suspect there’ll be some Betans on it, too. What can I say? We are loved.

Helen is traveling with us to Sergyar, where she’ll pick up a military courier. We’re looking forward to a few days with family. It’ll be good to see everyone when we’re not stressed about Da. He gave his medical team some very tense moments. Dr. Raven had replacement organs waiting in case the last set didn’t withstand some of the fevers and meds. Da did fine; Captain Thorne has a new liver and kidneys,

The big news is about Dr. Albu, who’s decided to stay on Escobar. Turns out she likes healing people with vastly different genetic codes. I don’t think she’ll ever be bored, plus it’s politically better for the Imperium. Having gotten to know her, I find her brilliant and compassionate. Seeing her take the time to listen to her patients and fully explain what is or will happen has made me a better surgeon. I suspect spending time with KareenVB’s Dr. Sutherland will, too.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Any chance we could spend a weekend at the Long Lake? I’d love time sledding, skiing, and skating, away from Sergeant Plaksin. Ever since he and his wife had a baby, he’s been working us into the ground for the slightest thing. Let’s just say the barracks have never been so clean and lots of us bought new toothbrushes.

And if Lambros could come, that would be great, too.
Love, Everard

I could use a family (+ Lambros) weekend away, my love. What say you? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

After surviving 7 rounds of adolescent hormones, I can say with total conviction that if it’s consensual, involves appropriate contraception, and doesn’t upset the horses, I don’t really care what two 10th years were doing in the barn. I’d care if Nile were smooching a staff member (as Ivan did around that age, to Aunt Alys’ consternation) or someone 10 years her senior a la Lady Augusta Vorkalloner, but her brother’s best friend? You’re both overreacting.

If you think I’m underreacting, please consider what was going on during Da’s boarding school years. Or how common sexual hazing/harassment is in every military group in the nexus. Including the oh-so-civilized Cetas, or Dr. Albu wouldn’t have feared being raped by her proposed ghem-general husband.

Should Nile and Lambros have a nasty break-up, it’ll be up to Everard to navigate conflicting alliances. I guarantee it won’t be the last time he faces that problem.

Love, the man whose lovely, confident wife nonchalantly hosts his past lovers

Scolding accepted, love. Why is Ekaterin more open-minded than we are? Love, Me
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

While I appreciate the compliment, I trust my husband that the past will stay there. The meek mouse he first met likely wouldn’t, but the Imperial medal hidden in MY desk is proof I’m as brave as any who came before me. There is, after all, a reason I wear poisoned pearls on our anniversary and named our daughter for a woman who loved Miles enough to give us our future. Unlike my first husband, who’d have expected me and Nikki to mourn him forever and name a grandson Etienne. Nyet!

Love, Ekaterin

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Dyana and Daniel throw an amazing party! Most of the ideas for the engagement party at the viceregal palace, including about half the menu, came from our niece and nephew. Vasco was so pleased by how enthusiastically they welcomed him as their ‘real’ uncle. It was so wonderful to be with another group of happy people! Who knew Uncle Ivan would be so excited about a wedding?

Helen leaves in the morning. My fiancé and I (we refer to the church farce as our betrothal) are looking forward to teaching anatomy to the twins’ classes. Dr. Azalea gave us lots of wonderful ideas from her voyage with Alani.

Before we get too deep into wedding planning, do you have any thoughts of things we need to include or avoid? I promise we’ll try to minimize the disruption to you and the troops. Mama would prefer we married in Vorbarr Sultana, but we want this event to be easily accessible to our colleagues and less so to Da’s professional contacts. If every living count and government official didn’t attend my parents’ wedding, there’s no need for them to overrun ours.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

Is this where we request all drunken pre-wedding bacchanalia be held elsewhere and complete strangers be sent to a hotel? The thought of strangers having access to our sleeping children makes this overprotective da very nervous. Love, Me

I didn’t say it was a rational fear, my love. Bad enough we’ll probably wind up hosting the Cortez family. From all accounts, that’ll be a joy. Love, Me

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m home. For about 6 minutes. I have briefings all week, and then we lift off Saturday. Aurelia is very excited. For good reason – most of the improvements to the test drones were hers. All that robotics is serving the Imperium well!

We’ll write from aboard ship. Meanwhile, enjoy your spring break.

Love, Helen

Dear Mother,

I wish you hadn’t gone away. We’re having fun with Mila, but I like doing homework at my desk. I also wish I could’ve gone to the South Continent with Mark. He and Uncle Enrique are trying to sell microbes that speed up terraforming. Cousin Johnny has promised to explain how it works next time we see him. All I understood from Uncle Enrique was nitrogen and oxygen help grow crops.
Lujayn and Kiona send their love. They have THREE birthday parties this week! Kareen has promised to take the rest of us for a treat Friday afternoon. Perrin hopes it’s to the candy factory. Trying out the new play area would be fun.

Love, Alani

My love, do you think we’ll be forgiven when we bring Lizzie and Vasco back with us? I probably should feel selfish lounging at MPVK Manor, but how else could we monitor Aurelia’s flight without everyone calling me a worrywart? I’m so glad you humor my occasional feelings of foreboding. Love, Me

*****

To: Vorkosigan, ENVK, CNVK, OPJ, MPVK, KKV
From: HNVK

AURELIA AND I ARE FINE. The on-board fatality was the corporal who bolloxed loading Drone3 into the launch tube and was sucked out when the exterior door opened prematurely. Thankfully, this was a single-fatality event. Aurelia and Professor Muenster were confined to quarters while a search team retrieved our colleague’s remains. Neither quite realized what they were seeing on the external monitors until the corporal’s decompression injuries splattered the vid pick-ups.

---

From: OPJ

Thanks for notifying us so quickly. Grandma is very upset.

Was the ship damaged? Will your mission be curtailed?

We love you both!

---

From: HNVK

We’re holding position near the anomaly while the ship is examined inside and out. Normally, I’d have taken a turn in a pressure suit, but the captain didn’t want to distress Aurelia by sending me on a spacewalk. We kept working instead.

We were unsure if Drone3’s flight path was impacted. Vid captured it entering the anomaly. We’d been receiving data from Drone1 and Drone2 for hours when Drone3 began transmitting. I was working to decipher star charts when an Imperial courier one jump out from the Hegen Hub toward the Whole responded on the coded frequency. Twice. Then our team at the Hegen Hub transmitted via our wayward drone. We have no idea how drones ended up on opposite ends of a wormhole, not until we download all three hard drives, but it’s theoretically possible that Drone3’s trajectory could’ve propelled it through.

We’re awaiting instructions from HQ. We have three more drones, but are uncertain the launch tube is up to the task. And since we only have the one tube, it may be better to return to port and try again another time.

---

From: Vorkosigan

I spoke to the Head of Ops. Our girls will arrive at the shuttleport before dinner. The sole crewmember capable of certifying the launch tube operational is returning in a box. What a tragedy!

On the positive side, preliminary results are VERY encouraging. ISI will push for another launch, but Professor Muenster has already declared he’s not available until after the end of term. So no
worries about Aurelia wanting to miss class.
---
From: CNVK

Oliver and I would like to meet Aurelia and Helen. Miles, we’ll need a car and driver with proper authorizations. Thanks, Mother
*****

To: Vorkosigan, ENVK, CNVK, OPJ, AAVK, HNVK, TVK, SPVK, SAVK
From: EVK

We’ll see you tomorrow. Warning – we have huge amounts of luggage, courtesy of Vasco’s relatives. We got some very odd wedding presents!
---
From: ENVK

Dress nicely, please. Alys, Simon, Irina, Drou, Kou, and our favorite count and countess will be joining us for dinner.
---
From: SPVK

Yes, ma’am! The Commandant kindly approved my half-day pass. Can’t wait to see you, Lizzie. Vasco, too.
---
From: TVK

Does this mean I shouldn’t bring Zane?
---
From Vorkosigan

Totally up to you, Taurie. Mama has ordered me not to discuss anything remotely controversial at dinner. We’ll save your sister’s antics for another time.
---
From: HNVK

I’m SURE you meant the phenomenal work I’m doing, Da. My crew are all getting commendations for our last mission. So there!
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Are you entirely comfortable with everything discussed the other day regarding the wedding? I was charting things today and unless Kareen and Mark offer to take the overflow, we don’t have nearly as many spare bedrooms in Hassadar as Lizzie imagines. It was different for Nikki and Anna’s wedding because Vorkosigan House is bigger and we crammed the children together. We can’t overrun the troops’ personal space in the middle of the school term. I wish Alex and Mark would hurry up and design a luxury hotel for our District capitol!

Most of Lizzie’s other wants seem reasonable. We’ll send Ma Kosti and Ma Roic down early to supervise food prep. My assistants will cut the flowers and fly them down the day before to the floral room Miles plans on constructing in the sub-basement. We won’t need much, just coolers and work tables.

I received a stiff letter from Vasco’s parents accepting the offer of accommodations for their son’s vow renewal. I guess he married his stethoscope because Lizzie was not mentioned. We promise to keep them in Vorbarr Sultana as much as possible. At least until Miles orders them beheaded. Tell me, are WE the horrible in-laws?

The VSU Trustees meet tomorrow to consider designs for the new library and academic building. Keep your fingers crossed that one of Alex’s designs is chosen.

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

Well, Miles does come honestly by the penchant for on-the-spot justice from both parents, my love. Call me rotten, but I was half hoping Vasco’s family wouldn’t come. I don’t like them.

Miles and I are so happy. I’ve just performed an emergency appendectomy, my fiancé is sleeping in our magnificent new apartment, my brother’s won the commission to design the new VSU science library, and I’m insanely happy. Part of that is due to having far more family living in Hassadar than I could possibly have dreamed of when I began my medical journey, but really, the journey began long before I left for medical school. All those visits to Hassadar Hospital growing up mean I feel like I’m home.

Love, Dr. Elizabeth Vorkosigan

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It’s 4am, I just performed an emergency appendectomy, my fiancé is sleeping in our magnificent new apartment, my brother’s won the commission to design the new VSU science library, and I’m insanely happy. Part of that is due to having far more family living in Hassadar than I could possibly have dreamed of when I began my medical journey, but really, the journey began long before I left for medical school. All those visits to Hassadar Hospital growing up mean I feel like I’m home.

Love, Dr. Elizabeth Vorkosigan

Dear Cordelia,

As for the rest, some can’t take time off and others don’t want the kiddos missing school. Scarlett’s decided to be offended at not being invited to visit Miles at the Clinic or the Escobaran church fiasco. She’s whining about the fuss is being made for a couple who are already married. Someone is definitely jealous of her cousins’ wealth! James and Clark are disgusted. So are John and Sarah, who understand how important Barrayaran traditions are to Lizzie, and don’t plan on humoring Vasco’s family’s pretend outrage aboard ship or after we land. Yes, they spent a lot of money. Too bad it was for their benefit, not Vasco and Lizzie’s. They could, for example, have spent some of that money to
visit their son during his residency.

I have no patience with my granddaughter this week because one of my oldest friends is dying. Say a prayer for Lenore, please. We met when John and her son were toddlers, which means she’s been a major part of my life for almost a century. I shall miss her more than words can say.

Love, Mother

Oh, that’s a shame, love. I really like Lenore! I was also hoping Clark and his girl-friend could make it. Of John’s three, Miles and I relate to him best. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It snowed again yesterday. Spring flowers are blooming in Hassadar – Lizzie sent holos – and New Evias has snow. It also has Countess Riya, who’s tantruming about being subpoena’d to testify in her accomplice’s embezzlement trial. Dmitri’s hearing it personally, for fear his mother would embarrass Count Falco. Countess Riya tantrums in our offices regularly. It’s tiresome, embarrassing, and disruptive. No, it’s not the District’s responsibility to update your home. You have a generous widow’s jointure. Spend a mark of your own money, you loathsome leech!

Zane has gotten much better at handling the fits. Support from Dmitri and Lord Auditor Vorgustafson that we’re both doing great jobs helps tremendously. Dmitri doesn’t pull any verbal punches, which means his praise is utterly sincere. The Emperor requesting and requiring Countess Riya return every mark Zane calculated she’d stolen since her husband’s death in lieu of facing trial also helped build his confidence. After all, Komarrans are scarce here in the frozen North! So, unfortunately, are good accountants. New Evias has the lawyers and academics; the businesspeople are in the industrial cities to the south.

Gosh, I’m rambling. I meant to ask if you’re up for visitors. We could really use a long weekend away from cold, chaos, and prying about our living arrangements.

Love, Taurie and Zane

Weekend after next works for me, my love. Isn’t that the cherry blossom festival? I really wish they were punishing Countess Riya and her accomplice for funds they stole prior to the bombing. Vor privilege rears its ugly head! If this were a military theft, they’d both be rotting in the brig for life. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Can one more join the cherry blossom festivities? I’m due a few days’ leave, I want to see my sisters, and Dr. Drake will be in town. I really like it.

Love, Helen

Does Helen mean ‘like’ the way I like my boss or the way Taurie likes Zane? I can’t imagine the latter going over well in the Council of Counts. Love, Me

What do you mean it doesn’t matter? She’s the future count’s twin! Doesn’t that put her somewhere in the succession? Love, Me

My error, I assumed that since Mark’s title will continue down the firstborn line, so would the Vorkosigan countship. It seems very unfair that Selig would be Alex’s presumed heir until he has a son, not any of the four sisters in between. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Professor Muenster says the ISI would like us to attempt another drone launch in early June. After the last one, I’m rather nervous, though Helen swears we were never in any danger on the bridge because the launch tube pod is designed to be ejected from the main ship if compromised. I forget that launch tubes are usually designed for bombs, not exploratory modules!

If the drones perform as expected, we’ll launch a larger probe. Preliminary data suggests the ends of the anomaly are much narrower than the main tube. That could account for why it hasn’t previously been explored. It also augurs well for it to be converted to a working wormhole. I’m almost afraid to hope that a ship could go from Barrayar to the Hub in less than two days, with only 2 jumps!

Love, Aurelia

My love, I’m afraid to hope, too! I also wish we could go along! Love, Me

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Yes, I’ve spent a lot of time imagining this next chapter in House Vorkosigan’s history! I want it so much, for Aurelia, Helen, and Barrayar, but also Granda and Da. Mostly for them, I think. Who knows how different Barrayar’s history would’ve been if we weren’t a cul-de-sac planet? Maybe Granda and Mad Yuri wouldn’t both have been so volatile if they hadn’t fought through the Ceta invasion. If, if, if.

It’s probably too much to hope that the Admiral Vorkosigan will ever fit through Aurelia’s anomaly. Wouldn’t matter, as long as we could get people on and off the planet if the Komarr route was compromised.

I wonder if Aurelia appreciates how committed the Imperium is this project. A good chunk of Gregor’s discretionary budget has been poured into the ISI. If it succeeds, Gregor will be free to tell the corporal’s family more of what he was doing and award a deserved post-humous medal.

Now all our girls need to do is go into space and free our planet from Komarr’s clutches. No pressure!

Love, Captain Miles Vorkosigan (Ret.)

Though I thought it odd then, I’m glad now that Miles got his longed-for promotion. I understood concerns about blowing his cover, but Miles retiring as a captain was analogous to Simon still being a captain at that age. Simon’s then-commodore pay grade would’ve been much more representative of the value Miles was providing. At least until his ego got in the way of his brains. Love, Me

My love, I wonder if Miles has any idea that Gregor sent Aral security holos of Miles reporting to the Residence wearing most of his medals. Except if we ask, both will deny it ever happened. Love, Me.

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Watch the mail – the wedding invitations went out today. Musicians are booked. Next will be finalizing clothes and the menu, but that can wait until after the term’s over. I hope you’re both not buried in bad student papers.

Love, Ekaterin
Dear Mother and Oliver,

Is ImpSec arranging your transport to Sergyar or were you planning on traveling with us? I have a key meeting in Nuevo Valencia shortly after school ends. If you need the ship, I’ll hop on a fast courier and you can travel with Kareen and Mila.

Love, the beleaguered CEO who wants two of his key executives back!

My love, we’ll have to check with General Brodeur, but I thought ImpSec was giving us a ride after Aurelia returns from her survey mission? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Is it unreasonable to be worried about Aurelia and Helen? Miles assures me they’re in a very fine ship with an experienced crew, but I’m nervous. Good thing Ekaterin doesn’t mind me studying in Uncle Kou’s corner of the greenhouse. She helps me with my Russian and French, too. I’m glad I don’t have to study Greek anymore!

I miss Irina and Simone. The first is silly because we’ll see her on Sergyar. Simone says she loves sharing Hassadar House with you and strolling to work in the next building! I’m glad she enjoys doing public relations stuff in the District because Ekaterin is so busy here. She’s overseeing two staffs, the house and her business, plus preparations for Lizzie’s wedding and helping Miles with an auditorial case.

After seeing how everyone pitched in to keep things going while Miles and Ekaterin were away for his treatment, I’m beginning to understand why everyone resents Count Vorpatril shirking his responsibilities. As Miles muttered after the memorial this week, he shouldn’t still need his hand held after two years. Not when Uncle By and Aunt Rish are helping raise his siblings and run Vorpatril House. I’m glad they were given that assignment. Irina loves having them nearby and the two Vorpatril girls in the Old Town School seem much happier. Ekaterin says the Dowager Countess was always a negligent parent, but has turned very nasty since her husband’s tragic death. Taurie says she’s totally selfish, grasping, and rude.

Back to studying. Finals start Monday. Yikes!
Love, Nile

My love, Nile is absolutely correct – Count Falco isn’t putting his heart into his no-longer-new responsibilities. Ivan, Miles, and Mark’s annoyance is all justified. We all thought Taurie would be gone for perhaps a year; Mark and Kareen’s move to Hassadar was predicated on Dmitri and Charlotte being based in Nuevo Valencia; and Alys and Simon are bearing far too much responsibility for her marital House.

Granted, Count Vorhalas didn’t lose his father’s voting deputy, but I haven’t heard a whisper of anything untoward, either while he was at the Academy or in the year since. What will it take to convince Riya and young Falco that the next step after appointing Dmitri Imperial Advisor is taking back the District entirely? I’m positive the Emperor will do just that if Count Falco doesn’t start standing up to his mother.

I don’t know how to explain my confidence that Aurelia and Helen are safe. I didn’t predict every space accident when commanding Sergyar Fleet, but I can promise that the same error never happened on consecutive missions. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
Drones 4, 5, and 6 all emerged from the anomaly within a thousand kilometers of one another, about an hour from the last jump to the Hub from Jackson’s Whole. Having released them sequentially 8 hours apart, that’s totally amazing. There’s vid of Professor Muenster dancing with glee when the data from Drone6 came in!

The probe is scheduled to launch tomorrow, after we compare the drone data retrieved by a courier from the Hegen Hub. The data stream included excited congratulations from the crew, which was nice. The courier will be waiting to see if the probe makes it through. We won’t give up if it doesn’t. A professor in Darkoi who studied under Dr. Yuell has been recruited to our project. While Nile and I work on our Sergyar tans, Dr. Shabunin will be working with ISI and Professor Muenster to determine a stabilization process. At a minimum, it looks like a viable communications bridge, but I’m not giving up hope that it’s much more.

Love, Aurelia

-----

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Of course the Hegen Hub team is excited, everyone on courier duty dreams of playing a part in such a major discovery!

I’m very glad ISI has approached another expert to assist. I’ve come to doubt Dr. Yuell wants to find another exit from Barrayar. After all, it ruins the narrative of sad, innocent Komarr being forced under Barrayar’s vicious hold solely to maintain galactic access. Maybe at the 50-year mark, it’ll be revealed that rogue Komarrans jeopardized their own planet’s future by destroying the old Soletta array.

Everything aboard is operating normally, including regular sleep-breaks. We have plenty of supplies should we need to conduct more experiments in situ. Not that the ISI boffins care; they’d gladly eat non-stop rat-bars in exchange for more data.

Love, Helen

What a polite warning they’re holding Aurelia hostage! Good thing we’re not in a rush, my love. Another week, though, and I’ll beg you to make up a crisis to get me out of reviewing prospective course offerings. I hate committees! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Cordelia, do you remember reading us tales of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table? When in London for Dmitri’s graduation, we learned the Brits still hand out knighthoods twice a year. They still use swords, too!

I’m debating establishing such a practice here, to recognize Our Subjects who’ve made substantial, non-military contributions to the Imperium. The as-yet-unnamed-honor would carry a Sir/Lady title, a medal, and a small stipend. Some recipients would add a Vor prefix at the emperor’s discretion. What do you think?

Love, Gregor & Laisa

How intriguing, my love! Who’d nominate the recipients? I wouldn’t want to serve on that committee! Love, Me.

Oh damn, you’re right, I’ve probably just jinxed myself. Though honestly, if he weren’t so busy, I’d nominate Duv. And Alys, Tej, and at least two oligarchs. My, this sounds nepotistic! Love, Me
*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Okay, I lied, I’ll probably be analyzing data on the beach most of the summer. The probe gathered an incredible amount of information. In both directions – after downloading the hard drive, the ship on the other side launched it back through the anomaly. It emerged about 300 kilometers from our launch point. So did the three drones that followed. So yes, it’s indeed a two-way formation. Huzzah!

We’ll be home in two days. I promise I won’t stay up nonstop.

Love, Aurelia

Oh my love, that’s amazing precision. Even some of the established Komarran jumps aren’t that accurate. Now I want to keep chucking things through and see what happens as the size increases. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Oliver,

And we’re off! Mila’s a bit annoyed to miss the last few days of school, but she’s doing so well, it doesn’t matter.

I want to thank you both for being so understanding over my frustration about losing Dmitri and reassigning Charlotte. She does a wonderful job coordinating MPVK’s out-of-District operations, but was more valuable working with businesses on the Whole. I wonder if Laisa has any relatives who’d like to help? After all, we’re not just protecting MPVK’s investment in that blighted planet!

On the plus side, there’s meeting Gualter and the ribbon cutting on the Clinic’s new Rejuvenation Spa. I am so glad Kareen insisted on buying far more land than we originally needed! As you saw, the complex is almost as big as ImpMil and far more profitable. Much lower fatalities, too, thanks to organ regrowth technology and the latest and greatest in equipment. There were moments when Admiral Dr. Thatcher was green with jealousy, but equipment is affordable when, except for test subjects like Bel Thorne, you only serve a wealthy clientele. Nicol’s the only quaddie most have ever seen; treating Bel was totally new for most of the staff.

I’m looking forward to seeing Vorkosigan Pribyl again. I suspect our first real home together will always be my favorite.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

This architect is getting a VERY valuable reminder about living in a construction zone. The bedroom renovations were far less disruptive, plus I wasn’t living here full-time. Victoria is being a sweetheart about the mess and our blocked front door. Our cook is understandably less patient with the inspections every package and food delivery get from District Building Security before provisions cross into the house. Simone says the only reason she doesn’t feel trapped is we can use the side and back doors to reach the gardens and pool. She also says reception rooms need to be redecorated once a century and Count Piotr hired a very unimaginative designer. Brown and silver are still the prominent colors, but in shades and patterns. We also now have a unique Vorkosigan upholstery fabric. It’s glorious.

Yes, Victoria has moved into Hassadar House. She has a teaching job lined up for the fall in a nearby primary school. I’m sure Mama and Da will appreciate a current view from the trenches, so to speak. We all hope our District’s schools compare favorably to Victoria’s last job in Vorbarr Sultana.

We’re still finalizing designs for VSU’s new science library. It’s more complicated than expected because labs in the basement of the old building must be replaced. From the comments, I suspect the old labs’ safety equipment was drastically out of date. Which could’ve been catastrophic in itself, never mind the irreplaceable paper tomes stored directly above the old exhaust vents!

Yes, Grandma, Barrayarans!

Love, Alex, Victoria, and Simone

Does this mean Victoria might be The One, my love? Moving in is a big step. Or is it a test to see how she does living in the middle of a Vorkosigan circus? We’ll need to remind the troops not to go
upstairs without permission. You know how Lujayn, Kiona, Bonnie, and Mila love playing hide and seek! Love, Me

I’m glad you like her because I do, too. Anyone who can handle a class of year 2 students should be able to navigate the cliques, alliances, and vendettas among the High Vor in the capitol. Love, Me

*****

To: CNVorkosigan, OPJole, NEVorsoisson, AChaly, TVorpatril
From: IXVorpatril

My secretary’s managed to clear my calendar for Tuesday. Padma’s on shore leave, so all four of us will see you at the amusement park.

---

From: NEVorsoisson

Anna and I have wangled the day off as well, so add four more to the entourage!

Has anyone booked a private picnic pavilion?

From: CNVorskosigan

Officially, I did, but in truth, Alani counted heads and asked me to validate and book her excellent choice. She even pulled the camping packs from storage so we can jam sunscreen and other paraphernalia in them. Job well done!

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to a day off. The students in this summer session are excellent. If only they had off switches! I swear some are worse than Lujayn and Kiona on a sugar high. I really want to tell them to go find a bar or a date like normal college students on a beautiful summer night.

That’s not to say there’s no sex going on. Several students were already paired, others are having flings, and one young woman propositioned Yitzy. We had a laugh about that last. I’m glad we’re finally past the awkwards and can be friendly colleagues again. I think.

Love always, your Oliver

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Thank you for a wonderful day. We had so much fun at the amusement park!

The best part was everyone being silly, with funny shirts and colorful hats. And the laughing. It was fun to have a day with lots of family and lots of laughing.

Love, Lujayn & Kiona

Aren’t family days the best, my love? I can’t believe how well the sloppy clothes afforded us privacy; we were recognized far less than I dared hope. Yay for lessor weekday crowds. And fireworks. They were pretty good.

If only we had time for personal fireworks. This weekend, I promise. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My wife promises Hassadar House will be put back together before your return. From what we saw
last week, it’s going well. The gardens look spectacular!

I look damn good, too. We spent last weekend at the Long Lake with Gregor and Laisa. When was the last time I spent an entire day sailing, fishing, and swimming, without being crippled the next morning? I was a little stiff, but so was Gregor. We also got a bit sunburnt while catching our delicious dinner. Laisa and Ekaterin went berry picking, which became our dessert. Summer at the lake at its best!

We discussed Gregor’s knighthood proposal while lounging in the pavilion. Laisa suggests award ceremonies right before the Winterfair and Midsummer Balls. She wants Alexei to chair the selection committee. Her ideas for the first medal class are eclectic. I don’t know that some Komarrans would appreciate being knighted by their Emperor, but Gregor and Laisa are committed to honoring everyone advancing the Imperium, even if it’s in the form of the loyal opposition. So yes, I believe we’ll see the Order of the Imperium established by year-end.

Responses to the wedding invitations are trickling in. We’re ecstatic Elli Quinn will be joining us. We’re equally pleased most of Vasco’s extended family is not. Did Ivan mention Countess Riya complaining to him about not being invited? Other than maybe a ball or two at the Residence, I doubt the woman’s ever met Lizzie. Witch just wants a chance to lobby Gregor to get her daughters (and their allowances) back. Over Taurie’s and Rish’s dead bodies. Ha!

As far as Gregor is concerned, now that Riya’s accomplice has been sentenced and the funds returned to the District coffers, Taurie and Zane are free to seek other employment. Dmitri disagrees. Young Falco seems determined to give his Advisor an ulcer. Last week, Falco was unprepared and too hungover to hold court. That was after the New Evias Municipal Guard found their Count vomiting in a gutter. Da certainly did far more than his share of public vomiting during his misspent bachelor years, but not after the unwanted responsibilities of the Regency were thrust upon him. And while I’m sorry Falco had far less time to sow his wild oats than most of his peers, it’s time for him to man up. Dozing off in the Council Chamber at Vorhartung isn’t doing him any favors among his new peers, either.

Aren’t you glad I led with the cheerful bits? I hope you’re enjoying more of Sergyar than the beach, the amusement park, and Nikki and Anna’s house!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Despite knowing I’ll see everyone in Hassadar in a few months, I’m missing enjoying summer sunshine with my grandchildren. I’d have liked shows and sitting in the picnic pavilion while everyone enjoyed rides. The holos were so wonderful! I swear, it seems like forever since Aurelia was relaxed and smiling like that.

If it’s okay with you, John, Sarah, and I would like to stay a bit past when the MPVK Express departs. Not long, maybe a week or so, but we’d like to see everyone after the wedding chaos is over. Is that possible?

Love, Mother

We’ll make it work, my love. Everard will only be home on weekends and can bunk with Perrin. We can double up the twins – they still sleep together half the time anyway! – and bunk Nile with either Alani or Aurelia. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
Attached are the wedding plans Lizzie, Vasco, Simone, and I drew up. I feel something vital’s missing, but don’t know what. Help!

Love, the nervous mother of the bride

My love, it’s not even a challenge. There’s no Coach listed. Also, the hallway to the rear door Ekaterin references for guests to use from the gardens to the dining room goes past the main kitchen and will probably be chaos. I think they’ve got their floorplans confused. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma,

Mama and I got our wires crossed. Vasco and I asked Aunt Kareen to be our Coach. It’s not that I wouldn’t love for you to do it, but Aunt Kareen is the family member Vasco knows best.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

I’m glad you weren’t fazed, my love. Like Ekaterin, I assumed it was you. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We need a favor. May we please borrow Alani and Perrin (if he’s willing) for the trip home? Mila’s nanny was just diagnosed with renal insufficiency. Instead of waiting for it to get worse, we’re leaving her behind for transplants. We’ll hire a substitute nanny when we get to Hassadar, but worry Mila will be bored to death traveling with just her parents and a small security contingent. Also, we have meetings in four Komarran domes, so there’ll be some new sights to break up the trip. The stop should compensate for our ship’s faster speed and land us home in tandem.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and guaranteed-to-be-rambunctious Lady Mila

My love, it’s a given Alani will want to be with Mark et al. I’m not sure about Perrin, but some experience traveling without us would be good for a boy talking about starting Academy Prep in 9th year. It’s fascinating Kareen and Mark asked for the new teens, but I guess it’s a sign they want playmates, not the substitute nannies Nile and Everard would gladly be. If you’re agreed, let’s ask the requested kiddos if they’d like to fly MPVK’s friendly skies. Love, Me

General Brodeur needs to get out of his own way, my love, because I can’t see our rising 8th years as targets. Plus they both need more opportunities for independence. I’m sure Mark will accept some extra protection on Komarr, but wanting to add an escort ship is ridiculous. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

We arrive at Komarr tomorrow. Princess Kareen has invited us for dinner. She and Dr. Sutherland are also taking a day off to show us around Green Park Dome while Mark and Kareen have meetings. Mila is so excited! We’re also seeing the Empress’ parents in Solstice. Mila’s excited about that, too. She really doesn’t like being on a spaceship. Alani and I love it. The captain lets us on the bridge and the navigator is teaching us to read star charts. The entire crew is really nice, especially the cook, who gives us a lesson every day. Kareen was so proud that Mila, Alani, and I made our dinner yesterday! Mark also said it was very good.

Love, Perrin and Alani

Notice they don’t miss us, my love? That’s good, right? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,
Thanks for lending us two of the best, most responsible playmates one could ever want. KareenVB and Dr. Shaw were expecting them to flit in all directions, but they stayed together everywhere they went, including crowded places like parks and bubble car stations. They also were ultra-responsible about breath masks when we went out-dome to check on Enrique’s bogs. From above, they don’t look different, just boggy and green, but the plants have grown substantially and in spots are giving off enough oxygen that one could survive without a mask for as much as half an hour. I wouldn’t want to do it, but it’s still amazing progress!

My captain has made contact with yours and we should arrive about half a day ahead of you. Rendezvous at Vorkosigan House?

Love, Mark and his entourage

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My wife and I will be home to welcome you back. Everyone else (except Selig, who’s on maneuvers) will be in Hassadar or New Evias. How do you feel about a few days at the Long Lake while the luggage gets sorted?

Fair warning – Alexei wants you both for the Order of the Imperium selection committee. The Counts we’ve consulted so far are very enthusiastic. Initially, up to three nominations may come from each count. The Viceroy, Imperial Counselor, and current Ministers will have more slots, to reflect the wider expanse of their remits. The committee will submit recommendations to Gregor, who has veto power. Initial designs for the medal are very striking, round silver disks on a black and silver ribbon with variations of the Vorbarra arms on the front and the recipient’s name and date to be engraved on the back.

My first official nominees will be Mark, the head of Hassadar Hospital, and retired ballerina Olga Tsaplina, who left her Dendarii village at 7 and worked tirelessly to update the Vorbarr Sultana Ballet’s repertoire to galactic standards. The trio are prime examples of business, medicine, and art all strengthening the Imperium. If she were still alive, we’d nominate the mosaic artist who did our foyer.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

My love, Miss Tsaplina is a wonderful candidate. She was an amazing dancer and an even better troupe manager. I wonder if anyone will nominate the conductor of the Vorbarr Sultana Symphony?

Love, Me
Hassadar’s First Vorkosigan Wedding

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Thank you for being so gracious about me being called back to the ISI. Dr. Shabunin wanted us all to meet before he returned to Darkoi for the new term. Excited doesn’t begin to describe his excitement at our find.

That’s the great news. The more problematic part is he’d like me and Professor Muenster to take sabbaticals next term so the three of us can work full-time on stabilizing and widening my anomaly into a proper wormhole. Yes, Dr. Shabunin is confident it can be done, given the time to develop and utilize what he refers to unscientifically as wormhole expanders. He doesn’t think building the sonic devices will take long, maybe six to eight weeks, but using them would need to be done slowly over a period of months. We’d also need experienced crews on either end alternating readings and launching all manner of drones, probes, and sonic expanders. It would be a big commitment, with no guarantee of success. Assuming ISI can get us funded for such a major undertaking and no one goes crazy from being confined to a ship in stationary position for months.

I’m really conflicted about this. Not that I have as broad a social circle as Nile, but it would mean literally disappearing for months with no explanation. If we’re successful, the sacrifice will be worthwhile, but what if we’re not? Dr. Yuell seemed so dismissive of the possibility that any new wormholes existed outside of the Vorthys Bridge. Helen keeps saying he’s a jealous fool and not to worry because all long-haul crews have plenty of entertainment options aboard ship.

I’ll be back to Hassadar tomorrow. I know you’re both crazed preparing for the new term, followed by Lizzie’s wedding, but I think we need to talk this through.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Yes, I know all about Dr. Shabunin’s grandiose plans. Though more lab work needs to be done, funds have been set aside to equip a lengthy expedition. Should Aurelia take a sabbatical, she and the professors will be paid as ISI consultants. They’ll also, subject to Imperial security concerns, retain publication rights.

I will not order an underage Subject to leave terra firma. The data speaks to great scientific rewards. It doesn’t address the social or emotional impact of leaving school for a term, especially if the expedition is ultimately unsuccessful. I’m told the chance of success is high, but that may be spin to get the project funded.

You used to take ships into unexplored wormholes, Captain Naismith. What could I possibly tell your daughter that you can’t?

Love, Gregor the Armchair Explorer

He’s got you there, love. I’d really like Aurelia to take advantage of this incredible opportunity. Especially now that there’s a paycheck attached! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Aurelia, Nile, and I had a long talk today. Nile is incredibly supportive of Aurelia working with Dr.
Shabunin, calling it her personal semester aboard with the brainiacs. Did you see the year-aboard program Solstice University is sponsoring? I can’t imagine how much students are paying for classes aboard a luxury liner and a travel experience of at least 10 planets. I pity the chaperones!

I honestly love chaperoning my aunt. I swear an exhausted, stressed Aurelia is still easier than a grumpy Simone. It sounds mean, but Simone matured much later than the rest of us. The Simone I returned to after Da’s treatment was so different! I’ve always loved my baby sister, but now we’re finally becoming friends, too.

This expedition won’t be like the Vorthys Bridge ones, where everyone worked non-stop. I’ve been on missions to test new weapons or communications equipment and it’s much more like an office job, with almost everyone scrambling all day and a skeleton crew awake while everyone else sleeps. That’s an important distinction, because I think Aurelia was imagining months of sleep deprivation. There’ll be some stressful days, but nothing that we can’t handle. Plus, we’d be close enough for regular supply ships, so yay for fresh food and treats from home!

Do you get the sense that I really want to do this?

Love, Helen

My love, in the end, what matters most is what Aurelia wants. Has anyone said that there’s no set clock for her to complete her undergraduate degree? Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Of course I’m coming to cider festival. Lambros and I NEED apple fritters. We’ll also need to visit the shoe store because either my half-boots are shrinking or my feet grew again. We probably should do one last fitting on my new suit, too. Lizzie and Vasco’s wedding will be such a fun reward for surviving midterms!

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Three Vorpatrils, four Vorsoisson-Chalys, several assistants, and roughly a metric ton of presentations and flimsies left Sergyar orbit yesterday. Unless you come to Vorbarr Sultana, you won’t see any of us for the first week because all of us adults have full schedules. Especially Tej, who’s in charge of helping Ekaterin prepare for the passengers on the MPVK Express. Mamere’s already offered to have Nile and Aurelia stay with her so they have quiet for studying. It seems logical to us!

Love, Viceroy & Lady Vorpatril

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I hope you’re ready for the inundation because the MPVK Express leaves Escobar in a few hours. J.J. can’t wait. He was a wonderful companion while his parents and I had our checks at the Clinic, but now wants to see his granddaughters!

Please hold the comments on our luggage. We’re bringing gifts from absent family and friends. Some of Lizzie’s and Vasco’s supervising physicians sent gifts, too.

Aurelia hinted in her last letter that she may take next term off to work at the ISI. I assume you’ll share more when you can?
Love, Mother

*****

Dear Grandma,

Mama’s being mean. She says I can’t wear my tiara to Lizzie’s wedding if the bride’s not wearing one. How do I get Lizzie to wear a tiara?

Love, Mila

----

Dear Grandma,

I took your advice and asked Lizzie why she didn’t want a tiara for her wedding. She told me a secret – she’s wearing Cordy’s tiara as her something borrowed. And I can wear mine, too, so we match!

Love, Mila

---

Dear Grandma.

No, I wasn’t outplayed by my baby cousin. I waited until I was sure Cordy and Goncalo were coming before asking to borrow her tiara. Now all we have to do is hope it doesn’t rain and Gualter doesn’t scream throughout the ceremony.

Love, Lizzie

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

You may cross Nile’s and Aurelia’s outfits for the wedding off your to-do list. Lukin brought them to Estelle’s after classes so we could get final fittings done before they both began cramming for midterms. They both look beautiful! As will you and the other girls, WHEN you come for your final fitting.

Oliver, if you provide permission to take Everard from school, Ivan will gladly take him for new boots when he and Padma go for theirs. Ivan says being viceroy is hard on his formal footwear. We shall NOT discuss Padma’s stinky feet!

Menus and such are all drawn up for the capitol part of the wedding guests’ visit. Ekaterin booked caterers for the last two days so Ma Kosti can start in Hassadar. I really hope your cook is up to dealing with picky houseguests. Elena wrote Miles that Vasco’s parents are driving the crew crazier than Gualter’s new molars. We’re rather glad Admiral Quinn is meeting the MPVK Express in Komarr orbit. Weeks of incorrigible passengers traveling for free would be far too much for her to tolerate!

Much love, Alys and Simon

My love, why are our grandchildren attracted to people with crazy relatives? So far, Victoria’s family has been very nice. I sincerely hope the Vorreedis don’t mutate into entitled idiots when/if Alex and Victoria decide to formalize their relationship. I also wonder what the Drakes are like. Dr. Cam doesn’t speak of them much. That’s never a good sign. I want far more for our great-grandchildren than my sons got from my family. In fact, I sometimes wonder how your mother never gets tired of answering piles of short or cryptic missives. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
You know Mama’s frozen face? She and Nikki wore it all through dinner as Vasco’s parents regaled everyone with the horrors of their arduous journey. Yes, it’s a long way, but they made it sound like Uncle Mark sent them in a slave freighter. When they could get a word in, the other guests all said wonderful things about the ship, crew, and food. Dr. Verbena joked that without exercising every day, she’d have gained 5 kilos! Cousin J.J. agreed. It was so good to see him! He can’t wait to fly down to Hassadar and see everyone. I wish Vasco and I could accompany them.

Señora Cortez keeps referring to our vow renewal. Da said if two weddings were good enough for the Emperor, they’re good enough for me. He also pulled an ancient ordinance out of thin air. Did you know all marriages of Imperial subjects performed abroad must be repeated and registered properly within the Empire? Da said Emperor Dorca enacted that one to ensure Prince Xav’s offspring with his Betan wife were recognized as legitimate. Just think, Grandma. Without the second wedding on Bararrayar, the Vorkosigans and Vorpatrils would have no claim to the camp stool. How different all our lives would have been!

Thanks in advance for all you’re about to endure. Silly, selfish me, wanting to be the first Vorkosigan married in our District capitol. If I’d realized how obnoxious Vasco’s parents would be, I’d have set the wedding in my parents’ Bararrayan Garden so people could escape to MPVK Manor. Which wouldn’t have been fair to Uncle Mark, not after all he did to get everyone here. I must keep reminding myself that a lot of people came a very long way to be with us on our big day.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

Isn’t it amazing, my love, how acknowledging others’ sacrifices makes them less arduous? Or as Aral used to say, “Never lie to Simon. All it does is waste time and piss him off.” I’d rather know our houseguests will be royal pains in the arse than find out the hard way via our children or staff. And we did get a beautiful, updated space to hold the Science Department pre-Winterfair party! Love, Me

I’m trying to see the glass as half-full, my love. Better to host a party than be nominated to the curriculum committee for a third year. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We know you’re busy grading midterms, but one of you MUST COME HOME RIGHT NOW! We got home from school and found Señora Cortez rummaging in your sitting room. I told Kasun, who escorted her out, but we think she’s upstairs rummaging through Miles and Ekaterin’s suite.

Love, Alani

---

Don’t worry, sweetheart, we’re on our way. Kasun messaged us. Great job reporting suspicious behavior! We’re very proud of you! Love, Uncle Oliver

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

How about we don’t tell Lizzie and Vasco about this breach of common courtesy? I say this only because Alani’s quick thinking was enough for Kasun to activate the automatic locking mechanisms on every private room except Vasco’s parents’. Activating that protocol no longer seems rude, especially considering Kareen and Mark lock things down automatically. And it’s not like we don’t have a series of beautifully-renovated reception areas on the first floor. My favorite is the family dining room overlooking the re-landscaped pool area. I find it very restful.

Love, Vasco’s future in-laws

My love, I suspect we’re counting down to the wedding for reasons other than the actual ceremony! I
take Miles’ point about not stressing the bride and groom, but I hadn’t dreamed that houseguests would distress our children so much. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

If Victoria didn’t have to teach, I swear we’d hide in Vorkosigan House until Friday. The sly comments about us living together and how unusual it is for the third child to wed first are getting on our nerves. Anna’s dry ‘excuse me?’ was priceless. Anyway, if you need me, I’ll be in my office next door. Da ordered the connecting doors between buildings sealed so visitors don’t disturb our employees.

Love, Alex and Victoria

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

If you like, we’ll be glad to take Kiona and Lujayn for the rest of the week. They’re no trouble, at least not compared to your guests. Kiona looked totally miserable when we saw her at school drop-off. She said Señora Cortez called her hairstyle inappropriate for school. The woman seems to have forgotten how long we lived on Escobar and how many of our nieces attended school there.

We’d offer to take Alani and Perrin, too, but they’re really too old to be crammed into Mila’s room on a school night and every other room is taken!

Love, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Please let us stay at Mila’s house. Kiona was sad about her hair all day. Vasco’s mother is a horrible guest. Didn’t you teach us to be extra-polite when visiting?

Love, Lujayn and Kiona

That’s enough for me, love. If you pack a bag, I’ll take it with me to school pick-up. Yes, Kasun knows I’m doing this one personally. After I talk to the twins, I’m taking Alani and Perrin out for a treat. Don’t worry, we’ll be home in time for dinner. I hope Daniel and Dyana won’t be too disappointed that we’re sending their playmates away for a few days. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

My mean wife says I can’t run away with my baby sisters. She demolished my claim of not needing a bed with the tart observation that Mark has no space left for armsmen and counts don’t retreat unless their lives are in danger.

Love, the exasperated parents of the bride

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

For your enjoyment, we include Byerly’s observations from our daughter’s wedding:

a) Lizzie, Helen, and Ekaterin were gorgeous. Señora Cortez wasn’t. The Emperor and his sons won the ‘who wore black and silver better?’ stakes by light years.

b) Mila is adorable. She and Cordelia’s girls are also incredibly well-mannered. As are Everard and Perrin, who wear formal attire with remarkable aplomb.

c) Barrayaran wedding ceremonies aren’t that long. Whining about standing on a starpoint is ridiculous compared to kneeling in church for long periods.
d) How is a groat circle more hazardous than burning candles and incense?

e) Slurping excellent quality wine is a travesty. So is the groom’s father getting obnoxiously drink in the first hour of his son’s wedding reception.

f) Do not decline to toast the bride’s great-grandmother. Or the Emperor. Or anyone else the bridal couple choses to honor. It’s beyond gauche.

g) The groom’s brother should never proposition one of the bride’s sisters. Especially not when all three sisters have dates and high-level judo training.

h) Do not discuss the unprovoked Barrayaran attack on Escobar in front of the Emperor or the widow of the man who led the retreat. Referring to the bride’s late grandfather as the Butcher of Komarr is also incredibly unwise.

i) The food was excellent and plentiful, with many worlds represented. Rish and I were careful to take small portions because Ma Kosti! If you couldn’t find anything to eat, you started the day determined to embarrass your hosts.

j) There is never a need for anyone to speak during the bride and groom’s first dance. It’s rude even without a featured singer as talented as our niece.

k) The fireworks ending with a purple rose were exquisite.

l) The buffet after the fireworks was the perfect end to the evening.

m) There’s such an electricity on the rare occasions the entire Vorbarr, Vorkosigan, and Vorpatril families are together. Dono and I regret that the rest of the Vorrutyers have no such link.

n) We’ve never seen so many doctors in one place outside of a hospital or Durona party. Rish forbade me from flirting with Dr. Thatcher. He’s a head-turner!

o) Mark and Kareen are, as always, excellent hosts. The post-wedding snark session was fabulous.

The only point By missed was how proud we are of our incredible daughter and new son-in-law. All of our children, actually. Everyone worked very hard to give our practical scientist the romantic wedding day she’s always wanted. Enormous thanks go to you both for lovingly navigating all the upheaval it entailed.

Love always, Miles and Ekaterin

******

Dear Grandma, Mother, Aunt Alys, Uncle John, J.J., Kareen, Johnny, Martya, & Alex,

Now that the MPVK Express has departed and the students and Vorsisson-Chalys have returned to Vorbarr Sultana, Ekaterin and I have declared tonight ‘very casual family dinner and game night.’ Anything much more formal than ship knits and slippers will be considered overdressed and absolutely no work will be discussed. Ma Kosti is serving a massive buffet of wedding leftovers. We *may* have gone a bit crazy ordering food. No worries, there’s plenty of wine and dessert, too. We even have entertainment – Kiona and Lujayn plan on serenading us after dinner.

Please gather up your families/houseguests and come to Hassadar House!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

******

(handwritten) Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Last night was so much fun! We loved singing, playing charades, and just being silly with Grandma Elizabeth and everyone else. We’re glad the Betan visitors stayed longer. The time before the wedding was mostly fun – not Vasco’s parents – but last night was so much better. We need to have more silly dinners in our PJs.

Love, Kiona and Lujayn

They raise a good point, my love. When was the last time we had a mid-week PJ dinner? We need to
start thinking ahead to next year, when -gulp!- two more of our birds leave the nest for the brighter lights of Vorbarr Sultana. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Somehow, the return voyage was even more tiresome. Elli couldn’t wait to bail at Komarr. She’d had way too much of the Cortez family before we lifted off. It was really a shame because Auntie Elli was enjoying playing with Gualter! However, the comments about Barrayarans not understanding the lingering Escobaran resentment from the unprovoked attack 60 years ago had her teeth grinding. I’m thankful my mother wasn’t there to dispute the ignorant assumption. I enjoyed pointing out that just like Mark and Miles, my grandson was only 3/8ths Barrayaran. Watching Señora Cortez trying to do the math was VERY satisfying!

The rest of the accommodations were again top notch. We’re grateful to Mark and Kareen for enabling us to have this vacation with our family. Our son also enjoyed flirting with Lizzie’s friends. He and Dr. Violet are talking about getting together once they’ve settled back in. It could be an interesting pairing, as well as a ‘how did you meet?’ story similar to our official ‘we worked on the same ship’ one.

Any chance we can coax you to Escobar next summer?
Love, Elena and Baz
Risks and Rewards

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Professor Muenster and I had a long talk today. He opened up about a few things. Mostly about how he’ll miss his wife while we’re aboard ship, but also the very real opportunity to increase the Imperium’s global importance. I hadn’t thought of it in terms of how much more valuable we’d be to the Hegen Hub Alliance if we could get there in a few days. The professor also agreed with Miles that I’m not on any particular clock for to get my degree and at the rate I’ve been accumulating credits, even if I skipped a term, I’d probably be like Uncle Oliver and receive a combined Bachelors/Masters at the end of four official college years. I hadn’t thought about the fact that our expedition would be totally original material for a Masters’ thesis. Or how rare it is to get paid for collecting that data.

I need to speak to Helen one more time, but yes, I think I’m ready to go work for the ISI and try to make a viable wormhole.

Love, Aurelia

My love, every time someone comments negatively about Alani and Perrin traveling with Mark and Kareen, I have to remember that most don’t think about our spaceship backgrounds. And what’s travelling a known route on a safe ship versus sending our oldest out on a ship armed with piles of sonic weapons? I can’t decide if it makes us lax parents or ones fostering independence. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

So it’s official – Aurelia is most definitely my husband’s granddaughter! He’d be so excited at the prospect of creating a wormhole. Especially for a world like Barrayar that was isolated from the nexus for so long. And if you’re lax parents, I’m an addlepated grandma who thinks space exploration at 18 is absolutely wonderous!

Please hug Johnny, Lina, and the girls for me. We miss them so much, but seeing them all thriving is proof moving was the right decision. None of us could believe how much Bella had grown! Or how much happier Bonnie is with playmates and the ability to play outside. Why, she’s even looking forward to snow!

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The inaugural class of the Order of the Imperium certainly has some surprises! Who nominated Byerly? Dono? Dmitri? Ivan? When we stopped laughing, my wife and I congratulated By on the first public acknowledgement of how well he’s served the Imperium for most of his adult life. We liked most other picks, too, and are very grateful Miss Tsaplina will be honored. Exceptions include obnoxious Dr. Yuell and the snotty journalist who refers to your height-challenged sons as Count Inches and Lord Half-Mark. Vorkuric’s body of investigative work is impressive, especially when it comes to covering unpleasant topics like domestic violence and sexual harassment, but the jokes about us were old a very long time ago.

Love, Count and Countess Vorkosigan

My love, can you imagine Miles’ reaction if he knew the answer to his nomination question was d)
all of the above? Or how many Counts nominated family or retired military instead of civilians who’ve made major contributions to the Imperium? I really thought the instructions were clear. So did our chair, who acquitted himself extremely well. Now all we have to do is agree on the final medal design. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Our work at the ISI is going extremely well. Dr. Shabunin may not be quite as expert as Dr. Yuell, but he has Professor Muenster’s gift for sharing his knowledge in a way that invites collaboration. Being paid to learn is so, so wonderful.

Ekaterin and Professora Muenster are helping us avoid burnt out. Both expect us to be home for dinner. Or in my case, dining with friends or family. I stop by campus several times a week to see friends. I made great strides last term in fitting in with peers and refuse to let those ties weaken. There’ll be questions later, but for now everyone seems to think that being asked to assist Professor Muenster on his sabbatical research is an honor not to be missed. Whew!

Have you heard from Simone? She’s pretty down lately. It looks like she and Jules have hit the end of the road. Sad, but considering who knows where he’ll be posted after graduation, it may be for the best. I don’t see Simone doing well with a long-distance relationship. It’s what’s holding me back from accepting a date with a guy from last semester’s psychology class. If Stefan is still interested after we return from blasting the anomaly, I’d like to get to know him better.

Niles is waiting impatiently to see if her tulip seeds bloom. If so, Ekaterin wants her to enter the Spring botanical show. Lots of people, me included, are wandering into the greenhouse in hopes of being the first one to see little green shoots.

When will Perrin hear back from Academy Prep? He was so excited about the interview, I really hope they take him. Ekaterin, Nile, and I have started planning for when Alani transfers to the Old Town School. We think she’ll enjoy it.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I’m so proud of my brother for being accepted here. I was a little concerned because there weren’t many year 9 spots available, but Perrin rose to the challenge! Now I can focus on earning a prefect spot for next year.

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

THEY BLOOMED! Attached is a picture of my new tulips. Aren’t the shades of green and silver BEAUTIFUL?? And just in time for the botanical show this weekend. Can you come???

Love, Nile

P.S. Ekaterin entered me weeks ago, just in case. So it’s all right and proper. NNK

*****

Dear Mother, Uncle Oliver, Mark, and Kareen,

You MUST all visit this weekend. Our sonic devices are complete, the relay ship is on its way, and
we’re deploying very soon. And we all know Nile’s sure to win.

Love, Aurelia

Good thing Ekaterin warned us she was entering Nile into the botanical show, isn’t it? I hope Johnny and Lina can make it. Vasco’s got the antihistamines ready for Bonnie. I can’t believe we haven’t seen Taurie or Selig since Winterfair!

*****
To: Vorkosigan, ENVorkosigan
Cc: CNVorkosigan, OPJole, MPVorkosigan, KKVorkosigan
From: HNVorkosigan

We’re scheduled to arrive early Saturday morning. 48-hour shore leave! Please send a car and my green silk pantsuit to meet me at the shuttleport. I’ll change in the rear compartment and meet you at the garden show. Love, Helen

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

What an exciting week! I’m so proud of Perrin, Nile, and Ekaterin for each accomplishing something new. I don’t know why Lizzie or Taurie never submitted their own plants to the show, but I suspect Nile’s First Place ribbon for new flower hybrid is more important to Ekaterin than any of her own enormous pile of ribbons. I can’t say the student has surpassed the teacher, not yet, but our Nile is on her way to discovering many new things just as much as Aurelia and Helen are.

Have you heard from our explorers yet? I’ve hated classified missions for over a century because it’s so frustrating not to know what’s happening. I blame Miles for many of my grey hairs, but you and your father added plenty, my dearest daughter.

Things here are rather quiet. My friend Martina lost her husband last week. Sadly, death has become our constant companion in the twilight of our lives.
Love, Mother

I wish we weren’t so far away, love. Maybe we should put Aurelia to work finding a shorter route from Komarr to Beta Colony. Love, Me

Yes, of course I’m serious! A path for another neutral party with strong weapons capability to come to our aid should the Cetas attack would be priceless. Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Helen was correct – longer expeditions have a lot of down time as we wait for our probes and expanders to do their work. So far, things are progressing well. Also, no one other than Helen or Dr. Muenster will play Tacti-Go with me.

This ship is bigger than the last one and has a small hydroponics lab. The tech is thrilled to have some help. I like the distraction. Plus, fresh vegetables!

Love, Aurelia

My love, is it me, or was this note rather uninformative? Love, Me

Yes, you’re right, it’s pure covert ops Miles! Love, Me

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
Why didn’t you warn me that professors on sabbatical might experience final exam withdrawal? They’re both so programmed to be working nonstop, they don’t know what to do with the free time. Aurelia thinks it’s hilarious, but she’s lived with you during exam weeks. And I thought Da was bad after wrapping an investigation!

Things here are going VERY well. We’ve had no issues with communication with Dr. Shabunin’s ship and are syncing our launches perfectly. Dr. Muenster estimates we could fit a small yacht into the anomaly, but more expansion work is needed on the other end to get it out. It’s still too soon to officially declare it a wormhole, but we’re all very, very optimistic. ISI boffins are reviewing our work virtually in real time. So far, they’ve only made a few very minor changes to our schedules. It’s the least oversight I’ve ever experienced on a research mission.

Aurelia wants to name the eventual wormhole the Muenster-Shabunin Pass. She’s very wise to recognize that more academics will be willing to work with her if she doesn’t claim the primary credit. Dr. Shabunin has already suggested Aurelia consider doing post-graduate work outside the Empire. He says two professors in Nuevo Valencia are retired Dr. Riva’s most successful students and if he’d had the money, he’d have studied under them rather Dr. Yuell. To my surprise, Professor Muenster agreed that Escobar would be a fine option. Da would have to take a fresh look at the political implications, but it’s exciting that two such prominent educators are focused on what’s best for their student, not their own reputations.

And in case I haven’t mentioned it. I’m learning loads about wormhole mechanics. No matter what happens, I’ll be a better navigator after this expedition.

Love, Helen

Finally, love, a letter with real information! I’m very glad Dr. Shabunin confirmed my suspicion that the Imperium still lags other worlds in astro-physics. Helen’s correct, Miles would need to make a political assessment, but I’d feel much more comfortable sending a grad student than a teenager. Not only is the Whole more stable, Escobar is well positioned between Ivan/Nikki and your family.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Do NOT cut short your time on Sergyar by waiting for me. A supply ship just restocked us for another month. It may not be our last resupply. Professor Muenster and Dr. Shabunin have both told ISI that they’re available until the second week of August because they’ve both taught their fall classes before.

We continue to make slow-but-steady progress. The far end of the anomaly is less cooperative than the Barrayaran one. Dr. Shabunin says it’s not usual due to the significantly higher space traffic near the far end. After this project, he’d like to review all our data on the Vorthys Bridge. He said a team out in Vervain just published a paper on widening tube-shaped wormholes to allow bigger ships.

Love, Aurelia

Shall we take our girl’s sage advice and leave as scheduled? It sounds like the ISI will hold her in their clutches until the last possible moment before fall term. Annoying, but flattering, too. I’m not perturbed about her being alone afterward, either. Helen will be due extensive shore leave after months aboard. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thanks for taking Kareen and Mila with you to Sergyar. I promise to try to sort out the mess on the
Whole as quickly as possible. I’ve also written Gregor asking if I’m ever getting Dmitri back. After all, it’s been well over a year. If not, I’ll have to make more managerial changes because the cryo-businesses are suffering without Charlotte and the books aren’t as pristine as they should be without Dmitri. Plus, Charlotte misses her family. They’re getting vocal about missing her, too.

Love, Mark

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I hauled Count Vorpatril into my office yesterday and gave him an ultimatum: if by year-end, he doesn’t prove he’s capable of running his District to Prince Dmitri’s satisfaction, another Vorpatril will inherit the countship as a Winterfair gift. When told I couldn’t do it, I looked the brat in the eye and stated, “Your Emperor may do as We please, including taxing your District for the Prince’s time and effort.”

I didn’t add that if Charlotte breaks it off with Dmitri, he’ll likely ask to have young Falco beheaded. I owe Mark a massive apology as well. I envisioned this as a half-year assignment, not a two-year one! I plan to explain my new strategy to Charlotte and Dmitri this afternoon. Even if I strip Falco of the countship, Dmitri will not be involved in tutoring his successor. Right now, Falco’s younger brother is his presumed heir. ImpSec reports he’s even more of a wastrel than his brother, thanks to Countess Riya’s pernicious influence. That woman is poison.

There’s a possibility Charlotte may travel with you to Sergyar. Perhaps Mark will believe Dmitri desperately wants to return to Escobar if I return his partner first.

Love, Gregor the Aggravated

My love, isn’t separating lovers going through a rocky patch a risky strategy? I grasp that Gregor wants to send a message to Count Falco that Dmitri has better things to do, but question if the stupid boy will understand. And to whom would Gregor give the countship? Love, Me

*****

Dear Gran”Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Thank you for being so gracious about accepting one more to your traveling circus. Charlotte could’ve travelled all the way to Escobar by fast courier, but it’s a long, unconvertable ride and we all want better for her and Supply & Demand. I promise the cats won’t be a problem as long as they have their box, food, and water fountain. Extra belly rubs also appreciated.

Uncle Mark is correct, he was misled as to how long Da would need me, Taurie and Zane. I’m afraid everyone underestimated how determined Dowager Countess Riya was to bleed the District dry. Also how spineless her sons are. Never mind. If Falco doesn’t grow up by Winterfair, a perfect candidate is waiting in the wings. Either way, I’ll be on my way back to Escobar, my real job, and the love of my life.

Love, Dmitri & Charlotte

Well, that was a cliffhanger ending, my love! I guess we’ll have to be patient and wait for events to unfold. I hate that! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I hope you’re enjoying fair winds to Komarr. No, I’m not telling you who Gregor’s replacement candidate might be, except it’s not Ivan or Padma.
I’ve attached the list of the Midsummer Order of the Imperium recipients. Please show it to Irina. I think she’ll be pleased to see an opera singer and sculptor amidst the academics and businesspeople. The director of the Kayberg rep center was also an interesting choice. Did you threaten Ivan to nominate Dr. Tan?

We got a letter from Helen yesterday. Still reporting slow, steady progress. Every time I think I’d be stir-crazy sitting in one spot. I remind myself of Dagoola IV.

Alex has asked us to host Victoria and her family for a weekend at the Long Lake. Our other children are also invited. This sounds serious, doesn’t it?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

It does appear another wedding is imminent, my love. I only hope Victoria understands that Alex may not be able to completely foreswear men. Me missing flirting with Dr. Graham is proof I can’t.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

It’s official – the 12th Countess will be named Victoria Vorreedi Vorkosigan. She accepted my proposal and Princess and Countess Olivia’s betrothal ring at the Long Lake pavilion yesterday. My second has offered the Residence ballroom for our wedding. Luckily, there’s one evening open early in Winterfair week. Soon, I know, except if we wait any longer, Dmitri will be back to Escobar instead of by my side. And yes, I discussed this choice with my brothers. They both said anyone who could survive sharing an apartment with me for four years had earned the honor.

We’re hoping for a medium-sized wedding. Is there anyone you’d like us to invite from the University or MPVK?

Love, Alex and Victoria

My love, is it selfish to be grateful we won’t be hosting wedding guests? Asking if we wanted to invite anyone was very gracious. I’d like to include Dean Andronova, Professor Gunther, and their spouses. Unlike some of the guests, they’ve all met the bride and groom. I can hear Mark complaining, “But I needed those rooms at MPVK Manor for paying guests!” Any chance your mother will come? Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Of course I’m not missing my great-grandson’s wedding! Mark has offered to pick up me, John, and Sarah on the way back from Jackson’s Whole. He did warn he’ll be grumpy, but I’ll have my reader and John can usually charm Mark out of bad moods. Clark and his girlfriend are also scrambling to see if they can take time off. I’d love for them to join us! Clark’s particularly curious about Helen and Aurelia’s mysterious assignment. I keep saying I have no idea.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We’re so excited for Alex and Victoria! Helen is particularly glad Victoria has a job she loves and friends separate from the ones she’ll make as Lady Vorkosigan. Nile wants us all to wear shades of green. That’ll be great for you and her, but I’m not sure about the four brunettes. I told her we’ll discuss in person.
Now the bigger news. Tomorrow, we’re sending a manned ship through my wormhole. Just a small one, but we’ll all (including the Emperor, who approved the jump) be holding our breath to see if it works. Say a prayer, please.

Love, Aurelia and Helen

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Attached is a holo of the next three recipients of the Imperial Science Award. They successfully jumped from Hegen to Barrayaran space and back again. We’ve all got reams of data to study, but we’ll do it on land after physical exams and a mandated vacation. Mama, Da, and Ma Kosti are escorting us to Vorkosigan Surleau for at least a week of relaxation, fresh food, and LOTS of alcohol. Cam will join us on the weekend. I’ve missed it tremendously, but want to breathe fresh air and be pampered even more than I want to see my partner. Yes, we’re exhausted.

Love, Helen and Aurelia

My love, I don’t miss long deployments. Even on routine, dull missions, there’s always that niggling ‘must be ready’ in your backbrain to prevent perfect rest. And this certainly wasn’t a routine mission! I wish we could be there to meet them. In lieu, how about we send a masseuse? A week of daily massages would do wonders to get all the knots out. Couldn’t hurt Miles, either. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

It took Lizzie less than six minutes to message me the name of a great masseuse. I could’ve sent the one from MPVK, but he’s more about shoulder rubs and good posture than full-body relaxation. Anyway, your gift has been arranged and should be waiting at the Long Lake when Aurelia and Helen clear military protocols.

We’ve got lots of business to discuss when you and Mark return. John Naismith III is one of the best hires MPVK ever made. Not only does Johnny speak fluent Enrique, for the first time since I’ve known my husband, he’s working on multiple projects at once. It’s miraculous!

Love, Martya and Enrique

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I thought I was taking care of myself aboard ship. I guess I wasn’t. Helen and I predictably fell asleep on the flyer down to the Long Lake. Ma Kosti had a huge dinner waiting. I went to bed shortly afterward and woke in time for lunch. I also fell asleep in the pavilion after my massage. Good thing it’s shaded because Miles saved Helen from burning to a crisp when she fell asleep in a chaise by the lake. Forget about swimming or sailing, I haven’t even dipped my toes in the water yet.

Even if I wanted to study under Dr, Yuell, which I don’t, my body’s reaction to months of recycled air tells me I could never spend years on Komarr or Beta Colony. After we wrap this project, I’ll spend some time researching the professors on Escobar. I never thought I’d consider going back, but if these are the best in the field, then that’s where I’ll need to be.

If you go to the amusement park before you leave, I’d love a new shirt. The last one went through so many washes aboard ship, it’s ready for the rag bag.

Love, Aurelia

This letter shouldn’t have made me laugh, but it did. How did we forget to teach our girl not to take
your favorite clothes on deployment? Love, Me
A Season of Changes

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Our girls are much revived, having gone riding, shooting, and swimming today. Dr. Cam, Alex, and Victoria arrive tomorrow. So does Aurelia’s university friend. She didn’t want to be the only one unattached. We wonder if Stefan’s ever met a herm before. This should be interesting!

Love, your evil son and his long-suffering wife

My love, it’s a good thing Count Vorkosigan is far more polite and proper than Miles is in private! I’m rather glad Aurelia took the initiative with a boy. After all, she’ll be 19 soon. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Stefan was a perfect houseguest. You can ask Ekaterin if you don’t believe me. He also looks VERY attractive in a bathing suit. We didn’t do anything other than kiss, but it was nice to feel like a university student again, discussing classes and clubs. He’s also got a very good eye for art. Stefan spent a long time looking at the portrait of Da with his parents and siblings before saying, “You and Count Vorkosigan are full siblings, aren’t you?” I didn’t say anything; Miles nodded.

Dr. Cam is very, very nice. Most important, Helen looks very happy when she’s with it. I don’t recall Helen ever being with someone who could match her quip for quip. I do wonder how open-minded Vorbarr Sultana or the military will be should they make their relationship permanent. Plus, if they decided to have children, Dr Cam would be a single parent a lot of the time. Which I guess is a problem for many military families, just not one to which I’ve given much thought.

My calendar says you should’ve left Sergyar by now. I can’t wait to see everyone!

Love, Aurelia

I can’t wait to see her, either! I can’t believe we’ll only have Lujayn and Kiona home with us this year. How the hell did that happen? And how will we get everyone outfitted in time? I’m concerned that both boys seem to have grown significantly since we left Barrayar and all the uniforms we pre-ordered will be much too small.

My love, I think this is where you tell me that none of the kiddos need their full winter gear the first week of school and there are plenty of stores in Hassadar and Vorbarr Sultana. I don’t know why I’m so stressed about this! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Are you planning on going from the orbital station to Vorbarr Sultana or Hassadar? Either’s fine, though if you want to see Aurelia first thing, it should be the capitol. ISI is getting every last ounce they can from the team before university terms start.

Fair warning, Simone’s anxious about her role in the District going forward. Alex and I would like her to step into Public Relations full-time after graduation, but she’s afraid of stepping on Victoria’s toes. Never mind that Victoria has no intention of adding a second full-time job to teaching. Simone is also downright brilliant at juggling appearance requests and parceling them out amongst the family so no one is overwhelmed. Laisa would love to scoop Simone up as a junior secretary, but our daughter thinks it’s nepotism, not genuine admiration for her social organization skills. Thank
goodness Selig has a guaranteed job when he graduates. Career insecurity times two would drive us all insane.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I have the most exciting news. Guess who’s been named a regiment commander? Yes, it would be your youngest grandson. Not that I’m bragging, but Nikki, Alexei, Pavel, and Padma never made it higher than company commander. So yay me!

Love, Selig

My love, I won’t mention that studies show company commanders ultimately wind up higher ranked than regimental or battalion commanders. Being in the middle of the chain of command is very valuable experience for active duty. Love, Me

Sorry, my love, I wasn’t pissing on Selig’s accomplishment, just pointing out his bragging was a touch inappropriate. Of course I’m proud of him! Love, Me

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia,

Congratulations on Everard being named a Prefect! After this honor, we doubt you’ll have any worries about his Academy application.

Ekaterin would like you both to join us for the next meeting about Alex and Victoria’s wedding. Let us know some good dates over the next few weeks,

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Why am I so nervous about school starting tomorrow? I already know some people at the Old Town School, I know the armsmen who’ll be with us, and Nile will be in the same building. I feel so stupid considering Perrin has breezed into Academy Prep. Tell me it will all be okay!

Love, Alani

Oh, my love, Perrin’s a better actor than I thought. Alani clearly has no idea he and his roommate hate each other and his Russian teacher is on him already. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Everard warned me that new students get hazed. I was expecting pranks. Not my uniforms and all my shoes except the ones on my feet being totally destroyed. Don’t worry, Everard already took it right up the chain of command. I’m not sure if obnoxious Lord Igor will be expelled, but he’s been removed from our room while his punishment is decided. Jerk thinks his grandfather being a count will save him from the indignity of sharing a room with a prole. He also didn’t think my brother THE PREFECT would remind the Commandant that Cadet Bataille was matched with a new student because none of the continuing students would room with him. Which is great, except a) I need replacement clothes and shoes ASAP and b) Da will likely be called to the school to discuss the situation. I’d suggest dress greens, Da.

Love, Perrin
My love, I just had a Miles moment – I looked at my son’s missive and laughed at the subtle reminder that in a military setting, a retired Fleet Admiral outranks the brother of a traitor. It seems Lord Igor learned nothing from his late uncle’s death.

I’m pleased Perrin was mature enough to want to tell us himself, even if we already know about the situation from the Commandant. I also appreciate Miles’ offer of an escort. Entering campus escorted by Vorkosigan armsmen will be a strong reminder that Lord Igor isn’t the only cadet with connections. Love, Me

No, I’m not considering pulling Perrin from school in the second week. He and Alani need to be separated. You know as well as I that if Alani hadn’t stayed in Hassadar through year 8, Perrin would’ve applied to Academy Prep for year 7. He may not be the strategist Everard is, but the Imperium also needs logistics experts like Ivan, General Haines, and my younger son. Love, Me

Dear Mother and Oliver,

You are so mean! I wanted to watch you slice the Commandant into ribbons and you told me to go to work!

On a more serious note, I’m very glad Lord Igor was expelled. So is Dono, who’s very concerned that Richars Vorruutyer’s sister introduced far too much mental instability into her husband’s line. I’d have expected any competent rep center to flag the extreme aggression common in the Countess’ male descendants. Lord Igor is in line for the countship because his older cousin was disowned after raping a servant. Given how extreme Lord Igor’s behavior is at 14, I wouldn’t be surprised if he grows up to be as sadistic as dear Uncle Ges. If so, I can guarantee he won’t be confirmed as heir. The Vorbataille District deserves better.

The Vorpatril District deserves better, too. Gregor’s long, mostly-peaceful reign has given him an advantage Da never had, to question whether Counts are performing to their District’s and the Imperium’s benefit. No one believes Count Falco didn’t know what his mother was doing. It’s a shame when a young man with huge potential allows anyone to drip poison in his ear, but he did, and must bear the consequences. Granted, this appears an extreme reaction to underpayment of taxes, but the District funds Count Falco slyly diverted from a crucial infrastructure project to his mother last week are proof he cannot be trusted. I don’t envy Dmitri sorting that out. Poor Vorgustafson had steam coming from his ears when we talked. Gregor had that calm, cold look he wears when pushed into a corner and forced to do something extremely unpleasant like sign an execution warrant.

On a more cheerful note, the first Vorkosigan tulip bloomed today. Nile is hoping Victoria will want to carry some in her bridal bouquet. For a brown and silver flower, they’re extraordinarily striking. Just like my extraordinarily talented sister!

Love, Lord Auditor Count Miles Vorkosigan and his extraordinary lady wife

And here I thought the Vorruutyer madness had been contained, my love. I’ll bet Dono is frantic! Lord Igor’s father and uncle were probably body-births, but I doubt he was, which means someone made a conscious decision to ignore the standard aggression screening. Yikes! Love, Me

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Professor Muenster, Dr. Shabunin, and I will officially be released from the M-S Pass project next month. after a series of about-to-be-scraped couriers of various sizes take turns testing our tunnel. Dr. Shabunin says they’ll all come through without an issue. I hope he’s right. So does Stefan, who has no idea why I spend so much time at the ISI, but wishes it could be less. With classes, the ISI, his labs, and wedding planning, we don’t see each other as much as either of us would like.
Did Nile tell you Victoria LOVES her tulips? She cried at the thought of carrying flowers no one else ever had. Madame Vorreedi cried, too. I’m happy that in the tumult of protocol and guests, some things are exclusively about Victoria and Alex.

Alani is doing well. She’s taking dance lessons and joined the student business club. They run the school store. Profits go to the scholarship fund, so there’s incentive to manage the operation well. Unless you’re against non-rich people attending private schools. That’s probably why Lord Igor felt justified picking on Perrin. He wouldn’t be the first High Vor to assume that non-Vor = poor.

Love, Aurelia

Flowers are better than butterbugs, right, my love? Aurelia raises some good assumptions about Vor biases. After all, the current Lord Vorbataille was shocked to meet Admiral Jole (Ret.), not some jumped-up prole determined to better his sons at the expense of these claiming their birthright. Asshole. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

So far, every ship has successfully traversed the M-S Pass in both directions. ISI is debating testing a battle cruiser. I’m of mixed minds. On the one hand, we have to know, but what if it’s too big and blocks the wormhole entirely? All that work would be for naught, plus there’d be multiple casualties. Oh, well, not my decision to make. Though if it were, I’d probably send it and pray.

Love, Helen

Admit it, my love, you want to be on the bridge of the battle cruiser that proves your daughter right. If I didn’t have underage children, I would, too. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m in my cabin looking at hundreds of holos of Alex and Victoria’s wedding. It was truly an amazing day. Laisa just glowed as Coach. It was a lovely way to pull her into the wedding circle and recognize her many contributions to this fairytale event. I can’t wait to brag to my friends about how Nile made Victoria’s flowing bouquet and Simone assisted Delia with all the details of a major event.

I look forward to spending more time with Victoria’s parents. They’re wonderful and kind, appreciative of their daughter’s new title without being fawning. I admire Gregor for keeping his temper and sense of humor when surrounded by sycophants. I know Miles had to issue some courtesy invitations, but really, some of his pretentious professional associates were incredibly tedious. Such a contrast to the bride and groom’s friends and associates, who were lively and polite to a little old foreign lady. I do love not being treated like I’m invisible or demented.

When can we expect my next great-great-grandson? Facetiously yours, Mother

I suspect Gregor would answer, “10 months from now, please.” Would it be tacky to start a pool? Mischieviously, your Oliver

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Part of me wishes we’d witnessed our friends become Lazlo and Raisa Vorpatril-Vorgrankin, Count and Countess Vorpatril, but my wife and I are enjoying being newlyweds at a sunny beach resort. It’s a perfect solution to a thorny problem. Having spent years working for Vorgrankin Building Supply, Lazlo certainly knows business, just as the late Count Anthony’s oldest daughter knows
District. Probably better than her brother, given Raisa worked with their father until their mother boycotted her wedding to a nobody. I wasn’t there; Victoria says it was heart-breaking. After that betrayal, my wife says there is absolutely no danger of Countess Riya absconding with as much as a tenth-mark from the District coffers. Two lingering questions – will Uncle Ivan surrender custody of Countess Raisa’s sisters to her and her husband and what happens to Uncle By and Aunt Rish?

We do not miss the snow. Not when there is sun, sand, and drinks with umbrellas.

Love, the younger Lord & Lady Vorkosigan

If Ivan’s smart, love, he surrenders custody on the condition By and Rish continue to supervise the girls until both graduate secondary school. Nile says they’re both thriving and who knows what Falco and his brother will try to get away with while their sister and brother-in-law are up in the District? Love, Me

****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you for your wise input on the guardianship situation. Lazlo has agreed to give both lads the allowance stipulated for the younger in Anthony’s will, which should be ample for modest town living. Both were horrified by my suggestions that they pay rent somewhere – no, you can’t sponge off your sister and Mamere’s not giving you a free apartment! – and seek regular employment. It will be awkward, which is why I’m glad By and Rish have agreed to stay on to defend Vorpatril House when Lazlo and Raisa aren’t in residence.

For now, Lord Francisco’s oldest is the heir-apparent. That will change once Lazlo and Raisa finally start a family. With luck, they’ll have an heir by next Winterfair. Being a paranoid sort, I’ve suggested the replicator reside in a locked room in Vorpatril House, where no one can meddle with it.

We look forward to seeing you for supper at Mamere’s on Saturday. One last chance to see our songbird, then back to Chaos Colony!

Love, Ivan and Tej
Travels With Gregor

Hey Sis –

Greetings from Vorkosigan Pribyl! We sent Clark home by passenger ship while we went to the Clinic for our regular treatments. Sarah and I are fine; as expected, Mother is becoming less responsive. No concern at this time – Dr. Crocus called her remarkably healthy for almost 130 – but 150 is unlikely. We also should reconsider long trips in the cold, germy winter months. When the time comes, try to convince Taurie and Helen to get married in the spring/summer, okay?

Mark and Dmitri are buried in work. Elena and Baz have agreed to escort us home on Mark’s ship. It’s very kind and much appreciated. Not only are they great company, the four of us will be able to play cards while Mother rests.

Love, John and Sarah

Sad to see that the ominous reports at the MPVK Board meeting are true, my love. Poor Mark, being away from Kareen and Mila is killing him. For a change, we’ve got a fairly straight-forward spring term. Should we be good grandparents and offer to watch Mila so Kareen can be with Mark? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Yes, please, send me my wife! I don’t say this lightly, but having Kareen here will drastically cut down the time spent on getting things back on track and bring us home to our Mila. And you have Martya as back-up if you need to leave Hassadar.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!
Love, your overwhelmed, lonely son

My love, I admire how Mark doesn’t complain about WHY he’s overwhelmed. And I’m sure after two years away, Dmitri’s got much to relearn. Meanwhile, why don’t we invite Kou and Drou to help smooth Mila’s first week without Mama? Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thanks so much for the constant updates. I miss my Mila, but I also miss my husband and our employees in Nuevo Valencia. And knowing how swamped Mark is, it feels good to be focusing on work instead of playdates. The crew is a bit worried that they’re only seeing me for meals and my daily exercises, but I have astronomical amounts of reports to read and stacks of notes.

Love and kisses, Kareen

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The other half of my heart has arrived safely. We’ve sent a vid for Mila. Also ‘thanks for being great kids’ gifts for all three girls.

Dmitri, Charlotte, and I are all stunned at how much Kareen accomplished in flight. We hit the ground running tomorrow!

Love and thanks, Mark and Kareen

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Guess who’s getting knighted next Midsummer? If you said your oldest daughter, you’d be correct. Not before we go joyriding, of course. Our spring break visit to Vervain will be the first official transit through the Muenster-Shabunin Pass. Care to come along? Plenty of room on the flagship for a short voyage. And Vervain does have the most amazing custard pies.

Love, Gregor & Laisa

Hell, yes, I want to go! Do you think Lujayn, Kiona, and Mila would be okay with Alex and Victoria, or should we ask Drou and Kou to visit? Love, Me

Or we could pull them all from school for a week to experience the miracle Aurelia helped create. Alani missing a week probably won’t be an issue, but we can’t assume Nile can just take off in her last term. Especially not with university acceptances still pending. And the boys can’t leave Academy Prep. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We hate to be nervous parents, but we’re not comfortable with Mila traveling to Vervain without us. Olivia has offered to spend the school week in Hassadar and take Mila to visit Grandma and Granda on the weekends. She and Martya will probably leave Enrique in the lab and have slumber parties at Hassadar House!

Love and kisses, Kareen and Mark

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Don’t worry, we’ll keep the home fires burning in Vorbarr Sultana while you bask in my sister’s glory. Aurelia has asked if Stefan could accompany her. Gregor and Laisa have no objection; the final decision is yours. Personally, we’re for it. If this relationship is to continue, Stefan should see exactly how brilliant his girlfriend is.

Love, Miles and Elaterin

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Don’t believe my cousin’s complaints – Lady Mila is enjoying herself immensely. So are Aunt Olivia and Aunt Martya, who are presently wearing 10 different shades of nail polish. I had to take off my fingernail polish, but my toenails remain multi-colored. Vasco and my surgical team can’t stop teasing me about it.

Much as we both want them, we’ve decided to curtail the topic of children until after our second anniversary. KareenVB will be back by then. After the struggles with Bella’s health, we want the best advising us on our reproductive journey.

The only things I know for sure are I don’t want twins or our own volleyball team. Maybe 3, like Vasco’s family, but I want a girl first. Not only do I want to play with more ribbons and nail polish, there’ll be bonus points for pissing off my monster-in-law, who’s been begging us to reproduce since that church sham in Escobar. Nyet. We’ll have children on our clock, not hers.

Everyone is going crazy with the speed of your journey to the Hub. The holo of the Emperor and Crown Prince holding up current Vorbarr Sultana headlines against the backdrop of Vervain’s capital city have elicited every reaction from joy to tears. Also many loonies coming to the hospital
claiming the Emperor’s been kidnapped, the End of Days, or Ceta Conspiracies. Lina’s exhausted. So is every psychologist in the Imperium because my aunt has achieved the impossible. We are so proud!!!

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

P.S. The Emperor telling everyone they were going to Komarr was brilliantly diabolical. We’re sure it also cut down a lot of nerves over the first jump. Helen says everyone on the bridge was as tense as if they were heading into battle. We’re so proud of my sister, too. Do you have any idea how many of those test flights she was on? The best of you and Granda, wrapped up in a tidy bow. EVK-C

My love, does Lizzie have ANY idea of what Aral’s stomach would’ve been like at the thought of Gregor jumping a new wormhole? He’d have been swilling antacids and trying to hide that he was coughing up blood. I haven’t been so nervous for Gregor’s physical safety since the first time he and I were two jumps out from the Hub. I was also incredibly proud to be by my Emperor’s side as he once again put his body where his mouth is. After all, who’d really believe a second wormhole existed if the Emperor wasn’t willing to travel through it?

I am REALLY looking forward to tonight’s celebratory ball. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I am SO glad Aurelia decided to stay put at Vorkosigan House for this academic year. Ever since Gregor announced that the wormhole was discovered by Aurelia Kosigan, the media has been lining up outside the house to catch a glimpse. Sir Vorkuric contacted my secretary begging for an interview. The request was declined with a quip about me being short of time. The receptionist at the District Offices has said no to at least 5 different Vorkuric staffers. Tenacious old bugger!

I sent Gregor a quick note warning him of the media issue. He promised the welcome home press conference will take care of the problem and accused me of worrying too much. He also said you and Laisa enjoyed clothes shopping while he met with Vervaini officials and Helen and Dr. Cam visited the Academy. I hope they’re proud of the soldier they helped create. We certainly are! So, somewhere, are Da and Granda. Without Helen’s support, the M-S Pass would never have come to fruition. I’d say this new chapter in Vorkosigan history belongs to both of them.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We have very exciting news! Count Lazlo has hired two senior accountants from Vorgrankin Building Supply to oversee the Vorpatril District finances. It’ll take some time to relocate two families to New Evias and for us to fully train our successors, but we hope to be living in Hassadar by Midsummer. Temporarily in Hassadar House, but into MPVK Tower once an apartment opens up. Da’s agreed to hire me back and Zane will be interviewing with MPVK next week. With luck, Aunt Martya will take him on to handle some of the finance stuff Charlotte was doing. We can’t wait to get out of here!!!

Love, Taurie and Zane

My love, I think everyone’s agreed that whatever debt House Vorkosigan and House Vorruytier has ever owed House Vorpatril has been repaid. At least Taurie, Zane, and Feodor Vorgustafson’s part in this farce will soon be over. I fear Miles, Ivan, and Gregor have yet to hear the end of this. Young Falco will eventually convince some count to lay charges that his District was unfairly seized. I suspect Miles had already written the legal defense before Falco was disinherited. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Public medal ceremonies are both exciting and terrible. It was wonderful to be recognized as part of a large team working to improve Barrayar. The publicity, not so much. Sir Vorkuric is bombarding everyone, especially me and the professors, with requests for interviews. What part of the Emperor’s ‘No one on the team is free to discuss their work until the commercial applications of this amazing discovery have been thoroughly studied’ is unclear? Go away, you leeches!

Stefan and I had way too much fun yesterday. We borrowed an ISI lab for an afternoon and built the drone repeller net we dreamed up on the Admiral Vorkosigan. It’s a mini force-field, except it neutralizes drones operating on public frequencies. By next week, with the exception of the sports fields, VSU will be a drone-free campus. Adios, peeping students and peeping reporters! Staff at ISI is kindly handling the patent paperwork. Uncle Gregor has already said any profits are ours and a lot of citizens who homes aren’t protected by force-fields may want to invest in a cheaper form of home protection. So we’ll see.

Love, Aurelia the Inventor

My love, I know she said they had an idea, but an afternoon? She and Stefan built the entire thing in an afternoon?? Georg would be so proud! Love, Me

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I tried your comconsoles and wrist coms, but didn’t get through. You MUST call me. I just got accepted to VSU’s honors horticulture program!!!

Love, Nile

My love, what’s our cover story? Department meeting? I doubt you want to mention that we were entertaining Dr. Thatcher. Very, very privately. Love, Me

Dear Mother,

Thanks for worrying the hell out of me when you ignored my override. Also thank Horus no camera was active in the room from which much noise was being made. Also that Nile was not in the room when I tried to contact you.

Grumpily yours, the son who didn’t have a nooner

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Great things are happening on Barrayar! The vid of everyone cheering for Bonnie at her first swim meet were glorious. So was the news of Nile’s university acceptance and the advance MPVK paid Aurelia and Stefan for their anti-drone technology. If it also neutralizes illicit weapons drones, they’ll make a fortune.

I was less happy to hear someone stole most of the money Alani’s store earned. Do they suspect a student or teacher? Also, has Lord Igor really reapplied to Academy Prep for next year? I hope he doesn’t succeed in buying his way back in.

How is Mila doing? Her last letter said she misses her parents. They miss her, too.

I haven’t heard from Everard. When do Academy acceptances go out?
Kareen also tells me that Dmitri and Charlotte are very happy to be together again. One wonders if an announcement is imminent. After all, they’ve been together for years and Dmitri is soon to be an uncle. Yes, Kiona spilled the beans about Alexei and Katya being transferred to Home Fleet in anticipation of starting a family. Will it be one boy or two to start?

Love, Mother

My love, do we wait to tell her that Father Frost is bringing us all a Prince? Otherwise, she seems very well versed on what’s happening around here. Notice she didn’t pass on any Betan news? Is something bad going on? Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia –

The official Academy acceptance letter should arrive soon. Please put it in my room. I’ll probably want to frame it. It’s special, but not as special as being called into the Academy Prep Commandant’s office one by one to hear our fate from the Academy Commandant himself. As Prefect, I went first. Lambros had to wait until they got to ‘S’, which takes a long time without the Vor prefix. By then, about 8 of the 11 who weren’t accepted hadn’t been called in, so my best friend was a bundle of jangling nerves. Not surprising since the acceptance rate is usually about 95%, not this year’s paltry 82%. I understand all but two of the rejections. I guess now the younger cadets will believe our teachers when they say Academy admittance isn’t guaranteed. Perrin’s nervous, which is silly considering how well he’s doing.

Nile and I conferred, and we’d love a joint graduation celebration. Who knows, maybe some of our friends will wind up paired. I certainly wouldn’t mind meeting a nice girl. Neither would Perrin.

Love, Everard

Well, I guess that answers that, my love! I’ll admit to wondering what side of the bed my sons would land on. Or maybe they’re tired of dirty socks and want to give the other gender a try? Love, Me

No, of course it doesn’t matter! Can’t a bi-sexual Barrayaran admiral speculate on possibilities? Especially considering at least two of your grandchildren like both genders? Love, Me

*****

Dear Uncle Oliver,

Da is taking me to Sieglings on Saturday to be measured for my sword set. Would you and the boys like to accompany us?

Love, Selig

I’m sorry, my love, but I’ll have to skip the girls’ swim meet. Swords! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Of course the ballroom is available for a joint graduation celebration! If you like, we can also arrange a large flyer to bring primary school friends from Hassadar. I know Nile’s kept in touch with many friends there. Has Everard?

Selig was resisting a graduation party until Simone and Irina put their feet down, saying it was the last academic milestone they’d be celebrating together. Miles wants to invite the entire Academy class. Ma Roic sighed and said we’ll have to double the food and beer allotment per person. I sincerely hope no one vomits in the pool. Or has sex before they leave the party.

I wondered when Selig and Simone were born how we’d feel when they graduated university, a full
two decades after Nikki. It’s terrific. We’ve succeeded in raising seven good, caring adults. And thanks to your using the gift Aral left you, we’ve had the opportunity to influence five more. That’s the dozen my ringmaster husband wanted, with the bonus of Kiona and Lujayn lurking in the future.

The Duronas have kept age from catching up physically, but the children, all of them, keep us from aging mentally. They’ve also helped keep us on an even keel when idiots like Riya Vorpatril moan that no one can possibly understand what it’s like to be widowed with underage children. Tell it to all the other women widowed in the bombings who could live the rest of their lives on a month of your allowance! And no, no one expected any more from your overburdened, sad Falco than they did from our Alex or Dowager Countess Vorhalas’ Rulf. Far less, in fact, given Gregor’s assistance. It would’ve been nice if Taurie had been supporting our son instead of yours when we went off-world to prevent my husband’s early demise.

Yes, I’m still resentful on many levels. Riya and Falco’s condolences were conspicuously absent from the mountain my cousins receiving acknowledging the passings of Aunt and Uncle Vorthys and young Grisha. I didn’t tell Ivan or Gregor. There was no point getting them more distressed at this early indication that Anthony had failed to teach his son any of the responsibilities of his station.

Going deeper into the well of maliciousness, I appreciate the irony that a woman who ignored me and my oldest due to our lowly antecedents now finds herself a virtual outcast. Luckily, Riya failed to poison her oldest. Countess Raisa was obviously her lovely grandmother’s shadow. She’s also smart enough to make use of Lady Alys’ and Lady Tej’s vast knowledge on making things right and proper.

I shall now endeavor to stop whining like a spiteful teenager, but it’s hard. Almost three years later, it’s still soul-crushingly hard knowing that Grisha and scores of other children will never grow up, never graduate secondary school or university, never fly on a spaceship or get married and have children of their own. It’s also sad that a woman who openly despised her husband has obliterated his proud legacy and ruined his sons. Or as Byerly puts it, when they kill themselves from excess, he hopes they don’t take any innocents with them. My therapist agrees.

This letter has gotten far more somber than I expected. I could erase half of it, but then it wouldn’t be a true picture of my mixed emotions as the third anniversary of the bombing approaches. As wonderful as my son’s creation is, I still get a knot in my stomach when we go to the new Municipal Stadium. I wish Simone’s graduation was being held at the Opera House, but then they’d have to ration seats.

Let me know when you have time to chat and we’ll start talking parties. Or maybe we’ll just talk. I may have more to let out than I thought.

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

Yes, my love, our lovely daughter-in-law has a lot of pent-up anger toward Riya Vorpatril. I don’t blame her in the least. A snobby, uncaring thief subjecting Taurie to a constant stream of abuse is totally worthy of Ekaterin’s disdain.

Do you think two parties will be too much for Ekaterin? We could always rent out the Stadium instead. I joke! Love, Me

Okay, as long as you’re sure. Once the university graduations are past, we can take turns spending time in Vorbarr Sultana helping with our kiddos’ celebration. And no, I’m not offering strictly so I can see Graham! Love always, your Oliver

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
Thanks for the holos of the sword shopping. I could feel the testosterone oozing. Too bad Helen wasn’t there to temper it a bit. Seriously, though, I’m so glad Everard and Lambros achieved the next step of their military dream. I know they’ve worked very, very hard to be top of the class.

Thank you for the invitation to visit you on Sergyar, but I think I’ll stay put this summer. Next year.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

I hope you’re prepared for a Midsummer wedding next year because a very special economist said yes to my proposal the other day. Please don’t tell the troops yet because there’ll be no official announcement until we (along with Mama and Da) visit Earth to tell Charlotte’s family in person. For variety, the betrothal ceremony will take place in the Barrayaran Embassy in London.

You probably know Aurelia’s wormhole cuts almost three weeks from the round-trip to Earth. Charlotte and I will meet the Admiral Vorkosigan at the Jacksonian orbital station. I’ve only met the Earl and Countess Sandwich a few times, so I’m a bit nervous. So is Mama. Da’s not. He says the M-S Pass is proof the Empire is at the forefront of scientific discovery, not a stagnant backwater without relevance.

Love, Dmitri and Charlotte

My love, why have we never gone to Earth together? Perhaps we should take a sabbatical there when Kiona and Lujayn finish secondary school. Only six more years. That doesn’t sound as far away as it used to, does it? Or maybe we should take a family trip for your milestone birthday in two years. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I know you’re in class or I’d be calling. The Midsummer knighthoods list was just released. How could you not tell me that I might be on it???

I am shocked. Completely, utterly shocked. Also thrilled for Professor Muenster and Dr. Shabunin, who deserve every award the Imperium can give them. Not just for their accomplishments, but for every child on three planets who wonders why they’re required to learn boring things like math and astronomy.

Amazedly yours, Aurelia

My love, will she believe we didn’t know because we recused ourselves from considering the Minister’s nominations? And how proud we are of this once-in-a-lifetime event? Love, Me

*****

Dear Miles, Ekaterin, Tante Cordelia, Oliver, Aunt Alys, and Simon,

We hope our nieces and nephew understand how much we regret missing their graduations and party. They were so dazzling mature, Selig in parade dress and Simone and Irina in cap and gown. The party vids and holos looked like everyone was enjoying themselves. Thanks for not including holos of planters used as vomit vessels. We did wonder why all the outside planters looked so – pedestrian? ordinary? plain? – in the set-up vid. Good thinking on your part, Ekaterin!

Mila sent a very funny letter praising the party, food, and music. She also complained that Selig’s friends were very loud when she was trying to sleep!
Thanks to your generous help watching our daughter, our urgent stack is much reduced. I’m happy to report that we will absolutely, positively meet you at Sergyar Station, even if it means Dmitri and Charlotte don’t sleep until they board the flagship. Yes, we’re demanding bosses, but we’re not going on vacation for most of the summer. We are determined to relax more. Mark’s suggested taking Mila to see Grandma Elizabeth. I’m fine as long as we get our Sergyar vacation first.

I’m sure you all saw our letter to Aurelia, but we want to congratulate you six, too. From wall-holes to wormholes, all because you gave a prodigy the tools she needed to explore her extraordinary natural gifts. We can’t wait to see what happens next!

Love and kisses, Kareen and Mark
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re sorry to have missed Everard and Nile’s celebration, but duty called. Green Park Hospital didn’t want to see our daughter go, but Kareen’s always been clear that she was returning to Barrayar after learning everything she could about reproductive science. She’s anxious to interview some rep centers in Vorbarr Sultana before we embark on our journey to Earth. Dr. Sutherland has a job lined up at Vorbarr Sultana Hospital. He’s expressed great appreciation for the free ride!

It’s Alexei’s turn to stay home – he’s been seconded to Ops so a certain little fetus doesn’t get lonely while Gramma and Granda visit Aunt Charlotte’s family. Pavel’s traveling with Dmitri and Charlotte to the Whole, so at least the Montagus will get to meet our youngest. Pavel has promised to behave. We don’t believe him.

Looking forward to seeing you at the Midsummer Ball!
Love, Dr. Kareen Vorbarra’s proud parents

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

You threw a great party yesterday. Selig and Simone’s celebration was raucous and fun; this was just adorable, watching two groups awkwardly interact until everyone got comfortable. Mother, thanks again for NOT sending me to an all-male secondary school. It was painfully obvious some of Everard’s friends had never danced with girls before. Perrin, meanwhile, was flirting up a storm, showing the older cadets how it’s done. Ekaterin also said this was the first teen party in our house where not a single girl wound up crying in the lav. Trust me, it’s tedious!

Simon was amazed how some parents were so shocked that Nile and Aurelia are moving into Irina’s apartment. Apparently, it’s okay for boys to board at VSU, but not girls. What horse manure! Especially considering that the only reason Aurelia didn’t move out two years ago was she was too busy DISCOVERING A WORMHOLE!!! Well, and she didn’t want Alani to feel abandoned, but mostly the wormhole and the anti-drone field. ISI wants Stefan Vorlakial so badly, they’re willing to pay for his graduate work. That’s not an offer they make frequently. I checked.

Every time I worry about Alani being the only one with us next year, I remember that her sisters will come for dinner often and your middle daughter is the only one who thrives on quiet. It’s just so odd to those of us who don’t.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

This may’ve been the best Midsummer Ball since Gregor and Laisa’s wedding. Don’t get me wrong, Alexei and Katya’s wedding was wonderful (as Dmitri and Charlotte’s will be), but life-changing events like Imperial heir announcements and knighthoods aren’t that common. I guarantee a certain college student will see academic doors open all over the nexus. All hail Lady Aurelia Vorkosigan! Huzzah!

Love, your inebriated son and his tipsy wife

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
And we’re off to court the in-laws! This should be VERY interesting!

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

You know what’s better than holos of shiny medals? Loved ones wearing them! Everyone here is so proud of Helen and Aurelia! Holding the Imperial Science medals ceremony immediately after the knighting was a brilliant way to share the spotlight with the hordes who made the M-S Pass a reality. Also, this retired lab rat enjoys seeing awkward, mostly-covert scientists being celebrated!

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

When can we expect you? We’re packed and ready to leave Escobar. We can’t wait to hug our Mila and everyone else. Ivan and Tej want everyone to spend the first night with them before we go down to Port Nightingale. Seems reasonable to us.

Love, Mark and Kareen

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ve succeeded in finagling a free weekend! We’ll see you Friday.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Hey Sis –

Got some bad news. Mother fell and broke her shoulder. Silica Hospital made her comfortable and consulted with the Clinic before doing anything aggressive. Dr. Freesia, the orthopedics specialist, insists we bring her to the Clinic for the replacement. We’re leaving for Escobar tonight. Can you please meet us there?

Love, John and Sarah

*****

To: CNVorkosigan, OPJole, Vorkosigan, MPVorkosigan
From: NEVorsoisson

There’s a fast courier leaving in the morning for Beta via Escobar. Can you be ready? ---- Nikki

---

From: CNVorkosigan

Yes. Will need three berths, me and two armsmen. Thanks, kiddo! --- Grandma

---

From: MPVorkosigan

Keep us posted on ETA. We think the Betan shuttle will arrive before you. --- Mark

---

From: Vorkosigan

Do we need to come out? Don’t hesitate if the answer is yes. --- Miles

---

From: CNVorkosigan
At the Clinic. Mother insisted on waiting on me. The surgery is tomorrow. Dr. Freesia also wants to examine my clicky knee. My brother says he’ll tie me to the exam table if I don’t cooperate. I’m outnumbered!

---

From: MPVorkosigan

Grandma Elizabeth came through surgery beautifully. Mother isn’t nearly so cooperative. Dr. Freesia wants to replace both knees and give her some Rejuvenation treatments while she recovers. We could use some support here. Nikki, can you get Oliver on a courier? ---- Mark

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

I’m on my way to join the chorus determined to improve your quality of life. None of what’s proposed are life extension treatments, love, merely quality control. How will you dance at Dmitri’s wedding with bad knees? Or pace the floors of Hassadar House with the 13th Count Vorkosigan and his siblings and cousins?

A very long time ago, I promised to be by your side until death do us part. I’m doing everything I can, including life extension treatments, to keep that promise. Now it’s your turn to stop being so stubborn and make sure you’re physically capable of all the adventures to come in the next decades.

Love always, your Oliver

****

Dear Mother,

How are you and Grandma Elizabeth feeling? Uncle Mark swears you’re both recovering well. Uncle Ivan has a ship lined up for Nikki and Orlov to bring us to Escobar to see you. Aunt Tej may come, too. She’s wonderful at keeping everyone calm and focused. Nile, Everard, and I alternate always being with Kiona and Lujayn. They understand what’s happening, they’re just not used to being without you or Uncle Oliver for more than a few days. Alani and Perrin are doing okay. Both are visiting old friends and trying their best to remain cheerful. It’s stupid, but none of us will believe you and Grandma are okay until we see you.

Love, Aurelia and the rest of the troops

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Slight change in plans. I commandeered a courier the day after we received Uncle John’s note. We’re a day out from Sergyar, where we’ll join Nikki and Tej and make all appropriate haste to bring the troops to your side.

Love, Miles and Helen

He must be worried, love, to leave Barrayar when Gregor’s away charming the future in-laws. Or else he planned on shouting to get yourself looked at by a medical team he trusts implicitly. Though I don’t imagine Alexei and Katya will let any harm come to a certain replicator at the Residence.

Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia,

We’re so glad to hear you and your mother are recovering well. We’re ever happier that you’re allowing Dr. Crocus to give you a tune-up. Simon and I swear she’s a miracle worker! And honestly, after all of Miles’ bone replacements, we don’t understand why you balked at a procedure that’s been standard for centuries.
Simon, Drou, Kou, and I were talking. Don’t worry if Oliver and the children need to leave before you’re ready to travel. With Ekaterin’s and Kareen’s help, we’ll make sure everyone is properly outfitted and reports to school in a timely fashion. We’ll even make sure to take your ‘first day of school’ holos.

Much love, Alys and Simon

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We’re confused – wasn’t it Our turn to have summer adventures? More seriously, we’re told everyone is being a good patient. That’s wonderful. It’s also wonderful that a certain retired Vicereine actually paused to take care of herself for a change.

Adventures we did have! Charlotte’s family is very nice, once they relax. The ancestral home is magnificent, if crowded on tourist days. Their chef does the most marvelous afternoon tea. Sadly, he’s not interested in emigrating. I tried.

The Earl and Countess are resigned to their daughter being wed on Barrayar, subject to a second wedding in the family chapel and a large reception thereafter. Given the distance, Laisa and I made no promises to attend; we will likely send Alexei and Katya in our place. Lady Montagu was very relieved to learn that Charlotte’s wedding attire is entirely up to her and the horse part of the ritual was optional for the second son. Charlotte was wavering until her father said, “Horse hair on your bridal gown, luv. And sidesaddle will leave terrible creases.”

The betrothal ceremony went off without a hitch. Ambassador and Lady Vorinnis are clearly ready for a more demanding assignment. We shall see what’s available.

Despite missing Dr. Sutherland, our daughter is enjoying the trip. We hope they’ll be as successful as Lizzie and Vasco in luring other doctors back to Barrayar. We believe some of their classmates are waiting to hear about Vorbarr Sultana Hospital before deciding to relocate. We’ll be disappointed if Dr. Sutherland isn’t impressed by the Trustees’ constant push to bring VSH up to galactic standards.

In case you’re wondering, ImpSec has scoured Dr. Sutherland’s background. His professional reputation is impeccable. The Sutherland clan is a respectable, upper-middle class family. Many are in the medical field. We’d want to meet the family before giving our blessing, but so far, Kareen’s long-time beau raises no red flags.

Pavel is thrilled some of Charlotte’s younger cousins are coming to the wedding. He plans to flirt with as many young ladies as possible. As long as there aren’t any incriminating holos and no one gets pregnant accidently, we don’t care.

Love, The Thankfully-Socially-Acceptable Vorbarra Family

Isn’t it funny, my love, how one can be THE social pinnacle at home, yet be far less relevant elsewhere? It also sounds like Pavel’s sowing plenty of wild oats. Good for him! Gregor’s life was so constrained at that age. Aral would be so proud of how hard he and Laisa worked to make sure their children weren’t. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m seconding Aunt Alys’ concern about a certain stubborn redhead trying to rush her recovery to travel home with the troops. Nyet. You’ll be discharged when the doctors say so. Alex and Simone have District issues well in hand. There’s no reason your sons can’t stay by your bedside until you’re declared cured. ImpSec will happily work out your transportation when that day approaches.
I know there’s some disappointment at not being able to help Aurelia and Nile move, but honestly, there’s not a lot to be done other than shifting personal possessions. And not even all of them, as we anticipate frequent overnight stays. We found with Simone that living in two places meant she needed more loungewear and slippers. Can you imagine what Sir Vorkuric would say if he knew Lord Auditor Count Vorkosigan mostly sleeps in hand-me-down ship knits?

Love, Ekaterin

Dear Grandma,

We’re all on the ship except you, Da, and Uncle Miles. I miss you already. Hurry up and get better so you can come home to Hassadar.

Love, Mila

Hey Sis –

We’re half-way home and Mother is doing very well. The nurse Mark hired is terrific. So is your son. Twice a day, he does all of Mother’s rehab exercises with her. Watching him gently coax Mother to stretch when she’s tired is just beautiful.

Love, John and Sarah

Dear Mother,

Why can’t Kiona and I stay with Uncle Ivan and Aunt Tej until you’re ready to go home? Didn’t you say you’d probably be home before our classes started?

Love, Lujayn

My dearest Cordelia,

I’ve already told the girls that divide and conquer doesn’t work and the eight of us (ten with Kareen and Mila) are leaving for Barrayar together. All our belongings are packed. Yours are, too. Tej has taken your bags back to Gridgrad in case you feel well enough to stop over for Daniel and Dyana hugs. If not, someone will bring your things to the orbital station and you’ll continue on your journey home to us.

Love always, your Oliver

To: Vorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, EBothari-Jesek
From: MPVorkosigan

Grandma is safely back in her apartment. The nurse will stay with her for a month. I left Uncle John a credit chit in case Grandma still needs help after that.

I should be back to Escobar in about 4 days. Do we have an estimate of how much longer Dr. Freesia and Dr. Peony are holding everyone hostage?

---

Dr. Freesia says about 4 days. ImpSec will have a very fast escort ship waiting. Sorry, love, we talked them down from 3 to 1, but they wouldn’t budge after that.

---
From: Vorkosigan

Excuse me, I was never admitted to the Clinic this trip. All the outpatient work is done and Drs. Watson & Amiri have formulated me even better arthritis blockers. I’ve been exercising beside Mother with no ill effects.

I ordered a set of the rehab equipment Mother will need so she can continue exercising aboard ship. She snarled at me.

---

From: EBothari-Jesek

I wish you could’ve seen them wrangle, Mark. SOMEONE thought she was done with rehab when she was released. It was a great show.

You can’t leave until Aunt Cordelia’s had a good night’s sleep followed by a long shower. We’ll order food the day she’s discharged so we can have a proper farewell dinner before you fly off. It’s been nice to have my aunt and foster brothers to myself for long stretches. Love, Elena

---

From CNVorkosigan

You three keep talking about me like I don’t have a brain left and I’ll pound all your heads together. I love you all. CNVK

*****

To: Vorbarra, KLVorbarra, CNVorkosigan, Vorkosigan, MPVorkosigan, ENVorkosigan, EVorkosigan-Cortez, KKVorkosigan

From: OPJ

The Emperor will’ve seen the official reports by now, but I have news for the rest of you. We were all sound asleep, about midway between Komarr and Barrayar, when the artificial grav failed. We’re all fine except Lujayn, who smacked her head flailing around. On-board doctor has diagnosed a mild concussion and is watching her closely. Just in case, however, we’d like to have Vasco, Dr. Sutherland, and a pediatric neurologist of their choosing meet us at the orbital station. Thanks, OPJ

---

From: Vorbarra

Doctors have all been notified to meet you. Reports are unclear. Is the artificial grav fixed, or has it failed again?

---

From: KKVorkosigan

Parts of the ship are stable; the sleeping quarters are not. Oliver is in sick bay with Lujayn. The rest of us are packing in preparation for transferring to one of the escort ships. Kiona is very upset she insisted on taking the bottom bunk. Kudos to Alani for making sure Mila vomited in a bag the third time the grav cut out.

---

From: OPJole

Because the escort ships are smaller, Kareen is taking everyone but Aurelia and Everard to the second ship. The three of us plus Lujayn are transferring to the third ship, which has a bigger sick bay. Lujayn is oriented and passing all the tests, but is very tired. The doctor says rest is good and we all need some.

From: ENVorkosigan
Vasco’s on his way. He says they’ll likely take Lujayn directly to VHS for tests, but are unlikely to admit her. I have rooms ready for everyone.
---
From: CNVorkosigan

So much for ImpSec keeping us all safe, Gregor. Has anyone checked the ship’s maintenance logs yet?
---
From: OPJole

Yes, my love. The records aboard ship are deficient. I angrily confiscated them for comparison with Home Fleet’s official records. Nobody questioned my tirade about my sick child. But really, she’s doing much better and we’re almost home.
---
From: EVorkosigan-Cortez

To Dr. Shaw’s surprise, we’re on our way to ImpMil, not VHS. Everyone agrees this is more than just a slight head-bump. If Lujayn is to be admitted, which is a possibility, the Emperor wants her in a hospital with top notch security.
---
From: OPJole

We’re at ImpMil. No signs of any brain bleeds, so no surgery required, just lots of rest and therapeutic exercises like puzzles. No real exercise until further notice.
---
From: Vorkosigan

Much to our escort ship’s dismay, we’re traveling faster than they deem advisable. We’re almost to Komarr. Please have a faster escort waiting.
---
From: Vorbarra

ImpSec wants you to dock for an hour at Komarr station so the escort teams may confer. They will also be handing over Fleet maintenance logs for auditorial inspection. I want to be sure this was an accident, not a maintenance cover-up.
---
From: Vorkosigan

Two more fast couriers are overdue for routine maintenance. I smell an audit of Home Fleet in my future. If so, I’m commandeering Captain Entsky to assist.
---
From: Vorbarra

I’ll meet you at Vorkosigan House when you arrive. Lujayn and most of the troops will be there waiting. Everard and Perrin have reported to their respective Academies. Cordelia, are you doing your stretches?
---
From: MPVorkosigan

Damn straight she is. She’s also walking better than she has in over a decade. Miles and I are relentless coaches.
---
From: Vorkosigan
It’s payback for a childhood of: Just one more set of stretches, Miles!
---
From: CNVorkosigan:

Point, Vorkosigan. Are we there yet?
---
From: MPVorkosigan

One more day, Mother, before you can stop pretending we’re torturing you. Oliver, how’s the newest patient?
---
From: OPJole

Very tired and headachy. Alani’s an excellent help to Kareen and Ekaterin when I’m not around and our college students are in class. Dean Andronova is very understanding of me flying back and forth to Hassadar for classes and office hours. Some of the students aren’t. Yes, I’m normally on campus every day for the first few weeks, but professors DO have lives outside of class and everyone knows my lead assistant is recovering from surgery.
---
From: Vorbarra

Welcome to my life, Oliver. No matter how much I accomplish in a day, I’ve disappointed somebody by not giving their issue my full attention.
---
From: Vorkosigan

We’re about to board the shuttle to the civilian spaceport. Ask Farkas to send a separate vehicle for the luggage. Vorkosigan out.
*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

This past summer was not the carefree one we anticipated. While we’re happy you and Grandma Elizabeth are recovering well, we’re very upset Lujayn was injured by shoddy maintenance. Anna has reviewed all of Sergyar Fleet’s maintenance logs. Everything ground-based is pristine, as we expected from Yulia’s perfectionist husband. Space-based looks good, too. A few ships out on missions are slightly overdue for overhauls, but they’ll jump to the head of the line when they return.

We’re hearing some rumors that Komarr and Home Fleets are finding far more issues than they should and that the Admiral Vorkosigan was sent to Earth with some fabricated maintenance logs. WTF? Is that considered treason?

Daniel and Dyana love this year’s teachers. It’s great because Dyana’s year 3 teacher was very lax on discipline and there were a couple of bullies in the class. Enlisted men’s children taunting the officers’ kids is an issue at the base school. There are other school options in Gridgrad that we may consider in the future, but for now, it’s more convenient for both Anna and our nanny to have them on base.

Lizzie says Lujayn’s cycling through the stages of post-concussive syndrome and is struggling to keep up in school. Anna suggested maybe Lujayn should focus on 3 or 4 subjects and let the rest slide. I can’t imagine trying to read in three different alphabets after a head injury. As parents of twins, we understand Lujayn wanting to keep up with Kiona, but not at the expense of her long-term recovery.

We hope you’re both taking care of yourselves. Please keep us posted on everyone’s aches and
pains. In the meantime, enjoy some vids of the twins!

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana
Lujayn Saves the Day

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Integrating our Academy class is taking longer than I’d hoped. Unfortunately, the other Sergyarans are rather clique-ish. So are the Komarrans and our 4 female cadets. Then there’s a fresh dose of Vor privilege. Sadly, there are more scions like Lord Igor Vorbataille who think their das, uncles, and grandas rule the Imperium. I’d love to lock some of these conceited blockheads in a room with Miles for an hour. I think it would be…informative. Also a bit scary for those who enjoy making fun of anyone who struggles to keep up in any way.

If it sounds like I’m unhappy, I assure you the opposite is true and there’s no place else I’d rather be. I’m doing well academically and many of the Academy Prep boys are emerging as leaders in the other training areas. I’m confident that if I keep working hard, I’ll do my Da proud.

Love, Everard

Nature or nurture, my love? Is Everard destined to be a leader because it’s in his DNA, or because Miles and I told him too many soldier stories? Love, Me

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Yes, we’re attending Perrin’s first judo match of the season. If you’re not up to it, stay home. I can tell you’re having residual knee pain, Mother. You need to keep doing your exercises. Maybe Lizzie can arrange for you to do some rehab when Lujayn has her sessions.

As for Lujayn’s schoolwork, I’m confused by your stubbornness. Why haven’t you asked the certified teacher living under the same roof for help? Victoria may not teach the higher years, but she has plenty of experience with learning issues. Simone could help, too. Use your resources!

Alani has done very well on recent schoolwork. She loves the business classes. Her finance class is managing a mock stock portfolio. So far, they’re up 12% over the VSSE 100 index. At this rate, Mark may give her some real money to invest!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

College midterms are no joke! Aurelia and I studied and studied. I feel I did well. It’s nice to have Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon upstairs for when we need a break or something other than snacks. Two students new to living on their own haven’t quite mastered grocery shopping and meal prep. Stefan’s great at it. He’s also very kind about cooking for at least three. Six if Lambros is around. I swear he’s eating more than ever, but doesn’t have an ounce of fat on him. It’s rather annoying, actually, but then I don’t want to exercise as ferociously as the armsmen. Lambros was a bit crestfallen that Lukin runs faster than he does.

I’m thinking of coming home next weekend. I want to see my little sisters and Bonnie and Mila have invited me to their swim meet. Not sure Aurelia can make it. I think she and Stefan have a party.

How are your knees, Mother? Do I have to send Lambros down to supervise rehab?

Love, Nile

A very small part of me misses those bygone days when I could eat anything because my sergeants
sweated it off me. I’m thrilled our girls are happy and that Lukin continues to watch over them. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Even with a medical waiver for physical stuff, I don’t know how Miles kept up at the Academy. It’s like they purposely schedule our classes all over campus so we get extra running in. The midterm test schedule was INSANE! I’m waiting for most of my marks, but the first ones were very good. Better than Victoria’s cousin and Cadet Taine, who’re both shaping up to be strong competition.

We have a free weekend, just in time for Lambros’ sister’s betrothal. He hasn’t said which one, but it doesn’t matter because Savalas family gatherings are always fun. I didn’t say that his grandmother’s spit-roasted lamb is even better than Ma Kosti’s.

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

No, I wasn’t invited to the Savalas betrothal. Which is fine because a) I don’t want nosy aunts telling two college freshman we’re next and b) as far as these people know, I’m 100% Betan. Not being at least part Greek is bad enough, but not being at least part Barrayaran is a total crime against humanity. Also, I’m a reminder that Everard’s father lives in sin with a woman twice his age. Or some such drivel.

Has Everard mentioned that the Savalas family still clings to TOI ideas about women and education? It will be quite a fight when Lambros’ youngest sister pushes to go to university. She wants to be a nurse or lab tech.

Aurelia definitely has weekend plans. Lukin will fly me down after class on Friday.

Love, Nile

My love, are you as sure as I that Lambros’ parents will tell their daughter that there’s no money left for her to attend university because they spent it all securing their son’s future? They wouldn’t be the first and, until the Imperium has universal free college education, they surely won’t be the last. It’s a damn shame because if the baby sister is half as smart as Lambros, she’s very bright.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Happy anniversary to us! Alex is right, tropical beaches are very romantic. They’re also a good place to think. By next anniversary, we want to be holding our baby girl. No names yet – we’ll decide when she’s born – but this is your very advance notice of more great-grandchildren on the way.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

Oh, that’s very exciting, my love. I haven’t held a newborn in some time.

Love, Me

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

What a hideous day! Lujayn’s tears when she confessed her headache was so bad, she couldn’t see to press the correct button on her wrist comm tore at my heart. Everyone else’s, too, once the adrenaline of the false intruder alarm wore off. I’m so grateful Lina had the day off and could rush over instead of us trying to take our baby girl to the hospital. I also appreciate Vasco’s honesty that Lujayn is pushing herself too hard and she needs to rest, rest, rest. We need to be stronger about limiting her activity because as much as Vorkosigans try, you can’t grit your teeth and will yourself
better from a brain injury. As Miles emphasized when he rushed from Vorbarr Sultana with the neurologist. His conversational tone when he described how his seizures start served to get more information from Lujayn about how she was feeling since the first days after the grav fail.

Miles’ investigation will accelerate with proof it wasn’t just a minor mechanical problem. He also lectured me that there was no guarantee it wouldn’t have happened on another flight if we’d relented and let Kiona and Lujayn travel with you aboard Mark’s ship. Maybe not to one of our kiddos, but to someone alone in a cabin for hours until the chaos wore off and they were missed. Kiona holding her sister so she wouldn’t bump her head again saved Lujayn from worse injury. A single person could’ve bounced their way into a skull fracture. Or worse.

We must make time tomorrow to sit with Kiona and explain Lujayn’s condition. I’m afraid she got short shrift from everyone except Simone. I truly appreciate Simone rushing over to help as soon as the alarms stopped clanging. I’m not surprised Kiona vomited from stress. I came close myself. You can train yourself to work through your soldiers being hurt, but not your children. Never your children.

I love you more than words can say. Your Oliver

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Do you need us to come home and spend the weekend with Kiona? Stefan, Nile, Alani, and I make a great cheering section. We’re great listeners, too.

Love, Aurelia

My love, we need to stop being stubborn and allow the troops to sweep in and help. It’ll make everyone feel better. Especially Alani, who’ll happily sit quietly by Lujayn’s bedside while you or I rest. Between classes and doctors, I’m pooped. And I’m not the one nursing our girl at night. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma,

Please stop trying to be in 500 places at one time. Vasco has found you two pediatric occupational therapists willing to alternate day shifts so you can cover your classes and office hours without worrying about Lujayn. They’ll also help her with the rehabilitative exercises the neurologist prescribed.

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia

We have a free weekend coming up. Can I come home, or should I go to Vorkosigan House?

Love, Perrin

Worst Da on Barrayar, right here! I meant to write Perrin last week to tell him he could travel with Everard, Lambros, and Nile, and I forgot. If I grade your quizzes, can you convince our boys I haven’t forgotten them? Love, Me

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

The Imperium seems to think we’re popping the cork after the Winterfair Ball, on Uncle Miles and Aunt Ekaterin’s anniversary. Nope, we’re doing it several days earlier, the morning of Alex and
Victoria’s anniversary. Assuming everything goes smoothly, we’re planning on hunkering down for at least a week at one of Da’s country estates with Lizzie, Vasco, and vast amounts of diapers and potent potables. If you’d like to witness the birth, please join us at the Residence at 11am sharp. Lunch will be provided after everyone admires our offspring.

Love, Alexei and Katya

I didn’t really want to attend a faculty meeting, my love. Who would, when offered the chance to be part of history? Notice the invitation is for us only? Let’s not tell the troops until after the baby’s here. I’m sure there’ll be way too many people present as it is. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

In an effort to avoid alerting people that something’s going on, we’re scattering arrivals to the Residence. You two, Drou and Kou, and Alys and Simon, are invited to spend the evening before with us, Alexei and Katya, Madame Entsky, and my parents telling stories from our childhoods. Food and lodging will be provided.

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Mother,

I suspect you know that Stefan and I just received our first royalty checks for MPVK’s drone-net. I’d like to treat you, Aunt Alys, Ekaterin, and Nile to a spa day after finals. I figure we’ll have all earned some relaxation by then!

Love, Aurelia

P.S. The first draft of my Masters’ thesis is written. I’m hoping some of the family will read it over Winterfair break. I can’t wait for everyone to gather for Father Frost! I hope he brings LOTS of maple crunch bars. Stefan loves them. ANVK

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’ll be home soon – my ship will be providing an escort for Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril. Nikki, Anna, and the twins will be on the same ship. Unfortunately, Cam cannot take an extended vacation during the holiday season, so we’ll be flying back and forth between the capitol and Seligrad. Cam is a bit annoyed I’ve asked it to wear a suit to the Winterfair ball. It loves ball gowns almost as much as I do, but the uproar if I wore my dress uniform would not be beneficial to my career.

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Mother,

All my term papers and horticultural projects have been submitted and I’m halfway through exams. We have the best landlord in the District. She has food delivered every day. Aurelia and I ate our weight in stroganoff yesterday. It was delicious, soothing, and far tastier than the rat-bars Aurelia shoves in my school bag. I fear all that time in space has numbed her taste buds.

Love, Nile

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I don’t love rat-bars, but they’re better than eating every fried thing in the school cafeteria. One of my
friends has gained two kilos and an acne outbreak from junk food binges. I don’t want my sister making her official debut covered in pimples!

Everard says Lambros is nervous. I don’t see why. As far as I’m concerned, the uniform he wears is far superior to many men who wear House uniforms without being at all relevant to the line of succession. Speaking of, there are rumors on campus that the Vorpatril brothers are planning on crashing the ball. That could get ugly, especially for Uncle Ivan and Uncle By. Can you please tell Uncle Gregor?

Back to studying!
Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Had Aurelia called, I’d have assured her that Falco Vorpatril is persona non grata at the Residence. Falco is feeling his oats, having convinced Count Vormoncrief to lay charges of usurping his seat against his brother-in-law. Gregor’s got at least 50 votes, which makes the whole thing a waste of time. Should be good theater as the Dowager Countess manipulate her brother-in-law into embarrassing himself defending her. Yes, I said her. If Lazlo and Raisa Vorpatril-Vorgrankin were at all malleable, Riya wouldn’t care which of her children inherited the countship.

The case will be called right after Winterfair, so Ivan and Dmitri will be available to testify. You might want to bring Lujayn and Kiona to see our political process at work. Who knows, maybe there’ll be another marriage proposal!

Love, Count Vorkosigan, who has much better things to do with his time

If you’re tied up with the MPVK annual meeting, my love, I’ll gladly take the girls to Vorhartung. Not only will this be quite a show in its own right, I think they’ll enjoy seeing so many familiar faces testify. I certainly will! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Prince Artem Gregor is absolutely adorable! I wasn’t expecting him to be so fair, but I guess Laisa’s and Katya’s genes superseded the Vorbarra ones. Alexei and Katya look so happy, without a touch of new parent anxiety. It’s lovely.

Mila’s unhappy she was excluded from your spa trip. I believe it’s good for our little lady to hear ‘no’ once in a while. We don’t want her totally spoiled!

My shoulder is a bit stiff, but functional. I suspect it would be very uncomfortable in the Barrayaran winter. How are your knees? More importantly, how’s Lujayn’s head? She hasn’t written to me since before the accident. I miss her letters.

Closing with a bit of good news: Clark will be a grandfather in about 6 months. We’re all very excited.

Love, Mother

*****

To: Farkas, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, ENVorkosigan, MPVorkosigan, KKVorkosigan, AAVorkosigan, VVorkosigan, AVorpatril, SIllyan, IXVorpatril, TVorpatril, Kasun, ANVorkosigan, NNKosigan

From: Vorkosigan
Emergency Protocol A.

Kerfuffle at Vorhartung. Potential perpetrator arrested. No injuries, thanks to Lujayn and Oliver. All safe. Details to follow.
---
From: IXVorpatril

Vorpatril District challenge hearing postponed. Falco almost pissed himself when Oliver tossed one of Tomas Vormuir’s replicator farm daughters over the balcony.
---
From CNVorkosigan

Excuse me? How the hell did she sneak past Security?
---
From: Vorkosigan

When I know, you’ll know, Mother. Please be patient.
---
From: SIllyan

Was this woman armed? If so, how did THAT get past Security?
---
From: OPJole

Old ladies with Vorfemme knives don’t pose ANY danger, he said sarcastically. Or attract much attention, until they start quizzing the girl sitting next to her a little too closely. Lujayn magnificently followed security drills. ‘Lidiya’ alerted me to a problem by asking her Granda to switch seats so she could sit next to ‘Katya.’ ‘Granda’ noticed his grey-haired peer had virtually no wrinkles, dark brows, a bad wig, and was staring intently at the Emperor. I grabbed her wrist when she reached for the knife. She tried stabbing me. After disarming her, I flipped her over the rail. She landed almost in Sven Vormuir’s lap, leading to much screaming and cursing about Gregor ruthless killing her sisters instead of protecting them from their father’s greed. Count Vormuir spat on her before guards dragged her away.

Gregor, Miles and Alexei are interrogating the bruised-but-whole prisoner. Ivan, Alex, the girls, Dmitri, Count Vormuir, and I are cooling our heels in a conference room. Dmitri is white as a ghost, but continues to praise Lujayn and her quick thinking. Not only did she save someone from a nasty knife wound, it’s the first time Lujayn’s felt smart since the concussion. Silver lining anyone? ---

From: AAVorkosigan

Virtually all the Counts and voting deputies are milling around the Council chamber waiting to learn more. The Vormuir’s will need a new desk. Let me repeat, although we’re all shaken, we’re safe and comfortable, with drinks and snacks.
---
From: CNVorkosigan

Oliver, did you give Lujayn any headache remedy after she saved the day?
---
From: IXVorpatril

Both girls insist they’re fine. I promise we’re watching them closely. Oliver has Lujayn, I’m holding Kiona, and Alex is doing a magnificent job keeping everyone calm and hydrated. Gregor will need
to pull out something stronger than tea when he comes back. Sven Vormuir desperately needs a drink. Actually, I think we all do, having witnessed attempted treason.

---

From: Vorkosigan

The perpetrator has signed a confession and admitted to attempting to kill the Emperor. Municipal guards across the planet are bringing the other 99 sisters in for interrogation. Most are married/have families, which leads me to hope they’re content with the settlement Count Vormuir granted them.

We’re returning to Vorkosigan House. Anyone wanting more details may meet us there. Oh, and Lujayn is about to become the youngest recipient of the Imperial Medal of Honor. I believe this is Oliver’s 3rd or 4th. Vorkosigan out.

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

How are Lujayn and Kiona? So much for being a hardened military man – I had trouble catching my breath at the thought that they or the Emperor could’ve been hurt. I’m glad the Emperor ordered this treasonous subject put to death without benefit of trial. I know Grandma disagrees, but Grisha and the children dead in the Great Square didn’t get a trial. None ever got a chance to swear an oath to their Emperor, either. Not like soldiers or those on the floor of the Council Chamber.

You may think I’m crazy, but I believe that’s an important distinction. I have no doubt that if Lujayn had been caught up in the intense debate over the Vorpatril countship and not alerted Uncle Oliver to the weirdo beside her, she’d have been injured, too. Whether it would’ve been by a madwoman or by proximal stunner blast is almost irrelevant to the MASSIVE Security fail at Vorhartung.

Not that Anna ever had one, but after this, we are NOT introducing Dyana to the concept of a Vorfemme knife. Should our daughter choose a military career, she may carry whatever weapon she wishes. In the meantime, it’s time to stop issuing knives to teen girls so they may defend their virtue or the honor of their House.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

Nikki raises great points, my love, about how certain detrimental TOI traditions linger. At least one Count or Voice could’ve been injured because Security didn’t consider Vorfemme knives weapons. Not that this was a Vorfemme knife, it was a poorly made dagger. The thought that Lujayn could’ve been stunned makes MY head hurt. I’m just as happy the visitors’ gallery will be closed next week. We can watch the Vorpatril circus by live vid like civilized people.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I can’t believe you’re so nonchalant about Lujayn sitting next to a potential murderess! I’m proud of her instincts, of course, but shouldn’t Council sessions be the safest places in Barrayar? Has nothing changed since that dreadful Vordrozda tried to get Miles convicted of treason decades ago?

Clark and J.J. have offered 100 Betan dollars each if Oliver wears all his Medals of Honor to the ceremony next week. Part of me can’t believe he has seven, but then I remember how many times he saved Aral’s life. Please take plenty of vid!

Love, Mother

Next time we’re back on Sergyar, I’ll probably pull all my medals out of storage. I’ll never wear them all, but I think the time has come to have most properly framed. Would you mind if I displayed them in our sitting room? Love, Me
I considered our home office, next to our diplomas, but I don’t want to intimidate academic visitors. Anyone making to our suite should know enough about our pasts not to be surprised that an admiral collects many, many medals along the way. Certainly not an issue for Graham, who’s got plenty of his own. Love, Me

****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m nervous about tomorrow. Do we have to go back to Vorhartung? Why can’t we get our medals quietly at the Residence?

Love, Lujayn

My love, how do we get past the post-concussive processing issues and make Lujayn understand that Vorhartung is safe and many, many Counts want to express gratitude for her quick thinking? Especially Count Vormuir, who’s worked so hard to make good on his father’s empty promises?

Love, Me

Did you talk to Kiona? I’m not sensing any apprehension. Like the rest of the troops, she’s excited to see her twin get her medal. What a talented family we have, our oldest and youngest earning Imperial medals while underage! At the risk of sounding metaphysical, I wonder if Aral and Count Piotr know. Love, Me

****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I am SO proud of my baby sister! Lujayn looked dignified and serene in front of the most powerful men on the planet. Her gleaming eyes when facing the Chamber so Gregor could fasten the ribbon behind her were pure, unadulterated Da! I know Alex spotted it; I suspect some of my older colleagues did, too. After all, how else could Lady Aurelia look so much like Ivan?

The rest of the session was predictable. Falco’s claim was dismissed by near unanimous vote – a couple of Conservatives abstained. Watching Alexei cast his first vote made the day even more memorable. It shook several people, including Count Vormoncrief, who expected the Vorbarra District to abstain. He deserves every second of the guaranteed tantrum he’s getting from Dowager Countess Riya. Her daughter and son-on-law don’t. Byerly and Rish are so impressed with how hard they’re working to take over the District. They were also privy to news Count Lazlo announced after the vote – he and his lady wife are expecting a son in about five months. We wish them nothing but happiness.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin
Confessions and Decisions

Dear Family, Near and Far,

Please enjoy the attached two vids. The first is Piotr Naismith Vorkosigan; the second, Tatiana Nile Vorkosigan. They’re due in September.

Love, Alex and Victoria

I win the bet! Piotr Naismith is such an elegant way to honor Victoria’s and Aral’s Das, with a tribute to you, too. As for our future great-granddaughter, of course a teacher would name their daughter for the patron saint of students! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Thanks so much for the offer to buy extra bassinets for every level of the house. So very practical! Mama wonders if we’re twins and done. We don’t know yet; it just seemed more practical for Victoria to skip a school year for twins. Plus, she plans to continue tutoring Lujayn next year as needed.

We’ve decided the replicators will stay at the rep center until September. With so many people going off-planet this summer, it seems safer. Also less lonely to be gestating with their eventual peers. Getting on Dr. Vorbarra’s crowded calendar is becoming very chic in certain circles. KareenVB says some of the demands are ridiculous because you can’t enhance a trait that isn’t there. Will our son be taller than I? We neither know nor care, just as we didn’t care about our daughter’s hair color. These two things, and about a dozen more, make us unusual. Also much easier clients. And you know KareenVB. If we were annoying her, she’d tell us.

Love, Alex and Victoria

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m afraid we must rescind our invitation to visit this weekend. Gregor and Alexei both caught the respiratory infection racing through the capitol. Our son has been banished to his childhood bedroom. Remembering the all-around torment of sick infants, I encouraged Katya to keep the baby isolated until everyone’s healthier.

All our love, Laisa and her grumpy, coughing spouse

*****

Dearest Family, Wherever You Are,

Please say hello to our nameless daughter. Anyone coming down to Hassadar for Cider Festival may also get a glimpse when we crack the bottle!

Love, Lizzie, Vasco, and Baby Girl Cortez

Lord Piotr is about to be outnumbered, my love. It’ll almost be like triplets – everyone gets a turn!

Love, Me

*****

To: ENVK, Vorkosigan, CNVK
From: EVK-C

It’s 3am, the hospital is quiet, and I want to scream at the top of my lungs. We got a letter from
Vasco’s parents today. They expect us to pay for them to visit for at least three months so they can get to know their Maria Theresa. Besides there being no way I’d EVER name a child for Vasco’s mother, I can’t get over the casual greed. They want our money AND our precious time with our newborn. NYET!!!

Why do these people suck the joy out of everything?
---
From: CNVK

Lizzie, small-minded, grasping people are incapable of thinking of anyone but themselves. You and Vasco chose to become doctors to help people. From his parents’ perspective, however, Vasco chose medicine for the money and prestige. And if they can’t show him off at home, they want to be able to brag that their son the doctor has ABC and bought them XYZ as proof of his love and success.

And then there’s your Uncle Mark. Vasco’s relatives don’t want commercial passage to Barrayar, love. They want the real MPVK Express and its dedicated crew at their beck and call so they can lord it over their friends how important they are and what a Good Deal Vasco’s marriage is. It’s very Jacksonian, but where else are people forever measured solely by their economic value to their House or family?

Yes, there’ll be protests and guilt when the Escobaran Cortez family doesn’t get what they want. That’s not the Hassadar Cortez family’s problem. Love, Grandma
---
From: ENVK

Like your father, Grandma gets very philosophical when insomnia hits. Granda used to either work himself back to sleep or snuggle cranky small children until they were both tired. You slept on his broad shoulder many times, Lizzie-love.

Grandma’s correct about your in-laws coveting Uncle Mark’s ship. I’ll bet no one ever mentioned that family trips are planned well in advance and are closely tied to Uncle Mark’s business schedule. For all its many amenities, the ship is as much a business tool as the comconsole on his desk at Vorkosigan Pribyl. Has anyone ever explained the name to the Cortez family? Do they understand that it’s equal parts admiration and teasing that Mark and Kareen earned enough to build that beautiful estate the same way they build everything, from the ground up?

As for wanting to stay for at least three months, I wouldn’t want to host those miserable people for three days. Keep saying no, darling. Those first few months are too important to allow selfish, opinionated people to ruin them. I speak from experience there – Tien allowed his mother to run roughshod over our household as I recovered from Nikki’s birth. It was awful. Aunt and Uncle Vorthys eventually ousted her after my crying call about missing my mother. Love, Mama
---
From: EVK-C

You’re both right. MPVK’s success and my aunt and uncle’s generosity are likely a huge part of the travel entitlement problem. The rest is they’re horrible people who want to control their children’s lives forever. Vasco’s sister can’t make a minor decision without calling her mother and his brother continues to dump any girl his parents don’t like. He was looking at rings when his parents talked him out of the last relationship. No spine whatsoever. Clearly not a Vorkosigan!

From: Vorkosigan

Lizzie-love, grandparents got to name their own children. Anything after that is none of their damn business. Mama and I would prefer you don’t choose anything outrageous, but promise to love little
Scalpel, Stethoscope, or Sedative to the depths of our hearts. We’ll also provide armed guards if that’s what it takes to allow you and Vasco uninterrupted time to glory in your newborn child. Love, Da

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

My Masters’ defense is scheduled for right after Spring break. If possible, I’d love for you to attend.

I’m getting a little anxious about not hearing from City University. Professor Yuell liked my video interview enough to offer me one of his coveted PhD slots. Nile would like me to remain with Professor Muenster, but I really, really want to study with Drs. Torres and Scalfani. Stefan has already been accepted into engineering programs on four planets, but won’t make a final decision until he knows where I’ll be. Aunt Kareen asked if he’d be living with me, Dmitri, and Charlotte at Vorkosigan Pribyl. No, but he’d likely be a frequent guest.

I’ll be so disappointed if the best astro-physicists in the nexus don’t want me! Love, Aurelia

I’m so torn, my love. I want our girl to learn from the best, but I don’t want her so far away, either. And at the risk of being called sexist, I’m also very uncomfortable at the thought of Nile living on her own. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

A bunch of our friends are talking about spending Spring break on the South Continent. The resort part, not the Black Escarpment! Nile, Lambros, and I have enough saved to cover transport and our share of renting a beach house. You’d probably have to co-sign, but we promise not to be extra rowdy or break anything.

Love, Everard and Nile

So much for convincing our university kids to watch their baby sisters so WE could go away. I’d love a week on the beach. Not a great idea with Lujayn still so tired, though. Maybe a few days at MPK Manor with our favorite admiral? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I know you’re in class, but I couldn’t wait to tell you: I WAS ACCEPTED AT CITY UNIVERSITY! I’m looking forward to being back on Escobar. Maybe I’ll be able to reconnect with people from La Escuela.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Celebratory dinner here Saturday night? We’re so excited!

Love, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The attached was too cute not to share. Everyone here is busting with pride at Aurelia’s accomplishment. J.J.’s partner checked and only one student from Beta Colony has been accepted to City University’s astro-physics program in the past decade. Used to be, that would’ve been at least
one a year.

Love, Mother

---

Dear Great-Grandma,

I’m confused. Everyone is very excited that Aurelia’s leaving us to go to school in Nueva Valencia. It’s not fair. SHE gets to live in OUR house and I have to stay in boring Hassadar. Do you know how hard it is to get good chips and salsa here?

Love, Mila

My love, I’m so glad your mother shared. Our galactic granddaughter makes me laugh over the silliest things. She’s right about the salsa, though. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We are having THE BEST time at the beach! Not all our time is being spent idly. So far, I’ve finished four applications for summer horticulture internships. If all else fails, Aunt Martya says I can work in the Hassadar hydroponics facility until Dmitri’s wedding, and at the Gridgrad facility while we’re on Sergyar.

Enjoy the holos and vid!

Love, Nile

P.S. Everard promises to write tomorrow. He and Lambros are out fishing. NNK

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Now that the dissertation’s been defended, we probably should talk about a graduation celebration. We need to discuss Alani’s summer plans, too. Has she mentioned wanting to work in MPVK’s finance department?

Miles and I were talking about the wedding last night. Are you okay with the older troops staying in the girls’ apartment? Laisa has asked us to house some of Charlotte’s relatives and space is getting a wee bit tight.

Love, Ekaterin and Miles

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

As we waited to process into Alex’ magnificent Municipal Stadium this morning, I was appreciating how lucky I am to have parents who’ve always encouraged me to reach for the stars. Literally, in my case, but the rest of the troops are equally blessed to be encouraged in their endeavors, no matter how unusual. Miles jokes there’s nothing any of us could do that would be worse than his stunts, but he’s not giving me and Perrin sufficient points for creative destruction. Yes, I helped rearrange the biking ramps so Perrin could roll things down them. No, I didn’t take the 10 seconds to realize the momentum would carry everything straight into glass doors and windows. Oops. The nocturnal holes in the lawn were us, too. Perrin wanted to find moles and I wanted to see if we could successfully elude the ImpSec patrols and vid pick-ups. Alex is still angry about us dyeing the Hassadar pool brown. I swear, absolutely no feces was involved! We also had no idea he went skinny-dipping at night and that the dye we used would also color skin. Alex sure looked funny. I’ll have to pull out the holos when the babies arrive.
I’m not confessing to any more stunts, merely thanking you for always supporting me. The party was great, too.

Love, Aurelia

Ah, my love, the truth comes out! I always thought the ramps were the boys, the holes were Kiona and Lujayn, and the pool was Alani and Nile. Good thing we never punished without proof! Love, Me

What do you mean, you knew Aurelia had to be behind anything that involved evading security? Why didn’t you ever say something? Love, Me

I cannot believe there are Miles stories still to be told. Actually, yes, I can. I can see him doing everything Aurelia described and more. No wonder he wasn’t upset about the huge cost to drain and clean the pool. Love, Me

*****

Mother – Just keeping you up to date. MNVK

Dear Uncle Miles and Aunt Ekaterin,

The ship from Earth should arrive about midday tomorrow. Please join us for an early dinner before you take Lord and Lady Montagu and their children back to Vorkosigan House. I promise the Earl’s brother’s family will be delightful guests.

Love, Dmitri and Charlotte

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Your vids and holos beat the official ones AND Mamere! Thanks to the time difference, our viceregal celebration was still going when your messages arrived.

Everyone agreed Charlotte was utterly gorgeous. Many of her female relatives, not so much. I saw many hats in London; a meter of foliage attached to an askew skullcap is not a hat. Menace, eyesore, insult to fashion, were some of the terms bandied about. Tej dubbed headgear dipping over one eye as the pride of the Lady Pirate collection. Nikki helpfully pounded Padma on the back when he choked.

There was much applause for our daughter. The Solstice Music Institute is doing a fine job helping her voice mature. Irina’s sung most of her program for years, but it’s so much richer and deeper now. We let Rish do most of our crying for us, but it’s still painful to me and Tej how her family wanted to throw away our daughter’s talent for their own ends. I suspect that heinous injury will never heal completely.

Daniel and Dyana enjoyed pointing out people they knew. It’s a surprisingly large number for children not being raised in Vorbarr Sultana. It appears that this wedding was another boon for Estelle, because our family all looked fabulous!

At the risk of sounding pompous, the goodwill engendered by serving a replica of the wedding feast was well worth the expense. The official reception when Dmitri, Charlotte, and her family visit will be similarly lavish. The Imperial Counsellor is a mite nervous about welcoming a family with more history than the Imperium. Funny how the democrats get so flustered by the peerages they claim to disdain.

End-of-day reports from HQ indicate absolutely no issues other than complaints about the length of
the fireworks. Those obviously came from foreigners.

Love, Ivan, Tej, and Padma

Complaints about fireworks? Seriously? Otherwise, I’m thrilled everything went smoothly. Sometimes, uneventful is refreshing. And to echo Ivan, you did look fabulous. The smile you wear at family weddings is so, so beautiful. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Elena says we’re a day out from Escobar. A few days at the Clinic, then Kareen and Mila whisk me to Sergyar and its fresh ocean breezes! Tell me, has Aurelia packed her winter things so they can travel to Escobar ahead of her? What about Stefan? Is he vacationing in Port Nightingale or going straight to Nuevo Valencia?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

The look on Grandma Elizabeth’s face when Johnny, Lina, and the girls met her at the shuttleport was everything we hoped for. I’m so glad we convinced them to take a vacation off-Barrayar!

Uncle Ivan is keeping your guests for another day or two. Grandma is tired and Aunt Tej wants to show Lina and Johnny parts of Gridgrad. Don’t worry, we’ll save the amusement park for after everyone’s gotten over jump-lag!

Love, Colonel Vorsoisson and his VIP guests

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

You were right. Despite not riding many rides, I still had a good time. This year’s shows this year were great. Hanging out with Grandma, Cousin Lina, and Bella in the pavilion was nice, too.

It wasn’t all fun stuff. Grandma said I’m pushing too hard to catch up with Kiona and our classmates. She suggests I go to school part-time again this year and concentrate on finishing the rest of my year 7 subjects so I’ll be ready to tackle year 8 next year. She also said that if I didn’t want to be separated from my twin, I should talk to you about entering the Old Town School for year 8, as Aurelia did.

I guess we have a lot to talk about after our guests leave.

Love, Lujayn

Trust your mother to get to the heart of the matter, love. With a year to plan, there’s nothing to say we couldn’t all move to Vorbarr Sultana next year. Not to Vorkosigan House, to a house or maybe an apartment in Alys’ building. We can always use MPVK Manor for what Miles calls our ‘extra couple’ activity. Love, Me

What about my job? I can fly myself back and forth several times a week, stay over at Hassadar House as necessary. I just can’t see separating Kiona and Lujayn. Both starting over at a new school, however, would level the playing field a bit. Might have to postpone our trip to Earth, though. Let’s see what Lujayn says. Love, Me
Dear Aunt Cordelia and Oliver,

Thank you for being such excellent hosts for our first real visit to Sergyar. The girls had such a good time and Lina and I actually returned from vacation relaxed, thanks to all the activities for the children available on a commercial cruiser.

While we were away, Dr. Kareen was working hard on our behalf. Our son is now at five weeks gestation and everything is going well. Unlike his sisters, we asked that gene-cleaning included screening for environmental allergies. We’re not sure if Miles will be relieved or jealous.

Love, Johnny, Lina, Bonnie, and Bella

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Grandma is on her way back to Silica with Aunt Elena and I’m busy unpacking. I’m excited for the new school year. I also miss my boyfriend. Stefan’s courier arrives in a few days. The apartment Cordy found for him is small, but nicely furnished.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Yes, of course I knew about my newest great-great-grandson. Johnny and Lina told me right before they left, after KareenVB sent the first progress report. I’m thrilled!

I also wouldn’t be surprised if, finances permitting, they had a fourth. Most Betans are brainwashed into believing zero population growth should be the goal of every civilized society. There’s a logic to it in domed societies or planets lacking resources, but at the same time, some people are meant to have larger families. Ideally, those should be the ones with good genetics and the means to raise them in reasonable comfort, but as Falco Vorpatril’s example proves, you can be raised with every advantage and still not be ready when real life rears its ugly head.

Sorry, I’m in a mood today. My shoulder aches. So does my back. The cleaner missed some cobwebs and silly me went after them myself.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The MPVK Express will be hitting Sergyar orbit tomorrow. We’ll come downside for a day or two, then off to Komarr. Are Kiona and Lujayn still interested in traveling with us? Mila definitely wants company and we’d love to have them. I promise we’ll monitor Lujayn so she doesn’t overdo.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

If they want to go, love, I’m all for it. Perrin really enjoyed traveling with Mark and Kareen. I’m sure our girls would, too. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Mark’s ship is great! We promise we’re not taking advantage, but the crew is so interesting! The chef
lets us help cook and the chief steward is teaching us about managing the non-flying parts of the ship. His job is like a housekeeper, except he has to plan ahead for everything because he can’t just send someone to the shops. And he doesn’t have a hydroponics lab like most of the big Imperial ships. That’s why he places grocery orders in advance for almost every port. Do you give ImpSec menus or grocery lists? I don’t remember ever running out of anything on a flight.

Love, Kiona and Lujayn

There’s a valuable lesson, my love. Food, drinks, and soap don’t just materialize in the middle of space. Also, a mediocre commissary officer can make everyone’s lives miserable. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Alex and Victoria’s babies are adorable! I can’t believe how much Piotr looks like my baby holos. And Tatiana looks so much like Victoria! I wish I were there to hold them, but then I’d be missing the educational opportunity of a lifetime. No hyperbole there – Dr. Torres and Dr. Scalfani are as brilliant as their reputations indicate. The rest of the department has also been very welcoming.

Since I already have a Masters, I’ve been assigned Dr. Lasorda’s primary teaching assistant. Dr. Lasorda mostly teaches intro classes, but swears I’ll learn, too. We had a good laugh when I explained that I’d grown up surrounded by professors. She’s even read some of your work on how tidal patterns affect algae. That’s because her primary research is whether distant stars can also affect tides!

The Bothari-Jesek-Salazar family is busy making sure I’m not lonely before Dmitri and Charlotte return from their honeymoon. Gualter has grown so much, plus he’ll be a big brother in a few weeks. I’ll confess to being a little bit homesick. I’m actually peoplesick. I guess I’ve gotten spoiled, being able to have real-time comconsole conversations with almost everyone. Yes, I have Stefan and all the Duronas, but somehow, Escobar feels further away than it did when I was 12.

Please don’t worry about me. I’m fine, just a bit melancholy.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

I hope I didn’t embarrass anyone too much by bursting into tears when Lizzie and Vasco revealed their daughter’s name. We hope Sonia Vorosigan Cortez will grow to be as wise, gracious, brave, and kind as her namesake. Padma told me so many stories about his mother. I regret not ever meeting her. I like to think Princess and Lady Sonia Vorpatril would’ve approved of the choices I made as a single mother scared to death of losing her son to dynastic violence.

Much love, Alys and Simon

Love, I remember Aral saying once that Aunt Sonia was the only woman who truly commanded his father’s respect after Mad Yuri’s death squads struck. I know Sonia is one of Irina’s string of names, but it’s always nice when a brave legacy is honored. Bonus points for the Russian spelling annoying Vasco’s family. Love, Me

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Just wanted to let you know that my sister’s been a busy little geneticist. We’re taking a pair of replicators back to Escobar after Winterfair. One son will be 4th in line to the camp stool; the other, 2nd in line to the Earldom of Sandwich. My brother-in-law has many years to secure the succession, but if he doesn’t, our older son would inherit his titles. Kareen really wanted to give us triplets, but
we’ll see how it goes before deciding on adding a girl into the mix.

Love, Dmitri and Charlotte

Twins before their first anniversary – how efficient. Or is there genuine concern about the Montagu succession? The Earl seemed fairly healthy at the wedding. And Lord George seemed a bit awkward, but not unmarriageable. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Now that Oksana and I have settled in as roommates, we were wondering if Kiona and Lujayn could come for a sister weekend after midterms. We promise to keep it low-key so Lujayn doesn’t overdo. Not that Alani would let us get too rambunctious, but don’t want them feeling lonely now that Aurelia’s gone to Escobar. If they miss her half as much as I do, it’s got to be unbearably hard.

Love, Nile

Sounds reasonable to me. Better yet, it gives us a free weekend, too. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

When is Lujayn’s next neurologist appointment? All of us noticed that she’s not remembering jokes from our favorite vids or lyrics to popular songs. Kiona said it’s much more noticeable in an apartment because there are fewer places for Lujayn to hide when she’s tired.

Love, Nile

Just as we suspected, my love, Lujayn wasn’t ready to scale back her therapy sessions. She’s so desperate to be all fixed. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

When is a winter respiratory infection convenient? When it allows Vasco to sneak in some neurological testing! He came home elated from his house call that Lujayn is showing some real progress. Also, tests confirm you’re all quarantined to your floor at Hassadar House for three days until the meds render you noninfectious. Whatever you do, stay away from Piotr and Tatiana!

Love, the Doctors Cortez

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m sorry you caught the dreaded lurgy, but excited to hear Lujayn’s making progress. I love her vids, but know it’s also so she doesn’t have to worry about grammar and spelling in actual letters.

School is going extremely well. Dr. Torres and Dr. Scalfani are everything promised and more. Plus they have better equipment. The brand-new survey telescope is AMAZING! I love the lab, too, which is good because Charlotte complains that some days, I live there. She’s getting nervous as the babies get bigger.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We hope you’re enjoining the conference on alternative uses for inedible marine life. How was Uncle Enrique’s paper received?
Some interesting mail arrived while you were gone. Lujayn and I have both been accepted to the Old Town School. We’re very excited. May we tell Alani, or should we keep mum until you get home?

Love, Kiona and Lujayn

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Of course I’m happy for my sisters! I always expected they’d be with me for my senior year. I never considered you’d move to Vorbarr Sultana. I understand the whys, but I also love knowing I can always go to Hassadar to see my friends. Right now, I don’t feel I’m imposing on Alex and Victoria because we have our own floor and meal schedule, but it would be very different if they were the only ones living there. It would be like losing yet another childhood home.

I also love living with Miles and Ekaterin. We have a routine, the three of us, the armsmen, and my friends. Moving in with you would mean starting over in terms of getting security to know/accept my friends. Plus if you rent an apartment, it’ll likely be too small to have vid parties or sleepovers. Senior year will be hard enough with worrying about grades and university applications. I don’t think I can do it in an unfamiliar place.

When can we discuss this by comconsole? Does your conference have any breaks?

Love, Alani

Once again, our introvert child is digging in her heels. I don’t know what to do. Silly me thought she’d be pleased by a major change. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver –

The solution is simple. You move into your suite on the third floor of Vorkosigan House, Kiona and Lujayn take rooms near you, and Alani stays on the second floor with us. Vorkosigan House will always be your home, Cordelia. And to be honest, your being here would help my business. I’ve been avoiding offers to work on the South Continent for years. I believe the time has come to see what I can do there.

Love, Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Echoing my wife, there’s no need to waste money renting a place to live when we have a very huge home and staff. Also, if you move to the capitol, it’ll be much easier for the armsmen if we’re in one place. Are you ready for your social life to expand dramatically? You’ve done a great job avoiding official responsibilities by hiding in Hassadar, but being in Vorbarr Sultana mean invitations will be pouring in. Another argument for living in a house that’s always well-guarded.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

When weighing privacy versus safety, my love, safety wins. We can always escape to the Long Lake or Hassadar on weekends if the invitation pile gets overwhelming. I also get the impression that Alani’s application list is a sham and she really wants to attend Hassadar University so she can be near Mark and Kareen. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

It wouldn’t be a problem if Alani wanted to live with us while attending Hassadar University. She’s
fascinated by MPVK’s operations and the local business program is very good. Not quite in the same league of Solstice’s or Silica’s, but among the best on Barrayar, thanks to investment by your older sons. It would also be good optics for one of Professor Jole’s troops to enroll in his place of employment.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

Damn, she’s right. As always. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Well, it’s finally happened. Lambros and Nile have officially broken up. I’m a bit disgusted with both of them that it’s for such a bullshit reason. Nile was very clear that she didn’t want to go to Lambros’ oldest sister’s betrothal. Why she suddenly wanted to go to sister #2’s is beyond me. And instead of checking with his parents, Lambros just said Nile wouldn’t be welcome because she’s not Greek. I guess after 7+ years of friendship, I’ve become Greek by association? Or maybe it’s because I don’t have flaming red hair? Either way, they say they’re done. I’m not convinced.

Love, Everard

I don’t think it’s a bullshit reason on Nile’s part. Lambros is almost of legal age, which means he’s certainly old enough to bring a date to family events! As for the appearance issue, Everard’s blonde military fuzz surely stands out just as much at Savalas family gatherings as Nile’s beautiful red locks.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m more disappointed than upset, if that makes sense. Proof that the feelings I have for Lambros are more brotherly than romantic love. No need to fear scenes when our paths inevitably cross.

Will you be able to make it to the botanical show? I have four entries, including my Vorpatril tulip. Aunt Alys can’t believe I was able to match the house colors so precisely. Frankly, neither can I. The first generations were pale blue and yellow.

Love, Nile

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Congratulations on Nile’s stunning upset at the Spring Botanical Show. Beating Ekaterin for best container garden was quite an achievement!

Mamere tells me Nile may be picking up some side work designing a House flower. I’m not sure what surprised me more, that Count Vorhalas asked if a navy and silver tulip is possible or that his mother didn’t faint at him consorting with the enemy. Tej says maybe his mother will think twice next time about dragging a bored, single twenty-something to a flower show! She’s also bet me 100 Betan dollars that Count Vorhalas will have asked Nile out by next fall. I think it’ll take a little longer, if only because creating variegated tulips takes years, not months.

Not much to report from Chaos Colony other than it seems like Daniel, Dyana, and every other child we know are growing like the proverbial weeds. Decades of effort invested in traditional agriculture, hydroponics, and vat-proteins means not only is Sergyar self-sustaining for our growing population, more and more is being exported. I’ve already asked MPVK to consider another expansion of the packaging plant. There’s plenty of wine and cider still in vats, waiting for bottles to hold it.
Love, Ivan and Tej

Consider yourself complimented, my love! With the food issue solved, more attention can be paid to amenities like education and the arts. As for Count Vorhalas, outside the family history, isn’t he a wee bit old for Nile? Love, Me

Sorry, but until they reach 20 next autumn, I refuse to think of her or Everard as official adults. Also, I forget that to the Vor, a gap of 10 or more years isn’t unusual. I just don’t know if I’d want one of our girls involved with someone publicly in need of a wife until she’s done with university. Love, your toy boy

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

And so it begins – a long, tedious diplomatic tour whose highlight is becoming grandparents. We’re looking forward to Ambassador and Lady Voranthiss sharing such a personal event with us. We’ll also enjoy Grandma Elizabeth joining us for part of the return voyage and sailing Sergyar’s high seas with the troops.

Love, the grandparents-to-be

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m sure you’ll see the official vid, but for now, allow me to introduce Lord Philip Montagu Vorbarra and Lord Simon Miles Vorbarra. Aren’t they adorable?

Aunt Elena is bringing me aboard her next run to Beta Colony so I can see Uncle John, Aunt Sarah, and all the cousins before the Admiral Vorkosigan arrives. I’m looking forward to attending the State Dinner. My heart is with Stefan, but there’s nothing wrong with dancing with good-looking men in uniform!

The Emperor and I are also meeting with the Betan Astronomical Survey. Professor Torres is starting to call me the wormhole whisperer. We think there might be a direct wormhole from Sergyar to Beta Colony. Wouldn’t that be AMAZING?

Love, Aurelia

My love, our girl buried the lede on this one. Direct access from the Empire to Beta Colony is far more impressive than two adorable great-grandnephews. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

What were Dmitri and Charlotte thinking, naming their son after two of the most paranoid men in the Imperium? Needless to say, I’m humbled, as is Simon. Gregor and Laisa were caught off guard, too, but in a good way.

In response to our wondering about Charlotte’s father, yes, he’s ill. Inoperable benign brain tumor. Pavel has been ordered aboard Sergyar Fleet’s VIP vessel. They’re transporting Dmitri and his family to Earth so the Earl may see his grandsons. There are rumors Charlotte’s younger sister Louisa is being wooed by a man of questionable morals. The Vorbarra brothers plan on scaring him off.

We’re feeling very sad for Charlotte’s mother. Underneath the public formality is a strong, loving relationship that goes back to the Earl and Countess’ teen years. As you well know, losing your partner of 40 years is excruciatingly hard.
Love, Miles and Ekaterin
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Our initial meeting with Betan Survey officials was frustrating. There’s residual bitterness Barrayar got to Sergyar first, plus they demanded to take the lead on the mission. The Department Administrator is a retired ship captain. Cordelia, do you happen to remember a Joe Camus? He’s about your age, and one of the most obvious glory hounds I’ve ever had the displeasure to meet.

Administrator Camus was shocked to be summoned to the presidential office mere hours after dismissing a lesser world’s pathetic scientific endeavors. Unlike his subordinate, President Igwe was intrigued to learn Barrayaran scientists may’ve succeeded where the Rene Magritte failed, finding a potential wormhole connecting Sergyar and Beta Colony. Laisa ably expounded on all the potential import-export opportunities before I got to the crux of the matter. Mr. Igwe blanched when told that if the Imperium was forced to develop the wormhole without support from the Betan side, we’d place orbital stations on either end and charge enormous tariffs for any Betan ship wishing to reduce travel time from weeks to days. It was very hard not to laugh when Laisa murmured something about how much better sun-ripened produce tastes compared to hydroponically grown.

I fear the Betan Survey team hasn’t kept up with the giant leaps the Imperium has contributed to astrophysics since the Soletta disaster. There were stunned expressions when my wife laid out the rough costs of the process of finding and stabilizing a new wormhole. We suspect the money we poured into developing the M-S Pass constitutes far too much of Survey’s annual budget. It also convinced everyone present that we are taking this potential new transit very, very seriously.

We’ve pushed back our departure by a few hours in case we’re called into another meeting tomorrow. I’d really like to have the bones of an exploration agreement decided before we turn toward home. We may also have some professors in tow. Laisa and I agree that it makes more sense for Sergyar Fleet to be involved in this project. General Chaly may soon find herself riding herd on a group of professors and ISI boffins. The Imperium was truly blessed the day Nikki introduced Us to his girlfriend. I have no doubt Anna would still be General Chaly if they’d never met, but she wouldn’t be my go-to person for all manner of classified military projects. I’ll deny saying it, but in that respect, Nikki absolutely married his stepfather!

Time to get dressed for tonight’s State Dinner. Grandma Elizabeth has decided to skip it. Grandma came aboard this morning. Aurelia did all her unpacking already, including holos from our discreet family lunch at the Embassy. Uncle John, J.J., Clark, and the ambassador have filled us in on all the latest jokes and scandals. Uncle John and Aunt Sarah also offered to travel to Earth to support Dmitri and Charlotte when the inevitable comes to pass. I have forwarded the offer to Dmitri and made appropriate financial arrangements with the ambassador. Laisa thinks our son will appreciate some of our family being in attendance at such a hard time.

Maybe the parade red and blues will impress Administrator Camus. Probably not.

Love, Gregor, Laisa, & our entourage

My love, why do I suspect that at one time, you and Joe Camus knew each other intimately? If he’s who I think he is, he knew Aurelia was related in some way. Bet he was shocked when the ‘net revealed you’ve been busy in retirement. Love, Me

How can I possibly be jealous of an affair conducted when I was a babe in arms? Revenge is a dish best served very cold, my love. Joe meeting a better scientist than he ever was is a far better revenge.
than anything we could’ve dreamed up. The shock of meeting Lady Aurelia is probably eating at his guts. Please do write to Gregor immediately so he may use this info to Barrayar’s advantage. Love, Me

Why, yes, love, sometimes it is about the Imperium. I looked up Camus. He has no major discoveries and appears to have been promoted to his level of incompetency. He’s also had at least four partners and many girlfriends. Not sure of the attraction considering he’s definitely not fitting into his old captain’s uniform! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Administrator Camus is an asshole. He opened our meeting by asking questions about my mother and revealing you’d dated. The Emperor cut him off with a sharp comment that a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell. If this is the best Beta Colony’s got, we won’t be able to work with them. Honestly, I’d rather not. If their experts can’t answer my scientific questions, how will they keep up with my four mentors?

We left with nothing decided. We’re picking up Professors Torres and Scalfani in Escobar orbit and bringing them back to Gridgrad. Using the Vorthys Bridge, we should be able to exchange data and strategic ideas fairly quickly.

Grandma is doing great. We can’t wait to see everyone!

Love, Aurelia

Well, my love, the tiger showed his stripes early. Glad to see our girl kept her cool. Next question: did ImpSec book a picnic pavilion at the amusement park? Love, Me

What do you mean, they booked half the park? They’re really going to limit the amount of tickets sold? It makes sense, but my prole heart is wounded. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Aurelia’s professors are keeping my wife busy, but in a good way. Anna says they’re professional and polite, justifying the need for every piece of equipment they’re requisitioning. Did you know the rank and file refer to Anna’s compound as the House of Secrets? They don’t know what to make of three generations of Naismith women popping in and out. Or the Emperor and Empress.

We (and half of Sergyar ImpSec) will see you at the amusement park tomorrow. Daniel can’t wait to ride the coaster with ‘all the guys,’ especially the Emperor. I hope everyone remembers to bring hats to avoid sunburn.

Love, Nikki, Anna, Daniel, and Dyana

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

After last week, I’m convinced the Vorbarra District needs a good, old fashioned amusement park. Watching children run in sprinklers and enjoy water rides proves we don’t need a seashore for the concept to work.

We’ll have to study the cost structure first. Outside of initial construction, it must be self-sustaining. Surely that can happen without everything inside the park being so overpriced? Our group’s lunch tab was about what we’d expect to pay at Vorbarr Sultana’s finest restaurants. How can working families afford that?
Please scribble notes when you can and we’ll discuss when we’re all back home.

Love, Laisa and Gregor

She raises some excellent points, love. The nexus needs more municipal amusement parks! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Sergyar Fleet’s jump pinnace was very comfortable for the voyage to Escobar. I think it’s safe to say my university advisors adore Grandma. We four spent a lot of time discussing how a wormhole would change Sergyar and Beta Colony. Grandma thinks there’ll be a fair amount of emigration by couples wanting more children. She also thinks Betans will flock to beach resorts and Sergyar’s mountains for winter sports. The gleam in her eye was disturbing reminiscent of Mark and Miles!

Drs. Torres and Scalfani are back with their neglected families and Grandma and I are comfortably ensconced in Vorkosigan Pribyl. So far, her medical tests have gone really well. Dr. Watson formulated better meds for her shoulder and Dr. Crocus taught her some new exercises. Other than that, we’re relaxing and enjoying Ekaterin’s gardens. Grandma has decided she wants to stay until Dmitri and Charlotte return from Earth in a few weeks. The letter I got yesterday says Charlotte’s family is doing as well as can be expected and virtually all the succession paperwork has been handled. Also that Uncle John and Aunt Sarah are worth their weight in gold and the twins absolutely adore Uncle George and Uncle Pavel. Dmitri says the two have struck up a very strong friendship, so that’s nice.

The MPVK Express leaves tomorrow. Mark says to tell you that they should catch up to you just before Komarr and Mila will be desperate for company by then.

Love, Aurelia

Pavel has always been mature beyond his years, love. I’m sure he and Uncle George talked through much angst while playing with their nephews. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Your rooms are ready and waiting. I must be a strange child because I’m looking forward to living with my ma and da again. Or maybe I like playing with my sisters.

Love, your oldest

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The Betan ambassador has requested a meeting. What are the odds it’s NOT about a possible wormhole? Optimally, the Betans are ready to throw research money into the pot. Professors Muenster and Shabunin say that’s all they really want. They also suggest that even with transport costs, it’ll be cheaper to build most of the physical devices they’ll need at ISI than creating a specialized machining shop on Sergyar base. Professors Torres and Scalfani agree, saying there appear to be ample resources in place to adjust drones and the like.

Please don’t be angry at what I reveal next. About 10 months ago, Professor Yuell approached Us about a possible anomaly leading from Komarr to Beta Colony. It’s not large enough to be a proper wormhole, but the latest round of tests confirms it’s a viable communications bridge. Professor Yuell’s discovery gives teams on either end of the prospective wormhole a quicker, secure way to share information. It also will revolutionize Imperial communication in that quadrant.
Hopefully, I’ve have good news when you arrive. But in the meantime, enjoy the latest holos of our three grandsons.

Love, Gregor and Laisa

As we suspected, Yuell’s only interested in Komarran skies. It’ll kill him if his new communication bridge is key to developing his students’ discovery. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Guess who was first to submit his Academy application? Alani’s annoyed I got my back-ups in, too. What did she think I was doing in my cabin on the trip home?

So far, I love being a senior. The ‘lasts’ feel good, not sad. And being a Prefect is so satisfying. I’m learning loads every day.

Love, Perrin

Well, at least one of our seniors is happy, my love. Alani seems determined to be sullen. Ekaterin says she wants to be independent, but is scared to claim the privileges we’d gladly extend. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Just confirming that you’re bringing the troops down this weekend for Piotr and Tatiana’s first birthday celebration. Dress code is very casual. After they squish cake everywhere, we’re having family game day.

Love, Alex and Victoria

I doubt we’ll get all the troops, my love, but definitely the three youngest. How has a year gone by so fast? Love, Me

Has Lizzie said anything about Sonia’s birthday? I rather assumed we’d have cake after the cider festival. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I blocked off the weekend of the fall school show on the family calendar. Alani says its unheard of for a year 9 to win a supporting role, but I was unquestionably the best dancer there. Oh, and the advisor agreed that if she wants, Lujayn can be part of the stage crew. Thanks to her height, she might be an understudy, too.

Do you know if Aurelia’s history tutor is still available? My teacher is very inspiring. I think I’d like to learn more to decide if it’s a possible career path.

Love, Kiona

That was very slickly done, my love, getting Lujayn involved in the drama program with her peers. Is it time to start planning our fall vid party? Maybe being exposed to year 8s and 9s will easy Lujayn’s needless anxiety about being thought stupid. After all, so far, she’s doing fine in everything except Greek.

Do we know Miss Vorbelova’s married name? Nothing would make Duv happier than sheparding a history student in his retirement. Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Well, it wasn’t 50%, but the Emperor haggled the Betans up from 25% to 40% of our estimated budget for the Sergyaran/Betan Corridor. The Empress estimates the Imperium will recoup that extra 10% within a year. I hope she’s right.

It’s going to be another Winterfair in space. Dr. Torres and I will be on the Betan end, ready to chase whatever probes and drones Dr. Shabunin and his grad student send through. Professor Muenster and Dr. Scalfani will monitor developments from Gridgrad base. We’ll all work the data over the next term, reconverging in Sergyar June 1st. We’re aiming to be back in space next fall. Everyone but me is taking a fall sabbatical to see if we can make a wormhole happen. I’ll officially be registered as doing research for my dissertation. No rest for the weary!

In all seriousness, I’m really feeling the weight of this project. The M-S Pass was a closely guarded Imperial secret. This involves researchers from another world and oversight from a third. Plus the stakes are SO much higher. If we succeed, money will flow into Sergyar at an unimaginable rate and the Nexus will be forced to acknowledge that backward Barrayar is a major scientific force. But if we fail, the odds of the Betans honoring our confidentiality agreement are precisely zero.

One good development – Stefan has received permission to conduct some of his thesis research with Sergyar Fleet, so he’ll be coming to Gridgrad with me.

Love, Aurelia

I detect the Emperor’s hand in that last bit, my love. It sounds like we’ll have to postpone our birthday cruise to Earth. Maybe next summer? Love, Me

*****

Dear Vorkosigan family,

Everyone on planet, regardless of age, is invited for a casual dinner Friday evening. Drinks at 1830. Zane, Lady Oksana, and Dr. Drake welcome. Regrets only.

Love, Count and Countess Vorbarra

Interesting signature, my love. Has Dr. Sutherland finally asked for KareenVB’s hand? Would Gregor allow his daughter to marry a prole? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

A wedding AND a baby prince? That must’ve been some dinner! Artem’s ‘Big Brother’ shirt was totally adorable. So was the ‘Ringbearer’ shirt he wore next!

Random thought – you can’t ever surprise your sister with baby news when she’s the one popping them into replicators!

With luck, Helen and I will be done with next year’s wormhole blasting in enough time to get us back to Barrayar for a Winterfair wedding. She’ll be on the Sergyar ship for the initial drone phase, but with me and Dr. Scalfani on the Betan end for the actual expansion process. Dr. Scalfani was intrigued by Professor Muenster and Dr. Shabunin specifically asking one of my relatives to take a key role aboard ship. At least until soon-to-be-Major Vorkosigan sent her latest C.V.

Please tell Nile and Aunt Alys that I’m relying on them to choose wonderful gowns for me for both the wedding and Winterfair Ball.

Love, Aurelia
*****
Dear Mother, Uncle Oliver, Miles, and Ekaterin,

Thank you for throwing us a magnificent cast party! Everyone had a wonderful time, even the year 12s, who we didn’t expect to come. I hope you enjoyed the show as much as we did because we want to do more, more, more!

Love, Kiona and Lujayn

As long as the doctors say Lujayn can handle the rehearsals, I’m willing to throw many more cast parties. It’s the first time since the accident that she seemed truly comfortable amongst her peers. And Kiona, well, all those recitals have given her incredible stage presence compared to the average secondary student. Love, Me

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We heard a rumor that Nile is dating Count Vorhalas. Is it true? Is Nile dating our family’s dynastic mortal enemy? If so, Granda and crusty old Count Vorhalas must be spinning in their graves. And Da, he can’t possibly be okay with this!

Things are busy as Anna prepares for Part I of the great wormhole hunt. The base is overrun by ISI boffins. Aurelia’s ship left Escobar orbit two days ago, bound for Betan space. Winterfair gifts for her and Grandma are already aboard.

The kiddos are looking forward to Father Frost bringing Aunt Helen lots of gifts. Because she can, General Chaly has ordered both ships to planetary orbit for Winterfair Eve/Day. We’ll be hosting three professors for Winterfair lunch. Hopefully, the entire conversation won’t be astrophysics!

Love, the Vorsoisson-Chaly family

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Things aren’t going quite as well as we’d hoped. Grandma, do you remember a ship called the d’Artagnan? Official records show it destroyed during the Escobar War. Official records are, to put it kindly, greatly mistaken. The d’Artagnan and several Betan probes are stuck near the Sergyaran end of our new wormhole. Ironically, those objects helped pry open what was probably a minute funnel end.

What makes this all very suspicious is Administrator Camus’ Aramis was flying in formation with the other Musketeers when the d’Artagnan disappeared. His lack of enthusiasm for this project was likely due to his complacency in deceiving many Betans into thinking their loved ones died heroic deaths in battle.

All drones sent from our ship safely emerged on the Betan end. Half, however, have disappeared on the return. Now that we know why, engineers will need to work on how to pull the wreck out. Who pays for this effort is, however, yet to be decided. General Chaly is adamant it won’t be us.

Enjoy the Winterfair holos. I had such a wonderful holiday with my oldest niece and nephew! Our lunch with Aurelia’s professors was fun. We all learned a lot about Escobaran Christmas traditions. That’ll be helpful when Sonia gets older.

Love, Helen

How the hell do you get a ship out of a wormhole? And what the hell was that captain thinking,
going wormhole jumping in the middle of battle? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I did say Administrator Camus is an asshole, didn’t I? He’s unequivocally denying any knowledge of the d’Artagnan’s fate. It might be plausible if one of the probes crashed into the d’Artagnan wasn’t clearly marked BES Aramis.

Stefan’s about to be pulled into this project, in hopes he can provide some engineering insight into how we can remove a huge obstacle stuck in a wormhole. We might have to blast it out the Betan end. Helen would enjoy that. Anna won’t.

Having known General Chaly since I was 7, Dr. Torres believed me when I said that I’ve NEVER seen her so angry as she was in the vid explaining that she was terminating drone experiments early for safety reasons. Anna was careful to say that we were suspending, not shutting down, onsite operations, until we receive further instructions from ISI. So the lab work will continue, albeit with a different focus, until the diplomats reach consensus on our next move.

On the plus side, I got to have a longer visit with Grandma. The Ball at the Embassy was fun, too. Cousin Clark kept me giggling most of the evening!

Love, Aurelia

Assessing the situation more calmly, once Camus is fired and President Igwe has agreed to pay the freight, I’d advocate the physics team focuses on widening both ends of the wormhole while the engineers figure out how to remotely shove a decommissioned jump pinnace full of ordnance through the Sergyar end at high velocity. Would I be a meddling grandpa if I suggested that course of action to General Chaly? After all, I know more about spaceships than she does. Love, Me

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan and Admiral Jole,

Thank you for your measured advice on our wormhole fiasco. It was extremely helpful to know how you’d manage the situation were it occurring on your watch. It’s also far more practical than some of the outlandish suggestions being bandied about. Yes, our initial timeline is no longer viable. No, we don’t want to be working this same project 10 years from now. Not when we have a potential plan that doesn’t involve pilots sacrificing their lives to blast the d’Artagnan.

Lady Aurelia is correct, I was furious to cut short our first data capture operation due to our partners lying to us. I also felt guilty interrupting the Emperor’s holiday celebrations to confirm my unpleasant recommendation. Snide comments from Dr. Yuell about his colleagues returning home early didn’t help anyone’s state of mind. I have requested ImpSec analysts review the Yuell Bridge for backdoors. I suspect its discoverer may be monitoring highly classified communication. I’d like to be wrong, because the otherwise I’ll have to order the whole damned thing shut down.

I have reserved a large house on-base for Aurelia, Stefan, Helen, and any visitors. Should Perrin accept my written offer to be the team’s go-fer, he’d be housed there, too. I know he has other offers – prefects are rare commodities – but I can’t think of many young men I can trust wholeheartedly in Chaly’s House of Secrets.

I look forward, personally and professionally, to spending the summer with you. I foresee many interesting discussions in the viceregal residence!

Sincerely, General Chaly & Family
P.S. My husband laughed his head off at your formal communication style. I’ve tried to answer in kind. Welcome to Team Wormhole! Love, Anna

*****
Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

It feels weird knowing I won’t be visiting Sergyar because I’ll be on maneuvers. Nile should probably stay back, too, but the lure of flora and beach is hard to resist. I think it’s also a test to see how Rulf handles a lengthy absence. Yes, we all know she’s 99% guaranteed to work with Ekaterin and Mark, but it’ll still mean business trips. If Rulf needs his girlfriend by his side all the time, they’re not meant for each other. That would be a shame because I like Rulf. Far more than I expected given the age difference and family history. I think it’s because Rulf understands duty from both a military and civilian perspective.

Rumor says the Admissions Committee is almost done selecting the next class. It’s stupid, but I’m nervous for my brother! Aurelia says she felt the same way waiting to see if Nile was accepted to VSU. She sent a great holo of her playing with Philip and Simon. Funny, but I think the babies are keeping her grounded when her stress level gets high. Has Anna set a date for her trip to Beta Colony yet?

Love, Everard

I’m not worried about Perrin, my love. At least that’s what I keep telling myself. I guess when it comes to the Academy, I’m still the prole from an outer district, wondering if I’ll make the grade.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Great news – my university education will be free! Yup, I’ve been accepted to the Academy! I felt SO grown up shaking the Commandant’s hand as he welcomed me to his school. At least I was the first – he said it to 63 of my classmates, too. That’s a 100% acceptance rate because one’s moving off-planet and the second has opted for medical school. I’m lucky my class was such a good one.

Love, Perrin

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

May I be proud, too? Because I am so very proud that my baby brothers will both serve the Imperium as their fathers did. And who knows? Go-fer today, aide-de-camp a decade hence. After all, Perrin’s learned snake wrangling from the best.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’d like to skip school and fly down to Hassadar with you tomorrow. I’ll even let you walk me into the Admissions Office when Alani Vorkosigan accepts their offer. Yes, the Business School accepted me, and yes, I’m going. Not a word, please – I want to tell everyone myself.
Love, Alani

Well, that answers that! Nile will be disappointed. Or maybe she won’t. Nile and Lady Oksana seem to enjoy sharing an apartment. Dean Andronova, on the other hand, will be ecstatic. Do you realize what this means? They’ll probably ask me to deliver the Commencement Address. Also, another lingering question has been answered. Alani Vorkosigan? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Everyone at MPVK is celebrating Alani’s college plans almost as much as we are! Her visits and cogent questions have clearly left a most positive impression. As for Mila, she was literally running around in circles as she outlined all the things she and Alani will do together. It was sweet, if a bit dizzying.

A long time ago, Mother, you told me that you can’t repay your parents, that the debt is passed forward to your children. It is my honor to repay a small part of what you and Da gave me toward my beloved sister.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

P.S. I have a strong suspicion that the name change is due to wanting to be seen as a Vorkosigan at MPVK, not a political statement of any sort. Love, Mark

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Are you free for dinner this weekend? Rulf’s mother would like to meet you.

Love, Nile

Surely you’ve met the dowager countess, my love? I know I’ve heard her name announced at functions at the Residence. Her mother-in-law, as well. Love, Me

Okay, I guess that makes sense that you’d know each other only by sight. Can we ask to get together Saturday or Sunday? I hope our hostess will understand we’re committed to helping Johnny and Lina welcome John Jacob Jingleheimer Naismith on Friday afternoon. I was hoping they’d break the chain of Johns. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

What did it feel like to set foot in Vorhalas House as an honored guest? I’ve heard it’s very nice. Is it musty or modern? Were you greeted with spears or stunners?

Yes, that last was a joke. Nile said dinner went well and that Rulf’s grandmother apologized for the pain her brothers inflicted on you. That was unexpected!

All gossip or baby holos appreciated. It’s a nice break from studying and analyzing the d’Artagnan problem. On the positive side, if we get this to work, my thesis will most assuredly be cutting-edge science and engineering. Stefan’s advisor wants to talk to me about a Masters’ in engineering. I’ll consider it after finals.

One thing I have considered. If anyone says a single stupid word about siblings getting betrothed in birth order, you may assure them that I don’t care if every female member of the family, including Sonia, marries before me. A little exaggeration, but if Nile and Rulf get that serious, they should follow their hearts.
Love, Aurelia

There’s a lot of maturity in that past paragraph, love. Also an understanding that a single, sitting Count doesn’t have the luxury of procrastinating succession issues the way an heir does. I’m surprised Charlotte’s brother isn’t rushing to wed. Is it possible the Earl is sterile? Not ‘your sample is poor,’ but totally sterile? Is that why Lord Philip has publicly been named his uncle’s heir?

Mark promised to distribute vid of John Jacob. I’m sending holos of Mark holding Jake. Also the one of all the toddlers staring at the baby. Should we tell Aurelia that we’ve been invited to Graham’s daughter’s wedding? Is that gossip enough? I’d rather not mention that Yitzy’s expecting twins with a man less than half his age. Dating former students is iffy enough, but I’ll bet they didn’t wait until the kid graduated. Not professional! Love, Me

Damn, you’re right, love, she’ll learn about Yitzy when she returns to Gridgrad. I’m fine with delaying until then. Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Simon and I were wondering if we could convince you two to take a short vacation with us between when you finish the spring term and Perrin and Alani graduate. The summer resorts in Dono’s District should be open by then, Nile can help keep an eye on her sisters, and we’ll miss you when you fly off to Sergyar.

Much Love, Alys and Simon

That sounds like such a good idea, my love! I dare not say it to the girls, but flying back and forth to Hassadar is starting to wear me out. Do you think Alys and Simon would mind if we invited Graham? He needs a vacation, too. Love, Me

Alys has no objection. I’ll call Graham tomorrow. Love, Me

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

If you want to watch Artem become a big brother, we’ll need your rough schedule for the month of June. Kareen says our son is measuring ahead and will likely arrive 1-2 weeks ahead of schedule. We’ll try very hard to avoid Alani’s and Perrin’s graduations, but if Baby’s ready, we’re ready to welcome him. (Well, almost. Mama is still crocheting his baby blanket.)

Love, Alexei and Katya

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The vacation gods are with us. Not only was my leave request granted on short notice, I was able to book the room next to your suite. As long as we remember to lock the connecting doors every morning, we should be good.

Fair warning, my daughter will probably message me multiple times a day. Josie’s very anxious about planning a wedding without her mother. So am I. I’m hoping Lady Alys can give me some ideas on how to hold off an over-helpful mother-in-law.

Love, Graham

*****

Hey Sis -
Good thing you got a chance to relax with tropical drinks before last week’s chaos! Two valedictorians and a new prince within five days sounds exhausting! We’ll confess to being surprised by Alani’s achievement, considering she hasn’t mentioned schoolwork since about year 5. I think Maksimillian Johann is rather wrinkly and red, but my wife disagrees, calling him almost as perfect as our Jake.

Just so you know, our sons have renamed the other valedictorian P-cubed, short for Perrin the Perfect Prefect. We’re all very proud of him exceeding the very high bar Everard set. His summer job sounds intriguing, too.

Not only are we looking forward to seeing you in a few weeks, there’s the issue of Joe Camus’ sudden retirement. I ran into him a few weeks ago. Whatever happened, it must’ve been a doozy; Joe looks almost as old as Lily Durona.

Mother said to tell you that we’ve barely seen Anna. Hopefully, she’ll have time to take a breath aboard ship. And who knows, maybe she’ll drop some hints about what everyone’s working on!

Love, John and Sarah

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I and my VIPS are relaxing (to the extent one can relax on a military courier) as we speed toward Escobar. They’ll rest a few days at Vorkosigan Pribyl while Ambassador Voranthis and I meet with Escobaran officials. We don’t want any diplomatic incidents arising from those crazy Barrayarans blasting things in foreign space. We’ll be doing a helluva lot of blasting, all at Betan expense. Based on current estimates, they’ll wind up paying about 60% of the total project cost.

We’ll fill you in in person, but abandoning the project was never an option. Not only is this wormhole vital for Sergyar’s economy, we need to prove we can work peaceably with other worlds. Even when the allies are lying liars. Administrator Camus was the worst, but hundreds of supposed war heroes obeyed his unlawful order not to breathe a word about what truly happened to the d’Artagnan. And unlike the Imperium, who lost the last of the Escobar War’s survivors three years ago, virtually all of the Athos’, Porthos’, and Aramis’ crews are still alive to testify.

As my husband says, it’s a good thing I relish challenges!

Love, Anna

THREE SHIPS’ crews lied!? And the M.H.B. thought YOU were hiding things?

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

When are you arriving? I can’t wait to sit down and tell you everything happening here. Telling Perrin about the decommissioned ships graveyard is guaranteed to make him green with jealousy. It was both creepy and heroic, if that makes sense. To Helen, it was the shopping trip of a lifetime!

All teasing aside, I’m very glad Perrin is joining us, even if it’s only for a short while. Never too young to see how the military and ISI work together!

Love, Aurelia

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I’m here at Gridgrad 4 full days ahead of you, thanks to the ultra-fast courier. Most of the crew were
expecting the newbie to get very jumpsick. Or be very arrogant/demanding/unpleasant. A bunch about had seizures when I revealed my Academy plans. I suspect most new ensigns don’t treat the enlisted very well.

General Anna has already put me to work. Good thing I got my driving certification because I’m constantly buzzing all over the base. My Academy Prep fatigues stand out a little, but the rules are more lax in the House of Secrets because most people on this project aren’t military. It’s only been a few days and I now grasp the deeper meaning of ‘boffin’ versus ‘expert’ or ‘analyst.’ These people are obsessed! All of them, including Aurelia, Helen, and Stefan, but they eat and sleep more.

I’ll see you at viceregal residence tomorrow.

Love, Perrin

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Marching in the summer heat with heavy packs is no joke! Two key benefits of rat-bars – they’re lighter than reddi-meals and don’t leak. I fear far too many of my peers expected someone else would forage for food and build latrines. At least eight cadets have poison ivy on their assed, over a dozen have eaten poisonous berries, and far too many have sliced themselves trying to prepare their kills. I owe Emin a lot for teaching us how to clean fish and kill/butchef forest animals swiftly. I’m nowhere near as fast as Miles, but right now, I’m the Ma Kosti of my regiment!

Love, Everard

I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help myself. It seems some things haven’t changed since my Academy days. I plead guilty to being poor at deboning fish. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I think I need some tips on working alongside my boyfriend. I’ve discovered the downside of a family project. It’s all we think about. Thank goodness for Aunt Tej, who distracts us with nonmilitary things like concerts and doing our nails.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I can’t wait until Mark and Kareen return. Our floor in Hassadar House seems very empty with only me. In contrast, the 4th floor is a constant buzz of activity. Piotr and Tatiana don’t nap at the same time, and rarely in their beds. Piotr goes and goes until he collapses in the middle of the floor, while his sister prefers curling up in an armchair with a cat or two. One learns quickly to watch where they sit!

The big news – Simone has a new boyfriend! Cousin Lina introduced her to one of their new hires. Dr. Bogdan Vetrov is a neurologist who returned to the District last year after studying at VSU and VSH. The name may be slightly familiar to Mother; Bogdan’s great-great-great-grandfather was an armesmen who perished in the bombing of Vorkosigan Vashnoi. Bogdan’s very nice. He also loves the District almost as much as Simone, so that’s great.

Little Jake is so adorable! He has two bottom teeth and drools like a fiend. Bonnie and Bella are doting big sisters. They both have many friends, but miss Mila.

I got my university schedule today. I’ve got two afternoons free to work at the Butterbug Ranch, so
that’s perfect. Cousin Johnny’s looking forward to someone multi-lingual tracking expenditures. Aurelia thinks my Spanish is up to the task of getting Uncle Enrique to focus, which I took as a very great compliment!

Uncle Oliver, can we have breakfast the first day of classes?

Love, Alani

Two afternoons working for MPVK is reasonable, right? I hope Martya appreciates all the hard work Alani put into practicing Spanish this summer. I truly think it will help. One of the hardest things to teach young officers is that the less educated enlisted do better when you give them orders in their first language. Enrique is used to English being the language of Science, but I’ll bet he reverts to Spanish on the rare occasions he thinks about money. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

It’s time to start praying to the wormhole gods! Ships are in position to begin using sonic expanders on both ends. I miss Helen, but General Chaly wants her on the Sergyar end for the munitions phase. Dr. Shabunin and I are very comfortable with our new crew. He’s also pleased we’ll be returning to Betan orbit every few weeks to restock and update our project partners. We do have an observer from Survey aboard, but it’s so far out of its scientific depth, it’s a severe hindrance.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Guess who made company commander? Two points if you guessed me and Lambros! It’ll be a challenge because while our companies are great, the regiment commander is an arrogant, brown-nosing, son-of-a-general.

This is where you tell me it’s good practice for the real military, right?

Love, Everard

It sure is, my love. But what great soldiers they’ll be by graduation! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

The expanders are working! Dr. Scalfani’s latest measurements indicate we could squeeze a pinnace through. Too bad he won’t give the all-clear until the opening is at least thrice the size of the d’Artagnan. 89% of the sims show the main debris exploding outward toward Betan space, but the pesky minority show a significant blowback that could cork the wormhole at its current width. So we press on. The current plan is to try to blast the d’Artagnan out by late November. Other ships will monitor the situation while we Barrayarans return home for a royal wedding/ Winterfair. Assuming we haven’t caused a complete collapse, the team will reassemble in June to continue widening/stabilizing the d’Artagnan’s graveyard.

General Anna has sent a fascinating question to HQ. Are there any central records of ships that disappeared during jumps? If we succeed in moving the d’Artagnan, perhaps the same technology could be used to open other wormholes. It would certainly be more efficient to scout for wormholes in areas where ships vanished. And who knows, maybe we could locate and unblock the original wormhole the Firsters used to get here from Komarr. Wouldn’t that be amazing?

Feel free to say it – we’re thinking like Da. Why the hell not?

Love, Helen and Anna

*****

Hey Sis –

I swear, listening to Aurelia and Dr. Shabunin ramble reminds me of Dad trying to explain the purpose of some of his missions. It’s oddly comforting.

Mother loves the regular visits. Sarah and I are grateful that her ongoing interest in the wormhole is keeping Mother mentally active. She’s collected every article published about Joe Camus’ firing. May I go back to calling him the ratfink? Given the scandal that’s emerged, it seems even more
appropriate than it was when he stupidly (for him) dumped you. You got away lucky!

It’s amazing how a single discovery can change decades of anger and resentment. While Barrayar trying to take Escobar was incredibly stupid, we’re not the Great Saviors we’ve pompously painted ourselves. Even armed with plasma mirrors, we took severe losses. An official inquiry is underway to determine if all the other missing ships were shot down by Barrayaran Forces. Another inquiry is trying to determine an appropriate punishment for hundreds of people lying under oath. Ratfink should be glad we don’t have corporal punishment/long-term incarceration because there’s a growing minority that wants him punished as a war criminal.

How are the rest of the troops handling the new school year? We can’t believe Everard and Nile are graduating this year. Where did the time go?

Love, John and Sarah  
*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

In the next few days, Helen, Stefan, and the Imperium’s most experienced drone operator will attempt the most critical real-life video game of our lives. Dr. Shabunin and I feel very comfortable in the hands of the Imperium’s best tactical maneuvers pilot. After all, we have no idea what, if anything, may spew out of the wormhole. Decommissioned ships being cheap compared to our other equipment, the first pinnace will carry much less ordinance than originally proposed to prevent blowback. I wish Betans with private ships were as leery as we are. President Igwe has declared large chunks of Betan space off-limits to protect his ignorant citizens.

Wish us luck!
Love, Aurelia  
*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

The good news – Sergyar reports no blowback from the explosion. The bad – nothing has come out the Betan side. The teams will be sending drones to see if the d’Artagnan budged, broke, or expanded to fill the wormhole.

Love, Gregor and Laisa  
*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We were partially successful. Our controlled explosion propelled the d’Artagnan about halfway down the wormhole. The better news – it’s still in one piece. Stefan and our engineering boffins are frantically calculating if getting the ship out in one piece is possible. And if so, how big a payload is required. My guess is about 1.5-1.75x the initial payload set off in 3-4 chain bursts, with the largest at the end to get the debris clear of the wormhole. But I’m just a lowly navigator.

Love, Helen  
*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’re told Anna didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when she got the boffins’ report on arming the next exploding pinnace. Helen swears she never said a word to Stefan about the payload, though they did discuss timed bursts. The official recommendation is setting off 1.66x the initial payload, with the fourth burst containing 40% of the firepower. My daughter’s pretty smart, ain’t she?

Gregor’s given permission for them to go ahead. So now we wait.
Love, Admiral Naismith (Ret.)

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

WE DID IT!!!

Please enjoy the vid of the d’Artagnan emerging into normal space after almost 70 years. It’s a lot worse for the wear. Three Betan ships are coming to determine if it’s stable enough to be towed back to their space station. The drone we sent through the hole in the side confirms frozen bodies aboard. Don’t worry, Dr. Shabunin and I did not look at any of that vid. He did wonder if President Igwe will award our team any medals for returning their war dead. I suspect that will depend on what, if any, data can be retrieved. The ship did some sort of flip, so the bridge is virtually intact. I’m not sure if that’s good for former-Captain Camus or not.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Team Wormhole needs a vacation. I need a vacation. We’ll see you in Vorbarr Sultana in about three weeks. Victoria has kindly agreed to review the children’s make-up schoolwork with them. She’s a very good aunt/sister-in-law.

I’m glad we’ve left the salvage to the Betans. I don’t want to be accused of tampering with a potential shrine. It would be nice if someone, ANYONE, in the Betan government had thanked us for presenting them with a ship, not fragments, but I doubt anyone really wanted the d’Artagnan retrieved. Grandma Elizabeth says they’ll probably just blame it all on the deceased Steady Freddy, though the true answer likely lies with corrupt therapists at the M.H.B. I don’t care, I just want to go back to sonic expanders and chucking probes in two directions.

Love Anna, Nikki, Daniel, and Dyana

Poor Anna sounds miserable! Not surprising considering she’s been overseeing this mess nonstop for over a year. Should we send her to the spa? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Mila’s reward for tantruming about not being invited to KareenVB’s wedding is an overnight at Hassadar House with Piotr, Tatiana, and their nanny. She’s old enough to grasp that this is a formal, evening affair for adults and expecting the Empress to make child arrangements twice in one week is totally unreasonable.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and sulky Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We’re approaching Komarr. Anna swears we’ll only be a few hours before we turn toward home. Stefan is crawling out of his skin, not having seen his family in over two years. He was supposed to go home last summer, but the d’Artagnan.

I can’t wait for my dress fittings! You all chose beautiful things for me! Stefan has a new evening suit, so I think we’re good to go.

Love, Aurelia

*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,

My favorite parts of this holiday season were the hugs and seeing my children and siblings chattering away nonstop. It’s been a long time since we were all together. Princess and Lady KareenVB and Sir Sutherland’s wedding was magnificent, as was this year’s Ball, but I liked our anniversary lunch best, with everyone laughing and the grandchildren hiding under the table.

Count Rulf was a nice addition to our celebration. No surprise he gravitated to Selig, Everard, and Perrin. I’m sure Oliver was as pleased as I to hear the praise he heaped on our prefects for representing Academy Prep well. I didn’t expect my colleague to be nearly as gracious to Anna, Helen, and Aurelia, given the historic Vorhalas objection to women in the military.

Enjoy the Long Lake while you can, before we send our loved ones back out into the Nexus. We’ll be lucky to see Selig for at least a year.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Back to the books! And the physics lab. And the engineering classes. And the dissertation. And working on what the team has dubbed the Four Musketeers Pass. That’s as much a tribute to my professors as it is the d’Artagnan. I’m irrationally annoyed that we Barrayarans seem more remorseful about the ship’s loss than the world that sent it into battle. So is Dmitri.

Living with Dmitri, Charlotte, and the boys is wonderful. The boys have become my long-term inspiration. Someday, they’ll likely be living on distant worlds. The more wormholes I can develop, the more time they’ll be able to spend together.

Everyone is purposely avoiding discussing the possibility that releasing the d’Artagnan may’ve killed the wormhole. I’ll be distraught if that’s the case. Not because I expect my every theory to pan out, but because this one is so important to Grandma Elizabeth. Traveling long distances is getting harder for her, plus we need to be able to reach her quickly if she takes another fall.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

As you know, I hold your daughter Nile in the highest regard. I would like to request a meeting at your earliest convenience to discuss her future.

Most sincerely,
Vorhalas

Should we expect a baba or is he handling it himself? May I sit in? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Of course you should say yes! I would be honored to be Rulf’s wife!

Love, Nile

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m thrilled for my sister, but when do Nile and Rulf plan on getting married? I don’t want to be a wet blanket, but doubt I’ll be able to get back to Barrayar until June of next year. And that’s IF the
Four Musketeers Pass project has concluded.

Love, Aurelia

What a wonderful excuse to give them a betrothal period of over a year! I believe they’re well matched, love, but would prefer Nile get an outside career launched before the wedding. Otherwise, I fear she might succumb to the responsibilities of being Countess Vorhalas and her true gift for horticulture might become nothing more than an occasional hobby. Nile – and the Vorhalas District – deserve more than that. Granted, there’s no Vorkosigan Vashnoi to reclaim, but surely there are parks to be designed and hungry people to be fed more efficiently? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Just to be clear, I have no intention of getting married without Aurelia standing on her star point next to you. Betrothed, yes, in a modest ceremony next fall. I have no time to plan anything in my last term and a huge wedding takes time to organize. Rulf wants a flowery, romantic spectacle in Vorhalasgrad’s Main Square. We will NOT, however, be leaving flowers on the family graves. There’s no way in hell his two bastard great-uncles are getting recognized on MY wedding day.

Love, Nile

Well, that’s one etiquette problem solved, my love. Only a million to go! Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

When do we meet the in-laws? Please don’t say Nile’s graduation. Mark wants Rulf’s mother and grandmother to meet the bride’s very scary brothers ASAP so they understand that prole Nile Kosigan is to be treated as graciously as KareenVB.

Has Alani mentioned the boy she met in her Advanced Spanish class? Gleb is obsessed with visiting Escobar. He can’t believe we live there part-time.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia –

When are we going to Sieglings? We need to set a date so Lambros’ father can travel down to meet us. Some of our other classmates from non-military backgrounds might want to come with us, too. Is that okay?

Love, Everard

My love, how did our boy wind up so considerate? The quality of my first sword set was crap because I had no one to show me any better. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Would you like us to arrange flyers for the Hassadar guests to Nile and Everard’s party? This way you won’t have to worry about any drunk flying afterwards.

And because they’re adorable, here are holos of our hyperactive twin terrors. Victoria swears they both take after Da. I don’t disagree.

Love, Alex & Family

*****
Hey Sis –

First, thanks for the vid of Kiona and Lujayn’s latest show. Both girls did very well.

We owe you for sending the security vid of the meet-the-in-laws dinner. We haven’t laughed so hard since Alexei’s wedding. I swear, Miles and Mark both seemed to be 8 feet tall when rejecting what sounds like bullshit Vorhalas wedding traditions like the bride attesting to her purity. If Gregor got married without dragging the wedding guests to his mother’s grave, Rulf and Nile can avoid visiting his father’s.

I know it sounds disrespectful to a bombing victim, but you and I have lived most of our lives without showing formal respect to Dad at every holiday and celebration. The respect is in our hearts and every time we mention him in normal conversation, which has been plenty recently. We both know he’d be scouring the ‘net even more avidly than Mother for every scrap of info on the d’Artagnan. Sarah’s cousin was on that ship, as was a distant relative of Dad’s. Both have been cremated and received proper memorials. Joe Camus has also been cremated. Coward took his own life rather than face any punishment beyond house arrest.

The full truth isn’t out yet, but what’s publicly known is very bad. The formation knew they were near a wormhole. Ratfink ordered the protesting d’Artagnan crew to break formation and make the jump in hopes of sneaking up on the Barrayaran rear flank. Idiot didn’t consider that if the jump was successful, dozens of ships could’ve come through the new route and cut off Betan support to Escobar. Yes, for want of a captain with a brain, an entire war could’ve been lost.

What’s the point of making war weapons if we don’t have a trained navy to use them? A lot would’ve had to have gone right for Aral, but there’s a faint possibility he could’ve captured Escobar AND Beta Colony for Emperor Ezar. Think about it. You and he could’ve controlled five planets for Gregor, not three. Scary, isn’t it?

Love, John and Sarah

Too scary to contemplate, my love, considering we barely slept dealing with the three we had. But yes, John has the military situation exactly right. And depending on when the d’Artagnan materialized, Prince Serg and Ges Vorrutyer would’ve cheerfully hacked Beta Colony to pieces. I’ll stop now. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

It’s the night before graduation, virtually all my friends are panicking, drinking, or both, and I’m here thinking about how lucky I am. I have a wonderful, kind fiancé, a large circle of friends, a job lined up, and a huge, loving, supportive family who told me from the day I was born I could be anything I wanted. Wife and mother before 25 probably wasn’t in the plan, but like Aunt Olivia, it didn’t take me long to recognize my soulmate. Thanks to her example, I also understand the baggage Rulf carries from his life taking a very unexpected turn. Most of his Academy friends are scattered across the Empire, he’s yet to develop a clear political identity despite wooing from all sides, and Count Vormuir still can’t look him in the eye. And despite not being the bride his family expected, I know that we’re meant to be.

Lest you wonder, Rulf knows my gene scan will show I’m not entirely Betan. He also knows whose Barrayaran DNA I carry. His family does not, and will not, know because it’s none of their damn business. I love the current Count Vorhalas, not the ones who came before, with their complicated relationship to Da and Miles.

A year or so from now, I’ll be Rulf’s Nile. But for now, especially tomorrow, I’m yours, the daughter you raised with care, patience, and boundless love, no matter what I needed or how much dirt I trekked everywhere. Perhaps you should’ve named me for Aunt Martya. Hydroponics is neater than soil.

Love always, Nile

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I wish you could’ve heard the strength of Everard’s conviction when he put his hands between mine and swore his allegiance to the Emperor and the Imperium. I felt just as honored as when I accepted Helen’s and Selig’s oaths. How rare and special it is, to be there at the exact second a loved one truly becomes an adult.

I have every confidence in Everard, Lambros, and most of their class. A few clammy hands tell me that not every graduate will become 20-year men. As long as they continue to serve the Imperium with honor when released from military service, it’ll all have been worthwhile. In fact, I’m going to be a nosy in-law and suggest that Rulf check his class to see if any are interested in becoming armsmen. I don’t think he’s carrying a full 20 and married life will be easier if some of the armsmen are closer to his and Nile’s ages.

And tomorrow, we party times two!

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, who occasionally likes filling in for the Emperor

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m at Grandma’s, baking cookies and talking our ears off. Helen’s ship picks me up in three days and Grandma doesn’t want our only snacks being rat-bars.

I’m feeling unreasonably confident. I have no idea why, other than Sergyar base is still getting good energy readings on their end. Dr. Scalfani probably isn’t thinking about it at all, given that he and his wife are at the Orb. All those ISI consulting fees are being put to good use!
Yes, I’m wearing my hetero-but-taken earring. It’s brought on some disappointed looks from people attracted to my very exotic studying-outside-tan. I didn’t used to be able to tell the difference from sunlamp tans, but now I can.

Wish us luck!
Love, Aurelia
*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

If you had any doubts that the Imperium is getting their money’s worth from Stefan, you may toss them. We’ve chucked over a dozen probes of increasing size in both directions and there’s barely any debris. Furthermore, adding magnetized plates to the larger probes is succeeding in pulling out more scraps with every trip.

Probe chucking is getting dull, but General Chaly has ordered it to continue until we stop collecting scraps. Then we’ll send some more sonic wideners through and return to Solstice for a break and to collect more cookies. The crew LOVES them!

I’ve written Uncle Mark asking him to send someone from the Clinic to examine Grandma Elizabeth. I know she’s 134, but something seems off since last fall.

Love, Helen and Aurelia
*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Helen spends entirely too much time with doctors. Dr. Crocus says Grandma’s had a mini-stroke. She’s been tested extensively for more blood clots – none – and been given different meds to reduce the odds of another episode. Given how tired Grandma seems, it’s obvious this new wormhole is her only chance of attending Nile’s wedding. The many jumps to Barrayar are otherwise just too exhausting.

On the plus side, Mila has been a wonderful travel companion. She did some baking and enjoyed the Zoo with her cousins while I had a few meetings. Our ambassador is thrilled with the progress the wormhole team is making. He also agrees the Betans are treating the team rather shabbily while they try to unravel who knew what about the d’Artagnan. It’s like they’ve never heard of fast-penta!

Love, Mark and Lady Mila
*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Today was our first live experiment. A three-crew courier refitted with measuring equipment successfully jumped in both directions. The time from Sergyar orbit to Betan orbit and back was 31 hours. Yes, I said 31 hours round trip in a not-particularly fast ship. The MPVK Express could probably go one-way in under 12.

The bad news – the wormhole’s not wide enough for large cargo freighters or battle cruisers. We’ll keep working it.

Love, Aurelia and Helen
*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I know I wanted ship duty – who doesn’t? – but Fort Kithera is busy and interesting. It’s also close enough to the District capitol that we can go into town for meals and such. Miles promises that his
friends the Vorbrettons will invite me for dinner when they return from their summer tour of the District.

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I can’t request and require, but I’d really appreciate if you could attend the reception for the Betan team visiting the House of Secrets. A few of them don’t grasp that ‘no earring’ doesn’t mean ‘proposition at will.’ It’s getting rather awkward, particularly for the younger base soldiers and ISI boffins.

As a bonus, you’ll be able to see how well Nile has done refreshing our garden!

Love, Ivan & Tej

It must be bad if harassment complaints have reached the Viceroy! I say we go and introduce our visiting lotharios to some local social mores. Starting with: anyone anxious to sleep with a Betan will ask.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

You must come to the reception. Irina and Padma will both be here!

Love, Nile

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Count Rulf is really the most charming young man. He invited Ekaterin and me over to Vorhalas House to see/measure the ballroom so she can start planning decorations for the betrothal ceremony. He also admitted to missing Nile terribly and to looking forward to honeymooning off-world. The lad – because aren’t they all lads to us? – has never been further than Komarr.

Judging from the holos, Nile and Ekaterin will have their hands full sprucing up Vorhalasgrad. Some old trees surrounding the Main Square are pretty; others are well past their prime. Vorhalasgrad House, though huge, may be overpopulated, what with several generations spread throughout. Ekaterin plans on suggesting to Nile that she and Rulf select a private floor and relocate everyone else accordingly. We both had the impression that his mother and grandmother see it as their house, not his. It’s reasonable to a certain extent, given that two siblings are still underage, but the Count should not still be living in his childhood bedroom!

I can hear you snickering, Cordelia, but as territorial as Piotr could be, he didn’t compare to TWO dowagers trying to dominate a very young daughter-in-law. Nile needs to begin as she means to go on.

Much love, Alys and Simon

One advantage of the military – unless your father-the-count dies unexpectedly, they cut the apron strings for you. So does sending your child away to university or having them live apart from you. I like how Kareen expects Alani to care for Mila and the household when she’s away for a few days. The dowagers will be shocked that Nile already has a fairly good idea of what being a countess/hostess entails. God knows Tej has seen it all! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
I’m sorry, but I’m not returning to Sergyar until December. We’ve reached a point where General Chaly and the ISI boffins can handle overseeing the remaining tests and I’m far behind in my coursework. We’re confident the wormhole works. To prove it, Anna has authorized Helen to bring Grandma for a short visit before you return to Barrayar. It’s important to everyone that Grandma have a new adventure!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

You’re not changing my mind. Just once, I want to be the Naismith who’s first to fly a new path. I’ll see you tomorrow.

Love, Mother

General Chaly is very wise, my love. Your mother will motivate the team to continue pressing forward on the sloggy part of the project by showing them what they’ve already achieved. Because who doesn’t miss their grandma? Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m advised we’re getting a VVIP tomorrow. Pack up the troops and we’ll have a gala reunion in our rejuvenated gardens.

Love, Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril

*****

To: CNVorkosigan, OPJole, AChaly, NEVorsoisson, IXVorpatril, TVorpatril, HNVorkosigan, ANVorkosigan
From: Vorkosigan

What do you mean, Grandma’s visiting tomorrow? Does Gregor know?

---

From: HNVorkosigan

No, Da, I’m stealing an Imperial ship. Of course the Emperor knows!

---

From: CNVorkosigan

What my granddaughter said. Miles, how paranoid are you?

---

From: Vorkosigan

Very, I’m afraid. Having hijacked a ship or two myself, I was afraid I’d given Grandma ideas! Fly safely, Helen. You’re carrying very precious cargo.

---

From: NEVorsoisson

Excellent orders, Da. Though I believe my wife gave them first.

---

From: AChaly

Why yes, I believe I did. I even notified the Emperor and Viceroy.

---

From: IXVorpatril
She did indeed. You’ll be missing a magnificent feast tomorrow, Miles. And don’t tell Grandma Elizabeth, but the MPVK Express is expected in orbit by morning.
---

From: Vorkosigan

I’ll shut up now. Everyone needs to hug Grandma for us. Vorkosigan out.

*****

Dear Mother, Aunt Alys, and Ekaterin,

Can you join me, Rulf, his mother, and grandmother tomorrow to discuss our betrothal ceremony? Lady Vorhalas-Vorville, Countess Vorhalas, and I define ‘modest’ very differently. It appears the event exploded when they saw Count and Countess Vorbarra on my invitation list. We need to rein this in, pronto!

Love, Nile

*****

My dearest Cordelia and Ekaterin,

This is very disappointing. I thought we’d covered almost everything months ago when Ekaterin and I toured the ballroom. Inviting all 60 counts can wait for the actual wedding. Not that most will trek to Vorhalasgrad, which is probably what’s motivating the desire to host a betrothal ceremony worthy of Alexei and Katya.

Chins up, my dears, we’ll set this right.

Much love, Alys

If I were you, my love, I’d just sit back and let everyone blather until Alys shuts it all down with a few pointed, yet exquisitely polite, remarks. After all, aren’t she and Rulf’s grandmother contemporaries? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

The look on Rulf’s mother’s face when you calmly explained that you legally had 10 children, five of each gender, still makes me laugh. Someone born toward the end of the Regency obviously never contemplated who exactly raised the Emperor after his parents’ deaths. Explaining that you and Uncle Oliver are jointly obligated to all seven of us also cut out plenty of haggling as to why next June, your lover will be proudly standing on his star point between my mother and my oldest sister.

Aunt Alys suggested Dr. Graham be seated with Uncle Oliver’s colleagues at the betrothal dinner. Will that be acceptable? For the wedding, I’m planning on having Dr. Graham partner Grandma.

Oksana enjoys this wedding crap far more than do. Ekaterin suggested I hire her as my secretary, saying it would be better to have one whose first loyalty is to me, not House Vorhalas. Is that logical or might it strain our friendship too much?

Love, Nile-the-nervous

Lady Oksana would be a brilliant hire, my love. She’s smart, detail-oriented, and has a pedigree Rulf’s mother can’t question. I bet she’ll be brilliant at reorganizing the status quo at Vorhalasgrad House, too. Tell me, is there a dower house, or is Nile stuck with two women determined to show her the Vorhalas way? Love, Me
Sibling Love

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Dr. Vorbelova-Vorivkin wants to speak to you about my last assignment. I’m not sure if it was good or bad.

Love, Kiona

I’m sure Dr. VB-VI was very impressed with Kiona’s work. I was. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Is there any way I can get a medical dispensation for Greek? I’m trying very hard, but it’s the only subject that makes my head hurt. I also hate classes with chattering year 8s, but mostly, it’s the headaches.

Love, Lukayn

Did you catch the typo, my love? Poor thing’s head must be pounding. Do you want me to talk to Vasco when I’m down in Hassadar tomorrow? Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We can’t believe a year 11’s paper on the Ceta Occupation has been accepted into a year 12 history scholarship competition! We’re so proud of Kiona! Delia said Duv was absolutely awestruck. She also says he’s planning his retirement assault on the Vorkosigan attics. Between the artifacts and the documents, there’s probably enough for a dozen dissertations.

We’re also glad Lujayn has dropped Greek. We sometimes overhear bits of her coaching calls with Alani and she seems to be doing well on math topics I found confusing. Science seems a bit harder. I’m very proud of Lujayn for offering to study extra Russian in lieu of Greek. That was responsible bargaining, a skill that will serve her well in the future should she have other post-concussion issues.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

What the hell is happening at Vorhalas House? Oksana wrote me that Lady Vorhalas-Vorville hired a commercial florist because she won’t have Ekaterin’s radioactive flowers in her house. Also, that Nile can’t hire a secretary because there’s no room in the household budget for her to have any private staff. Do we have a Countess Riya situation developing here?

Classes are going well. So is work on the Four Musketeers Pass. They’re sending the Prince Serg through next week. Miles says he’s glad the former flagship has another few jumps left in it.

Love, Aurelia

Rulf’s grandmother best be careful or Miles will assign Simone to be Nile’s secretary until after the wedding. On second thought, that’s a really good idea. And if Simone feels a need to hire her twin’s girlfriend, well, paying them is Miles’ problem, not Rulf’s. Considering he offered to pay for the wedding, I doubt he’d have a problem with making sure his sister and wife get what they want.

Love, Me
*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Wouldn’t it be easier to have the betrothal here? We have a large, reliable staff used to throwing big events. It doesn’t sound like Countess Vorhalas is ready to host something so important. At least that’s what Lord Vorhalas-Vorville intimated at Vorhartung today. His mother not being as sharp as she used to be was also discreetly mentioned. Could some of this outlandishness be senility? The Vorhalases do tend to be long-lived, but the old bat’s got to be 90, which without any sort of rejuvenation treatment is getting up there for a Barrayaran.

Should we call Nile and make the offer directly?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

That has my vote, my love. Not sure it has Nile’s. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Problem solved – working together, Simone, Oksana, and I convinced Nile to hold the betrothal ceremony at Vorkosigan House. Nile says Rulf seems relieved. Sounds like he’d prefer to think about wedding improvements to Vorhalasgrad than hosting a huge betrothal to please his mother. Also, no one gave a thought to the extra security necessary to host Count and Countess Vorbarra. Idiots!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Cordelia, Ekaterin, and Simone,

Together, you ladies hosted a magnificent betrothal. Nile and Rulf looked so happy in every holo. Rulf’s mother, not so much. She really was planning on stomping all over the young, ignorant prole, wasn’t she?

My favorite holo was Nile surrounded by Team Koudelka. The ultimate finishing school for every countess-to-be!

Love, Mother/Grandma

Interesting point of view, my love, though Countess Vorhalas seems to have spent her adult life as a wife and mother, not a hostess and businesswoman. I’m not confident she truly understands the underlying reason her husband died. Love, Me

Okay, yes, I’ll say it – the dowager countess is a pleasant, not-very-bright woman who seems to have spent her entire marriage under her mother-in-law’s thumb. Why else would Lady Vorhalas-Vorville have moved into her father’s quarters after his death, not the current Count and Countess? And while I’m venting, I also didn’t appreciate the snide comments about Everard and Aurelia missing their sister’s betrothal. Escobar is far away and our boy was on duty! Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Lujayn asked if she could visit this weekend so Victoria could help her with her science homework. We fear she may be hiding some post-concussion symptoms because she specifically said everyone at Vorkosigan House was too busy to help her. Maybe send her down so Victoria and Bogdan could work with her, maybe slip some diagnostic tests in to see where she’s at?
Love, Alex and Victoria

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Lujayn needs to see an ophthalmologist. Bogdan also insists she needs to see the pediatric neurologist again. Fewer symptoms doesn’t mean no symptoms. Have you noticed her rubbing her head while studying or wearing sunglasses when it’s not very bright outside? Those are signs of dull headaches. We can’t say if vision correction may solve the problem entirely, but it should help.

Love, Lizzie, Vasco, and Sonia

My love, could her vision have changed so much since last spring? How did we miss that? Should we have Kiona re-checked, too? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I told Lujayn she can’t have vision correction until I’m home to nurse her. Stefan and I barely see each other because we’re slammed with our end-of-term projects, prepping for our finals, and getting our students ready for theirs. Stefan’s lead professor and Dr. Lasorda both agreed we can grade our students’ finals aboard ship. It’ll be cramped in a fast courier, but worth it to see our families!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Will you be staying at Hassadar House for finals week? Please say yes. Gleb and I just broke up and I could use some support while studying for my exams.

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

As break-ups go, this was mild. Gleb’s a nice kid, but far too immature. Alani needs someone older and past the stupid university partying stage. Does Everard know any ImpSec analysts? I’d ask Duv, but that would smack of coercion. In the meantime, Mila is doing her part, agreeing that boys are yucky. Funny, that’s not what she said last week. Why didn’t anyone warn us what 12 would be like?

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

What would be the fun in that? Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I should be arriving at the shuttleport about two hours before Aurelia and Stefan. I’ll find a chair and nap until they arrive. How’s Lujayn? Is she ready for surgery tomorrow? I have audiobooks for her. Also funky sunglasses and multiple kilos of the best fudge anyone has ever tasted from a small shop in Bretton Hills.

Love, Everard

I knew we forgot something! Funky sunglasses for the win! Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,
We’re all so relieved that Lujayn is recovering so quickly from laser surgery. Now it’s time to relax and enjoy the holiday season with (most of) your family. I’m sorry you won’t see Helen or the Vorsoisson-Chalys until Nile’s wedding, but we Betans are close enough for a weekend visit.

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I cannot believe how much sucking up there was at the Ball last night. Is it like this every time a sitting count marries? Also, we’re terrible human beings for not leaving before the dancing because Lady Vorhalas-Vorville was tired. Tiresome is a better word. I’d give it even odds as to whether she graces the anniversary lunch today. I’m only going higher than 10:1 because the entire Vorbarra clan will be there and she’ll want to see the little ones. Lady VH-VV is very distressed that Alexei and Katya will be the only Vorbarras trekking to Vorhalasgrad to attend our wedding. How much time does she think the Emperor has for such frivolities?

Love, Nile

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Does Lady Vorhalas-Vorville’s face always look like she sucked on a fresh lemon, or was she not enjoying our typically rambunctious gathering? For someone who’s so concerned about Rulf needing an heir, she doesn’t seem to like little ones. Yes, they’re loud and sticky, but that’s part of the charm.

Please tell me I’m not reading too much into the fact that all three of Olivia’s children brought dates. It’s well past time SOMEONE gave us great-grandchildren and secured the Vorrutyer succession.

Much love, Drou and Kou

She has a point, my love, though it doesn’t seem fair that Delia’s and Martya’s children aren’t pressured to procreate. After all, all four are partnered. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Guess who just had a fit that my wedding dress isn’t pure white? Apparently Lady VH-VV also patronizes Estelle’s. She tried to cancel the order, but Estelle was quite adamant that Lady Alys had specifically ordered the ice blue silk to heighten the contrast with the silver embroidery.

Love, Nile

What did I just read? Lady VH-VV tried to cancel Nile’s custom-designed, hand-embroidered dress? The one ordered a year in advance? Is she nuts??? Love, Me

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

I’d like to apologize for the misunderstanding at the dressmaker’s yesterday. Grandmama was not aware the navy, silver, and ice-blue color scheme also applied to the bride’s gown. I’m positive Nile will be even more breathtaking than she is with dirt on her nose! She and Countess Vorkosigan are working incredibly hard to revive Vorhalasgrad’s Main Square. I am in awe of their combined talent.

Most sincerely,
Vorhalas

Well, at least he’s got nice manners, my love. I suspect Nile would not have been so calm if she
weren’t positive that no dressmaker on this planet would DARE cross Lady Alys. Especially not given the generosity of this wedding gift.

Do we want to visit Vorhalasgrad over March break? Pardon the pun, but I’d like to get the lay of the land. Always good to know where the foxholes are. Love, Me

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

You’re welcome to join us when we go to Vorhalasgrad in March, IF you’re willing to help! I’ve already drafted Perrin and some of his friends. Rulf has provided plenty of manual laborers, but most know little about horticulture. If everything is to be in full bloom on the big day, it must be planted PROPERLY. No more upside-down bulbs, unsupported saplings, or plants in the wrong places. Unfortunately, Nile and I can’t be everywhere at once and my other foremen are on other jobs. Congratulations, you’re management! I’ll book you a hotel suite.

Miles should be around, but either way, we can ask Simone to stay over and keep an eye on Kiona and Lujayn. I’m confident they’ll enjoy themselves.

Love, Ekaterin

She really does think of everything, my love! What is there to do in Vorhalasgrad? We should arrange ways for Perrin’s crew to entertain themselves in the evening. We don’t want them being boisterous in their hotel rooms. Love, Me

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Thanks for being so nonchalant about Rulf’s mother’s faux pas in not inviting you to Vorhalasgrad by now. She’s obviously under orders to keep trying to scare me off. You’ll enjoy the hotel. The food and plumbing are good, there are lovely views of the Square, and every suite has a hot tub. Vorhalasgrad House doesn’t have a hot tub. I’m not sure of the drains, either, but I’ll follow up after our honeymoon. The main reception rooms are nice; the kitchen needs drastic updates. We won’t discuss the overgrown back garden. The original design was lovely, centuries ago. Good thing it’s a big space because Ekaterin and I have grandiose plans.

Love, Nile

*****
Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Thanks for finding so many fun things for us to do in Vorhalasgrad. I really appreciate my buddies sacrificing part of our leave to help. Some are doing it for me and my sister; others for a fellow Academy man. Our instructors speak very highly of Rulf. Several old-timers have said if not for the bombing, he probably could’ve been an Admiral like his namesake before assuming the countship.

Nile says they’re inviting Count and Countess Vormuir to the wedding. Is that wise? What if some of Rulf’s liege-people try to retaliate for his father’s murder? Not that I think it would be fair to exclude them, but after studying crowd control and mob mentality recently, it’s pinging my totally untested instincts. (You may now laugh at my paranoia. Both of you!)

Love, Perrin

Perrin’s got good instincts. I hope ImpSec or Ops recognizes his worth. Love, Me

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,
From the holos, it’s obvious you’re good sports. I haven’t seen you both so dirty since Kiona tried selling mud pies. I never thought of it that way, but Mama’s really in the mud pie business, isn’t she? The Square will be beautiful by June. As Mama would say, I can see the bones of a very welcoming space.

I’ve put in for leave for the wedding. Not sure if it’ll be granted, but my Lt. Cmdr. thinks it’s possible. I hope so, though I’m really hoping for a transfer to either Home Fleet or Ops. Oksana has been patient with my crazy schedule, but it’s past time to spend some quality time together.

Love, Selig

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Aunt Elena has kindly offered to drop me and Stefan in Betan orbit. Mark and the MPVK Express will claim us, Grandma, Uncle John, Aunt Sarah, and Clark, take the short-cut to Sergyar, and then off to Barrayar. Mark promises we’ll go slowly, with no more than one jump a day so we don’t tire Grandma unnecessarily.

Can either of you tell me WHY you agreed a double PhD was a good idea? Stefan is exhausted, and he’s had far more math and engineering classes than I have. Plus we FINALLY got a near-complete list of ships lost during jumps. Dr. Scalfani says we’ll start researching them in the fall because he wants to spend the summer relaxing and being a Papa to their baby-to-be. Dr. Torres agrees, saying we need to officially wrap the Four Musketeers Pass before we take on anything else.

Thanks for the holos of my dress. I hope it looks as good on me as it does Alani! She really looks smashing in hers, too. I hope Rulf’s sisters look good. They’re around Alani’s age, right? Old enough to dress like grown-ups?

Mark is so kind, he’s hired a physical therapist for the trip home. Maybe that’ll get the studying knots out!

Love, Aurelia
Sorrows

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Just wanted to pass along something not wedding-related. KareenVB has worked her magic and Sonia is getting a baby sister for her third birthday. We’re excited!

Love, Lizzie and Vasco

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ve been sitting on our news for months because everyone is (rightly) preoccupied by Nile’s wedding. Mama and Da are still in shock that we showed them a humming replicator last night. The twins are getting a baby brother in late July. Holos of William Anatoly attached.

Love, Alex, Victoria, Piotr, and Tatiana

Oh, hell, my love, we’ll be away when William arrives. Your mother will be disappointed. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m very glad you’re excited because the response from Escobar was pitiful. Vasco’s parents are mortally offended that we’re not doing our duty to carry on the Cortez name. Vasco’s got a brother and dozens of cousins, but somehow, if we don’t have a boy, the Nexus as we know it will collapse in upon itself.

Ironically, we were planning on having a boy next. After this diatribe, however, Vasco now says he only wants girls. No decisions will be made for quite some time, other than his parent should count themselves lucky if they get a single holo of our precious daughters together.

Love, Lizzie, Vasco, and Sonia

Damn, those people are awful! I am curious, however, what Nile and Rulf will decide. One boy? Two? I assume replicators? I can’t believe Rulf and his sisters were body births. Those Vorhalases do resist progress, don’t they? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

You know how Ekaterin claims I’m always handed investigations at the most inconvenient times? A munitions storage facility in the Black Escarpment just blew during a live-fire training exercise. Perrin’s fine – it was the class above his.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

He means a bunch of cadets aren’t fine, my love. We likely know some. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The explosion was caused by a tank mistakenly firing in the wrong direction. No charges will be filed for this accident.

I’m distraught to report that Ensign Lambros Savalas is among the dead. Officers have been dispatched to tell his family. No formal announcement will be made until you confirm you’ve spoken
to Nile. I’ll contact Everard – he’s been leaving me messages every few hours.

I am so, so sorry. Lambros was a fine young man and a credit to the Service.

Love, Miles

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I can scarcely believe the news. I feel like I’ve lost one of my brothers. Because truly, that’s what Lambros was to all of us. In her letter, Kiona said she doesn’t really remember not knowing Everard’s sidekick.

I wish I could be there to pay my respects in person. Please convey my love to all who mourn, especially Everard.

Love, Aurelia

The very sad truth of military life – stupid shit happens and people die. I’m so angry our bonus son died because of someone else’s mistake. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Thank you, Miles, and Ekaterin for representing me at Lambros’ funeral. I tried to get leave, but couldn’t be spared.

I feel like half my innards are missing. Is this what true loss feels like? I thought I knew bereavement from the bombing, but this is very different. It’s raw, constant, and makes me feel a bit more sympathetic for Rulf’s mother and grandmother. I still think they treat Nile dreadfully, but can understand how the wedding is a trigger for missing Rulf’s father. Lambros’ third sister is postponing her wedding for at least a year. She wrote me today, thanking me for being her brother’s friend. I cried like I’ve never cried before.

Love, Everard

Ironic that Aral used almost those exact words in describing his reaction to Admiral Rulf Vorhalas’ death. How different everyone’s lives would’ve been if Evon had remembered that friendship before firing off the soltoxin grenade. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m in complete shock. Not from the accident itself – we all know those happen! – but the loss of such a talented, polite, kind young man. Lambros charmed me the first time he confessed that he knew he should call me Madam Naismith, but it was hard because he thought of me as Grandma Elizabeth.

Please send me the Savalas family’s address so I may express my sympathies.

Love, Mother

*****

From the Vorbarr Sultana Gazette:

Another Eligible Bachelor Gone: Count Rulf Vorhalas Marries Miss Nile Kosigan

Thousands from the Vorhalas District joined invited guests in witnessing the wedding of the 9th Count Vorhalas to Miss Kosigan, daughter of former Sergyar Vicereine Cordelia Vorkosigan. The
ceremony took place in Vorhalasgrad’s Main Square, which has seen quite an overhaul under the
direction of the bride and her employer, Vorkosigan Landscaping. Beyond the new flowers and
greenery, the entire square was draped in navy and ice blue bunting embroidered in silver.

Count Vorhalas wore a traditional navy and silver House uniform. The new countess wore a gown
from society dressmaker Estelle. The unusual ice blue gown was hand-embroidered at the neckline,
bodice, sleeves, and hem in the silver Vorhalas floral motifs and sparkled delightfully in the
afternoon sun.

The groom is a graduate of the Imperial Military Academy. His second was Lieutenant Lord Boris
Vorville. The bride graduated from Vorbarr Sultana University’s Horticultural program. Her second
was her older sister, Lady Aurelia Vorkosigan, who was knighted several years ago for her Scientific
Contributions to the Imperium. The rest of the star points were taken by Vicereine Vorkosigan,
Admiral Oliver Jole (Ret.), Dowager Countess Vorhalas, and the groom’s uncle, Lord Vorhalas-
Vorville. Countess Ekaterin Vorkosigan served as Coach.

Invited guests, which included Crown Prince Alexei and Princess Katya and over a dozen Counts,
adjourned to Vorhalasgrad House for a formal dinner and dancing. Floral arrangements included a
new navy and silver tulip created by the bride. Commercial production of the strikingly delicate
flower is sadly several years away.

Food and traditional Barrayaran music was available in the Main Square from the end of the
ceremony through to the evening’s extravagant fireworks display. MPVK Enterprises served all 31
flavors of ambrosia, their delightful frozen treat, as well as several more in the development stage.
The mango ice is sure to be successful!

Until yesterday, the couple had been rather coy about how they met. Count Vorhalas revealed,
“Accompanying my mother to the Vorbarr Sultana Garden Show three years ago was the wisest
thing I ever did. She saw her flowers and I found mine.” The new Countess Vorhalas blushed before
 teasing that she was too excited to have won her first ribbon to notice any personal interest.

The groom’s grandmother, Lady Vorhalas-Vorville, refused to comment on the long-standing feud
between the Vorkosigan and Vorhalas families. The bride’s mother, who with her late husband,
Viceroy Prime Minister Admiral Aral Vorkosigan, was poisoned by the late Commander Evon
Vorhalas, merely stated, “I’m very happy that Nile and Rulf have found each other. True love is a
rare gift.”

****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Congratulations on not being misquoted!

Laisa doesn’t care if the official wedding vid has been edited yet, she wants to see every frame. We
should have plenty of time on our leisurely voyage out to Sergyar. Then the exciting bit. President
Igwe and his delegation will meet the flagship for the tandem jump that will officially open the Four
Musketeers Pass. We hope Betan citizens will be excited by this amazing discovery. It certainly cost
them enough!

Are you sure we can’t convince you to visit Escobar with us? Philip and Simon are growing so
quickly, plus you might want to be there when Kareen and Shaw hand over the replicator holding
our first granddaughter!

We’ll see you on board in a few days.

Love, Gregor & Laisa
KareenVB has been the busy little scientist, hasn’t she, my love? It’ll be nice to have her and Shaw along to help distract us from missing Everard and Nile. Our boy put on a good show in public, but his grief is so deep. I was holding my breath hoping Selig would be there so they could support one another. I also am having trouble processing that unlike Aurelia and Everard, Nile’s ‘real’ home isn’t with us. Parental separation anxiety. I have it. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Slight change in plans. With Nile and Rulf having postponed their honeymoon due to Grandmama’s hypochondria, that leaves the MPVK Express free for Kareen and me to fly ahead to Sergyar and visit some factories while the rest of you drift along in the flagship. We’re assuming there’s still room for Mila in Kiona and Lujayn’s cabin? If you don’t want to be responsible, we’ll take her with us, but her ladyship would prefer to spend extra time with Grandma et al on the Admiral Vorkosigan.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

Your mother would be crushed if we said no, my love. Besides, Mila’s never a problem. She saves her sass for her parents. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

It’s a good thing we postponed our honeymoon because it’s not hypochondria this time. Grandmama has pleurisy. The prognosis isn’t good. And since Rulf insisted on spilling the beans to her, I imagine you’re not shocked we’re having a ‘wedding night’ baby. KareenVB popped a male embryo into a replicator the day before the Admiral Vorkosigan left port. So it’s very early – much too early to tell anyone but you two! – but if all goes to plan, Dyana and Daniel may share their birthday.

Another not-to-be-shared comment. After losing Lambros, 13 cadets, and many others in the training accident, I’m having a hard time supporting efforts to extend the life of someone who’s been bullying her family since her husband became her father’s heir. I’ve heard enough slurs over the past few weeks to know Lady VH-VV’s inner core is just as diseased as the trees we removed from the Square. Disturbingly, it’s not just Vorkosigan vitriol. Grandmama hates everyone, including armsmen and staff that have dutifully cared for her for decades. Special contempt applies to KareenVB for dirtying her hands helping women avoid their primary duty. Which is, of course, an unwinnable argument because the best way to guarantee a healthy heir is to create and monitor a male embryo every moment for 9 months.

I’m pleased to say the staff and liege-people are all kind and respectful. V-grad Hospital may not be as modern as Hassadar or VSH, but the base level of care is decent. Rulf is pleased health and nutrition will be my key priorities. We may not have as much farmland as the Dendarii District, but the water and wind coming off the western mountains could be wonderful hydroponic and vat-meat resources.

I’ll say one great thing for marrying an Academy man – Rulf’s neat! Staff confirms this isn’t just the honeymoon phase, that my husband never leaves messes for someone else to clean up. Ekaterin has suggested we install shower rooms between our eventual greenhouse and pool to limit the dirt tracked into the house.

Oksana is settling in nicely. I’ve already tasked her with looking up what was done when Rulf’s father died. I’m sure Rulf will want memorials in both Vorbarr Sultana and V-grad. I’ll have to ask Aunt Alys what mourning clothes to order.

Rulf’s sisters are pleasant, but beyond sheltered. Both almost passed out to learn their brother wasn’t my first lover. Nor I his, but apparently that doesn’t count. The Vorhalas obsession with body births
explains the age gap between Rulf and his sisters – their father was on active duty most of my husband’s young childhood. My suspicion that both are deathly afraid of Grandmama is sadly true. They used to have constant bruises from being pinched for ‘misbehaving.’ I wasn’t aware that speaking during breakfast or lunch was a punishable offense.

I realize a lot of this letter sounds very negative, but I promise that Rulf and I are adjusting to married life and I love him with all my expanded heart.

Love, Nile & Rulf

P.S. Did the Betans greet you with marching bands? NVH

I’m not sure about how to feel about this missive, my love. Losing Grandmama so soon into marriage will be very stressful. Countess Vorhalas may also try to jump up and control things once her nemesis is gone. She certainly will have plenty to say about raising the 10th Count. Nine months seems a long way away for many things, but not babies. Every single time, I felt we popped the cork about 9 weeks after it was sealed. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

What do you mean, no marching bands? Surely a cargo bay full of fresh summer produce is worth a band? Are these Betans HEATHENS?

There was much excitement at news of the new Sergyar/Betan route. At least from Barrayar. Komarr was less enthusiastic at the prospect of Betan import dollars being spent elsewhere within the Empire. There’s also concern that Sergyar immigration will increase dramatically as it becomes a more civilized place to live. And this last bit is off the record, but Professor Yuell is highly insulted not to have been asked to consult on a project of such importance. Word is use of the Yuell Bridge to speed communication is a large part of his discontent.

Other news from V-grad – Lady Vorhalas-Vorville isn’t expected to last the week. She’s currently obsessed with her obsequies. Oksana is very patiently listening to outlandishly pretentious ideas like a special monorail with a glass viewing car to transport the casket to Vorbarr Sultana and back. As befitting her station, Lady VH-VVV expects to lie in State at Vorhartung. On what grounds, I know not, considering that’s primarily a privilege for Counts, Auditors, key military figures, and great statesmen. As far as I know, Princess Kareen was the only woman so honored in the last century. And she was the mother of an Emperor, not a Count. Don’t worry, we’re committed to helping Rulf and Nile ensure it’s all right and proper.

Lady VH-VVV also expects the baby to be named for her. Yes, the secret’s out – congratulations! We have it on good authority that Evgenii/Evgenia will never be a possibility “even if every other name on Barrayar is taken.” Can’t say we disagree.

Only a week until we meet William!
Love, Miles and Ekaterin

Hopefully, Rulf’s uncle will be more realistic about proper memorials for his mother. I don’t have the sense they’re particularly close. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

My first funeral as Countess Vorhalas wasn’t too terrible. Rulf’s uncle refused to move a casket to Vorbarr Sultana and back, so the lying in state was in the atrium of the District Building. Two days of that, followed by the funeral/burial/reception, was exhausting. Miles, Ekaterin, and Simone were
an enormous help to me, Oksana, Rulf’s mother, and his aunt. Aunt VH-VV is very nice when she’s not being antagonized. So are Rulf’s cousins, who were more upset for their father than themselves. Rulf’s sisters were distraught, but I think that was more flashback to their father’s death than extreme grief over their grandmother’s passing.

Some people did come from Vorbarr Sultana, but most opted to wait until we return to the capitol to express their condolences. Oksana returned to Vorhalas House last night to confer with the housekeeper; the rest of us are flying down after lunch. With luck, I won’t be seated next to my mother-in-law. I need a break, even if it’s only 5 hours, from her acting like chief mourner and head of my houses.

Miles and Ekaterin are on their way to Hassadar House. It’s William’s birthday!
Love, Nile & Rulf

I see, my love, that the power struggle has begun. I predict that public announcement of the upcoming heir will give Nile all the clout she needs to reorganize the houses to her satisfaction.
Love, Me
Dear Family, Wherever You Are,

We’d like to present our not-so-little Liam, who tipped the scales at just over 4 kilos. We hope you enjoy our first holo as a family of five, as well as the more humorous ones of the twins’ assorted reactions to their brother.

Love to all, Alex, Victoria, Piotr, Tatiana, and Liam

I like the nickname! He’s a very cute chunky blob. I’m glad they brought in a professional holographer to capture it all. I hope Nile and Rulf get a chance to visit soon. There’s nothing better after a loss than snuggling a newborn. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Is it okay if I travel home with you? Mama and Da are working like crazy and flying with them when they’re in the work fog is soooooooo boring!

Love, Mila

If it’s okay with the parents and the girls, it’s okay with me. All the ideas Mark’s been formulating since Aurelia discovered the anomaly are suddenly being developed at once. That would make anyone crazed. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Thanks for bailing us out of the travel dilemma. Mila deserves better company than she’ll get from us. She’s had a great time with Philip and Simon. Dmitri even paid her to watch them for a few hours so they could go out for brunch. Our little lady is very good with toddlers. We may try renting her out to Victoria and Alex.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

When we get home, could you please schedule some sessions with the therapist Lujayn saw after the accident? I can tell she’s a little resentful and sad that it won’t be her last year, too. And honestly, I sometimes can’t handle when she struggles with stuff that used to come so easily to her. I’d like to hash it out in front of a professional so we can both enjoy the new school year.

Love, Kiona

My love, I’m tremendously proud of Kiona for raising the issue now rather than after she and her sister have been snarling at each other for months. Especially when both positions have merit. Maybe the therapist can also help them work through some grief at losing Lambros. Despite the many joys around us, it’s still a very heavy weight for everyone. Love, Me

Yes, I agree we should also run it by Victoria. Both girls have such a good relationship with her. Maybe we can head off some of next year’s anxiety, too. We’ve both dealt with enough students to know the freshman year is even tougher when they feel they’ve left friends or partners behind. Love, Me

*****
Hey Sis –

Glad to hear you’re home and everyone has started their new school years smoothly. Especially Mila. Mother was sure she’d demand to transfer to Kiona and Lujayn’s school. I guess we underestimated the only child effect.

Miles has registered his disappointment at his perceived lack of Betan enthusiasm for the Sergyar wormhole. I pointed out that unlike the average Betan, he’s had years to contemplate the benefits. Government and commercial publicity is increasing interest in all the wonderful things Sergyar has to offer.

Is it true Aurelia and the four professors forwent pay for a small % of the wormhole tariffs? Mark was looking out for his sister, wasn’t he?

After years of wrangling, the Betan government has officially forbidden facilities offering life extension treatments on planetary resource grounds. Like Barrayar, they’ve licensed a Regeneration Spa. Mark says we’ll go there for check-ups from now on, with travels to Escobar as needed. Mother is relieved.

Love, John and Sarah  
*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Little Sorcha is so beautiful! I especially love that Lizzie and Vasco searched for a name with the same meaning as Lambros. What a wonderful honor!

Love, Mother  
*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

My first quarter’s tariff payment was 17 Betan dollars. Stefan and I had a daiquiri to celebrate. Dmitri and Charlotte met us after and bought us dinner. It was nice.

School is busy. My physics profs are pleased with my dissertation outline. The engineering ones say it has a way to go. The raw material is there, I just need more coursework to fully express the technicalities I’ve glossed over. Stefan, meanwhile, is zooming along and may be done as early as this Spring.

ISI wants to send Stefan back to Sergyar to work on building a larger commercial space station. So far, the existing station is handling the increased traffic, but will be overwhelmed when new tourist resorts open. MPVK is only opening two. Dmitri says it’ll be more profitable to export products they already make. Are Betans ready for ambrosia, real pickled beets, and sun-ripened tomato sauce?

Love, Aurelia  

Given how much space station-raised Tej adores real dairy products, I suspect a lot of Betans’ palates are about to be expanded beyond their wildest dreams. No reason they can’t start importing real milk, cheese, and butter. Love, Me  
*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I cannot believe a creepy teenager asked Lujayn to a party after Kiona turned him down. That’s just horrible! Mila asked why I was so upset. I explained that it hurt Lujayn tremendously to be seen as the second choice. I knew Mila had understood when she asked if she should say no if her best
friend’s crush asked her out. How did this happen? Surely my baby niece isn’t old enough to need romantic advice?

Speaking of, I’ve been out a few times with a guy I met in the library. Mark’s eyes lit up when I mentioned that Ganya is studying food production. I’ll let you know how it goes. Ganya is definitely not ready to meet the family.

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Did you hear the howls from V-grad? The noise was my mother-in-law protesting Oksana hiring a team to begin renovating the Count’s suite. No, you pushy idiot, you’re not getting the best suite in the house based on your age or volume.

Rulf’s sisters were glad to vacate their current rooms when offered the opportunity to choose/decorate rooms on the floor above ours. Rulf’s mother was not, even though there’s a suite on that floor bigger than the one she has now. I might have had sympathy for the ‘I can’t leave the rooms I shared with my Justin!’ if the refrain began before the attempt to claim Grandmama’s suite. The fury when Rulf backed me up, adding that she’s welcome to move the furniture, shocked everyone. Including the staff, who’d never heard the meek countess tantrum before.

We’ll be cracking the bottle at Vorhalas House. Dr. Kareen’s calculations say Justin Xav should be arriving during your school break, so hopefully Alani and Perrin can come, too. To celebrate, not to work. I’m determined that the room situation there will be completely sorted by then, too. Any ideas for nursery decorations?

Love, Nile and Rulf

Justin Xav is a wonderful name, my love, but will draw many questions. Do you care? Nile obviously doesn’t. Love, Me

*****

Dearest Family,

Here she is, Princess Laisa Grace Vorbarra. We knew she’d have dark hair, but not how much she’d look like Auntie Kareen. Did she stack the deck?

You all must wait until Winterfair to see our little miracle. Charlotte’s mother and sister arrive in a few days. Seems only fair because my parents saw the boys first.

The boys are mostly taking Laisa’s arrival in stride. Things are fine when she’s happy. Philip tries to cheer her up when she cries; Simon covers his ears and runs.

Love, Dmitri, Charlotte, Philip, Simon, and Laisa Grace

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m in love with Princess Laisa. Not that I don’t love Philip and Simon madly, but it’s really struck me that Laisa and her peers are the real reason we work so hard to improve communication and transportation throughout the Nexus. I doubt it’ll ever be possible for Laisa to visit either of her grandmas in 12 hours like Daniel and Dyana can see Grandma Elizabeth, but every week cut from a long trip or hour cut from an urgent message transmission strengthens family bonds. And isn’t improving the Imperium’s quality of life ultimately why we all do what we do?
Love, Aurelia

She’s right, my love. Some improve the Imperium far more than others. Or in more subtle ways.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

Is it okay if I don’t go shopping with you, Nile, and Lujayn tomorrow? Uncle Duv has a rare afternoon free and he’s promised to show me and Dr. Vorbelova-Vorivkin some of the recently declassified letters from the Ceta bunker. That sounds far more exciting than looking at baby furniture!

Love, Kiona

Yes, it does, if studying history is your passion and you’ve applied to premier university programs across the Nexus. I, however, have been a part of so much history that I’d almost rather look at furniture.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Guess who’s gotten leave for Winterfair? The soldier who worked overtime over Midsummer! I’m looking forward to playing with all the little ones. Poor Sorcha, my Lambros stories will probably bore her to sleep.

Should I bring more fudge?

Love, Everard

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Does my invitation to the Winterfair Ball include a date? It’s fine if it doesn’t, but if so, I’d like to bring my friend (just a friend!), Cadet Odette Martin. She’s staying in the barracks over break because she’s from Sergyar and can’t make it home. I just don’t think it’s nice to leave her alone over the holidays.

Love, Perrin

Aw, our boy’s being considerate. As a cadet, Odette should pass the security check automatically. Should we ask Delia if there are any spare seats?

Love, Me

No, I didn’t give a single thought to what she’d wear. Surely something in the enormous cedar attic would do with some minor alterations? There are zillions of fancy dresses up there from our daughters and granddaughters.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Happy Winterfair from Silica! The crew said Stefan and I were the quietest students they’d ever had on the Beta Colony/Escobar run. That’s because unlike the rest of our partying peers, we skipped drinking and jumped straight to the ‘sleep it off’ phase. This was the worst end-of-term I’ve ever had. My students this term seemed particularly needy. A bunch kept calling, even though Dr. Lasorda was very clear that no final exam grades would be posted until after she’d finished grading end-of-term projects and determined course grades.

Charlotte and Dmitri are incredible. If I didn’t show up for dinner, one of them brought food to the
university almost every night. Often with Laisa in tow; after food drop off, they’d drive around the city for a while until the baby fell asleep. When Stefan and our friends tried to thank them, they’d laugh and say they remembered being in our shoes, eating from vending machines in the middle of the night. My friend Felicia still can’t get over how the Imperial commitment to education starts with their sons, KareenVB, and exam time care packages.

Grandma and Aunt Sarah are spoiling us. Both have more energy after their last round of treatments and some new supplements. Mostly personalized vitamin compounds; no one dares question what Dmitri’s personal physician carries.

Love, Aurelia and Stefan

*****

Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

I know Aurelia was jinxed by the propensity to try to do the work of three people, but she’s really not caring for herself properly. She and Stefan still had circles under their eyes when they arrived. That’s because on top of everything else, they’re trying to trace two possible new wormhole routes between Komarr and Escobar and several others that might link Komarr and Barrayar. I understand Anna will be talking to the Emperor, ISI, and HQ about doing a bunch of drone and probe chucking this summer, to try to narrow down the possibilities of viable conduits.

It was a very nice holiday break. We even attended the Embassy Ball. Tej and Lady Voranthis are much better hostesses, but it was still very enjoyable.

Love, Mother

My love, when did probe chucking become normal vocabulary for us? Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Are we absolutely sure that Perrin and Odette are only friends? If so, I’d like to get to know her better. Odette reminds me so much of Anna and Helen, only more confident because she sees the place other determined women have carved out in the Service. Plus she knows what I mean when I say Kayberg or Lake Lethal. But if Perrin is interested, I’ll never say another word.

Nile and Rulf seem happy. His sisters are more open, too. Having them to Winterfair lunch wasn’t nearly the chore it was last year. I’m rather glad they still came despite their mother’s unfortunate post-Ball malaise.

If you ever reveal I used ‘malaise’ in a sentence, I’ll be laughed out of the Service!

Love, Everard

That’s a conundrum, isn’t it, love? I don’t think Perrin has feelings for Odette, but I’m not 100% sure. What to do/say? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Grandma’s right, we’re burning the candle like a candelabra, but there’s just so much to explore! We also need to modify our probes to put transmission equipment near the rear in case the noses collide with old ships.

Grandma’s also of the opinion that it won’t matter if I take a decade to get my degrees as long as I keep showing steady contributions to the fields while completing the required elements. The problem
is I love doing all of it – the research, the teaching, the exploring, the creating new equipment so we can find things others swore didn’t exist. And maybe I don’t have an off switch, but Mother, neither do you or most of the rest of the family.

How much drone chucking we’ll do depends on if we can map out a reasonable route. I promise you’ll see me on Sergyar later in the summer even if I don’t make it to Barrayar to see my nephew-to-be. Let’s try convincing Nile to bring him to us.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

You were right when you said gestation time flies by. It looks like our only honeymoon will be a vacation on the South Coast. But we were talking to Uncle Mark and we three are welcome to join him, Kareen, and Mila aboard the MPVK Express to Escobar. After that, the ship will be ours to visit Sergyar, Beta Colony, or anywhere else as long as it’s back in time to bring Lady Mila back to Barrayar for the new school year. Traveling with an infant may be challenging, but Uncle VH-VV is agreeable with us taking an extended trip. He’s a wonderful, supportive man.

Only 6 weeks until we become parents. Eek! We need to go clothes shopping!

Love, Nile & Rulf

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Congratulations on the newest grandson! Justin is adorable. That reddish-brown fuzz reminds me of John as a newborn. The rest, I think, is Rulf, but I’ll decide when they visit. I can’t wait!

What was the final decision on the 10th anniversary memorial of the bombings? Alex’s stadium, the Great Square, or somewhere else?

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I overruled General Brodeur’s entreaties to hold the bombing memorial indoors. There are just too many people. As it is, I’m sure the Stadium will be overflowing.

I’m bringing Ivan (and Tej) back for this, both as Viceroy and senior representative of House Vorpatril. I sincerely hope Countess Riya and her obnoxious sons behave themselves. If not, We are prepared to take drastic measures. I’m sure General Brodeur is as tired of mentioning misbehaving Vorpatrils in the morning briefing as I am of hearing of drunken or drugged escapades.

You two will be seated in a protected box with the Head of Komarr Fleet and whichever other retired Viceroy/Counselors/Fleet heads choose to attend. Each deceased Count’s and Auditor’s families will have separate, highly-secure boxes. I’m particularly concerned about attacks on Count Vormuir. After all, at least a dozen of his remaining 97 half-sisters confessed under fast penta to wishing him, his siblings, and his children dead so they can claim the District. It’s obvious no one gene-screened the baby farm for logic or delusions of grandeur.

On a more cheerful note, I’m forwarding vid of Laisa Grace removing her socks to suck on her toes. She’s definitely an agile little thing!

Love, Gregor & Laisa

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Our family vacation can’t come soon enough. Rulf’s mother is convinced that using a replicator means I know NOTHING about infants. No matter what I do, she’s got a better way. No, I’m not letting my newborn scream because he shouldn’t need to eat more than every three hours. Yes, Rulf is capable of changing a dirty diaper. She panicked because we went for a walk in the Main Square today and people LOOKED AT THE HEIR! Just so you know, it will be my fault if Justin has at least three contagious diseases by morning.

Rulf and his sisters have decided, over their mother’s vehement objections, that they’d like to host a modest reception after the memorial service. I fear nothing I do will be right. After all, I’ve already caused my mother-in-law immense pain with my child’s ultra-traditional name. I’m not sure how, except very little related to her late husband is logical. I suspect Rulf’s grandmother browbeat her into believing she was required to mourn her late husband forever. It’s been ten years. Surely that’s enough for a marriage that wasn’t a love story for the ages?

That last may sound mean, but we’re talking about a couple that spent more time apart than together. Did you know Rulf’s mother allowed Grandmama to serve as her husband’s political hostess while she busied herself raising the girls? She didn’t even know her husband was at Vorhartung that day until Rulf called in tears.

I’m hoping the memorial service will mark a turning point with Rulf in relation to Vorhartung. He and his uncle discuss every vote proposal extensively, but Rulf rarely votes in person. I understand the reluctance, but this is not the example Count Vorhalas needs to set for Justin or any other future children.

Lest you think I’m being a nagging wife, I assure you that in all other respects, Rulf is an exemplary Count. His people love him and he loves them back. I can attest to the hours he spends on District management or preparing to hold court. He listens attentively when I mention what my family is doing in their District, whether it’s Simone supporting festivals or Lizzie and Vasco importing more doctors. And of course he can’t wait to travel the Four Musketeers Pass!

Here’s some vid of Justin. Or as Rulf and I call him, Lord Cutie-face.

Love, Nile, Rulf, and Justin Xav

My love, I clearly don’t appreciate your mother enough. Or you, who are always the mother-in-law your children’s spouses needs you to be. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Sonia’s nursery class is having a Spring Carnival. Would you like to attend?

Love, Lizzie, Vasco & our girls

Sure, why not? We can stay in Hassadar for a few days and get some other work done. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Remember how I said there was only one university in the Nexus that would tempt me more than VSU? Guess who just got accepted to the University of Oxford??? Why, that would be ME! Pack your bags, we’re going to Earth!!!

Love, Kiona
I hope Kiona’s prepared to be looked upon as the Barrayaran savage, my love. Also for how much Lujayn will resent her going so far away. This is, however, too magnificent an opportunity to squander. I’ll bet Admissions will be shocked when we send back the deposit to hold Kiona’s place.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

As you suspected, there’s a lot of crying going on in Lujayn’s room. No need to rush back tonight, we’ll keep an eye on her. Kiona is bouncing off the walls with excitement. According to Delia, so is Duv. It’s always been a disappointment to him that neither of their children were interested in history.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The probe chucking has commenced! We’re doing up to three per anomaly, which so far is a lot of marks wasted. From my perspective, at any rate; varying echo frequencies at one of the Escobar/Komarr possibilities has Stefan convinced it’s a clog, not a dead end. He wants to shoot some drones into what we suspect might be the other side. Helen’s all for it and has us heading to Komarran space at top speed. Professor Yuell will be furious that Dr. Torres and I are testing in his patch. I no longer care, not after the scathing review he did of my last published paper.

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

With the graduating class having just been deployed, we rising seniors have been honored with participating in the bombing memorial service.

I remember being scared for Miles and the Emperor that day, but not myself or anyone else in our family, which in retrospect shows I really didn’t understand the situation. Also that Hassadar was eerily quiet. Not as quiet as Vorbarr Sultana must have been under curfew, but so very odd. I also remember being so proud of Miles for helping catch the perpetrators so quickly. That part hasn’t changed. No matter how bad things get, Miles always holds it (and us) together. As he’ll have to do again, when he speaks at the memorial.

We’re being given 2 days’ leave after the service. I plan to visit Vorhalas House before meeting you at Vorkosigan House.

Love, Perrin

He doesn’t need to rush home on our account. How long do you think the reception at the Residence will drag on? Love, Me

*****

Our Dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

While the memorial service was heartfelt and solemn, the aftermath was not. Falco and his brother arrived at Vorpatri House shortly after the main group from the Stadium. Ivan’s ears turned red at the vitriol they aimed at their sisters, accusing Raisa of stealing the District and the younger ones of forsaking their mother in hopes of making good marriages. And being under the influence of Horus-knows-what, the foul language disintegrated into violence and property damage. Countess Riya sat calmly by while her sons destroyed priceless TOI antiquities, slashed paintings, and ripped drapes off the windows. It took ten armsmen to control the two wild young men. They were turned over to the municipal guard; Riya was escorted to a flyer and returned to the Dower House.
Ivan and Gregor are scheduled to meet in the morning. I fear criminal vandalism charges will be the least of the boys’ problems.

Love, Alys and Simon

My love, why does Alys keep calling them boys? They’re men of 30 and 32 who act like adolescent thugs. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

While there were no fisticuffs, this reception cannot be counted as one of Nile’s social successes. Blame attaches entirely to her mother-in-law, who alternated sobbing and complaining bitterly to whomever would listen how she’d been ousted from her homes. I personally think Rulf was very generous, offering to finance a luxury apartment in the capitol in addition to updating the dower house. From his disparaging comments, Rulf’s uncle thinks so, too. He and his family were clearly disgusted by his sister-in-law’s shenanigans. So were Rulf’s sisters, who continue to mature under Nile and Oksana’s careful guidance.

Today has resulted in my making a decision. Although I will take the temporary assignment at the Residence so Aunt Delia and Uncle Duv can accompany Kiona to Oxford, after that, I’m returning to my job and my boyfriend in the District. Bogdan’s showing signs of being ready to settle down. Maybe I am, too.

Love, Simone

My love, if I were Rulf, I’d lock my mother in the dower house and throw away the key. I was beginning to wonder if Simone and Bogdan’s relationship was decaying, but maybe it’s gathering steam for a run toward a groat circle. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I know you understand why I asked to sleep at Vorhalas House tonight. Today was a very hard day. I’m proud of Kiona. She worked hard to be salutatorian and get into Oxford. I work hard, too, yet I didn’t graduate today. And when I do graduate next year, I won’t be giving speeches or have my pick of universities all over the Nexus. Not that I want to leave Barrayar, but it would be nice to have the option.

Most of all, I wish I could confront the soldiers responsible for changing my life for the worse. Let them see that I’m not the person I could’ve been because they were too lazy to do their damn jobs and ensure Imperial ships were serviced properly. I know they were court-martialed, but six years later, some have served their sentence. I, however, will never free from their actions. Yes, I know it was a quirk of fate that I hit my head. It doesn’t matter. The gravity shouldn’t have failed.

I promise I’ll pull it together for Kiona’s party tomorrow. But right now, I want to wallow. And eat ambrosia. And snuggle Lord Cutie-face. That’ll be good.

Love, Lujayn

Oh, my love, this hurts like hell. Our baby doesn’t see how valuable she is to us, no matter how well she does in school. Love, Me
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Reason #1 to love Stefan: he’s a bloody genius!

The first dozen drones got us nothing. Then came lucky 13, which pushed past debris and landed in normal space about a day’s journey from Sergyar. The ship General Chaly sent chucked a very dented probe right back at us. There’s a lot of clearing to do, but at a minimum, we’ve found a new communications bridge.

Dr, Shabunin was on the second ship analyzing data when he ordered a drone sent through a very small anomaly about 6 hours from our bridge exit. The drone hit something. So did the probe. The probe, however, sent back an echo pattern that matched the reading in Escobaran space. We’re not sure what on that doomed cargo ship is still running, but something is. If we can dislodge the ship and widen/stabilize the blocked wormhole, we may have a 2-jump path from Komarr to Escobar. All because Stefan understands mechanical humming.

Time being money, we’re circling around to test other anomalies between Komarr and Barrayar. I haven’t given up finding another safe exit from my home world.

Love, Aurelia

Some light housekeeping and we’ll cut the trip from Barrayar to Escobar from 2.5 weeks to about a week. That IS what I read, right? All because some manufacturer built something correctly?? My love, I need a drink. Maybe two or three. Love, Me

I’m flummoxed because a group of geniuses act like overcoming microscopic odds and immense engineering challenges is just a matter of time. It took over 600 years to relocate Barrayar, yet our oldest and her boyfriend have solved a pressing diplomatic conundrum in under two months. Sure, it’ll take a few years to make it work, but Escobar’s fears of being less relevant to Sergyar and Beta Colony now that there is direct travel between the two have just been laid to rest. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve reached Vorkosigan Pribyl safe and sound. Thankfully, Justin is a dream traveler. His version of jumpsick is some crying that a bottle and a cuddle fix quickly. Rulf had a few tough jumps, but is doing much better.

Rulf’s very interesting when relaxed and not on display. He was also more than a bit shocked watching my family spar! Mark stressed that Rulf needs to learn more self-defense because Vorkosigan history suggests that the last line of defense isn’t always an armsman. I really want the Vorhalas armsmen to cross-train with Miles’ squad – the three along on this trip don’t move nearly as quickly as they should.

Dmitri and Charlotte’s trio have grown so much! Laisa Grace is a little cuddle bug; her brothers are on the go all.the.time. Alex and Helen had nothing on these two!

It’s a good thing Justin likes people because he’s been meeting plenty of them. Elena and Baz were thrilled to meet the next of Mila’s generation. Baz also started throwing around speculation that with 51 years between Miles and Lujayn, how wide will the spread of first cousins be? Mark just laughed.

Do you remember those amazing planet necklaces Miles bought on Komarr when he and Ekaterin
met? The company’s still in business. Nile commissioned a wormhole necklace for Aurelia. It’s sitting on the nightstand, waiting for our explorer to return for what will happily/sadly be Stefan’s last term. I don’t know when/if they’ll make a great circle, but we’re confident he’s her partner for life.

Love and kisses, Kareen, Mark, and Lady Mila

My love, it’s good to hear that Rulf is getting comfortable with the fiercest of Nile’s big brothers. MPVK could do wonders to attract more people to his District and improve the quality of life for those already there. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Although it’ll take some time to blast through a 2-jump path to Escobar, after we do, I plan on knighting Stefan Vorlakial. The strategic thinking for which his great-great-grandfather was known clearly still runs through the bloodline. I’m very grateful, even if Sir Yuell says it’ll never work. Sir Yuell’s more than a little annoyed at having to compete for research funding against his intellectual inferiors.

After the current testing round is complete, I’ll be summoning General Chaly for a strategic summit. Obviously, the best physicists in the Empire can’t constantly be taking sabbaticals or we’ll slow down developing new ones. We also need to consider how to attract more scientists and engineers to the Empire. Somehow, I suspect there’ll be far more work than the ISI cosmic engineers can handle.

How are you enjoying Sergyar this year? Have Nile and Rulf arrived yet? We’ll be wanting more vid of Lord Cutie-face. Laisa can’t believe that nickname stuck, but it’s accurate. Even Ivan says so!

Speaking of sabbaticals, I’ve warned Dmitri that General and Madame Galeni damn well better be on the ship when it leaves Earth. General Brodeur misses his right hand and Laisa misses hers. Simone is doing a spectacular job, but she can’t read my wife’s mind the way Delia does. Especially given how much we regret not being able to see Philip, Simon, and Laisa Grace until Winterfair. Yes, we’re a might jealous that the grandchildren are on their way to visit Charlotte’s family!

Last but not least, some administrative details. The brothers Vorpatril have been exiled to Komarr until next Midsummer. If they behave, I might consider letting them return, but it’s unlikely. I’ve also declined to consider Rulf’s mother’s petition to continue to live in Vorhalas House. It’s not my fault three generations cannot co-exist there the way they do here. Granted, my house is bigger than Rulf’s, but if four or five large generations of Vorkosigans can survive living together, surely the dowager countess could stop trying to parent her grandson?

And now, in the Two-Step Pass’ honor:

A dark-haired girl from Bararrayar
Kept looking at faraway stars.
She kept finding ways
To cut travel by days.
No matter how near or how far.

No, I’m not a poet. I like it anyway.
Love, Gregor & Laisa

Yup, that’s our girl! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
Home Fleet reports two of the House of Secrets’ drones in Barrayar space. Best of all, they’re from two different anomalies. Ships are on the way to pick them up. Good thing General Chaly insisted on leaving some probes at the ISI, isn’t it?

Love, Aurelia and Stefan

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

You’re not going to believe this! A drone, followed by a larger, better equipped probe, slid through an anomaly and landed in Komarr space. We downloaded the probe data and not only is the crumbling hulk at least 400 years old, there are ancient probes buried in the Komarr side. Finally, proof of Aunt Vorthy’s theory that Barrayar wasn’t immediately forgotten and people tried finding the lost planet.

I cried a lot today. This discovery brought home the reality that explorers willingly gave their lives in hopes of reaching my ancestors.

Now all we have to do is remove the junk, widen and stabilize the anomaly, and pray that an express passage to Komarr is possible.

Love, Aurelia and Stefan

Again, just a few tweaks and we change the Empire. I was never that confident, my love. It’s also a bit daunting to know that Professor Muenster’s legacy is so much stronger than mine. Should’ve stuck with engineering. Love, Me

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Rulf doesn’t quite know what to make of Beta Colony. He finds the sandstorms, the tunnels, and no sunset or soletta set very odd. He loved the Orb, the theater, and introducing Justin to more family. I’m very tempted to have a portrait made of the holo of Grandma holding her newest descendant. Take a look and tell me that wouldn’t look great in our private sitting room.

Cousin Scarlet is as baby-crazy as ever. It’s been over a decade, why hasn’t she had some effective therapy by now? Rulf really gets along with J.J. and Clark. He said Clark somewhat reminds him of his father. He’s also enjoying Uncle John and Aunt Sarah as an example of what normal grandparents are like. He’s never said much about his deceased maternal grandparents; that’s because Grandmama scared them off early in his parents’ marriage. What a hag!

We’ve registered our flight plan to leave for Sergyar in two days. We need beach time! I’m also looking forward to catching up with Padma and maybe Selig.

Love, the Vorhalas-Vorville family

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

It’s a good thing I sent some of my stuff with you because this courier is VERY small. Also very fast – we should hit Sergyar space at least two days sooner than usual. After that, maybe it’ll be harder for messages to catch up to Uncle Duv. He’s getting tired of people not respecting that he’s on vacation!

We’re all looking forward to seeing everyone and doing some swimming and sailing before the Admiral Desplains stops to claim us. Selig is thrilled to have been assigned to the Fleet’s newest cruiser! He says it’s gorgeous and the crew is very excited that their first official mission is escorting
Prince Dmitri’s family to Earth.

I know I should be more nervous about not seeing Barrayar for a very long time. I’ll be missing so many things – my twin’s graduation, Alani and Perrin’s, likely some babies and weddings. Still – and this is how I know I’ve made the right choice – the pull of studying at a University that’s stood for two millennia is stronger than all these factors. And not just because Uncle Duv is dying of excitement, either.

To be honest, it’s all Prince Dmitri’s fault. If he hadn’t gone to Earth, made friends, met his wife, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to go so far away. But I’ll have Lukin and the Montagus and I’ll soon make friends. Maybe not other history majors, but with 8 siblings, I’ve been exposed (often against my will) to many different interests and careers. I’ll figure it out.

See you soon!
Love, Kiona

It’s all very well for Kiona to want to leave us, but are we ready to let go? What if she falls in love with a duke and decides to live there permanently? Love, Me

No, my love, I haven’t forgotten that you chose Aral over your mother and John. Or how many times you almost died during that first year of marriage. It just feels different when it’s a teenager, not an adult. Love, Me

*****
Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I thought Everard was exaggerating when he described the horrors of summer maneuvers. He was not. I’m covered in bug bites, half the squad gave themselves food poisoning, and the latrines reek! Probably so do I, considering it’s at least 35°C every damn day. No heatstroke yet, but it’s coming for somebody careless. Not me. I’ve never drunk so much only to pee so little.

Oh, and I guess I should tell you about my field promotion. I’m now company commander. The little vorling who stole my spot got booted for illicit drugs.

Love, Perrin

*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We’re home! Not only is the District still intact, so is Vorhalas House. Rulf’s mother tried to storm the battlements (I love that we have real battlements!), but was constantly rebuffed by armsmen AND her daughters. I’m very proud of them for standing up for themselves. First time for everything!

Justin had no trouble falling asleep in the nursery. It’s a sign that his siblings will never sleep, isn’t it?

Love, Nile, Rulf, and Lord Cutie-face

*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Guess who popped the question yesterday? Isn’t my ring gorgeous?

Love, Taurie and Zane

*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,

When are you coming home? Will you have time to stop at Komarr and meet Zane’s parents? We’ve
been invited to visit and discuss arrangements for the two weddings. Laisa’s parents have generously offered their estate as a venue for the Komarran one. Good thing you’re in Vorbarr Sultana now because they want to do the Bararrayaran wedding in Hassadar. Gregor would’ve preferred Vorkosigan House, but Hassadar makes sense because that’s where most of their friends are.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

It’s about damn time! When should we expect our next great-grandchild? I’m guessing 42 weeks after the first wedding. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Although I’d like to go directly home, we’re taking Aurelia and Stefan back to Sergyar and picking up Anna and Professor Muenster. If all goes according to plan, we’ll see Uncle Mark and Aunt Kareen at the Sergyar Orbital Station.

As much as I love probe chucking, navigating hither and yon is exhausting. We’ve put in a good summer’s work, with two major discoveries and a couple of minor possibilities that have been marked for further study at a later date. Now I’d like to relax, see Taurie’s ring, Cam, and Lord Cutie-face. I’m so happy Zane is about to become a permanent member of our family!

Love, Helen

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

We’ve cleared the Whole and are gliding towards Earth. We’re actually going fairly fast, but it doesn’t feel like it. The Admiral Desplains is just wonderful!

Much of the conversation revolves around the children or studying at England’s great universities. I’m anxious to visit London and Paris and what Charlotte swears are the beautiful English South Coast counties. Duv has visited Oxford, but never had a chance to do much research there. I’ve allocated him the week we drop off Kiona and I do tourist things in the area to take advantage of the credentials the Embassy secured for him. I believe he plans to research the English Firsters.

Kiona’s not talking much about what she’s leaving behind. She reminds me of Kareen’s determination to study on Beta Colony. And given how well her sisters are doing, I can understand Kiona’s desire to find her own niche, academically and socially. I believe she’ll do fine here. Lukin, too. She likes having adventures.

Love you! Delia and Duv

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Charlotte’s family and their estate are as magnificent as promised. The cousin who lectures on chemistry came down for the weekend with his family. Those Montagus are also very welcoming and promise to provide home-cooked meals as needed. It’s a very generous offer.

Earl George is the most doting uncle I’ve ever seen, yet no one mentions him having children of his own. He seems devoted to his girlfriend, too. Everyone is bubbling over about Lady Louisa’s wedding. I’ve met the future Duke of Devonshire and he’s nice, if a touch over-formal.

I can’t wait for school to start!

Love, Kiona
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Vorkosigan Pribyl feels so empty without the Vorbarras! Why, I haven’t tripped over a toy since I got back.

Isn’t my wormhole necklace GORGEOUS? What a splendid gift!

Stefan is defending his thesis in November. He’s hoping his parents can make it to graduation. Do you know anyone who could get them on an Imperial courier?

I’m doing lots of engineering coursework this term. So far, my intro physics students seem pleasant.

Love, Aurelia

Do we know anyone? Why didn’t she just ask Miles directly? Love, Me

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Sadly, our Earth adventure is at an end. Kiona and Lukin are well-established in their flat and both have begun making friends. Lady Louisa’s wedding was beautiful. It’s a good thing the Admiral Desplains is very large because Professor Galeni well exceeded normal ships’ luggage allowances with research materials. He’s hoping some of his finds will help Aurelia and the wormhole team locate more historical proof to decisively lay to rest claims that the TOI was an intentional act by Komarrans anxious to maintain their population and terraforming efforts.

Love you! Delia and Duv

Dear Mother, Aurelia, and Oliver,

Luckily, Stefan’s parents lead fine, upstanding lives. Given his importance to ISI, ImpSec has cleared them to ride on a fast courier. Stefan can contact Ambassador Voranthis for the exact schedule of when ships are arriving and departing.

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

I hope Aurelia appreciates the mountain Miles climbed on Stefan’s behalf! Love, Me
Contemplating Relocation

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Mark thinks I should apply to a Masters’ Program at the London School Dmitri and Charlotte attended. It would put me near Kiona for at least two years (longer if I did a doctorate). What do you think?

Love. Alani

I think London’s very, very far, my love, but if Mark recommends it, we should consider it. With Perrin to be deployed this summer, if Lujayn were to go to school in Sergyar or Beta Colony, you and I would be free to return to Port Nightingale. I miss exploring Chaos Colony. I’d also like to be closer to your mother. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

It’s obviously in our interests, and possibly Mark’s, for you to return to Sergyar. It would certainly add ammo to my argument for Mamere and Simon to move here for at least the colder half of the year.

While Hassadar Teacher’s College is a natural fit for Lujayn, Gridgrad’s program is good, too. It has to be, because our growing population needs to be educated. And if our medicine isn’t quite as good as Vorbarr Sultana’s, well, we’re only half a day from Silica. We haven’t snagged as many doctors as I’d hoped, but plenty are coming for extended vacations or to treat patients too ill to be transported.

Lest you think there’s still little interest in the Arts, this year’s budget request will include a line item for construction of a municipal concert hall. It won’t be as grandiose as the Vorbarr Sultana Opera House, but big enough to host visiting ballet/opera companies and be the permanent home of the growing Gridgrad Symphony. They’re pretty good. Not great, but a professional conductor, real rehearsal space, and some dedicated patrons would elevate them tremendously.

We understand you wanting to be near Lujayn if she has any issues, but if she stays in Hassadar, she’ll have plenty of family support. You’ll also see more of everyone except Nile if you’re here in Sergyar, what with Everard being assigned to Sergyar Fleet. There’s also a rumor that Perrin’s likely to be assigned to Sergyar Base.

Am I doing a decent sales job?

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

If I’d known that steering Alani toward the best business education might cause you to return to Sergyar, I’d have kept my mouth shut. No, actually, I wouldn’t, because I know you’re happier there. And Ivan’s correct, it would look good for MPVK to have another Board member close to a growing chunk of our operation.

A long time ago, Mother told us we needed decide the path that would make us happiest. It’s possible your path will again lead you away from Barrayar.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila
P.S. You could rent Oliver’s place to Simon and Aunt Alys. Have your playmates nearby, but not quite next door. MPVK

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia,

Preliminary inquiries indicate a transfer to Gridgrad Base Hospital is likely to be approved. I’m game if you are!

Love, Graham

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

After the tour, Victoria and I fear Hassadar Teacher’s College won’t be challenging enough. I also feel VSU would be too much unless I went part time, which would take forever. Looking at admission requirements, I’m wondering if Gridgrad U. would be a good compromise. I really should’ve taken a tour last summer and checked how my recollections of Uncle Oliver’s office and the campus compare with the reality of constant expansion. Don’t tell Nile, but Victoria suggested we anonymously tour the V-grad Teacher’s College. She says they have a good reputation for endorsing a solid combination of classic teaching methods and newer galactic practices. So that might be a good option, too.

I didn’t expect choosing a college would be this stressful! I’ll see you for dinner.

Love, Lujayn

V-grad is another interesting option, my love. Would Nile be in residence enough for us to be comfortable leaving our girl in a city where she doesn’t know anyone her own age? Love, Me

*****

Dear Victoria, Lujayn, and Mother,

ImpSec is working on false IDs for on-planet college tours. They’ll only be good for a week, so schedule yourselves carefully!

Love, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Nothing would make Lord Cutie-face happier than Aunt Lujayn going to college in V-grad. His parents would be ecstatic, too. With Grandma Annoying permanently banished from the house, we’ve got plenty of space for Lujayn to live here.

I can’t promise we’ll be in V-grad 100% of the time. With support from Alex and some of the younger Counts/voting deputies, Rulf is trying to attend more Counsel sessions in person. That said, if we do have a second child next year, I’ll be far less likely to travel with him on every trip.

If Lujayn comes here, would you two permanently return to Port Nightingale? I know you both miss it. I do, too. And as much as Miles would do anything to get you to stay on Barrayar, we seven all knew you would return to Sergyar once we were settled. I’d hoped we could keep you here until Kiona and Lujayn graduated, but with Kiona on Earth and Lujayn looking to spread her wings, that’s just selfish.

If you do return to Sergyar, I think we’ll have to hold you to Dmitri and Charlotte’s practice of returning to Barrayar once a year. I don’t care if it’s summer or winter, you must return annually like you did when Mother was Vicereine.
Love, Nile, Rulf, and Justin Xav

That’s not a bad deal, my love. For all of us. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

An evil, unethical son would use his Seal to ensure the only school in the Empire that accepted Alani and Lujayn was VSU. Thirty years ago, I’d have given it serious consideration. But if I didn’t fiddle any of my children’s acceptances – or my other siblings’ – now’s not the time to start. If parenthood has taught me anything, it’s that love means saying goodbye far too often. Which is a long way of saying that although I don’t want you to return to Sergyar, this is the only time I’ll outright say it. And you damn well better be here when the rest of my children get married!

Love, your oldest sprog

I admire the honesty, my love. Miles wouldn’t be Miles if he hadn’t considered all the angles. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Gregor and Laisa want you to stay on Barrayar. The Emperor, however, thinks the former Vicereine could better serve the Imperium as the current Viceroy’s Betan recruiter and senior MPVK rep. He also thinks the former Fleet Admiral will have more impact on the Imperium’s academic reputation as a professor at growing Gridgrad U. Not that you haven’t done magnificent work in Hassadar, Oliver, but a 20+ year academic career should interest Betan students/scientists yearning to study natural bodies of water.

Speaking of science, how’d you like to come to dinner this week and discuss the pros and cons of separate wormhole discovery and wormhole stabilization teams?

Love, Gregor and Laisa

I guess it’s down to Lujayn, my love. Let’s talk to her tonight. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Anna sent out some very interesting correspondence this week. First, she offered Dr. Torres and Dr. Shabunin permanent jobs in Sergyar. Dr. T would be in charge of evaluating ALL research proposals involving potential anomalies; Dr. S would coordinate every expansion/stabilization phase. That still leaves three foremost scientists as teachers, while eliminating accusations of bias against surly Professor Yuell. It also creates a teaching slot for one of Dr. Shabunin’s very talented former students. Also perhaps one for me if I wanted to stay on Escobar, but with Stefan going to Sergyar to work with Dr. S on clearing debris, I’m probably headed there, too. Anna was very clear that although a summer slot is always available, she really wants me to keep working on boiling down the complexities of the Four Musketeers Pass into a Nexus-changing dissertation. No pressure, General Chaly!

I’m excited that Lujayn has applied to Gridgrad U. I’d love to have her return to Sergyar with you. Nile, of course, is pulling for V-grad Teacher’s College. We’ve worked with a couple of Gridgrad professors and they’re very good. Also, if the House of Secrets is becoming Wormhole Central, we can expect to see the Astro Physics program expand. The Biology Department, too, if Mother brings back more scientists every time she visits Grandma.

I’ve included vid of Laisa Grace’s first birthday. She’s so damn cute!
Love, Aurelia and Stefan
*****

Hey Sis –

There is much rejoicing that you’re returning to Sergyar. Or as Mother calls it, only a day trip away. She’s really going downhill, Cordelia. Not surprising for a woman of 136, but depressing nonetheless.

There’s a slight chance Mother might make it to Taurie and Zane’s Komarr wedding, but Barrayar is just too far. I hope everyone will understand. Especially Johnny and Lina. They swear this is their fourth and last. Sarah and J.J. are lobbying hard for them to bring the children to Sergyar this summer. If you’re not there yet, we can try out one of Mark’s new resorts!

Please keep us posted on Lujayn’s school applications and your travel timetable.

Love, John and Sarah
*****

Well, my love, it’s official. Gridgrad U wants me back. Preparing for the new term will be grueling, so let’s try not to delay getting back home. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

How does a Spring Barrayar wedding sound, followed by a Komarr one right after Midsummer? We’re letting Zane’s and Aunt Laisa’s mothers make all the arrangements on that end because other than seeing our friends, we don’t really care what they dream up. Mama’s disappointed that we’re not more interested in discussing every detail, but after Lizzie’s wedding, other than menus and color schemes – I want lots of Spring pastels – there’s no need to reinvent anything else.

Love, Taurie and Zane

My love, that sounds absolutely wonderful and considerate. After Komarr, we can just keep going.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I just threw Mama into an absolute tizzy by announcing that Cam and I are getting married and moving to Sergyar. Other than Cam’s family and a few special friends, we want this to be very intimate. Da seemed okay with turning their anniversary lunch into our wedding meal; Mama is too shocked at the idea that I’m finally leaving home to start party planning. Especially with Taurie’s wedding taking up so much of her attention. Oh, and I’m getting married in uniform.

Love, Helen and Cam

Poor Ekaterin! There’s so much cheering inside my head, yet I know she’d prefer her daughter marry a man and keep Barrayar as her home base. I wonder if they want children. If so, I wonder if Dr. Kareen has ever done herm/human crosses. She must have, right? Love, Me

*****

Our dearest Cordelia and Oliver,

Simon and I have been discussing my son’s pleas for us to visit Sergyar. Ivan’s correct, we should be closer together and winter in Vorbarr Sultana is tiresome. The prospect of a new concert hall was the ultimate bribe. Simon and I would love to serve on the board of such a worthwhile endeavor. We’d also like to be able to skip over to Beta Colony or Escobar as whim (or medical necessity) dictates.
Our plan is an apartment in Gridgrad and a house in Port Nightingale. Are you willing to rent us Oliver’s, or does Alexei still hold the lease?

Much love, Alys and Simon

Yay for playmates!!! We should think about a place in Gridgrad, too, especially if Lujayn goes to school there. Let’s drop a note to Nikki and Anna. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Oliver,

Have you forgotten about MPVK Village? It’s the most secure, upscale complex in Gridgrad, with everything from flats and villas to detached homes surrounding a golf course. Best of all, every unit has a servants’ suite that can be used for security personnel. For security purposes, you’d probably be best with a villa, especially if Lujayn is there alone. Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon would probably do well in the penthouse of the apartment building under construction.

Nobody at the Academy ever once said that ImpSec spends a lot of time reviewing real estate, but out here, it’s a key portion of my job.

Love, Nikki et al

I thought we were trying to avoid MPVK Village because it’s a bit out of the way relative to the base, but if Nikki says that’s the safest place to be, then Madame Director should make the appropriate calls. Love, Me

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’ve been offered a very nice house on base. Rank has its privileges! My only concern – do you two still have round-the-clock security access to the base?

I can’t tell you how excited I am to be going somewhere new. ImpMil is full of young doctors trying to oust the older ones, whereas Sergyar needs all the medical personnel it can get, regardless of grey hair.

My sons have promised to visit. Josie is too busy fretting that her children won’t have any grandparents. I guess the ones on her husband’s side don’t count.

Love, Graham

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Laisa and I have rearranged our calendars so we can provide your transportation to Sergyar as part of a diplomatic foray and maiden voyage of our new flagship. The Admiral Vorkosigan isn’t being retired, just reassigned to Sergyar Fleet for use by VIPs like Dmitri, Ivan, and the former Vicereine and Fleet Admiral.

Both of you are requested and required to attend the dedication of the new flagship. I promise you’ll find the Admiral Jole to be state-of-the-art mechanically, a true diplomatic vessel, and very luxurious in terms of personal accommodations.

Love, Gregor and Laisa

That was a typo, right? RIGHT? They’re naming the flagship after ME?

*****

Dear Oliver and Mother,
Congratulations on getting the military recognition you both deserve!

There were some protests in the Council about commissioning another flagship less than 20 years after the Admiral Vorkosigan, but the Emperor’s increased travel schedule made a state-of-the-art vessel necessary. The Admiral Jole has been completely redesigned to withstand more use, longer wormholes, and different forces found in manufactured wormholes versus natural ones.

Don’t worry, the Admiral Vorkosigan has been extensively retrofitted for safety issues, it’s just not as fast or as graceful as the new flagship. And imagine what an impression you’ll make every time you visit Grandma! That, not Dmitri, was a real factor in determining which Fleet got the Admiral Vorkosigan. Gregor wants uneasy Betan tourists to see huge ships jump the new wormhole frequently.

We’ll all be traveling to Taurie’s Komarran wedding in STYLE! Ekaterin and I are also wondering if you’d like us to continue on to Sergyar and help you and Graham get settled. My wife’s very good at house decorating.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

I’d love to have their company, my love. Graham will, too. He hasn’t moved house in decades. I’m sure he’ll appreciate Ekaterin’s guidance in making a boring base house a home. Plus we’ll have all the troops’ junk to unpack. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

No, I do not want you to move all my possessions to Sergyar if I go to London. I don’t have much at Vorkosigan House; I’ll move everything there or at Hassadar House to Kareen & Mark’s. Unless Mark decides to post me elsewhere, I plan on returning to Hassadar when I finish my Masters. Best to have it all in one place.

I’m of mixed feelings about the move. I understand how much you both love Sergyar, but I’d hoped you’d decide to stay close to all the grandchildren.

Love, Alani

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’m struggling to understand your decision to leave Barrayar. It’s been our home since Lujayn and I were 6. Sergyar is nice, but to us, it’s a vacation spot, not a home. We’ve been so happy, plus you know I plan to return and study at VSU.

If you’re determined for all of us to vacate Hassadar House, I’d like my things moved to Vorkosigan House.

Unhappily yours, Kiona

Can’t say I like the attitude, my love, considering Kiona left for Earth with nary a backward glance for us or her twin. I do understand her point about Barrayar being where most of her memories are, but who knows how she’ll feel when she graduates from Oxford? Should we stay bound to a planet she may not see again for up to a decade? That seems very selfish thinking. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

There’s some decided attitude in our house lately. For a change, it’s not coming from our daughter.
My wife and I are distinctly unimpressed. So is Ganya. Alani’s the one who decided to apply exclusively to business schools off-planet. She can’t be upset that things will change while she’s gone.

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I can’t wait for you to return to Sergyar! I’ve been down to Port Nightingale, but it isn’t ‘home’ without you two. And to have Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon here part-time, well, that’s a win!

I don’t think there’s much left of mine at Hassadar House or Vorkosigan House – I brought most of my school memorabilia to Sergyar – but yes, please bring what’s left and I’ll sort it on leave. Can you bring some of the archery equipment and knives from the Long Lake? I’d love to set up a range for us to practice together.

I can’t wait to see my Da arrive on a ship bearing his name! I’m so proud to be your son!

Love, Everard

Well, at least one of our children is enthusiastic! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Considering I’m likely to spend the next decade bouncing between Gridgrad and Nuevo Valencia, I’m ECSTATIC you’re returning to Sergyar.

I don’t have much in Hassadar. Nor much I need in Vorkosigan House, either. Certainly not my ball gowns or winter furs. The rest can be boxed and dumped in my closet in Port Nightingale until I have time to go through it.

I’m truly sorry to be missing weddings and graduations, but until we succeed in establishing the Two-Step Pass, it’s just too far.

Love, Aurelia and Stefan

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

Don’t worry about my stuff, I’ll pack it myself long before graduation. I have no idea where I’ll be posted, which will impact what I need. I may ask Miles for a space allocation in the attics.

Love, Perrin
Dear Grandma,

Cam and I would like you to sit in our discussion with Dr. Kareen about embryos. I’m not saying you should expect more great-grandchildren any time soon, but we want to do the embryo creation now, before either of us gets much older.

Love, Helen and Cam

Ooh, love, that’ll be tricky. I’m honestly not sure what I’d advise. If they plan to stay within the Empire, I’d probably advocate for single-gender offspring. And whichever form they choose, I think they should follow Bel and Nicol’s example and have all the siblings have the same physiology. Though I do wonder why they didn’t have a boy quaddie. Love, Me

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia,

Are you aware your accent gets more Betan when discussing things unique to your home world? I’m very appreciative you participated in our meeting because this certainly wasn’t a standard fertility consult.

I didn’t expect Helen to be so shocked that Alex and Victoria screened all their embryos for sexual orientation. I also didn’t expect it to lead to such an argument between her and Cam. Maybe Helen wouldn’t have such blinders if she were raised by the type of parents who drag their gender-fluid children to the doctor and demand they be fixed! And not just here on backward Barrayar – plenty of Betans regret not specifying that they wanted their child’s brain to match their genitalia.

Given the complicated decisions to be made, I recommended freezing gametes, not embryos. Both have agreed.

As a reward for being such a support in this process, I’m giving you advance notice of one of Da’s Winterfair Ball announcements. Shaw and I are expecting boy/girl twins in the Spring.

Love, Kareen and Shaw

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

It’s hard to believe our mercurial Helen has settled down, but with Alex and Victoria about to welcome baby #4, maybe her clock has finally caught up with her. And how handsome she looked in her shiny new Captain’s uniform! You know, it would be much easier for spectators if the Navy and the rest of the Imperial Service used the same ranks. It’s hard to explain that she far outranks her retired father.

Clark and I are planning to visit Sergyar once Helen and Cam are settled in. I hope Cam is better than Helen at décor or their base house will be incredibly bland.

Gregor must’ve been over the moon announcing 4 grandchildren all at once. I’ll admit to being a bit surprised that Alexei and Katya are having another boy. As for Dmitri and Charlotte’s new son, they must be very concerned about the Earldom.

Will you be going to Hassadar to help Johnny and Lina welcome James Jordan?
Love, Mother

It’s encouraging that your mother still wants to travel, isn’t it, my love? Clark’s a good sport. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The acceptance from Silica U arrived today. I’ve heard from everyone except London. If I don’t get in, I think I’ll stay here at Hassadar U.

Love, Alani

My love, did you get the same huge whiff of our girl digging her heels in? It’s getting tiresome. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We’re going to Humphrey’s family’s Italian villa between the Hilary & Trinity terms. He’s annoyed I’m bringing Lukin. Not understanding the concept of a personal bodyguard is rather a sign Humphrey isn’t as sophisticated as he thinks he is.

Love, Kiona

At least she’s not plotting to leave Lukin behind! My love, do you want to visit Italy? It’s reputed to be quite beautiful, with amazing food. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I spoke to Miles and Ekaterin. They promised my home address may remain Vorkosigan House regardless of where the Service sends me. Ekaterin did say something about not waiting until the night before to ask the staff to clean my dress uniform. Apparently Helen doesn’t pack as neatly as us guys. I didn’t ask.

Love, Perrin

Wise, wise boy! I’m also proud he made his own living arrangements for a Barrayar assignment. Yes, it’s family, but he didn’t ASSUME the way Alani did. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We’ll be cracking the bottle toward the end of next week. What day works best for you to meet your newest great-grandson?

Love, Alex and Victoria

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Thanks for the vid of Lujayn’s school play. Hard to believe the long progression of recitals, shows, and science fairs is finally coming to an end. Yes, Mila has another two years of secondary school, but this feels so very final, doesn’t it?

I got a long letter from Lujayn fretting about university choices. She seems almost set on V-grad, unless Gridgrad accepts her, which would leave Nile all alone. She’s also very cranky Kiona isn’t writing often enough and thinks Gridgrad is a weaker option than the teachers’ colleges on Barrayar. I reminded her that Nile will have dozens of Vorkosigans and Vorbarras to keep her company, as
well as her sisters-in-law. Not much I could say about Kiona’s predictable self-absorption other than between classes and Humphrey, she must be very busy. What does Lukin say?

Timofei is adorable. I wondered if any of Alex’s boys would have his dark hair! I’m also thrilled to hear that Nile and Rulf are expecting another baby. It’s a shame they won’t be going to Komarr. I’m looking forward to seeing the Admiral Jole!

Love, Mother

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

I swear I had nothing to do with Lujayn being accepted into Gridgrad U! Tej and I are extremely excited and proud. You’ll find, Oliver, that your students are of a higher caliber than they used to be. Things have changed in the last few years. A lot of Komarrans thought of Gridgrad U as a sinecure school that would be an off-planet adventure, not a place where they’d actually be expected to do real work!

Now what must we do to convince Lujayn to leave Barrayar?

Love, Ivan & Tej

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Please join us next week when we crack the bottle and meet Valentin Artur. We’re planning on a late afternoon birth so Lujayn can join us.

Love, Alexei, Katya, Artem, and Maks

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I can’t believe that I’ll be Zane’s wife in less than two weeks! Honestly, I’d married him years ago, were he not concerned about not being good enough for a count’s daughter. It took my soulmate a long time to accept that not only does my family adore him, Those Who Matter have the utmost respect for him. Also that I don’t give a damn that he has no title, inherited or earned. Not that he needs one to be effective, but Zane would definitely feel better about himself if he had a doctorate.

On to other things. If this goes anything like Lizzie’s wedding, Mama and Da will be busy with VIPs. Please do your best to introduce Zane’s family to as many people as you can. They’ll probably do best with people from MPVK, Johnny and Lina, or anyone who’s spent time on Komarr. Luckily for us, they’re not related to any of the Martyrs. And even if they were, Zane’s exquisite manners came from his parents. I’m not at all worried about any outbursts like Anna’s crazy family.

Lizzie says being married is different from living together. So if you’re expecting more babies, you’ll have to wait a bit before Dr. Kareen does what she does best.

Love, Taurie and Zane

*****

Dear Grandma Cordelia and Granda Oliver,

Thanks for the holos and vids of Aunt Taurie’s wedding. It looked so romantic and beautiful! Even Da said so, and he’s usually too busy looking for trouble to notice.

I have the most exciting news! Mama has decided that she needs to go to Komarr on business right around Aunt Taurie’s second wedding! We’re not sure if Da can come, too, but the three of us, plus
Aurelia and Stefan, will see you in Solstice. While we’re there, we’re going to check out Solstice University. Da says we’ll check out VSU and other schools when we come for Winterfair. Daniel and I are both very interested in the Academy, but doubt they’d take both of us.

Love, Dyana

I don’t know, my love, I think having two high-ranking parents might offset the twin thing. Plus our great-grandchildren are among the best Sergyar has to offer. Can you imagine Miles’ joy at buying two sword sets at once? Love, Me

Realistically, how could two military brats NOT be interested in the Academy? Besides being legacy candidates on Nikki’s side, General Chalys and Commodore Entsky are inspiring women throughout the Imperium to consider military careers. And by my calculations, by the time they graduate secondary school, the twins should be the first children of TWO generals to apply. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Miles,

I think it’s time to schedule our trip to Sieglings. I hear there’s a backlog on orders. I’ll like to bring Odette, too.

Love, Perrin

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

General Chalys is the best command officer I could ever want. She’s decided that we’ll need an on-site visit with the Komarran team working on expanding the Two-Step Pass. Not only are we getting work done, we’re attending a family wedding! I have my dress ready for when Stefan and I see you in Solstice!

Love, Aurelia

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Italy was WONDERFUL! It’s so pretty, with beautiful churches and good food everywhere. Some of the local wine was a bit rough, but reminded me of the rustic places outside Dos'tovar. Yes, it made me a little homesick. Humphrey teased that I dragged him to every museum and statue, but there’s plenty left to explore.

Taurie was a beautiful bride. I wish her and Zane much happiness. Being an alien here on Earth – my friends say that when tired, I slip from Galactic to Barrayaran English – has increased my respect for people who change worlds. Everyone I know makes it seem so easy, but it’s not. At least I have Lukin. She may be the best decision Miles ever made. I mean it. She’s not just my bodyguard, she’s my friend.

Humphrey says I’m the only student looking forward to the Trinity term. I doubt it.

Love, Kiona

I don’t know about you, my love, but this is exactly where I hoped Kiona would be by now – excited about her studies, making friends, settling in to a totally foreign environment. I’m so proud of her! Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
I guess my grade point average got their attention, because I’ve been accepted for a Masters’ degree in London. How far exactly is Uncle Gregor’s trip taking him? Will I be able to travel most of the way on the Admiral Jole?

Love, Alani

Well, that’s not the slightest bit presumptuous, my love! Is she serious? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I wasn’t meaning to cause any offense, I was just being practical. After all, Kiona got to travel to Earth with Prince Dmitri!

What about security? Why should I need any on Earth? Lukin isn’t with Kiona 100% of the time. I’m only months away from graduating university without a single incident. Do you expect that to change now that people know who Dmitri really is?

Love, Alani

Oh, our poor innocent girl, Dmitri’s never NOT been guarded every minute of his life. Also, I think it’s time for Alani to know that ImpSec has vetted every person our girls have ever dated. Would we be cowards if we let Miles explain? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Greetings from Hassadar, where Mark and I have just set our naïve sister straight on her importance to the Imperium. Also why a) Aurelia lives at Vorkosigan Pribyl instead of a student apartment; b) several of Rulf’s father’s armsmen have retired because they’re not up to Vorkosigan standards; and c) ImpSec-Earth has several men posted to Oxford. We also explained that where Lujayn goes to university will determine whether I, Mark, Rulf, or Nikki have primary responsibility for her safety. Also that anyone who tries to persuade her to take off her wrist comm has evil intentions. That panic button isn’t there for show.

Hopefully, you’ll see an attitude adjustment. We’re also curious if Alani will want to go to Earth now that she knows she’ll still be monitored. Somehow, we doubt it.

Love, Count Inches and Lord Half-Mark

P.S. Have you seen Sir Vorkuric’s excoriating piece on MPVK’s expansion into the Vorhalas District? He’s clearly not a fan of jobs and sustainable agriculture. MNPK

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia –

Do you need any help/moral support as you wrap your careers at Hassadar U? For the record, I’m very good at cleaning out offices. During my first 20, I was doing it every 2-3 years.

Love, Graham

I think we should invite him down, my love. Clearing out our office at Hassadar House will be grueling. Plus there’s finalizing plans for Alani’s graduation party and playing with the grands. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

When, exactly, do I stop being a pawn, able to make my own decisions about where and when I
want to go somewhere? I’m tired of checking in, of people knowing where I am every second. I guess Aurelia doesn’t care if ImpSec knows when her boyfriend stays over. I resent it. I resent it even more that you expect this paranoid overprotection to continue on a planet far, far away from the Empire.

Yes, I’ll wear my wrist comm in London, but that’s it. I’m not registering under another name or having any sort of ImpSec perimeter. If I wind up kidnapped or dead, it’ll be my own damn fault for trusting my own judgment as an educated, adult woman. And to show how serious I am about this, I’ll sign an affidavit or swear an oath to the Emperor releasing ImpSec of responsibility for checking under my bed for monsters and assassins.

Love, Alani

Our girl’s correct, my love. Legally, she can refuse protection. It’s just very stupid. Not much we can do about it, however, short of asking the Emperor to refuse her oath, which seems infantilizing.

Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Sorry I haven’t written, but things have been busy. The Trinity term is much harder than the previous two. I’m slightly nervous about end-of-term exams; if I don’t pass, I’m out. Lukin says I’m being ridiculous because my lecturers are all fabulous, my papers are great, and my tutor adores me. I have to believe her because after going to university with Irina, Simone, Aurelia, and Nile, Lukin’s probably learned enough for a doctorate in general studies!

I’m very comfortable with my decision to stay in Oxford for most of our summer break. Uncle Duv has a list of research he wants me to do for him. Lukin’s looking forward to her break when Dmitri and Charlotte visit. If the Vorbarra team can’t keep me safe, it can’t be done.

While I’m pleased Alani is coming to Earth, I’m also disappointed in her attitude about security. Any major city has its dangers and London is no exception. Plus out of all of us, Alani has the least ability to be aware of her surroundings. That sounds mean, but it’s also plain fact.

Nile just sent holos of Lord Cutie-face. I can’t believe he’ll be a big brother soon!

Love, Kiona

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The advantage of having pediatricians in the family is you can schedule births on weekends. Vasco says he, Lizzie, the girls, and Alani can fly to V-grad Friday night and we’ll crack the bottle Saturday. Does that work for you and Lujayn? I sent a note to Perrin, too. Unfortunately, Rulf wants his mother here, too. Ugh.

Love, Nile, Rulf, and Lord Cutie-face

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Nile and Rulf certainly make attractive children! Lord Mikhail Naismith is as much of a cutie-pie as his brother. And as healthy, which is far more important.

How goes the packing? Holos of clearing Oliver’s office were very entertaining. So were the holos from your farewell dinner. I’m glad they recognized your many contributions to the University, including joint programs with Gridgrad U. Good thing Gregor isn’t giving you a weight allowance because those boxes look heavy!
It looks like everyone except perhaps the guest of honor enjoyed Alani’s graduation party. Holos of the buffet made me very hungry!

I’m sorry to say this, but I think going to Komarr is too much for me. I’ll meet you at Sergyar after you have time to settle in a bit.

Love, Mother

Doesn’t sound like a medical trip to Escobar would be easy for her, either. We’ll have to talk to Mark about having a team visit her. Love, Me

Hey Sis –

Mother says you’re packing like mad because your ship won’t wait for you. I’m looking forward to seeing the Admiral Jole. Hopefully with you and Oliver on it because I’d like you to come with us to the Silica Durona Clinic. Best for us all to have a clear picture, I think.

Are you sure Alani’s ready to go to Earth? I know that sounds odd considering Kiona’s already there, but Mother’s concerned Alani’s backed herself into a corner and will be miserable for the next two years.

Everard’s planning on visiting next week. Most of his shipmates will likely spend their shore leave at lower-priced versions of the Orb. Maybe that’s why we have no navy – no uniformed Betan sailors flooding the place looking for cheap sex!

Sarah and I are planning on visiting Earth during Kiona’s Christmas vacation. We were thinking of Africa or Australia. Do you think Kiona and Alani would like that?

Love, John and Sarah

They’re a very good aunt and uncle, my love. I’m sure both girls would love either destination. I’d rather go to Australia. Or maybe Antarctica. Maybe my next sabbatical, we can do both. Love, Me

Yes, I know I could’ve taken off this year, but I’d rather be busy while Lujayn finds her footing at Gridgrad U. I’m so glad our baby’s coming with us! Love, Me

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Count Vorkosigan is a sneaky man. He’s insisting his personal ImpMil physician accompany him to Beta Colony. The orders have been approved, along with a fast courier berth from Silica to Gridgrad base, so I’ll see you on the Admiral Jole!

Love, Graham

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Yes, I’m sneaky, smart, and many other good adjectives. Also, Gregor is seriously worried my brain will pop between Sergyar and Silica. Besides, this way Graham’s possessions have a much better chance of arriving together AND he won’t spend a long voyage alone wondering if moving to Gridgrad is crazy.

Do you need some help clearing Hassadar House? I could send some armsmen and their wives. Ma Mishkov is particularly good at packing.

We got a lengthy correspondence today from Laisa’s mother. We should all stop eating now because
the reception menu sounds absolutely sublime. Everything else seems to be in order, too. Sonia and Tatiana have their flower girl dresses; Dyana will recite one of the traditional Komarran blessings, so everyone’s happy. Especially us, who look forward to sharing another happy day with the Stantons.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

There you go, my love – Miles has admitted he likes some of the in-laws. The Vorreedis are nice, too. So that’s two nice, two awful, one meh, and two TBD. I give the Drakes a meh because they’re more than a touch defensive out of their home environment. I guess Cam’s parents heard more than a few Barrayaran barbarian stories. Love, Me

Nope, Rulf’s mother is our in-law problem, not Miles’. We’re 0 for 1, with one pleasant prospect (the Vorlakials) and 5 TBDs. Love, Me

*****

Dear Oliver and Cordelia,

Congratulations on Perrin’s graduation! He was the only cadet who wasn’t scared to death when We took his oath. No, your boy was calm and confident. Somber, too, no doubt remembering those he knew who have perished in My service. Overall, though, it was far better than last year’s class, most of whom looked like they wanted to run in the other direction.

I hope Perrin enjoys his short break; the moment we break Komarr orbit, the House of Secret’s newest ensign will be on the clock. Anna, Aurelia, Stefan, and the boffins accompanying Us will have plenty to discuss after our many on-planet meetings. I hope Perrin realizes this plum position is no sinecure and every bit of math, science, and logistics he’s ever learned will be tested every single day.

I’m not sure what’s exciting the Toscane clan more – hosting a wedding or Kareen and Shaw bringing Veronica and Stewart for their first visit! Laisa and I are looking forward to some quiet time with our daughter and her family. The downside of three generations living in the same building – it’s almost impossible to get one-on-one time with our visiting children!

Love, Gregor and Laisa

*****

Dear Mother,

You will be back from Hassadar to help with prom, right? Three chaperones have backed out. The principal is very worried because he didn’t have enough to begin with. Miles is threatening to send armsmen. Or ImpSec. I don’t think he’s joking.

Love, Lujayn

While it’s nice Miles wants the show to go on, ImpSec seems like overkill. Let’s see who’s available from Team Koudelka. Love, Me

---

From: KKVK
To: CNVK, OPJ, Vorkosigan
No need to waste Imperial resources when my sisters and I are available to chaperone Lujayn’s dance. Olivia jumped at the chance to avoid a political dinner; Martya wants to do some shopping in town; and Delia actually had a free evening. Plus Martya and I get to see Mama and Da, so it’s a win all around. Love, Karen

*****

My dearest Cordelia,
What time do my dresser and I need to arrive to help Lujayn prepare for the third most formal event of a young girl’s life?

Much love, Alys

*****

Dear Mother,

Perhaps it’s good you’re taking Lujayn to Gridgrad because my heart almost stopped when she swept down the stairs. For a moment, I thought I was looking at Princess and Countess Olivia. Ekaterin joked that Lujayn’s date was as speechless as I was. After all, how often does the average teen see a Vorbarra princess?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

I don’t know how it took Miles so long to see that if Aurelia is Princess Sonia, Lujayn is Princess Olivia. Maybe because Lujayn so rarely dresses formally? I predict many interested swains when she makes her formal debut. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Uncle Oliver, and Aunt Alys,

I’m not sure how anything could possibly outshine last night. Thanks to you (with some help from Team Koudelka), everything was perfect. I feared it might be strange, celebrating such a major event without Kiona, but it felt good to be surrounded by friends. It’s also calmed my fears about making my formal bow at the Residence. I also owe Kiona a debt of gratitude for foregoing a debut until I’d graduated the Old Town School. I didn’t realize then what she was giving up.

Love and thanks, Lujayn

My love, at the time, neither did Kiona. Probably because we took our cue from Miles and Ekaterin and never made a major fuss about being old enough to join the grown-ups at the Winterfair and Midsummer Balls. I hope Kiona doesn’t regret her decision when the holos reach her. If Lord Yevgeny was amazed to see Lujayn in her prom dress, he may pass out when he sees her debut ballgown. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, and Ekaterin,

Call it seizure hangover, exhaustion, or the weight of family history, but at some point during Lujayn’s graduation celebration, I heard the most peculiar thunk in my head. No, it wasn’t a stroke, it was the end of the secondary school chapter of all our lives. It was somewhat evident when Lujayn and Kiona changed their surname last year, but today, the last of our fledglings officially spread her wings, ready to fly. I’m so proud of Lujayn, her siblings, and our children. That’s 14 trustworthy adults launched into the Nexus. I can’t wait to see what happens next.

Love, Miles
Fast forward/Gregor

Chapter Summary

In response to constructive criticism, I've added a chapter covering a traumatic event alluded to in the next chapter.

Chapter Notes

Note:
Having advanced 10 years since Lujayn graduated from secondary school:

Kiona and Lujayn are 29
Alani and Perrin are 32
Nile and Everard are 35
Aurelia is 37
Oliver is 88; Cordelia is 115
All of the troops are paired except for Kiona

Miles, Ekaterin, Elena, and Ivan are 79/80.
All of Miles and Ekaterin’s children are paired.
Ivan and Tej’s Padma is married. Irina is not

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I’m unhappy to report that we won’t be visiting after all, thanks to my personal physician. Val was beating me at Tacti-go last evening when I began to feel unwell. The official diagnosis was a minor stroke, but thanks to rapid administration of meds, I feel perfectly fine, albeit very tired. However, journeys to Komarr and Sergyar are off the table until we’re sure this was an isolated incident.

Being an unreasonable patient, I was wondering if perhaps you’d like to visit instead? You haven’t attended my birthday gala in some time. I think it would be worth the trip to see Lady Irina perform. Her company will be in Vorbarr Sultana for three entire months! We plan on using the Imperial box often during their visit.

Love, Gregor and Laisa

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I promise Gregor’s physicians are keeping a very close eye on him and this was indeed a minor blip. Why, they didn’t even cart him off to ImpMil, just treated him at the Residence!

That said, Gregor is turning 85. The longest-lived Vorbarra ruler in recorded history looks his age. He’s fighting using a cane in public, and is delegating more and more public appearances to Alexei and Katya. I’m honestly not sure how much more dancing he’s got in him, so if you want a waltz, Mother, you should consider a visit before Winterfair. I’m not looking forward to the change of
seasons. It’s really not fair that I have more arthritis than you do!

Not much to report since our last letter other than Selig seems to be dating someone new. He’s not kissing and telling, so we have no idea who. All we know is it’s not Cam’s sibling – it moved back to Beta Colony a few months ago,

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

It’s too late to cancel our fall classes, my love, but I can certainly get an assistant to cover if you want to visit Barrayar for Gregor’s birthday. Or if you want to make a longer visit and be there when Nile and Rulf crack the bottle, I can muddle through a term on my own and meet you in Vorbarr Sultana for Winterfair. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Thanks for giving my wife an excuse to visit Vorbarr Sultana without me. It’s a good thing Irina’s troop is stopping in Sergyar because it’s not fair that you and Tej will get to see and hear our songbird! On a more serious note, I’m glad Tej will have a traveling companion. I wish I could accompany you, but I really can’t leave Chaos Colony for four months.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Cordelia,

We’re so looking forward to seeing you! Any chance we can convince you to stay over at the Residence for a week or two? It’s easier for people to come to us than mustering our escort for personal visits.

History is repeating itself. Our grandson is very distressed that his twin sister hit her growth spurt first and is temporarily taller. Veronica is a beanpole, while Stewart is still boy-like. That’ll change soon enough, when the testosterone hits!

All our love, Laisa and Gregor

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

How was the trip? More important, how’s Gregor? Dmitri and Mark are trying to convince us to come to Barrayar for Winterfair. I think we will.

Love, Elena and Baz

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

You and Gregor both looked pretty spry in the vids of the Emperor’s birthday gala. Did either of you get out of your pajamas the next day? I’ll bet Miles didn’t – he looked exhausted. Another auditorial investigation hitting at an inconvenient time?

My new teaching assistants are good, but they’re not you. Or maybe I’m just used to talking shop at all hours. Having to take notes of things to discuss in team meetings is annoying! Thankfully, it’s a decent bunch of students this term because I have no patience for idiots. Is it possible I’m getting old?

Graham and I are going down to Port Nightingale next weekend. We’re trying to convince the viceroy to join us. Ivan’s very lonely without Tej. He’s also grumbling about next year’s budget requests and whether to hear two capital punishment cases. Oh, and another earthquake is imminent
Lujayn and Perrin send their love. We dined with both of them this week.

Love always, your Oliver

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Our bachelors’ weekend was fabulous. It felt good to feel the sun and spray as we sailed. Your staff pampered us, too.

Professor Vorkosigan and Admiral Vorkosigan are successfully taking turns serving as my hostess. Stefan and Cam are being good sports about their wives sacrificing family time to keep things running smoothly here. I appreciate all the effort.

I hope you’re taking good care of my wife. I miss her! I miss you, too.

Love, Ivan

Dear Grandma,

When are you coming down to the District? I swear there’ll be a mutiny if you don’t visit for Cider Festival!

Love, Alex, Lizzie, Taurie, Simone, et al

Dear Cordelia,

I’m learning more about marine biology than I ever wanted to know. Seriously, how many hours a day do you and Oliver devote to research?

Also seriously, your toy boys miss you. Maybe not as much Gregor and Miles miss you when you’re with us, but Sergyar sparkles brighter when you’re here to toss off sardonic quips and dream up exotic private activities. Somehow, playing doctor is far more fun as a trio!

I haven’t heard a word about Gregor’s health, which makes me believe everyone bought the story that you went for the ball and the baby. Oliver says Nile and Rulf’s son will make his appearance next week. We’ll expect holos!

My sons both reported that you all enjoyed dining out with Miles and Ekaterin. I’m sorry Josie and Martin didn’t make it, but she’s never liked leaving the children with sitters. I blame Martin’s mother because my late wife and I had regular date nights away from our beloved, noisy, exuberant offspring. Although Gridgrad has very good food, I do miss some of Vorbarr Sultana’s better restaurants. And that scrumptious fudge from Bretton Hills. Do you think you could bring some back?

Love, Graham

Dearest Cordelia,

I can’t wait to see and hold little Piotr. Finally, a true ginger like Mama and Grandma! Nile was very sneaky, forgetting to mention that.

Midterms are graded – on balance, most did well – and I’ve reviewed outlines for term papers. Only six over-achievers proposed dissertation-type topics for a 10-page research paper. I tried to rein in the enthusiasm, but we shall see. My plan is to get all the finals graded first and grade the term papers
aboard ship. I warned Graham to bring his own entertainment because Ivan and I will be lousy company. He’s threatening to travel with Mark. Quite honestly, he’d probably enjoy it more. You know how much Graham enjoys flirting with Kareen and Elena!

I swear our children and grandchildren are doing their best to keep me from being too lonely. Anna invites me to dinner every time Graham has an evening shift. I’ve even gone out for drinks with a few colleagues anxious to keep me entertained in your absence. It wasn’t nearly as awkward as I expected.

Love always, your Oliver

*****

To: CNVorkosigan, ENVorkosigan, AAVorkosigan, EVorkosigan-Cortez; TStanton; SPVorkosigan; SAVetrov
From: Vorkosigan

Slight change in my 80th birthday plans. Rather than an intimate family dinner at my favorite restaurant, we’ve been invited to dine at the Residence. No sprogs; our plans to have a large family celebration at home the following weekend with Everard and your aunts remain unchanged. Love, Da

---
From: SAVetrov

Are we staying overnight at the Residence? We have childcare, but Bogdan needs to know for patient scheduling purposes. Love, Simone

---
From: SPVorkosigan

I’ll do my best, but no promises. This training mission is already a week behind schedule. No major injuries, but my poor ship won’t be returning to port in the same condition it left. Love, Selig

---
From: Vorkosigan

Overnight is up to you. Aunt Laisa has promised to have rooms ready if we dip too deeply into the wine cellars. Love, Da

---
From: CNVorkosigan

For what it’s worth, I’ll be staying overnight regardless of how much we drink. Alexei is convening a meeting of the Order of the Imperium Committee. We need to make some recommendations for the Winterfair honors list. Love, Grandma

---
From: AAVorkosigan

Are you going to tell us who Da nominated? He refuses to share. Love, Alex

---
From: TStanton

We keep telling him to nominate Aunt Martya, but nada. Why isn’t what MPVK has achieved all over Barrayar worthy of recognition? Love, Taurie

---
From: CNVorkosigan

You know I’m not allowed to discuss. There are an awful lot of talented people in the Imperium, you know. And it’s not like people from our District haven’t been recognized. Believe it or not, even
after 20 years, not every Count can make that lofty claim. Love, Grandma
---
From: SAVetrov

Alex is grumpy because one of his classmates was recognized for repurposing old factories in the Vorfolse District into affordable housing. Love, Simone
---
From: CNVorkosigan

Sir Vormaison’s designs have literally changed thousands of families’ lives. Not just in the Vorfolse District, either. That one was a no-brainer. Love, Grandma
---
From: ENVorkosigan

How about we save picking on Alex for Da’s birthday dinner? Love, Mama
---
From: EVorkosigan-Cortez

Mama, it’s like you don’t know us. Vasco and I can’t stay over. Love, Lizzie
*****
Dear Mother,

I realize it was a milestone birthday, but it’s really not fair that Miles got two celebrations this year when I only got one. Uncle Ivan hosted a very nice dinner, complete with a variety of dessert. The kiddos made quite a mess!

Work continues on the new route between Barrayar and Sergyar. The middle jump of the three needs more expansion. We estimate another year before we can sync everything together.

Uncle Ivan promised the kiddos we’ll have a second Winterfair dinner when everyone returns from Barrayar. I think he’s started packing already.

Love, Aurelia, Stefan, and the kiddos
*****
Dearest Cordelia,

We went to the opera last night. Lady Irina got a well-deserved 20-minute standing ovation. Ivan was grinning so proudly, we thought his face would split.

Irina brought plenty of gossip from Vorbarr Sultana, including rumors that Selig and Pierre Vorrutyer have been seen together in a variety of intimate settings. Why didn’t you say anything?

Tej has reminded us that we’ll be mid-voyage for Ivan’s 80th birthday. Anna’s putting together a ‘reception’ on base before we leave. Ivan will be overdressed for kiddos smashing cake on him. Best of all, Dyana and her boyfriend will be in town!

Graham is being run off his feet with a new insect-borne virus near Mount Rosemont. Chaos Colony, the gift that keeps on giving!

Love always, your Oliver
*****
Dear Cordelia,

The new virus is serious, but not a regional pandemic. For most, untreated, it’s a flu lasting about a week. With our new anti-viral, it’s two days of fevers and muscle pain. We’re working on dosage for
children and a preventive vaccine for next fall.

The MRM virus does mean my Winterfair trip to Barrayar has been canceled. I’m about to have very disappointed children and grandchildren, but my expertise is needed to treat the outliers. Our new flu has taken several lives, including an infant. Ivan is devastated.

Love, Graham

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia,

Every time I think we’re in control of the environmental risks, some new disease pops up. The lab team is working flat-out to develop vaccines for the MRM virus before we lose anyone else, or, Horus forbid, tourists get scared away. We brought in techs from Komarr to help. That, plus the forecast cold snap, should make it acceptable for me to go off-planet. Not Graham, unfortunately. I am so grateful for his time at the Durona clinic. I’ve added ‘send more scientists to worlds with indigenous insects’ to the long list of things to discuss with Gregor and ISI.

Other reports are overwhelmingly positive. Tourism and export revenues are forecast to hit new highs. Planet-wide standardized tests after years 2, 5, 8, and 11 show significant improvement, especially outside the cities. More Sergyaran students have been accepted to universities off-planet than ever before, proving our focus on education is paying big dividends. Hard evidence to pry more appropriations out of the Council of Counts!

Padma promises he’ll be home for Winterfair. This deployment has dragged on far longer than anyone expected, including our sainted daughter-in-law. Tej worries our granddaughter won’t recognize Da in person!

Love, Ivan

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

Ivan, I, and our crates of work are aboard ship. So is my dress uniform. Good thing you reminded me or I’d have forgotten to pack it for the Ball. The locker where all the swords are stored positively rattles. Maybe it’s because Helen’s and Perrin’s swords are there, too? Yes, we’ve picked up extra passengers. Lujayn is also with us. They all want to see Gregor. So does Aurelia, but Stefan is out working the new wormhole and she couldn’t leave the children over Winterfair.

Love always, your Oliver

*****

Dear Mother,

Now that the secret’s out, what am I wearing for the Ball? Can you and Ekaterin check the attic? One of Aurelia’s dresses should fit if I wear higher heels. We’ll have to do some shoe shopping!

Love, Lujayn, who misses her toddler and husband already!

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’ve just about to make the jump to Komarr. The cargo hold is full of Winterfair gifts and formalwear. Mila is particularly excited for her first Ball in several years. She’s anxious to see the entire family, too. Gregor’s health issues have reinforced that a lot of people she loves are getting older. Who’d have guessed Dono would reach 90?

Love, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila
My love, I can’t wait to see our Nexus-trotting granddaughter, either. It’s been too long. Been too long since I held you, too. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother,

No, you don’t get Lujayn – she’s staying with me, Alani, and Kiona at Vorhalas House. We need some time with the sister you see all the time!

Love, Nile

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

You two looked smashing at the Ball! I’m so sorry to have missed it, but leaving three kiddos under 7 with Aunt Anna and Uncle Nikki just wouldn’t work, especially with two ships out working a wormhole. We enjoyed our family potluck Winterfair dinner. Cam’s a good cook. So are Nikki and Graham. We raised a glass to you, the Emperor and Empress, and also to Miles’ and Ekaterin’s anniversary.

Love, Aurelia and the kiddos

*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

We discharged our last flu patient today. Poor man was here for over ten weeks, thanks to the fever weakening an already-enlarged heart. It’ll be a long recovery from organ replacement, but ultimately, he should be healthier than he was before.

My calendar’s clear if you’d like to go down to Port Nightingale this weekend. I can’t wait to see you both!

Love, Graham

*****

Dear Mother,

As usual, Lujayn left a trail. We’ll send her necklace to you along with some of the girls’ new artwork and a few other small gifts.

Love, Nile

*****

To: CNVorkosigan, OPJole, MPVorkosigan, KKVorkosigan, IXVorpatril, TVorpatril, NEVorsoisson
From: Vorkosigan

Gregor had another stroke last night. This one looks bad. Laisa would like you all to get here ASAP. Sergyar Fleet is at your disposal. Mark and Kareen, you may want to travel with Dmitri and company. Love, Miles

---

From: IXVorpatril

We’re leaving as soon as my secretary and I finish clearing my desk. I told ImpSec that Tej and I are staying at Vorkosigan House. I hope you don’t mind; it seemed easier than scrambling to reopen/secure our apartment. Oh, and Graham is coming in a medical capacity. Someone’s got to monitor my blood pressure and my regular physician isn’t ship-certified. Love, Ivan & Tej

---

From: MPVorkosigan
ImpSec doesn’t have anything big/fast enough in port to get us all to Barrayar. We’re taking my ship in convoy with a bunch of couriers. Waiting on our escort to depart. Love, Mark, Kareen, & Mila
---
From: Vorkosigan

When have we ever not had space for family? Rooms will be waiting for everyone. Ivan, you’d better listen to Admiral Dr. Thatcher!

Gregor is resting comfortably. His speech is fairly clear, but his entire right side was affected and he’s very weak. Love, Miles
---
From: NEVorsoisson

We left orbit about an hour ago. The crew has orders to make haste. Anna is staying put. All senior base and fleet officers are on alert. If not for the Empress’ direct request, I’d have been left behind, too. Love, Nikki
---
From: KKVorkosigan

Almost to Komarr. We’ve passed two convoys that left a day ahead of us. Mark and Charlotte are both jump-sick. Dmitri and Mila are trying their best to keep the children calm, albeit with limited success. Love, Kareen
---
From: OPJole

One more jump to go. I’m glad we brought Graham because we’re going so fast, some of the crew is sick. Tej is miserable. Nikki’s the only one of us who isn’t at all queasy. I’m jealous. Love, Oliver
---
From: Vorkosigan

It’s snowing and bitterly cold. Cars will take you directly to the Residence. We, Kou, and Drou have been here since last night. Things are not good. Love, Miles
*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

All the Counts have been summoned back to Vorbarr Sultana. Vorhalas House is open to anyone needing lodging. Why didn’t anyone tell us Aurelia was with you?

Love, Nile, Rulf, and the troops
*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Are you staying at the Residence for the duration, or will you return to Vorkosigan House at any point? Kiona explained why it was historically important for you to be there when the Counts and Ministers all took oath to Emperor Alexei, but your other children on-planet would like to hug and console you. I speak for Simone, Taurie, Lizzie, and Aunt Martya when I say they’d like to see you, too.

Love, Alani and the rest of your grieving family in the District

Oh, my love, I want to see them, too, but Laisa and Alexei need us more. Laisa is clearly having flashbacks to losing her parents and I doubt Alexei’s slept more than a few hours since his father died. I’m not sure Miles, Mark, or Ivan have, either. There’ll be time for others to console us as events unfold. Not now. Love, Me
*****

Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

Sarah and I broke down when we heard of Gregor’s passing. By our standards, your boy was so young! He did you proud, Sis. Always remember that you and Aral took a scared little boy and raised him to be an Emperor worthy of the title.

We’re so very sorry for your loss. We’d offer to attend the funeral, but think it might be better if we visit when you return to Sergyar. That can be your opportunity to stop being strong for everyone else and lean on us.

Love, John and Sarah

I’d like that, my love. Very, very much. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

I wish I could be with you to share your pain, but my place is here, protecting the House of Secrets and our scientific discoveries. Anna’s recalled all our exploration vessels. Extra ships are protecting our wormholes, especially the Escobar/Komarr route. We’re well prepared should our enemies try anything untoward.

Please hug Aunt Laisa and everyone else for me.

Love, Perrin

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I’ve been asked to sit in when the Protocol Officers review the funeral plans with the Imperial family and their trusted advisors. Uncle Duv and I have scoured every scrap of documentation from Emperor Ezar’s funeral. Given growth/changes in the Empire over Uncle Gregor’s reign, we believe services from Da’s funeral and some of the other State Funerals associated with the Vorbarr Sultana bombings may provide a better platform. Please warn Miles and Ivan that I may be raising memories they find very painful. I’m sorry in advance, but we want history to remember Uncle Gregor as he deserves.

Love, Kiona

P.S. Has the Komarran Imperial Counselor arrived yet?

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The official schedule has been published and it looks very daunting. Is anyone really prepared for five full days of speeches? And are you prepared for yours? I understand why Uncle Ivan and Uncle Oliver are speaking on Sergyar’s day, but wonder why Mother is speaking as Vicereine Vorkosigan rather than at the end with Miles and Emperor Alexei. Surely you deserve that honor, Mother?

Love, Lujayn

Oh, to be young, my love, and not realize it’s easier to speak as Admiral and Vicereine than it is as Oliver and Cordelia. I don’t know how Miles will hold it together to speak last before Alexei, but I know he will, because that’s what Miles does. Barrayar’s never been allowed to see his pain and they won’t now. Love, Me

*****
Dear Cordelia and Oliver,

I don’t know how you pulled it off. I don’t know how Ivan pulled it off, either, but throughout virtually all of your speeches, I saw pride, not pain. I am in awe.

Love, Graham

*****

From the Vorbarr Sultana Times:

Emperor Gregor Vorbarr Buried in Imperial Cemetery

Emperor Gregor Vorbarr’s 5-day State Funeral ended today with speeches by Prime Minister Depardieu, Lord Auditor Count Miles Vorkosigan, and Emperor Alexei Vorbarr. Per Emperor Gregor’s request, he was buried next to his mother, the late Princess Kareen Vorbarr.

Estimates of the crowds in the Great Square over the course of this week numbered in the millions as subjects from all three planets joined diplomatic delegations from across the Nexus. Guests of note included the presidents of Vervain, Pol, Beta Colony, Marilac, and Escobar, as well as Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja and Empress the haut Rian Dagtiar of Cetaganda.

The Dowager Empress was a splash of color on a bleak landscape. Empress Laisa shocked onlookers today by wearing red, Komarr’s mourning color, rather than Barrayar’s traditional black. Although the Imperial Counselor also wore red when she spoke on Tuesday, the Empress was not expected to follow her cousin’s lead.

Emperor Alexei was at times wistful, at others, brisk, as he shared memories and promised to continue his father’s work of expanding medicine, education, and the arts to galactic norms while preserving the Imperium’s rich history and tradition. He also promised to continue terraforming efforts across all three planets, including consideration of another upgrade to Komarr’s Soletta. He closed with a pledge to maintain the Imperial Navy’s prestige as the premier fleet in the quadrant and the cutting edge of wormhole exploration in the Nexus.

Full text of today’s speeches may be found on page 6.
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Rulf has renamed our sons Lord Instigator and Lord Troublemaker. Their stunts drive the girls to tears way too often. Stealing their baby brother’s favorite blanket almost got them killed last weekend. In between pacing with an inconsolable infant, Rulf and I turned the nursery upside down. After two days of screaming, the blanket mysteriously reappeared in the crib Monday morning!

The truly unforgiveable part of this prank was the timing. Not only was the baby’s nanny sick, they knew we were hosting a District-wide agricultural conference this week. It doesn’t look good when the sponsors have bags under their eyes.

Despite everything, the conference went well. Thanks to hydroponic installations, virtually the entire District has reasonable access to fruits and vegetables year-round. Not everyone takes advantage, but it’s getting much, much better.

Looking at my calendar, someone’s got a milestone birthday next year. How do you want to spend your 90th, Uncle Oliver? Do you want to celebrate alone, or should we include Uncle John’s 120th in the festivities? Let us know.

Love, Nile, Rulf, and the troops

A joint celebration sounds good to me, my love. Maybe at one of the MPVK resorts so the off-worlders are all together and no one has to do much work. Love, Me

******

Dear Cordelia,

Your brother’s grumbling that Nile remembered his milestone birthday before our children did. No matter, a full family reunion would be a wonderful way to celebrate John and Oliver. Do you think everyone will come from Barrayar?

Love, Sarah

******

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Of course I’ll be there. It’s about time I took a summer off rather than squirreling away doing research with Uncle Duv. Even if we love every hour we spend together. Have you read our paper on the relationship between Mad Yuri and Prince Xav yet? Those old letters are FASCINATING!

Love, Kiona

******

Dear Mother and Oliver,

A summer in the sunshine is just what these arthritic joints need! Pick a resort and I’ll make reservations.

Alex just ripped the scab open by reminding me that the yearly District tax payment is now due before Midsummer, not in the fall. I wish we could skip Alexei’s birthday ball, but our absence would be too conspicuous.
Love, Miles and Ekaterin

Oh no, I forgot about the financial implications of a different Emperor’s birthday! Will Alexei accept partial payments from those who aren’t ready for the tax year reset? Love, Me

Yes, I imagine an acceleration is better than a double payment if the yearly tax has already been paid once that calendar year. No wonder Aral put all the Imperial budgets on a calendar year. Shifting them would be an invitation for funds to disappear. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Of course we’ll be there. If they’re free, we’ll bring the Bothari-Jesek-Salazar family with us. No need to worry about reservations. We blacked out a three-week block at MPVK Manor-South Beach in hopes it’ll be enough to get the Emperor and Empress to take a vacation. Alexei looked ghastly hosting his first birthday Ball. And we miss Laisa since she decided to spend her mourning period in Solstice.

Love, Mark and Kareen

Oh, that’s much better, my love. All our Sergyarans will get a vacation, too! And isn’t South Beach one of the family-friendly resorts with camp programs and nannies for the littles? Maybe some activities will keep Justin and Mikhail from finding more trouble or annoying their cousins. Love, Me

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,

General Chaly has just declared the House of Secrets’ annual summer shutdown will include the weeks Mark has blocked out. That means Helen, Aurelia, Stefan, I, and our families will all be on-planet and able to party with you and Uncle John!

Love, Perrin, Odette, and the sprog

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Is it okay if we invite Cam’s parents to the celebration? Dana is turning 80 later that summer and I’m not sure we’ll be able to see them otherwise. Not with all the work we’re doing trying to develop a path to Earth that bypasses the Whole.

Love, Helen, Cam, and the deadly duo

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

How many times must I tell my headmaster that I don’t want to move into administration? We all know I’m happiest in the classroom with children facing learning challenges. If she were smart and promoted my husband into the slot he desperately wants, she’d have the best of all worlds – a fabulous administrator whose wife would accompany him to events to raise the school’s profile.

I hope Mark’s not giving the nannies a vacation while we’re at the resort because our kiddos will only be 3 and 1. Are you coming next month to crack the bottle for Gregory Naismith? We hope Bethy takes to being a big sister. Right now, our spoiled miss likes having all our attention!

Love, Lujayn, Larry, Bethy, and the kiddo-to-be

*****

Dear Da and Aunt Cordelia,
The Admiral Vorkosigan just arrived at Home Port. Not bad considering we did a round trip to Sergyar in only three days. I’m not sure the Three Penny Pass will be available for public transit by your party, but it definitely should be ready to relay your guests. Are Dr. Graham’s children coming, or are they still pretending that you two are just their father’s social friends?

I can’t wait to surprise my wife and sprogs. They don’t expect me for another 10 days. Not only was my mission classified, Claudine gets nervous on the rare occasions I get to go exploring.

Love, Captain Everard Jole

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The time has come for Tej, Rish, and Amiri to be reunited with the rest of their family. Per the terms of Gregor’s will, three cryo crypts are to be shipped to the Durona Clinic by the first anniversary of his death. Alexei’s decided not to wait until next winter and the required memorials to roil the waters. FYI, the will declares Star, Pidge, and oily Erik forever persona non grata within the Empire.

Ivan has asked that an Auditor accompany the crypts to explain the financial and personal developments since their last attempted coup. As Senior Auditor, I fobbed off the job to Lord Auditor Vorlightly. Don’t worry, he knows every bit of history Ivan, By, and I could provide regarding the Terrible Trio. They’re wealthy enough to settle down any place in the Nexus except the Whole. Things have changed in the years they’ve been sleeping. Not only has House Cordonah been fully integrated into House Jain, even those on the Whole say it’s hard to keep pace with new ways to screw people over. Too bad it won’t stop them from trying.

Everyone on this end, including Lina and Johnny, are anxious to have a huge family reunion. And now that Aurelia and Stefan have reduced the trip to under two days, Drou and Kou should be able to join the rest of Team Koudelka celebrating with us.

Even more than missing Gregor, it’ll be very strange to have a huge family party without Simon and Aunt Alys. Somehow, I hoped the life extension treatment would give them a normal Betan lifespan, not just 20 extra, extremely good years. I’m sure Irina would agree the Terrible Trio is a terrible substitute as far as relatives go. Speaking of, do you have any idea where in the nexus our diva might be?

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

Didn’t Ivan say they were touring around Zoave Twilight? Love, Me

*****

Did you know something interesting about Ivan. If yes, then you are correct. If not, then you need to read more about him. He is a very interesting person.

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

I’m afraid I must send regrets for your big celebration. Alexei and Katya deciding to link their first official diplomatic voyage with their Sergyar vacation means I’ll be guarding the camp stool while they’re gone. I honestly don’t mind, not when it means postponing the day Alexei can no longer travel with all three sons. Silly Uncle Pavel wants to keep them young for as long as he can.

Love, the Vorbarra voting deputy

Pavel’s a wonderful brother and uncle, my love. I just worry that at 50, he’ll turn around and realize how lonely he is. Been there, done that. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Enjoy the holos of Liza’s third birthday. We took her out to the Butterbug Ranch and let her ride
whichever animals weren’t radioactive or scary-looking. She had a wonderful time. I dread next year, when we’ll be expected to host squads of pre-schoolers while trying to keep a baby calm. Yes, Dr. Kareen’s popped your next grandson into the replicator. He’s due about a month after we return from Sergyar.

I can’t wait to see MPVK’s full annual results. Led by our food production ops, MPVK-Barrayar will report record quarterly and annual profits. Rulf and Nile are the best advertising we have, bragging about turning windswept mountains into sustainable food sources. The plant my sister helped design in New Evas is on its third expansion in just five years!

Love, Alani, Vlad, and Liza

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

You may add eight more to the party list. Commander Jole will be aboard the Admiral Vorkosigan when it chugs into Sergyar orbit with me, Charlotte, and our basketball team. My brother has offered to put a newer, faster, smaller ship at my disposal, but I’m the kid who won’t surrender my Da’s old flagship until she’s no longer viable. Not when she holds so many precious memories.

In other news, we’ve started discussing university with our oldest sons. Kiona has sold Philip on Oxford. Simon has predictably decided he’d prefer to follow Uncle George to Cambridge so they torment each other with school rivalries. Neither has any interest studying within the Empire. Laisa Grace seems likely to go to Komarr, especial if Grandma is still there, but that’s a discussion for down the road. Edward and Anne might be interested in the Academy, but it’s way too soon to tell.

Love, Dmitri, Charlotte, and the team

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

This will be the best stay-cation ever! I just got a note from Claudine that she and the kiddos will travel with the Emperor and meet Everard here on Sergyar. Or I should say – there – considering I’m floating in Sergyar space. There’s a chance Stefan may need to join me. If so, could you please check in with our nanny regularly? I know Nikki’s team monitors our kiddos’ whereabouts, but I still worry. Don’t tell Anna, but one of the reasons I love teaching at Gridgrad U every Fall term is the guaranteed block of downside time with my children.

Have you heard from Uncle Ivan yet? Call me nosy, but I wonder what’s going on with the cryo crypts. Is it petty to say that Simone and I hope the revivals fail?

Love, Aurelia, Stefan, and the kiddos

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Things here at the Clinic are...unsettling. Star and Pidge have recovered their memories. Erik has not. I must say he’s much more pleasant as a blank slate. The more time that passes, the less chance Erik will recover completely. Although it’s a known hazard associated with multiple revivals, Pidge is predictably threatening to sue. I’ve lost track of all the grounds she’s cited for lawsuits, though the one about her parents’ cryo-freeze contract with the Durona Clinic expiring with their death has been the most prolonged. Her refusal to acknowledge that Gregor’s favorite Jacksonian negotiated an iron-clad, 50-year contract is grimly amusing. And Star, well, she’s demanding to review decades’ worth of financial records to prove Gregor stole their entire inheritance. Yawn, as Byerly would say.

As you predicted, Star and Pidge were not happy to see how their only surviving siblings have thrived without them. The light in Star’s eye when she proposed using Irina as a bargaining chip to
retake a Great House proves she’ll never change. Lord Auditor Vorlightly calmly countered that any attempt on Barrayaran citizens will be punished as treason. The argument that Crystal isn’t a Barrayaran citizen was as ridiculous as any other plot these bitches have ever dreamed up.

The only upside I can think of is at least Tej and Rish are no longer cowed by their younger, less intelligent, boorish siblings. The expressions when they learned Tej and I govern an entire planet were priceless. There was much dismay when Pidge asked where Padma and I stood in the succession. Not that we wanted to, but how exactly were we supposed to stop Gregor and Miles’ children from procreating?

For now, all three Arquas are being held in a secure wing while they rehab their unused muscles. Though weak, Star and Pidge are clamoring to be released. I’m afraid to leave them unsupervised lest they send an army to kidnap our daughter. Vorlighty, on the other hand, wants to let them go and see what they do. So does Mark, who feels their lack of subtlety will have them in trouble within a week.

Tej is mostly with me on wishing her sibs remain confined. She has sympathy for Erik because he seems so lost. While I doubt he’s acting, I fear a belated memory cascade will return Erik to his normal feral state. It’s a conundrum.

Love, Ivan & Tej

All I can say is I hope Irina knows the revivals were successful. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Well, we’re down to just two revived Arquas. Star had obviously forgotten that high-end personal sidearms are coded to the owner. Ivan is extremely irate she succeeded in distracting one of his ImpSec guards long enough to steal his weapon, but not particularly perturbed that Star died in the struggle. I’m peeved at all the damage the melee caused to one of the Clinic’s nicest suites.

Eric is still pretending to be helpless. I don’t believe him. Neither does Dr. Rowan, not after seeing numerous patients fake ongoing cryoamnesia. He’s being watched very, very carefully by staff with extensive experience dealing with violent patients.

We got a note from Mila the other day. She’s enjoying her new job as Irina’s dresser. Nice to know that all the money spent on clothes and make-up paid off!

Love, Mark and Kareen

My love, your boys are sneaky, assigning Irina a covert bodyguard before unfreezing the jackals! I hope it’s enough. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Touring with an opera company is nowhere near as glamorous as it sounds. Irina swears it’s usually more interesting, but we’re avoiding high-traffic areas where tourists, kidnappers, and assassins congregate. You’d never know Irina is very nervous about kidnappers when she takes the stage. For those hours, she’s lost in her role, returning to real life after the admirers have gone and the stage make-up removed. I’m impressed with how carefully backstage visitors are screened. From my experience, other companies aren’t nearly that careful with their performers.

We’re working our way back toward you. I wish we could skip the Whole entirely, but my boss is sending major reinforcements. And in case Da tries to persuade you into coaxing me into a desk job,
there’s plenty of time for that after I gain more practical experience as an active bodyguard. I have big plans for the Security Division, but it and I need some ripening.

Love, Mila

Can’t argue with her reasoning, my love, I just hate KNOWING our granddaughter is about to be pursued by the nastiest bounty hunters in the nexus. Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Pidge asked for a comconsole today. After some cursory legal searches, including how Star’s estate will be split under Escobaran law, she used it to try to contact old allies. Most didn’t answer; of the few who did, only two agreed to talk more. Those conversations won’t go the way she intends, not after Mark’s people explain the dire consequences of welcoming Pidge and Erik back to the Whole. Did Pidge really think we gave her an unmonitored unit? Or that other Houses are interested in going to war with House Jain simply because she wants to upset existing truces?

Mark is even grumpier than last week. Thanks to Dmitri’s astute financial management, the Terrible Trio were individually worth more than House Jain paid for House Cordonah. Per both Escobaran and Jacksonian law, Tej will inherit 20% of Star’s estate. We’ll have to talk about what anonymous donations would best serve Sergyar. Tej wants to upgrade university language programs. I’m wondering if we should build a real Opera House with proper acoustics so our songbird’s voice can soar the way it does in London, Solstice, Graf Station, or Vorbarr Sultana.

Reports say Chaos Colony is doing fine. I’m sure my desk belies this positivity.

Love, Ivan and Tej

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

I’m so tired of the screaming. My colleagues and staff are also tired of verbal and physical abuse. Erik slapped the physical therapist who answered his roared. ‘Do you know who I am?’ with a calm, ‘I have no idea. Here, sir, you’re simply a cryo revival patient who refuses to do his exercises.’ Security got him with a hypospray before he could do any more damage. I then had the gruesome task of informing Pidge that until both are declared physically and mentally competent to survive outside the Clinic, we cannot legally release them. The sneer faded when I showed her the applicable legislation and legal remedies should intensive rehabilitation not succeed. Legally, I must wait 30 days to commit patients. Twelve more days to go!

Love, Mark and Kareen

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

I have disturbing news. Erik Arqua fell to his death last night. Although the scene suggested it was his choice, forensics quickly established that he had help. Poor guy was drugged and then pushed out from the eighth story.

Pidge is in custody of the city police. She’s loudly protested her innocence. She’s also claiming diplomatic immunity, political asylum, cryoamnesia, and anything else she thinks might stick.

Mark is as angry as I’ve ever seen him. The Clinic is in a total uproar, with spa patients demanding refunds and tossing fits because the police won’t allow anyone to leave yet. Kareen is furious at nosy patients acting like this is a vid, not a real death. Police are still all over the Clinic. They’re presently focusing on what lapse of procedure allowed Pidge to obtain sedatives. It’s a valid concern
considering Pidge supposedly has been under constant surveillance since she was revived.

Rish is in an emotional tailspin at losing another sibling. Aunt Tej managed to maintain her composure enough to tell the police that Pidge’s motive was likely saving their brother from a lifetime in a mental institution. Amiri agreed, saying Erik was completely unstable, with little prospect of improvement. He told the police that Pidge is also unstable, she just hides it better under the legalese.

This mess is making me miss my mother and siblings all the more. Da wanted to give Aunt Tej’s relatives a chance to redeem themselves when there was still time for them to be a family. Uncle Oliver’s birthday can’t come soon enough!

Love, Dmitri, Charlotte, and the team

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The Clinic has been cleared of all culpability in Erik’s death. The sedative in his bloodstream was one prescribed to Pidge several times in the week before she defenestrated her brother. Premeditation means there’s no chance of bail being granted before trial. Mother probably thinks it’s barbaric, but Pidge is in isolation, with no access to comconsoles, bounty hunters, or other schemers. Mila will stay with Irina just in case, but we’re all a bit less concerned for their safety.

Love, Mark and Kareen

Too bad Escobar doesn’t have capital punishment. I don’t trust Pidge not to find some way to communicate with any planet she chooses. Love, Me

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Tej and I are on our way home. Tej will need to return when her siblings’ estates are adjudicated. Star’s should be straightforward; Erik’s, not so much. Pidge has already filed a claim for ‘her’ quarter of their brother’s estate. How many millennia ago was the precedent set that murderers can’t profit from their crimes?

The Clinic’s lawyers are arguing that Tej and Rish have nothing to add to Amiri’s testimony about their siblings’ mental state and do not need to be recalled for Pidge’s murder trial. We’ll see. By and Rish really want to return to Bararray in time to see their foster-daughter’s baby born. You know Byerly – he never lets a chance escape to annoy Dowager Countess Riya! And to be honest, their bond to Countess Raisa and her sisters makes looking after my House one less thing I must do regularly since Mamere’s passing.

Love, Ivan & Tej

Chapter End Notes

There’s been a lot of reproduction during our time jump. To sum up:

The troops:
Aurelia (39) & Stefan – tricky trio
Everard (37) & Claudine – three unnamed sprogs
Nile (37) & Rulf – Justin, Mikhail, two unnamed girls, baby Piotr
Alani (34) & Vlad – Liza and boy in the replicator
Perrin (34) & Odette – one unnamed sprog
Kiona (31) – childless
Lujayn (31) – Bethy & Gregory

Mila (28) – single & childless

The Vorkosigans
Nikki (61) and Anna – Daniel & Dyana (28), marital status unknown
Alex (51) & Victoria – Piotr, Tatiana, Liam, Timofei, Rosalind
Helen (51) & Dr. Cam – deadly duo
Lizzie (48) & Vasco – Sonia, Sorcha, Solina
Taurie (45) & Zane – Geordie & Aral
Selig (42) & Pierre – childless
Simone (42) & Bogdan – three unnamed
Miles/Ekaterin (81/82)
Mark (72)
Lady Mila (28) – single & childless

The Vorbarras
Alexei (52) & Katya – Artem, Maks, Val
Dmitri (51) & Charlotte – Philip, Simon, Laïsa Grace, Edward, & Anne
Kareen (46) & Shaw – Stewart & Veronica
Pavel (45) – single & childless
Troublemakers

To: IXVorpatril, TVorpatri, DVorbarra, MPVorkosigan, BVorrutyer, LLVorrutyer, TVKStanton, ZStanton, CNVorkosigan, OPJole
From: Vorkosigan

I’m dismayed to report that a relatively-new designer drug making the rounds in Komarr has turned lethal. Over a dozen attendees at an all-out debauchery in Serifosa Dome succumbed last night. Fatalities included Falco Vorpatril and his brother. I’m so very sorry, everyone, that your sacrifices on behalf of House Vorpatril couldn’t save the putative heirs from themselves.

Too soon for funeral arrangements. I’ll keep you informed. Love, Miles

---

From: IXVorpatril

Thanks for keeping us updated. What an absolute waste of lives with such potential! I believe Padma’s at or near the Hub. He’ll have to represent us because Tej, Rish, and I are on call to return to Escobar. Love, Ivan & Tej

___

From DVorbarra

Byerly and I are headed home on the next courier. Someone has to keep Countess Riya in line. It’s the least we can do for Raisa, Lazlo, and the girls. Love, Dmitri

___

From: TVKStanton

Zane and I will be there, too. So will Nile and Rulf. Winter in New Evas. Our favorite! Love, Taurie

___

From: Vorkosigan

Just to add to the mayhem, not only did both brothers die intestate, a woman has come forward claiming Falco was the father of her 6-year old son. Gene scans confirm. It’s a certainty Countess Riya and the boy’s mother will make a play for the Vorpatril countship. Damn it!

___

From: CNVorkosigan

How old is Raisa and Lazlo’s oldest? Has he been confirmed as heir yet?

___

From: Vorkosigan

Yes, but since he’s just shy of his majority, there might be room to argue paternal bloodline. We’ve got the Vorhartung lawyers working on it. Damn it!

___

From: IXVorpatril

I’ve assured Lazlo and Raisa that my support remains with their son. What a mess!

___

From: DVorbarra

Uncle Ivan, you have no idea. Alexei’s literally tearing his hair out. Falco’s former partner isn’t at all respectable and has three ill-mannered, neglected children by different men. There’s also no evidence Falco ever knew about this child, who’s clearly a Vorpatril. Didn’t stop the mother from parading her
son Falco about during the funeral. It was repulsive on many levels. Love, Dmitri

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m pleased to report that the challenge to the Vorpatril countship went nowhere. Had Falco Vorpatril known of/acknowledged the child, it might have played out differently, but the legacy of the Vormuir sisters is still fresh enough that illegitimate children are looked at askance. The Emperor has decreed that Falco’s son may receive his District allowance, but only until his age of majority. Countess Riya is free to support her grandson, but that prospect is considered very unlikely now that her bid to control the District through him has failed.

All of our children have cleared their summer calendars and we seven will see you in a few short months. Mean parents that we are, we refused to bring Tatiana’s current boyfriend. At the rate she goes through them, they’ll have broken up by then anyway, plus we want her to spend a bit more time with Rosalind. Our baby worships her big sister, yet often gets short shrift in return.

Da has designated Padma as Vorkosigan voting deputy while we’re away. It’s gotten some strange reactions in Council, but if MPVK-South Beach blows up, taking us all with it, the District would be his through Count’s choice, so why not? Victoria claims normal people don’t plan for mass fatalities at a family celebration, but after Vorkosigan Vashnoi, I think it’s habit.

Is Aunt Laisa coming? I can’t get a straight story from Alexei. I think he genuinely doesn’t know, which is frustrating the hell out of him. For all that he was trained to step into his father’s shoes, the reality is proving far, far more difficult than anticipated. For all of us.

Saved the best for last. The Imperial collection had long outgrown Vorhartung before unearthing the Ceta vault. My design for a new museum/research center is one of three finalists. Mine is the only design that’s on the river – the others are in the University District – so that may make the difference. I hope.

Love, Alex, Victoria, and the troops

Notice the glossing over acquiring a riverfront site, my love? Is he planning some urban redevelopment in the warehouse district north of Vorhartung? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

I may’ve just put my foot in it. I was examining papers in the Residence archives yesterday. As I was leaving, I ran into Prince Pavel. He invited me to stay for supper. I didn’t think twice about saying yes, assuming we’d be eating with Alexei, Katya, and the boys. Nyet, it was a private dinner in his suite. Which would’ve been fine, except when he flirted a bit, I flirted right back!

I know all the negatives you’re going to say: he’s 14 years older, the gossip of a Vorkosigan and a Vorbarra together, my utter unsuitability as a military wife. But conversely, I feel I know Pavel least of the Vorbarras because he’s either deployed or busy being a Vorbarra. And it’s not like men are chasing after me. The academics are usually dull or self-serving and most of the rest are intimidated by my knowledge of most things Barrayaran. Most of all, Pavel is INTERESTING. And we’re fourth cousins, with mothers from off-world, so genetically, it would be fine.

Tell me I’m not crazy to say yes if he asks me out again.

Love, Kiona

Our girl’s not given herself enough credit, my love. Gregor always said she’d wind up with someone
older. The laugh would be on him if it turned out to be his son! And while I agree Kiona wouldn’t do well among the enlisted men, she’ll do just fine in the rarified company Commodore Prince Vorbarra finds himself. Love, Me
*****
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

The baby Falco show isn’t over yet. Countess Riya’s taken her case to the people, begging the citizens of Barrayar to restore her grandson’s lost legacy. It’s all over the media thanks to the nonstop interviews. Opinion polls in the Vorpatril District are solidly behind Count Lazlo and Countess Raisa. Zane and I aren’t in the least surprised considering at least four other mothers have come forward claiming their children are also Vorpatrils. So far, the two confirmed claims aren’t Falco’s get, they’re his brother’s. The Emperor has held off ordering any form of support for six months. That’s the window he decreed for all paternity claims to be presented and adjudicated. Da says they’ll probably return to the Vormuir precedent of adequate child support and a one-time financial settlement at age of majority for each illegitimate child, but at amounts low enough not to harm the Vorpatril District. Some grasping women who avoid contraception will be very disappointed.

Work is great. Since Aunt Martya’s retirement, Zane’s been running the Hassadar operations like a Komarran oligarch. I get to spend lots of time with Alex, Simone, and the people of the District. I love how some people still come in person to pay their annual taxes. Most are friendly. Some are belligerent. All have an interesting story to tell. My favorite tax payments this year were roosters, moonshine that made maple mead seem mild, goats, and enough cured rabbit skins to make some lovely warm coats, hats, and hand muffs. Lizzie was delighted. Geordie and Aral wanted the Ceta live ordinance someone found in an unexplored cave. Nyet!

Is it summer yet?

Love, Taurie, Zane, and our intrepid guerilla fighters

Oh, yes, my love, those two ruffians are Vorkosigans! Do you think Taurie will ever forgive Miles for giving them swords and helmets last Winterfair? Love, Me
*****
Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

We had Kiona and Prince Pavel for dinner yesterday. It’s a shame Pavel’s staying behind on Barrayar for the birthday blowout because they’re really cute together. And yes, a man in his 40s may still be considered cute – my husband definitely is!

Lord Instigator and Lord Troublemaker behaved themselves, as did the girls. Rulf and I fear, however, that our youngest may wind up being more mischievous than all of them. Piotr’s barely walking and is into EVERYTHING! He’s also very wary of strangers, so we were surprised at how quickly he took to Pavel. A man with 10 nieces and nephews definitely knows children.

The mystery of Lord Philip being the Earl George’s heir has finally been explained. The radiation meter on a university experiment failed. The Earl, his professor, and 10 classmates were affected. Some have gone on to have healthy children, but most have not. Earl George refused to try; his daughters were conceived with donor sperm. They’ll receive generous inheritances from the Earl’s personal fortune; everything entailed to the title will go to Lord Philip. That seems fair.

I feel like I’ve purchased an entire shop’s worth of summer clothes for the children. Virtually nothing from last year fits!

Love, Nile, Rulf, and the troops
Seems like little Piotr might be another Miles, doesn’t it, my love? Justin and Mikhail are very intelligent, but they don’t quite have Miles’ craftiness. Love, Me

*****

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Summer can’t come soon enough! Two of Bogdan’s colleagues are on extended leave and it seems like he’s on call every weekend I have off. Between that and the children’s activities, we barely see each other. Who decided soccer was good for building coordination and teamwork skills? The games aren’t so bad, but scheduling the endless practices makes spring my least favorite season!

Things are going very well otherwise. The new meadery achieved the impossible, a high-end version of maple mead worthy of being included with any good brandy selection. No more watering eyes with every swig! At the year-end census, urban/suburban population was up 2.3% and .8% overall. Not bad considering we’re still losing mountain folk to the military and Sergyar. A lot of that growth is of course the new hospital complex in Seligrad, but we’re pleased that at least for a year or two, immigration is outpacing emigration.

I know you’ve been concerned about Alex, but he’s doing great. Da’s decision to complete the District handover after Uncle Gregor’s death has gone very smoothly. We’re lucky in that our District capital is commutable to Vorbarr Sultana. Alex usually spends two days a week there, with the overnight spent with Leonid. It bothers Bogdan, but I’ve told him repeatedly that my brother’s marriage is none of our business. Victoria is happy, the children are happy, Alex is happy. Just because it’s not my husband’s version of marriage doesn’t mean it doesn’t work.

I’ve seen the complete plans for the new museum. It’ll be spectacular!

Love, Simone, Bogdan, and the tricky trio

*****

Dear Great-Grandma and Great-Granda,

There seems to be a widespread logic fallacy that the children of two doctors are automatically destined for the medical field. Even if I were, everything Mama and Papi have gone through to help launch Seligrad General Hospital has convinced me that the only part that interests me, the administration, would be a thankless job slightly up from garbage or tax collector. And, well, I do like things to be orderly.

Abuela is still praying for my wayward soul after Papi reluctantly revealed that I’m planning on applying to the Academy. That’s not what niñas doooooo!!!!!!! Yes, they spent the money to send a lecturing, crying vid instead of a complaining letter. It’s all Mama’s fault. Or Granda’s or maybe Aunt Helen’s and Aunt Anna’s. Either way, I’ve been brainwashed by the wrong side of the family. They’re also insulted not to have been invited to the Naismith/Vorkosigan family reunion. Isn’t it enough that we’re going to Nuevo Valencia first? Mama’s threatening to spend the entire visit at the Durona Clinic. If Abuela continues to favor our male cousins the way she did last visit, my sisters and I may develop a burning interest in the lab animals!

Sorcha and Solina keep sending my boyfriend strange messages pretending to be me. Mama suggested a code so he knows when it’s not me and to play along.

Love, Sonia

Damn, that’s smart, my love, letting both sides have their fun with silly messages. Too bad Señora Cortez hasn’t mellowed at all with age. Vasco’s parents had better not try to crash our celebration or they’ll be spending a lot of time explaining to ImpSec that they had no ill intent toward the Emperor and his family. Love, Me
Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

Well, it’s official. Next fall, I officially take over as head of ImpSec-Sergyar. This promotion’s been a long time coming, but was also constrained by my refusal to accept other promotions in Vorbarr Sultana. Not that I’ve resented Anna’s career – the magic emanating from the House of Secrets continues to astound – but it’ll be nice to be recognized on my own merits.

I’m not sure if our children will make more than a fleeting appearance at the family reunion. Dyana’s busy flying all over the sector and Daniel’s just been assigned a stint in the Betan Embassy. He’s very fond of women and herms in sarongs, and wears an earring when off-duty. We know better than to ask which one.

Love, Nikki and Anna

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

I’m afraid we can’t make the family reunion. I’m being sent to the Hub to monitor Ceta activity while the Emperor’s away. I promise we’ll visit another time.

Love, Selig and Pierre

Well, that’s disappointing. Pierre amuses me. He’s simultaneously respectful and totally outrageous in a manner reminiscent of By. Those Vorrutyers! Love, Me.

Hey Sis –

Sarah says we’ll have to use numeral candles or we’ll create a fire hazard. I’m okay with that. I’m really looking forward to seeing (almost) everyone. That hasn’t happened since Mother’s memorial service. Ten years and I still miss her each and every day, Cordelia. I miss Dad, too, but in a different way. Mother was such a rock after the explosion, I think I believed she’d never leave us. Childish, I know.

My last check-up went extremely well. Sarah’s kidneys are showing signs of wear, but are not an immediate concern relative to a vacation off-planet. I hope no one laughs when we announce plans for another reunion in 8 years. We’ve decided our 100th anniversary calls for a blowout celebration. Mark your calendar!

Love, John and Sarah

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Fickle ruler that I am, I just countermanded Commodores Vorkosigan’s and Vorrutyer’s orders. Selig and Pierre have been assigned to the Admiral Jole for the length of Our travels. Selig’s actually overdue for some diplomatic duty, plus I don’t want him to miss such an important family reunion. It’s bad enough we’re leaving Pavel and Padma behind, but as you know better than most, the Imperium doesn’t stand still just because the Emperor desperately needs a vacation.

I’ve decided to leave Pavel the 9th Auditor’s Chain to avoid any doubt that he speaks in my Voice on all things. Pavel’s been suggested as a candidate for the open 8th Auditor position, but it’s too soon. Just because I never made Admiral doesn’t mean the very talented Commodore Vorbarra should forego the ultimate promotion epitomizing his dedication to Barrayar’s Military Service.

Mama is definitely joining the celebration. We’ll pick her up in Solstice AFTER we do the
diplomatic niceties. I came very close to a request and require, but Katya wisely used the softer touch of our boys missing Grandma. I miss her more. It’s all your fault, you know. You staying in Port Nightingale after retiring put the idea in Mama’s head that her adult children didn’t need her living on the same planet. I try not to resent that she visits Dmitri, but wants nothing to do with Barrayar, where everything reminds her of Da. And unlike Karen or Pavel, I can’t just slip away to Solstice without my absence being noticed.

Good God, when did I become such a whiner? Have Maks and I traded roles? Yes, our middle son is having an existential crisis. Maybe you can talk him out of applying to the Academy simply to keep up with Artem. We’re not sure exactly what Maks is meant to do, but it’s not soldiering or politics. Unlike our Val, who is so like Uncle Pavel, it’s frightening.

I might as well mention now that should things evolve that way, Pavel and Kiona would have Our blessing. We wouldn’t mind a few nieces or nephews, either.

We’re not looking forward to the diplomatic visit to Escobar. Pidge Arqua may well be the most difficult prisoner they’ve ever had. Da had me watch the vids from the Ceta vault negotiations so I knew exactly how crafty and sly Pidge was long before she turned against her parents. Too bad Uncle Mark didn’t have Shiv and Udine sign 100-year cryo contracts. If so, Da might’ve left them frozen for a full century so any secrets they knew would’ve been worthless. But then again, knowing Da, he likely wanted me to have the wise counsel of Uncle Miles and Uncle Ivan when the Terrible Trio was released out into the Nexus. Certainly none of us expected the scenario to play out as it did, with two dead, one facing life imprisonment, and a decorated ImpSec officer retired in disgrace.

Star distracting an ImpSec officer still disturbs me most. Yes, Aunt Tej was visiting her sister, but any officer deemed worthy of guarding Viceroy and Lady Vorpatril on a foreign planet should’ve been prepared for ANY eventuality. Especially when visiting known dangerous patients who were cryo frozen against their wills!

We’re counting down the days until we reach South Beach and can finally relax.

Love, Alexei, Katya, and our boys

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, my love. It’ll be good to see everyone for the first time since Gregor’s funeral. Maybe we should’ve gone back for Winterfair, except neither of us likes dealing with horrible winter weather. I’m glad you’ve made Pavel promise to come to us after the Emperor returns from his diplomatic tour. If I were Alexei, I’d dread Escobar, too. Though honestly, with Mark owning only 49% of the Clinic, what exactly can they blame Alexei for? Gregor’s will decreed the cryo crypts be returned to the Clinic after long-term storage on Barrayar. Reviving the Terrible Trio was officially Amiri’s decision. And since he’s an Escobaran citizen, I’d argue Pidge is strictly an Escobaran problem. Love, Me

Love, there’s not enough therapy in the history of the Nexus to fix Pidge. Even if she thought anything required fixing, which she doesn’t. My biggest fear is that being able to afford the best legal team money can buy, they’ll find a way to get her out of the death sentence she deserves. Or worse, get her out on parole based on age. Being half-haut, who knows what her life expectancy could be? Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’ve still got a few cabins left on the passenger yacht if there are any other guests you want to join us at MPVK-South Beach. Security-clearance-dependent, of course.

If you like, we could make one last attempt to get Graham’s daughter to join us. Frankly, I don’t
understand why someone who claims Sergyar is too far and expensive to visit her supposedly-beloved father would refuse a free, luxury vacation complete with express transportation. Does Josie expect everyone to spend the entire vacation naked? That’s not what what ‘family resort’ means!

Sorry for being frustrated, it’s just that we want Graham to be as happy a Granda as Oliver, Uncle John, Kou, Miles, and the rest.

Love, Mark and Kareen

While it’s very sweet that Mark still imagines the power of Kareen will cause Josie to change her mind, it won’t. Not since Graham betrayed her dead mother by moving on with his life. Dismay over our open sexual relationship is just a smokescreen for Da choosing himself over his adult children. His wife’s been gone for 25 years and Josie still expects Graham to be mourning on her terms. It’s immature, selfish, and won’t change because Josie’s convinced she’s got the moral high ground. Which she doesn’t, not with repeated legislation being placed before the Council to legalize tri-party relationships. Eventually, the law will pass and Barrayarans may wind up wearing earrings the way Sergyarans and Betans do. Not sure about the Komarrans. They’re stubbornly private about sex….until they’re not. Love, Me

Feel free to write to Josie, but you’re wasting your time. Especially if you remind her that we subverted a naïve 55 y.o man who frequented gay clubs into an utterly unwholesome, uncommitted lifestyle. Or maybe Josie’s jealous that you have two fascinating toy boys and she’s got a boring municipal roadway engineer. Love, Me

*****

Dear Vicereine Vorkosigan,

Thank you for the most gracious invitation to visit Sergyar, but I’m afraid we can’t get away. Summer is my husband’s busiest time at work – winter is so hard on our roads! – and we’ve made arrangements for the children to attend camp with their friends. Perhaps when the Three Penny Pass opens to commercial traffic, we could consider visiting at a less busy time of year.

Best Regards, Josie & Martin Volkov

But we’ll need to be home for Winterfest and the spring break is too short and…the excuses will go on and on. Thanks for trying, my love. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother, Oliver, Miles, ad Ekaterin,

There was a prison break in Nuevo Valencia last night. It was all going perfectly until Pidge crashed the flyer meant to be her escape vehicle. She did not survive the resulting inferno. Numerous police officers have been hospitalized.

Amiri has requested the remains be cremated once the investigation is complete. He’s not particularly upset. I don’t know how Tej and Rish will take the news. Dmitri feels his brother will be elated to have the Arqua problem solved. We’re pleased, too, because Irina and Crystal will be much safer without Aunt Pidge.

Love, Mark and Kareen

I’m not sure anyone will cry for Pidge, my love. Maybe a few tears for what should have been, but she chose her fate. I can only hope the injuries her escape brought about are minor. Do you think we could talk Tej and Rish into an Arqua building for Gridgrad Law School? Love, Me

Yes, I agree a sanitation plant would be more appropriate for the feces Pidge was fond of spewing,
but it’s not a very nice memorial. And a law building would free up space for other departments.

Love, Me
Celebrations

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Despite loving the sanitation plant idea, we made an anonymous donation to Hassadar Law School instead. Rish and By were pleased. So were Tej and Ivan.

Did either of you realize that having started the Academy at 17, Graham hits his thrice twenty this fall? The Emperor plans on presenting all 20-year medals personally while at Sergyar base. The Volkov family has been invited to witness this great honor. They’ve even been offered credit chits to transport the entire family. It wasn’t quite a request and require, but damn close! The Brothers Thatcher are very pleased. So are the Brothers Vorkosigan.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

Damn, I thought Graham’s thrice twenty was next year! Trust Miles to find a way to get what we think we want. I hope Josie isn’t a clingy pest. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

The Admiral Jole left today for Komarr. One more week until our ships depart for the Three Penny Pass. ImpSec added two escorts to our little convoy. Presumably to protect Dr. Kareen, but also to guard the Vorkosigan dynasty. General Pym is very unhappy we’re all jumping ‘untested’ wormholes. Arthur obviously doesn’t understand the thoroughness of my sister’s work!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

*****

From the Gridgrad Herald:

Emperor Alexei Visits Gridgrad Base

The Imperial Family was on hand to watch Emperor Alexei Vorbarra conduct his first official visit to Gridgrad Base. After reviewing the troops, the Emperor personally officiated at the quarterly promotion ceremony. A list of promotions may be found on page 3.

Empress Katya presided over another important quarterly ritual – recognizing Sergyar’s 20-year men. Special recognition was given to four people attaining their twice-twenty – General Anna Chaly, General Gennedy Vetrov, Master Sergeant Iosif Domnin, and Master Sergeant Erik Zaytsev. But the most special part of the ceremony was recognizing Sergyar’s first thrice-twenty man.

Admiral Doctor Graham Thatcher entered the Imperial Academy at age 17. His journey to a medical degree began at the Imperial Science Institute, but included assignments on Barrayar, Komarr, Beta Colony, and Escobar. Admiral Thatcher transferred to Gridgrad Hospital 13 years ago at the urging of his close personal friends and staunch Sergyar advocates, Vicereine Vorkosigan and Admiral Jole.

Admiral Thatcher is widowed, with two sons and a daughter. To the Admiral’s surprise and delight, his three children and eight grandchildren were all on hand to applaud the family patriarch’s tireless service to the Imperium.

The Imperial Family plans to vacation here on the South Continent. No further information has been made public, but residents of Port Nightingale, where the Emperor once rented a beach house, report increased activity.

*****
Dear Mother and Oliver,

Looks like the rumors we started about the Lairoubans renting the South Beach Resort found fertile ground! All is ready for tomorrow’s transport from Beta Colony. Rumor is there’s a songbird aboard. Let the reunion/vacationing begin!

Love, Mark and Kareen

*****

My dearest Cordelia,

It was an honor to be the center of attention with all of our nearest and dearest. Fireworks with no exploding radials or related injuries were also a treat. We’ll have to visit the MPVK resorts more often!

I had no idea when I flung my shirt over Alex and Helen on my 50th birthday what our life together would be like. Whether Miles, Mark, Ivan, and their partners could come to understand and accept my past, secret relationship with Aral. If they’d understand our separate decisions to have Aral’s post-humous children. If your existing grandchildren/nieces/nephews would accept an “Uncle Oliver” on anything but the bare politest of terms. If they’d welcome my boys the same way they did your girls without knowing that Everard and Perrin are also Vorkosigans. I’m glad we told the troops when Kiona and Lujayn reached their majority – it saved a world of questions when Everard’s first came out of the replicator looking just like Alex!

Over 60 years since we first met, it still amazes me how circumspect the Naismiths are about relationships that would be public knowledge, if not flaunted, on Beta Colony. Your mother and the grace with which she made me, Yitzy, and Graham comfortable at public events are among my most cherished memories. If Elizabeth were here, Josie would get an earful about parents being allowed second chances at happiness. Someone else, likely Clark, would follow up with repression jokes. Cam and its parents make Josie very nervous. I think it’s hilarious how she expects everyone else to be as shocked as she is. The look on her face when Dana revealed that it fathered Cam and Terry fathered their second child was the most wonderful combination of intrigued, aroused, and repulsed. Yes, love, Barrayarans!!!

And now, in the Vorkosigan tradition:

A man with many appetites,
A lady who took him to heights.
Adventures they had,
Most good, a few bad.
The very best parts are the nights.

Love always, your Oliver

*****

Hey Sis –

We’re home after the best birthday celebration ever. Sarah and I still can’t believe that every Naismith, Vorkosigan, Vorpatril, Vorbarra, and Koudelka save Prince Pavel and Commodore Padma came together to celebrate me and Oliver. I can’t speak for Oliver, but I’ve never felt so IMPORTANT. That’s always been your role, not mine, yet there was an Emperor of three worlds taking a backseat to ME!

We’re concerned about Laisa. She’s aged so much since Gregor passed. We also have the sense that she doesn’t care. It must be very, very hard to lose your husband and your work simultaneously with virtually no warning. That didn’t happen to you because Sergyar, but may account for some of the
worst dowager countess stories we’ve heard over the years. No wonder dower houses still exist!

Kiona sounds head-over-heels for Prince Pavel. I wish the age gap were the other way, given the varied life expectancies, but if they can be happy for a year or 40, love is a precious commodity. It’s odd to think Sarah and I have been together longer than Oliver and Graham have been alive, isn’t it? Or that we have great-great-grandchildren. That all seemed so far away, so adult, when we met. Yet here we are, me at my guaranteed 120 and Sarah close behind, determined to enjoy every moment we have left. I have no guilt over buying more moments, either. I hope Oliver doesn’t. Not when he continues to publish almost as much as Kiona.

We hope you, Oliver, and Graham will make good on your promise to visit the old sandbox for your next birthday. You know we love seeing all of you!

Love, John and Sarah

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

Nosy Josie is tedious. She wants to pry into all of our lives without revealing much in return. I’d have been glad to chat with her mother to mother, but pretending the armsmen weren’t in the room when she asked about them was so rude! Josie was even miffed when I left her to supervise the girls’ showers after sparring practice. No, I don’t have people to do that, at least not on vacation. Does she think our staff never gets time off to enjoy their own families?

I hope Mark’s not mad Rulf tipped the camp staff who helped entertain the troops. They all had such a good time. So did we. I miss being all together with my parents and siblings. The afternoon we spent together at the beach was so special. I’m not sure Claudine understood why it was necessary, but the old jokes were still funny. Justin and Mikhail are beginning to protest some family time. It’s understandable because Piotr sometimes does put limitations on what we can do together, yet he is the missing piece that makes our family complete. And really, what’s a decade between siblings compared to the years between me and Miles?

I wish we could visit for Winterfest, but Rulf has too many obligations. Now that my sister has dramatically shortened the trip, I promise we’ll come during the troops’ spring break. And of course we’re coming for Uncle Ivan’s retirement gala.

Love, Nile, Rulf, and the troops

I’m holding them to those promises, love. The troops are changing so quickly! All the children and grandchildren are, actually. And not just the little ones. Seeing Helen as an adored daughter-in-law is so refreshing. Not that I’d have minded vacationing with most of the other nice in-laws, but the Drakes are the only ones who seem to have slipped into our lives with little muss or fuss. Not what anyone expected initially, but their oldest did marry into one of the few Barrayaran families where almost anything goes, as long as it’s done with honor and respect. Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Oliver,

Prince Pavel asked to meet with me. I told him that I’d be glad to discuss any Imperial business, but had no authority over any of my sisters. I think you can expect a meeting when you’re here for Winterfest.

Love, Count Miles, who’s not always Head of House Vorkosigan

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,
I did not foresee Pavel taking a page from my playbook and commandeering a courier so he could ask for Kiona’s hand far enough in advance to hold a betrothal ceremony at Winterfair and a wedding at Midsummer. It seems fast, but necessary if there’s any chance of Kou and Drou attending. As you saw, the life extension treatments have reached the end of their efficacy and they’re both finally showing their age. Pavel seems determined to have as many loved ones in attendance as possible. I hope Laisa won’t mind, but I’ve been asked to stand on Gregor’s star point. The front of my House uniform will probably be wet from my tears.

Love, Miles and Ekaterin

From the Vorbarr Sultana Times:

The Royal Wedding: Prince Pavel Marries Professora Kiona Vorkosigan

Over 900 invited guests crammed the Residence gardens today to witness the wedding of Commodore Prince Pavel Vorbarra, son of Empress Laisa Vorbarra and the late Emperor Gregor Vorbarra, to Professora Vorkosigan, daughter of former Sergyar Vicereine Cordelia Vorkosigan.

As a serving officer, Commodore Prince Pavel wore the Imperial red and blue parade uniform. His bride wore a gown from society dressmaker Estelle. The unusual white silk gown was a modern replica of the dress Princess Olivia Vorbarra wore when she married Count Piotr Vorkosigan. Like the original gown, the silver embroidery paid homage to features from the Vorbarra and Vorkosigan motifs. Unlike Princess and Countess Olivia, whose wedding bouquet was white, this bride carried a colorful arrangement of the red Cordelia roses and blue Koudelka roses created by Countess Vorkosigan. It perfectly matched her new husband’s uniform.

The groom is a graduate of the Imperial Military Academy and is a commodore in the Home Fleet. His second was his oldest brother, Emperor Alexei Vorbarra. The bride graduated from the University of Oxford, Earth, and holds a doctorate from Vorbarr Sultana University, where she teaches History. Her second was her sister, Madam Lujayn Miller. The rest of the star points were taken by Vicereine Vorkosigan, Admiral Oliver Jole (Ret.), Empress Laisa Vorbarra, and the groom’s godfather, Count Miles Vorkosigan. Countess Nile Vorhalas served as Coach.

An outdoor cocktail reception was followed by a formal dinner and dancing in the Residence ballroom. The towering black and silver floral arrangements with red accents included the black Vorbarra rose created by Countess Vorkosigan and the black and silver Vorbarra tulip created by Countess Vorhalas. These flowers were also represented in the breathtaking midnight fireworks display.

The couple plans a honeymoon cruise to Earth.

*****

To: MPVorkosigan, KK Vorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, NEVorsoisson
From: Vorkosigan

Kou is sinking fast. If you want to see him, you’d better come now. Nikki, you have authorization for whatever ships/personnel you need. ---- Miles

---

From: MPVorkosigan

We left Escobar two days ago. Should be home by tonight. --- Mark

---

From: CNVorkosigan

Waiting for pre-flight checks to be complete. We’ll see you ASAP. --- Mother
---
From: Vorkosigan

Kou’s fighting to wait for you, Mother. An ImpSec flyer will bring you and Oliver straight to ImpMil. Ekaterin and I are here with Drou and Team Koudelka. --- Miles

*****

Dearest Cordelia,

You didn’t see Kou’s smile when we heard your entourage clomping down the hall to his room. If he could, I’m sure he’d have made a snarky comment about you always making an entrance!

Thank you for rushing to be with me as we said goodbye to the love of my life. Over 80 years married and my only regret was that it wasn’t a century. I don’t have an ounce of regret for the illicit medicine that gave us those extra years, either. Not when our entire life together was attributable to the medical magic that replaced my husband’s nervous system.

I don’t really remember the funeral, but know our daughters ensured everything was right and proper. I don’t know how to thank Miles for allowing Kou to be buried at Vorkosigan Surleau. Kou loved the lake almost as much as Aral and Oliver. Maybe not the Gorge, but everything else. Especially swimming, the only sport he could keep up with me.

I appreciate your offer to visit, but think I’ll go to Vorkosigan Pribyl first. Oliver has to finish the term, Mila has promised to rearrange her schedule, and I’d like to spend more time with Elena and Baz. We have memories to share, Elena and I.

Love, Drou

*****

(expedited transit)Dear Mother, Oliver, Miles, and Ekaterin,

I can barely see to write this letter. Drou did not wake this morning. Dr. Watson says it was likely an aneurism and there’s nothing anyone could have done.

The Clinic’s mortuary staff says everything will be in order for us to leave tonight. Mother, do you want to meet us at Komarr Station, or can Nikki arrange a direct ship home for you?

Love and kisses, Mark, Kareen, and Lady Mila

*****

To: MPVorkosigan, KKVorkosigan, ENVorkosigan, CNVorkosigan, OPJole, NEVorsoisson
From: Vorkosigan

Delia and Olivia are adamant that haste is not critical. Mark, that means you don’t have to redline the engines or try to outrun your escort ship. Nikki, Grandma and Uncle Oliver can travel on tomorrow’s scheduled courier. Like Kou, the service will be at Vorrutyer House, with interment at Vorkosigan Surleau.

---
From: OPJole

Lujayn would like to accompany us. Is that possible?

---
From: NEVorsoisson

Yes, but Lujayn only. Larry and the kiddos aren’t cleared for a fast courier. She can share a cabin with Aurelia and Helen. I’ll be bunking with the crew.

---
From: MPVorkosigan

Dmitri, Elena, and Cordy will be traveling with us. Possibly Laisa Grace, too. Three couriers have been mustered to escort us. We’ll leave in the morning. Kareen is sleeping; she and I will keep vigil tonight.

---

From: NEVorsoisson

We’ll be on the ground in about two hours. Please send transport. We’re all exhausted and slightly jumpsick.

---

From: MPVorkosigan

One jump left to go. We’ll see you this afternoon.

---

From: Vorkosigan

Mother, Oliver, Ekaterin, and I will meet you at the shuttleport and escort everyone to Vorrutyer House. Martya isn’t well enough to leave the premises. She’s had multiple guilt-induced anxiety attacks.

---

From: KKVorkosigan

Has anyone contacted Martya’s cardiologist? If not, get his name from Martya and fly him up from Hassadar ASAP!!!

---

From: ENVorkosigan

Done and done. Martya never mentioned having palpitations before the other day. We can’t believe Enrique didn’t know, either!

---

From: CNVorkosigan

Martya and I will be having words when she feels better. In the meantime, we’re waiting with open arms for you to bring Drou home. Almost here. Love, Mother

*****

Dear Gran’Tante Cordelia and Uncle Oliver,

Please mark your calendars for the gala celebration of Vicereine Vorkosigan’s milestone birthday. As much as we’d love another Sergyaran resort vacation, Our schedule won’t allow it. So we’re throwing your party here instead.

It being your birthday, the celebration may be as large or small as you like. We’ll make space for as many Naismiths as can make it.

Love, Alexei and Katya

*****

Hey Sis –

Of course we’re coming to celebrate your birthday! I never expected you to make 120. Not with your penchant for finding danger around every corner, bush, and wormhole! Did you really have to send holos of the new species of flesh-eating jelly fish? Just looking at them gave Sarah shivers!

It’ll be nice to visit Barrayar again. It’s been a while for us. I can’t believe that thanks to the Three
Penny Pass, we can make it from home to Hassadar in under three days. J.J. said his trip last year was absolutely fabulous. I think he and Clark will join us for your birthday. Probably not Scarlett and James. She’s convinced the new wormholes aren’t safe. Or she’s madly jealous of Aurelia and Stefan’s work. Either way, we’ve given up trying to reason with her.

How is Martya doing? Mark said she needs a heart transplant. Too many years of MPVK anxiety, I suspect, though losing both parents so close together is very stressful. How are you holding up?

I don’t know what took so long – government pressure, maybe? – but someone finally released an authorized book about the d’Artagnan conspiracy. We’re sending copies to you and Aurelia. It’s a fascinating read.

Love, John and Sarah

My love, by fascinating, does your brother mean credible or horse droppings? Is it code for ‘it’s all Steady Freddy’s fault?’ Love, Me

*****

Dear Mother and Uncle Oliver,

The Lost Musketeer was one of the better things I’ve read lately. Parts about the ship correlate to the physical evidence, including recorded protests from the crew about breaking formation to go wormhole hunting. As for the post-disappearance conspiracy, I particularly loved the quote from Joe Camus’ brother about him knowing it was all over the moment Cordelia Naismith’s daughter was introduced. The reviews claimed Betans would be shocked to learn who was behind the attempts to make Mother appear crazy. What the reviews didn’t say was Camus’s girlfriend was a rising star at the M.H.B. and Mother’s ‘treatment’ was the smoke-screen for reshaping the memories of three ship crews. Is it treason when your memory has been altered to forget what you saw and heard? I tend to think not.

I found some of the crew testimony about their post-war struggles very disturbing. Someone should’ve investigated the higher-than-normal rates of PTSD and depression among these particular crews. Blatant disregard for the Betan precept of fundamental rights to information and medical care shows that the M.H.B. desperately needs a counterbalance of some sort. Or at the least, a very thorough Audit. Who knows what other scandals Miles could find?

At least the book absolved Steady Freddy! Kiona will be pleased there’s no evidence he was behind the cover-up. Sad, however, to have confirmation of how the M.H.B used him and several other Presidents like puppets to conceal their wrongdoing. It also makes me wonder if many of the criminals rehabilitated by the M.H.B. have truly been cured, or just mind-wiped. I’d like to think I’m not the only one with huge moral objections to wholesale abuse of medical power.

Love, Aurelia

My love, Gregor would’ve loved confirmation that the initial unenthusiastic meeting was because a bureaucrat was intimidated by our girl! Certainly not Betan Survey’s finest hour! Love, Me

*****

Dear Tante Cordelia and Oliver,

Recuperation is extremely dull. Enrique will barely let me do anything beyond brushing my teeth without Dr. Willow’s express permission. Our nephew’s not much better. I’d like to go home, but Lord Clement Vorrutyer insists I stay near VSH, the Durona Spa, and my own private transplant surgeon. You know you’re going stir-crazy when you start looking forward to cardiac rehabilitation exercises!
Dono and Olivia are down in the District. Dono’s got full court dockets of very bad things in four different cities. Not much of a break from the Legislative Session, but Dono’s conscientious about dealing with the worst of human behavior himself. He also doesn’t want Clem’s time with a new baby to be poisoned with such filth. I can’t say I blame him. Clem’s very much enjoying their youngest. She’s a doll.

Everyone’s fussing over me, but what I want most is for Mama to bring soup and read me stories. I guess part of me thought I’d always be Kou and Drou’s little girl. Does that sound as stupid as I think it does? Or is it that we haven’t had time to grieve, that everyone’s concern about my heart drew attention away from Mama’s death? Da’s, too, them happening so close together. I wish I understood why Mama felt she had to go to Escobar, yet I’m afraid to ask my sisters for fear of being thought selfish or insensitive. Maybe I am, wondering why Mama wanted to see Elena, what secrets they shared that her daughters didn’t know.

Love, Martya and Enrique

Dear Tante Cordelia,

What can I say that will make Martya feel better? If only Aunt Drou had asked, I’d have come to her to share stories of her Imperial Service. I swear we didn’t discuss anything her daughters wouldn’t have known. It was a rewind of sorts, returning to the days before Uncle Kou, when her life was about Princess Kareen and little Prince Gregor, with no dreams of her own husband or family, and how hard she had to fight the likes of my father to be accepted. And with Uncle Kou, those first years after the Pretendership when her and my father’s raison d’etre was protecting you and Miles. She asked if I resented spending so much of my early years with Ma Hysopi. At the time, yes, but in hindsight, I’ve come to appreciate how a damaged man who should never have been a parent did the very best he could.

And now for the hard confession. I never dreamed any of Team Koudelka would have a reason to be jealous of me. Not the four beauties with their sisterly bond and their loving parents. And to have both parents for so long, well, I’m not sure Martya appreciates how lucky she was. Or that her mother wasn’t just with me and my family on Escobar, she was with Kareen, Mark, and Mila, too.

Love, Elena

I’m not sure there’s anything Elena can say, my love. No one was ready to lose Drou so soon after losing Kou. And while Martya’s got a long road to recovery ahead, Elena’s right, too. Not many Barrayarans are lucky enough to have both parents into their 70s. Hell, in some parts of Barrayar, 70 is still a great age to achieve. Love, Me

Yes, your Betan side is showing on this, love. Having a guaranteed minimum lifespan means expecting your parents to be with you for a very long time. Why do you think your sons and I take such good care of our health? Love, Me

Dear Mother and Oliver,

We’re looking forward to seeing the Admiral Vorkosigan in Home Space! Katya and Tej have been working very hard to plan this celebration. We’re thrilled Lord and Lady Vorpatril decided to split their retirement between Sergyar and Barrayar. Ivan and I very much enjoyed working together on my last auditorial investigation. Lord Flow Chart sussed out the embezzling contractor very quickly while I focused on the inspectors bribed to okay shoddy construction. We don’t want Alex’s museum sliding into the river in a decade or two!

Love, Miles and Ekaterin
Hey Sis –

Our bags are packed. We’ll see you at the shuttleport in the morning!

Love, John, Sarah, & company

Dear Grandma and Uncle Oliver,

We sense a promotion ceremony might be in the works. Serving officers have been asked to wear dress uniforms to your party. Who do you think it’ll be? Has Pavel’s and Padma’s time come at last? Or maybe Everard’s?

Love, Helen & Cam

Dear Mother,

Considering it was YOUR birthday, you gave out an awful lot of gifts last night. Neither Anna nor Nikki were expecting any more stars; Helen was shocked to be promoted to Vice-Admiral. Pavel’s and Padma’s promotions were expected. Selig being first in his class to reach Rear-Admiral should ignite a new wave of competitiveness in his classmates. Commodore Everard glowed almost as much as Colonel Perrin when you and Oliver replaced their collar tabs. Not as much as Anna and Nikki when Dyana and Daniel both collected their promotions to Major. That’s a family portrait for the ages!

The rest of the party was good, too. I’m very glad Alexei ordered the swords locked up after the promotion ceremony because the proposed Stanton versus Vorhalas swordfight definitely would’ve wreaked untold destruction. Katya was wise to order sections of the dining room rug and ballroom floor covered so the little ones didn’t create a mess. Parents of three active boys know these things!

We know you said you didn’t want presents, but hope you’ll enjoy the album the holographers worked so hard to create. It’s got formal portraits of family groups, as well as candid shots of you and Oliver with almost every party guest. Not everyone is looking at the camera, which makes it a true representation of our family, but everyone looks so very happy, even the normally-sulky teens and overtired toddlers. That’s you, Mother. Being with you makes us all happy.

Happy Milestone Birthday!!!

Love always, Miles and Ekaterin
Epilogue

From the Vorbarr Sultana Times:

The Imperium is in mourning today, shocked by last night’s terse announcement of the death of Vicereine Countess Cordelia Vorkosigan. She was 123.

The Vicereine was born Cordelia Naismith on Beta Colony, the daughter of the late Miles and Elizabeth Naismith. She was a member of the Betan Astrological Survey, rising to the rank of Captain. Captain Naismith and her ship, the Rene Magritte, are credited with finding the second wormhole to what is now Sergyar. It was there she met her future husband, then-Admiral Lord Aral Vorkosigan.

Lord Vorkosigan was subsequently appointed Regent to young Prince Gregor Vorbarra. After Princess Kareen’s untimely death, Lord and Lady Vorkosigan were named the Emperor’s guardians. Count Vorkosigan subsequently served as the Emperor’s Prime Minister until he and Countess Vorkosigan were appointed Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar. Vicereine Vorkosigan remained sole governor of Sergyar from her husband’s death through her retirement five years later.

Vicereine Vorkosigan spent many of her retirement years on Sergyar, pursuing scientific research on what many referred to as her planet. She also served as a director of MPVK Enterprises, a teaching assistant in Marine Biology at both Gridgrad and Hassadar Universities, and an energetic booster of Sergyar’s economic, medical, and educational expansion.

The Vicereine is survived by her partner of 46 years, Professor Admiral Oliver Jole, her brother, John (Sarah) Naismith, two sons, Lord Auditor Count Miles Naismith and Lord Mark Vorkosigan, and their wives, Countess Ekaterin Vorkosigan and Lady Kareen Koudelka Vorkosigan. She is also survived by five daughters, Lady Aurelia Vorkosigan (Sir Stefan Vorlakial), Countess Nile Vorhalas-Vorville (Count Rulf Vorhalas), Alani (Vladamir) Avilov, Lady Kiona Vorkosigan Vorbanna (Admiral Prince Pavel Vorbarra), Lujayn (Lawrence) Miller, and two stepsons, Admiral Everard (Claudine) Jole and Colonel Perrin (Odette) Jole. Lastly, she is survived by thirty grandchildren, twenty great-grandchildren, two great-great-grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews.

Arrangements for a State Funeral in Vorbarr Sultana are pending.

*****

Breaking News: Emperor Alexei Vorbarra has just announced the death of Lord Auditor Count Miles Vorkosigan. Count Vorkosigan was scheduled to speak today at the 50th anniversary memorial of the death of his father, Viceroy Prime Minister Admiral Count Aral Vorkosigan, 10th Count Vorkosigan and former Regent of Barrayar. No other details are presently available.

---finis---

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!