Beginnings.

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Summary

Of promotions and dinner parties and new beginnings.

Notes

For reference: Vorkosigan House blueprints for this verse.

Guy Allegre has not, to be exact, spent the last two weeks expecting the Emperor to pull another qualified candidate for Chief of Imperial Security out of his pocket, but the possibility has been one of the few things making it possible for Guy to sleep at night.

He begins the day as the provisional head of Imperial Security, still holding tight onto the delusion that this wouldn't be permanent. That this wouldn't cost him his career. That the Emperor wouldn't look him in the eye and say he could have ImpSec or he could have Petya, and he has to make the choice right then and there. Because Guy would choose Petya and he would do that with a clear conscience, but Petya would never forgive him for that, and of course Petya would find out
somehow, even if the Emperor didn't tell him outright.

The data chip with his resignation feels heavy in his pocket as Guy bows and then stands at attention. Guy goes through the motions, accepting the return of the copies of Miles Vorkosigan's complete ImpSec file that Guy had given the Emperor a few days ago, giving the Emperor the summary of General Haroche's interrogations, running through the morning briefing on sheer nerves and the knowledge that, whatever the Emperor says, Guy has to see this through.

And then it winds down and Guy says, "one more thing, sire," and hands him the security analysis that Alexei Vortala finished only a few hours ago. "The security analysis of my relationship with Minister Vorkosigan."

And the Emperor smiles a little to himself, looking at it, and then he looks up at Guy. He doesn’t touch the chip. And then he says, "I don't consider your relationship with one of my Ministers to be a problem."

The security analysis says that there's no threat, but, Guy knows the report also says, that was from a security perspective alone. There are a few thousand complicating factors outside of the security perspective to deal with.

"Racozy and Vortala can handle the politics of it," the Emperor continues.

Guy frowns, but doesn't say anything.

"I have been well informed of this from multiple sources," the Emperor says. "And I consider this to be a family matter, barely a step up from family gossip. I don't consider it a security matter. Do you?"

"I am fully aware of the potential conflicts of interest, sire," Guy says, "and the potential dangers. And a Minister's relationships are security matters, as are those of ImpSec department heads."

"And those of the Chief of ImpSec," the Emperor says.

"Yes, sire." And of course the Emperor decides to have this conversation now, on the heels of talking about Petya. No, the Chief of ImpSec can't be in a relationship with a Vorkosigan. A department head could get away with it, if he were careful, but not the man meant to be standing between the Emperor and all dangers. "When will he be appointed?"

The Emperor raises an eyebrow at him. "In the next five minutes, at a guess. Guy, I really don't care what you're doing with my foster-brother. I don't care if it ends, or if it stalls, or if you and Petya run off to Beta Colony together, so long as you let me know first. Your private life remains your own. I have enough problems without trying to dictate your off-duty hours."

Bullshit, Guy does not say. "Sire, the implications are--"

"Enough," the Emperor says mildly. "I will have this conversation with Racozy or with my political advisors. You, General Allegre, have too much of a conflict of interest. And I have the security analysis right here that says there's no problem." The Emperor picks it up between his thumb and his forefinger. "Isn't that right? If there were a problem, I'm sure I would have woken up this morning to Petya calling to tell me that he isn't courting you anymore. It would have been over before this ever crossed my desk. Wouldn't it?"

Guy grimaces. "Yes, of course it would, sire."

The Emperor leans forward. "If you're going to become the head of my security," he says softly, "you are going to have to learn to trust my judgment, General."
There isn't anything he can respond to that that isn't actual treason other than, "yes, sire."

The Emperor smiles. It's not reassuring. "Then, as there are no legitimate objections, you may consider your promotion confirmed. Congratulations, General Allegre."

Guy swallows hard. So, that's a no. He's really not getting out of this. The Emperor really doesn't care how it looks for the Chief of ImpSec to quite literally be in bed with the Vorkosigans. "Thank you, sire," he manages to get out. He wonders if Illyan had felt like this when he'd gotten his mid-war promotion. Or Negri, when he'd gotten his. We really have to do better at changing chiefs.

"There are several things that must happen now and in the next few days and weeks," the Emperor says. "What can wait, must wait. You already have access to all of Illyan's files and eyes-first reports, and I have asked Illyan, with Vortala's assistance, to put together a list of Domestic Affairs projects that you had not needed to know as head of Komarran Affairs. Vortala will be available to you exclusively for the next two days to get you up to speed on all of them. What remains or is too sensitive for Vortala shall be done... at some other time." The Emperor grimaces. "My future in-laws are arriving this afternoon and I must be there to meet them. Tomorrow morning, I hope. Certain offices in Domestic Affairs report directly to me when the Chief is not available; they will begin to report to you tomorrow morning. Ask them what details they can give and I will answer the questions they can't."

Domestic spying, Guy fills in silently, beyond the scope of Alexei's department. The spies on the spies and on those too sensitive to be known outside of those who absolutely have to know. All those little Domestic Affairs secrets, those tiny departments hidden away in corners, the last vestiges of the old spymaster's nest that ImpSec used to be.

And Domestic Affairs might end up needing another Audit, after and on top of all this. ImpSec's high command always meets every morning before Illyan, or whoever's standing in for him, goes to brief the Emperor on the state of his security, and every morning since Haroche's arrest, Colonel Sokolov has looked more strained than everyone, Guy included. If Sokolov were Vor, Guy's thought more than once, he might have already offered to theatrically swallow his sword over this. Guy's grateful that he hasn't. He's entirely out of patience to deal with Vor theatrics over their honor and imagined slights to it.

"What can wait... you will, starting tomorrow morning," the Emperor says with a certain amount of emphasis, and Guy wonders, with an equally certain amount of dread, if Petya had told all of his relatives what he'd planned to do tonight, or if it was just the Emperor he'd mentioned this to, "be required to review certain security-classified files. Not at the highest level, for my eyes only, but everything up to that level. You will find a full list at your comconsole when you return, and you may add any files to it that you choose. Illyan may have some further suggestions. This list of files includes Petya's."

Guy curses and then apologizes quickly.

The Emperor looks amused, not offended. "You need to know who you're dealing with. Or sleeping with," he continues blandly. "There is a great deal that you now need to know for the safety and security of the Imperium. This includes information about the Vor. I know that Domestic Affairs has never been your focus. Your expertise with Komarr is among the many reasons I -- We -- require you for this service, General, but Domestic Affairs is equally as volatile right now. We cannot allow chaos."

"Yes, sire," Guy says. No wonder the Emperor highlighted that he's to start this tomorrow. Going through even one full, or mostly full, file can take weeks, if not months, depending on the level of scrutiny and the length of ImpSec monitoring, which, for the High Vor, can start at birth. Even file
reviews, which the Emperor must be ordering as opposed to full file pulls and checks, is going to take enough time that if this were time-sensitive, Guy wouldn't be going off-duty, let alone sleeping, for the next two weeks.

"I trust your discretion," the Emperor continues. "And I am trusting you personally with My security. And the security of My Imperium." The Emperor assesses him, a slightly twisted smile on his lips. Then his eyes flick to the floor. "As the head of My security, your oath is to Me directly. And only. Get on your knees, Guy."

Guy swallows hard, wondering why this, instead of everything else, is what makes him suddenly terrified on top of his nervousness. He's gotten this far in life, he realizes, without ever having made oath directly to a Vor. His oath to his Count was made to a Count's deputy, a barrel-chested old sergeant down in the bowels of an old building five miles away from where Guy had grown up. And then he'd been released from that oath when he'd made his oath to his Emperor as officer, but that had been to a deputy as well.

The last time Guy had done this, he had given his oath to Illyan as an officer to his commander, and Illyan had seemed as bored with it as any prole would be after a lifetime of receiving oaths from officers who technically outrank him either militarily, socially, or both.

And Guy, without ever consciously intending to do so, has managed his entire career until now without having to ever swear anything to the Vor directly.

No, Guy thinks, staring at the Emperor's hands as he places his hands between them, he's just made them to the Vor indirectly. And refused to think about what it meant. By his soul on his breath and his word as his soul, he had sworn an officer's oath to his Emperor to give him his obedience in all things, his sword in war, his honor in life, and his life in service.

His obedience and his sword are long-fulfilled. He'd have given his honor, too, as much as the Vor admit it exists, but it hadn't been asked of him. Not in any way that had stung. But he had nearly given his life uncountable times. His life, the way Great-Uncle Louis had, and Xav had taken it from him in payment for Louis obeying a lawful order from his liege lord -- damned if you do, damned if you don't, and equally dead no matter which Vorbarra ordered your death -- and that is the reality Guy has to accept, here and now. His life could be forfeit for any thing, and this oath won't end with the Emperor's death; Guy could be killed for keeping a secret from the Emperor's heir that the Emperor had ordered him to.

Death will not release me, and may death take me, and Guy doesn't sputter as he finishes the phrases. This is the oath he makes, and he will obey it. He will keep any secrets even from the Emperor's heirs, if the Emperor requires it. By his soul on his breath. Not the bargain his uncle made, to obey Yuri even if it meant betraying Xav, but it could trap him and kill him the same way.

But this isn't an armsman's oath. It's nowhere as simple and straight-forward, as liege relationships go, because Guy isn't Vorbarra's District-born and he's taken oaths himself from his subordinate officers and he'll keep doing that. This is the kind of oaths that Counts make. Guy remembers hearing how Ezar and Negri and a handful of Imperial lawyers had put this together, creating something a prole could swear out of the fabric of a Count's vassal oath, because suddenly it was necessary to codify and formalize that oath relationship. Negri, Illyan, and now Guy. This is terrifying company. The oath goes so far as to request that the Emperor, as Count Vorville's liege lord, nullify any responsibility on Guy's behalf to make oath to Count Vorville, and if Guy had not already received the release from his previous oath, the Emperor grants it a second time, just for the sake of being absolutely sure that the Emperor alone holds Guy's oath. Congratulations, Guy, he thinks bemusedly, you can measure upward social mobility in terms of the kinds of treason you can
commit by either obeying or betraying this oath.

Guy finishes the repetition without stopping and then lifts his eyes to realize that, sometime between the Emperor ordering him to his knees and taking his hands in his, Alexei Vortala and Prime Minister Racozy had entered the room. Witnesses, Guy thinks. Of course. And the fact that he didn't notice them entering is not, he reminds himself, a failing. He's here to report, not to play guardsman. His focus was very properly on his Emperor, not on the security of the room.

Racozy is giving Guy a very strange look, but he congratulates him without hesitation. Alexei congratulates him with more enthusiasm and then gives him a sharp salute.

"I will make the formal, public announcement in four hours," the Emperor says. "If you want to inform your family in person, Vortala will take you there to do it now."

Shit. Guy hadn't even thought... and his family's going to kill him for this. It speaks to his level of panic, he thinks, that he hadn't even thought of that. Of them. How they're going to take this. Probably not well and that's probably an understatement. His career has always been dangerous for him, but it's never reached a level where it could hurt his family, too. Guy's had security since he was promoted to the capital, but his family had never had to be involved. And now Guy has just gotten them involved. Yes, he thinks, this is something he is going to have to tell them in person. And then apologize profusely.

"Your family will be receiving Ministerial-level security," the Emperor continues. "Vortala's department will arrange it and he knows the level of detail that they are allowed to know about the arrangements."

Alexei nods cheerfully at this. The Emperor dismisses them after giving Guy a few more reassurances that do nothing to distract Guy from the sudden realization that he really is now the head of Imperial Security.

Alexei leads him down quickly to the secured garage. Guy pauses by the last secured comconsole in the building, sparing a fond thought for the fantasy that, if there'd only been a little more time, he could have managed to go back to his apartment and change out of his dress uniform before going to see his parents. His father's always hated seeing him wearing his eyes. Too many memories of what ImpSec's done to their family to ever be truly comfortable seeing his own son as one of them.

"I need to call ahead," Guy says to Alexei. "Stay out of the frame." He keys in the family's business code and Arielle answers. That's a relief. If it had been Jerome, there would be questions. "Hi, Arielle," Guy says. "I need to tell you all something. Is it okay for me to come directly there and not to the house?" At this time of day, he is much more likely to get everyone there and not back home.

"Sure," Arielle says. "We'll be expecting you."

"Thanks," Guy says and keys off the comm. He looks over his shoulder at Alexei. "Any delays?"

Alexei shakes his head. "Welcome to the Chiefship, sir. Everything is high priority now. We've already scrambled security to meet us there. Word came down this morning for Major Charbonnier to detach himself from the Prime Minister for long enough to set everything up for your family."

His family is going to see a lot of ImpSec today, Guy translates that. He grimaces. "My father hates seeing me as full formal Imperial Security," he says to Alexei. "So you and your protection squads are going to leave him alone, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Alexei says.
Guy precedes him into the garage and returns the salutes of the ImpSec men guarding it. The flyer waiting for them is an official one and they're joined en-route with two more. Guy looks out of the windows at their escort, his jaw set. He's increasing his estimate by the minute at how much his family is going to absolutely hate this.

"You said yes to this," Alexei ventures.

So much for being in an enclosed space with Alexei Vortala without Alexei either being a nosy brat about something or trying to tell Guy more gossip than Guy ever wanted to know. Gossip that he's now going to have to know, Guy realizes with dread. "I know, intellectually, your failure rate," he says, "I've read all your damn reports. I know Major Charbonnier is excellent. And I probably owe Piotr Vorkosigan an apology somewhere in all of this."

Alexei laughs, sounding a little relieved. Well, he's probably right. If Guy's having second thoughts about accepting the Chiefship, those thoughts are an hour too late. But, Guy supposes, nerves over introducing his family to the fact that he got a promotion and, oh, did he forget to mention, his new position means that his family has to have Minister-level security, those are coming right on time.

"My ma made us all promise when we joined up," Guy continues after a long moment, watching the scenery passing below them and deciding that, yes, he might as well talk about this. "We'd make sure that someone would let her know before the official notification came. That she would never be taken by surprise. My brothers haven't worried her for years. She used to call me star-headed. That's not really a compliment," he adds.

"I know the story," Alexei says in his best encourage-the-witness tone.

Guy smiles at him weakly, letting him know that he's seeing straight through him. "She's going to be upset," he says. "She's probably hoping that me coming down in the middle of the day is to tell her that I'm retiring. Some of my siblings follow the news from the capital, but my parents don't. I don't know what they're going to think."

Alexei feeds him a few distracting, leading questions about his family and the business, which Guy knows has to be telling him things he already knows, because Alexei must have already gone through Guy's financials and background with paranoid and painstakingly scrutiny, if only for the purposes of conducting the threat assessment. But it helps keep Guy's mind off of things, so Guy goes along with it.

They're officially on ImpSec business, and Guy's never gotten through traffic control this quickly. He can't even tell when they cross the border into the District, but Alexei trying to distract him probably goes a long way in doing that.

Much too soon, they're landing in front of the glass house. Guy stares at the front entrance, wondering if what he's feeling is nerves or homesickness. He'd always expected, somehow, that he would come back to this when he was done with Komarr, done with ImpSec. Come home, find a place to live near enough to everyone and far enough away to give him some privacy. That's what everyone's done. Everyone eventually comes back here, with the military men retiring back into it like they'd never left, and everyone who actually left, like Guy and Emily, still holding a financial stake in it, still keeping their attention halfway on it, even while they're pursuing other dreams. It's the best place to find as many of Guy's relatives at once on short notice, but, Guy thinks, staring out the window as ImpSec descends upon the glass house, he should have found a better way to do this. To tell everyone. Not here. This feels too much like a violation. With this flyer and the escort, it must look like ImpSec is invading.

The sergeant riding armsman's perch next to the driver gets out of the flyer and leads the swarm of
men from the escort in securing the premises.

"I hope my father's not here," Guy says quietly. "Ma's not going to forgive me for this, if he is."

"I can order the head count," Alexei offers.

"Fuck no," Guy says, gripping Alexei's arm as if to physically hold him back. "You are not going through there and identifying everyone in the building. This is my family, Colonel, not some dangerous, unknown situation."

"Due respect, sir, but ImpSec has never detailed this building. We don't know the exits and the entrances, we don't know the escape routes, we don't even have an official survey of the area. This is, by definition, an unknown situation. And unknown situations are inherently dangerous."

Guy curses more under his breath.

The sergeant returns and reports, "it's secure."

Guy gets out of the back, composing his face to be very blank. Alexei follows him, setting himself into position. They enter the glass house. Guy's family's standing there to meet him. Da -- and Guy winches to see it -- is holding onto Ma with an iron grip, and Jerome has his hand on Da's shoulder. Everyone else is clustered around them, looking very nervous.

They look marginally less nervous when they spot Guy and Guy wonders what they'd been thinking, if they'd thought that he'd been arrested and then brought back for some obscure ImpSec reason.

"Sorry about all this," Guy says, knowing that it's completely inadequate as an apology. "I need to talk to all of you."

Arielle comes forward and nods. "We've got the big room free for now."

"Great, thanks," Guy says, relieved. He glances back at Alexei and, out of the corner of his eye, notices some of his family startle at suddenly realizing that Alexei is there. But ImpSec invaded. Of course they didn't realize that Guy is being shadowed, too. "I'll need some privacy, Colonel."


Da flinches. "Are you in some kind of trouble?" he demands.

"No," Guy says swiftly. He gives Alexei a steady glare and Alexei returns it. No, Guy isn't winning this one. Yes, Gregor would have Alexei's head for it if he left Guy alone now in an unsecured location. Yes, Guy can yell all he wants at Alexei later for presuming to do his job as he was ordered to. And Guy's really not winning this one and he's an idiot for even hoping that he could have. "Just you, then," Guy says, conceding their unspoken argument. "No one else."

Alexei gives a small nod of assent and then checks reports in his ear, and nods again, giving the all clear. Anyone who might have taken a shot at Guy's family before ImpSec could arrive and set up a guard didn't take the opportunity.

Arielle leads them back to the large conference room at the back of the building. Everyone sits down around the table, with Guy hesitating for a moment before taking the chair at the head. Alexei settles into guard position by the door.

"This is privacy," Guy says, trying not to sound as frustrated as he feels. You gave up your privacy,
"remember? "Everyone, that's Colonel Alexei Vortala. Ignore him, please. I usually do. He's the Commodore of the Domestic Affairs department in charge of everyone's security, but he's temporarily taken a leave from that post to fill an emergency one. However, for today, he's returned to that duty because of competing emergencies. I'm sorry I can't stay long, I need to get back to the capital as soon as possible."

"What's going on?" Laurent asks, eyeing Alexei nervously.

"My promotion's been confirmed," Guy says. "The Emperor will be making the announcement this afternoon. There are no time restrictions on this information. You can tell anyone you want before then. I ask that you please tell everyone who you think needs to be told personally rather than being informed officially along with the rest of the Imperium. Major Charbonnier, who should be arriving shortly, will be staying after I leave to brief you about your own security. I'm sorry, I know this isn't anything you expected. It wasn't anything I'd expected, either. But you shouldn't worry. The Emperor will be giving you the same level of security that Prime Minister Racozy's family has. Harry will brief you completely."

"Promotion," Jerome says flatly. "You might have mentioned you were up for one. This one."

No, he couldn't have mentioned, and Jerome used to have a security clearance, so he should know about not being allowed to talk about certain things. "I'd been serving as the acting head of Imperial Security until this morning," Guy says. "It was highly classified and I cannot talk about the circumstances that led to this promotion. The Emperor has assured me that he is taking concerns about my family's safety very seriously."

Laurent slides lower in his chair. "You had a discussion with the Emperor."

Alexei's directly in Guy's line of sight, or, rather, Guy is in Alexei's, which means that when Alexei swallows a surprised laugh, Guy notices it. I am going to be hearing about this forever. And that's another problem with Alexei being in this room. It means that Guy's family isn't going to be as indiscreet as they'd like to be. Not with ImpSec conspicuously breathing down their necks, to say nothing of Alexei being Vor. It's not going to go as badly as it could go, but Guy doesn't consider that to be a good thing. He'd rather they'd get their yelling at him over with now.

"Of course he has, you idiot," Arielle says. "What do you think department heads are?"

"There's more I need to tell you," Guy continues. He takes a deep breath and says, "I've been...," then he falters. "I'm courting Piotr Vorkosigan," he finishes.

It's not as bad as he'd worried it would be. He has to repeat a few times that, yes, it is that Vorkosigan, and that yes, he does know what he's doing, and Alexei is giving Guy a lot of sympathetically blank looks. Guy raises an eyebrow at him, I remember your reaction to Maxim and Petya, you can't throw any stones. Alexei barely shrugs in acknowledging the point.

Eventually, Alexei accidentally interrupts the interrogation by giving a few soft orders through the comms, and everyone stops asking Guy about Petya to stare at Alexei.

"Is something the matter?" Arielle asks.

"No," Guy says. "This is an unsecured building in an unknown environment. My security is perfectly correct to indulge in paranoia. I have to get used to it. What is it, Colonel?"

"Major Charbonnier has arrived, sir," Alexei reports.

"All right," Guy says. He gives Alexei the signal and Alexei opens the door for Charbonnier. "This
is Major Charbonnier," Guy continues. Harry Charbonnier looks around the room at everyone. "He runs Prime Minister Racozy's security and he will be briefing you fully. Vortala will be appointing you a personal head of security, but, ah, competing emergencies. Charbonnier will be serving in both roles until he can be relieved."

Harry smiles amiably at everyone, trying to look harmless. Guy doesn't think anyone believes it. Guy makes the introductions, which feels like chiseling stone. Jerome's giving him looks that say that if they were in any kind of privacy, Guy would be getting chewed out right now for deciding that he actually did want an ImpSec career after all.

The driver comes to the door after Harry has convinced Arielle to give him the blueprints for the building so he can start planning guard stations and rotations. Alexei confers with him quietly and then signals to Guy.

"I need to get back to the capital," Guy apologizes.

Jerome stands up quickly. "I'll show you out," he offers. Guy rolls his eyes, but follows him out.

"I know my way around," Guy says to him in an undertone.

"Yes, and now so does ImpSec," Jerome says, matching his tone. "Guy, you did think about this first? Right?"

"Little else since it became clear it was inevitable," Guy says, "and that's really all the detail I can give you."

"You could have resigned," Jerome grumbles.

No, he couldn't have. Who else could the Chiefship have gone to? Miles Vorkosigan, like the Emperor originally intended? Markouizos of Galactic Affairs isn't the top man even in that department, and Farris could leave Komarr, but he would be extremely difficult to replace there, and he's never served anywhere other than Galactic Affairs. He'd be running to catch up, and they can barely afford Guy's gaps in his knowledge and he's years ahead of Farris there. Olshansky's too busy trying to organize Sergyaran Affairs into a proper department to even go home half the nights of the week and the ink on Sokolov's promotion to head of Domestic Affairs is barely dry. They both have enough problems. Rathjens on Komarr is in paranoid line of succession and has the authority to take over ImpSec Barrayar if necessary, but without half of ImpSec high command dropping dead, the best hole Rathjens could fill would be to take over Guy's old job. No, there really isn't anyone else. Not right now. "I'll keep that in mind," Guy says.

Jerome leans in and, without looking back, Guy knows that Alexei just went on nervous high-alert. Guy signals Alexei to please stand down, there's still no danger here. "I can't tell you we're happy about this," he says, voice barely above a whisper, "but, hey, congratulations on finally finding someone who'll put up with you."

"Thanks," Guy murmurs in return. "Also, you're making my security very nervous."

Jerome looks surprisingly pleased by that. "Always good to return a favor."

"Try to get along with them, please," Guy says. "You'll make my life easier if I'm not getting complaints from all sides here. I know it's a mess, I know you don't like it. I'm not expecting you to like it, and I'm not asking you to. Just to work with them. And, if it helps, the Vor have it worse. Trust me."

"I do," Jerome says, showing Guy and his entourage out the door. "Believe me, I do." He gives Guy
an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Good luck. And we're all looking forward, very much, to your retirement." Then Jerome salutes him lazily and heads back inside, shoving his way through Guy's guards.

Guy settles down into the lightflyer and watches the front door to the glass house slam shut. Alexei gives him a few concerned looks as they fly back to the capital, but thankfully has the discretion to not say a word about what just happened.

The next few hours are a blur of protocol and full dress uniforms and formal announcements. Illyan is there and they endure the formal handing-off publicly and then the more private ceremony for the General Staff and ImpSec high command. At the last, Illyan places his hand on a palm-reader and Guy follows after him, officially transferring control of ImpSec's most secure systems to Guy.

When it's all over, Guy doesn't think he's imagining the way Illyan looks like a heavy weight has been lifted off of his shoulders. "You'll do fine," Illyan says to him after they exchange final salutes.

Guy tries not to look like he's been feeling that weight settle down on his back ever since Miles Vorkosigan ordered him to arrest Haroche. "Thank you," he says.

He accepts the rest of the congratulations in order of rank. Everyone seems equally confident in him, and why not? Illyan had taken over ImpSec in the middle of a war, when they hadn't had control of the capital and no one knew exactly where the Emperor was. Compared to that, falling headfirst and already running towards the Emperor's betrothal and wedding is nothing to lose sleep over.

And, of course, comparing everything to the Pretendership is the surest way to lose sight of all of the real dangers involved, but Guy figures that he's allowed to do it today. They aren't at war. That's about as best as you can hope for in the aftermath of treason that high up in ImpSec.

Guy ends the day where he'd begun it, at ImpSec headquarters, and he heads down to the analysts cave, idly straightening his cuffs. Duv looks up at his entrance and then stands without a word. Duv looks like a man going to his execution, which Guy prudently does not mention. He says, instead, "relax, Duv," in an undertone as he escorts Duv down to the exit.

Guy checks in on Alexei as they leave. "Get some sleep," Guy advises him. Alexei's been pulling extra shifts during this emergency, covering both his usual duties and arranging security for the Emperor's betrothal. The past few weeks, whenever Guy has felt like he's going to snap from the strain of Illyan being incapacitated and an Imperial Auditor sniffing around and then Petya Vorkosigan deciding to take risks, he's only had to look over at Alexei to reassure himself that someone has it worse.

Alexei looks pained and rolls his eyes. "Good night, sir," he says. He nods to Duv. "Captain Galeni."

If Duv has relaxed at all, it's not apparent as Guy ushers him into his groundcar. Guy pretends not to notice security following them to Vorkosigan House.

"Duv," Guy says as he eases them into traffic, "I promise, he's not going to hurt you. No one's going to do anything to you tonight."

Duv nods stiffly.

Okay, if the first approach of reassurance doesn't work to calm the witness, try distraction. "What did you and Commodore Vorinnis usually talk about, back when you were at the Academy?" Guy asks.
"Cetagandans," Duv says. He hesitates and stares out the window before continuing, emotionlessly, "Piotr Vorkosigan used to sacrifice children to the war effort. The other Piotr Vorkosigan."

"No one's going to be sacrificing anyone or anything tonight," Guy interrupts him before that can get any worse. And it's probably true. Guy didn't sacrifice his career today, and it's likely he didn't even sacrifice his relationship. For all that the Emperor had made the point of how little he cared about what Guy and Petya are trying to do, Guy still isn't sure if this is something the Emperor expects him to stop on his own. That this is a choice that the Emperor shouldn't be seen to be ordering, but he's doing it anyway. The Vor have played stranger mind-games. But the Emperor probably isn't that convoluted. Or that sadistic. As loyalty games go, it would be a pointless one, with Guy already prepared to resign over this.

Or maybe Petya will just refuse to start it. That will, Guy reflects, make the conversation he just had to endure with his family all that much more awkward for him having to tell them that, no, never mind, he isn't courting Piotr Vorkosigan after all. Even though they would all be relieved to hear it.

"Vorinnis used to be... very Vor about it all," Duv says haltingly. "The Vor-- that was the point of it. The burden of service, giving everything, including your honor, for your planet. I... disagreed at loud volume and-- I couldn't ever say he had a point, not after I'd given my honor to Komarr, made my own sacrifices. And-- he used to say he liked the way having a Komarran around made everyone examine their implicit and explicit assumptions about audience, about we, about-- well, everything, the same way it had when the Vor suddenly had to contend with having proles in class with them. It changes... certain assumptions. And he'd turn it around on me. He used to provoke these detailed, meticulously sourced responses from me. I'd stay up all night, fuming, just to prove him wrong. Which I did, a lot. It took me longer than it should have to realize that was the point, because the Vor don't play those juvenile games, except when they do. If it wouldn't have gotten me interrogated by Service Security and probably imprisoned, I might have given in to his urgings to try to publish some of them."

Guy smiles. "You could publish some of them now."

Duv snorts. "After that? No, thank you, sir."

Vorkosigan House is just ahead and Guy heads directly to the gate. "Why not?" he asks. "You won't spend any nights in the cells over it, I can promise that." And it can hardly ruin Duv's career now, but Guy won't say that yet. Not until the Emperor decides who will be replacing Guy in Komarran Affairs.

The gate guard waves Guy through with a sharp salute and Guy brings the groundcar to rest inside the porte-cochere. An armsman is there immediately as they exit and he swings the door open to reveal Petya waiting there for them, looking, to Guy's eye, endearingly nervous.

Petya welcomes them in with what Guy imagines is appropriate protocol, dispatching the armsman, Pym, to see to Guy's groundcar and get Guy's security settled. Petya conducts them into the North Wing and into a small parlor with red lacquered floors two doors away from the grand library.

Commodore Vorinnis is already there and he's standing by one of the windows, idly flipping through a bound book. He puts it down as they enter and greets Duv the way Guy imagines Vor throughout the centuries have greeted proles they would like to steal.

Petya is standing just a little too close to Guy and he looks from Vorinnis to Guy before giving Guy his full attention.

"Miles won't be joining us," Petya begins. "He's still sleeping off his surgery at ImpMil, but he asked
me to give you his congratulations on your promotion. And the Countess is at the Residence tonight, greeting the members of the Toscane family who have just arrived. So-- we have some privacy tonight."

Vorinnis gives Petya an inscrutable look from across the room and Petya looks slightly abashed.

"Let me show you around," he says, and proceeds to conduct Guy and Duv through an extensive tour of the first floor and all of the public rooms, going through each one of them and indulging them -- really it's indulging Duv, Guy thinks, and bless Petya for figuring out how to get Duv to actually start to relax -- with a deluge of historical anecdotes and ancient political gossip. Halfway through, Petya stumbles over Duv's interest in physical battles during Council political battles, and gives Duv a slew of examples.

After a good hour of enthusiastic historical recollections among Petya, Duv, and Vorinnis, Pym comes up from behind them and signals to Petya, and Petya conducts them back to that small parlor for dinner.

Dinner is excellent, not that Guy expected anything else from Petya when he's in this kind of mood. And Duv seems to have forgotten that he's surrounded on both sides by Vor lords, which is a relief. After the complications of the last two weeks, Guy's been worried about how well this would go.

After dessert, Petya makes a very pointed remark and Vorinnis invites Duv to look over something in the library with him on his way out, cheerily offering to take him back to his apartment to let them continue the conversation as long as possible. Duv gives Guy a subtly panicked look and Guy gives him an encouraging nod. Not that he isn't nervous, too, but there's no danger here. It's just something new.

And it's not just that Petya is giving him a shy smile. It's all of this. For all that Guy has been increasingly taking part in social gatherings of all types that include the Vor since his promotion to the capital, this part of it, the private side of the inner-Vor dealings that he's been welcomed into tonight, is something completely new. It's made up of parts he recognizes from both sides, both running security and being inspected by security. But usually he's being surrounded by armed guards because he's one of their number or because he's having a meeting with the man being guarded.

This is Vorkosigan House. This is paranoia's native habitat. The armsman are part of the scenery here. The heavily armed scenery.

Guy reminds himself that he's fairly certain this is a good idea.

Well, at the very least, it's not a terrible idea.

"So you've seen the public rooms," Petya says. "Allow me to continue the tour."

Guy has to admire the paranoid strategy behind this. First a tour of the public rooms and now Petya can take Guy upstairs under cover of continuing the tour and performing the essential duty of familiarizing the new Chief of Imperial Security with Vorkosigan House.

Although, Guy thinks, if Petya's trying to keep this a secret from anyone in this household or in his security, it's a futile waste of time and effort, and wasting the small amount of time they have together is not an attitude Guy should be encouraging, paranoia or no.

"I've studied the blueprints, you realize," Guy says. Day one at ImpSec HQ: find five ways to kill the Prime Minister in his bed. And if you're really creative, Simon Illyan will glower at you and write you a commendation.
Guy realizes, with a start, that he's going to be the one writing those commendations now. But, thankfully, for whatever analyst manages to find a way to kill Racozy. Not a Vorkosigan.

Duv had completely underperformed on that quiz, but Guy had expected that.

"Yes, but probably not the decor," Petya says, smiling.

"Do you remember my thoughts on briefings as foreplay?" Guy asks, probably futilely, as Petya leads him out into the hallway.

Petya turns, one foot out the door, suddenly extremely serious. "It is absolutely vital," he says quietly, "that you know your way around. Blindfolded, if necessary. Even if I didn't want to-- welcome you here, it is absolutely necessary for you to know where you are at all times, without a native guide to help you get around. Certain parts of the architecture are deliberately designed to confuse the invader. This isn't Vorrutyer House, that labyrinth of paranoia, but it was built with a similar notion towards defense. We've outlasted sieges here, too. You may have seen the blueprints, General, but if you tried to get out of here right now without any help and at speed, without being able to use the front door, you'd probably fall into the dungeons in the sub-basement."

If Vorkosigan House actually still has those dungeons, then everything Guy has heard about Countess Vorkosigan is a lie.

"I get around ImpSec HQ every day," Guy reminds him. "Your paranoid architecture isn't much of a match for that maze of insane architecture."

"Yes, my ancestors thought of that," Petya says. "Which is why I don't think any curious children would trip over the more subtle security measures, but they would draw someone like you, or Pierre le Sanguinaire, down into the basements without fail. Not that we ever tried to imprison Pierre le Sanguinaire here," Petya continues after a moment's thought. "His disagreements with Count Selig the Second never escalated that far. Well, officially tried. There was the incident with the sleeping pill... but I digress."

"Yes, you do," Guy says dryly. "And, in any case, I would prefer not to visit any dungeons or cells of that sort. Even if it is on the way to your bedroom."

"It would be a far detour," Petya says. "I had planned to skip that section of fortifications for now, and also forgo the usual familiarization with the security forces, which would be a waste of time better spent on more enjoyable familiarizations."

Guy sighs. "Not to dispute the undisputed truth of that, but your lines are still pretty terrible. Haven't you gotten any practice? Lord Vortala has some poetic sense, or so Colonel Vortala informs me."

"I seduced Maxim with alcohol and late night cold-blooded political discussions, with a side foray into inheritance law just for variety's sake," Petya says. "Not poetry." He frowns. "I suppose I could try," he says doubtfully. "I'm sure you had Shakespeare at school. I think I can still recite something from memory. Would you, ah. Is that something you would expect from me?"

Petya looks actually worried about this. Guy decides to have some mercy. He pats Petya on the shoulder. "Stop being so damn nervous," Guy says. "You really don't have to impress me. And I'm not some Vor lord you can seduce with politics. I prefer more direct seductions."

"I'd noticed, thank you," Petya mutters.

"So," Guy says, surrendering to the inevitability of Petya dragging him all over the House before they finally end up in Petya's bedroom. "This is the first floor."
Petya flashes him a grateful smile. Guy begins to suspect that not only does Petya have a script for how he wants tonight to go, he might have even mentally rehearsed this tour from start to finish.

"Yes," Petya says, and picks up the patter from there. He leads Guy down the length of the first floor and then turns a corner to the right into a small parlor that, Petya explains, is often used as a more private receiving room during large parties, and opens up a door to a staircase through a hidden latch right next to the lift tube.

Petya winds them up a back staircase and kindly allows Guy to look out of an arrow slit to get his bearings. Petya wasn't kidding about the architecture being deliberately confusing to someone of Guy's training; all of his well-honed ImpSec instincts are telling him things about the fortification structure that are directly contradicted by what he's actually seeing. Petya's right, he probably would end up falling through some well-placed trap door if he tried to find his way out of here right now without being allowed to simply retrace his steps.

"The second floor is currently Miles's territory," Petya says, leading them through a partly-hidden door that blends in almost completely with the wall once it's closed. "He's recently taken over the guest suite that used to be our grandfather's." Petya points in that general direction. "Ivan has a room on this floor for when he spends the night; he picked it out from the guest rooms when he was young and hasn't moved. The few nights when Gregor has stayed here, he's been on this floor as well, down that way, in the large suite in the North Wing. But right now, the parts of this floor that Miles hasn't taken over are mostly guest suites."

"Your father didn't take over your grandfather's rooms after he died?" Guy says, surprised. "I'd assumed the Count's Quarters on the blueprints were, well, the Count's Quarters."

"No, my father prefers the third floor. He took over the smallest suite there when they returned from the war, something about the way the light hit the wall. He did a lot of drawing back then, so I suppose the light was important. When he married Cordelia, they took over the entire floor, which my grandfather encouraged, because there's a lot of room for a growing family. And then my father chose not to move down. He offered me those quarters, but I was perfectly happy where I was and didn't see a reason to move. And since no one was eager to move into the old Count's domain, we made it a guest suite."

Petya turns a corner and Guy notices that the walls are thicker here. He presses his palm against the wall and feels the hum of a shield generator. Petya notices and smiles without comment. One of Illyan's improvements to the fortifications, Guy imagines, and says so.

Petya nods in agreement. "One of several. But you've seen the blueprints." He frowns idly, studying the wall. He looks back to Guy. "Speaking of ImpSec, what's your schedule for tomorrow? Do you-- do you need to be there very early?"

"My usual time," Guy says. "And I don't have a clue what my schedule for tomorrow is. It was still in flux when I was leaving. It'll probably be completely different compared to what it was yesterday by the time I check in tomorrow. The last change I saw before I left was the Chief's-- my secretary informing me that I will be spending an additional hour at the Residence after Gregor's morning briefing, and Count Vorville will also be in attendance. He didn't mention why."

"Oh, that'll be Gregor informing him how honored he is to have one of his District men as the Chief of Imperial Security," Petya says. "With the emphasis that you act only on the Emperor's will, and under no circumstances should Vorville ever imagine that you answer to him."

Guy groans. The Vor. It's been thirty years since Emperor Ezar died and some of them still have no idea how to handle a prole outranking them. "And with some barbed remarks about what would
happen if he tries to take it out on the members of my family who are liege sworn to him?"

Petya looks apologetic. "Probably. Sorry about that. If it helps," he continues, "we're getting better about that." Which is nice of Petya to say, but Guy suspects it's only true because the Vor who couldn't imagine a world where a prole would ever be allowed to outrank them are quickly dying out. Petya runs his fingers across the wood paneling beneath a portrait of one of his relatives. "What does your family think about this?"

"They're surprised," Guy says. "Very. They were very careful and discreet when we spoke earlier. I went down in person. And I told them about you, too. I think Vortala scared them more than anything else."

"Sure, it was Vortala," Petya mutters. "I'd like to meet your family," he adds. "If or whenever you'd like."

"I'd like you to meet them, too. But it might take time for them to come around on the idea of you," Guy warns him.

Petya nods. "I figured as much. They probably don't approve of me."

"It's nothing personal, it's just what you are," Guy says. "And they didn't say a word against you. But, well, they didn't need to say it."

"I understand," Petya says. "I've told my father and Cordelia about you, that they should expect to see you around. But I couldn't have told my grandfather."

"He wouldn't have approved?" Guy asks gently, knowing the answer.

Petya shakes his head ruefully. "In terms of you as an officer -- highly decorated, very honorable -- he would have loved you. But, otherwise, no. You're a male prole. He wouldn't have approved. Not that he would have tried anything, because he'd completely run out of heirs he approved of by then, but he had a way of making his disapproval stick."

"And the Allegre part might have been a problem," Guy suggests, leadingly.

Petya opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again. "Guy... I was once broken under fast-penta. I've made my peace, and I assumed that-- I assumed you made yours, too. Do you really want to talk about this?"

Guy grimaces at the phrasing. Not that he can dispute the truth of that, not with what he now knows about who had been the one to give Petya such an enduring hatred of interrogation drugs. But it's rather blunt for Petya. On the other hand, Guy thinks, bluntness should be encouraged. "We probably should," he says, "eventually. Just to have it out there. Not now," he adds quickly. "But eventually."

Petya nods. "You're right, we should. Um. If you want details, you should ask my father. I don't know what he remembers, but if anyone has any more details than what's in the historical record, it would be him."

"I don't want details," Guy says, retracing the route Petya's fingers have been taking across the wall, and is rewarded by a panel jutting out. Petya pushes it back in and a concealed door opens further down the hall.

"Blocked escape route," Petya explains. "It's, uh, useful as a decoy these days, nothing else. The staircase collapsed a long time ago. Illyan put pressure-sensors at the bottom in case one of his men
'accidentally fell down it and needed a rescue, but it's otherwise empty. Sorry, when I get nervous, I,
uh--"

"Run through security drills and find the nearest escape route," Guy fills in. "I have met you."

Petya gives him a relieved smile. "We have real escape routes. You need to know about them. Um,
shall we continue?"

Guy takes Petya's hand in his. "Yes."

Petya leads him down the cross-hallway into the North Wing. "My nursery was down there, the
large room on the far end," Petya says. He looks back at Guy and then hits a code on a side door
slow enough for Guy to recognize it as the year the Cetagandan War ended, followed by the year of
the fall of Vorkosigan Vashnoi. The door opens into a small hallway hidden in the wall that, from
the look of the spacing of the doors, could be used to get around much of this floor without being seen.
There are weapons mounted on the walls and ammunition piled in boxes beneath the weapons.

Guy looks around. "This wasn't on the blueprints."

"Yes, it is, it's a decorative wall," Petya says. "It's just a very big one." His wave takes in all the
armaments. "These are checked monthly, they should all work. None of them are gene-coded, so
anyone can use them. This is relatively insecure. It's for ImpSec's use, mostly. It's useful for quickly
arming and rearming, and if we ever find ourselves in the position of having to retake the House
floor-by-floor. The last time we had to," he adds, "was in Dorca's day. It's not currently a great
concern."

"This is just for paranoia, got it," Guy says.

"And for getting around invisibly, if you'd like," Petya says. "I think my grandfather used to use it
when he'd hide my presents, because I was too short to reach the code box. Here and in the armory. I
can just imagine the inventories. Nerve disruptors, plasma arcs, swords, probably a spear or two,
baby presents."

Guy laughs. "Those sound like very well-guarded presents."

Petya looks wistful and a little grim, but he nods. "I used to think -- oh, it doesn't matter. What about
you? Did your parents keep your toys next to your weapons cache?"

"Prole," Guy reminds him dryly.

Petya shrugs. "In the pantry, then? I don't know. Where do normal people hide toys from inquisitive
children?"

"I don't know about anyone else," Guy says, "but we used to hide them in the basement. We each
had our own place to keep them. Nine kids," he reminds Petya. "You don't have secrets. You just
pretend you do."

"What wonderful training for ImpSec," Petya says. "Because I'll bet you managed to keep some
secrets."

Guy shrugs. "Things like who broke Ma's favorite brooch? Conspiracies like that, you always have
to wonder who knows what and when. But you try."

Petya nods like he understands the difficulties involved, and maybe he does. He leads Guy down to a
door and opens it into a short hallway. Petya slides a second door open and Guy finds himself inside
the Yellow Parlor where Guy had had those teas with Illyan.

"And here we are, the Yellow Parlor," Petya says. "Familiar territory."

Guy nods and he walks around it, marveling at how changed it looks since Petya had opened that door and walked back into Guy's life. "Things change," he says quietly. Or maybe it's just the shadows in the darkened room that make it seem so different.

Petya's watching him with hawk eyes. "Yes," he says, and then takes a breath. "Are you having second thoughts?"

Guy's head snaps up. "No." Petya exhales a sigh of pure relief. "I was just thinking," Guy says. "How much has changed since you came back from your District to start preparing for the Imperial Wedding."

"Did I remember to offer my congratulations?" Petya asks. "Because, if I forgot... congratulations, sir. I can't think of a better candidate."

"I can't think of any other one," Guy admits. "And I did try this afternoon. My brother asked me why I took the promotion and I started thinking about what if I'd turned it down, who could it have gone to."

Petya frowns in thought. "Um, the head of Galactic Affairs has seniority next, doesn't he?"

"You'd have to pry his cold, dead fingers off of Komarr first," Guy says, "and if you managed, his deputy on Komarr is very new. They could handle it, if need be, but it wouldn't be a good idea if you had other options. And then there's Sokolov, who's been the confirmed head of Domestic Affairs for a whole two weeks. Olshansky's had his department less than a year. Eventually, if you work down the list to the Deputies, Rathjens on Komarr could do it, but if he's getting promoted back to the capital, it'll be to fill my boots, not Illyan's. I suppose Markouizos of Galactic Affairs wouldn't be a disaster. Unlike his boss, Markouizos has spent enough time in the capital that he could find his way from the Residence to ImpSec HQ without a map. But even still."

Petya frowns deeper. "I don't dispute your analysis, sir, but I'm sure there were other candidates the Emperor considered. Had to have considered. And, um, did you discuss--"

"Us?" Guy fills in for him. "Yes. He says he has no objections to our relationship and that it has no bearing whatsoever on his decision." He shrugs at Petya's dubious look. "I don't argue when the Emperor asks me point-blank if I trust him or not."

"Of course not," Petya says. "I just want to make sure this isn't hurting your career."

Guy decides that Petya really doesn't need to know about his prepared resignation chip, which is currently sitting in the private safe in his office. "If it will, I'm sure the Emperor will inform me," he says. "I'm not going to try to convince him to order me to not court you."

Petya nods. "That's very sensible. I understand." He licks his lips. "We'll be discreet," he promises. "I won't give the scandal-mongers cause to notice you."

"They're going to have other concerns for the next six months," Guy says. "Domestic Affairs is going to be very busy over it all. And so will I," he adds. "We aren't going to have a lot of time together."

"I know," Petya says. "And how is Domestic Affairs handling it all? Alexei Vortala's been looking very strained."
"They're managing," Guy says. "Sokolov's over his head, but he's sensible and he can ride it out. Of all the times for this," he trails off.

Petya smiles tightly. "You, of all people, can't call yourself surprised. You've been talking to me for years about ambitious officers in the capital stabbing each other in the back to advance their careers."

Guy raises an eyebrow at him. "So, you're saying that I should be saying that I told you so?"

"I never disputed the truth of it," Petya dismisses. "Although I certainly question Haroche's sense, doing this as a time when ImpSec can least afford to be off its game."

"He can't have known about the Emperor's betrothal when he started it," Guy objects.

"Of course he couldn't," Petya says, "but when is it ever a good time for ImpSec to be at a disadvantage? You deal with six emergencies before breakfast and probably more than I'm allowed to know about before lunch. Any time is a bad time, and for all Haroche knew, we could have been at war with Cetaganda the day after Illyan collapsed. He put his career ahead of the Imperium's safety. And, what was it Miles was saying, he's pleading down to assault on a superior officer? I know people call me my grandfather's son behind my back, but I would have taken him out and shot him. I would call that mercy, giving him a short, quick military execution, not what Gregor's decided on, to let him live."

Guy winces. Quick military executions, indeed. At least Petya didn't call for him to be hanged, the quicker traitor's death. "I knew Lucas for years," he says. "You have the advantage of unfamiliarity. When you look at his crime, you don't see his years of service to the Imperium trailing behind it, you only see his treason. Do you look at your brother and only see treason?"

"There have been times when I have," Petya admits. "And I'm not proud of that. But it's a different sort of treason, Guy. Lucas Haroche tried to murder the head of Imperial Security. My brother raised a private army and fought a war that had nothing to do with Barrayar. It was treason, yes, but it posed no danger to my Emperor's life. Haroche's treason could have resulted in Gregor's assassination."

"Through negligence only," Guy says. "Or are you accusing him of being a direct threat to Gregor's safety?"

"You would know his abilities better than I would," Petya says. "You are in a much better position to tell me if, say, Haroche was ever a covert ops agent, playing all those trust games before thrusting a dagger into someone's chest."

"No, that was me," Guy says.

Petya dismisses that with a shrug. "Haroche tried to melt Illyan's brain while Illyan was still alive. It was supposed to be a public, embarrassing, horrible death. I completely question the wisdom of letting Haroche live. He knows too much about ImpSec and he's proven himself to be faithless. But it's not up to me, and the last time Gregor asked my opinion about an execution, he didn't follow my advice. I doubt he'll ask again."

"We're not exactly going to let him just walk away," Guy says. "He's going to spend the next few years in a military prison, and after that remains to be seen. We have more pressing concerns about Domestic Affairs, like the fact that Haroche managed to get away with scrubbing his tracks and manipulating security footage. We might end up asking for another Audit if we can't dig out all the problems ourselves. That's another reason we need Haroche alive, so we can keep interrogating him about all the weaknesses he was able to exploit to get away with it for so long."
"I understand," Petya says. "Really, I do. I know that this is a luxury, being able to get caught up in emotion over it, to say, this man should die for what he did, and not have to say, he's more valuable alive than dead. You're the Chief of ImpSec now. You have other things to be concerned about."

Guy swallows hard at that. *Yes, I'm the Chief of ImpSec now.* His family seems to understand that. Why is it taking so long to sink in for him? "I'm not Illyan," he starts, because if anyone can understand this, it's Petya.

Petya looks at him like Guy is confusing him. "Even Illyan wasn't Illyan most of the time. Negri wasn't Negri, either. Reputation is what other people make of you. You know that, Guy. You can't tell me you've bought into this Illyan the Great propaganda. You've worked with him for too long. The chip is," Petya shakes his head, "was a good tool for him, but... when people saw Illyan, they saw him as embodying ImpSec. And now that's you. That doesn't change. People will look at you and see ImpSec. That's what scares them. It's... it's you, but it's not you. They aren't seeing you when they look at you, they're seeing the man behind the Horus eyes. And, I'm sorry, Guy, but you're going to have to get used to that, and very quickly."

Guy nods. There's propaganda, and then there's living up to it, and Guy knows where he falls when it comes to living up to the myth. And it's nothing that he hasn't encountered before in running interrogations, when suspects would look at him with the same fear in their eyes that Guy's father used to have when he'd talk about ImpSec. Guy's never had the luxury of thinking that his Horus eyes didn't mark him as the enemy to most of the Imperium.

It's just worse now. And maybe there's some lingering hero worship, because Illyan is still Illyan, and Guy's worked with him long enough to both know that he's not infallible and realize just how good he is at what he does. And he never knew Negri, but from the way Illyan talks about him, and the way Guy's father has, too, Guy's put together a mental image of the man as mentor and as enemy, and it's a ghost that Guy can't even begin to imagine himself having to be compared to and measured against.

But Petya has to understand that, too. He can't ignore those shadows, not with his family.

"And was your grandfather the great general?" Guy asks. He waves his hand at the furnishings. "You can't tell me that he sat in here and plotted for fifty years, holding the Imperium on his shoulders, without being what everyone said he was. Or, at least, mostly that way."

"My grandfather," Petya starts slowly, "was the man who tried to kill Miles repeatedly, because my father wouldn't do it for him. And my grandfather was the man who used to cry at my grandmother's grave *and* at Prince Xav's grave. He was... a very complicated man. But he was never infallible, Guy. And he wasn't always right. He wasn't always wrong, of course, but he was the man who lost half his guerillas in a futile push in the fifth year of the war, trying to rid the Cetagandans from his District, and was rewarded with our District being one of the worst-ruined ones of that war. He made mistakes. The great general, the great admiral... they're just men, Guy. So am I, so is Illyan, so was Negri, and so are you."

Petya rubs his arms and looks around. "And now he's breathing down my neck," Petya mutters. "Let's get out of here."

Guy has no objection that and he follows Petya out. Petya closes the door behind them solidly and then rests his hand against the wood, before shaking his head quickly, like he's clearing it.

"I can't understand how Miles can voluntarily sleep in that suite," he says, and then runs his fingers through his hair. "Anyway," he says, turning his back on the entire rest of the East Wing, "shall we continue?"

Petya smiles grimly at that. "I did sleep down here a few times," he says, as if admitting something shameful. "My nursery was," he gestures generally towards the far corner of the North Wing, "over there, but by the time I was reliably walking, I got myself a bed down here, right next to his private sitting room. Not my own space, that was clear, all my toys had to stay in the nursery, but, uh, just a bed, because I had a terrible habit of sneaking out of the nursery on adventures. I was convinced that everything exciting happened after I was supposed to be asleep. I am still sure I was right," he adds. Guy doesn't doubt it. "The problem was temporarily solved by putting me close enough to my grandfather so that I was near the action, but far enough away so that he didn't trip over a sleeping child when he was plotting politics. And then they'd move me back to the nursery after they were sure I was asleep for the night. But I got over that eventually. And then I grew out of the nursery, so it didn't matter anyway."

Petya leads them back to the grand staircase and he frowns at its twisting railing contemplatively. Guy rests his hand on Petya's shoulder.

Petya looks up at him. "You don't want to see the nursery, do you?" he asks, smilingly wryly.

"No," Guy says. "I don't."

Petya nods. "There's nothing there, as it is. All the baby stuff is in storage. Miles-- Miles never used any of it and he got his own room when they moved back here after Gran'da stopped trying to shame my father into obedience. So no one's had that space since me. It's a nice room," he adds conscientiously. "Bright and cheerful, gets the light well, and it's right near two different escape routes. I'm right on top of it now, actually. Two floors up."

Petya rubs his thumb over an inlaid engraving of two galloping horses and then starts to mount the stairs to the third floor, leading Guy around the turns. Petya makes a point of showing Guy the exact location where you have to stand on the stairs if you want to be able to take cover and also keep shooting at someone below you.

"I've been on the fourth floor for most of my life now," Petya says. "My grandfather encouraged me to mark my own space and claim my own territory by pointing out the benefits, trying to sell me on independence and privacy. I'd thought for a time that the third floor might be an appropriate place, but reality failed to conform to those expectations. I was, oh, eight? It was after they all came back from the mutiny, so I guess I was eight. I moved around a few times, and finally ended up in the blue suite in the North Wing of the fourth floor, and if that sounds even slightly familiar, it's because those were Emperor Dorca's rooms when he would stay here, and it was where Pierre le Sanguinaire and Count Selig the Second first made oath to him, back when Dorca was a junior prince jostling for position and the inheritance."

Guy makes a noise of interest, wondering if Petya would let him pass that along to Duv. That story had been absent earlier, how Dorca had escaped from some dusty suite in Vorkosigan House on the heels of another Vorbarra prince and his assembled cavalry, and then the Vorkosigans had pulled out their legal arguments and then their swords to stall long enough for Dorca to flee the city.

"The secret staircase behind the wall is still there and structurally sound," Petya continues, leading Guy through the third floor. "I used to use it constantly, but not in years. On my first home leave, I decided to take it down to the cellar for a late night foraging and nearly got shot by a terrified ImpSec corporal who thought we'd been invaded. Their patrols hadn't taken into consideration that anyone actually still used them as back stairs and not an escape route. Since then, I've refrained from giving ImpSec more heart attacks and false invasion alarms."
Nearly every room that Petya has pointed out to him overlooks the back garden, until Petya ducks them into a small room on the third floor that overlooks the street. He places his hand deliberately on the wall above an old wooden table and Guy hears the beep of a very modern scanner that must have replaced some old lock. "I love technology," Petya explains. "It's so helpful in aiding our paranoia."

The wall slides aside and then Petya nudges away a small box on the floor that's just large enough to hold a nerve disruptor. Petya leads Guy through a small windowless room and then pulls down on a rope hanging from the ceiling. A staircase slides down.

"If you ever need to get out of here in a hurry, this will get you to the roof. The trap door over here," Petya taps his foot against a plank of wood identical to the rest of them, "will get you to the sub-basement, right next to the armory, where you can use a door or one of the tunnels. You're already keyed into the lock."

"Who else is?" Guy asks.

"My family and armsmen. Alys and Ivan. Illyan, and my father will speak with him and decide if Illyan still needs access to this in his retirement. Gregor isn't," Petya adds. "He has his own way out of here."

Because they wouldn't be Vorkosigans without having a royals only escape route, Guy supposes. One they could block as desired. Guy wonders if that's how they managed to conveniently accidentally imprison Prince Fedor long enough that he missed Yuri's birth in one of the stories that Petya and Vorinnis had told earlier.

"Only one?" Guy asks skeptically, and if there really is only one escape route out of here that the Emperor can access, that has to be rectified immediately. Not that Guy thinks Illyan would ever allow that or that the Vorkosigans would ever do that, but... he's ImpSec and he's professionally paranoid. If Petya can't handle that, then that's necessary information and a problem they would have to resolve before this relationship can go any further.

Petya grins. "No, of course not. But he's not keyed into this one, because after-- we decided that useful paranoia meant that someone who could not, by law, be given a fast-penta allergy did not need to have access to every way you can get out of this building."

That makes absolutely no sense, because Gregor could still be keyed into a route he didn't know about in case there was a sudden emergency that blocked off every other escape route, but Guy lets it go. Petya would pretend to be offended if Guy suggested that they not tell Gregor about an exit route that he can use, and, anyway, it's clear that the Vorkosigans here aren't worried about subversion; they're worried about getting out of the building if the Emperor ordered them killed again. And Guy can't argue with that security need. If the Vorkosigans learned certain security lessons from Yuri, well... it's not for an Allegre to tell them they're wrong. Guy is going to assume, for now, that Illyan accepted them as harmless to Gregor's safety. He can investigate further later.

"Roof and sub-basement access," Guy repeats dutifully.

Petya nods. "I'll show you the entrances on the other floors and the secondary route mirroring this in the morning. That route's a little hazardous; we try not to use it if we don't have to. That one used to get out through a tunnel directly to the Residence, but it, uh, collapsed during the Pretendership. On the Residence side. And its alternate escape was through the stables, which Yuri burnt down to spite my grandfather. These days, its use begins and ends with getting out of the building; you're on your own after that. So we discourage using it; it's not good security. I'll show you all the tunnels and routes out from the ground floor and the basements in the morning. It's better to get acquainted with them in daylight."
Petya has Guy open and close the trap doors to prove he can do it, and then leads him out again through an opposite hidden door, with an identical palm reader above an identical wooden table.

Petya smooths his uniform down and then looks around, taking a deep breath to continue the tour.

"You don't need to be this nervous," Guy informs him, cutting through whatever Petya was going to say about the historical importance of the third floor of Vorkosigan House that he hadn't already said. "Why are you this nervous?"

Petya looks uncertain. "I've only done this a couple times?" He looks down the long hallway. "Usually, for the most part, everyone's known me since we were at school together. I couldn't exactly impress someone who knew me when I was a kid. Familiarity breeds, well, I don't know, but I couldn't show them the House at its best when they'd already been introduced to it from playing here when we were kids or coming to parties and going exploring and needing to be saved by the armsmen, which happened more often than you'd-- no, about as often as you'd think."

Petya rubs his fingers around his wrist. "You're right, though," he says. "I'm-- I'm being terrible at this. If we were at your childhood home, what stories would you be telling me?"

Guy looks at him, smiling slightly. "Somehow I don't think you're interested in grubbing around in the dirt stories."

"Oh, I have a ton of grubbing around in the dirt stories," Petya says brightly. "Gran'da started taking me on District tours after I figured out walking. It was fun. We rode around on a horse and I was allowed to eat outside. Sometimes I got to pet the goats. Gruff, old, weathered guerillas used to put me on their laps and tell me stories about blowing up Cetagandans. And after I started climbing trees to look around for Cetagandans myself, Gran'da got annoyed with me constantly disappearing on him and just handed me to the perimeter guard and told them that since I was looking for trouble anyway, I could at least be productive."

"Did you see any Cetagandans?" Guy asks, amused.

"No, just a lot of rabbits. Occasionally we'd run into another patrol or a military training group, but those were never surprises; they weren't allowed to be there without Gran'da knowing about it and he wasn't going to pull any surprise drills with me along."

"And to think I thought Laurent was bad," Guy says. "He and Emily used to hide from Cetagandans under the table. They loved to interrupt me when I was studying for the entrance exams and I had to drag them kicking and screaming back to bed. And Laurent, that monster, actually got some good kicks in."

"I was a monster, too," Petya remembers fondly.

"Your grandfather was notorious with recruits," Guy says, surprised. And notorious is putting it diplomatically. Guy remembers some of the stories he'd heard the old men in ImpSec tell about the good old days when Negri would send trouble-makers to General Count Vorkosigan to be straightened out. "I would've thought you to have been a preternaturally well-behaved child."

"Oh, no, I was a terror," Petya says. "Gran'da spoiled me completely. I got away with everything."

Guy looks at him dubiously. "Really."

Petya nods. "I wouldn't say I was completely successful, but I tried. I fought valiantly against the tyranny known as bedtime. I was taking a rather guerilla approach to it by the end. My grandfather's fault entirely; he shouldn't have filled my head with all those war stories if he didn't want me to argue
with the armsman-commander when he informed me that the Vor did not run and hide from the approaching forces demanding total surrender. It was extremely asymmetrical warfare, especially because old Armsman Petrov had no compunctions whatsoever about picking me up, slinging me over his shoulder, and putting me into bed bodily. I had a secret weapon, of course, because I'd discovered all the secret staircases by then, and Armsman Esterhazy later told me that they didn't mind it, because Petrov used to say that if a child could hide there, so could the enemy, so I was actually making positive contributions to my own security by pointing out the flaws. But Gran'da always won in the end; he could outwait me until I fell asleep, and then outwait me until I went off to the preparatory academy, where there were other people around to enforce a curfew."

Petya calls that acting out? Guy's siblings would have scandalized him. "Were you slipping your security?" he asks leadingly. That's usually at the top of Alexei's list of the ways his relatives are trying to bury him in an early grave.

Petya shakes his head. "No, Gran'da was very careful about that. I had some leeway about disappearing inside the House because of the sheer amount of security on the entrances and exits, but if I'd dared to try anything outside the House-- well, I wouldn't have dared. Gran'da was paranoid about my security and he made sure that I understood that I was to never go anywhere without following appropriate security protocol first. I mean, I accidentally slipped security those few times on District tours in the Mountains, but that wasn't intentional, and he solved that by throwing me to his guerillas."

Guy smiles icily, thinking of suggesting that as a solution to Alexei the next time he grumbles about some Vor lordling disappearing to go partying on Komarr. "That would solve the problem," Guy agrees. Now, where could they get suitably terrifying old guerilla soldiers in this day and age? Probably nowhere, but that would be Alexei's problem.

"Fascinating men, all of them," Petya agrees. "They probably didn't appreciate the General ordering them to babysit me when they were supposed to actually be patrolling the perimeter, but it worked. I was too fascinated by them and their stories to wander off. And, hmm," he frowns thoughtfully. "That might explain why there were suddenly always some of his old guerillas around on the days when Gran'da wanted to keep me in one place and occupied and not wandering around the House. Keep me distracted, keep me out of his way when the situation required delicacy and care. Sneaky, Gran'da."

"That sounds somewhat excessive to keep one child in one place," Guy says, "for a man with twenty arsmen and a few dozen ImpSec guards on constant rotation."

"Well, that was just speculation on his motives," Petya says, waving away the objection, "but other than that, no, it was never anything like that at all. Gran'da was always very careful about my relationship with my security. He made it clear that they were not the enemy force. They were there for my protection, not to be my grandfather's spies. My protection, not my prison. Because I might have tried to escape a prison, or not sounded the alarm if someone offered me a chance to escape, and that was a serious concern. Serg had gotten a little too old by then for any kidnappers to try to get him to be complicit in his own abduction, but I was just the right age for it as soon as he wasn't. My grandfather had very well-founded concerns about my safety, and he had reason to be worried about what could happen if I decided that I didn't want to cooperate in my protection. I knew the arsmen reported to him, of course, but it was made exceedingly clear to me that there would be no adverse consequences if they witnessed me doing something I wasn't supposed to do and then told Gran'da about it. Which probably contributed to me getting away with everything. Gran'da was more concerned with making sure I didn't get killed than with disciplining me."

"And you playing hide and seek at bedtime probably didn't help," Guy suggests.
Petya smiles a little sadly, staring into the past. "Well, the way I see it, looking back, he had to let me get away with *something*, and of the things I could get away with, that was reasonably harmless. Let me have my minor victories and then make sure I understood that if the alarm sounded, all games were over and it was time to follow security protocol. It probably seemed like a harmless trade, spending time looking for me when it was safe instead of having to do it when it wasn't, and with the vindication in retrospect that it was perfectly harmless. Huh, I never thought of it like that before," Petya says, sounding pleased. "The great general teaching me strategy games by example and when to deliberately lose so you can have greater victories later, when it matters. Because he couldn't lose, not when it mattered. That wasn't a risk he was willing to take, not with me there. Because security is never a joke and I had to learn that as young as possible. He was too worried -- he would say cautious, but, no, he was worried -- that I might make myself vulnerable in case of attack. If the alarm sounded and the armsmen couldn't find me quickly, too much valuable time could be lost. It could be my death if I'd decided I didn't want to be found in time for someone to get me to safety. The ghosts of my father's siblings were always present. I wonder if every time we had a security drill, my grandfather relived the night of Yuri's attack until the armsman carrying me reported in. That was one of the first signals I learned, *take the baby and run*. It wasn't until I was older that I found out that it was an armsmen signal, not a standard ImpSec one. Still, it was useful."

"And Ezar's reign had its share of dangers and crises and treason," Petya continues. "You remember those days. Mariner's Ridge, Admiral Fecteau firing into the ravine, Prince Xav dying and the Count's treason that followed. Then there were all the political maneuvering and fights in the Counts that never led to open warfare, but made Gran'da plot into the night with his allies or report to the Emperor at all hours about the status of his troops." Petya rubs at his chin and smiles painfully. "Remember the Karian Base mutiny?"

Guy nods. "Vaguely." It hadn't touched him at all, but he remembers his parents worrying about what Count Vorville would do. Eventually he did nothing, but there had been a serious concern that he would side with the Vorpinskis.

"That was a year," Petya says ruefully. "What was I, seven? I got left behind with my great-grandmother; I remember being very excited and not realizing how long it was going to last, how long everyone was going to be gone. Seven when it started, I should say, when General Vorkosigan went to the outpost and took command of the infantry and then marched on Vorpinski's District and took it in the snow, and my father brought his ship's guns to target a ruling Count... seven then, and just turned eight when the conspirators died in the Square. I remember Gran'da was upset about that, he'd asked Ezar for mercy for the junior officers and Ezar said no, not after what happened at that river. The cadets went, too, towards the end. Padma got a medal after he fought his way to the front and pulled my father back bodily from the soltoxin attack at the Lowland Armory. Padma used to get very upset about that and never gave me any details, even when I begged him for them, so I suspect that my father was closer to dying there than anyone had the heart to tell me."

Guy grimaces. No wonder Petya's obsessed with security and making sure that Guy knows how to get out of here before he even knows the way to Petya's bedroom. "How often were the security drills?"

Petya blinks at him. "Weekly, of course. Why?" He frowns deeply. "I've moved them back to monthly now; we're in nowhere near as much danger as we were in ten years ago, let alone twenty, to say nothing of forty. Do you think I should move it back up to weekly? I don't want to strain the guards with unnecessary drills, but if you think it's necessary, sir, I can of course increase--"

Guy kisses him to stop his nervous babble, then says, "stop being so damn nervous."

Petya takes a shuddering breath, then tries to look confident. "Right, of course. Because there's no
reason at all to be nervous."

Guy ignores that. "You said your suite was on the fourth floor? I think I'd like to see that. Your suite," he specifies firmly, "not the floor itself."

That surprises a laugh out of Petya and he looks much less nervous. Good. Petya's been blabbering nervously but it's not, Guy knows, for anything near the same reason everyone else is usually nervous around him. It's not because Guy's an ImpSec General or the man on the other side of the table. It's because this is new and this is real, and this is the human reaction to something new and uncertain.

They're both human, they're both nervous. There's no guarantee that this will work, that they are even compatible in the long term and not just falling into bed together whenever they're on the same planet. That they both want it doesn't mean they can wish themselves happy together. This is something new, this is something nerve-wracking, and it's okay that Petya's nervous. Guy's nervous, too. But that doesn't mean that Guy's going to waste time on it when they only have a short amount of time together to begin with.

"And then I am going to get you out of these clothes," Guy continues, "and I am going to take a tour of your bed. I expect you to be in it at the time. You may contribute running commentary and opinions of this venture, and I will expect some discussion afterwards about how well the explorations went and where we should proceed from there. But we are going to do that tomorrow morning, my lord." And one day, Guy trusts, they will progress to a point where Petya doesn't feel the need to give Guy a security briefing before taking him to bed. One day.

"I--," Petya stops. Then he reaches into his sleeve and flips something down with an ominous code lock. "I am not going to do this when I'm on normal comms," he says, and beeps another code lock. "If my Ministry needs me and the Cetagandans aren't invading, they can call the House," he decides firmly. "Now you."

"I'm not allowed to be unreachable," Guy warns him, but locks his comm to emergency only, too, although not only to emergencies of the planetary invasion scale.

"Gregor knows where to find you," Petya dismisses. "Whoever's running ImpSec night alarm -- no, I'm not asking who it is, don't give me that -- can call your security, too. And you know how to get out of here now. I'm happy, you're happy, let's go to bed."

"Direct and to the point," Guy says, "I approve," and then starts laughing as Petya growls at him and grabs him by the arm and drags him to the main staircase and up to his suite.

Yes, Guy thinks ten minutes later as he watches Petya take off his clothes, this is a much better use of the time.

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