Forward Momentum
by Bracketyjack

Summary

LMB famously has a rule-of-thumb in writing, especially where poor old Miles is concerned -- when in doubt, have the worst possible thing happen. But suppose that were turned around, and instead the best thing happened? or best things, unstoppably, in Milesian droves, and for pretty much everyone?

"Let's see what happens."

Notes

Most characters and settings belong to Lois McMaster Bujold, and are borrowed for fun, not for profit.

The story is set after ‘Winterfair Gifts’, beginning in the weeks before Midsummer 2804.
“Who did you say you’d invited?”

Miles was less able these married days to surprise Ekaterin, usually a source of pleasure at her increasing ease with high Vor society and the politics over which their lives in Vorbarr Sultana constantly tripped. Looking now at her slightly frozen face he found himself remembering why it had never been a good idea to try.

“Um … several people, actually.”

Ekaterin’s eyebrows rose. “Including ‘Gregor and Laisa’.” Her voice put the inverted commas neatly in position. “Who are as it happens our reigning Emperor and Empress.”

“Yes. That’s rather the point.” Ekaterin’s eyebrows stayed up. “It will all be very unofficial. I need Gregor to meet someone. And someone needs to meet him. It should all be … interesting. I hope.” What, Miles wondered, was spooking her so soon? Despite his excitement, he’d been careful working around to this. “Um … you know Gregor and Laisa pretty well now, love.”

Ekaterin contemplated her husband of five months with bemusement. “Know them? Yes, I suppose that’s true, but I don’t recall having the Emperor over for dinner before. Nor down for the weekend. With the Empress. And who did you say?”

“Guy Allegre and Yuri Vorlynkin.”

“The chiefs of ImpSec and the Imperial General Staff. Wonderful. And presumably your mysterious, needful someone as well. Keeping that company, whom should I expect?”

Miles grinned at her. “No-one you’ve ever heard of.” Or me, before last week. “A Terran scientist. Or so he says, and we can’t prove otherwise—or anything else. Which is giving Guy conniptions, but it’s the classic can’t trust/got to meet problem writ large, and there’s ways.” And ways. “An ImpSec squad will come in beforehand. The same people who were behind the scenes for Gregor at our wedding, I expect. No-one will be there officially except us Vorkosigans, so security will have to be discreet—and a friendly atmosphere will help everyone, you see.” He looked up at her, smiling ingenuously.

“Help us do what, love?”

Who knows? “Um … digest. Think. Decide, ultimately, if he asks Gregor what I think he will, how to advise our Emperor.”

Ekaterin relaxed a bit. Emperor Gregor Vorbarra was the least stampededable human being she had ever met, which—besides being foster-brothers—was probably how he and Miles survived as friends. The Emperor’s presence could be relied on as a brake if her own novice control of Miles in his more manic moments proved uncertain. Still, he was now using his seizure stimulator regularly without much prompting, and growing (she felt with secret pleasure) less embarrassed that she saw him in that helpless indignity. Keeping the vow he made while he watched Tien die. Memory of her
unlamented first husband no longer troubled Ekaterin much, even in dreams, but her present diminutive husband was another matter. And today there was, beneath the slight mania that was Miles-normal, a clenched place in him she had sensed before and been unable to reach. He was also being annoyingly mysterious.

“If who asks Gregor what, Miles? Your Terran?”

Miles looked at her in mild protest. *His* Terran? Much as his fellow Auditors assumed his personal ownership of ImpSec, no doubt, because he had once worked for that organisation. At least Gregor had lost his inverted commas.

“Yes. My Terran. I want him to talk for himself, to you as much as Gregor, but, briefly, he turned up last Wednesday, down in Hassadar, and asked to see me both as Count’s Voice and as a Lord Auditor. Which if he wasn’t confused was … interesting. Introduced himself as Dr Jack Chandler and showed some very pretty Terran documentation, all with a Barrayaran security seal of a kind that, ah, *had* never been successfully forged. Not least because it’s still on the developing-board in ImpSec’s deepest lab at Cockroach Central. Supposedly. Then he said he was led to believe I might do his credentials justice.”

Ekaterin looked at Miles’s lopsided grin and animated eyes. “So your heart warmed to the man, I suppose. As a worthy conundrum.” His smile blazed at her, making her heart trip. There were moments of inattention in her university classes, or pauses when pleasantly alone weeding in the garden at her Aunt Helen’s house, when she still couldn’t quite believe she had, not just in fact but in high Vor panoply and splendour, married Miles Vorkosigan last Winterfair. Outside in the snow. And with Gregor and Laisa as witnesses, come to think of it, so it wasn’t actually that unreasonable of Miles to expect her to have them as guests for a Vor country weekend. *Yes it was.*

“Oh, heart’s lady, it did. Troublesome thing that it is.” At the same time as it sank through my boots. “I confess I liked Dr Chandler and he made his impossible forgery into an excellent opening pitch, the better for proving relevant to his problem. Now our problem. Barrayar’s.” Miles gestured expansively. “The good doctor has a hypothesis, you see, of compelling interest, and would like our views on its, ah, implications. Not least, I begin to realise, for us and Cetaganda.”

For a moment Ekaterin’s mind chased in all directions. How was the immense enemy empire with which Barrayar had struggled all her life involved? Miles, she knew, had actually been to its central planet of Eta Ceta on one of his odder covert ops missions a decade ago. Now for all his intensity he seemed distant.

“I want you there because we will need all our truth, and all our beauty. And our courage.”

This time Ekaterin’s heart felt as if it had stopped, not stumbled. It was Gregor more than anyone who had made her aware of how those few men who knew about them admired her desperate actions the previous year on the Komarran jump-station, apologising at their first meeting for the need to defer public recognition. Thinking about the Emperor’s words crediting her with *a personal account of honour with the Imperium of great depth* could still make her head spin—but it was Miles’s humiliation, matter-of-fact admiration that still flummoxed her insides. Usually he seemed to know exactly what such words could do to her and looked thoroughly smug about it; today he didn’t notice his own effect at all. Suggesting … *Ulp.*

“And the minds of women as well as men.” Miles was still babbling away. “I’d really like to get my parents here from Sergyar, but I can’t see how. Unless … hmm, anyway, we *will* be Vorkosigans, all on our summer holidays in Vorkosigan Surleau, just as we ought. Think of it as a family weekend. A sort of … retreat. Or seminar. I’ll have to ask Gregor, but I want to invite your aunt and uncle.” A second Lord Auditor would be useful; even necessary, maybe. And Vorthys was an engineer, which
is what half of it would come down to, Miles bet. *If it comes to anything.*

“Oh good. I know it’s silly of me but I do find Gregor makes me less breathless when Uncle Georg is there too.” *Or Nikki. How odd.* Ekaterin’s ten-year-old Nikolai had developed a special if inevitably intermittent relationship with the Emperor after Miles short-circuited the horrible problem of what she couldn’t tell Nikki about his father’s death by taking the boy directly to Gregor. But she hadn’t realised explicitly until that moment that Gregor was, to her at least, subtly different in Nikki’s company; or was it that she was different herself with her son in sight? Miles had loving laughter in his eyes.

“Not silly at all. I believe your uncle considers Gregor a bioelectrical field phenomenon.” He gave her a slow grin. “You should tell Georg he damps Gregor down for you.” That earned a soft snort, and Ekaterin’s face relaxed a little more, he thought, not that most people would see any difference. But she wasn’t smiling back at him yet.

“Um … have you thought about Nikki in all this, Miles? School ends next week, so after his medical he’ll be free for the summer—but should I have him stay here? I could ask the Pyms to take him.”

“Actually I think Ma Pym and Arthur will be in Vorkosigan Surleau themselves. They usually come down for the summer. Denis and Ma Jankowski, too, and some of the others.”

Of course, Ekaterin realised, being District-born the Vorkosigan armsmen probably had relatives in half the villages and hills round the long lake. Summer pastoral for everyone, it seemed; Miles, at any rate, was trying to combine airs of faint accusation and injured innocence at the notion he might not have considered his stepson in his plans. *Hmmm.*

“Nikki can come with us for all of me, unless … you want to spare him more secrets? I did wonder about that, but there will always now be some hidden things he will know as a member of our household. Confidential District business, for example, and the edges of Auditorial matters. This weekend is no different, and I respect his integrity.”

Yes, Miles did that, Ekaterin thought, beginning with models of jump-ships emptied from an old box to array on a study floor, and a surprise morning conversation in a locked bathroom.

“The medical is just a formality, isn’t it, love? The retrogenes all took properly?”

“Yes, entirely.” She hadn’t meant to worry him about that. “They said last year it was all fine, but he should have annual checks just to be on the safe side.” The days were blessedly gone when Ekaterin had watched Nikki every fresh and poisoned morning in secret terror that today might be when the first effects of his Vorzohn’s Dystrophy became visible. The mutation inherited from his father caused a tiny, simple failure in a protein whose lack led to progressive self-destruction of neural tissue, loss of motor control, and early, senile death. And not only inherited but left untreated, year after year, because of Tien’s own crippling Barrayaran fear of being known as a mutant in a culture that until recently had on principle routinely cut the throats of misshapen infants. If there was one thing for which Ekaterin did blame Tien, fiercely, in the cold places of heart and mind, it was for forcing on Nikki the secrecy of his own cowardice, making something that was with galactic medicine wholly treatable an enduring occasion of personal shame. Miles had said nothing but she knew he shared her contempt. Now fully in possession of the facts, including his retrogenetic cure and disqualification despite it from military jump-pilot training, Nikki silently accepted her reassurances of health and love but never talked of his condition or the heartbreak Tien’s concealment of it had brought him. Nor had he so much as mentioned his Da when telling her and Miles he had decided he too would take his stepfather’s name, and become Master Vorkosigan. Ekaterin had to admit to herself, though, as Miles was inadvertently pointing out, that Nikki’s harshly taught guard of his tongue was an important maturity.
“He’s kept his word to Gregor impeccably, you know—never a hint to anyone about Komarran events. So what’s not to trust? Besides, children see things clearly, sometimes.”

“So do you, love.” And at the same level. “So when exactly am I to host my Emperor with his Empress and an ad hoc secret cabinet for a friendly weekend retreat? Or seminar. As it may prove.” Ekaterin’s eyebrows crinkled. Had she really just said yes to this absurdity, as if it were perfectly normal? Miles looked more pleased than chastened.

“The weekend after next, when we would have been down at Vorkosigan Surleau anyway. Your classes have finished, haven’t they? You said you’d be happy to go down to the District then.” Hastily he searched his conscience. Certainly her distraction by botany and biochemistry finals had been useful in the last week, but that was none of his planning. And she had said. “I’m sorry to invade our first weekend there with this business, love, but using Vorkosigan Surleau solves the security problem.” Not that Allegre or Vorlynkin thought solves was quite the word. “We’ll still be doing all we’d planned down there. Just not that weekend. Whatever the outcome there’ll have to be some quiet time afterwards. We can go riding. Swimming. Fishing, if you like.” Or thinking of his own last fishing expedition with Simon Illyan perhaps not, if he didn’t want Nikki trying to bomb fish with buggered stunner power-packs for himself. “I know some good camping places in the mountains I’d like to show you.” Miles paused, looking carefully at her, suspecting what one part of her fear might be. “You will be very much liked as well as respected in the village, you know. You need only ever be yourself and you will make your own name for them.”

Now her smile came and twisted, though her warm alto stayed level and serious. “Yes. My new name, and its effects on people. I have noticed the quality of Vorkosigan liege-families. So have others. Do you remember what Guy Allegre said that morning, about Roic and Taura? That half the secret of the Vorkosigans’ political pre-eminence since the Time of Isolation was the quality of the people they attracted to their service.” Does that include me, now? “What’s the other half, do you suppose? I’ve never heard you say.”

Miles blinked. Where was Ekaterin going with this? Her oblique reference to their wedding-morning, after Roic’s and Taura’s discovery of the gift intended to kill her even as she spoke her vows, was uncomfortably pertinent. Still, Miles didn’t have to think about his answer. “Inbred persistence. Dumb hill-man stubbornness. Vorkosigans just don’t stop. It’s well known. I even learned it myself.”

“And great loyalty runs both ways. Yes. I don’t doubt it, Miles, and I know it’s Vor, but I had no real experience of it at all before I met you. You and the worlds you bring.” Ekaterin looked away for a minute from his puzzled, patient face, still sensing that knot of tension in him under the animated intensity. Whatever it was didn’t arise between them, she thought, but from outside the partnership they had begun to forge. From his father. She compressed her lips, gathered herself, and looked back at him. “But Vor doesn’t need understanding. And while I don’t know about making a name, I agree it will grow about me anyway.” Like gripweed, probably. “Imperial visits, however, are less … certain. So may I request an addition to your, um, guest-list. Lady Alys.”

“Oh. Yes.” Miles digested this. “And Simon?”

Ekaterin moved her hand slightly. “As you wish. I’ve come to like him, very much. But … if I am to grow to be this person I appear to have become with our marriage I need some proper help, and for this that means your aunt.” She considered her wardrobe, vastly expanded since her wedding from that reliable all-purpose half-mourning dress and black bolero, but still, she knew, of nothing like the scale and range that would be demanded once she graduated from the university at the end of the year. Then as Lady Vorkosigan she would become ever-open game for the reporters and tourists, now present in alarming numbers in the Barrayaran capital. “And her modiste, sooner rather than later, please.” She gave Miles a wry smile. “After Taura I shall barely qualify as a challenge.” She
hesitated. “Perhaps you could tell General Allegre that while the outside cover is that nothing at all is happening, the inside cover is that there’s a, um, friendly family retreat. For … Count and Countess Vorbarra? And so naturally Alys would be there, as family.”

Miles thought about it. “Well, we’ll all be there, ultimately, for Gregor, and it can’t not be for the Emperor. He’ll need to be that before we’re done, I hope.”

*Need* to be Emperor? That did not sound reassuring, though Miles seemed blithely unaware of the alarm he generated.

“But you’re right that Count Vorbarra will be there too. And Count Vorkosigan, by proxy if nothing else.” So an extra security layer, Miles thought, could be that what was really going on was, yes, a very secret meeting, under government and ImpSec aegis, of certain high Vor and imperial officials; purpose—wait and see. Politics not science. *Besides, it’ll be true.* Which was always the best cover, and in any case—

With a scrabbling noise and the sound of expensive fabric suffering a small grey-and-tabby head thrust itself over the arm of his chair. He sighed as Ekaterin grinned. Zap the Cat had numerous, invariably bold kittens, and this recent addition to his menagerie had taken to following him about whenever and wherever it could. The back of his brain wondered what a suitable name for such a misguided beast might be as his hand reached out to rub a determined, bony cheek. A rough tongue began to wash his fingertips.

“I’ll add Aunt Alys and Simon, and your aunt and uncle. They all have the highest clearances, anyway. But that must be it. Too many voices would be as bad as too few. Heh. Actually, I think Gregor will be relieved. Keep to normal, and let’s see what happens.”

That useful phrase always worked for Gregor, as Miles had often seen and admired, and the oddly marked kitten was purring like an engine on his lap, pushing its head imperiously against his hand and writhing in ecstasy. So why was Ekaterin looking at him with such resigned alarm?

* * * * *

Emperor Gregor Vorbarra, left the day before looking quietly askance at his most senior military men as Miles departed, cheerfully assuring all that everything would be fine, had even then had the wit to be grateful Miles had insisted on Laisa’s inclusion in the meeting, and spared him having to spring news of this strange weekend on his wife. Understanding at once when Miles called to relay Ekaterin’s request for Lady Alys and his own for the Vorthyses, he had immediately agreed to the expanded guest-list and now faced Guy Allegre feeling slightly guilty.

“Of course, it’s not Lady Alys, Sire. Or Chief Illyan, God knows. Or Lord Auditor Vorthys and his wife. But … Sire, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan has just highjacked the Imperium for a mystery weekend.” Allegre rubbed his forehead. “I can’t honestly say I’m surprised, given his track record. But I am thoroughly alarmed. If there is any substance at all in this Dr Chandler’s, ah, hypothesis, it may be ImpSec cannot guarantee your safety.” Silence stretched. “I cannot approve your meeting him.”

“No, Guy. But while I never ignore you, sometimes I must overrule you. Please.” Gregor gestured, gently, smiling. “Relax.” Startled, Allegre did anything but. Gregor sighed. “You are perfectly right, General, there are no guarantees. There is a finite chance Miles has been horribly fooled, and that during the weekend something hostile will happen. All usual and some unusual measures will be in place. You can do no more. And the chance is small. The greater probability by far is that Dr
Chandler does indeed have something new, that he is by careful choice offering to us. To Barrayar. So Miles is also right. Yes, Dr Chandler requires us to trust him. But he is and will be on our ground, under whatever security we care to put in place. You cannot suppose him invulnerable to us. He offers the trust he craves.” In the summer light Gregor’s narrow face was lit in equal detail of etched light and soft shadow. He paused a moment, looking out on the gardens Ezar had designed. “And as you say, if he is telling the truth, or an earnest of it, everything will change, and we must know.”

Gregor looked at Allegre consideringly.

“You said Lord Auditor Vorkosigan had highjacked the Imperium. Not that Miles had.” He gave Allegre a sudden imperial grin. “Now that would worry me. Cordelia always said a sensible government wouldn’t trust Miles with a screwdriver, never mind a battle-fleet. But Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, now … after Komarr and the Vorbataille case, if he were, ah, temporarily to highjack the Imperium for a particular … purpose, that he had explained, I should not be unduly concerned for its safety. Or mine. But I think we will face a dangerous decision at this mystery weekend.”

The observation that Miles was after all, as Allegre knew perfectly well from his ImpSec files, an unusually experienced highjacker of many things hung unspoken. Then Gregor smiled again, taking Allegre even more by surprise as it was edged with … a quiet glee?

“I wonder if you are forgetting that you are also invited to this … weekend party, Guy. And Yuri Vorlynkin. Hmm. Perhaps I’d better request and require that you delegate command of the security squads. Free yourself of any immediate duties for that Saturday and Sunday, please. This is strategy time, not yet action time. Miles is right that data makes far more sense than threat at this stage.” Gregor’s hands were clasped. “One of the things you and Yuri must start thinking about, Guy, is what effect Dr Chandler’s hypothesis, if true, has on our relations with Cetaganda. Just now they’re as good as they’ve ever been, not that that’s saying much. But the hypothesis is potentially a very serious problem, and that may be our main business when it comes to it.”

“I have been thinking about it, Sire.” Allegre’s face was tense.

“Good. And consider this also, Guy. I think there’s something Miles didn’t say” There’s volumes. “About Dr Chandler.” Allegre frowned. “I’ve known Miles a long time, Guy, and while he can never be entirely predicted I know this look. Lord Vorkosigan is intent upon serving someone—probably his father or me, though no doubt with a side-agenda of his own. And you’ve said yourself Miles has an amazing eye for personnel, the Vorkosigan talent at a very high pitch. So perhaps he’s done it again. But in any case what he’s seen in the good doctor, I strongly suspect, is a man who is looking to give unusual service. And Miles thinks that service is genuine, so he is turning it to what he thinks Barrayar’s maximal advantage. He is Vor, Guy, and utterly loyal.” He shrugged slightly. “Bad reason says we have to do this anyway, just to find out, but good reason says the same.”

Gregor came upright in his chair, and Allegre automatically braced even though he was sitting down.

“In any case, Guy, it’s just a weekend with guests. As when I went to Miles’s wedding as Count Vorbarra, if you like. I shall certainly be waiving imperial protocol. Khourakis or whatever squad-commander you choose can wrap Vorkosigan Surleau up inside as many security shells as he likes, and go on searching for anything you can get on Dr Chandler. Who may also be searched in person, very thoroughly, once. I’ll have my usual Armsmen, of course. But the ImpSec perimeter stays outside the house, Guy. And unless your search finds something serious, Dr Chandler comes in.”

“Yes Sire.” Allegre could say nothing else in direct response. “I still strongly advise against it.”

“You’re still overruled. Drop it, please, General.” Gregor gave his ImpSec chief another, very neutral smile. “We’re going to see what happens. And you will be there, Guy—as a guest.”
What was going to happen would be spectacular, if Miles had anything to do with it. Once Ekaterin left for a hastily arranged meeting with Lady Alys, he sequestered himself in his study and prepared to try the supposedly comconsole-like device the Terran physicist had left as the best means of contacting him. It had been described simply as a dedicated unit and Pym said while security screening showed nothing to cause concern, neither did it give a single clue as to how the unit worked as it contained no detectable components save the one visible button. There was a slight anomaly in the base, suggesting a hollow, but nothing Pym could make open.

Frowning, Miles took the metal frame, a dull iron-grey rectangle a foot or so square on a base, and set it on the desk before him. The base was plain, but one recessed red button sat invitingly on the upper bar, so with only slight hesitation he pushed it firmly. When nothing happened he cursed and mentally gave it five minutes. Who knew what sleep schedule the Terran kept? But while it seemed longer it was actually only two minutes or so before the frame abruptly filled with the vivid image of Dr Chandler, more as if Miles looked at him a few feet away through a window than through any kind of lens and projecting-device.

“Lord Vorkosigan. Good evening.”

As the Terran spoke Miles’s eyes automatically scanned all he could see of the closed space. Chandler was in what looked a general workroom with tables covered in piled books and arrays of electronic instruments, including several with uncommonly large circular green oscilloscope screens and one with a protruding needle-toothed clamp that had a distinctly threatening air. The scientist had a deep bass voice, gruff but full of warmth. Miles liked it, as he was coming to like the man.

“Dr Chandler. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I had a question. By way of singing for my supper first I can report you are invited to Vorkosigan Surleau the weekend after next, with other guests we mentioned. There will probably be some, ah, intensive army and ImpSec exercises going on just then in the District, but we shan’t be disturbed in the house.”

Chandler looked pleased. “Quick. And efficient. Good.” The scientist also looked momently nervous. As he should be. “Thank you, Lord Vorkosigan. What was your question?”

“Oh …” Just how quick is that brain in your head, Doctor, and what gets you off-balance? “In sketching your hypothesis the other day, Doctor, you implied that one, ah, possible implication was very rapid communication. Would this”—Miles gestured at the iron frame and Chandler’s image —“be an example of it? Where do I find you just now?”

Chandler was still. “On Barrayar, not far from you. But yes, the device we are using is, um, an implication of the hypothesis. At this small distance, however, there is very little distinction in speed from standard comconsole technology.”

“But there could be?”

“Yes.”

“Over what distance?”

“Any.”
Miles looked at the man, almost shocked. “Any?”

“Yes.”

“What would be the effective time-lag at interplanetary distance?”

“Effectively? None.”

“Realtime galaxy-wide communication?”

“Yes. But communication only. That can be done with purely waveform energy. Matter cannot pass through this device, nor any other I can, ah, hypothesise.”

“Plainly you can hear me. Can you see me as clearly as I see you?”

“Certainly.”

“Where is the ‘vid-pickup?”

“Its equivalent has been made a function of certain atoms in the frame. Anything detectable on any scale above subatomic is relayed to the matching frame I have. The display is actually a new optical phenomenon, but practically it’s just a better sort of holographic projector.” A pause. “The frame is over-simple to look at just now for a reason.”

“I bet it is, Doctor.”

“Terrans have good reason to fear new technologies.”

“As do Barrayarans.”

“Yes. Did I answer your question?”

“Half of it. If I am right that you could not, before next weekend, transport two people from Sergyar to here; but you could get to Sergyar a frame such as this one, or larger, with a, a twin that might be installed at Vorkosigan Surleau?”

Chandler looked away for a moment thinking. “Yes. That could be done.” He hesitated. “You are referring to your parents, yes? If you can tell me what you wish, I can think what can be done.”

Uncharacteristically, Miles felt himself unsure. Wasn’t it slightly absurd as an adult to seem to run to your parents?

No more than to your emperor. Whom this man wants to serve.

“I do not speak only as their child when I say the Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar are wise. They are de facto Gregor’s parents, too. Their voices will be … needed. And they are, in duty, far away. So if there is some way of getting their voices at least to Vorkosigan Surleau next weekend, please tell me now.”

“Of course. And yes, there is.” Chandler touched something out of sight and swivelled to look at a display apparently conjured out of thin air. Peering through his own screen Miles could see an excellent tactical map of the nexus, with wormhole routes between Barryar and Sergyar highlighted. “I could send a frame there and link to it as you suggest. But as it happens I already have a link to Sergyar, so if there is someone there who can contact your parents, who will know you by sight, and whom you and they can trust in this, it should be possible to get them to leave for Barrayar in time to arrive by”—his face wrinkled concentration—“sometime next weekend, maybe. And they could carry the existing Sergyaran frame with them, making them available at any time.”

It was much more than Miles had hoped for, though he had done a lot of wondering about what
exactly Chandler might have up his capacious Terran sleeves. And confirmation of an existing interplanetary link to Sergyar required some urgent follow-up. But his attention was riveted by the glowing model of the nexus.

“I don’t suppose, Doctor, you could make my, um, frame generate that sort of nexus map, could you?”

“Easily, as it happens.” Chandler’s hand moved again on unseen controls. “If you press the base of your frame to its extreme right you should see … Ah, you have.”

Dimly Miles realised his face must have betrayed him instantaneously as his searching fingers pressed what had seemed solid metal but now moved under his touch as a small panel slid aside. Or perhaps Chandler had another way of telling what happened with any frame; he’d certainly released a lock of some kind.

“First button to the right turns the map-projector on. The others control magnification and rotation. Last one to the left brings up a small menu of graphic options on the left side-bar of the frame. Enjoy.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s why I came to you, Lord Vorkosigan. Political consultancy, on the grand scale.” Chandler’s smile widened. “Daring rescues your speciality too, just as I need, if I read those particular runes aright. ImpSec does not leave much evidence to be found, you know.” His smile faded. “I’m sorry. But I’m right, aren’t I? You’re thinking about what my presence here rather than, oh, somewhere on Eta Ceta, say, means for the balance of power across this whole side of the Nexus?”

Miles smiled thinly. “That would be one way of putting it, certainly, Doctor.”

Chandler grimaced. “Put it how you will, Barrayarans are very unusual people—the biggest galactic surprise of the last long while. And you’re a very unusual Barrayaran, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. You have not only, uniquely among senior Barrayarans, actually met both the haut Fletchir Giaja and the haut Rian Degtiar but are in some sense their … friend. As well as a childhood intimate of an Emperor closer to hand.”

Miles was bolt upright by then. Faint praise of ImpSec’s leavings and sly Dendarii allusions be damned, that was guessing way close to the bone. “Dr Chandler, I have to know how you know that. And exactly what you understand about the Star Crèche.”

“Oh, I looked long and hard at His Celestial Majesty the haut Fletchir Giaja, and those strange haut women who made him, before I came to look at your Emperor Gregor. Nothing less would be conscionable. And my hypothesis allowed me to sidestep their security a little, as it does yours. Besides, the announcement of your Cetagandan Order of Merit was on record in the Ghem Imperial Information Bureau—made by General Benin himself, no less, if in a rather strangled voice. They also had ’vidshots of a state funeral with you and the haut Fletchir Giaja side by side as he reconfirmed the haut Rian Degtiar as his number one empress, along with a lot of watching Cetagandans, haut and ghem alike, looking almost as poleaxed as your ambassador.”

Even at a decade’s insulating distance Miles winced a little. Chandler’s information was much too good all round. He certainly understood something rarely even known about the workings of gender in the Cetagandan Imperium, and considerably sooner than later Miles was going to have to find out exactly how sidestepping Cetagandan Imperial Security worked. Not to mention sidestepping ImpSec. Chandler was looking carefully at his face, which had perhaps betrayed more than it ought. Again.
“The Ghem IIB didn’t—and don’t—know I looked at those vidshots, mind you. Nor do the haut know anything.”

“Ah.” Chandler’s answer was all and nothing. “So all Cetagandans know nothing. But …” Miles let his voice trail away, invitingly. Chandler listened ironically to the silence for a moment and smiled appreciatively.

“But … I find, Lord Vorkosigan, that Barrayar makes … a better beast of burden. For everyone’s sake, I fervently hope. And perhaps I should add I find I greatly prefer the view from Vorbarr Sultana. But I also very much want to know how exactly you, Lord Vorkosigan, would best interpret this damned hypothesis of mine to … rechannel Barrayaran–Cetagandan relations. I believe you follow me.”

_Oh yes, I follow you, Doctor. Like a shadow._ There was a pause in which both men could hear the other’s breathing.

“The frame I mentioned on Sergyar is there because I considered first approaching your father. But to realise the hypothesis, or suppress it, must be your Emperor’s decision, and he is here. As are you.” There was another pause. “The man with the Sergyaran frame is an academic friend, visiting the medical facility where they did the work on the worm vaccine. He’s perfectly respectable, though as a Terran doubtless watched by your ImpSec people on principle.”

Miles certainly hoped so. Even on Chaos Colony galactic specialists warranted a security file. Chandler glanced at a display unit, presumably showing real-time chrono-comparisons.

“You could speak to him in a few hours, early morning there. He could then fetch whomever you ask for, or deliver the frame to Sergyar House. Then you could talk to them directly yourself.”

“That will do nicely.” _And so will this star toy._ “Thank you, Dr Chandler.” The man unnerved Miles, but not with doubts; it was the extent to which Chandler already lived with the possible realities of his hypothesis. “Tell me, Doctor, how old are you?”

Chandler stared at him briefly. “Younger than I seem. Not so much older than you, really.” He blinked several times, looking tired beneath his surface vitality. “Having a genuinely different view of what reality might be is … educational. Will you excuse me now? I’ll call back with the Sergyar link at … 23:00, if that will suit? Yes?”

Miles nodded and the display blinked out. There was much to ponder about Chandler’s admissions of a frame already on Sergyar and that he had looked at the Cetagandans before he came to Barrayar, and Miles. But meantime the new buttons on his frame beckoned his fingers, and a quick prod had the same wide view of the nexus he’d seen on Chandler’s machine floating _outside_ the frame. In fact his own disproportionate head was in the way of Barrayar. _Chance, surely._ Rising and retreating a few feet the sweep of the nexus seen from Barrayar came into easy view; other buttons brought up controls as promised, and before long he could lean against the wall and consider a politically shaded map of this side of the nexus as a whole.

For his grandfather’s and father’s generations the great problem had been the long, crooked tube of connected wormholes budding outwards at Komarr that was Barrayar’s only connection with the Nexus proper. Beyond Komarr lay Pol and, passing the Hegen Hub, Vervain and Aslund, forming with Barrayar the systems of the Hegen Hub Alliance. In the other direction lay Sergyar, then Escobar, with its wormholes to Beta Colony and Kline Station. Pressing against and twining around the Barrayaran–Vervani end of the Alliance were the eight Cetagandan planets with their associated wormholes and local space. Behind the largest Cetagandan cluster was isolated, independent Marilac, whose only connection to Barrayar avoiding Cetagandan space was from another direction
entirely, a sweep of light-centuries through Sergyar, Escobar, Tau Ceti in the Western Orion Arm, and finally the Zoave Twilight.

The long—or wide?—frontier between Barrayaran and Cetagandan imperia blazed across three sectors, tinted in the most lurid clash of imperial purples Miles could conjure from the controls. Away beyond Beta towards the study door was the blue dot of Terra. Much closer, just outside the region of inter-empire boundary, was the small, multi-wormhole system of Jackson’s Whole, reached through Escobar; it pulsed in a malevolent yellow, expressing Miles’s opinion of the hideous trades whereby its hackwork gene-crackers and robber-barons grew obese on the vilest solutions to age and boredom technology and amoral license could conjure. Not to mention genetically customised bioweapons for contract assassinations. They will pay, for Ekaterin, and Mark, and Taura. And for Da.

Rotating the display, at first for the thrill of the graphics (and however Chandler was doing them, Miles had to admit they were a serious upgrade), he saw it wasn’t just of the Nexus but the Nexus picked out from fuller astrocartographic display. In anything other than spaceship command functions, space not of interest wasn’t usually shown; there was too much of it. Absent-mindedly he scooped from his feet an inquisitive grey-and-tabby shape that had somehow passed a closed door, and turning Chandler’s model saw a far greater volume of unexplored local space around both empires than he was used to thinking about. All his travels had been inward, always by wormhole, with time lagging even as it stretched. The kitten began to purr in his arms. And wormholes were a military fixation, for good reason. Even realtime galactic-wide communication wouldn’t change that. But it would change a lot. And if it could change Barrayar, could it change Cetaganda?

No, how would it change Cetaganda? When he took Chandler’s call in—he glanced at his chrono—two hours, something new would start. The kitten tried to eat his thumb, and he looked down at it in mild admonition. Chandler’s genie was about to leave its bottle.

[1] A Civil Campaign, Ch. 15.
For all her unfailing kindness to her niece-by-marriage Lady Alys Vorpatril was beyond question the most intimidating Vor woman Ekaterin had ever met, even counting her long-dead Great-Aunt Vorvayne, and when the front door of the apartment in the exclusive building opened Ekaterin found herself full of the most horrible, percolating doubts. What was she doing here? And how to ask what she thought she must?

With barely time to nod as a solicitous Armsman Pym was briskly despatched back to the groundcar parked in the building-forecourt with instructions to move it, she found herself whisked inside, sat down, and issued with tea in a china cup bearing the Vorpatril arms whose worth and age she hardly dared imagine. But the drink was welcome, the ritual soothing while mundane enquiries were made and answered. Eventually Ekaterin took a deep breath and looked straight at Lady Alys. She is my aunt by marriage. You can’t say she doesn’t bite but she won’t bite you.

Noiselessly setting down her own cup in its saucer, Lady Alys gazed back at her unexpected guest with well-concealed curiosity. Even at home her dress was impeccable, but less formidable than in public and at the Imperial Residence—a plain, full-skirted dress that in cut and colour Ekaterin might have worn (if not afforded) herself.

“So, Ekaterin … or perhaps it is Lady Vorkosigan today.” Eek. “What has happened, and how may I help? Gregor said only that he, meaning you, needed Simon and I next weekend at Vorkosigan Surleau. Miles said only that he was very sorry to be mysterious, which seems improbable, trusted I understood the necessity, and suggested you would explain.”

Drat. “Yes, Miles. Well.” Don’t burble. “Lady Alys, I need your advice. And your modiste. Perhaps the easiest thing would be just to tell you the guest-list I am supposed to deal with.”

“Estelle will be delighted. Guests to deal with, ah … at this sudden weekend?”

“Yes. Besides you and Simon, and my Aunt and Uncle Vorthys, I am asked to expect General Allegre, Admiral Vorlynkin, a Terran scientist who is the cause of all the trouble, and, um, Gregor and Laisa. Or rather the Emperor and Empress in some degree of incognito.”

The names of Allegre and Vorlynkin made even Lady Alys’s face go still for a moment. “How unusual.” She gave Ekaterin a slow smile. “But I think I shall look forward to it.” Despite the shambles we both know Miles can make of even a simple dinner-party. “I imagine it is a semi-incognito Gregor that has you wondering.”

“Among other things. How does that work?”

“Well, it’s not incognito, exactly, but Gregor does have degrees of officialness. Here he is plainly waiving normal protocol. Without knowing what will be happening with this scientist my advice would be simply to regard Gregor as … family. Your foster-brother-in-law, in fact.”

Ekaterin nearly gawped. “Is that how he thinks of me?”
“I judge so.” Lady Alys seemed serious, though in another woman Ekaterin might have thought her eyes twinkled. “He was quite exercised last year when ImpSec wouldn’t let him give you a medal because it would have had to be reported.” What? “Not that he or anyone else would say why you deserved it, exactly. And that was before your, ah, spectacular wedding. And truly memorable betrothal.” Now Ekaterin was afraid even to look at Alys, but the woman was smiling. “I never thought I’d regret missing a session of the Council of Counts, but both Gregor’s and Ivan’s accounts made me wish I’d seen that one.”

There was a calm pause while teacups were refilled. Bad sign.

“Now, what is it that really has you spooked, Ekaterin? You know, I think, that Gregor likes you, as Laisa does and we all do, even if you don’t care to admit it to yourself. And you are plainly Vor.” Looking at Ekaterin’s evident confusion Alys hesitated, then spoke decisively. “Forgive me, but despite what I know of your first marriage nor do I think you are still troubled by it in this way. So what is the problem? Do you know?”

In what way? But Lady Alys—Aunt Alys—was right. “Tien I survived. And with Miles I have found a way to remake myself, and my honour. My oath.” Now Alys was intent on her words. She took a deep breath. “And you are quite correct it isn’t really Gregor, though I’m not at all sure why not. It’s … being Vorkosigan.”

“Ah, yes. That can be … strange, I imagine.”

“Miles thought I was worried about the village at Vorkosigan Surleau being full of retired armsmen and other families who have passed generations in service. But I know I can’t appreciate them properly until I’ve lived there a little. That’s alright. It’s … something else I don’t think I understand at all.” She stared at Alys and took a breath. “And you might. Forgive me if this stirs up wrong memories, but one thing I did on the only occasion I’ve been to Vorkosigan Surleau, on our little honeymoon, was look at the graveyard. Elena burned an offering for her father. I was looking at the family graves and trying to take Mad Yuri’s Massacre out of the history books.” Where it belongs. “And looking at the Count-his-Father, looking at those graves. It wouldn’t matter, but Miles was looking too, in the strangest way.” She took another breath, bracing herself. “Last year, during that, that slander mess Richars Vorrutyer stirred up, when Gregor saw Nikki about it all …” Alys nodded. She would have known what Gregor was doing, though not the Komarran details of why Miles had asked him to do it. “Gregor told Miles to ask his Da about reputation and honour. Requested and required it in fact.” Alys smiled. “And it was good advice. Miles told me his Da said honour was what you knew about yourself, reputation what other people knew about you. It … helped Miles a lot, I think. He was very angry for a time.”

Alys offered a careful nod. “Yes. Though he does not really have the Vorkosigan temper, as his father did.”

Ah. “His father?”

“Oh yes, Aral has it, but he subdued it wholly to himself, oh, forty years ago.” There was a pause, during which Lady Alys seemed to look straight through Ekaterin for a minute. “Cordelia may be able to say otherwise but I don’t believe anyone but her has seen Aral truly enraged since the Komarr invasion. Except I imagine Piotr, who wasn’t telling then and certainly isn’t now. You must know about the Solstice Massacre?”

“In outline. On Komarr there are many stories, of course, but not often told to Barrayarans.”

“I imagine not.”
“And Miles told me the truth about the Political Officer who gave the order.”

“Including what happened to that officer?”

“Yes.”

“Strangled in rage until his neck broke, on the bridge. That is—or was—the Vorkosigan temper.”

Ekaterin stared at her … aunt. “You approve?”

“Why not? God knows the idiot man cost Aral and Barrayar dearly. I would certainly have wanted to kill him myself. And eat his heart, though perhaps not in the marketplace.” What? Later. “Besides, I loathed the Political Officers. They had neither style nor honour.” Grimacing was not something Alys did often. “I can’t say ImpSec has any style despite a lot of effort in certain quarters, but believe me, it is a vast improvement. But I doubt this is what you were wanting to ask about.”

“I’m not sure”, said Ekaterin slowly. “It feels … warm.” One more breath. “I believe that during his conversation with his father he—”

“Call him Aral, Ekaterin. He is your father-in-law.”

Try Admiral-Lord-Regent-Prime-Minister-Viceroy-Count-Vorkosigan-my-father-in-law. Aunty. “… that Aral said something else. I don’t know what. I do know it’s almost always a bad idea to set Miles wondering. Which I think he started doing intensely once we were back in Vorbarr Sultana and life was … less hectic for a bit.” Ekaterin felt her mouth form a defensive smile. “Of course, newlyweds easily get things wrong, or misunderstand a mood, but … I have become certain Miles is preoccupied by something to do with his father.” That I need to understand. “He said this morning when he was telling me about this weekend that he’d really like to get his parents back from Sergyar for it but couldn’t quite see how.” A frown from Alys led Ekaterin to a flatter truth than she’d intended. “There’s Miles’s normal mania, of course, and above that the excitement of whatever big thing this scientist has decided to foist on us.” A reappraising blink and flash of Vorish approval met her crispness. Alright. “But below all that, something else. I’ve heard Miles talk of his father with pride, with mock-disrespect, with open admiration. Never without love. But there was a moment during that ceremony for Sergeant Bothari when I swear he looked at Aral with … well, awe isn’t right, nor pity or outrage but … enraged indignation? And again, I can’t know … but listening to him this morning, when he spoke of Aral and”—double drat! oh well, make a pair of them—“Cordelia, the same thing was there, the same strange mix.”

Ekaterin paused and smiled pointedly. “So … Aunt Alys, should I be concerned when Miles so oddly desires his parents to join Gregor and all my other weekend guests-to-be? I have the sense of … an old wrong in new-minted sights, but I don’t know what wrong.”

Both Cordelia and the daring Aunt Alys won Ekaterin little nods of approval. Her question won a long, not altogether easy silence filled with careful scrutiny ended by an elegant smile of acquiescence.

“I am reminded that Miles also said he didn’t know what you wanted but was sure you wouldn’t waste my time,” Alys said at last. “Not that I needed telling, dear, but I confess I had not anticipated this and perhaps should have.” She steepled long fingers while Ekaterin assimilated that possessive vocative ‘dear’. “You would, I think, have been, ah, somewhat isolated as well as blessedly insulated growing up in South Continent?” Ekaterin nodded. “And you realise there are not many people still alive who remember Aral personally from before the Regency. You mentioned Mad Yuri’s Massacre—that’s the root, of course. Then, ah”—Alys made a moue of distaste—“the unfortunate death of Aral’s first, Vorrutyer bride.” The long fingers tapped one another gently. “There may be something
in that, via another Vorrutyer, but …”

Alys let her voice trail away but held Ekaterin’s gaze.

“You must understand, when I first came to know Aral, as a debutante, then as Padma’s wife, he was already a full ship’s captain with command duties, and promotion to Admiral came with the invasion of Komarr soon afterwards. I did see him soon after the Solstice killings because he was brought back under arrest, then parked in Vorkosigan House for weeks before Ezar allowed the trial. Padma took me over once or twice. Then Aral was gone again, sent to what Padma said the Ministry ops people jokingly called the Leper Colony. All their misfits together.” Alys’s face lit with a smile. “Which was where he met Cordelia, so their mistake. But … “

After the unexpected, reassuring intimacy renewed uncertainty surprised Ekaterin. What was coming?

“All in all, I don’t think there was anything at Komarr or immediately afterwards that fits your bill. But what does, I think, is Escobar.” The failed invasion? But hadn’t Admiral, urk, Aral been the one to snatch survival from the jaws of disaster? “When people congratulate him on it—and a few still do, you know; Escobarans particularly will never let be—Aral has a line in mild, implacable irony that deflects everyone. He points out he was officially in some disgrace beforehand, for opposing the whole plan, and that no commander cares to dwell on retreats, then tells them at what threatens to become inordinate length all about some especially tedious aspect of the peace negotiations and gratefully lets them escape at the first opportunity they manage to invent. Cordelia never says anything at these junctures.”

There was a brief pause while Alys appreciated the strategy. Or …

“But I have seen her look at Aral, during and after such enquiry, and such deflection. And I see Aral’s pain for myself.” A piercing look made Ekaterin shift uncomfortably. “I loved Padma Vorpatril completely, but what I loved in him I see intensified in Aral, so I read him sometimes more deeply than he realises.” There was another pause. “Forgive me, your Nikki was a body-birth, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.” What has that to do with anything?

“I was looking at Tatya Vorbretten with her baby son the other day, and thinking how odd it must be to be a mother without ever having been pregnant; but you’ll understand.” The Vorbrettens, Ekaterin knew, had started their first child the day of Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding, and—what did her mother-in-law say Betans called it?—cracked the lid of the uterine replicator two months ago. “When Aral got back from Escobar and resigned from the military I was just pregnant with Ivan, and not going out much. He disappeared down to Vorkosigan Surleau, and though I never saw him there I gathered from Padma, and once from old Piotr, that for four months he did all he could to drink himself into a total stupor again as soon as each hangover cleared. Then Cordelia arrived and death by alcohol, ah, ceased to be his preferred option.”

Ekaterin grinned to herself, imagining her frightening father-in-law taken briskly in hand by her even more frightening mother-in-law. But Alys had not been making a joke.

“I give Aral this credit, that he was genuinely craving oblivion. I saw him once or twice in those months, when Piotr came to fuss gleefully over my pregnancy, and with the life in me I saw the death in him.” Oh. “I have never seen Aral more … paralysed. By grief, I think, though I’m not sure for whom. Or perhaps what, now that you ask.”

A wintry smile lit Alys’s face, but abruptly melted into warmth and something else as both women
heard the front-door of the apartment open and the sounds of someone entering.

“Ah … Frankly, Ekaterin, I had not exactly forgotten all of this, but it had, I confess, slipped my
mind lately. Another thing you know perfectly well but probably won’t admit to yourself is that
whatever you have done for Miles, you have certainly made Aral and Cordelia as happy as they can
be until you”—a frown—“or perhaps Kareen provide them with grandchildren. Aral was as deeply
content at Winterfair as I’ve ever seen him, and I saw no sign of his old sorrow. But you remind me
that I wondered for years what had wounded him so deeply at Escobar, and whether it might yet
matter one day.” Alys rose. “I’ll tell you this. Whatever it is, Cordelia knows about it. And there is to
my knowledge only one other living person who could have seen it, though whether he remembers is
moot. Leave the pitch to me, if you don’t mind.” What?

Alys had already opened the room-door. “Simon, dear, there you are. Did you find what you
wanted? Good. An excellent man, Agamnos. I’ve added a note to your audio-filer about next
weekend, by the way—an expedition to Vorkosigan Surleau that Gregor has mandated. Miles may
explain more, if you ask him, but he was being mysterious. And Ekaterin’s here on an errand. Will
you join us?” A low murmur sounded like demurral but grew louder all the same. “Yes, but you’ll
have to ask Pym about that later. Do come in, please, Simon. We need to pick your brains.” Ulp.

* * * * *

Watching his father that winter-honeymoon day in the little cemetery at Vorkosigan Surleau Miles
had actually been thinking mostly about the late, great, and painfully testate Sergeant Bothari, whose
death still lay nearer his conscience than any other. There are enough. He had learned with the
strange triple death of Admiral Naismith as commander, cover-identity, and alter ego to forgive
himself his teenage desperations, and understood long since that repining for lost opportunities was a
fool’s occupation. But with the return to Barrayaran life of Lord Vorkosigan, and unexpected advent
of Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, that respectably married man, had come a keener heart-ache of honour
than Naismith had ever acknowledged.

Silvy Vale and other places in his ancestral District that generations of Vorkosigans absent on
imperial service had neglected were part of it, and thanks to his clone-brother Mark’s business
enterprise and financial acumen he had a real chance to start properly doing something about that; a
chance his father had never had. Shivering in the pale winter sunshine Miles was aware, as always,
of his father’s long pause by the graves of the mother and brother he had seen murdered as a child,
and what ambushed Miles, that he did not realise Ekaterin could sense behind his eyes, had as she
thought started from the useful lecture Gregor requested and required the Count-his-father provide on
honour and reputation. And outliving the bastards.

I feel like I’m being gnawed all over by rats. Miles had said then. Little corrosive rats, flicking away
too fast for me to turn and whap them on the head.

The Count had been looking down at his hands when he replied, so Miles had not seen his eyes.

It could be worse. There is no more hollow feeling than to stand with your honour shattered at your
feet while soaring public reputation wraps you in rewards. That’s soul-destroying. The other way
around is merely very, very irritating.[11]

Distracted by unresolved circumstances with Ekaterin and the unholy alliance of Richars Vorrutyer
with that conniving idiot Alexi Vormoncrief, Miles had not followed up on the remark. But weeks
later he found it lodged in his ear, in his father’s exact tones yet now edged with pain he couldn’t
understand not having heard at the time. Because when, exactly, had Admiral Vorkosigan
experienced such an honoured, dishonouring fate so vividly as thus to speak of it? Or had it been an experience of Lord Regent Vorkosigan? Count Vorkosigan? the Prime Minister? the Viceroy? No, nothing so recent, Miles was sure, and no events he knew of on Sergyar had that kind of moral weight anyway. Unless … a thought tickled, but wouldn’t surface. Dammit, did his father have to have had quite so many jobs that were bear pits of honour? It could be anything. No, not anything. Someone must have died, or it would not be so irrevocable. Or some thing.

Miles’s memories, of course, held nothing of Aral Vorkosigan before the burden of Regency had marked him, and if his parents could speak volumes with a glance, they could also say nothing in remarkable detail. With Sergeant Bothari’s gravestone before his eyes as Elena stared into the blue- and-orange flames of her offering, Miles forcibly recalled just how little he knew of his parents’ lives before his own birth, and how mortal errors arising from that ignorance had cost Bothari his life and Elena her father in more ways than one. But that set of horrors he had subsequently researched very carefully, first with help from Dendarii Fleet Intelligence, then in a profoundly surprising conversation with his mother. Playing wall, indeed. Hah! Cordelia Naismith had been a truly remarkable woman even before she became his father’s surprising bride and his own mother. No wonder he liked Ekaterin’s cool head in a crisis. All of which made him fairly certain what ailed his father had not been to do with Bothari.

What, then? When did who die who should not have done, and to what dishonouring end?

Komarr, obviously … but he had heard his father speak of that, in private and public, and he’d bet Betan dollars to sand that for all the anger that remained—mostly, he thought, on Gregor’s behalf, and more at the sheer political stupidity of the order than the long-dead officer who gave it—the Solstice Massacre had not cost his father much sleep these thirty years or more. Nor even the idiot officer dead at his own powerful hands. At his feet. It wasn’t Chaos Colony either. Miles had almost snorted aloud at the thought of that frontier world, just remembering in time where he was, and why. Was Viceroy of Sergyar a fitting title for his father to end with? He knew his parents loved the third Barrayaran planet deeply, but besides their obvious nostalgia, having first met there, he’d never understood why. Admittedly the flora was friendlier than Barrayar’s, especially to his allergy-prone system, but not the fauna, from vampire-balloons to the perfectly horrible worms. All in all, he rather thought the wretched place actually deserved to be named for … and felt the penny drop. The millstone. The sky.

What had his Da said, later in that same conversation? No, earlier, because the reason they’d been having it at all was that he’d turned to Gregor for help with Nikki.

I thought, because of Crown Prince Serg, Gregor would know how—or whether—someone ought to be apprised that his da was a criminal. If you can call Prince Serg that, for his secret vices.

And his father’s implacable, heartfelt reply.

Criminal, and halfway to raving mad, by the time of his death.

Miles remembered reflecting that his father had been an eyewitness to the Escobaran invasion disaster on the highest levels. Then Da looked him full in the face, and smiled sombrely.

That Escobaran ship’s lucky shot was the best piece of political good fortune ever to befall Barrayar. [2]

Again Miles found his inner ear preserved perfectly the Count’s tone—tones—of voice, and with pure certainty he knew Bararray’s great fortune had never depended on anyone’s lucky shot. One lucky miss from Evon Vorhalas. Two if you’re feeling vain. But not one lucky hit. Oh God. Da knows Serg died by design. For the good of us all. It was in that moment, utterly absorbed in his father, that Ekaterin had seen him. Escobar didn’t just kill Serg. It gutted the War Party for good,
then the riots Negri orchestrated took down the Ministries and Political Officers. Miles wasn’t supposed to know about that; it wasn’t in the history books, but during a long, often immobilised childhood he had learned many of his father’s security access codes, and later a number of Simon Illyan’s in ten years of covert ops for ImpSec. Between them there hadn’t been much older stuff he couldn’t get to if he wanted, even before he acquired his Auditor’s seal, and information was always power. No, ignorance is always vulnerability. Not the same thing.

The identity of the assassin didn’t trouble Miles for a minute. Only Ezar could have pulled it off, Ezar the Implacable and his faithful, compliant Captain Negri, who armed with his Imperial Master’s Voice and his own twisted, far-reaching private intelligence and security net could orchestrate anything. And would, if so commanded. Ignorant of details, Miles for a brief moment intuited the whole thing, as his mother had once done; a wormhole-orrery of betrayal within betrayal that hid one corpse under a mountain of them. The most expensive funeral offering in Barrayaran history, he thought numbly, an emperor’s preservation of his family honour—and imperium—with a lie no-one could bear to undo even if they learned of it. In the ImpSec attics of Miles’s mind a cold-eyed fellow nodded appreciation of what must have been a truly classic plot, successfully executed and so closely held that no more than three or four people could ever have known it to its sincerely rotten heart. And that meant …

Oh, Da. What did they ever make you do?

* * * * *

As the door swung wide to re-admit Alys and a smiling Simon Illyan Ekaterin made herself remember she trusted the former ImpSec chief as warmly as she liked him. But of all Miles’s high acquaintance—except Gregor, to whom you are giving breakfast on Sunday week, and Aral, whom Aunt Alys is just helping you dissect—Illyan was the one whose legend had impinged on her childhood. Her service-mad brothers had made sure of that; even her father had approved what he called Illyan’s ‘low profile’ and efficiency. So leave the pitch to Alys as she asked.

“Simon, how lovely.” Resolutely Ekaterin kissed Illyan’s cheek, and sat back down. “You’re well?”

“Yes, thank-you.”

More tea appeared, served by a maid she neither heard nor saw enter, and Illyan took a cup with murmured gratitude. She and Alys sat back with their own cups as the door closed behind the maid, and Illyan glanced between them with a slight smile.

“Perhaps I should ask what Miles has done now?”

“We’ve really no idea yet, dear,” Alys replied, “except that it’s something galactic. And scientific. Useful, no doubt.”

“Ah.” Illyan seemed slightly bemused, as well he might.

“Doubtless we shall all find out at this weekend. The one after next, dear.” Miles was careful to do the same thing, Ekaterin realised, scattering little reminders in speech to compensate for Illyan’s damaged short-term memory. He seemed grateful, nodding at his … mistress? Lover. Protector. “I like it in the mountains, but that old house does have memories. We’ve been stirring them up.” Illyan said nothing but adopted a sweetly enquiring look, until Alys smiled and went on. “You’re right,
dear, I shouldn’t try to manage you.” She didn’t look penitent. “Even for your own good. In any case … I’ll be direct. Escobar.” Illyan’s face grew closed. “And Aral. Focus, please.”

Tea was sipped from three cups.

“Do you realise, Simon, Ekaterin inevitably knows less about the Vorkosigians’ recent history than she now needs to know?” There was a pause, while grammar and stress might be digested. “She has seen in Miles an echo of that sadness in Aral about which we have several times spoken. And she believes Miles is about to take something he knows or guesses about it as a cause of action.”

There was a longer pause, but though Illyan’s hand strayed towards the little audio-filer he always carried on his belt, as if to check it was there, he showed no sign of wanting to use it immediately. What strange or ordinary data did it really contain, Ekaterin wondered, to help Illyan navigate his injured world?

“You know I know the limits, dear. But what can you tell us, please? If there is ever to be a time of speech I think this must be it.”

There was a long pause, during which Illyan didn’t appear to move at all and Ekaterin did not remember having breathed. Then his hands twisted. “Alys, Ekaterin. I was first sworn to Ezar and even now I pay him every day a due of silence.” He swallowed. “The partial amnesia I have suffered since Haroche’s attack can seem a blessing, sometimes. I have so much less to remember to forget.” Ouch. “And I don’t deny it can be convenient. But in any case, I am bound by my oath to Gregor, and I remember more than enough that even your clearances do not allow me to divulge. Only Gregor could command it.”

Drat! But … he’s not done. Wait for it. Illyan’s hands twisted again, and out of the corner of her eye Ekaterin saw muscles in Alys’s arm tauten, but she said nothing. Illyan looked at them unhappily.

“But I am also bound to Aral.” He glanced at Ekaterin with a sudden smile. “And District-born, milady. As it happens. As I’ve told Alys, that’s partly why Ezar could foist me on Aral before Escobar.” Illyan settled back. “Let me be clear. You are asking me, Alys, what happened to Aral at Escobar that only Cordelia could … relieve? And that imperfectly?”

“Yes. Though … I think I would have asked you what broke his heart, and Ekaterin wants to ask you a better question.”

Illyan smiled enquiry at her. Deep breath.

“I do not know if it has to do with Escobar, Simon. But the question I see in Miles is how and when did Aral believe himself irrevocably to have lost his honour?” She hesitated. “I don’t know that I want to hear any answer at all, but if you know the true one I will bless you for it.” What else could she say to him? “It has Miles by the heart. I believe you understand how that can be.”

Alys seemed to relax again as Illyan eyed her with … respect? Help. He rubbed his brow a little, then smiled. “I seem to recall saying to you once that Miles was very good at picking personnel and the habit had not deserted him?”

She nodded. It had been in the garden at Aunt Vorthys’s house, after the dreadful dinner-party. She had not been able to pretend to herself that she had not understood or was anything but secretly thrilled.

“I was right, I see. A very good Lady Vorkosigan.” Then he added, almost to himself, “So of course you ask about Aral.” His fingers drummed once on the arm of his chair. “A permissible, personal
narrative. I was assigned to, ah, watch Aral during the Escobar invasion as a compromise between Ezar, who was protecting him like a hawk, and Grishnov, who wanted his head for strangling that thrice-damned Political Officer at Komarr. There were more recent causes of ire as well.” He paused, frowning. “That was the official version. Actually, Ezar had, ah, planted me on Aral several weeks before he gave Grishnov and Serg the green light they were demanding.” He drained his cup and declined the refill Alys silently offered. “For the first week I was down at Vorkosigan Surleau with a thoroughly surprised and far from happy Aral. We both knew the invasion was probably going to go ahead, but neither of us had the least idea what I was doing there. He spent most of the time glowing while I … learned the house and grounds. And met Count Piotr.”

Illyan’s hands twisted again in his lap, fingers whitening.

“Then I spent a whole week waiting even more tediously in one of those corridors in the old East Wing of the Residence while Aral and Ezar had the longest conversation I’ve ever known an emperor have with anyone. Or the longest row.” Now Illyan was taking a deep breath. “What I can tell you is that I first saw the … haunting Alys speaks of seeing in Aral’s eyes after the first day he spent closeted with Ezar. And I saw it always thereafter, until it was … overwhelmed by Cordelia.”

“Ah.” Alys’s face sagged a little, and she looked as old as Ekaterin had ever seen her. “Was anyone else in the room that day?”

“Negri. None other that I ever saw.”

“There wouldn’t be.” There was a long silence before Alys went on briskly. “Simon, I can do the political maths, I think. Ekaterin, can you?”

“Uh …”

“Then let us be clear. Simon, what broke Aral’s honour at Escobar? In your personal opinion.”

“Are you sure you want it, Alys? I don’t see how any of this can do the poor man any good at this stage.”

“Nevertheless, Truly, dear, I knew I didn’t want to know. But that’s because I knew, really.” This seemed to make sense to Illyan. “Please say it once, Simon, for us all.”

“Then .. my first guess is that what broke Aral’s honour in his own eyes was being forced into complicity with what I must suppose Ezar’s assassination of Crown Prince Serg.” The tension hummed for a moment and abruptly fell away as Illyan grimaced. “Murder will out, they say, but not this one. I can’t break a confidence I never held. Nothing anyone has ever said to me confirms a word of this.” That sounded like a weasel truth. “But I thought it through long ago, when I had to digest Negri’s files. He … knew in advance about the plasma mirrors and Cordelia’s smuggling run from Beta. It confused me for ages, because I couldn’t see how withholding that information even for a moment could square with the invasion itself, as a project. And … I had been given reason to believe Aral only found about the mirrors when it was too late, in a most … serendipitous way.”

Ekaterin could not fill in these blanks, and didn’t think Alys could either. Illyan took his oaths seriously.

“Then I realised how closely Negri manipulated the mobs that destroyed the Ministries and the Political Officers, and the other shoe dropped because to do it he must have known the invasion would fail.” He brooded over his clasped hands, uncertain. “But do you see, Alys, the twists in this? You asked for my personal opinion, and ultimately it is that Ezar and Negri did an astonishing job. Do you remember Serg?”
Illyan shuddered in a way Ekaterin had never seen in him before. It looked like the waves that convulsed Miles during his seizures.

“I do. Ezar was right to skip a generation, no matter what it cost him or anyone else. If he’d let Serg ascend the throne there would have been another bloodbath on Barrayar, for a generation at least. And if he’d ever let it be known he had a hand in Serg’s death, the bloodbath would have started the same day. So I believe he and Negri did what they had to do. And to do it they spent Aral’s honour to the dregs. Dorca the Just’s own blood. Ezar’s nearest imperial rival. His regent-to-be.” Illyan’s smile was rueful, as he wound down. “You asked, Alys love, so I’ll say one other thing. I don’t think Ezar thought of his final plan until late in the day. After Komarr, at any rate. I wasn’t alive to see it, of course, but I swear Aral’s regency was the fruit of something Ezar planted the day Mad Yuri died. The Escobar plot didn’t build Aral’s cage. It just locked the door.” And threw away the key? Has Miles found it again? Or somehow made another one? “Ekaterin, may I ask what has prompted all this? What has Miles done? Or what is he planning?”

Strangely she felt a burden lifting. “I don’t know, Simon. But”—she grinned—“I trust his luck. And I think he may have seen a way to”—no, not right, that was impossible—“lessen an old wrong.” She finished her own tea and put the delicate cup silently down in its dry saucer. “Do consider what the Count-my-father”—a sly glance at Alys, smiling amused approval—“and the Vicereine have already managed to, ah, recover. What do you first think of now in association with Sergyar?” Worms. Chaos Colony. Drat—no, no matter.

“In any case, Simon, Alys, thank you. My mind is eased.” And … more. She gave them a gentler smile, looking suddenly demure. “And you will both be very welcome at Vorkosigan Surleau to see Gregor see what happens.”

[1] A Civil Campaign, Ch. 15.

[2] A Civil Campaign, Ch. 15.
Talking to his parents in realtime across interplanetary distance had been considerably stranger than Miles had anticipated. Chandler had left the frame linked to Miles’s on one side of his workroom, and set up the frame that would link with Sergyar directly opposite. The Terran sat himself to one side, where he would be visible to both parties if they peered slightly sideways.

“Your medical friend was very straightforward and trusting, Dr Chandler. He does realise ImpSec will now be looking at him much harder, I hope?”

“Oh … perhaps not. They won’t harm him, will they?”

“No. They won’t do that.”

“He knows very little, you know, but Charlie was … willing to help.”

“How so?”

Chandler looked oddly appreciative. “Actually I’m not sure it wasn’t you who turned the trick, Lord Vorkosigan. Charlie was already on Sergyar when I arrived. Been there for a year working on the worm-vaccine and treatments for infestation. I was … collecting impressions of your father.” Miles nodded. Most of the stories would have been good, and the planet was full of District loyalists who would set anyone right about his Da. Forcibly, if need be.

“So your name naturally came up. And Charlie said it was the damnedest thing but he’d seen the broadcast of your swearing-in as Lord Auditor and you looked exactly like a mercenary commander called Admiral Naismith he’d once seen on ’vid back on Terra and particularly remembered because Naismith was the man who organised the Dagoola IV escape. Which, as it happened, saved a Marilacan friend and relative of his wife.”

“Ah.” Miles wondered how long his former cover-identity would continue to leak these little surprises into his life. He approved strongly of Gregor’s decision some years before to allow holovid broadcasts of major state occasions, but in his own case it did sometimes have unfortunate if on this occasion timely results.

“That set me digging, I’m afraid. And when I suggested Charlie could do me a favour by keeping a frame and looking at it if a certain button lit up, he was happy enough.” A gleam came to Chandler’s eye. “Of course I may have implied your knowledge, but I did not promise your approval. Perhaps you might give that and rescue him from ImpSec after next Sunday. And I did have to be rather more persuasive last night but I let him think I was on Sergyar, in backcountry somewhere, and the frame just new technology, not new science.” The big hands smoothed back Chandler’s unruly hair. “Your ImpSec man there is a bigger problem. If he has wits for that job he must realise you weren’t on Sergyar.”

“Not ImpSec, Doctor. A Vorkosigan Armsman, Banharov. Sworn to my father personally for years. He found it unusual, certainly”—and goggled like a fish, Miles remembered with pleasure—“but he will do as ordered, which included saying nothing whatever to anyone except my parents. Who may —” His mouth dried as a light he hadn’t seen on the further frame suddenly blinked on. “Is that
“them?”

“Yes. Shall I withdraw immediately, Lord Vorkosigan?”

“No. Please stay to introduce yourself and … ah, say a few words.”

A dry smile. “Lord Auditor.”

Miles did appreciate the Terran’s subtle punctilio with Barrayaran formalities. _Not a careless man. Nor a mad scientist._

“Very well. Here we go.” The deep voice edged higher with tension as Chandler reached across to tap the glowing button.

The other frame blinked on so quickly that to Miles it was as if his parents simply appeared out of thin air. They sat side by side on a comfortable sofa in a room he recognised as their shared study, the Viceroy in undress Greens, the Vicereine in something blue and expensive but not quite full-fig. Banharov had said they had an early evening reception but not being on duty himself hadn’t been sure for what; there were so many possibilities. He had been sure they would be free by eight, debarring emergencies, as milady insisted on certain evenings, um, free of viceregal business. Miles had grinned. Now his parents were looking at him through two frames with bemusement. _Forwards._

“Sir. Milady mother. Good evening. Are you alone?”

His father sat forward, peering. “Banharov is with us. And Miles, neither of us is alone. Where are you, anyway?” Viceroy Count Aral Vorkosigan’s glance at Chandler was assessing. The scientist could explain himself and Miles at the same time.

“No indeed. Ma, Da, this is Dr Jack Chandler, lately of Terra but presently visiting Barryar, thanks to whose interesting, ah, _hypothesis_ we are now talking. Dr Chandler, the Count-my-father, Viceroy Aral Vorkosigan. The Countess-my-mother, Vicereine Cordelia Vorkosigan.” A murmur of greetings all round. “Dr Chandler?”

“Yes. Thank you, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan.” There was the punctilio, again. _Gregor will like that._ His parents looked relieved at this evidence of official business, and to his delight Chandler not only looked nervous but actually coughed. “Ha-hhm. Lord Viceroy, Lady Vicereine, what is of real importance will be clear if I tell you it is now just after 11:30 here on Barryar, and just after 8:00 in the evening on Sergyar.”

The Viceroy’s gaze swung away, presumably to a chrono-display. And back, in astonishment. “We are talking in realtime, between planets?”

“Yes. Thank you, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan.” There was the punctilio, again. _Gregor will like that._ His parents looked relieved at this evidence of official business, and to his delight Chandler not only looked nervous but actually coughed. “Ha-hhm. Lord Viceroy, Lady Vicereine, what is of real importance will be clear if I tell you it is now just after 11:30 here on Barryar, and just after 8:00 in the evening on Sergyar.”

This time the pause went on too long for Miles’s liking. _Ability to stay silent, more like._ Chandler, thankfully, did not want to linger.

“Lord Vorkosigan, I think that’s my few words. But”—he swung back to the Viceroy and Vicereine —“there is one other matter I promised to explain before leaving you to your privacy. I shall withdraw out of earshot. This room is not surveilled. But the frames are capable of recording their use, and in these I cannot easily disable that function. I _can_ erase recordings unheard, and have given
Lord Vorkosigan my word I will, as soon as you are done.” The Terran gave a tight smile. “On the value of that word I must leave you all to decide.”

He retreated out of sight and Miles heard a door he presumed from their tracking eyes his parents could see open and close. They stared after Chandler, then in unison at him. Miles shrugged.

“He’s a conundrum. But I think most of that’s because of his technology. Which, by God, works. And I … have chosen to trust his word. He means it as we would a name’s oath.” This last was to his father; quite what his mother thought of Barrayaran oaths he didn’t now like to imagine.

“Good enough.” The Viceroy peered again through the double frames. “You’re in Vorbarr Sultana? Hmm. Yes, it does work, doesn’t it. Amazing. What else do you know about all this, Miles? And what has so far been done?”

“Everything and nothing, sir, in answer to both questions. Chandler brought it to me in Hassadar as an hypothesis. He gave me … a persuasive token of his seriousness, and asked what if he had such a technology? And what if it wasn’t exactly a technology, but an expression of a new, ah, paradigm in our understanding of physical reality? And finally, what if, being such a paradigm, it didn’t make a technology possible, but several technologies. Many devices. Including ones that would need guarding in the same place as old-fashioned atomics or gravitic lances and Cetagandan bioweapons. What then?”

Both his parents were looking at him with dismay.

“As to what has been done, I have arranged with Gregor that he and Laisa, with Alys and Simon, the Vorlheses, Guy Allegre, and Yuri Vorlynkin will join Ekaterin, Dr Chandler, and I at Vorkosigan Surleau next weekend. For a … retreat. An imperial family retreat. To which you are both invited, and which, if you leave tonight on one of those fast couriers Gregor keeps assigned to you, you can attend.” Miles gestured vaguely. “Hence this rigmarole with the frames now.” There, Clear as water.

“Milady mother. You aren’t saying anything.”

“No, Miles dear. I was enjoying the unexpected sight and sound of you. And thinking that your Terran friend asks very sensible questions. Do you know if he has asked them of anyone else?”

Straight to the heart, as usual. “He says not—that he, ah, looked at Cetaganda but considered Barrayar, and I quote, a better beast of burden for everyone.”

The Vicereine looked amused. “I like him already. Except that it will all mean a great deal of work.” She paused, frowning. “Starting now, apparently. Are we really to leap aboard a courier, Miles? The Health Services Committee we are supposed to entertain tomorrow night would not be pleased. Though I’m sure your father would miss them less than they him.”

“Yes, please.” He hesitated. “What would you have had me do once I accepted Chandler’s bona fides? And realised this much of what he had? Too much need to know and you wind up whispering to yourself. Too little and we’re all in the swamp. So I talked only to people I had to and the ones I most trust, for myself and … all of us. For Barrayar.” And I had this other idea I’m working on.

“I wasn’t criticising, dear.” His mother’s smile was serene. “Actually, you seem to have been remarkably sensible. Not that you aren’t, these days. A weekend in Vorkosigan Surleau sounds a much better idea than some frightful conference in a secure basement somewhere.” Which is exactly what Allegre and Vorlynkin wanted. The Vicereine’s gaze sharpened. “I’m glad you’ve included Alys, Miles, if only for Ekaterin’s sake. You must have given her a fit when you sprang Gregor on her as a guest at this sort of notice. I trust you were apologetic?”
“Uh … well, he would be. “She took it in her stride, Ma.” Confess while you can. “I wanted the Vorthyses anyway. And she asked for Alys. So I got Gregor to agree.”

“And he’s telling Guy, is he?” His Da’s voice was dry. “Miles, this is a lot to absorb and we were thinking about something quite different. You’ve had some time to reflect …” His father’s rich voice trailed off enquiringly.

“A dollar for them, son” his mother added. “Give.”

Miles looked at them, for once intent on him not only in his own right but for his knowledge of something critical and now Barrayaran; he spread his hands carefully. “Without anything but frames Chandler has a technology that while its exclusivity could be protected would give any military space force a decisive edge. If Barrayar had it, no-one on this side of the nexus except Cetaganda could offer us serious resistance. But with the Cetagandans it will be only a road to renewed tension, even another full war if we spook them badly enough. And … has Barrayar any need or desire for such a military advantage?”

Slowly he extended one finger, then another, then all ten.

“Chandler isn’t saying much yet, but he asked me at our first meeting what was the single most destabilising invention I could imagine. As a Vor lord, my Count’s Voice, and as an Auditor. Off the top of my head I told him anything that made galactic weapons cheaply available to ordinary Barrayarans. And he said, what if it made everything freely available to everyone?”

Miles took a slow breath and looked directly at his parents in turn.

“I have no idea why it should connect with realtime communication, but I think the good doctor has some sort of molecular technology that allows material replication. A nanoforge, if you will. And I think it will work for weapons. Perhaps even big ones, and with almost as little time-lag as this frame.” Chew on that, eh? I have. “It’s the same problem as the frames, really, but with higher stakes again. Flatly, the Cetagandans could not let us enjoy such technology in peace. Whoever has it could amass overwhelming forces.”

“In material, yes. Not in personnel.” His father’s face was intent.

“Sure. But the bottom line there is three planets to eight. Any way you cut it, unmanaged, Chandler’s technology means a war with Cetaganda we would probably lose, cannot bear to fight, and that no-one I can think well of would win.” One hook set. “Which is why I want you both here for this weekend. I need your help to commit what Gran’da and old Ezar might very well have called high treason.” And the other. He grinned in relief. “I’m rather hoping you’ll approve.”

* * * * *

Ekaterin had not quite understood when she asked to use Madame Estelle’s services that visiting a modiste could take three days. Taking her measurements occupied five minutes in a curtained scanner. Two comfortable and excellently cut outfits for a high Vor lady relaxing at home, and two more formal evening gowns (one of which she really wanted to see Miles appreciate) took an exhausting but well worthwhile couple of hours to specify in detail. Had Alys explained at that point that two more days were required Ekaterin would have fled, but the older woman merely remarked to Estelle that they might as well design the full trousseau while about it, and out again had come the
fabric books and great folder of patterns.

Had Lady Vorkosigan thought through the social engagements of her first few months after graduating? No? Well, there would of course be the ten nights of Winterfair season, and corresponding lunchtimes. Had she heard old General Vorparadijs was sadly ailing? No? Well, an Auditorial funeral might be expected, and of course one never knew who would succumb in a hard winter. These new grays, a fabric from an Escobaran firm, milady, were very useful. Belts, shoes, jackets, coats, and hats were all matched, of course, and had ever so many styles. Perhaps something like this might suit?

Ekaterin had secretly enjoyed shopping until her pinchmark days with Tien outlawed the pleasure. With Miles’s purse suddenly available she had privately anticipated regaining a little of the taste. But if Lady Alys hadn’t been there, considering a swatch of Betan dye samples with a critical air, Ekaterin would not have stayed the first full day, let alone reported back for two more. But Alys made sure to lace the hours with useful information, some relayed to Ekaterin only when they were alone. In general, though, Estelle apparently had the convenient deafness and utter discretion that marked all Gregor’s close servants.

For onward transmission to Ma Kosti Ekaterin received a judicious list of Gregor’s particular likes, and the odd but welcome warning that Admiral Vorlynkin hated cauliflower with a passion. For Ekaterin herself, stitched through the afternoon, Alys provided a series of images and reminiscences of Gregor and Miles as children in Aral’s and Cordelia’s care. Fascinated, Ekaterin heard for the first time of the web she had begun to realise must have existed, a safety net Cordelia wove around the boy-emperor dumped in her care and her own, desperately fragile son. She also heard the amused contempt in Alys’s voice as she described the belief of what she called ‘the Old Guard’ that Cordelia had been left without influence over Gregor.

“And that was after she’d lopped off Vordarian’s silly head,” Alys ended that snippet. “When Gregor went off to the pre-Academy school Vorhalas and the other Conservatives were all sure they had him. Never knew what hit them. Still don’t, most of the time. Fools.” She looked straight at Ekaterin. “Cordelia taught me to take no nonsense from old men merely because Barrayaran tradition said I should. Remember you can call on her at need, as on me.”

Ekaterin stored that one away to think about. She had had one serious heart-to-heart with her mother-in-law. What else did Alys mean? Late on the first afternoon, as some very unusual new material was unrolled for consideration and details of the coming weekend were debated, Ekaterin felt a different penny drop and mentioned to Alys Miles’s odd remark about Cetagandans. She had read summary material on the sprawling imperium of eight home planets and as many more satrapies, all ruled by the haut Fletchir Giaja, but very little of it made for clarity.

“Hmm.” Alys was looking at her intently. “Both Miles and Gregor have been very elliptical about their real agenda here, but I have been thinking Cetagandans may … be important.” Then she became elliptical herself. “Don’t worry, dear. I know just the woman.”

Much of the second morning was interrupted by older Vor friends of Alys’s who seemed to drop in on their ways elsewhere. After Countesses Vormuir and Vorinnis had come and gone Ekaterin decided she was being introduced to women she would Need to Know, but the next arrival was a slim, dapper man who turned out to be Gregor’s tailor. Intense discussion of the unusual new material from the day before followed, into which Ekaterin was drawn by respectful and to her genuinely interesting questions about the effects of its surprising opalescent shimmer in brighter shades of red and blue. Gregor must be considering a new full-dress parade uniform; if he opted for this fabric Ekaterin badly wanted to see the result, but was careful to say nothing that seemed to hint or enquire. After the dapper man left Alys nodded approval.
“Very nicely done, dear. I believe I shall soon have a proposition to put to you. But here’s Lady Vorob’yev.”

The handsome dark-haired and olive-skinned woman entering the inner salon did not look Barrayaran and turned out to be a former Vervani diplomat, once posted to Eta Ceta, who there met and married a now retired Barrayaran Ambassador to the Celestial Garden. As always, Alys had known just the woman.

“Mia Maz Vorob’yev.” The grip was firm. “Call me Mia. Alys said you had a Cetagandan problem I could help with. What did you want to know?”

Everything was probably too tall an order, but several informative hours later Ekaterin had a far clearer grasp of the stranger features of Cetagandan imperialism, especially the bizarre duality of the purely aristocratic haut and the military-patrician ghem who served as the haut’s galactic buffer and executive arm. Some uncertainties about haut women were extremely interesting. She had been able arresting to reinterpret improbable bits of what she knew about Miles’s Cetagandan adventures when he had as a junior lieutenant and imperial relation, or perhaps undercover agent, attended the funeral of the haut emperor’s mother. She said goodbye to Mia Vorob’yev with a strong sense of having an interesting friend to make in the Vervani woman, if she cared to develop the acquaintance. It would have to wait, but an invitation of some kind in due course was certainly an idea.

On the third day, perhaps an hour before lunch as Ekaterin agreed to what she was sure must be the thousandth sumptuary particular she had been confronted with, Alys suddenly grinned and stood up.

“Good girl! And now it’s done. Just drop by to see Estelle once a year and let her know of special occasions. She has the standard list of birthdays and the like. Then your wardrobe will appear at need.” That sounds good. And Alys’s eyes did twinkle, dammit. “And send any female bodyguards permanently assigned to you to be measured, so their formal dress can be co-ordinated with yours.” Colour-co-ordinated female bodyguards, right. “But I must disappear for lunch with Gregor and Laisa. I shall give them your regards and see you on Saturday in Vorkosigan Surleau. If the weather is fine we can eat on the south terrace.”

And if ImpSec permits … But before she could say anything Alys was gone. Estelle the inexhaustible modiste looked at her sympathetically. Ekaterin looked back.

“I’m afraid I don’t know how the, ah, accounts are managed yet.”

“Oh, Master Tsipis called me the first morning, before you arrived, milady. Everything is arranged. My courier will deliver the most urgent outfits to Vorkosigan House by tomorrow evening. I hope they serve you well. You have my comconsole code when you have need.”

Then Estelle too was gone, conjuring in her place a absurdly well-dressed young woman who deferentially showed Lady Vorkosigan out to the street. Once Ekaterin would have been walking, and felt the urge to stride out through the crowds that bustled about her, galactic tourists prominent among them. Once she would not have been visiting modistes in the most upmarket area of central Vorbarr Sultana. And there was Pym, waiting patiently by the groundcar with a faintly reproachful look to remind her she had yet again failed to warn him by wristcom of her imminent approach. Gah. It’s not as if it’s possible to surprise him anyway. But she was unexpectedly free, and close to the university district where classes were over for the summer.

“Milady?” Pym looked his concern as she stood irresolute on the pavement in front of Estelle’s discreet door and plaque. People flowed around them. “Is all well?”

A wardrobe for all seasons. My house-guest, the Emperor. What’s the mystery, Miles? “Never
better.” Pym’s face turned rewardingly blank. “Lady Alys had a lunch date.” Which you knew, didn’t you? “And I have a fancy to see my Aunt Vorthys before she too is dragged into this … weekend adventure of m’lord’s.” Was that a flinch? Surely not from Pym. Ekaterin relented a little, and smiled at the wary Armsman. “Let’s call by for lunch.”

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Professora Helen Vorthys had seen almost as much of Ekaterin since her marriage as she hoped, her niece’s renewed commitment to classes at the university nicely offsetting her Winterfair move with young Nikki to the grandeur of Vorkosigan House. She had even, to her great pleasure, at last persuaded Ekaterin to call her Aunt Helen rather than the Aunt Vorthys she had learned as a child and retained throughout her crippling marriage to Tien. But with teaching ending for the summer and the Vorkosigans off to his District she and Georg had expected to be abruptly alone again, and neither had looked forward to the prospect. Then Miles called with his curious invitation—command—to come to Vorkosigan Surleau for a weekend, and here, unexpectedly, was Ekaterin in person, flushed as she turned from Pym towards the house. The Professora hastened to let her niece in.

“Hello dear. What a nice surprise.” To Helen’s concerned eyes Ekaterin looked tense. “Is everything all right? I haven’t forgotten some arrangement, have I?”

“Heavens, no.” Ekaterin hugged her aunt. “I have just been measured six ways to Sunday by Lady Vorpatril’s very superior modiste. Apparently I shall never have to worry about an outfit again, which on the whole I think I regard as a blessing. I was let out early for good behaviour, so I am rewarding myself with a visit to see you.”

Was there something in this banter? Ekaterin’s voice wasn’t strained, exactly; controlled, maybe. The door to the basement laboratory creaked open and a noble nose poked out, followed by her husband.

“Did I hear a strange voice?” Georg Vorthys enfolded his niece in a hug of his own. “Come to inspect your future house-guests, have you?”

“Consult them, maybe.” Smiling, Ekaterin followed her aunt and uncle into the kitchen, where but for the garden she always seemed to feel most comfortable, and obeyed her aunt’s wave to sit down at the capacious breakfast table. “But it’s tricky.” She looked apologetically at them, and Helen, considering her niece, got up to turn on the kettle and set in motion some lunch.

“No tricks on an empty stomach.” That earned Helen a clearer smile, deepening as Georg added his favourite admonishment on cue.

“No artificial shortages. Splendid. How is Miles?”

“He’s good.” And hopping out of skin when he called, Helen thought. But it was hard to judge a comconsole image. “Very excited, of course. By tricky I meant there’s a lot I can’t tell you because there’s a security blackout on this weekend thing. Miles assures me you understand that better than I do, and after Komarr of course you must. But … it feels wrong, and I hate having to be … alert even with you. It’s easiest, I think, to leave the future to itself. What I really wanted to ask you about was history. And engineering.”

The professora in Helen noted with pleasure how subtle Ekaterin was becoming. A security blackout probably meant Gregor was involved. Oh my. So the guest-list would be rarefied even by
Vorkosigan standards, and she and Georg were invited first and foremost in his professional capacity. Interesting. She started to arrange cold meats on a plate and passed Georg a loaf to slice.

“What kind of history, dear?”

“And what kind of engineering?” Georg’s growl was in his studiously neutral mode, so he too had picked up Ekaterin’s careful clues.

“Oh, imperial history. And Vor engineering. The same thing, perhaps.” Ekaterin looked sombre.

“And not very nice. What do the books say about Mad Yuri’s Massacre, Aunt Helen?”

“That shambles?” Two radishes came to decoratively geometrical ends. So, it is Miles’s father she is asking about. Where did sixty-five years go?

“It happened in 2739. I was only four, but I remember my father’s horror when the news came. And my own. It is usually described as Emperor Yuri’s attempt to murder every living descendant of Emperor Dorca other than himself, but I don’t think that’s true. Some collateral and more distant imperial relations were not targeted.”

Helen passed plates and cutlery around before sitting down at the table herself.

“However, the only descendants of Prince Xav who survived the day, and that by chance, were the infant Padma Vorpatril, Lord Ivan’s father, and the eleven-year-old Aral Vorkosigan, whose mother, elder brother and younger sister were killed.” Ekaterin must have seen their graves in the cemetery at Vorkosigan Surleau. “Which turned General Count Piotr Vorkosigan into a most implacable rebel, and put Ezar on the throne and what was left of Mad Yuri in an unmarked grave by early 2741.” She ate reflectively. “Some of those events have never been well sorted-out—the late Captain Negri’s heavy hand, I think—but I have heard on good authority that Ezar and Count Piotr actually made the new Lord Vorkosigan kill Yuri personally. By a thousand cuts. Not that he needed much encouragement, I shouldn’t suppose.”

Ekaterin looked horrified and even Georg grunted with distaste.

“They made a thirteen-year-old boy do that?” Little wonder then that he killed that Political Officer with his own hands, Ekaterin thought. “Why would they?”

“I’m not entirely sure. Georg?”

Her husband shrugged. “Vor revenge, I imagine. Suppositions of manliness, probably. It was a bloodier time. And whyever it was done, if it was, it made of Aral Vorkosigan the man who ended that kind of bloodshed and stupidity. As your aunt is always telling me I understand very little of history”—his unsubtle wink made Ekaterin smile—“but if you’re asking about Vor engineering I’ll tell you that the best I’ve ever seen was during the Regency.” Georg chewed some bread. “I came to appreciate the present Count Vorkosigan very sharply as Lord Regent during Gregor’s minority, you know. Studying engineering as a Vor was not easy in my youth. Insufficiently Vorish. And Mad Yuri’s War left everyone very edgy until the Komarr invasion turned us outward. That was Vorkosigan, announcing himself and changing us by main force, but peacefully. And as Lord Regent I saw him cajole Barrayar forward again and again, bit by little bit. Then as Prime Minister he managed those extraordinarily timely military and diplomatic manoeuvres at the Hegen Hub, spanked the Cetagandans so hard they ran back to Mu Ceta, and forged a proper Hegen Hub alliance for us out of it all, at last.” He took a final bite, round which he spoke. “Superior load and inertia calculations. Very efficient job.”

The Professora smiled. “You’re actually very good at history, dear. And I shall steal your metaphor. But I think there must have been more to the killing of Yuri than manliness, or even revenge.” Helen ran a catalogue in her mind. “Nothing much has been published on the Massacre for years. And
though the Viceroy will sometimes see serious military students he never cooperates with biographers, so there’s little trustworthy on his early life. Professor Krokov of my own department is the authority, but he, ah”—is an idiot yesman—“was never one to rock the boat, and his magnum opus on the Regency is more dependent on various official lines than I would think wise.” She folded her napkin. “Still, Ezar was not a man to do anything lightly. Nor did he have the kind of rage and guilt I think would have driven Count Piotr. One can’t be sure, dear, but if it was Ezar who made Lord Aral kill Yuri it wasn’t just tradition. I’d suspect aversion therapy.”

“Huh.” Georg grunted. Ekaterin looked as if she’d eaten a lemon, but was thinking about it.

Helen’s curiosity bubbled. “Has Miles told you much about his grandfather, dear?”

“No really.” Ekaterin thought a moment. “I once saw a bag of what Miles said were Cetagandan scalps in the attic at Vorkosigan House. He thought they must have been given to his grandfather by his guerrilla troops during the Occupation. And reading between the lines, I think the estrangement between his parents and grandfather after his birth was … much worse than people know. He once said flatly the old man tried to kill him as an infant. Several times. Because of his size and brittle bones. Also that he killed his grandfather with disappointment by failing his Academy physicals.”

Georg looked concern at his niece. “I remember from the files I had to read on Miles that his grandfather did die that same night. There was a picture of him at the funeral with both legs in casts. But the old man was nearly at his century, surely? Miles can’t seriously think …”

“No, I don’t think he does. I said much the same to him when he made his dramatic confession. But … there was love lost as well as found there, I think. Miles does not … miss his grandfather, though I think he would still relish his approval.” Ekaterin’s smile was bleak. “Not that he would get it, I suppose.”

“You might be surprised.” The Professora’s voice was mild. “During one of those delicious dinners Miles holds as Auditorial seminars he argued passionately that his grandfather changed more, and more often, than anyone in Barrayaran history.” She smiled at Ekaterin, looking fractionally put-out to be reminded her aunt had known her husband longer than she had herself. “They’d chosen a nice historical case to autopsy, you see, so I could be admitted to the main event for once. An odd bit of treason early in Ezar’s reign. Vorlaisner suggested the outcome was critical in making Piotr a mainstay of the Vor conservatives, but Miles argued his grandfather had always been mislabelled. He said he didn’t imagine Piotr had ever thought much at all before the Cetagandans arrived, but once he started he never stopped. And the net result of his thinking about Cetagandans was that the only possible direction for Barrayar to go was forwards.”

Ekaterin was sitting very straight. So this was the right track.

“As evidence Miles pointed out his grandfather had been the power that put his father in charge at Komarr despite his youth. Which with Aral’s Regency is what locked your Vor engineering down, Georg.” Her husband nodded agreement. “And Miles also pointed out, very perceptively I thought since he witnessed them only from inside his replicator, that close study of events during Vordarian’s Pretendership would show clearly that Piotr’s support of his son as Lord Regent was critical and unswerving, despite the ghastly personal breach between them that followed.” Now Ekaterin looked frozen stiff. Nevertheless … “In other words, for all Piotr’s lamentations in later life, he as much as Aral drove us forward to face the Nexus and control ourselves at home.”

Georg had been listening intently. “Go back to the case we were discussing at that dinner, Helen. Vorlaisner said it was the treason that really mattered, which is what first set Miles off, I think.”

“Yes, you’re right, dear. His grandfather’s evidence in the case suppressed the treason charge that
should have been made. Vorlaisner suggested Piotr was protecting the reputation of the Counts against yet another scandal, but Miles thought it more about protecting Ezar from having to order another Count starved to death in the square, and because the Count’s heir was a very able spaceship commander and Piotr already had his sights on Komarr.” She reached over and took her niece’s hand. “In any case, dear, what impressed us all was Miles’s clinching argument. He said his grandfather had clearly been under an obligation to speak truth in honour, sworn by name’s oath to the enquiring Auditor. But he didn’t. And the only explanation for that was a greater need.” Her professorial frown flickered. “Then he descended to epigram and said Vor conservatives always claimed to be protecting Bararrayar’s honour but actually never tried to protect anyone’s except their own, which they defined as narrowly as suited them on any given occasion. While his father’s Centrists, who became our Progressive Party, with just as keen a sense of Vor honour, had learned to place personal honour at the service of the Imperium. Which might sometimes mean setting it aside. This, he said, his father learned from his grandfather, who had it first-hand from the Cetagandans.”

She smiled ruefully.

“If it were a postgraduate thesis I should be very hard-nosed about it until much more data was proven. But as a postprandial thesis from that source it has considerable merit. Admiral Vorkalloner thought it too cynical a view, but Miles meant only that the necessary must trump the desirable, and the problem isn’t deciding what’s necessary, or doing it, but living with oneself afterwards.” For some reason that brought a sudden, more genuine smile to Ekaterin’s face, and the Professora was moved to a confidence. “It wouldn’t mean anything if you weren’t happy, dear, but as you are, I want to tell you that in a funny way I’m so proud of you for marrying Miles. I liked him anyway, when he started coming to see Georg to ask about old cases and started his dinners. But for the longest while I had this little frisson, from having read so much history.”

She paused reflectively.

“Only Gregor and the Vorkosigans have that effect on me, you know. Generals and ministers are nice enough to meet, but they come and go. Gregor and Count Aral make history themselves, as Count Piotr did, so I feel it from them. Miles, too, a little. Which Georg tantalisingly says does not surprise him while properly refusing to enlighten me.” Her sly glance found Ekaterin’s smile returning. “But the thing is, for all the blood on old Piotr and Count Aral, between them they shook us out of the slaughter that did not end with the Bloody Centuries. The old man led us to victory over the Cetagandans and if Miles is to be believed, on to Komarr. His son took Komarr, consolidated our galactic modernity, and held it all together for Gregor after Ezar’s death. Gregor, of course, has kept us moving forwards.” Now. “Miles is truly his father’s son, you know. But also Cordelia’s.”

That earned her a straight look. “I do know, Aunt Helen. Truly. I’m proud too.” Ekaterin gave her aunt and uncle a small smile. “When I’m not terrified. But … you’ve left something out, and I need to learn as much as I can. Has Miles ever said anything to either of you about Escobar?”

“The failed invasion?” The Professora frowned. “No, I think not. Piotr never supported that. I seem to recall a speech he made in Council afterwards describing the whole venture as an ill-planned natural idiocy, which seems about right.” Ekaterin was listening with a frown of her own. What was her niece after? “But while I don’t believe any Bararrayan has ever wholeheartedly argued the case, galactic historians have been clear for twenty years that whatever modernity Komarr brought us was cemented by Escobar. The riots afterwards smashed the Ministries completely, you know, and it’s clear that for all he was mourning Prince Serg old Ezar took the opportunity to clean house.”

Why had such a bleak look flashed in Ekaterin’s eye? Go carefully, historian. What does she know?

“Without Escobar, well, I suppose Crown Prince Serg would have succeeded Ezar, but Grishnov
would have controlled Serg. For a while. Then it would have been the wrong sort of Vor Pageant again for who knows how long, so what I am really thanking the Vorkosigans for, I suppose, is the peace Barrayar has enjoyed for the last third of a century.”

“But …” Ekaterin stopped, obviously biting her tongue, then went on resolutely. “I know this isn’t quite your term, Aunt Helen, but how do we keep a peace in honour if it is founded on such disregard of honour as … Escobar. An invasion that was … purely selfish. I’m sorry, I can’t explain. But it’s not your peace I doubt. Only its price.”

“Whatever happens, Ekaterin, we go on. What else can we do?”

“Analyse the engineering failures”, boomed Georg, “while going on. Don’t repeat the mistake.” He wagged a big finger. “And don’t ever think a personal price for a real peace is too high. It makes for bad engineering, you know.” The table-top received a firm admonitory tap. “I don’t think I have the least idea what’s really on your mind, Ekaterin, my dear, but I will tell you frankly when it comes to Vor honour in the sense I think you mean I prefer kilojoules and cubic metres. In my youth I saw men duel and die for the stupidest reasons. Unreasons, too. And I saw them taken by Grishnov’s creatures, and Ezar’s. All in swaggered honour. Utter nonsense.” The table received a harder tap. “What interested me about that treason case was only that it was suppressed. Clearly the practical thing, with the great merit of avoiding further deaths. I don’t know what price you fear someone paid, my dear, but I can tell you I know no price I would not pay for these decades of peace. Neither did you know of one that day on Komarr.” He rose and gave a surprised looking Ekaterin an avuncular kiss. “So there. Enough history and engineering.”

The Professora looked startled herself. Georg never tired of engineering, even in its social senses, and since his unexpected appointment as a Lord Auditor five years before had grown increasingly politically as well as historically minded.

“Instead, my dear, I am going to take your aunt clothes shopping. We have an interesting weekend to dress for. Would you like to come with us?”

Helen bowed her head. Ekaterin managed to keep her face neutral. “No thank you, Uncle Georg. I have some things to do, and I was going to tidy up your garden while I can.”

Georg looked puzzled at both women’s lack of response to an offer he did not often make. “Are you sure?”

Inspiration struck Ekaterin, who pulled from her pocket an exceptionally elegant pasteboard square. “I am, Uncle Georg. But why don’t you make a start at Estelle’s? She’s Lady Alys’s modiste, so you can’t go wrong.”

“Alys Vorpatril?”

“Yes.”

Her uncle whistled. “Well that’s going to the top and no mistake. Thank you, my dear, I shall take your advice.” He took the pasteboard with a smile, feeling its embossed design, and began chivvying his wife out to the hall, and then out of the front door where an ImpSec aircar waited, the driver chatting amiably to Pym.

Ekaterin found herself alone in her aunt’s kitchen. Time to weed the garden. But she found, as the flowerbeds were swiftly reduced to order and Pym drove her back to Vorkosigan House, that while still thoroughly nervous about the duty Miles thrust on her, she did feel more content. Of course you do, silly. This is Miles. Whatever malign and ancient history her often alarming husband had lodged
in his brain, and whatever this strange scientific hypothesis of Dr Chandler’s, she trusted Miles. Not, of course, to observe decorum or over-respect anyone’s proprieties, but with her heart and hopes, her son and herself. Miles had always made her laugh and feel better and still did, despite the nerves and pressure of being a Vorkosigan. What had Armsman Roic told her Martya Koudelka had said of her strange new family?

*The Vorkosigans are amazing, but you have to admit, they do eat you up. They give you a wild ride in return, though.* [1]

It wasn’t often a bad deal, and sometimes a truly asonishing one. The groundcar smoothed to a halt in the porte-cochere, and before Pym could escort her, she opened the rear door herself and slid to her feet.

“Don’t worry, Pym, just put the wagon away. I’ll be wherever Miles is.”

“Very good, milady.”

But the Armsman didn’t drive away until the double doors had closed behind her, Ekaterin noticed with what she suddenly realised was approval. *When did I stop minding the security screen?* Now Roic was reporting to her from his station by the control-panel for the door and force-screens.

“You have an urgent message from Lady Vorpatril, milady.”

*Ack.* Had three days with Estelle not been enough, after all? Or … Squaring her shoulders Ekaterin headed for the secured comconsole in the library.

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Midweek found Miles at Vorkosigan Surleau with the free hours for which he had hoped after satisfying Guy Allegre’s very stern-looking young ImpSec captain the old house could be satisfactorily defended at need, and, more to the point, that Gregor could be safely evacuated in several directions. *Though not all at once.* Miles nobly refrained from pointing out to Captain Khourakis that a five-year-old Gregor had been evacuated to this house (and almost immediately re-evacuated, by quarter-horse) at the outbreak of Vordarian’s War. More positively, Miles made sure that Arsman Jankowski, not just District- but village-born, and until eight years before a frighteningly efficient ImpSec sergeant on the diplomatic protection detail, was with them throughout and would remain at Vorkosigan Surleau as liason and pointman for Khourakis and his team. Miles had also, as they contemplated possible fields of fire from the stable loft, taken the trouble to speak to Khourakis with an honesty he intended to show.

“ImpSec’s Horus eye never closes, Captain, That’s basic. But don’t be alarmed by all this, either. You know, I think, that while my official record says courier service, I actually did ten years in covert ops under Chief Illyan.” Khourakis nodded cautiously, so Miles risked a professional grin. “You don’t know any more details than you ought, I’m sure, but you know I survived. And my considered opinion is that the risk here is *very* low.” This earned him a searching look and Khourakis an explanation. “Frankly, the only people in a position to make trouble are already coming to this meeting. And the ones who would like to make trouble, if they knew what we shall be doing, don’t know anything of the sort. The only surprise is the one we’re debriefing, the Terran, Dr Chandler. Who has, by the way, readily agreed to co-operate with one total search, as Gregor requires, so you’ll need to let me know how you want to do that. He will also be bringing some equipment you can scan however you wish, but will then need to be installed.” Khourakis nodded regularly during this recital. “You have Jankowski as a liaison, and I am only a call away. Have you questions?”

“I don’t think so, Lord Auditor.” Khourakis gave him a keen appraisal. “You have been very helpful. Save for the secrecy it seems no different from a weekend at Count Vorvolk’s, where this squad has been many times.” Appraisal seamlessly became a bland look worthy of Pym at his most head-butlerish. “So any surprises would be down to you, my Lord. As host. And I’m sure you know better than that.”

Miles blinked. Where was Allegre getting them? Or was it some effect of working especially closely with Gregor? He made a rapid decision. “Let me apprise you also, Captain, that we shall have some late arrivals. But you need not be alarmed. The Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar have experienced delays. They will come in through the usual official channels at the shuttleport, then come directly here in an unmarked flier whose designation you will receive in good time from the senior ImpSec Duty Officer at the port.”

Khourakis offered a surprised nod. “Of course. That is very clear also, my Lord.”

“Otherwise, I assure you, all surprises will be inside our discussions, and no concern of yours.”

“Very good, my Lord.” Khourakis continued calmly to assess possible fields of fire, and when they emerged from the stable-block Miles was able to hand him off to Jankowski and claim his free
hours. His reward was to visit a man he would cheerfully go out of his way to avoid. Staring glumly at the view as Pym sedately piloted the lightflyer over the lake and turned towards Hassadar, Miles thought there was probably no-one on Barrayar he would rather see less. *Needs must when the devil drives*, they said, and he knew it to be true; also that the devil’s worst was nothing to what had to happen when angels drove.

He glanced down the valley in the direction of Vorkosigan Vashnoi, or rather the glassy wasteland where the old District capital had been before the Cetagandans’ parting atomic gift to his grandfather —lands left specifically to him, not his father, in the old man’s will. In the first bitter flush of the gift he had with inner glee mortgaged them lock, stock, and barrel to an unsuspecting ship-owner on Beta, during the adventure that gave birth to the Dendarii Mercenary Fleet; but he had later taken care in his admittedly violent teenage fashion to redeem them from hock. More lately he had come to think of the once bustling, now barren site with more emotional attention. On the way down Pym had on instructions taken the specially shielded lightflyer much lower across the badlands than was officially permitted, after comconsoling a warning to their tracking ImpSec escort and air control in Hassadar. When he was a child they had still glowed faintly in the winter dark, but now they were dull and inert. Or not quite so inert: scrub and twisted trees were beginning to recolonise the outer zone, and earth had blown over the glassy centre of the site, reducing its odd refractions of light with a dull coating of soil, stunted weeds, and red Barrayaran grasses. *An inheritance I have neglected.*

Clearing the hills around the long lake Pym accelerated, and a brisk flight brought them to Hassadar, now District capital for more than seventy years and growing towards its second million residents. Ahead of them the boundaries of central traffic control were clearly visible as a convoy of lumbering heavyflyers entered the automated zone and were marshalled into a tighter string. Trade was booming. *Good. We’re due some prosperity.* But with the zone still several kilometres north Pym peeled to the right and brought the flyer down on a rooftop landing-pad marked with the Vorkosigan mountain-and-maple-leaf sigil. *Still feeling proprietary, Mark?* At least it wasn’t genetically branded on the building’s most important workers anymore. Exiting the flyer he found Martya Koudelka waiting by the entranceway, but Pym was speaking.

“Would you mind if I got some lunch, milord? We will need to leave by 15:00 if you wish to keep your later appointment.”

*Which was with his seizure stimulator, and not to be missed if he wanted his brains tomorrow morning.* “Of course, Pym. I’m sure you can find something splendid to eat here.” Very bland smiles were exchanged. “Carry on, then. Hello, Martya.”

“Hello Miles.”

Pym slipped past into an access-door, leaving Miles alone with Martya, though he imagined his Armsman would be checking on the building’s overall security before going in search of food. Above him the ImpSec escorts Gregor had insisted on began their wide waiting–and-watching circles.

“Is all well with the Koudelkas?”

“Yes, Mama and Delia send love. But your visit has Enrique distracted, poor man. He’s asked me at least a dozen times if I thought it could be those Escobarans back again to carry him off. I’ve assured him you wouldn’t allow that. Would you, Miles?”

At Martya’s potent look Miles thought better of teasing her. “No, no, nothing like that. I just need … a word about a project he mentioned to Ekaterin. Who sends you love, by the way.”

“She’s coming with you to Vorkosigan Surleau for the summer, isn’t she?”
“Oh yes. And Nikki. We come down on Friday in fact, though the weekend is given over to business. Call next week. I know she’ll be glad to see you.”

“I shall.” Martya was looking at him … affectionately? Eh? “I know Master Tsipis keeps you informed, Miles, and you’re pressed for time today, but there’s a lot here you should see.” Briefly, she squeezed his arm. “We’ve placed a large order with your meadery, you know. They’ll need some new investment for the money really to flow up into the hills.”

He glanced up at her sharply, but keeping data relevant to them secret from the Koudelka girls was not, in his experience, a useful thing to try. She was smiling at him with open approval. Dammit, this won’t do. Not that Martya was the sort to blab anything she didn’t mean to say. Even to Mark? His clone-brother could be persistent. But Mark and Kareen Koudelka were still on Beta. A good thing too.

Such grumpy thoughts were dispelled when, swinging round a corner behind Martya Miles found himself abruptly in office-space, with half-a-dozen clerks of both genders gazing at him from behind data-units. He almost saluted them in reflex but hastily converted the twitch to a palms-down gesture as they started to rise; to no avail whatever. A young woman in the front row seemed to be their speaker.

“Welcome, my Lord.” A slightly strangled look came to her face as she found she had no room to curtsey behind her desk and attempted a bow. “We wanted to thank you for the work you’ve brought here. It’s making a big difference.”

What? The woman’s accent was pure mountain, thick as maple mead. Mark had taken care to recruit in the hills, had he? That was—smart of him—very proper. Or was there more to it? Miles’s own accent, he heard with amusement, thickened a little to match.

“Belike. I hoped it might. Ah … have we met before?” He looked up at her hopefully.

“Oh not to speak to, my Lord. I’m Vada Rachov, from Silvy Vale. I was one of the older ones at the school when you visited two years ago.” She smiled nervously. “I’m sure Ma Csurik would skin me if I didn’t give you her best wishes.”

“And please relay mine. Is she well?”

“Oh yes. Last I talked to my ma, anyway.”

“The comlinks were installed, then?”

“Oh yes, my Lord. It’s how I knew about this job. Having power has changed everything for the Vale.”

And not just on the surface, Miles thought. But the deeper changes were the more wrenching. No more Ma Mattulich now; Ma Csurik instead. And that’s not progress—that’s a miracle. He looked at the other clerks, also by their looks young mountain folk. “Are you all from Silvy Vale?” The expected flow of denials got him across the room with a word or two spoken to each person. None but Vada were from anywhere close to Silvy Vale, as it turned out, but all were from upland communities scattered along the flanks of the Dendarii, used to hard work and long winters, and, he was assured, sending some of the money they made back to folks at home. Martya, waiting by a further door, was grinning at him.

“You do public relations very well, you know, Miles,” she teased him as the door swung shut behind them. Drat the girl! But slightly to his own surprise Miles found himself more content than embarrassed, and freshly determined to take Ekaterin to meet Hanna and Lem Csurik in Silvy Vale. It would be a good ride from Vorkosigan Surleau, and he wondered if the flood of wild roses he had
once seen on that trail would still be there in their wondrous beauty for him to show her. And for Fat Ninny to eat. The thought of his beloved horse, growing stiff in the joints and more deserving of his disrespectful name but still hale and always eager to see him, cheered Miles immensely. It had been the best thing about his morning with Khourakis. After what seemed like a mile of corridor—and when did this place of Mark’s grow so large?—Martya led him into a conference-room where a familiar, ectomorphic figure nervously waited.

“Enrique.”

“Lord Vorkosigan.” Miles raised an eyebrow as he extended his hand. The Escobaran looked as if he was screwing up courage to dive into icy water, and his voice went up an octave as he took it. “Ah … Miles. How are you?”

Ah well. Points for effort. It had taken Ekaterin with extensive help from Martya and Kareen most of an evening to persuade Enrique to call Miles by his given name, on the one occasion since their marriage he had invited the scientist to eat with them. The little drama of Burgos’s attempted arrest by Parole Officer Gustioz had penetrated the genetic entomologist’s usual happy oblivion to worldly consequence, and the hypnotic authority Miles exerted to save him from incensed Escobaran authorities who had pursued him across the Nexus was branded deeply into his mind.

“Very well, thank you, Enrique. Ekaterin too.” Martya was twitching at him. “Please, there’s nothing to worry about. I can see this, ah, facility is running wonderfully, and has grown beyond recognition. Congratulations.” Surely that was enough to reassure anyone? Enrique still looked as if he might suffer a renewed attack of twitching at any moment. “I wanted to ask you about a research-project Ekaterin mentioned to me. One you had to abandon, I gather, about reclamation of irradiated land.”

Enrique’s long face, which had brightened at Miles’s reassurances, became more lugubrious than ever. “Oh, that. I’m afraid it’s completely stalled.”

“Nevertheless. Ekaterin did tell me, but would you summarise for me what you hoped to do, and what prevented you?”

“Well … do you know about the betaradiophagic bacteria the Cetagandans found in a system near Sigma Ceta?”

As it happened, Miles did. Or he probably wouldn’t have been there, he thought, slightly guiltily in the light of his warm reception by Martya and the local employees. “Ah, yes. Clever little critters feeding on primordial radionuclides on an outcrop of rock in a saline lake somewhere.”

“Yes, exactly.” Enrique didn’t seem impressed Miles knew this string of unlikely facts. But perhaps he thought everybody should know about improbable Cetagandan bacteria in the same detail he undoubtedly did himself. “The mineral source gave unusually pure and steady beta-radiation, and the bacteria evolved to harvest it. And of course some Terran insects like the cockroach are extremely resistant to gamma-radiation. I was hoping I could splice some of each into an armoured version of the butter-bug and get it to scavenge radioactive isotopes.”

Miles had heard more than one Koudelka sister remark that Enrique had bioscience ideas the way Zap the Cat had kittens. Judging from this, the ideas were not unlike the kittens in any case. Fascinated by a willingness to re-arrange nature almost as great as his own, he nodded for the Escobaran to go on. “What a splendid thought. But it didn’t work out?”

“No.” A hesitation. “It was Vorkosigan Vashnoi I had in mind.” Was it, indeed? Despite himself, Miles warmed to the Escobaran, who was frowning. “But the radiation plats were a shock. I don’t
know what kind of bomb the Cetagandans used but there’s still an awful lot of alpha-radiation out there, far more than any data I’ve seen would predict.”

From a number of old ImpSec reports he’d managed to find in the family archives Miles also knew something about this. And he knew who would know a great deal more. “Yes. I believe there were some experimental features of the device. An unusually high level of continuing alpha-radiation was suggested as a possible consequence.”

“Well, it’s too high for my girls.” Miles presumed he meant the butter bugs. Armoured radiation-eating butter bugs. “They’d be torn apart.”

“So what you need is a … biologically compatible way of absorbing the alpha radiation?”

“Yes. But I really don’t think it can be done.”

“You might be right, of course. But I have a notion it may be possible, Enrique.” The Escobaran’s eyebrows shot up. Chandler had been very surprised, too, Miles recalled with pleasure, to be asked in a sudden call long after midnight whether it would be correct to think that an adapted version of frames, while unable to transmit particulate matter, could safely dispose of its energies whether directly emitted or produced by collision. It would. Excellent. And could such a cubic frame be made solid yet miniaturised to fit inside an insect? It could. Even better. And no, he didn’t want to explain what he had in mind just yet. “You said there were two problems?”

“Yes. Assuming the girls could concentrate radioactive materials, there would be considerable residue after they extracted energy for themselves. I thought to make them bind it with organomagnetics into a pellet they would regurgitate, that could be swept up by a hover with a field-tractor. But I’m sorry, the genetics of the Sigma Cetan bacteria proved very hard to work with. I simply could not make the molecular equations work dynamically. So beta-radiation became a problem again. Round and round.” Another long hesitation. “I’m sorry, Miles. I wanted to help you, and all these people you look after.” Enrique’s loose-limbed gesture took in the whole population of the District. Now Miles was embarrassed. He knew only too well what absentee landlords the Vorkosigans had been in recent generations.

“Thank you, Enrique. It was a good thought.” That was true enough, but not much to offer. “Don’t despair. I take it what you would really like, if the alpha-radiation problem could be resolved, would be to talk to a top-flight Cetagandan geneticist about their bacteria? The papers were in their Journal of Non-Human Genetics, I believe.”

Enrique’s soaring eyebrows were a pleasure to behold. As were Martya’s. “That’s correct.” Enrique stole a sidelong glance at Martya. “I wanted to send an enquiry to their embassy, but Martya said that wasn’t a good idea. And that I shouldn’t really mention Cetaganda at all here, because of their Occupation.”

“She has a point,” Miles admitted. About five million of them. “But Gregor has always sought reconciliation and peace. I think you’ll find the process is much further along than people think. And you can always mention Cetagandans to me, you know. I’ve made some acquaintances among them, down the years.” Like the Emperor, the Handmaiden of the Star Creche, and the Chief of the Celestial Garden’s security. “Nice enough people when they’re not invading you or any of your close friends. Anyway, no promises, mind, but I just might be able to get you a Cetagandan consultant.” His wristcom vibrated gently to remind him of Pym’s admonitions. “And that would be a way forward, yes?”

Enrique manfully swallowed astonished curiosity. Martya looked as if she really hoped Miles was not teasing Enrique and couldn’t quite see how that could be. “Certainly. If the alpha-radiation issue
were resolved. But how you propose to change the laws of physics …” Enrique trailed away into a mumble.

“Not physics.” Miles grinned. “Just reality.” *Maybe.* “I’ll get back to you.”

* * * * *

Very late that night, lying sleepless beside her, Gregor found his Empress no more asleep than he. Laisa propped herself on one elbow to look at him.

“What is it, love? Are you worried about this weekend?”

“Not exactly. I do think Chandler’s for real, and that we’re going to be faced with a major decision.” *I am going to be faced with it.* “But it’s not that. It’s … Miles.”

“Oh? He seemed cheerful enough when he called this evening to reassure you that your squad-captain was already patrolling the stables and posting lookouts all over.”

Gregor snorted. “Oh, he’ll survive.” Laisa didn’t think he meant Miles. “But … you heard Miles warn me the other day he’d used one of these frames to talk to Aral and Cordelia, and that they’ll be here, delays permitting, sometime late on Saturday night?”

“Yes?”

“Did anything strike you? About Miles, I mean.”

Laisa frowned in the thin summer darkness, thinking. “Not really. I was wondering if you’d mind him calling the Viceroy and Vicereine, but saw you were pleased. And I thought Miles was right we might need their … voices. That was his word, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. And I agree, he was right.” Gregor looked at her intently, his head turned on the pillow. “After yours, there is no-one whose advice I heed more than Aral’s in politics, and Cordelia’s in, ah, philosophy.” He paused, meditatively. “Their voices, yes. He did say that. But it was Miles’s voice I was thinking about.” He rolled to face her directly. “I can barely remember life before Miles, you know. As a child he filled this place with his needs. I adored him. So much determination in so tiny and fragile a being.” A gentle hand stroked her hair. “He gave me an inspiration I needed then, as you do now. A strategy.” His grin flashed. “Of course the *tactics* weren’t always so good.”

Restless, Gregor turned back to stare up at the high ceiling. “I’ve always admitted to myself that he saved me during that nonsense when I ran away. He and Aral, who could bring the fleet.” Almost in a murmur he added “The *Prince Serg*”, and Laisa’s heart beat a little faster. So far as she could see Gregor’s quiet obsession with defending himself from his father’s genetic and other legacies was his only real vulnerability—he had even insisted that what should be the *Prince Serg* class of warships be known for the second vessel of that design, the *Princess Kareen*, and Laisa knew there was much she had yet to learn about her husband’s private thoughts of his un lamented sire. The tale of Gregor’s youthful adventure in bond-slavery and strange part in orchestrating a timely start to the War of the Hegen Hub had left her speechlessly grateful to Miles in a much wider context than the personal ones she had expected of Gregor’s foster-brother. What was coming now?

“I think for Miles the best thing, really, was to have served his father’s reputation. Do you remember news of the victory reaching Komarr?
“Oh yes.”

“You were, what, nineteen?”

“That’s right.” She thought back to student days. “There were still a lot of people who wouldn’t believe anything good of Aral Vorkosigan.” The Viceroy’s old and unfair soubriquet, The Butcher of Komarr, had no place in her mouth, she thought. Nor in this bed.

“And you’re right it was a turning-point. I remember a professor of politics made himself a considerable reputation by arguing on the ‘vids that everyone on Komarr now owed Aral a dinner of his choice. And we Toscanes had a family meeting that grew smug with recollections of our wisdom in co-operating with the Imperium.” She paused to sort out memories, and frowned. “You know the Vorkosigans far better than I do, love, but I haven’t had the sense the Solstice Massacre troubles any of them deeply. Or … did you mean that Miles could actually equal his father for a minute? You said it was the only time, practically speaking, they ever met as Admirals.”

“Yes.” Gregor smiled reminiscently. “Technically Aral had to get me to confirm retrospectively his own reactivation as a fleet admiral, but I wasn’t going to quibble. And you’re right that Aral came to terms with what happened at Solstice long ago. Miles and Cordelia too.” His tone went bleak. “But there was another war, between our conquest of Komarr and lucky triumph in the Hegen Hub. Escobar. Where Aral commanded only retreat from a ghastly disaster.”

There were an awful lot of skeletons in Gregor’s family closet, but she had not forgotten this one. Time to be more direct. “Escobar, yes. Where your father was killed. Which—forgive me, my love—was not a disaster. It was your good fortune. As it was Barrayar’s by all the accounts I’ve ever heard, including yours.” Had his breath hitched?

“Exactly.” He turned to look at her. “Stupendous good fortune, for all except the soldiers and the crewmen who died with him.” Was that it? But surely … Gregor looked miserable. “The fortunes of war, that can affect even princes. A stunning lie.” What? “Laisa, love, you know how risks must be calculated in business, and you have seen something of how it must be in politics. The Escobar disaster did not simply kill my father and all those other people. It killed his War Party, the whole reversionary interest, and the Political Officers, the Ministries as they had been for a generation. Look at it coldly. It did everything necessary for Aral’s Regency and my inheritance—right down to boosting his reputation again as the savour of a hundred thousand men and three-quarters of a fleet. Ezar could hardly have planned it better.” A vile silence seemed to stretch around her and she heard Gregor’s voice down a tunnel. “D’you really think he didn’t?”

Her mouth was dry, but Gregor seemed calm. Your grandfather killed your father? “Ezar killed his son?” Once again she appreciated Cordelia’s use of her proprietary expletive: Barrayarans! What Russian moodiness and French romanticism didn’t add to their insane cultural mix, Greek tragedy soon took care of.

“I have thought so for many years. Since not long after the Hegen Hub business, in fact.” His hand held hers. “I told you what sent me climbing off the balcony and running away that night was finding out what kind of a man Prince Serg really was.” Gregor gave a twisted smile, as he spoke his father’s name. “At the end of it all I told Miles that, and he made me promise to speak to Cordelia. I did. She … set me straight on many things.”

I bet she did, poor love. Laisa risked a smile, but Gregor didn’t respond. Instead he grimaced.

“She was there, you know, for the worst of it. And told me things that aren’t mine to pass on. But thinking it through afterwards I realised she had been unusually careful about what not to tell me. Which Aral also hadn’t told me—how he came to be a junior to Vorrutyer and my father in that shambles.” There was another meditative pause. “After the Hegen Hub I talked about Serg with
Aral, and saw he felt very constrained. To my great relief later I had the wit not to press it, and after a while I realised why.” Gregor took her hands in his. “Ezar lined up the shot but I think he made Aral pull the trigger.” His grasp tightened. “Then he made Aral take Serg’s place, as Regent and as my father. Think about it, love, for a man like Aral. Not his blood-claim to the throne—he’s never wanted it, truly—but his honour.” His grasp was painful, but not for the world would she interrupt him. “And Aral did it. Never once as a child did I fear him, never once did he disrespect our … titles. His love for me was and is unstinting, and untainted. But as an adult, knowing what I do now, I can see that under the iron control and open love something in him never stopped mourning.”

His hands relaxed, and he rubbed hers softly. “Sorry, love. What has me spooked is that ever since I’ve pretended to Aral with every power at my command that I do not know or suspect anything about his part in my father’s death. I’ve pretended that same thing to Miles. And I thought it had worked. But I think Miles has worked the assassination out, and I am very nervous about what he plans to do.”

So that was it; at least he knew. Cordelia’s voice sounded again in Laisa’s mind. *Barrayarans! They eat their own young, you know.* And so, it seemed, they did. She had to agree with Gregor there was no easy way out of this tangle—family secrets didn’t allow anything but painful melodrama anyway, and on Barrayar, with these families, so much more was always at stake. Not to mention Miles’s mysterious Terran and whatever surprises he had planned. Still … her grin surprised her. “Perhaps you’ll just have to wait and see what happens, love.”

Gregor gave her a rueful look. “Yes. And for once I hate it.”

* * * * *

When Miles, directed by Roic, strolled into the library at Vorkosigan House he found Ekaterin sitting with Nikki in front of the unsecured comconsole. Both seemed intent on a colourful display of cartography, by the look of it Barrayar’s Northern Continent at about, Miles calculated with a squint, the end of the Cetagandan Occupation. His cough was forestalled as both turned to look at him.

“Hello, love.”

“Hello, sir.”

“Hello Nikki.” He looked greetings and mild puzzlement at Ekaterin. “I thought homework was over for the season.” Ekaterin smiled and gestured at her son.

“It is, sir. I was asking Mama about the Cetagandans.”

*Were you, indeed?* But a thought saved Miles from over-reacting. “Would this be to do with your Captain Vortalon, by chance? I heard”—he tapped his nose—“that you and Arthur Pym had an earnest disagreement about him.” Nikki’s slit-eyed appreciation of good intelligence-work warmed Miles’s heart and Ekaterin looked at him with a smile, but the boy was shaking his head.

“Not Vortalon himself. It was something Emperor Dorca said.” A slight hesitation. “I can explain it, sir, but it involves some plot-stuff.”

“I’ve the time, if you want to explain it, Nikki.” *And no terrible wish to use my seizure stimulator just yet.* Nikki nodded, and with a glance at Ekaterin Miles settled into a spare chair. “So what did Dorca the Just say, and what is your dispute with Arthur?”
Nikki frowned. “I think you know, sir, that Captain Vortalon, well, Lord Vortalon really, had to hunt down the men who killed his da?”

It was Miles’s turn to nod, rather abruptly. Ekaterin too stiffened in her seat. It was Vortalon, after all, who had oppressed Nikki last year with consciousness of possible obligations to revenge, when slander had rumoured Miles as the killer of his own unlamented da. Not unlamented by him. The thought was shared, but Nikki was speaking again, at careful length.

“It took Lord Vortalon a long time to get the last assassin, the mastermind, because it turned out to be his cousin.” A steady look traversed them both. “A bit like Lord Richars attacking Count Dono last year. The cousin was going to kill him too—Lord Vortalon, I mean—so he could inherit the Countship. It was greed, really, I think. He was poor because his da and Lord Vortalon’s da quarrelled, and his da was disinherited, so he felt cheated.” Nikki took a breath. “Lord Vortalon couldn’t believe it for the longest time, but eventually his friend gave him evidence so he knew he had to kill him but he though the dishonour of kin-killing was too great. So he went to Prince Xav, who he always calls his mentor as well as his commander, and asked him what he should do.”

Despite the thorny ground and uncertain pronouns Miles was caught up in the tale and the unfolding problem. As his stepson spoke he also found himself appreciating the boy’s mind. Nikki had caught up quickly with the weight of Barrayaran history that had so suddenly entered his life with his new family.

“The Prince was your great-grandfather, wasn’t he, sir?”

“Quite right. His daughter Olivia married Count Piotr, and was my Da’s ma. So what advice did old Xav give Lord Vortalon?”

“He said everyone must decide for himself what truly matters. There was obviously dishonour and danger in killing the cousin, who was being protected by some Cetagandans, but also in letting him live. And Prince Xav said he couldn’t ever be allowed actually to inherit.”

“Did Lord Vortalon accept that?”

“Well, he had to. But he asked Prince Xav what he thought his Da would do—what Emperor Dorca would do.” Miles held his breath. “And Prince Xav said sadly that Dorca would certainly kill him, on principle. And that’s what Vortalon did, only they didn’t show the actual killing.” Nikki brooded briefly on this injustice, then looked straight at Miles. “Arthur and I agree Prince Xav was very noble but Lord Vortalon and Emperor Dorca were right. What do you think, sir?”

If they were agreed this was not the dispute, so Miles trod warily. “That is a mature point-of-view, Nikki, but I think myself it was Vortalon and Dorca who were noble, and Xav who was right.” He gave Ekaterin a mildly apologetic glance. “As to whether the cousin, ah, needed to be killed … well, I don’t think I can honestly say without knowing a lot more about him.” This seemed to be accepted. “What did you and Arthur disagree about?”

“What Emperor Dorca’s principle was, sir. Arthur says it’s revenge, that you have to avenge a wrong, especially a killing.”

“And what do you say?”

Nikki gave a sly grin. “I think it’s more complicated than that because emperors have to be.” Out of the mouths of babes … Gregor had taken to Nikki after the boy called him to request rescue from Vassily Vorssoisson’s panicked attempt to take custody of him from Ekaterin. “Of course, he’d want revenge”—he was now Ezar, Miles guessed—“just like everyone else. But he couldn’t make that a
principle, I don’t think. Not over everything else.”

“You are very right, Nikki.” Speak to the heart. “And you have good reason to know why that must be so.”

“Yes. That’s part of it.” A frank look—good boy. No—smart boy. “But Prince Xav knew the cousin killing Count Vortalon wasn’t just murder, it was high treason. So it wasn’t in every case that Dorca would have said to kill the killer, only this particular one. Emperors can’t overlook treason.”

“That’s a persuasive idea, Nikki, and mostly right. But you know, emperors can overlook a lot, when they want to. Not all treason is equally threatening to the Imperium.”

“I thought of that, sir. But the cousin who murdered Count Vortalon wasn’t just stealing a rank. He was stealing a district. And he was … I don’t know, poisoning the Council of Counts.” Nikki blushed a little. “I heard Count Dono say that about Lord Richars. It made me think of Lord Vortalon’s problem because he decided in the end he’d do it, the killing I mean, because it wasn’t only for himself, but for everyone the cousin would rule.” The frown returned. “But that’s a different thing, isn’t it? From Dorca’s principle? Or what I think his principle is.”

This scrupulous addition won Miles’s admiration. “You’ve certainly thought about it very carefully.” He peered at the comconsole display. “Where did the maps come in?”

“Oh … I was wondering where Vortalon’s District could have been. I know they made it up, but it’s supposed to be close to Vorbarr Sultana.” Another frown. “In the stuff at the beginning it’s always said to be heavily occupied. I was wondering if that could have been what Xav meant about Ezar, that the cousin would have to die because he was a collaborator.”

“Ah … probably not. But that’s just another version of the treason theory, Nikki. And like treason, collaboration comes in many forms.”

“Huh.” Nikki gave the comsonsole display a thoughtful look. “I don’t think I understand the Cetagandans, sir. How they think, I mean. Mama said the ones who came here were all ghem, but they would have orders from the haut who stayed behind.”

Did she, now? “That sounds right.” Miles considered. “I can’t think of a simpler way of putting it, Nikki, than to say the entire Cetagandan Imperium is a sort of giant genetic experiment. The haut want to become more than human. Post-human, some people say. They may already be … inhuman. But they certainly run the show, and though Cetagandans don’t talk about it much these days, your Mama is right that the ghem would not have invaded Barrayar without their haut emperor’s command.”

“But what do the ghem get out of it? Are they just troops, then?”

“Not really, Nikki. But what the ghem get out of serving the haut is a good question.” With no certain answer. Miles looked at Ekaterin more to gain time than anything else, but to his surprise she took it as a cue.

“Think about it, Nikki love. You know about the need to feel loyal to something—to love something. In their own way, I think, the ghem love the haut. As their parents, really. And they are fiercely loyal, as you are to Miles and I.”

Miles’s came to red alert. Not surprising Ekaterin was one thing, but that analysis cut deeper to Cetagandan bone than any reference article Miles had ever read, which was all of them. In about five thousand fewer words. To whom had Ekaterin been talking? And how had it been arranged?
“Loyalty? Huh.” Nikki brooded on this.

_Time to switch tracks._ Miles waved a hand airily. “In any case, I’m impressed by your and Arthur’s dispute.” He grinned at his delightful stepson. “It’s very high-minded. How shall you resolve it between you?”

“Well, that’s another thing. I was going to ask the Emperor when I had a chance.” Nikki glanced up as his parents came simultaneously to alarmed attention. “I know that’s not what the special card’s for. I meant at some party or something. You’re always going to them. But Arthur’s never met him at all so it doesn’t seem fair.” Had Nikki been standing he would, Miles thought, have been scuffling his feet, hands in pockets. “I suppose there isn’t really an answer anyway. They never said on the ‘vid what the principle was.”

Miles and Ekaterin both eyed him warily. “You know, Nikki,” she began, “that episode was first shown only two or three years ago, wasn’t it? You could write a letter to the company that made it.”

“Would they reply?”

_Good point._ “They would, I fancy, if the letter was on Auditorial paper.” Miles had no objection to dumping problems on the scriptwriters, and grinned at Nikki, who grinned back.

“Well, they would then. I’ll ask Arthur. He and his Ma went down to the lake today. We’re going on Friday?”

“Yes.” Miles returned Ekaterin’s measured look. “It’ll be fun, Nikki. Summers on the lake and in the hills are among my best memories. But you know we have guests this weekend? And some business, I’m afraid.”

“Oh yes, Uncle Georg and Aunt Helen, and Aunt Alys and Uncle Simon, and others I’m Not to Ask About.” Nikki’s voice teased his Ma, who smiled back, but the boy’s face revealed sudden calculation. _Uh-oh …_ At the same moment a thump and quacking miaow from the far side of the library revealed to three startled gazes a triumphant grey-and-tabby form perched precariously on the uppermost brass-ring of an armillary sphere of which Miles was extremely fond; it dated from the last decade of the Time of Isolation. A tail waved in uncertain balance. As if reminded Nikki shook himself free of his seat and stood, his head almost level with his mother’s and well above Miles’s.

“Can I go see the new kittens?”

_Zap already had more of the persistent little horrors? How fast, exactly, _could_ cats breed? Not for the first time Miles began to believe reports he’d read about feral colonies of _Felis catus_ on old Terra, and shuddered at the thought of the progressing Barrayaran infestation for which he could probably be held single-cattedly responsible. Ekaterin was simply nodding at their son.

“Yes, but take care you don’t disturb Ma Kosti, Nikki dear. She’s … a bit preoccupied today.” _And extremely indignant about Vorlynkin hating cauliflower. Apparently._ Or so Roic had informed Miles with a whistle, to his lordship’s confusion. There was another wild miaow and clatter from the far side of the room; Miles carefully didn’t look. “We’ll see you at dinner, dear.” Ekaterin turned as Nikki slipped out. “Which is early, of course.” _So I can use my stimulator and pass out at a decent hour._

“Right.” And onto more cheerful things, not before time. A small paw felt his shin and extended needle-sharp claws in secret greeting. Miles sighed and reached down. “Martya Koudelka sends love, and says she’ll call you at Vorkosigan Surleau sometime next week.”
To Ekaterin’s intense relief Saturday dawned fair and sunny. She had been in two minds about Aunt Alys’s notion of eating outside, but a quiet hour the previous evening, sitting in peaceful twilight on the shaded south terrace while Miles showed Nikki round house and nearer grounds persuaded her she wanted to try. As she breathed upland air, even at this low elevation clearer and colder than that of Vorbarr Sultana, the improbable presence on her lap of a purring grey-and-tabby kitten also helped settle her mind while she wondered how the adventurous little beast had conned or stolen its way in Miles’s wake into one of the many aircars transporting Armsmen and staff. Rain, she discovered with surprise, would have been an absurdly bitter disappointment, and long before Miles was up, let alone about, she rounded up an assortment of staff and stray ImpSec men to rearrange tables and bear china or linen to their destinations.

Miles himself, having been brought a breakfast tray and coffee by Pym before leaving his own chambers, peered round the kitchen door at this organised bustle and sensibly headed in the opposite direction. Everything he was responsible for had been fine the previous evening—multiple security perimeters established, Chandler’s equipment screened and installed, Chandler himself resigned to an uncomfortable evening with ImpSec who would deep-screen him, keep him incommunicado overnight, and bring him in time for lunch. Nor, Miles told himself, was he nervous—it’s not like a combat drop mission; really—but did admit to a twangling anticipation a little north of his stomach, like waiting for fireworks to begin on the Emperor’s birthday.

Wandering round the house he was both mildly horrified and rather admiring to find at the side-door, where guests would enter, Captain Khourakis, in unexceptionable mufti but nevertheless at something very like parade rest, and on a nearby bench Nikki and Arthur Pym, suspiciously neatly turned out. Both greeted him politely as Khourakis nodded a mufti salute. Suppressing both a squawk and a grin he gave greetings back and went to lean against the wall by Khourakis. After a moment the boys resumed a muttered conversation both adults could hear perfectly well, and they listened together in, Miles thought, mutual fascination to Arthur’s colourfully indignant commentary on a young Jankowski hoyden in the village. He already had something of his father’s turns of phrase but without the senior Armsman’s range of nuance and banked-up tact, producing a sometimes compelling effect. Miles’s crystallising thought was that Miss Jankowski sounded an ideal candidate for ImpSec training in a few years, for the women’s squad in the protection detail. A true niece of her uncle, belike. When he caught the captain’s eye at the end of the tale he knew his thoughts were shared. Miles smiled to himself but had to swallow a groan as Arthur guilelessly continued another fascinating conversation he and Nikki must have been having.

“Do you think He’ll be in an unmarked aircar, then?” The capital H was clearly audible, and Khourakis stiffened militarily inside his mufti.

“Probably. But you can’t be sure. It might have false markings, for disguise.”

“But there’s no danger here.”

“No, I know, but security’s like insurance, you know? You have to think it might happen.”
Miles had, he sadly realised, used his happy metaphor of explanation for apparently pointless precautions once too often; in Nikki’s mouth it sounded horribly like a quotation. Khourakis glanced at Miles accusingly, and cleared his throat. Nikki and Arthur looked round.

“Whom are you discussing, please, Master Vorkosigan?” The official ImpSec voice was as level and severe as Khourakis’s grammar. Nikki glanced at Miles, who shrugged. *Your ball, kiddo.* Nikki swallowed.

“The Emperor, sir.”

“And why should you think His Imperial Majesty is expected here today?”

Nikki sighed with the long-suffering tolerance of children for slow adults. “Well, you are here, sir, with your squad fully deployed. I remember you from my Mama’s wedding to Lord Vorkosigan.” Then he added in an undertone, “And everyone’s been so mysterious it has to be Gregor. I mean His Imperial Majesty.” Khourakis looked delightfully nonplussed.

“You see,” Miles observed sententiously, “how security can become self-defeating?”

Khourakis glared at him, and showed that nonplussed did not mean distracted. “So why are you and Master Pym waiting for Him?” This time Miles gave Nikki’s quick glance a fractional shake of the head. Greeting Gregor with Lord Vortalon’s problem was not what Miles wanted; not that it wasn’t rather horribly relevant in its own way, and the time might come. Nikki took the hint and answered smoothly.

“Because Arthur’s never met him, sir, and we thought he’d be busy all the rest of the time.”

“And you have met him, Master Vorkosigan?”

“Yes, sir. Several times.” He gave a sidelong glance at Arthur Pym, very still beside him. “Through my step-father, sir. And at my Mama’s wedding, of course, when he was being Count Vorbarra.”

Now *that* was a skillful deflection, Miles thought, and it was interesting that Nikki had not chosen to mention his personal access to Gregor to the ImpSec captain. Or in front of Arthur, whom he hasn’t told? Either way, good boy. Miles levered himself off the wall.

“No security breach, you see, Captain Khourakis.” Khourakis had the grace to look down. Despite his apparent ease the ImpSec man was still, Miles thought, more unsettled by the oddity of this weekend than he ought to be after three days with Jankowski. *Hmm.* “I can’t see there’s any harm in my stepson and his friend being here. My foster-brother likes children, you know. And this is a family weekend, after all.”

The obligatory acknowledgement from Khourakis came out slightly strangled, but his blushes were spared by the arrival of a roomy old aircar bearing the Vorthyses. Nikki ran to greet his great-aunt and uncle, and after a moment he and Arthur extracted cases and valises from the hands of the ImpSec pilot and carried them into the house.

“Hello, Miles. A lovely day.” Shrewd eyes twinkled down at him.

“Georg, Helen.” He stretched to kiss the Professora’s cheek. “You’ll find Ekaterin directing a small army in the kitchen, if you care to risk life and limb. Or . . .” He steered the Vorthyses into the library, catching Roic’s eye at his duty station as they passed through the hall and requesting refreshments for the new arrivals. “There’s a nice spot here to curl up with coffee.” Miles glanced through the window as a sleek lightflyer he recognised as Allegre’s private vehicle came down. “If you’ll excuse me.”
“Of course, Miles dear.” Helen Vorthys waved him on his way, her glance straying to the laden shelves around her. “We shall be fine.”

Allegre had brought Vorlynkin, Miles saw as he re-emerged into the morning sunlight. Both were, like Khourakis, in well-chosen but ineffective mufti—similarly unremarkable suits that did nothing to conceal habitually military bearings. Khourakis was already trotting towards them. Behind him Nikki and Arthur slipped out, peered briefly, and stepped aside to stand neatly in front of their bench as the party approached, the captain now bearing two small cases.

“Shall we take those to the guests’ rooms for you, sir?”

Miles enjoyed the look on Khourakis’s face as he tried to reconcile abandoning the personal property of two very senior officers to ten-year-old boys with his deeply engrained security protocols. Allegre, suppressing a grin, took pity on his man and thanked Nikki and Arthur gravely. The boys claimed their trophies and departed. Miles stepped forward.

“Good morning, Guy, Yuri. All well, I trust?”

Allegre looked at him sardonically. “Indeed, Miles, Captain Khourakis says so, as much as may be.” He took in the mellow stone of the house, then the lake sparkling in the clear air, and with unfeigned approval gazed toward the Dendarii peaks looming on the skyline as strengthening summer light caught higher rockfields and meadows. “A beautiful setting. I’ve seen it on security ’vids many times, of course, but never been here in person. Your grandfather’s retreat in old age, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. With his horses.” Miles turned to Vorlynkin. “He and your late uncle exchanged stock once or twice, Yuri. And you ride yourself, I believe?”

“When I can.”

“The stables are over that rise, well inside our second perimeter. Wander over whenever you like. These days there’s nothing like the number of beasts my grandfather kept, but you’ll have a few to choose from. And the hacking paths beyond the paddock stay on the estate for several miles. Some go up to the castle.” He gestured at the crags with ruined fortifications topping them that rose above village and lake. “The ostlers will show you.” Miles thought of the cases he had seen. “There’s riding gear as well as tack.”

Vorlynkin looked disarmed at this friendly Vor beneficence. Good. “That’s very kind of you, ah, Miles. But I doubt I’ll have time.”

“Oh, early tomorrow you should, if it’s fine and you’re up. In the meantime …” He ushered them into the house and towards the library, where the Vorthyses stood in greeting. A footman, who had plainly only just set down a tray of coffee-pot and cups, retreated in search of additional china. Heads were nodding hellos.

“You all know one another, I think, except … Helen, this is Yuri Vorlynkin, of the General Staff. Yuri, Helen Vorthys of the History Department at Vorbarr Sultana University.”

“Admiral.”

“Professora.”

Everyone, it seemed, had been doing their homework. Reward time. As the footman returned Miles gestured everyone to sit, placing himself where he could see out of the window. “Lunch will be on the south terrace, but frankly, it’s more than our skins are worth to go out before we are summoned. Though I hope Ekaterin may spare herself and join us before too long.” He settled back and turned to
the Professora. “Guy has been asking about the house and Yuri has hopes of my horses. Did you find something on the shelves to interest you, Helen?”

“Oh yes, dear.” The Professora’s eyes twinkled. “I have had occasion recently to realise that a great deal of recent history is not in the books. Biographies of your grandfather, for example, are notably sparse and confused. But I have a promising young graduate who might rectify that for you, if you let her. And what do I see in those wonderful family bindings over there but muster-rolls for an entirely undocumented bit of the First Cetagandan War.” She shook a finger at him. “Really, dear, I know I agreed with you that Commodore Galeni was exaggerating when he denounced the uncatalogued state of your attics at Vorkosigan House, but I begin to wonder if he doesn’t have a point.”

Miles looked at Ekaterin’s smiling aunt with affectionate rue. Not quite the opening I wanted. But it’ll serve. He circled cautiously. “If you and Duv gang up on me, Helen, I expect I shall have to give in. I confess I had forgotten the muster-rolls, and”—a sly glance at Allegre—“I can’t see there’s any possible objection to releasing that sort of thing now.” Allegre twitched, but his job made him constitutionally allergic to telling anyone anything. “For a proper biography of Piotr, though, you’d need my Da, not muster-rolls. And I don’t know he’d be any more willing to co-operate now than he has ever been.” Miles steepled his fingers, glancing at Vorlynkin. “Strictly military seminars, yes. I think several of us here have heard one of those. But even in-house he says very little of his father.” Nor does Ma. Helen was nodding.

“I know, dear. And I see, of course, there might still be some very sensitive matters regarding Count Piotr. But I do think some greater openness, and frankness about matters that are open, would … serve the Vorkosigans and Barrayar better than the formal opacity we have all traditionally favoured.” The Professora smiled mischievously. “Do you agree, General Allegre? Can you? In principle, I mean.”

“Actually, I can, Professora. My concern is to keep secret what needs to be kept secret. My job is easier if there are fewer such things. You, I think”—he gave Miles a very dry glance—“are not discussing security issues at all, merely inefficient documentary accountancy on the civil side.” Ouch. Miles didn’t want anyone messing about with his Gran’da’s books and papers, never mind his own, but maybe a proper librarian was the lesser evil. Allegre smiled at him and went on. “Yuri may have a different perspective, of course. Military secrets are in a distinct category, and far less often my concern than people believe.”

“Well, that’s true, I suppose.” Relaxed in his chair, Miles found Vorlynkin a pleasant tenor counterpoint to Allegre’s baritone. “But military secrets tend to have short lives, for the most part. Secret weapons, for example, don’t stay very secret once you actually use them. It’s the ones you’ve never used that are the headache. And in a general sense I would certainly agree with the Professora that General Count Vorkosigan’s muster-rolls should be properly analysed and written-up. That’s a book I’d like to read myself.” He paused, choosing words carefully. “The guerrilla aspects of the First Cetagandan War are of interest to military historians everywhere, you know, Miles. I don’t have to answer them, thank God, but I know the Staff’s library people get a lot of galactic requests for access to our old records, as well as the usual heavy traffic from Barrayarans about their own relatives. Were I asked I would, I think, favour extensive declassification of materials predating the Komarr invasion. Even a little later.” He grinned. “And Colonel Vorinnis, our Chief Librarian, would doubtless be delighted to be able to refer enquiries to you.”

Miles smiled acidly, but there was his opportunity on a platter. “You don’t feel then, Yuri, that the Imperium would be ill-served by reviving so many memories of the, ah”—horror-show—“less savoury aspects of Barrayaran history? And the Occupation?” He gestured upwards. “I happened, for example, quite recently, in those attics at Vorkosigan House Duv Galeni is so keen for me to
have inventoried, to come across a small bag among my grandfather’s things. It contained a score or so of rather tatty Cetagandan ghem-scalps. I confess, publishing on the matter did not cross my mind as an option when I was wondering what to do with them.” Miles smiled toothily. “Is Barrayar really ready to think about its Barrayarities? It would, I fancy, be news to my lady mother.”

A snort from the Professora reminded Miles that Helen and Cordelia were close allies in the great women’s league of benign family management, a channel of communication not to be underestimated and beyond his control. But Vorlynkin took his question straight and ignored its addendum.

“I see your point, of course, Miles. But … have you seen the tourists who go to Vorhartung Castle and pay to see Mad Yuri’s scalp with all the other Vor bits in the museum? And the way Barrayaran visitors, not just Vor or attendants, are amused by them? Not cross, or embarrassed—just amused.” He shook his head. “I’m not altogether sure how or when it happened, but since Komarr Barrayar has … grown up. And, frankly, things are stable. Safe, in the short and visible medium term, over, well, more than a decade now. Since the War of the Hegen Hub at any rate, and that was something of an anomaly. So I think probably we could afford to face ourselves a little more than we have.”

Thank you, Admiral. We could indeed. And we’re going to have to. As if on cue Miles saw in one corner of his eye the slow descent outside of another capacious old aircar discreetly marked on wide doors with the Vorpatril arms, and in the other Ekaterin appear in the library doorway, cool and elegant in a long summer dress shimmering with soft greens and blues. Yes! “Hold that thought, people.” Miles beamed at his wife. “We’ll be back in just a moment.”

* * * * *

Ekaterin’s morning had been efficiently productive and satisfying to her. At some basic level it was a pleasure, pure and simple, to be able to invest properly in the duty and reward of receiving interesting (and some beloved) guests in her home. One of her homes. Miles’s home. My home. The mantra had, she thought, worked to some degree. What she had caught of Admiral Vorlynkin’s words as she skimmed across the hall sounded positive, and Miles, when she saw him, looked like a cat choosing between a rich variety of canaries. As he bounced up, excusing himself, she saw the aircar coming down and with nods to the assembled company let him drag her out again.

“Is this just Alys and Simon, Miles? Or …”

“I suspect they have company.”

“Ah. Hold on a minute.” Ekaterin swung round to collar a passing maid. “Please ask Pym immediately to escort all the guests from the library to the terrace, and warn our special guest to be ready.”

The maid galloped off as they swung out through the door. Nikki and Arthur, Miles saw with approval, were back on parade. With considerably less approval but renewed admiration for the feline covert ops network he saw next to them a small, unusually marked kitten, not as smartly turned out or presented as the boys but doing its best to get there by washing vigorously. Briefly he pondered the possibility of recruiting Zap and all her offspring as ImpSec trainers at the Academy, but decided discipline would be a problem. And Guy would almost certainly not find the idea funny. Pity. In front of him Khourakis came to quivering attention, and two other ImpSec men in mufti drifted into view beyond the descending aircar. Miles clapped Nikki on the shoulder.
“Good work. Make sure everyone knows which room they’re in, mind. You and Arthur were so efficient they never got shown up to them.”

Nikki grinned, but kept his attention on the aircar, watching it settle solidly on the grass. As the kitten looked round the front canopy opened and a guard came smoothly out, eyes scanning round before turning to Khourakis. ImpSec nods were exchanged, and a second man slid out to open the rear canopy and let down a pair of steps. Nikki and Arthur more or less came to attention themselves as the bodyguard leaned in and handed out Empress L—no, judging from her Komarran trousers it was Countess Vorbarra today. Gregor, in a simple suit but as dazzlingly elegant as ever, swung himself out next, before leaning back to hand Alys down the steps and receive her benign smile of approval. Illyan followed. The driver was still constantly scanning ground and sky with an even, quartering sweep, and Miles urged Ekaterin forwards to greet everyone in the hope of getting the whole party inside. *But we’re lunching outside anyway. And there’s Nikki …* With a mental shrug he reminded himself Vorkosigan Surleau was, after all, safe and ImpSec men paid to be alert. Besides, air cover was up, two further aircars had settled by the security-men’s barracks to disgorge liveried Vorbarra Armsmen, and before he and Ekaterin finished exchanging kisses all round Gregor noticed the children, and sent Nikki a quick grin before giving Arthur Pym an appraising look that made him quiver, and walking over.

“Hello, Nikki.”

“Hello, Sire. May I present my friend, Arthur Pym. You know his da, Armsman Pym.”

“I do.” Gravely Gregor shook Arthur’s hand. “Your father is a fine man. Laisa, love—” He captured his wife and effected the further introduction. Arthur goggled, but manfully shook hands when they were offered. The kitten demanded to be introduced as well. Looking away with a sigh Miles noticed with greater satisfaction that the windows by the side-door framed a beaming Pym and Ma Pym, watching their son talk to his rulers, and nudged Ekaterin to follow his gaze.

“All is well.”

“Yes. It is, isn’t it.” But her eyes were serious. “Until your Dr Chandler sets us all by the ears. ImpSec delivered him by his request to the back door and he begged a chance to freshen up. Pym will bring him down at your signal.”

“Perfect.” Imperial introductions had been completed; the kitten trotted back towards the house while Nikki and Arthur claimed Alys’s and Illyan’s cases, leaving imperial baggage to be dealt with in proper security by the well-laden ImpSec captain. Gregor looked across at him.

“Miles sighed again. “Because ‘Armillary Sphere’, ‘Pierre le Sanguinaire’, and even the simple ‘Pest’ have all been summarily rejected by my nearest and dearest. As it follows me everywhere like an interfering ghost I am presently considering ‘ImpSec’.” As he hoped this shotgun sally produced confused silence, save a stifled snort from Illyan. “Splendid. Everyone’s here. Let’s eat.”

Ekaterin wasn’t quite sure how it happened but tradition smoothly exerted itself and she found herself walking beside Gregor while before them Miles escorted Laisa; Alys and Simon brought up the rear. As they crossed the hall Pym and Jankowski stood tall without exactly coming to attention, and Pym peeled off to precede Miles through the kitchen. Ekaterin’s mind froze. *Gak. Yes, she really was escorting the Emperor of Barrayar through her kitchen.* Gregor looked … charmed; he didn’t, she supposed, get to see many kitchens. What Laisa might be thinking she would not imagine. The other guests, she saw as Pym exited to the terrace and deftly slid to one side, were already in their
appointed places round the long table. Sunlight dappled china and expectant faces.

“Count and Countess Vorbarra. Lady Alys Vorpatril. Captain Illyan.”

Pym’s voice was just as usual. Laisa waved the company to keep their seats with a smile. Both Vorthyses managed to do so equably, Ekaterin noticed with restorative amusement at her aunt’s and uncle’s savoir faire, while Allegre and Vorlynkin half-rose and had to subside as Gregor held his own palms down, smiling round and taking in the scene.

“Professora, Gentlemen. No formalities today, please.” He turned to Ekaterin as Alys and Simon slid past to their places. “Save in thanking our hostess.” Momently full Emperor, he gave her a half-bow, eyes dancing but intent on her as his gesture encompassed terrace and gleaming table. “To bring such grace to events is a blessing, milady.”

The compliment was absurdly pleasing. *I can do this.* “I’ve had the best help, as you well know.” Her eyes sought Alys. “Lady Alys has been a godsend. And of course it’s Ma Kosti we must thank for the food. You and Laisa are in the middle there.”

She saw them seated and took her own place as Miles claimed his at the far end of the table, but remained standing beside his chair. Now only one place was empty, between Uncle Georg and Simon Illyan. Nikki would be fed elsewhere by Ma Pym. Numbers were hopelessly uneven, of course, but *that* she could not control.

“One formality, Gregor, and we’re away.” Miles looked over to where Pym waited, flanked by a Vorbarra Armsman, and nodded. Pym vanished. Eight faces looked at their host, and one at her husband, who gestured to the empty chair. “Friends. Our missing guest, as some of you know, is a Terran scientist who has an hypothesis upon which much may hang. I have asked you here that you may see and hear him for yourselves, with a little time at least to reflect on what he says.” Miles smiled at his assembled Imperial cabinet. “And on an idea or two of my own. All of you have special skills and areas of knowledge I ask you to draw on. And all of us—” he smiled warmly at Laisa —“have the interests of the Imperium close-held in our hearts.”


*Forwards.* “As Simon will tell you, I have been known to exceed my orders. But in case any of you thought I was running away with myself again, please be assured you are all here not only informally, as valued friends of this house, but quasi-formally also, as advisers of Emperor Gregor. After lunch there is a seminar, to outline our problem, so I make no apology for the absence of wine now. But I do promise to raid the cellars this evening.”

Gregor was looking thoughtful. “You know, Miles, I’m not sure I can advise myself. But it’s a nice legal point and I shall certainly try, with or without wine’s help.”

“Thank you.” *I think.* And here was Pym, with Chandler at his shoulder, well-groomed and tense. “Ah, Dr Chandler.” Pym guided the Terran round to his chair. “Your Majesties, may I present Dr Jack Chandler, of Terra. Dr Chandler, Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Gregor and Empress Laisa Vorbarra of Barrayar.” Hands were offered and taken. “Who today are Count and Countess Vorbarra.”

Chandler nodded, studying Gregor intently, as the emperor studied him. Each, Miles was vastly relieved to see, seemed reassured by the other. Quickly he ran round the company again, this time giving first names and discarding the titles Chandler already knew.

Chandler nodded and shook hands in turn around the table, before seating himself as servitors began to appear with plates of delicious soup and warm, fresh bread. For a while everybody was occupied with tasting, noises of appreciation, and setting-to, and Miles was beginning to think he would have to set some harmless ball rolling when Chandler opened his own account by turning to Georg Vorthys.

“Lord Auditor.”

“Oh, Georg, please.”

“Thank you, but I meant the address. I have read some of your papers with admiration, but none with more fascination than your Auditorial report on the strange soletta disaster at Komarr early last year.” _Eh? Did Chandler know he had just stiffened spines around the table?_ He did. “I thought it unwise to trail in negotiations with your fellow Auditor, so I have said nothing to anyone, but now I am here perhaps I may satisfy some part of my curiosity.” Chandler paused to eat, and glanced over to Miles. “Excellent soup. Of course, you also signed that report, Lord Vorkosigan, and naturally I believe every word of it. But it doesn’t explain why there should at the time of the disaster have been such a strong gravitic anomaly near the soletta array.” He dried his mouth. “Of course, granting the report as a cover, I must respect its motives. But as a scientist, Georg, relieve my curiosity on one specific matter.”

Vorthys’s gaze, Miles noticed, strayed momentarily to Gregor and returned to Chandler. “If I can.” _Not ‘If I may’. Permission had been given._

“My own data, peripherally gathered, made me aware of the gravitic anomaly. A little work persuaded me the nearby jump-point was of interest.” Chandler paused. “My question is whether I should, in the _natural_ course of events, expect other wormholes so to … fluctuate?”

Vorthys smiled appreciation. “That would be no. Nor even, I hope, in the unnatural.” The old engineer turned Auditor looked at the Terran keenly. “I suspect that was a fine deduction as well as a delicate question, Doctor.” He nodded at the murmured ‘Jack, please.’ “Jack. Have you a particular concern with wormholes? Or jump-points?”

“So long as they cannot spontaneously do what that Komarran one seemed to have done, not really. Save in political terms.”

This spread the conversation nicely. Miles leaned forward. “Do you mean as choke-points?” No-one was pretending to do anything but listen anyway.

“Partly.” Chandler gestured round at his audience. “There is an old Terran expression about not teaching one’s grandmother to suck eggs. Perhaps a Barrayaran equivalent would be not teaching your Baba to negotiate. I wouldn’t presume to lecture _this_ company, nor any Barrayarans, on the importance of the wormhole network. But”—his hands spread eloquently—“our strengths are so often our weaknesses. Yes, wormholes are the skeleton of the nexus—so like a skeleton they support our movements but also determine where we can go, what we can do. My concern is with what may lie beyond those limits, as sensors go beyond eyes, and technology takes us beyond the limits imposed on us by our necessary possession of skeletons.” He smiled apologetically. “I mean that wormholes are merely a phenomenon. I come to the physical universe through another door. But wormholes have, quite incidentally to themselves and for accidental reasons, become critical to the Nexus and its polities in a manner no astrophysicist can ignore.”
Attention was sharp around the table.

“Accidental reasons, Doctor?” Gregor’s voice was neutral. “Cogent reasons, surely?”

“Certainly, ah, Count Vorbarra. Given the technology we have. I mean no disrespect to existing systems but the problems of the Nexus—as Bararrayans may especially appreciate—smell to me of epistemology, not ontology.” Vorthys was nodding at this; so, Ekaterin saw, were Allegre and Vorlynkin. “I may be wrong but I seriously doubt the use of mutually interfering Necklin fields to enter a spontaneous connection between points of quantum instability is the only means of rapidly transporting matter around the galaxy.”

Now Uncle Georg was laughing. “Put like that, I agree. It’s not elegant enough to be basic, is it? But it’s all we have.”

“Indeed. But not all we know.”

Illyan stirred on Chandler’s other side. “An interesting distinction, Doctor.” He paused as empty bowls were replaced with plates of cold smoked fish and delicate salad, glasses replenished with a strong, clear apple-juice. “Second-guessing is a tricky game, prone to disappointment. But are you suggesting there is something else we could do?”

“Not that we could do today, sir. Wormholes remain a limiting condition on development for all, as Newtonian mechanics restrain free movement in space. My point is simply that they are tactical or strategic parameters, not eternal verities.” A slight hesitation. “Some of this will become clearer in due course, I believe.”

“It isn’t unclear now.” Illyan smiled. “And you are quite right that the wormhole network is only incidentally critical. A single new link may render a dozen strategies and installations obsolete overnight.”

“That’s certainly true.” Vorlynkin was nodding vigorously. “I remember a ‘what-if’ exercise they used to do at the Academy, where the variable was our wormhole connection. What if it wasn’t via Komarr, but, oh, Tauranira? Or Jackson’s Whole?”

Miles couldn’t ignore that opening. “Well now. There’s a planet I’ve dreamed of invading.” He glanced at Gregor and Guy Allegre. “During my first Auditorial case, two years ago, I was more or less urged to pay it an official and heavily armed visit, and I confess temptation. The gene-houses there really do deserve some, ah, cleaning up.” He looked back at Vorlynkin. “I remember that exercise too, Yuri. What were your conclusions?”

“Oh, nothing startling. But thinking the variables through makes one sharply aware of the distinction between the facts that our link to Komarr is our only link, a lifeline we cannot ever abandon, but also our link to Komarr specifically, as itself.” He nodded to Laisa uncertainly. “I mean no offence, Countess, but one of my conclusions was that Bararray was lucky in its wormhole rediscovery. Komarr too. If Bararray had been rediscovered through a Ceta planet … well, it was all guesswork, of course, but I didn’t like the implications for anyone.”

Laisa was looking thoughtful. “No offence taken, Admiral. I hadn’t thought of it in quite that way. These days Komarrans tend to see themselves as Bararray’s galactic interface and, ah, buffer, not its victims. But those aware of the actuarial and insurance aspects of Komarran trade understand the degree of protection and consequent profit Bararrayan fleet-detachments afford us. What you say extends that awareness of a wider galactic shield to the relations of Komarr with Cetaganda—and I agree they might be most uncomfortable.”
Laisa paused while plates were again cleared and glasses filled. Then yet more plates appeared, bearing works of culinary and patisserie art. Ma Kosti, beaming in the kitchen doorway, had outdone herself, but waved away Miles’s nod of congratulations. When Gregor, contemplating a chocolate creation with at least three stories and delicate finials of cream, turned in his seat and half-bowed to her, however, she blushed scarlet without ceasing to beam. Alys sampled a peach tart with a sigh of pleasure.

“Ma Kosti really is the most extraordinary cook, Miles. I’m not sure it wasn’t your duty to let me poach her for the Residence.”

Miles hunched in his seat, Ekaterin saw with amusement. Laisa laughed. “Nooo, Alys. I should soon resemble a beachball, and so would you. Why Miles and Ekaterin don’t is a wonder to me.”

Amid general laughter and sugar-sated mellowness conversation became individual, food the common theme while Chandler and Georg rumbled science. Good coffee appeared, and Miles, judging his moment, caught Chandler’s eye. The Terran nodded, and Miles saw Ekaterin and Gregor had both noticed their exchange. Good. “Seminar time,” he sang out, and rose with Ekaterin to shepherd the party indoors.

* * * * *

Consulting Chandler and Gregor, and determined to avoid a schoolroom-grid, Miles had arranged the big study carefully. A low desk for Chandler stood at an angle to a table bearing a larger frame than any Miles had so far seen used; comfortable chairs made a wide half-circle, with Gregor and Laisa in the middle, flanked by Allegre, Vorlynkin, Alys, and Simon on one side, Vorthyses and Vorkosigans on the other. Early afternoon sun fell obliquely on the rear walls, providing sufficient light while dazzling no-one. A side-table bore bottles of water and jugs of apple-juice with an array of glassware. Miles had eventually accepted Ekaterin’s exasperated advice and decided to dispense with the little conference-packs of briefing-notes and give-away implements he still secretly wanted to provide. With everyone settled Chandler went to the desk but leaned back against the front edge, hands in pockets. Here we go. Miles sat back and reached for Ekaterin’s hand. The Terran’s bass voice was still pleasant, despite growing tension in the room.

“Count and Countess Vorbarra, lords and ladies, gentlemen. May I first thank Lord Vorkosigan for inviting you all, and you for coming. The more so as what I am going to do, frankly, is present you with a problem.” Chandler’s hands emerged from his pockets, one going to smooth back his hair, already returning to its usual disarray. “I should first explain I always refer to this problem, even bits of it that have proven true, as an hypothesis. Despite those few proven bits, including this frame”—he gestured—“the vast bulk of the problem is hypothetical. But the corollary is that it could all too easily and rapidly become real in quite the wrong way.” A twitch suggested the dire consequences that might follow. “Let me explain also how I came here, to Bararray and this juncture. Twenty years ago I was making a career in quantum astrophysics. I enjoyed what I did and I was building a fair record of clearing up niggles in theories—explaining anomalies, if you will.” He nodded at Georg Vorthys. “The paper you mentioned on Schemmerling’s set-theory for quasars was one of those.”

“A most satisfying explanation.”

“Yes, well. One day I was playing with an anomaly I couldn’t explain at all, and thought of another approach. Then … circumstances intervened—a blown instrument, a certain piece of obsolete equipment in storage I happened to know about and thought might do the job, and an unusual chance
to work in the lab alone over several weeks. The result was a very strange measurement indeed, and one I kept getting. At first I thought my jury-rig was malfunctioning, and when I could repeat the test with the proper machine, sure enough, the value reverted to what it ought to be. So I took the jury-rig home, took it apart, found nothing wrong, put it back together, and tried again. The anomaly again.” Chandler had mostly been looking at Georg and Gregor, but now looked around. “I won’t bore you with details, but the anomaly proved a loose thread, and when I pulled on it in the right way a lot of what I had supposed well-established cosmological and physical theory spectacularly unravelled. Then I put them back together, very differently, and found myself in a quite new universe.”

There was a pause while Chandler sipped water.

“The wormholes we were discussing at lunch are usually described as five-space/three-space interreference phenomena, but the fifth space in five-space might better be described as a matrix within which the dimensions of mass, energy, time, and space may be manipulated and locally controlled. The hypothesis I eventually worked out suggested a new means of approaching that matrix and effecting control over its components.” Chandler smiled without humour. “How wonderful. But then I did some real thinking, and realised what it might mean. And I knew there was a very important question I couldn’t answer at all. Whom did I trust enough to give it to?” He looked down, then back to meet the assembled eyes. “I am a scientist, and have no interest in flattery as a policy. It is nevertheless true that my eventual answer, my only answer, is you. Barrayar.”

“Why so, Doctor?” Gregor spread his hands invitingly. “Please feel free to be frank.”

“Thank you, Count. I do. But that would be another lecture.” Chandler shrugged. “Suffice to say Barrayar is unusual. You combine autocracy with responsibility, honour with pragmatism, in ways I have come to admire. But I believe my reasons will become clearer in due course.”

“Very well. Please go on.”

The Terran glanced at Georg Vorthys with a dry smile, one scientist to another. “I could, perhaps will, provide some mathematics for this, but for now I must ask you to accept two things. First, that when the matrix is approached in the hypothesis, energies needed to enter and control any given dimension are far less than in conventional theory. Orders of magnitude less. As a concrete example, standard fusion plants require very energetic initial conditions—deuterium and tritium are slammed together, mostly by relatively inefficient transfers of heat. According to the hypothesis you might instead invite them politely to fuse, and they will. The resulting energy is highly amenable to control. So power might become much cheaper.” Vorthys was clearly itching for the half-promised mathematics, but Chandler smiled at him again, even more dryly, and went on. “The second thing is that the matrix seems in its nature a meeting place of mass, energy, time, and space. Perhaps the meeting-place. Within it wormholes appear as straight lines across all four axes. But individual access to each dimension is mathematically possible, and that is where trouble really begins.”

The Terran’s hands found his pockets again.

“I shall not begin to describe what might happen if one sought directly to manipulate time on its own. I’m not sure I even know. But the direct manipulation of matter via the matrix has implications to which I will come. And the manipulation of space and energy against time offers an immediate attraction.” He looked at Miles. “Lord Vorkosigan?”

“Ah, yes.” Though he had been intent on Chandler, Miles’s backbrain took a second to recover from visions of what being able to manipulate time—go back in? go forward in?—would have meant to Admiral Naismith. Don’t go there. He nodded formally to Gregor.

“Sire, everyone. With Gregor’s approval I intend now to have two more people join us.” Miles
suppressed a smile that would have been purely gleeful. Introducing new technologies did have a pleasing quotient of unavoidable fun. “This also serves as Dr Chandler’s demonstration, for despite their best efforts my parents are still one jump away and will not be able to join us until late this evening.” He paused dramatically as murmurs of surprise sounded. “But for once, though perhaps not the last time, that need not inconvenience us. Dr Chandler?”

The Terran had acquired a tiny remote control for his larger frame, and seemed merely to gesture with his hand. There with the same suddenness and vivid immediacy as before were the Viceroy and Vicereine, plainly dressed and clearly in the tiny cabin of an imperial fast courier. The imposing effect of the larger frame made Miles blink and he felt his heart hop with the wonder of it. For others, even Ekaterin and Gregor who had known in principle what was coming, the sudden image was astonishing. Surprise blazed in all eyes and there were muffled exclamations from the Professora and Vorlynkin. Happily, Viceroy and Vicereine beamed at their son and daughter-in-law, then around at everyone.

“Gregor dear, and Laisa.” Cordelia’s voice was warm with amusement. “How nice to see you looking relaxed. I shouldn’t altogether have expected it.” Her gaze switched. “Ekaterin dear. You look well.”

Gregor recovered from his surprise. “We have all been very well fed and entertained, Cordelia. I’m sorry for your present discomforts, but selfishly glad of them as they mean you will soon be here.” He turned to the Viceroy. “Hello, Aral.”

“Sire. A pleasure, as always.”

Georg Vorthys had been taking in the lack of delay in the responses with increasing agitation and turned to Chandler with a rather wild look in his eyes. “They are still a jump out from Barrayar?”

“Yes.”

“Why is there no delay?”

“Because I have so configured a section of the matrix that the time-interval between the points in space represented by this frame and its pair on the courier is zero.”

Vorthys digested this. “The equation is fully dynamic?”

“Oh yes. And to anticipate you, no, there appear to be no limits. A zero-value can be set for any points within the Nexus. Theoretically, I can’t see why it wouldn’t work between galaxies. But I haven’t been able to check, of course, and it’s of no practical use just yet.” Vorthys had gone through red to a paler colour than normal, making Miles feel better about his own first crogglement at the implications.

“I’ll be damned.” Scientific caution took over again. “You really do mean, Jack, this technique provides real-time communication Nexus-wide? Here to Terra as much as here to there?” Vorthys looked from Chandler’s nod to the smiling agreement of Viceroy and Vicereine. “Hoo. Well, there’s something to think about.” He cast an appraising glance at Miles then Allegre and Vorlynkin. Alys and Illyan, too, beyond them, had preoccupied looks. Miles thought he could hear mental humming and wondered who would reach a formulation first, but as he thought about offering a prod of some kind Gregor waved him to wait, let the silence stretch, then intervened himself.

“I’d like first reactions, please. Yuri?”

Vorlynkin blinked and straightened in his seat. “It qualifies as a military secret, Sire. Any fleet
equipped with real-time communications between ships and with HQ would have a massive advantage.”

“Indeed. Guy?”

“For security it’s a double-edged sword. I’d suppress it if I could, and begin to appreciate Dr Chandler’s hypothesis closely. But I suspect these things will out. And I don’t like any of the implications.”

Chandler sat forward. “If I may, Count Vorbarra, suppression is possible. The only hard evidence is the frames themselves, which I can cause to make themselves unavailable.” The Terran grinned without humour. “And I have a sure means of closing off the only other possible source of information, which is my own mouth.” Seven Barrayarans, a Komarran, and a Betan regarded him steadily. None showed disbelief. “Lord Auditor Vorthys might disagree—he’s as optimistic an engineer as I’ve ever met—but even with what I’ve said here today I don’t think you could find the way into the matrix I found. Certainly not soon, or easily. Few would even know how to begin to look, and none would know where.” He looked around the company. “But please, bear with me. There is more to come. And I would not have burdened Barrayar with the spectre of this decision if I did not think there was truly a decision to make.”

Alys was nodding. “So I trust, Dr Chandler. How gloomily you see things, Guy.”

“Indeed.” Cordelia was not looking amused. “You know, Yuri, I don’t disrespect military issues, nor security ones, Guy.” Allegre muffled what Miles suspected would have been a memorable snort. “But neither of you mentioned even one of the real positives. For Sergyarans, for all families with members off-world, it’s the best technological advance there could be. And for the Nexus as a whole it’s a profound change in fundamental conditions. To suppress it for a narrow, personal or even planetary fear would be … very wrong.”

Beside her the Viceroy sat forward. “I can see the security risks, Guy. And the military side, Yuri, though you know no technological edge lasts for long. But my own reaction, Gregor, second as well as first, is that Cordelia’s right. The political change frames offer redetermines other issues.” His hands spread and tilted, turning in the light. “Dr Chandler, how hard are these frames to make?”

“Simple. There would of course have to be initial investment in plant to mass-produce them, but one end of the hypothesis certainly includes a new Nexus-wide realtime comnet.”

“Ah. Then suppose, Sire, we went the other way—not suppression but maximal manufacture and distribution. What would it mean, in security terms, to have instant connections throughout the Imperium, and with the Fleet? I would have seized that chance with both hands during my Regency. Surely it is a double-edged sword, but my hands would have been on the hilt, as yours would be now.” Ooh, nicely done, Da. “And what of the effects of distributing this device on social and administrative relations with Komarr and Sergyar? And on external relations, military and mercantile, with Pol, Vervain, and Aslund? With Marilac?”

Aral looked at Miles, whose admiring nod acknowledged the smoothness of the cue as he sat forward again. “Suppose we could talk to Eta Ceta, too. What then?”

Allegre’s and Vorlynkin’s heads cranked round sharply to stare at him, and they spoke almost in unison. “Give it to the Cetagandans?”

Miles looked back levelly. “First, if I heard Dr Chandler correctly, we are anticipating ourselves. He has not yet irrevocably decided to give it to us. And second, yes, perhaps. I suggest we think about it, at least.” Time to start corraling. “You said yourself, Yuri, military secrets can’t stay that way long,
and you’ve heard my father agree. In the case of us and the Cetagandans, therefore, what we should be weighing is the advantage—and the nature of the advantage—to be gained militarily, in the short term, and the advantages potentially gained politically, in the longer term, by forgoing that military advantage.”

Allegre’s hands were clenched, but his brow was furrowed in thought. “I see that, Miles, and concede your logic, but you will never get co-operation with the Cetas past the Council of Counts.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree, Guy. But times are not ordinary”—he gestured at Chandler—“and just now I don’t have to get it past the Council because they are not here. Bear with me, Guy.” He caught his father’s eye. “Your experience in the War of the Hegen Hub, sir, suggests the value of rapid communications in responding to a Cetagandan threat.”

Miles had had to think about this approach carefully. Illyan, and Allegre through his ImpSec files, would know just what part Admiral Naismith and one Greg Bleakman had played in those communications. He suspected Gregor had brought Laisa into that little circle, but Gregor’s secrets were not his to dispense, even to Ekaterin. His father’s mouth twitched slightly.

“Indeed. I judge the greater military advantage by far to lie in interplanetary not intership communications. Sending frames to all governments of the Hegen Hub alliance and Marilac would be necessary.”

“Just so, sir. Timely and coordinated responses to any threat would become far easier. Yet the threat will remain. Are we to talk to our friends and shun the Cetagandans?” Miles turned back to Allegre and Vorlynkin. “Truth to tell, gentlemen, these days I am much less worried about deliberate Cetagandan aggression than by the possibility that some idiot somewhere, Bararrayan or Cetagandan, will manage to explode one of the many minor frictions that remain between us and land us all in a bloody frontier war that will mean less than nothing to anyone except the close relatives of its dead.”

That brought rueful acknowledgements from both officers, and Allegre spoke, eyeing Gregor. “It’s true, Sire, that for all the steady improvement in Cetagandan relations every contact between us remains tense. Cetagandan affairs continue to occupy a large slice of my budget, as they do Yuri’s, where they necessarily dominate almost all planning”—a sharp military nod and mutter of agreement confirmed that aside—“and welcome as it is the reducing threat cannot yet justify any military or security cuts.”

“Just so, Guy. But we get ahead of ourselves, again, I fancy.” Miles didn’t want to go further down the Cetagandan road just yet. “Dr Chandler said he had something else for us to consider.” He turned back to the Terran. “If you would, Doctor.”

“Of course. But I am done with demonstrations for the day, so absent the math I must ask you again to take my word for certain things.” Chandler remained propped against the desk, but his look was inward, visualising, Miles thought, whatever wonderland of equations turned in his head. “These frames fold space and time to allow energy to pass. Because transmission between them—though it is not really any such thing—is concerned purely with wave-functions, little bulk is necessary in the devices themselves. But the dimension of mass is another story. As things stand I can see no prospect of, ah, transmitting matter; nor of time travel. But with resources on a more industrial scale, direct manipulation of mass at sub-atomic levels is another implication of the hypothesis.”

“And in practical terms, Doctor, what does that mean?”

“Tell me, Lord Vorkosigan, how long does it take Bararray to build a spaceship? A battleship, if you will.”
“The actual construction-time is usually several years at least. Design of course may be slower or faster than that.”

“And it takes that length of time because …?”

“Sheer logistics of assemblage, personnel shortages, manufacturing bottlenecks for more complex environmental, command, and weapons control systems.” Admiral Naismith had for all his brilliant distractions and personal limitations taught Miles about battleship construction and maintenance. His father winked and Vorlynkin nodded emphatically at his bluntness. Production delays in naval shipyards were a persistent bane of General Staff life. Chandler was oblivious to the byplay.

“As I imagined. I can do nothing regarding personnel, but within the hypothesis lie devices that would reduce your other delays. Complex circuit-boards and the like could easily be scanned and duplicated on site. They could also be manufactured from pretty much any raw material supplied. In flight, with a little miniaturisation, I would imagine shipboard waste could be turned into replacement munitions, or fuel.”

Vorlynkin’s face was a picture but Chandler was not being carelessly provocative. The irony was that there was none, and the Terran’s face showed for the first time that day the deep tiredness Miles had noticed. How long have you been carrying all this really, Doctor?

To Chandler’s side his mother smiled acerbically. “Swords into ploughshares, eh, Doctor? But also ploughshares into swords.”

His surprised look suggested neither the origin nor cutting perception of the Vicereine’s phrase was lost on Chandler. “Indeed, ah, my Lady.” Miles heard the feudal pronoun with satisfaction. He had bet himself his egalitarian mother, as a good Betan supposedly a committed democrat but in fact, like most Betans of any stripe, really a committed technocrat, would first win it from the Terran. “And hoes into plasma arcs or needlers, if one were not exceptionally careful.” Chandler rubbed his forehead. “The true limits are not clear to me, entirely, but I am sure in practice both physical size and absolute mass will provide sharply limiting parameters to any production process. The low energy demands I mentioned hold good up to a point; beyond that the power plant needed and concomitant shielding would rapidly become prohibitive, I think.” He gave a massive, weary shrug. “But where relatively few tens of billions of atoms at a time are involved, well … no more shortages of rare metals, nor any compound, and hence no existing chemical or electronic manufacturing process that cannot be radically short-circuited.”

He turned to Georg Vorthys. “Besides redefining the economy it sets a flow problem in logistics I think you’ll appreciate. Theoretically one could work with pure hydrogen and build everything up from there. Anything up from there. But if you wanted, say, something using osmium, or mercury, it would take you longer to get them than to make a helium-oxygen mix. Climb up to the transuranics and you have all the intrinsic nuclear instability problems to deal with as well, of course. But if you were to start with mercury, say, you could get to a transuranic more easily and cheaply than hydrogen could be made into anything much bigger than oxygen. I can give you relative energy values.”

Laisa’s business brain clearly had no trouble with any of this. “You’re saying efficiency of manufacturing will depend on the chemical signature of raw materials provided? And so on efficiency of supply? Normal economics applies, but with a different and variable set of parameters?”

“Exactly so, Countess. The hypothesis can entirely eliminate a whole raft of present impossibilities, but has its own practicalities.”

“Huh.” She turned to Gregor. “I think I find that comforting, on the whole.”
Allegre and Vorlynkin, Miles saw, did not. They were looking consternation at one another; this time Vorlynkin drew the short straw. He swung to face Gregor but stole a glance at the Viceroy and Vicereine.

“Sire.” Vorlynkin swallowed, looking deeply unhappy. “I remember another exercise from the Academy. One I also feel acutely in my present post. It asked, what is the minimum advantage Barrayar would need for a successful attack on the Cetagandan Imperium? The answer has always been a very substantial edge in materiel, personnel, or technology, a condition that has never applied.”

“Nor does it now.” His father’s voice was level and clear, and Miles felt himself breath easier. “Consider, Yuri, the timescale required, even with this new technology. Time to amass forces adequate for a general campaign against Cetaganda must still be measured in years at least. Not to mention the personnel problem.” There was an enquiring tilt of the viceregal head. “Tell me, Guy, for how long do you suppose we could conceal from Cetagandan Imperial Intelligence a programme for constructing and crewing a fleet of many hundred battleships?” There was a silence. Miles looked at his father with admiration for the surgical precision of strike and received the ghost of another wink. “Yuri, if there were no surprise to go with your military edge, would you still fancy all-out war with Cetaganda? Could we seriously hope to win a slugging-match, d’you think? And incidentally, Guy, supposing we could amass all those ships and actually use them somehow to conquer all eight Cetagandan planets and the eight satrapies, what kind of security would you think of imposing on them at that stage? Do you have a hankering for Dag Benin’s job as well as your own?”

“Hardly, my Lord Viceroy. As you know very well.” Allegre’s pained glare came to rest on Miles. “It is a lot to digest. And it seems uncommon hard such amazing advantages as Dr Chandler seems to offer should even on first reflection become their own worst enemies.”

Behind him Illyan stirred and spoke for the first time. “You know, I had been wondering what I was doing here. Being more retired than the rest of you. But that observation, Guy, crystallises my own experience in your office.” He gave a mirthless grin. “Not just with Admiral Naismith, Miles, who was a complicated case. But in general, yes, what I think Cordelia calls great gifts carry the immediate punishment of accepting them. Through the memory my chip gave me I came to see security paradigms as small, applied versions of a bigger … not law, certainly, but tendency.” Beside him Alys frowned. “The thing is, as they seem to reverse, so they can again. I don’t see these astonishing technologies as enemies, though they are perilous. They remain opportunities, Guy, though we are more aware of the potentials for disaster as well as success.”

Allegre looked lost. Alys was still frowning. “Success with what, dear?” Her mouth pursed with distaste. “Are we back to some kind of attack on Cetaganda? Surely Aral is right, and even if we won such a war we’d just give ourselves a new set of problems. Helen, you’ve said nothing, but surely history tells us this kind of secret plan never works anyway?”

“Ah …” The Professora cleared her throat but did not duck the question. “More or less. I was silent with fascination. And I wondered if Simon did mean a military option. Forgive me, gentlemen, are we not replaying with this second surprise of Dr Chandler’s the mistake we made with the first?” Ah, thank you, Helen. Miles raised his arm and muttered into his wrist-com. Beside him Ekaterin shifted slightly in her seat. “The twists Guy and Simon describe, or imagine, seem to me the same evolution of the military into the political the Viceroy pointed to with the frames. Miles said then we should be weighing one advantage against another, of forgoing the first. And what we have not discussed so far are those other advantages, in either instance.”

Bravo, Professora. The academic mind, Miles reflected, had serious advantages of its own. “You are right, Helen. And we must. But the afternoon has worn on and we should take a break.” With
exquisite timing a tiny light winked on his wrist-com; Pym must have been anticipating the needs of the human bladder too. “And after all this hard talking we should be able to do Ma Kosti’s tea justice.” He grinned at his parents. “Sorry. At least you can make up for it tomorrow.” It was relief to stand, Ekaterin rising smoothly beside him, and he gestured Gregor and Laisa to join them. “Everything is on the terrace again, so shall we say half-an-hour? Good.” Last lap but one. Forwards.
Chapter 6

It was a subdued party that returned from the terrace. Allegre and Vorlynkin had stayed together as they drank tea and ate simple but delicious cakes, saying little but exchanging mutually beetle-browed looks. Ekaterin and Miles made easy talk with Laisa while Gregor stood with Alys and the Vorthyses asking about Vorbarr Sultana University matters that interested him in his capacity as Chancellor.

Illyan had stood a little apart looking over the lake, grey hair ruffling in the onshore breeze, then turned to scan the groupings again. A calculating look had flashed over his face, and he had glanced at Miles to find his onetime pupil regarding him with a faint smile. Then to Miles’s delight he had with a slight smile of his own offered a fractional bow and an ambivalent waggle of his hand. *Nice plan but you have your work cut out*, Miles translated, euphoria subsiding. *You have that right, Simon.*

Back in the study his parents were already visible in their tiny cabin, and so—Miles smiled to himself—in the frame. Chandler’s desk now bore the smaller frame Miles had first been given, open panel revealing its buttons. Miles saw everyone seated as before, Chandler this time taking a seat properly, and opted to return directly to the attack.

“Correct me if you will, Yuri, but our military problem in a nutshell is that while the Cetagandans did not conquer us, we for all it cost us did no more than repulse them.” The Admiral nodded reluctantly and the Professora, on Miles’s other side, more sharply. “And while the relative security we have enjoyed since repulsing them rests in the first place on our space-forces, those ships are now rarely deployed in any numbers near Barrayar itself. They are at Komarr and Sergyar, visiting Hegen Hub nations or Marilac, out with trade convoys—itself, I would suggest, Guy, an indication our real security is political. Three bloody noses in a row from Barrayar have left the ghem-lords in considerable disfavour with the haut, and we have some reason to believe further attempts at aggressive expansion are not on the Cetagandan agenda for the next generation or three.”

Miles did not mention his own strange part in collecting that information, but saw Illyan’s eyes tighten as some detail of that particular mission came back to him.

“Specifically, we have the haut Fletchir Giaja on record saying that his *Empire is enjoying a necessary period of assimilation,*[1] and you both, I think, believe the Cetagandans do not, in fact, presently offer us any deliberate threat. But the fundamental imbalance between their eight primary and eight conquered planets and, with apologies to Komarr, Laisa, our much younger three, means the chances of accident or change hang over us, and seem implacable.”

This time Allegre took responsibility for nodding. Miles steepled his fingers and regarded Chandler.

“So, Jack here was telling me the other day about Terra in its early Atomic age. Two of their bigger polities had this defence system known as ‘Mutual Assured Destruction’. One imagines the irony of its acronym being MAD was not lost on them. We don’t have quite the same situation because Cetaganda is so much larger than us, but we have a similar sort of semi-permanent stand-off.”

Thought visibly sharpened Allegre’s and Vorlynkin’s faces. “What interested me was a device these
mad polities adopted. They called it a ‘hot line’—a primitive comlink between the offices of the rulers, for emergencies. To make sure that at least they didn’t bomb one another into radioactive slag by mistake.”

He took a slow breath and turned to Gregor.

“Supposing, Sire, you were to decide on an open approach to these technologies.” Gregor nodded, cautiously, following his own script for this moment. He had seen the need to prepare it even before Miles had pointed it out to him late the previous week.

“Go on.”

“We could hardly have a policy of making either frames or what I shall call nanoforges available to the Nexus at large and seek to deny them to the Cetagandans. So we would at some prior point have to contact our old enemies and, in effect, give them a very substantial present. The practical question, therefore, is how that contact might be made, and how to wring from it our own maximal security advantage. Does anyone have any correction to that? Guy?”

“No, Miles. You are speaking hypothetically, and the question you put is logical enough.”

“Then let me put what must be for Bararrayar its necessary answer. Do you know, Gregor, I never thought this could arise as a serious question, because it was so obviously impossible, but …” Miles drew himself straight. “Would Your Imperial Bararrayan Majesty personally welcome the opportunity to speak directly with His Imperial Cetagandan Majesty the haut Fletchir Giaja?” He made a slight turn to Laisa. “And Your Imperial Majesty with Her Imperial Majesty the haut Rian Degtiar?” Which will be the really tricky bit. Still, he had faith in Rian.

Silence grew. Looking round Miles saw even his parents were studying Gregor with intense interest, though he doubted anyone except Laisa, his parents, and Ekaterin would see the nature of the personal opportunity he was offering inside the public one. It was, he thought, a strange and probably misleading circumstance that the overwhelmingly dominant polities on this side of the Nexus should both be absolutist empires, but for once it made the way forwards very clear. The imperia were not similar in other ways—Bararray’s Time of Isolation and the haut gene-project made sure of that—but the kind of actions he had in mind could in either polity only ever be sanctioned by the emperor in person. More privately, he was fascinated by the idea of affording Gregor what would have to be for an absolute ruler a singularly interesting interlocutor.

“I don’t think I am at all sure, my Lord Auditor.” Gregor turned his head to raise his eyebrows at the Viceroy, watching with a slight smile from his simple frame. “My Lord Viceroy, is it perhaps a conversation I should not think to undertake? Even given this opportunity, and its temptations? A very great deal would be at stake.”

“That’s true, Sire. But Bararrayan law has always favoured the decisions of the man on the spot, especially in strange circumstances, and has on the whole done well by them. And it’s not as if you’re shy of setting precedents.” Allegre and Vorlynkin looked as if they had eaten bad lemons, while Alys and Simon suddenly sat straighter, calculation flashing in their eyes as they absorbed Aral’s unexpectedly positive stance. The Viceroy looked only at Gregor. “So I repeat my son’s question, Sire.” Beside her husband the Vicereine suppressed a smile. “Would you welcome the opportunity to speak directly with Giaja? He has been our enemy but not, I think, personally so.”

Gregor’s eyes had become distant, but returned as they sought Laisa, who simply smiled at him. “Would you, love?” Laisa’s voice was thoughtful rather than urgent and Miles blessed her with silent fervour. There was a long pause before Gregor spoke, but when he did his voice was certain.
“Yes, I would. I think high stakes mean a very great deal might be achieved.” He allowed an even longer, ruminative pause whose timing Miles admired. “Tell me, Guy, Yuri, professionally speaking, with your service peers and subordinates in mind, what would the Word of the haut Fletchir Giaja mean to you?”

Miles smiled in acid appreciation at Ekaterin, and saw his parents share a similar look. Gregor’s question sliced to a core issue without ever mentioning it—that his own imperial Word would bind both officers, indeed everyone present except Chandler, in a way none of them could for a second think to countenance breaking. That way destruction lies. And all here save Ekaterin had good personal and professional reasons to know beyond doubt that Cetagandans, however pernicious and persistent as foes, took words of honour and oaths of celestial fealty with the same deadly seriousness as Barrayarans of the Vor and imperial services. It really is possible. Miles’s heart quickened. Two emperors’ Words could as readily commit their empires to lasting peace as to recurrent war. It’s just getting there.

Allegre tried to sidestep. “I could not allow his Word to mean anything to me professionally, Sire.”

Gregor wasn’t budging. “And His Word exchanged with Ours?”

Vorlynkin came to the rescue with the defence Miles had anticipated from Allegre. “Sire, I do not believe the situation could, ah, properly arise. There is legislation governing contact with the Cetagandans. It may only be undertaken in council.”

“Quite true, Yuri.” Miles nodded, as slowly as he dared. Milk it just a little. “In council, but not in Council.” He smiled at Allegre as he sounded the capital C just as Gregor sounded imperial plurals. “You refer of course to the provisions misleadingly known as Vorpastov’s Codicil, governing formal negotiations with the ghem-Generals during the final phases of Cetagandan withdrawal. But”—he considered a sorrowful smile and thought better of it, continuing more briskly—“that untrusting piece of law specifies only that no substantive meeting with any ranking Cetagandan officer may take place outwith the presence of two Counts, two Lords Auditor, and two general officers on active service.”

Miles looked slowly round his guests, seeing Illyan’s and his father’s smiles of appreciation for unanswerable legal manoeuvre, racing calculation in Helen Vorthys’s eyes, and Vorlynkin’s dawning dismay.

“Unless you propose to disqualify Gregor as Count Vorbarra, or Guy as holding a general’s rank despite his long posting to ImpSec, I think you’ll find Vorpastov’s Codicil and all concomitant service regs are fully satisfied. The Count-my-father’s presence by frame no doubt sets a singular precedent, but no Barrayaran court could sensibly deny it, given the witnesses.” He stretched his legs, letting that sink in, and turned amiably to Vorthys. “In other words, as I trust my fellow Lord Auditor will agree, the persons here gathered are in Barrayaran law legally empowered, even without Gregor’s absolute imperial autonomy, to negotiate anything that might come up with any ranking Cetagandan officer may take place outwith the presence of two Counts, two Lords Auditor, and two general officers on active service.”

Miles looked slowly round his guests, seeing Illyan’s and his father’s smiles of appreciation for unanswerable legal manoeuvre, racing calculation in Helen Vorthys’s eyes, and Vorlynkin’s dawning dismay.

“That won him vinegar smiles of approval from all the women, but there was a step still to take. He looked at his father, then at Gregor, receiving slight nods. Turning back to Allegre and Vorlynkin, he looked each in the eyes. “I’m sorry to force you, Guy, Yuri”—no, I’m not—“but do you both concede in principle the necessity and legality of talking directly to the Cetagandans about all this? The blunt fact being that the mere existence of these new technologies, never mind their deployment, will otherwise set us on an almost certainly catastrophic course towards all-out war.” He received
two grudging nods, and tightened the screw. “Implicitly therefore, you both approve in principle the logical outcome of such talks, if it can be achieved. A full Barrayaran–Cetagandan peace and co-operation treaty.”

The silence stretched, but neither Gregor, the Viceroy and Vicereine so magically able to peer at them from space, nor anyone else offered the fulminating officers anything but polite if intense attention. Helen Vorthys, Miles saw, was actually holding her breath. History in the making, indeed. He wondered if his Gran’da would have approved what he did this day, and gave a mental shrug. Probably. He was always a realist. Finally, Allegre sighed and unclenched his hands. Vorlynkin also looked resigned.

“Yes, Miles.” Allegre spoke slowly. “We must. And if you can line up the Cetagandans as neatly as you have us, something might even come of it, I suppose.” His gaze rested on the impassive Viceroy and Vicereine, then heavily on Chandler, who shrugged apologies. “For the record, then. This technology, whatever eventually comes of it, is already real enough to destroy the existing status quo. That frame says so, unmistakeably and beyond doubt. So yes, we must find a new balance, most urgently. And that must mean Cetagandan contact in one way or another. Yuri?”

Vorlynkin grunted softly. “Yes. I don’t like it but I can’t fault the logic.”

Miles breathed a long sigh of relief as quietly as he could manage. “Well, it’s fortunate then, I dare say, that with the confirmation I may now transmit, ghem-General Benin as Commander of the Imperial Guard assures me Their Celestial Cetagandan Majesties will be available to take a frame-call tomorrow afternoon.” There was frozen silence. “So perhaps we might think about our shopping-list a little, before dinner?”

* * * * *

To Vicereine Cordelia Vorkosigan, peering through a small frame in her very small cabin, it looked as if Miles’s hasty babble of explanations about the curious but efficient plan he had spun out the week before to his surprised parents (and, plainly, as promised, to Gregor) was slowly having an effect. His gestures towards Chandler, herself and Aral, and above all Gregor, at first ignored by the gibbering officers, slowly achieved their end. And her impulsive son, she thought, had on this occasion actually been very careful. As an orchestration of men and manners his gathering here was already an orrery to admire, and there must be rotations and eclipses yet to come. The thought brought a flinch of memory in her head she would have to think about later, but not, she thought, too much later. What more could there be on Miles’s agenda? Better not to ask.

“Is he actually going to pull this off, d’you think?” she whispered to Aral, watching with equal fascination at her side.

“I think he might,” came the whisper back. “Chandler was inspired to see that Miles represents a direct imperial link.”

“A mighty short chain.”

Her husband grinned at her. “Yes. I swear he thought emperor meant playfellow before he could talk, and he’s never grown out of it. He also tickled Guy and Yuri round nicely, I thought.”

“Before clouting them both on the head.”
“Belike. But the logic is what it is.”

“Yes. We have to let go of the nuts to carry away the whole bottle.”

“Heh. The show’s starting again.” In their small but astonishingly vivid frame they could see and hear that Miles had at last quieted the uproar. Ekaterin was still admirably calm though looking slightly frazzled. Cordelia took a chance to wink at her daughter-in-law, and received a faint smile and roll of the eyes as Miles set off again.

“Dr Chandler.”

The Terran, who had been watching the fussing Barrayarans with cool interest, straightened. “Lord Vorkosigan?”

“In all our excitement we stand in danger of forgetting your proprietary rights. You have made it politely clear you could in all probability deny us these riches. Do you find yourself minded so to do?”

Clever boy, Cordelia thought, watching Chandler closely. A little courtesy, gravely worded, could achieve much, and Miles had done charm superbly since spending three of his first five years in a bone-protecting body-brace that made other people’s the only movement he could control except his own mouth and expression.

“Lord Auditor, I am not.” Chandler turned to Gregor. Did the Terran truly understand what he was about here?

“Your Majesty, I have carried this hypothesis a long time, as a heavy burden. I neither had nor could obtain strength to control its realisation, and until now could find no Terran or galactic polity I trusted sufficiently to ask for help.” His fingers drummed once on the desk at his side, a movement strangely like Illyan’s habitual sign of tension. “I did not approach the Cetagandans because I could not be sure they would share realised technologies with you, or anyone. But your interest in doing so, peacefully, is necessarily greater. And they have their biotech edge already.”

That was uncomfortably true, Cordelia thought, and would have to be addressed, somehow, if Miles’s bizarre scheme bore real fruit. She also remembered her suspicion that some of his understandable vagueness about further reaches of his enormous plan had been of the calculated, foggy kind rather than genuine uncertainty. *Hmm.* Chandler was looking round at them all.

“I have also become ever more conscious in my travels of the many problems the hypothesis might relieve. In some cases, obviate. If I could believe its demons were controlled, and would stay that way. There are no guarantees, I know, but I do not think I will ever have a better or safer chance to lay my burden down. And I have been impressed, Your Majesty, by all your advisers. So yes, I will deliver the science of the hypothesis to you for use in negotiations with the haut.”

His eyes closed for a moment and Cordelia wondered if the man might actually go to sleep; it was almost possible to see a burden lifting from him. Then his deep voice sounded as if it came to her down a long tunnel.

“D’you know, I thought I might have to offer far more in the way of … forgive me, bribes, to persuade Barrayar to this chance. To bring in the constituencies. This for the Counts, that for the Forces, something else for ImpSec. But I was wrong, I see. They are all in you. Sire.”

The room became very still. Gregor regarded the Terran gravely and Cordelia saw the burden pass between them. *Poor boy. It is a great gift.* “Thank you, Dr Chandler. Further formalities are required in Terran and Barrayaran law but I acknowledge your hands between mine.” His dark eyes studied Miles. “You bring me a fearsome gift, brother.”
Cordelia almost laughed, but was caught by the moment. Had she ever heard Gregor call Miles his brother, unqualified, in front of anyone but the immediate family they had formed? Miles too had shot his emperor a startled look, and now spread his hands apologetically. Gregor smiled, neutrally this time.

“But you have, I expect, a cunning plan.”

Miles winced. Did you think Gregor would let you have all the fun? Poor son. Then again, Miles didn’t look even remotely repentant, and for once she didn’t see why he should.

“Not a cunning plan, Sire. Only an obvious one writ large.”

He nodded to Chandler, who stood to activate the small frame on the desk. Even through their own little frame in the courier’s cabin Cordelia could see how brightly the model of the Nexus sprang alight in the study at Vorkosigan Surleau, darkening as the day failed. Miles, she suspected, had deliberately not provided any lighting before; his voice came crisply through whatever audio-link these astounding frames used, cutting through startled oohs as the sparkling display unfolded like strangely smokeless indoor fireworks. Stars, planets, and wormholes were all there, shining brightly in neutral whites.

“The Cetagandans, you know, take aesthetic pride in the art of giving gifts, and say true generosity respects the tastes of the recipient as well as the potency of the giver. The gift we have for them thanks to Dr Chandler is what it is, but we can shape it to our taste as well as theirs.”

The tiny sparks of Barrayar, Komarr, and Sergyar flared into distinct brightness, with the multiple wormholes connecting them, followed by the eight plus eight planets of the Cetagandan Imperium and their convoluted internal links. Miles, it seemed, had claimed the remote control from Chandler. Slowly the display shrank—no, expanded in scale, Cordelia saw, the empires still dominant in the centre, but more and more stars and planetary systems popping into existence around them.

“May I first draw our attention to just how big space is, how many systems there are out there. When Dr Chandler said earlier that wormholes blinkered us I knew exactly what he meant.” The display stopped expanding but continued to rotate slowly, so everyone could see its empty volumes and thin threads of light. “Uninhabited volumes have been ignored, of course, because without the convenience of wormholes travel takes months, even years, in either direction. But as a polity like Athos reminds us, this does not imply they are uninhabitable.” Athos began to pulse, visibly separated from the nearest wormhole terminus. Kline Station, Cordelia remembered. Never been there. “The Athosians, of course, settled there precisely to isolate themselves from what they see as galactic corruption. Few who feel less strongly have ever wanted permanently to be so far away in time, and so materially constrained.”

She heard Miles draw a deep breath.

“But now there are frames and nanoforges. Instant communication with family or superiors you leave behind and a means of manufacturing on-planet more or less anything for which you have a design. Travel-time to and from will not change, of course, and a substantial volume remains out of all practical reach. But at a conservative estimate, taking systems within a year’s deep-space time from any jump-point in a modern cruiser”—spherical swathes of space lit up with stars and planetary systems around the illuminated imperial systems and winding wormhole links winking in soft colours—“I count at least a hundred uninhabited systems, quite a few of which have terracompatible planets and all of which some unique resources, that will become of immediate interest.”

The display tightened again; imperial constellations grew as scale shrank but the pink-dotted space around and between them remained as evident as the skeletal links of wormholes. Miles’s voice was
sombre in the near-darkness surrounding the shimmering star-map, and Cordelia smiled with pride as much in her old profession of astrocartography as in her strange and clever Bararrayaran son.

“And what after all were we and the Cetagandans fighting over? Not, by this, truly any territory but our own, and that was a route of supposedly least resistance. The ghem-Generals came to Bararray simply because they could, and thought we would be easy meat. But there are no simple pickings in the Nexus anymore and both sides are constrained—or rather, were constrained. For us continued terraforming of South Continent, union with Komarr, and the frontiers of Sergyar draw off energies that might otherwise boil over, as they did when we were confined here in the Time of Isolation. With these new territories we can offer as much under terms to the planets of the Hegen Hub alliance. And our first gift to the Cetagandans, with frames and nanoforges, must be the equivalent for them, to absorb the energies of the ghem, and of the satrapies. Perhaps even the ambitions of the haut, to some degree.”

As Miles spoke delicate imperial purples began to spread out from the home systems, rapidly filling the volumes each imperium presently dominated and trickling out to retint first newly practicable fallow systems, then all the space between the empires. Slowly two masses of colour firmed against each other, forming a frontier-zone exactly mid-way between Bararray and Eta Ceta. Sergyar and its neighbour Rho Ceta formed one limit of the frontier, Cordelia saw; others trailed into open space. Lots of open space. The colours were subtler than when Miles had tried this on out on her and Aral; with a secret grin she suspected her son had asked and taken his wife’s advice.

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“Frankly, Sire, if we want fairness we must offer it. This distribution is not equitable in every way, but looks the fairest.” Miles paused for the underlying point about selling the deal to sink in. “If we allow a neutral buffer-zone of one light-week where what are or will be Bararrayan and Cetagandan inhabited volumes press most closely together”—curling sections of a slim grey edging appeared throughout the display, neatly bounding and separating adjacent purples and enveloping five distinct systems that began winking brightly within the grey middles of five spheres—“it becomes fairer still. We contribute three putative possessions to their two, a nice bargaining-chip. But I wonder if those five systems might become joint-fleet supply, exploratory, and defence bases.”

Miles brought up background lights and the familiar faces of his guests emerged from the gloom. Allegre and Vorlynkin were, Cordelia saw with relief, looking extremely thoughtful, their worst fears at least mollified. It was, she thought, a clever presentation. For all their caution and conservatisms, Bararrayans loved fireworks, and the glowing displays had reached even the officers on many levels. She doubted the show was over yet. Beside her Aral shifted restlessly, as sure as she there was something still to come Miles hadn’t yet mentioned. Éven to us. Which I do not like.

“That’s not bad at all, Miles.” Vorlynkin was openly appreciative. “You had me worried, but if we had Giaja’s sworn Word on a, a … mutual non-aggression pact, that display to show terms, and a real prospect of joint operations, I think the Staff would go for this.”

Allegre stirred, and turned to Illyan. “Is this what you meant, Simon? Or will this too turn on us?”

Illyan shrugged. “I have no guarantees, Guy. But something like this, yes. And when I was in your shoes, I would have been hellish suspicious, precisely because it is such a gift-horse.” He grinned at his successor in ImpSec’s hot seat. “When Miles came sowing dragons’ teeth on my carpet I was usually far too nonplussed to do anything but gibber at him. But where Cetagandans were concerned, I came to trust him strangely.”

Miles made a slightly strangled noise and was hushed by Ekaterin. Illyan only looked more sardonic than ever.

“First he pulled off that extraordinary nonsense with the Star Crèche itself at their state funeral for
Giaja’s mother, and won himself both a gold Imperial Star and the Cetagandan Order of Merit. For the same actions, mind. And in case that worried anyone he then took a speculative three-million-mark extraction mission, unilaterally quintupled its budget, and gave us Marilac, for which I shall be very surprised if you have not given thanks. Often.”

Allegre didn’t look convinced, Cordelia thought, but this last sally about that insane stunt Miles had pulled at Dagoola IV clearly hit home. When she had seen the Cetagandan security-vids of his performance in the camp, once Illyan screwed them out of the protective Dendarii, she had thought her heart would fail her, and they had left even Aral very thoughtful indeed.

“I don’t know …” Allegre’s voice trailed away as he peered at the colourful display of what Cordelia realised with a smile were literally spheres of influence. “Miles, where would this putative joint-fleet be headquartered? Sergyar and Rho Ceta?”

“That would certainly be possible, Guy, but less convenient all round than one might think. And frames will make actual proximity much less critical. Then there’s also whether we see this HQ as dealing strictly with, ah, inter-imperial matters, arising from our adjacent volumes, or also with the wider Nexus, who will, after all, be wanting to visit.”

Miles turned slightly towards her and Aral, and Cordelia could now see in his hand the little remote that controlled the display. Such small, strong hands, with all their replacement bones. He was pushing down on one of the buttons, fingertip white with pressure, and to her left she saw another system begin to glow, just beyond one end of the grey plane marking one of the proposed new neutral frontier-zones.

“And if the latter there is another most interesting candidate planet to consider.”

Miles voice still sounded cheerful but its suddenly murderous undertones brought Cordelia and Aral sharply upright, ears ringing. Here it comes. Abruptly she realised what Miles must have in mind, and knowing in gestalt it would probably work was paralysed with fear for her ageing husband and sneaking admiration for her elder son’s sense of justice, leaving room only for the stray thought that Mark would be both furious and delighted when he heard.

“I told you I had an itch to scratch, Guy.” The small form swung round to address his father with a still intensity even Cordelia had rarely seen in him. “You know, sir, I always thought you had the most rotten luck with invasions. Not just Komarr, but the idiocies of Escobar. You maintain meeting Mama there was the luck of your life, and cancelled all ill-luck preceding it. But I wondered if you would care to believe that third time pays for all.” Behind him the system containing Jackson’s Whole reached a pulsing brightness in lurid, warning yellow.

* * * *

Ekaterin, no more let into this bit of Miles’s agenda than Cordelia and Aral, had like them—and Gregor—heard with alarm the sudden murder snarling beneath her husband’s level voice. When he swung to face his father and became so terrifyingly intense, she knew they were close to the heart of what was driving him. His mention of Escobar set her teeth on edge even as she realised he had said nothing that went beyond the known history of that catastrophically failed Barrayaran venture. But she could not quite believe what he seemed to be suggesting.

The thought that first came to mind, shocking her quite as much as the idea itself, was whether her
father-in-law’s health would allow him to lead an invasion. *Gak.* Cordelia, she saw, was asking the same question, looking torn between wanting to give Aral a restraining hug and urgently desiring to strangle Miles. Perhaps it was fortunate one could not reach through frames. The notion that Lord Mark would be delighted also drifted into Ekaterin’s mind, and as she tried to push it away reminded her of *why* exactly Miles’s clone-brother hated the gene-lords and merchant-plutocrats of Jackson’s Whole with such constant and sometimes consuming passion. *Oh.* She had to admit it was by all accounts the most appalling planet—and since she had been drawn into Miles’s high acquaintance, the accounts she heard had multiplied considerably. Jacksonians had caused Barrayar a sorry deal of grief and trouble, with no more reason than quick profit and indulging malice, so if anywhere *deserved* to be ritually invaded, it was, she supposed, Jackson’s Whole. Looking round her she thought most of her guests had reached the same satisfyingly judgemental conclusion. Illyan especially was looking introspective, and Ekaterin remembered Miles telling her in one of her security briefings after their engagement that the weird poison that had killed Illyan’s eidetic memory chip and ended his long ImpSec career was of Jacksonian manufacture, though commissioned by Komarrans and administered by a Barrayaran. Come to think of it, the neurotoxin specifically designed to kill her at her own wedding had also been a Jacksonian product—and Miles had sworn to her and himself he would not let that insult and injury pass unshriven. *Bother Jackson’s Whole.*

Gregor’s eyebrows, however, quirked in unhappy bemusement. Despite having reigned for thirty-one years and survived both civil and galactic war, he had never, Ekaterin realised, ordered a first-strike operation. Or not an overt one. *How many agendas was Miles really juggling here?* Looking across the room at her father-in-law, who was regarding his diminutive, blazing son with quiet astonishment, she was sure even he had not anticipated *this.* At last his strong baritone came levelly.

“Miles, are you serious?”

“Deadly serious, sir. And I am not going to argue humanitarian sentiment by remembering all the times we have had sickening cause to curse the Jacksonian houses and their disgusting gene-trade.” His ringing disavowal served to remind all present that Vorkosigans in particular had good reason to loathe amoral Jacksonian practice. *Mark again.* “Instead let me stick to strategic analysis. Guy, Yuri, please come in at any point.” Miles’s hands gestured invitation. “A known, very active security hazard, and sink of especially vile criminal operations, remains untouched though more-or-less defenceless in military terms, partly for its occasional practical uses, but that is secondary. Either Barrayar or Cetaganda—and the Star Crèche disapproves of Jacksonian genetics quite as violently as we, by the way—could perfectly well shut the place down tomorrow, but it would take more effort than we can readily expend and cost more casualties than we care to afford. Additionally, the truly potent deterrent for us, and in reverse for the Cetagandans, is that unilateral action of that kind would disastrously disturb the political and military balances of the Nexus, and make the occupied planet very costly to defend.” He looked around slowly. “Is that pretty much the size of it?”

Military and professorial heads nodded. Miles turned to his father.

“I was not suggesting, sir, you lead a purely Barrayaran force against Jackson’s Whole, satisfying as that would doubtless be. I had in mind that securing its future headquarters, and simultaneously eliminating the biggest single problem in its immediate vicinity, would be a worthy first objective of the Joint Imperial Frontier Fleet. Count Aral Vorkosigan, Viceroy of Sergyar, commanding.” Miles looked at his mother, whose glare was accusing. “Or co-commanding, with a haut planetary governor or some impossibly senior ghem-Admiral. I’m not sure how the Cetas will play it.” The Vicereine did not look mollified, but Miles looked back at his father and risked a smile. “Without in any way circumscribing you, sir, I should also say I imagine it very much as an *honorary* command, not an executive one.”

Silence returned until the Viceroy broke it, turning slowly to Gregor. “Sire. Is this a strategy you
countenance?”

Gregor smiled back, very dryly. “No you don’t, Aral. It’s your advice I need first. Miles had not apprised me of this particular, ah, twist in his thinking.” The Emperor turned to look at his newest, most disruptive Lord Auditor with some severity. “Invading anywhere, with or without Cetagandans, was not what I expected to be considering today, Miles.” He frowned. “I can see various reasons for keeping this from me. But I don’t think I much like any of them.”

“I wasn’t done thinking it through, Sire. I’m sorry. And I thought the idea of alliance more important than the mechanics.”

“Hmm. And you are now done thinking?”

Miles smiled. “Yes. The whole thing’s a hook, really, as much as an end in itself and a … project for the proposed fleet. The psychology of which I think we could all agree on.”

“A hook?”

“Yes.” Miles turned. “Guy, what is the greatest remaining imbalance between us and Cetaganda that worries you?”

The answer was unhesitating. “The bio-arsenal held by the Star Crèche.”

“Quite so. And we would be dangerously misguided to suppose that even with a well-established alliance the haut ladies would give up anything. They are the innermost nucleus of the haut gene-project, and so of the Cetagandan Imperium. But they are not yet beyond human curiosity. Even fairness, perhaps. And especially self-interest.” Miles swung round a little and opened his arms wide. “Mama, what would be the effects of taking the gene-houses of Jackson’s Whole off the market? Permanently?”

The Vicereine, who had, Ekaterin thought, been looking more pensive than distressed or fearsome since Miles’s remark about an honorary command, grew still. “Now that is a point, Miles. Jacksonians provide services many very wealthy people use. Including things certainly not available either on Beta or Escobar, such as longevity at the cost of others’ lives. That particular, ah, market will be very unhappy.”

“And money will out. Quite so.” Both Miles and Cordelia, Ekaterin knew, had heard Mark wax eloquent more than once about his hopes that the Durona Group on Escobar, in whom he had invested heavily, would find a geriatric treatment good enough to undercut the mortal market that Jacksonian gene-houses tapped by offering clone brain-transplants. “Sire, hooks have no guarantees, of course. Only bait. But … let us suppose the Cetagandans buy this plan, because it is in their interests as much as ours. Better security all round for everyone, a stable frontier, a new technology and its applications to absorb and excite people. Old revenues released to better use, very large new ones generated—at least for us. And a formal territorial project that will sate aggressions on both sides and provide the central term of our new, formal imperial and celestial amity with a place beyond the decks of a serving fleet for some real cooperation and understanding to develop.”

That drew a long nod of appreciation from Gregor—and from Aral, whose brow was furrowed in intense thought.

“So, there we would all be. And there would be the very inelastic galactic market in living longer with a large but by no means permanent hole blown right through its stony heart. And who in all this hypothesis has the genetic expertise to put together a serious package of bio-enhancements to plug that hole properly?” Since that first murderous intensity in Miles’s voice nothing odd had shown as
he discussed invading the planet he hated so much. Now his voice became almost dreamy, though he still spoke directly to Gregor. “It should all be perfectly impossible, of course, Sire, but I have this vision of you standing next to the haut Fletchir Giaja, in orbit above Jackson’s Whole, or”—he brightened—“in Baron Fell’s palace, telling the assembled galaxy by frame Your joint-fleet has taken the place as headquarters. That Your is a new imperial plural, by the way. You could both invite embassies to fleet HQ, to manage galactic access to newly viable systems. And announce that as Barrayar will establish a technical institute to receive and assist ambassadors, so Cetaganda will establish a genetic one.”

This silence you could have broken with a pin. Ekaterin stared at her husband. He is extraordinary. And then, He is thinking of our children-to-be. And of theirs, in turn. The hand Miles extended to her was confirmation, though his gaze stayed on Gregor, slowly looking round at each of the company in turn. She felt her Aunt Helen stiffen slightly beside her as Gregor’s eyes rested on her. Then they were on Ekaterin, with that now familiar sensation of being looked through, all the way to the spine. What does Gregor see? Or better, What does Gregor want?

But she knew. And amid these makers of history it was terrifying to have one’s own judgement seriously sought. Yet Ekaterin no longer felt small among these amazing people, even as she learned more of their astounding qualities as friends and marriage-kin. And for all the dizzying complexity of today’s politics she had no more doubt of Miles than she had felt in that memorable moment in the council-chamber of Vorhartung Castle, when she decisively chose this life.

The emperor’s gaze left her, passing over Miles to Allegre and Vorlynkin. With Alys he held still for the longest time. With Illyan he seemed to exchange only the briefest glance, but both their lips twisted. Still floating on Gregor’s infusion of confidence and her husband’s outrageous vision of planetary conquest Ekaterin found she understood perfectly that Gregor would be familiar with Simon’s acerbic view-from-experience that Miles regarded any orders worth obeying as worth exceeding. I fired the little maniac. You gave him the gold chain. She could almost hear Illyan’s sardonic tones as Gregor shrugged and turned to the Viceroy and Vicereine for long moments, then back to Miles.

“I’m not sure I do invasions, Miles.” He seemed to Ekaterin’s enhanced eye unusually tense, even nervy, glancing at the Viceroy. “Your proposition stirs unwelcome memories.” He looked closely at his wife, and seemed reassured by whatever her eyes showed him. “Aral, and Yuri, I know you can only guess, but what would be the human cost of this …”— he glanced with appreciation at Chandler, who smiled uncertainly back—“part of the hypothesis?”

The Viceroy gestured Vorlynkin to speak. “With Cetagandan cooperation, Sire, I can see no reason for many casualties to be suffered occupying the system. Perhaps none, for us, at any rate.” The navy man rubbed his chin, calculating. “Taking the jump-stations will tell the Houses we’re there, of course, but only House Fell has anything that can be called a fleet and they have nothing bigger than cruisers—well-equipped ones, true, but our capital ships could take them apart from distance. The orbital platforms as well.” A smile tugged at his mouth. “Of course whether they would fight at all, faced with us and the Cetagandans, is moot. I imagine we are talking about a really rather formidable, not to say startling, array of warships, and Jacksonians usually have a good deal more discretion than they have valour.”

The humour faded. “Taking a planetary surface is another story, though. It would take far longer, of course, and casualties would depend on specific tactical objectives. I don’t have to tell anyone here street-fighting is never a good option, and one thing Jacksonians do have is strong-points—every major house facility could become one. Still … they’re very weak in personnel—there are no planetary forces as such at all, nor any co-ordinated government beyond the consortium that runs the jump-stations, so we’d mostly be facing isolated groups of house security-people, not proper
soldiers.” Vorlynkin paused and frowned, thinking. “The real trick, you know, might be organising them sufficiently to have someone to talk to. But if we can do that, with overwhelming force available on, um, our side, and an unmistakeable intent to do the job one way or another, those security-men will want out with their families. Fighting Imperial and ghem troops in divisional strength is not what they are trained to do at all. So if we could give them one controlled route to survival, not just ‘surrender or die’ but ‘lay down your weapons and walk’, I think most of ’em would take it. And isolated hold-outs could much more readily be targeted from orbit with x-ray and maser strike-cannon.” He shrugged eloquently. “Everyone surrenders then, unless they’re suicidal.”

“A bloodless victory? Truly?” Gregor seemed surprised, but, fascinatingly to Ekaterin, Laisa did not. Even now not many Komarrans, she thought, looked past the Solstice Massacre to the fact that the murdered Councillors had been just about the only fatalities of Aral’s takeover, and what the comprehensive success of his strategy implied.

“For us, Sire, very largely bloodless, I think, if it were played right.”

Gregor turned his head. “Aral?”

The Viceroy grimaced, and half-bowed to Laisa. “I learned at Komarr, Sire, that blood must always be reckoned with in planning invasions. But Yuri is right enough. And everything on Jackson’s Whole is crowded together on one continent in the temperate band, which makes it much easier.” He gave Gregor a straight look. “After all, I would hope a Joint Imperial Force, presumably of considerable size, could swat a polity like Jackson’s Whole with ease and only incidental losses. But one death may be too many, and I’ve been wondering about something.” He shifted to look round to his side. “Dr Chandler, did I understand correctly that your frames will transmit any waveform energy?”

“You did, sir. Though not all waveforms are equally amenable to the process.”

“Ah. And in the particular case of a stasis-field?”

At Ekaterin’s side Miles stiffened. This was apparently not even on his agenda. She saw Gregor also staring at Aral. Chandler’s gaze became unfocused as he gauged his answer. “I don’t see why not. The artificial gravity of your ship is not transmitted, because it’s an interference effect, but if you generated a stasis-field close to your frame, then, yes, it would extend through the frame here.” He frowned. “Of the field’s shape at this end I am less certain. But computing-power would supply an answer fast enough, and practical experiment would be simple.”

“So. And from what you have said there would be no difficulty in mounting frames in, say, drone-satellites?”

“Not in the least. Though if they were inside re-entry cladding a mechanical deployment might be required to use them.”

“Ah, yes. But that need not be a lengthy process.” The Viceroy turned back to Gregor. “The problem with stasis-fields, of course, Sire, has always been the power they require to generate. So like gravitic lances they cannot serve as field weapons, and the boffins struggle to extend their shipboard range. But it occurs to me that that particular struggle is among those Dr Chandler has just rendered obsolete.”

The Terran was looking resigned. “Weapons, already.” He shook his head. “But to peaceful ends, I suppose. Nevertheless.” He sent a steely glance at Gregor. “I will not help you to try to extend the gravitational lance as a field weapon. Sire. In any case it uses interference phenomena also.” He seemed reassured when not only Gregor but both the military men nodded. Then he frowned. “But,
you know, if a stasis-field is extended, tractor-beams should also work.”

Aral’s eyes gleamed. “Now there’s a thought.”

Beside her Miles was almost levitating from his seat. “Force-bubbles, Da. Fuse the joint-technologies and put frames in Cetagandan force-bubbles. You could flood the place from orbit with little stasis-and tractor-bubbles, immobilise everyone with a weapon, and march the Barons out of their own front doors to line up and meet you.”

For an appalling moment two Vorkosigan admirals grinned fiercely at one another, and the Viceroy huffed with laughter. Then he went very still. “But we could, you know.” His voice was a whisper. For the first time Ekaterin remembered he turned to look directly at his wife, who met his eyes levelly. The now familiar thought *Mark will like it* was there, and also, Ekaterin thought, something resembling *I like it too.* But there were opacities underneath, a lifetime’s worth. A planet’s worth too, maybe. *A son’s worth.* Then the Viceroy laughed and swung round to survey the room and assembled company.

“You know, Sire, there is no Barrayaran law whatever restricting the right of the emperor to wage war. The Counts, of course, are bound by Vorloupulous’s Law, but in tradition as in law you are supreme commander of the Barrayaran armed forces and do with them as you will.” He smiled. “We both know the reality of that. Or we did.” The blunt, square hands that once strangled a political officer were relaxed in his lap. “Today reality has changed. It seems to me the real advantage Dr Chandler and Miles describe is neither military nor political. It is a reality advantage. We were at the mercy of the natural galaxy in our Isolation, of the Nexus in our Occupation, but now Barrayar can call the galactic play for itself. Once.” He looked at his son, then at her, with a gaze Ekaterin felt as physical weight, a burden and grounding. “Will you summarise, please, Miles. Just the bones, cogently.”

Miles stood. The display of the Nexus brightened again, showing the dual imperial spheres of influence like lobes of so many brains, streaked through with narrow, twisting grey gaps; Jackson’s Whole glowed on in ugly yellow. “Physical demarcation of space as shown. The diversion of excess young and military energy into settlement of systems made viable by frames and nanoforges. A Joint Fleet to police the frontier and the new planets, headquartered at Jackson’s Whole, once it has been bloodlessly captured with tractor-bubbles.”

Miles managed to keep a straight face but still looked utterly charmed by his vision of hypothetical bubbles marching the Jacksonian Barons about their own streets. Brightly coloured bubbles, probably.

“Then galactically, distribution to all major polities of frames, and inauguration of a new Nexus-wide comnet with a joint Imperial address on or in orbit above Their Majesties’ new joint-fleet’s principal HQ. Saying the Barrayaran–Cetagandan hatchet is buried, everyone has a complete reassessment to perform, we shall be occupied with our own space and have tidied up Jackson’s Whole as a singular, preventative measure. All to be followed by establishment of proper embassies and institutions there, including our new technical and a Cetagandan genetic interface with the galaxy at large.” He considered. “I have some detail-stuff, but that’s pretty much it.”

Gregor looked at his foster-brother, his eyes dark and unreadable again. *What details did Miles still have an eye on?* The Viceroy nodded judiciously. “And domestically?”

Miles blinked. “Legally, Gregor can do as he wishes. The only objection the Counts could make is covered with Vorpastov’s Codicil. No formal ratification would be needed. Practically, the Council will have distribution of new technologies and a very great deal of economic business to keep its members occupied. They will also have the prospect of enormous galactic revenues to consider.
Politically, with the fleet happy and the Council fragmented, the biggest concern is public opinion.” Miles paused, and raised a hand to waggle ambivalently. “This, of course, is judgement. But at various points today we have said Barrayar has … moved on. And I think, if we let Dr Chandler’s new facts speak for themselves, we will find we can move on where Cetaganda is concerned. There are memories and painful scars, of course. For them, too, for all they were aggressors. But memories are fading, scars are old. There will be the distraction of new technology, and the economic benefits of that and greater security. And whatever inspirational leadership and guidance the Imperium may provide its subjects.”

“Heh.” Aral looked more musing than disbelieving. “And why will the Cetagandans agree to move on with us?”

Miles waggled both hands, and shrugged. “Another judgement. The Cetas have the advantage, in numbers and resources, but we have hurt them hard. Once by ourselves. Once with the Hegen Hub Alliance. Three times, if you count Marilac, which at the highest levels they certainly do. And we have confused the ghem–lords, perhaps all ghem, considerably in the process. After the Cetagandans’ little internal difficulty with the Star Crèche ten years ago the haut also had to do some shuffling at senior levels. They don’t want an all-out war with us any more than we want one with them. And they don’t want it sufficiently badly that I think they will go a long way to avoid it.”

*What little internal difficulty with the Star Crèche?* Nothing Ekaterin knew about Miles’s visit to Eta Ceta included any hint of such a problem—but he had been in contact with the Star Crèche. More than contact. Miles was counting on his fingers again.

“In addition, first, they equally have the technology and its implications to consider. Second, though this may seem to some of you an odd consideration, the haut are aesthetes, and I think some of this plan will appeal to them. Or rather, and third, to him. To them—meaning Giaja and Degtiar. We only have to persuade two Cetagandans. The rest will follow. And last, my guess is Giaja will be exasperated, amused, and under terrible pressure. Cetagandan law does *not* favour the man on the spot, and if Giaja thought it was just us pushing him, he’d stick; but he as well as we can see the problem the technology poses, and he’ll appreciate the advantage of speed. So the plan, because it is fair, will instead become the path of least resistance.”

As litany and logic developed everyone’s faces became absorbed. Her aunt and uncle, Ekaterin imagined, were processing it in their own ways, thinking of unforgiving historical forces or assessing loads and inertias. The officers and Illyan presumably had political and security angles; the Viceroy and Vicereine equally so, with heavy tangles of family as well. What did Alys make of her nephew’s mystery weekend so far? Gregor—no, the Emperor—looked round them all, then again at Laisa.

“My Advisors. Given all you have heard, does anyone wish to speak against this now?” No-one did. Miles let out a long, slow sigh, audible only to Ekaterin. “Then I shall speak tomorrow to the haut Fletchir Giaja. As to what may then be said … I shall sleep on it. Miles, I would appreciate it if you sprang no more surprises on me today. Please confirm the frame-call with ghem-General Benin, and tell him exactly who will be present at this end. *That* cannot wait.” Abruptly he looked at his Viceroy and Vicereine, side-by-side in their small frame and smaller cabin. “And I had, by damn, forgotten. These things are going to take some getting used to. Aral, Cordelia, when will you be here?”

“Sometime after midnight, I fear.”

“But not too long after.” Cordelia’s was smiling. “Aral’s had them redlining all the way,”

“Good. Then I’ll see you tomorrow. And we will see, eh? Meantime, Miles, while I am very fond of this excellent apple-juice you mentioned raiding your cellars. Just now, I request and require that you do.”
[1] Cetaganda, Ch. 15.
Armsman Jankowski had warned Ekaterin not to try eating outside after dark without finely tuned force-screens, and she had felt for herself flying insects appear in the lakeside twilight, so dinner was served in the main dining-room. In her forced absence Pym and Ma Kosti had laboured through the afternoon with drafted help to conjure a vision of white linen, glassware, and candle-light, centred on an ancient silver candelabrum whose arms surrounded miniature Dendarii mountains sporting the maple-trees symbolised on the Vorkosigan family crest. Around its base, a twining monogram was repeated between each lofting arm, the claspig V with flanking B and K of Princess-and-Countess Olivia Vorbarra Vorkosigan, Miles’s paternal grandmother and Gregor’s cousin-once-removed. Ekaterin had found it in the household’s capacious store-cupboards and admired it, hesitating to use it in case one of Mad Yuri’s victims was not a spectre Miles wanted at his weekend feast. But he had dismissed her fears, smiling distractedly.

“No, no, use what you will, milady. It’s a very fine piece. I remember it from childhood, and so will Gregor. Da likes it too. He showed me the maker’s mark once, when it was being cleaned, on the rear of one of the tree-trunks. And demonstrated how accurate the mountains were topographically, despite the oversize trees.”

Even with this encomium Ekaterin had her doubts, but looking at the old piece now, silver maple-trunks and palmate leaves aflame with mellow light and mountain-flanks gleaming beneath them, she knew Miles had been right. One of her long afternoons with Alys at Estelle’s had refined a seating plan, and she sat at her end of the table between Alys and Illyan with her uncle and aunt beyond them. Gregor and Laisa had the middle seats. Miles was fielding Chandler, Allegre, and Vorlynkin at the other end, with Nikki, back from whatever he’d spent the afternoon up to with Arthur Pym, to balance the sides and inhibit untoward officers’ shop or attempts to debrief Chandler further.

Her fast-growing son looked excited but at ease, despite keeping such adult hours and exalted company after a long day, and her heart melted a little while an affectless, encapsulated memory floated in her mind, of the rage at Tien and terror for Nikki she had felt watching birthday by birthday, then day by day, for tremors announcing the onset of their shared Vorzohn’s Dystrophy. Even if that poor excuse for a Vor man had left her some spark, even an ember, of the love and respect she once felt for him, she would have been well shot of Etienne Vorsoisson and knew it, body and soul. The love Miles roused in her was such a potent combination of exploratory desire and intense urge to respond she did not think she could have stood up against it for long in any case. But he was proving a wonderful stepfather, and to the marrow of her bones she felt an ease and security she had not known since the genetic revelation of Tien’s mutancy soon after Nikki had been born.

Despite his heartfelt words she had noted Gregor had not waited for wine to be served, instead wandering with Laisa over to the stables, trailing Vorbarra Armsmen and members of his security team. Miles had discreetly signalled Pym to join the trailers, in case Gregor should want anything the house could supply, but told her to let her imperial guests go as they willed. Now, however, Gregor was gently turning his glass in the candlelight, and raised it to Miles.

“Ivan once told me the cellars at Vorkosigan House contained bottles with more dust on them than an old Vor. Would this be an example, Miles?”
Her husband blinked. “Of a sort. Does that mean you let Ivan into the Residence wine-cellar, Gregor? That was foolhardy.”

At her side Alys grimaced. Lord Ivan, Ekaterin knew, resolutely single despite his mother’s best and worst efforts, had been rewarded for long-suffering official secondment to her during preparations for Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding with a year’s posting to the rapidly expanding Imperial Counsellor’s office on Komarr. Communication with his mother in the months since his Winterfair leave to attend Miles’s and Ekaterin’s wedding had not been frequent. Gregor grinned. Miles swirled his own wine in its finely blown glass, admiring the ruby colour.

“How they got the crop in is anyone’s guess, but this is one of the last bottles of a great war vintage. 2720. So it’s a little older than my Da. And about the same age as Fletchir Giaja, so far as anyone knows.” Pym circled with the bottle, and seemed to have several more on hand; a full one, still corked and sealed, was set before Gregor. Ekaterin held her breath but Miles was genuinely reminiscing, not trying to talk to the elephant in the corner of the conversation. “If it wasn’t a District wine to begin with I’d suspect it was part of Olivia’s dowry from old Xav. He’s the one who built our cellars. Gran’dá learned from him and passed it on, but I don’t think he ever cared that much so long as it tasted good and packed a punch.”

The Professora was still thinking of her promising graduate student. As Professoras should, Ekaterin thought. “That sort of bluffness wasn’t an act Count Piotr put on, then, Miles? I remember you arguing he was mislabelled as a Vor conservative, and supported change despite himself.” She sipped her wine. “Oh my. It tastes different now you’ve told me it’s older than I am. But I was wondering in that case how conscious his … mantling in Vor tradition had been.”

“I’m not sure.” Miles gathered another forkful of a spiced and fruited rice that was one of Gregor’s favourites; he had helped himself generously. “The Cetagandan occupation was a stern lesson in Vor tradition. I remember once having to explain to some Marilacans that its quickest effect was rapidly to clear our chain of command of deadwood and heroes. But with that Auditorial case I was arguing, as I recall, that what the Cetagandans really taught Gran’dá was that Barrayar had to look to the stars. To Komarr. And beyond.” He chewed thoughtfully for a minute. “All that Oldest Living Vor stuff just accumulated around Gran’dá because he—forgive this language, Nikki, but it’s a quotation —outlived all the other bastards. What confused him, I think, was that he found he cared passionately about some of it and didn’t give a hoot for the rest, but couldn’t quite keep straight in his mind which bits were in which category.” Miles drank more of the wine as old as Fletchir Giaja, bottled, Ekaterin calculated, when the newly married Piotr Vorkosigan was all of twenty-seven. “And of course I confused him horribly, so I’m still not sure. You knew him longer than I, Gregor. And we both inherit his political legacy. Helen must correct me, but I think the question is about Piotr’s bottom line—which I cannot impartially judge. Can you?”

The table, Ekaterin sensed, was holding its collective breath. No shop rule be damned. “Ignore his catechisms if you like.” She tried to offer Gregor an escape. “I do.” But Miles and Gregor both grinned at her.

“I don’t mind, Ekaterin. Truly. And the answer’s not far to seek, Miles, Helen.” Ekaterin was secretly thrilled to hear Gregor call her aunt by name; Barrayar did not encourage informality. “I told Laisa earlier in the week, when we were talking about this house. The first time I was brought here was at the outbreak of the War of Vordarian’s Pretender. Captain Negri, who was dying of plasma burns, poor sod, crashed us on the lawn. Then Aral and Cordelia were there, but Aral gave me over to Piotr and I was smuggled up into the mountains on horseback with hardly a word said.” Candlelight flickered on his face. “Piotr left us after a while. Cordelia, Sergeant Bothari, and I went higher into the mountains.” Bothari? Ekaterin hadn’t known of the dead Armsman’s involvement with Gregor as well as the Vorkosigans. “Looking back, I think even at the time I knew that while
Cordelia and others were caring for me, it was Piotr’s power that kept me safe. I never doubted it.”

Gregor gestured at the candelabrum. “These mountains are Vorkosigan to the bone. And Piotr’s bottom line was loyalty. He would not break faith. For the rest, necessity spoke as it might.”

“Yes. I’ll buy that.” Miles’s eyes glinted as he turned to the Professora. “People miss it, Helen, because Gran’da’s famous for switching sides on Mad Yuri. But the Massacre was Yuri’s breach of the oath between them. Even setting aside his rage and grief, by his lights Gran’da had to react, or all oaths became meaningless. But he would never have broken his oath to the emperor himself. Nor his later oath to the Lord Regent, which I suggest proves my point about his character.”

He looked round the table, and let his gaze come to rest on Nikki. Ekaterin’s breath tightened. Was Miles really going to … ? He was.

“You know, Nikki, this would be the moment, I fancy.” Miles took in the listening company again. “Nikki and his friend Arthur Pym have a dispute in hand, and he put to me the other day a most interesting question. It arises from a holovid series about a certain Captain Lord Vortalon, who was a jump-pilot smuggling arms for Prince Xav during the Occupation, and unhappily lost his da to an assassination.”

At Miles’s nod, Nikki set out the puzzle of Emperor Dorca’s mysterious but punitive principle with admirable clarity—and, Ekaterin noticed, much more disciplined pronouns. When had Miles found the time to talk Lord Vortalon’s problems through with him? That he had she did not doubt. Nikki had also somehow mastered Miles’s trick of addressing Gregor directly while talking to everyone round the table.

“So you see, sir, the script never revealed the principle. Arthur and I could not decide if it would just have been revenge, blood for blood, or if the Emperor wouldn’t have thought that important, but couldn’t overlook the treason involved, because it was a Count.” He looked round at Miles. “But I’m not sure how your grandfather’s character fits in, sir.”

“But I think it’s really the same question, Nikki. I think you are right about Dorca’s scrupulous distinction of principles. And whereas people often say Gran’da took his revenge on Mad Yuri, what he really did was respect both his oaths, the one Mad Yuri broke and the one he then swore to Ezar. It was bad news for Yuri either way, just as Xav saw that Lord Vortalon didn’t really have a choice about what to do—but he did have a choice about why he did it.”

Nikki frowned as he processed this, and Gregor leaned forward. “Between acting in revenge or in fealty, you mean? Huh.” He sat back again slowly. “Simon, Alys, you knew Piotr for longer than either of us, if not as intimately. Does that ring true to you?”

Illyan grunted. “Not really. At one stage your father had to cancel his blanket security classification, I seem to recall, to keep him away from you. But I was more aware of that as a conflict between him and your mother. To which she ultimately put an end by bowling Vordarian’s head down the table at him, and warning him his own would be next unless he—forgive me Nikki, and this isn’t a quotation—took it out of his ass.”
Gregor and Miles were smiling at this old family history. Ekaterin had been privileged to hear Cordelia’s own, much more rarely told version, which was considerably more emotive but still featured Vordarian’s rolling head. Sergeant Bothari had been in that story too. Somewhere inside herself Ekaterin was glad times had moved on, and the head had not become a traditional Vorkosigan bride-price as well as a family joke. So what did you do to those Komarran terrorists, eh girl? That internal voice was not one she wanted to listen to now. Lady Alys, she saw, was not smiling at Illyan’s barracks’ language, but the military men were grinning, with her uncle and Nikki, while Aunt Helen looked drunk on the undiluted history being offered her with such a liberal hand.

“So what did you do to those Komarran terrorists, eh girl?”

That internal voice was not one she wanted to listen to now. Lady Alys, she saw, was not smiling at Illyan’s barracks’ language, but the military men were grinning, with her uncle and Nikki, while Aunt Helen looked drunk on the undiluted history being offered her with such a liberal hand.

“Simon, dear.” Aly’s frown deepened. “Crudities aside, and I concede Piotr’s behaviour at that time did provoke them, I distinctly recall you fulminating about Piotr more than once.” She gave her partner — lover; protector? — a look that in another woman Ekaterin would call arch. “Not that you were up to noticing me at the time, save as an adjunct to Ivan.”

Did Illyan blush? He undoubtedly took Aly’s hand. “I’m sure I fulminated, dear. I was certainly preoccupied.” He turned to Gregor. “You were still in the mountains, not that I knew that then, and we were playing the long game. Not just for Vordarian’s hostages, but for the army. Aral wanted to save all the officers he could.” Vorlynkin looked struck by this. Illyan’s free hand found his glass.

“After Piotr came to Tanery Base he did some very useful political stuff, mostly seeing those of his fellow-Counts who were still free. But in-between-times, and once he’d seen them all, he hung round ops command and made Aral’s life a misery.” Illyan’s eyes glowed with remembered frustration. “It wasn’t the big strategy. They agreed on that before I ever got there, and Kanzian only confirmed for them Vordarian had never understood the nature of his own war. Idiot.” He paused reflectively. “I didn’t understand it at all at first. Continual sniping from Piotr, unwavering courtesy from Aral, always spurned. But spurned with the greatest imaginable pain. It was palpable. Then Cordelia explained it to me.”

Pym drifted around, refilling glasses. Gregor refused, Ekaterin saw, but Illyan did not. He drank and looked at Miles.

“No way round it, son. You were between them. But today you put yourself back together with the best of what they shared.” The ruby-red glass was lifted in toast. “If you hadn’t swizzed it out of Gregor with your gold chain, Miles, I’d be recommending your captaincy tonight.”

The tone was light but Ekaterin saw Miles freeze. Cautiously she looked around. Vorlynkin and her aunt, as well as Nikki, Laisa, and Aly were frowning in puzzlement, but her uncle, Allegre, and Gregor all seemed to swallow startled laughter and look at Miles with concern.

Another story I haven’t caught up with yet. But Miles was giving Illyan the strangest smile. Did it matter that Illyan, as Negri before him, had never taken army rank higher than captain, or needed one?

“D’you know, Simon, once that would have meant the world to me. And it still means a great deal. But”—he turned his level gaze on Ekaterin, who smiled warmly if uncertainly back—“because I no longer take physical risks to prove myself, having no such need, and have reclaimed my natal rank, I’d rather take that in its true spirit and pass your best wishes along in due course to our children.”

This was too much for Aly, who began to draw herself up for formal enquiry, but Nikki beat her to it. “Mama, you decided! How many?”

Miles winked at her, and Ekaterin faced her son. “Two, Nikki dear. A boy and a girl, to gestate while we’re away, next year, and be born when we’re back.”

Aly sat back with a look of immense satisfaction, qualified only, Ekaterin thought, by continuing frustration with Ivan. She saw the older woman cast several sharp glances at Gregor and Laisa while they and others exclaimed congratulations and toasted the future. With Laisa’s smile and kind words
there was an edge of calculation, either at her own situation or the extent to which Miles might have co-opted Ekaterin’s privacy in making his week-end work. *His interimperial treaty*. But Ekaterin found she didn’t much care: she wanted children with Miles, sooner rather than later, and wanted her friends to know; bone-deep, she also agreed with Miles’s remorseless logic of hope.

Coffee was served with yet more delectable pastries, and Gregor turned with his usual memory and care to Nikki, almost successfully concealing a yawn after the burst of excitement. “I don’t think your question about Emperor Dorca was properly answered, Nikki. Of course in one sense there is no answer. I never knew him, so I have no private source to draw on. But for all he is called Dorca the Just you are right to think he would as emperor have preferred a twisty principle to a simple one.” An emperor grinned. “Whether that will suffice Master Pym I cannot guess.” Gregor looked around. “What does his father say?”

“Pym! Front and centre.” Miles’s voice was cheerful. Pym’s slow step forward into general visibility was not.

“My Lord?”

“You heard your emperor.”

Pym swallowed. “I did, my Lord.” Not waiting for further prompts, he turned to Gregor. “In the matter of the dispute concerning your collateral ancestor, Sire, between Master Vorkosigan and my son, I have been extremely careful to take no side. I have however pointed out to both gentlemen”—Ekaterin, pondering that ‘collateral’, could have kissed him for omitting ‘young’; so she thought could Nikki—“that in a harder time men and women thought less of shedding blood, and that whatever Emperor Dorca’s principles may have been, times change.”

Nikki was squinting across the table. “You have, sir. And I think I understand what you meant. But if I have understood the talk this evening, people stay the same, really.”

“Not quite, Nikki.” Miles’s voice was intimate, not pretending he and Nikki were alone but addressed only to the boy. “They change more slowly, always a generation behind.” *And sometimes two. Or eleven.* He smoothly included them all again. “That, if you like, has been our reality disadvantage. And that’s what I think we have a shot at changing. For a while.” He switched back to the intimate mode again for Nikki. Why was it not embarrassing? “It’s your bedtime shortly.”

Ekaterin saw no obvious acknowledgement from Nikki but as coffee made a second round, with Pym in most invisible mode, her son—*their son*—gracefully made goodnights, including smiles for Gregor and Laisa, came to kiss her and his aunt and uncle, and vanished through the door. Gregor looked after him approvingly, then at Miles thoughtfully.

“Did you have a thought you weren’t saying?”

“About old Vortalon, you mean? Not really. Nikki initially connected the nasty-cousin problem with Richars Vorrutyer.” He grinned at Gregor. “Dono and Olivia like Nikki too, you know. I hear he got most of the story out of them, one way or another, and he’s got to know Armsman Szabo’s son as well. What I liked was that he pushed through all Vortalon’s shoot-‘em-up adventures to the genuine question about Dorca. And he was trying to think about Xav as my not-so-distant ancestor, a real person not a holovid shadow. He’s been studying the Vor genealogy ever since he twigged Da really was a living person who’d actually done all that stuff in his Barrayaran history syllabus.”

“You’re right about that, Miles dear.” Aunt Helen was laughing in recollection. “Ekaterin, I recall your telling me on Komarr you’d realised Nikki hadn’t understood who Miles was because of something he’d asked about Cordelia. When he saw Vorkosigan House and met Arthur he picked up
on the idea of the Vorkosigans pretty quickly, and asked me for some help looking things up.”
Ekaterin had thought Nikki unusually well-prepared for his first class in ‘The Modern Imperium’ the
previous autumn. “But what with, um, one thing and another, he didn’t actually meet Aral or
Cordelia until that day at Vorhartung Castle.”

Grins showed around the table at this reference to the appallingly public climax of Miles’s and
Ekaterin’s tumultuous courtship. But Miles didn’t care and for Ekaterin the absolute, known
rightness of what she had done made her impervious to embarrassment, now as then. Her aunt
continued, eyes twinkling.

“On the way back to Vorkosigan House he asked me about Aral. What really impressed him, I think,
besides his Ma’s exquisite timing”—and Ekaterin did blush a little—“was the way Aral and Cordelia
cleared a path into the council-chamber afterwards by sheer force of personality. And I have to agree,
you know. It was remarkable. They were buoyed by happiness and the occasion, of course, but I
have no doubt they could have done it anyway. The Counts just melted away in front of them.”

Gregor was smiling. “An effect I’ve seen, though I regret to say I missed that particular display,
being surrounded myself by whatever Counts weren’t mobbing Miles. It is formidable.”

Miles looked at Ekaterin, smiling almost shyly. “I saw them as your outriders, you know.” She
swallowed at the implication, but Miles’s gaze moved on to her aunt. “What did Nikki ask, Helen?”

“Oh, he’d spent several very exciting hours seeing history made, and he’d seen the force the Council
of Counts represents. It made it concrete for him. And he’d seen a particular, um, enemy very neatly
skewered by his Ma and swept away by that force. But then—and incidentally, dear, I do see what
you mean about your father’s way with children—he saw this charming, impressive old man to
whom he’d just been introduced as your Da simply blow those Counts aside to clear his Ma’s path to
you.” Aunt Helen laughed again, and everyone seemed to be smiling at her. “It was wonderful. The
session had finished of course, and all the hostility went with Lord Richars. But I think the image of
the Viceroy and Vicereine striding through a babble of Counts on the course they chose clicked in
Nikki’s head somewhere, and the history he’d read came alive for him. So when he was with me he
took the chance to check some facts.” Helen gave Ekaterin her mischievous look. “You know, dear,
if commercial jump-piloting doesn’t last I have hopes of him for history.”

“You can try, Aunt Helen. I thought Uncle Georg has a better chance for engineering.” And a more
liberal hand with pastries. “Nikki’s always off down to the basement lab.”

“And welcome,” Georg put in. “I don’t know engineering is his passion, but he’s curious and
helpful. I always enjoy his company.” He reached to nab some leftover cheese from his wife’s plate,
adding it to a biscuit on his own. “And of course the field, all fields I suppose, is about to undergo
considerable upheaval.” Georg gave Gregor an apologetic glance. “I don’t want to set us off again.
Enough is enough for one day, and this meal was a greater relief than I thought possible after lunch.
But I’ve had a chance to look at Jack’s math, and even skimming the surface I’ve been thinking new
planets are all very well but the real challenge for us will be re-tooling industry and upgrading
infrastructure without bringing the Imperium to a standstill. Just about every form of manufacturing
except the agricultural sector will be directly affected, and even there all peripherals will be. Then
transport, the power-grid and comnet …”

Gregor was nodding. “Yes, I am beginning to absorb that.”

Chandler, Ekaterin saw, had caught Miles’s eye, quirking his eyebrows, and Miles, after a second,
nodded. The Terran sat forward. “Sire.” He was still tasting the word when he said it, Ekaterin
thought. “I too have no wish to inaugurate another session now, but I wondered if my, um,
misconceived bribes might serve you here.”
“Please go on, Doctor.”

“Well, when I supposed I would have to sell myself more … selfishly, I thought to offer the Counts a preferential aspect of the hypothesis. Frames for themselves and their District offices, perhaps. And with the nanoforges”—Miles’s term had clearly stuck—“I wanted something that would steer them away from the idea of weapons.” Barrayaran heads nodded around the table. Vorlopulous’s Law worked well, but no-one wanted to overburden the Counts with temptation. “So most design-work I’ve done concentrates on programming a nanoforge with upgrading rather than creation in mind.” His hands gestured. “Without circumventing major safeguards I’ve designed, such a device could not be used to manufacture a large item from scratch. What it could do is turn an old engine into a better model, or effect repairs to machinery that would presently require a forge or expensive replacement parts. I am no economist, but I was trying as best a scientist might to provide the hypothesis with buffers. And it occurs to me, listening to Georg, that something similar might allow piecemeal introduction of nanoforges that didn’t disrupt your Imperium more than its sinews could stand.”

The last sentence had Gregor and Miles looking at Chandler with quizzical intensity. In the legal rhetoric of Barrayaran power Counts were the ‘sinews of the imperium’—a phrase Miles was given to quoting when the Council did something especially foolish or unwelcome.

“You have a most interesting political as well as scientific mind, Doctor.”

Chandler shrugged. “You’d need a central authority of some kind to, um, educate your sinews in your largesse, Sire.”

Miles almost clapped, Ekaterin thought. Gregor’s eyebrows quirked again. “Most interesting.” He turned to her uncle. “Sounds like just the thing for you to look after, my Lord Auditor.” Georg growled with dismay. “You see what you get for starting us off again.”

Miles twitched satisfaction. “Heh. Thank you, Georg, for getting me off two hooks at once.” He fed Chandler a cue, nodding to Vorlynkin. “So what did you plan for our military, Doctor?”

“Faster spaceship construction. Field repairs. My services for a period to develop military applications I cannot myself imagine.”

“But might thereby keep a close eye on. Quite so.” Gregor was smiling. “And enough ships, perhaps, to ensure no Barrayaran embarrassment at Jackson’s Whole as and whenever, while not enough to inflame wilder ideas?” Vorlynkin snorted, but Gregor waved him silent, eyes on Chandler, who returned the stare.

“I think I am going to enjoy life as your subject, Sire.”

Gregor’s smile grew warm. “I hope so, Doctor.” He looked around, nodding fractionally to Miles, who rose to speak to all.

“The ladies are, I believe, well taken-care of in this respect, as are you and Laisa, Sire, but I regret, gentlemen, I could find no way of observing security while warning you all to bring full-dress red-and-blues. By way of compensation, if you give Pym your codes he will arrange overnight for ImpSec to collect whatever you will require tomorrow for an imperial audience.”

There was a collective Gak. Ekaterin grinned to herself. Most of her guests might have been well-prepared for Gregor and Laisa, but to judge from startled expressions their thinking hadn’t encompassed a second emperor and empress in one weekend, nor the concomitant return of doubled protocol.
“Captain Khourakis should be waiting in the hall if you wish to check in with him, Guy. My parents, as you know, will be arriving at some point, so we shall not gather too early in the morning. Breakfast will be available, however, at any time—ask the nearest Armsman.” An easy smile found Vorlynkin. “You will have time to ride if you wish, Yuri. As will anyone who cares to do so. For now, there are liqueurs in the library. Otherwise, I must ask you to forgive me while I apprise the Duty Officer at the landing port of the identities of his imminent arrivals.”

Gregor had caught Laisa’s eye during this, and they stood in unison as Miles ended, somehow drawing everyone to their feet. “Of course, Miles. And we will say goodnight, I think, my lords, ladies, gentlemen.”

Pym materialised to draw back Laisa’s chair as Jankowski did Gregor’s. The emperor turned to the door, but Laisa came to give Ekaterin an affectionate kiss; her whisper, on the side away from the table, was barely audible. “Please come to our rooms when you can, with Miles.” Swallowing startlement, Ekaterin completed the goodnight ritual and as all the guests offered her and Miles salutations took the easy route of accompanying him out of the room. Gregor and Laisa had already disappeared upstairs. Miles was looking at her in surprise.

“I thought you would stay a little, love, with your aunt and uncle if not Simon and Alys. I really do have to call the ImpSec DO.”

“I had thought to, but Laisa whispered to me to come with you to their rooms.”

“Oh.” Miles’s brow furrowed. “At once?”

“When we can, she said.”

“Oh.” He seemed to find this reassuring. “Well, come on then” He paused in the hall for a word with the hovering Khourakis, then towed her into the deserted library and fired up the secured comsonsole. The Duty Officer at ImpSec’s nearest spaceport knew a courier was due in shortly but was surprised to learn whom it carried and what arrangements he was to make. Armed with the ID codes of the lightflyer that would quietly convey his parents to Vorkosigan Surleau and its escorts, he delivered them politely to Khourakis, now talking to Allegre, nodded renewed goodnights to Guy, and steered them both up the stairs. At the top, he turned to her for a long moment but said nothing, then with a small shrug started forward again. “Let’s see what Gregor wants.”

* * * * *

Still alert with adrenaline and private relief but exhausted by his claustrophobic night in ImpSec’s care, what felt like a very long day, and the astonishing food that flowed unstoppably from Vorvosigan’s kitchen, Jack Chandler was taken aback by the speed with which the dinner-party broke up and the apparent lack of concern about what he did himself, even from Allegre. The ImpSec chief, having talked to Pym, left shortly after the Vorbarras and Vorkosigans. The navy man, Vorlynkin, concluding his own business with Pym, went off with a gleam in his eye to inspect horses for the morning. Even the Vorthyses pleaded tiredness, though Chandler was willing to bet—what was it Vorkosigan always said?—Betan dollars to sand that the handwritten maths flimsies with which he had supplied the impressive Barrayaran engineer would be looking a good deal more crumpled by the morning.

Only the astonishingly elegant Lady Alys Vorpatril and her improbable partner, former ImpSec chief
Illyan, remained. Somewhat cautiously he accepted an invitation to shift chairs to their end of the table, and silently endured some thoughtful regard. He had known the military men would have to be present, and Vorthys made sense as a Lord Auditor and engineer. The interesting Professora, beyond her crisp, historical mind and evident support for the fascinating Lady Vorkosigan, seemed part of the Vorthys package. But why these two had been included he was still unsure, though Lady Alys clearly commanded Gregor’s deepest respect, and Illyan’s few remarks during the day had impressed and intrigued him, as best he had been able to follow words often plainly carrying individual payloads. Now the dapper, snub-nosed, somehow unremarkable man, an unexpected quality given his fearsome galactic reputation over three decades, raised his glass, smiling ironically.

“Congratulations, Doctor. I am, or was once, used to Miles changing worlds to suit himself, but you have, seemingly on his behalf, changed the laws of physics and the rules of”—he counted on his fingers, as Vorkosigan often did—“economics, politics, society, security, warfare, and diplomacy. What shall you do for an encore?”

Chandler laughed. “Why, live a quiet Barrayaran life, of course.” Lie in the bed I have now made and pray it doesn’t catch fire. “As I understand you do now.”

Alys sighed. “Even when Miles isn’t stirring us all up there seems no time to sit still.” She gave Chandler a look. “My own complaint would be that I hoped, after Gregor’s wedding, to retire a little myself. Not that Laisa doesn’t do wonderfully, but with increased activity driven by joint-ventures with Komarr the Residence is busier than ever. Now we shall have Cetagandans in and out all day, I suppose. No south coast this winter, Simon .”

Illyan’s face fell. “Perhaps not.”

Chandler smiled at the formidable High Vor woman, who seemed instinctively to understand that few things could have reassured him more than the proffered intimacy of such complaints. “Have you thought, Lady Alys, to take a frame with you? Of course comlinks are almost as fast over small distances, but frames do give a certain vividness to a person’s presence. It might lend itself to your needs.” He paused, thinking. “There would, of course, be matters of protocol to resolve, but I have wondered if the possibility of such visual presence, in realtime, might make physical absences easier to arrange.”

“That’s a thought.” Lady Alys spoke but both Barrayarans looked struck. “When this goes public Gregor will be inundated with requests to be present by frame, and we won’t be able to plead double-bookings half so easily.”

Illyan grinned. “Guy will try to lock him in the Residence and avoid the risks of travel altogether.”

Chandler looked ruefully at them. “Alas, more problems that may be laid at my feet. I’m sorry, my Lady.”

“Oh, please don’t be.” His punctilio drew a surprisingly gamine smile in which the wilful girl Alys must once have been flickered, while long experience showed in her eyes. “Cordelia says great gifts are great tests. Simon says the upheaval will do us all a lot of good if only we survive it. And I think”—she raised her glass—“that quite unknown to yourself, Dr Chandler, you made possible something else today. I’m not sure how to describe it even were I at liberty to try, but … an old wrong is being righted amid our confusion.” She drank, and looked at her smiling Barrayaran partner with an emotion Chandler couldn’t identify. “I saw a look in Aral’s eyes today I haven’t seen in decades.”

“Yes.” Illyan looked curiously at Chandler. “Do you mind if I ask, Doctor, when you knew what Miles had planned for Jackson’s Whole?”
“Only a few days ago.” He hesitated, then shrugged; as an old friend and seemingly a former commander Illyan of all people must understand how it had been. “Once Lord Vorkosigan learned I had a frame-link to Sergyar, he deduced I would also have maintained one with Eta Ceta and insisted we use it to speak to General Benin. I took some persuading, because of the risk to my contact from Cetagandan security.” Both Illyan and, interestingly, Lady Alys nodded sharply. “Lord Vorkosigan argued persuasively it had to be all or nothing, that a step-by-step deal wouldn’t work because delays would give too many people a chance to interfere. But I insisted in that case he tell me what his all was.”

“And you actually got him to? Congratulations again.” Illyan clearly spoke from experience. “The argument about interference is familiar to me. Miles has always thought of his superiors in just that light, though on this occasion …hmm, he really does have a point. Did he offer any other rationale that wasn’t expounded today?”

“No. He talked a little about his dislike of the place. I knew from research about his clone-brother, who could only have come from there. And though I could find little hard information, Lord Vorkosigan too has clearly been involved with various Jacksonian houses. So I required assurance that vengeance was not being … indulged.”

“I imagine you did. As I would. You were satisfied it was not?” Illyan was oddly intent.

“I was. Lord Vorkosigan in fact seemed to regard, ah, conquest of the planet as entirely a means, not an end. He spent much of the time we were discussing it outlining what he today called a hook, and gave me on oath, though not in detail, his understanding of the Cetagandans’ bio-arsenal and the need to use the hypothesis to offset it. He may have had further ideas, but I accepted his primary case.”

“Ah. Miles often does have more ideas than he can say.” Illyan seemed to relax again. “In any case, thank you for that account.”

As smoothly as the whole table earlier, again taking Chandler almost by surprise save that his knees seemed to have learned better than his head what was expected here, both Barrayarans rose and made goodnights, leaving him to the last of his wine and the sudden quietness of the old house. Even the amazing Pym had vanished, though for a moment Chandler heard him talking softly to Illyan and Lady Alys outside the door. What extraordinary people they all are. And with more subtexts between them than he could count, never mind track. But he did not feel as he had long feared, imagining a time when he might put down the burden of his terrible hypothesis, that he had made a basic error. The Barrayarans in their bizarre, seemingly so unwieldy imperium actually had a cohesion of policy he’d never found among Terra’s fractious governments or even technocratic Betans, let alone the discontented ghem-lords whom the Barrayarans under their warrior-aristocrats had twice so severely defeated. I have surrendered realtime communications to the Gregorian calendar, and it is good. Bemused but smiling, he took his tiredness, wine-glass with a half-full bottle of the ancient vintage Pym had thoughtfully left, and a small, oddly coloured kitten that trotted in to investigate the silent room, and went in search of the terrace to drink the health of brightly unfamiliar Barrayaran stars.

* * * * *

Laisa went to answer the crisp Vorbarra Armsman’s knock, and let Miles and Ekaterin into the sitting-room of their guest-suite. Gregor was in an armchair, superficially relaxed but to Laisa’s
concerned eyes, and she feared Miles’s knowing ones, tenser than he had been all day. He murmured greetings as she seated herself, waving to the other chairs, and the Vorkosigans cautiously eyed both of them with uneasy speculation, declining refreshments.

Laisa had pushed Gregor to this, hoping to resolve doubts she knew were worrying him, but looking at her husband’s extraordinary foster-brother her heart sank. How much Ekaterin knew of the riddle she was unsure, but that could be finessed. And, she thought, looking at Ekaterin’s concealed alarm, some worries need not be over-respected.

“Before anything else, we wanted to thank you both for heroic efforts. And I wanted to thank you especially, Miles, on behalf of all Komarrans. Dr Chandler and Lord Auditor Vorthys assure me the soletta repairs and enlargement can be greatly speeded. I’ve never really had the chance to thank you for the enlargement itself since Gregor told me it was your idea to propose it as a giant wedding-present.”

Miles shrugged, half-eyeing the silent Gregor and clearly wondering why he let Laisa take the lead, but there was a glint in his look. “The Laisa Toscane Vorbarra Soletta Array, perhaps. I look forward to seeing you bang a bottle of wine on its nose, or wherever the engineers decide.” Ekaterin and Laisa laughed at his image; even Gregor grinned faintly.

“I, too. My poor parents will burst.”

“You said they were well. Are they adjusting to your, um, status?”

Ekaterin’s query was not, Laisa imagined, wholly disinterested. “I think so. It hasn’t been easy, I fear, but they seem to manage.” She smiled, thinking of her father’s enduring terror of the horse carrying her to her marriage-circle, which he had had to lead before more guests than he had ever expected. “And of course, petty as commerce can be, their experience in Komarran and galactic capital markets means they were used to keeping secrets and living with personal security.” She looked squarely at Ekaterin. “I have sometimes thought, you know, that the last year must have been harder on you than me.” Laisa glanced, smiling, at Miles and her husband. “Not that we haven’t both had the best help. But I’m not sure I didn’t find Vorkosigans a more intimidating bit of Barryaran history than even Gregor’s alarming forebears.”

Her tone was light, but she saw tension snap taut in Miles. Ekaterin’s hands also tightened—at the same moment, not in response to Miles.

“Good.

She hated having to pussyfoot even in privacy with people who were in effect her brother and sister, but Gregor had been insistent some risks not be taken. Now she could relax, on one score at least. Sitting forward she looked at them both, but made the pitch to Miles. “There is something Gregor wants to ask you, Miles, but he has an attack of what your mother calls Barrayaryngitis.” Ignoring sounds from both men as well as Ekaterin’s smile, Laisa forged on. “What we have here, you see, Miles, is like one of your perfect security paradoxes. Gregor thinks he knows something, and thinks you know it too. But if you don’t and he asks, he’ll reveal it, which he is desperate not to do. So I’m going to ask you something else instead.” For a moment both Vorkosigans and Gregor stared at her in consternation, but to her relief Miles’s face cleared and he took Ekaterin’s hand with a smile from which something drained, though his face seemed still to blaze.

“Yours to command, milady.”

Why that phrase would trigger an answering smile from Ekaterin Laisa wasn’t sure. A different question than the one she had intended to ask floated into her brain, and she went with intuition. “Miles, when your father asked you to summarise things, you said there were some details you left out. What were they?”
“Ah, those.” Miles looked at her guilelessly. “There are two. One will require some background, if you’ll bear with me.”

Laisa nodded, and Miles told them. Twice she heard Gregor splutter with amusement, a sound that warmed her, and when Miles was done they both stared at him, blank-eyed. Ekaterin had apparently known about this.

“Will Degtiar allow it, do you think?” Her own voice surprised her by its normality.

“I hope so. The, um, aesthetics of the symbolism should appeal on several levels.”

“We shall all hope so. But you said there were two things?”

“Yes.” Miles told them the other, in one sentence. A long silence followed, broken only, after a few minutes, by Ekaterin raising Miles’s hand and gently kissing his fingers. Laisa thought one stroked her lips, but Miles’s eyes were locked on Gregor’s. And slowly Gregor relaxed, not just in body but in spirit.

“He does not know you know?”

“No. But he will.”

“Will he acknowledge it?”

“Perhaps not. I am ready if he does.”

“I will not tell him I know, Miles.” Gregor’s low voice was clear. “But if you ever know it right to tell him, you have my blessing. As he has always done.” There was another long pause, while Laisa and Ekaterin, having stared briefly at one another and silently confirmed mutual knowledge, watched Miles also relax utterly in body, as he so rarely did.

“An unlikely if.”

“Perhaps.” In a shorter pause Gregor seemed to reflate. “Tell me, how ever did you get from Chandler’s hypothesis to this … inspiration?”

Miles shrugged. “The other way round. I couldn’t see what to do. Any answer that might do the slightest good was plainly off-the-wall impossible. Then the excellent Doctor came along with his little bag of tricks and it all …”

“Exploded?”

“No.” An injured mock-dignity resurfaced in Miles. “Fell gloriously into place.”

Gregor laughed with real amusement. “Miles, I do not fall anywhere any more, even gloriously. Except”—a very private smile for Laisa lit his eyes—“in love, and very shortly into my bed.” They all stood, and Gregor crossed to Ekaterin to hold her hands and kiss her softly on the cheek. Then he just looked at her for a moment, smiling almost to himself. “Thank you for everything you have done.” Laisa also leant to kiss her on the cheek, while Gregor turned to Miles. “Until tomorrow, then, brother of mine.”

Before Ekaterin could worry about this emotional form of address, heard for the second time that day, both Vorkosigans found themselves outside again, with the patient Vorbarra Armsman closing the door behind them and silently continuing his vigilant guard.
While Ekaterin took herself properly to bed, Miles dozed for an hour in the comfortable chair in his private study until the indefatigable Pym brought coffee and news. “The Viceroy and Vicereine are safely landed and will soon be on their way from the spaceport, my Lord. They should be here in an hour or so. Captain Khourakis would be glad of a word when you have time, but the matter is not urgent.”

Miles rubbed his eyes and peered at his Armsman. “Pym, you astound me. How has ImpSec time for the less than urgent?”

“The Emperor told him he and the Empress might ride down to the village tomorrow morning. The Captain had to swallow his anxiety at the time, but later expressed it with force. Jankowski unwisely pointed out to him that everyone there was quite capable of working out Their Majesties were here and almost certainly had, given the number of ImpSec men hanging about the house in mufti for several days.”

Miles vented a sigh. “Ah. Well, that would do it. You’d better bring him up in five minutes.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Is Jankowski still on duty?”

“No, my Lord. He’s on early shift, so he went off to bed an hour ago.”

“Pity.” Miles contemplated waking the erring Armsman who had failed to finesse Khourakis’s instinctive caution and professional paranoia, but thought better of it. Besides, when had Gregor decided he wanted to visit Vorkosigan Surleau? On horseback? That wasn’t going to work. Or was it Laisa who wanted to go? Either way, Miles realised, it would surely do Ekaterin no harm to make her first appearance in the village as Lady Vorkosigan in that company. A call to Tsipis might be in order. Somewhere in the back of his mind it also occurred to him that the Jankowski hoyden of whom Arthur Pym spoke with such indignant passion might be further assessed, to a greater satisfaction than waking her uncle now.

“By the way, Pym, will you feel obligated to send Armsmen with us if we go on this jaunt? You’re going to be stretched pretty thin if you do with only five of you here and a lot of preparing. Banharov and Ruchinski will be exhausted, and with Gregor and Laisa coming Khourakis and at least half his ImpSec squad will be with us.”

Pym considered. “Not necessarily, my Lord, if you and the Count are happy with other arrangements.”

“I think so but check with one of us in the morning. Carry on, then.”

Miles tackled a third cup of coffee and by the time the stiff-shouldered ImpSec captain was shown in, his brain had cleared considerably. He motioned Pym to stay and waved Khourakis to a chair. “You’re District-born, Pym, if not village-born, so you shall do duty for Jankowski.” Pym’s smile
promised equitable balance between more and less local Vorkosigan Armsmen would be restored. “Whereas, forgive me, Captain Khourakis, you cannot be so. There is Greek blood in the hill-population here—Master Tsipis, the Count-my-father’s man of business is of that stock; a splendid manager—and a delightful Greek Quarter in Hassadar, where Ma Kosti likes to shop I discover, but no Khourakis. Please, have some tea and tell me of your background.”

Somewhat disarmed by the banter and swift segues, Khourakis found himself in possession of a beautiful cup filled with the Terran green tea he favoured but could rarely afford. He didn’t recall mentioning his taste to anyone at the old house, so perhaps it was good fortune that Vorkosigan shared it.

“It’s very ordinary, I’m afraid, Lord Auditor. I grew up in suburban Vorharopulos Athena.” The capital of the only Greek-majority District on Bararrayar was a notoriously dull, industrial city that resembled its ancient Terran namesake only in the vulnerability of some residential suburbs to scrubland fires. But to Khourakis’s surprise the odd little man opposite him—long familiar by sight as a childhood friend of the Emperor’s but in his new Auditorial role a more frequent and disturbing presence at the Residence—gave his confession no snide smile or look, but merely nodded.

“In which suburb?”

“The Forestry, my Lord.”

“On the western side, isn’t it? Quite hilly and still genuinely wooded. Were your parents born there?”

“No, my Lord. But raised there. All my grandparents moved to the city from the hills in Emperor Ezar’s time. My mother became a teacher in the local school and my father is a District agronomy officer with the olive tree project.”

“Ah, yes. It ran into difficulties over soil pH, didn’t it?”

How, Khourakis wondered, did a man who hadn’t been on the planet four years in the last twelve, and had never had anything at all to do with olive trees, know about that? His father maintained a test-plot of stunted trees in his own garden but the generous imperial and limited district money had dried up long ago.

“That’s correct, my Lord.” Khourakis decided on the lesser risk and took Vorkosigan at face-value; the man was obviously a data-store. “Soil pH on Barryar is higher than on Terra—not by much, but for olive trees too much. They grow well in special orchards, but in the open need too much protection to be viable. Neither botanists nor geneticists have been able to help.”

“So the olive-oil industry is stalled. No money for small-holders and villages in the western hills.”

Khourakis blinked, then realised Vorkosigan’s own mountainous district must have similar social problems, and felt heartened that despite his galactic air and alarming tendencies to sudden action the small, strangely powerful lord was so aware of locals who depended on his family. The present Count Vorharopulos, he knew, would not show up well by comparison for all his gaudy uniform. He nodded, dumbly, and Vorkosigan, after an enquiring glance, went on.

“Just like here, in many ways.”

Did Vorkosigan read minds? Thinking over the days since he had come to this house and its loyalist village Khourakis thought he might.

“I’ll bear it in mind. As it happens, I expect to be talking to several ah, notable geneticists quite soon. Perhaps your olives could learn from our maples or something.” Eh? But Khourakis had no time to
think what this might mean. “In any case, from what you say, Captain, I imagine while you knew country people growing up, you didn’t know a village like this one. More than two-thirds of the families here have at least one member on active service with ImpSec or regular forces, or as an Armsman. Nearly half have two.” Pym was refilling his teacup as Vorkosigan gazed at him peaceably. “Senior NCOs or junior to middle-ranking officers, in most cases. With families presently lacking an active member they also muster eleven retired forty-year men whom ImpSec, or in three cases the Imperial Rangers, were sorry to lose. I could also name you three sixty-year men who live within five miles of this room.”

As he contemplated these comforting statistics Khourakis found himself holding a plate bearing an aromatic diamond of baclava oozing honey that suggested to his fogging brain only that Ma Kosti must have recently been to the reportedly delightful Greek Quarter in Hassadar. The teacup had migrated from his other hand to its saucer, and he held a gleaming silver fork at which he looked in surprise. Vorkosigan’s voice acquired a thread of steel among the reassuring reminiscence.

“You have satisfied yourself no resident of Vorkosigan Surleau presently has guests other than related members of my own staff. And you can forget riding—my stables will accommodate Admiral Vorlynkin readily enough. They will not accommodate the Emperor and Empress necessarily accompanied by, at minimum, myself, yourself, my wife’s self, my stepson’s self, and the selves of at least eight ImpSec guards. To most of whom, begging your pardon, I should not in any case entrust a horse.” The fog in Khourakis’s head was beginning to spin, yet everything Vorkosigan said seemed to make sense. “Lady Vorpatril’s rather beautiful old aircar is another story. It will easily take five of us, and ImpSec can follow in normal pattern.”

With the air escort operating, Gregor’s physical safety would not be wholly Khourakis’s responsibility. His brain latched on to the comforting notion. Yes. Then Vorkosigan spoke again, almost as an afterthought.

“Besides, the village will expect no less.” Before Khourakis could absorb this, there was more. “You’ll be on parade, you know, as much as we, if Gregor goes ahead with this. More so, really, because we probably won’t take Vorkosigan Armsmen. The villagers know Gregor was hidden in the mountains here as a child, during Vordarian’s Pretendership. One or two older ones even say they saw him, and all think of him as specially theirs, through my grandfather’s loyalty to old Ezar. And through my father of course.” Vorkosigan gave what looked a genuine smile. “Who will be here shortly with my lady mother.” The genial force of the little man’s speech became a compelling briskness. “So, more usefully, Captain, you will discover, if you haven’t already, that almost all adults and half the children in Vorkosigan Surleau already have ImpSec files and security ratings at least equal to yours when you first met His Majesty. Which quite a few of them have, one way and another.” Khourakis found himself on his feet, empty-handed, with Vorkosigan smiling genially up at him. Where had the baclava gone? His belly was warm and his breath tasted of cloves and honey. “And at the risk of giving you an idea, Captain Khourakis, your responsibility tomorrow, if all this happens, is less Gregor’s safety, which is not in question, and more introducing Laisa, who has never been to the village.”

Now that was a thought to ponder. Adjusting his conduct of security duties to the presence of the new Empress had been a persistent challenge over the previous year. He believed, and the Emperor said, he had done well, especially at military functions where tact about Komarran affairs was not always as evident as it should be. Only one generation out from what most Barrayarans still called Greekie hicks, Khourakis knew something about deflecting racial and cultural prejudice, not that he’d had any hint of it here. Vorkosigan looked into his eyes, and Khourakis found himself oddly reminded of the Emperor’s gaze.

“As my responsibility will be to introduce my own wife. In whose hands, traditionally, we all rest
here.” Then he gave the strangest grin. “Rest easy, Captain. She does, I will. All shall be well.”

* * * * *

When the armoured ImpSec aircar bearing his parents slipped silently through the last security checks and settled on the grass, Miles was waiting with Pym and Roic, as well as a senior maid. Normally the Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar travelled with a staff of dozens, and their arrival anywhere precipitated upheaval; putting one’s own staff on duty was the polite thing, but largely redundant. For this strange, secret mission, however, they were accompanied only by a brace of Vorkosigan Armsmen, Banharov and Ruchinski, and the pilot—a vastly smaller entourage, Miles suspected, than either had managed for decades, so he was prepared.

As soon as they were out of the aircar, stretching cramped limbs, Roic and the maid went to gather luggage from tired armsmen, whisking away valises and awkward uniform and dress-cases. Miles stepped forward, and Pym slid around to his brother-armsmen with a discreet smile of assurance that they might relax.

“Welcome, sir, milady mother.”

Neither Cordelia nor Aral seemed much minded to formality. Miles wasn’t unduly surprised his mother bent to kiss him, firmly, with a murmured “Hello, son”, but was moved despite himself when his father swept him into a silent embrace. Releasing but not relinquishing his grip, Aral leaned back and looked closely at him. What did his father really see, Miles wondered, in his undersized and misshapen son? His own filial thoughts, even after seeing the man for half the day by vivid frame, were as always arrested by the palpable force the Count-his-father emanated in person. Perhaps he could learn to do that some day, but he suspected it was a quality you had or had not, and being distinctly short was not promising.

“Congratulations, sir.” The raspy baritone was Miles’s oldest memory. “You are trying a great thing, Miles. Your mother and I are proud of you tonight.” Miles almost gaped. What did he feel, hearing words he had so often dreamed of earning? Vertigo at apogee, perhaps? But that must wait, and his Da was looking at him with the oddest look in deep-set eyes whose twinkle overlay something wholly serious, and taking his Ma’s hand. “I confess myself strangely moved by your desire that I lead a singularly improbable annexation of Jackson’s Whole. Did you really leave Gregor in the dark about that, as you did us?”

Miles tried to gather his wits, and gestured vaguely into the darkness beyond the house-lights. “I didn’t want to spook him with a blood-price.” He brightened. “But your tractor-bubbles sort that out wonderfully.”

“My tractor-bubbles?” Aral’s indignant laugh was music to his ears. “Hardly, boy.”

“Oh they will be yours, sir. For everyone, everywhere.” Miles’s voice was level. “After the Nexus has seen by frame a singularly aesthetic as well as bloodless takeover, of old evil by new good, and heard you address them roundly on the subject. Think about it.”

Taking advantage of the moment Miles ushered his parents inside. Pym relieved them of coats, Banharov and Ruchinski went with grave thanks to well-earned rest in more comfortable beds than fast imperial couriers afforded, and both parents followed Miles to the kitchen. He had insisted Ma Kosti claim her beauty-sleep, pointing out that Sunday’s calendar, though less frantic, would again
be busy; she had left covered plates of bread and meats, with pastries to follow. Roic was busying himself with teapot and kettle.

“Food, my Lady? And tea?”

“Thank you, Roic. That would be lovely.” Cordelia settled in a chair across from Aral, leaving the head of the table between them. “Come.” She patted the vacant seat. Resigned, Miles sat. His mother contemplated him with a look in which familiar, suppressed exasperation mingled with sparks of worry and something he didn’t recognise. “Miles, dear, we are thinking about new good, old evil, and your notion of commandeering a Nexus-wide public address system. And we will talk further, dear, about your preferred methods for making the universe a better place and your father a happier man. In the meantime, what is the agenda tomorrow?”

Miles wasn’t going to touch most of that with a long stick, even at mother-point. “Rise when you will. An informal morning and lateish lunch, as Gregor wants to visit the village with Laisa. Ekaterin and I will certainly go, as she hasn’t been down there herself yet. If you both come, the village will be very happy.”

“I see.” Miles had no doubt his father did, to the uttermost. “Of course we shall come.”

Roic served the food and tea, received thanks, and at a signal from Miles withdrew.

“By the way, I told Pym he needn’t send Armsmen with Ekaterin and I tomorrow, or even with you, if we do all go to the village. Even with Banharov and Ruchinski they’ll be stretched, and we’ll have Khourakis and who knows how many circling ImpSec goons. Pym was reluctantly relieved, I think, but he’ll probably check with you in the morning.”

“Heh. So much for the local end. When do our more far-reaching duties begin?”

“Late afternoon, our time—16:30. Late morning, theirs. Dag Benin knows who’s here, and promises their party will match. He said he had everything in hand.”

“And you believe him?” His father managed to sound wry despite the questioning pitch.

“I think so.”

“Hmm.” The rasp in his father’s voice deepened. “And how did you get the poor man to agree to all this, Miles, without going through Ambassador Vorreedi or using ImpSec?”

“It was tricky,” he admitted. “Chandler’s friend there was another medic, doing something with their military hospital on burn recovery, so there was no way he could get to Benin. But do you remember that ghem-lord artist, Yenaro, from the Star Crèche business ten years ago?”

“The one who was supposed to have made that booby-trapped sculpture?”

“That’s right. Well, he came out of it all well enough, with a minor post in the Celestial Garden, and has since risen a few grades, enough to have access to places senior people go. So we got the medic to give Yenaro the frame and a letter for Dag Benin, using my name and requesting he closet himself in his office and push the button.” Miles grinned. “He was most surprised to see me. Even more so when he realised I was on Barrayar.”

“How much did you tell him?”

“All the basics. The frame is powerfully persuasive in itself, but I outlined what little Chandler’s said about the nanoforges. You could hear Dag thinking, I swear. Then he asked what I was proposing. I
told him three things. First—to his considerable relief, I fancy—that only our Imperial Masters could possibly decide this one. Second, that his job and mine was therefore to put them both in a position to do so. And third, on my word as Vorkosigan, that we wanted a peaceful outcome and would offer a straight, honourable deal to haut and ghem alike.”

“And he agreed to go straight to Giaja?”

“Oh yes. He saw the other possibilities as clearly as we do. He asked who’d be with Gregor, and I told him, promising to confirm it today with other arrangements we made. Which I have. So that end is alright.” Miles drummed his fingers. “At this end, Guy and Yuri may need soothing from time to time tomorrow, but unless Gregor asks for formal advice again I’d as soon not generate any more of it. We’ve done that bit. I think Gregor’s only hesitating, not doubting, if you see what I mean. And the doubt is about exposing himself to Giaja and the Cetas, not the pitch itself.”

“Yes, I’d agree with that from his looks. You wrapped it very nicely for him.” His mother’s voice was warm. “How is Ekaterin doing? I thought she was looking a little frazzled by the time you started rolling-out planetary invasion plans.”

Miles hunched. “She’s fine. She’s done wonderfully, of course. She knows I had to use blinkers for everyone on this.”

Cordelia regarded her son steadily. “And she is comforted no doubt by realising that you do not think only of her as a horse, but extend the privilege to everyone.”

Ouch. Miles hunched further and looked up at his mother from under drawn brows. “What would have had me do, milady mother?” A dangerous inspiration struck him. “I won’t pretend ignorance is bliss but you can’t tell me knowing isn’t a burden.” A hit, a palpable hit. And now a nice diversion. “Which reminds me, Ekaterin and I let something else be known at dinner.” He had the satisfaction of seeing both parents hold their breaths, felt only a second’s guilt at using the news to distract them, and let his own elation show. “A boy and a girl, by replicator of course. Next year, when Ekaterin’s done at the university, while we travel. Someones to come home to.”

Amid delighted congratulations awkward present questions retreated. With thirst and hunger sated, both his parents also began to show their inevitable tiredness after such a hasty voyage and multiple jumps. Following them to their rooms Miles mentally sighed relief. His mother could be distracted by very few things; prospective grandchildren, however, seemed to manage the trick nicely. But as he bade them goodnight and his father disappeared from sight, Cordelia turned back.

“Your brother will be furious, you realise, though he’ll probably want to hug you as well. I trust you’re prepared for both events.” She looked down at him with what might be mild astonishment. “As for your Da, Miles love …” She bent and kissed him. “Thank you. I don’t know yet if I hope it’s only for the thought.” With a smile she was gone. The door clicked shut behind her, and for the second time that night Miles found himself standing in the upper corridor with an alert Vorbarra Armsman studiously ignoring his presence.

* * * *

Half-awakened by early summer light, Miles felt sufficiently deserving of his rest to ignore faint noises he interpreted as Vorlynkin heading to the stables. Given the extra hours she had enjoyed, Miles even managed to ignore Ekaterin’s quiet departure from bed and bedroom. But the smell of food and growing anticipation had him impatiently showered, and (after some thought) dressed in his oldest, most comfortably worn house uniform, minus, for now, the tunic.
Sauntering downstairs with a pleasant sense of being virtuously betimes despite his late night, he was considerably put out to discover around the kitchen table everyone except Vorlynkin, Chandler, and Allegre. At the range Ma Kosti seemed to be mixing, frying, and serving simultaneously; Jankowski shuttled plates of pancakes to their destinations. Crockes of butter and jugs of maple syrup stood on the table. From Nikki’s satisfied look at least one round had already been consumed with gusto. Miles tried not to feel put out.

Ekaterin, sensing his emotional prickle, looked an enquiry. “Hello, love. I hoped you might sleep on a bit. Dr Chandler is. Your Da said you couldn’t have got to bed before three.” Sliding in beside her Miles waved this away, smiling at Ma Kosti as she acknowledged his arrival through a whirl of whisks and spatulas. He awoke to nods of greeting and mumbled good mornings from around the table, and nodded back. Vorlynkin must be riding. Good. Miles bet Chandler was sleeping in—he’d seen the Terran leave the terrace accompanied by the kitten and an empty bottle shortly before his parents had arrived. But where was Allegre?

“The delicious smells woke me. It would be churlish to complain.” He awoke to something else and turned to Ekaterin. “Um … I expect you’ve discovered I told Ma and Da about our decision …” This time he was properly glad to see her smile.

“Yes, of course, love. I meant to tell you to relay the news last night, but when … that other thing happened, I forgot.” As she poured him coffee she leaned to whisper, as close to a giggle as he remembered seeing her. “Your Ma was wonderful, of course. But I think your Da is going to be slightly drunk on it a while.” She gave him a look with the giggle still in it but a graver note too. “Your Ma said it ran in Barrayaran paterfamilias blood like a cattle stampede, and told me to take no notice.” A note of wonder entered the mix. “It’s not even as if I’m pregnant.”

Her slightly plaintive tone made Miles’s heart soar, and his faint ill-humour of tiredness dropped away. A smiling Jankowski put a full plate before him; he reached for butter and syrup and let things go on without him, as they were clearly doing anyway. Busy mouths had no spare capacity to talk, and on full stomachs conversation became desultory—Nikki and his uncle exchanging comments about how maple sap was concentrated and an experiment in the boy’s chemistry syllabus, while Ekaterin and her aunt discussed someone called Estelle, who seemed to be extraordinarily formidable but whom he couldn’t place. Only his parents had more to say, to Gregor and Laisa, relaying brisk thoughts about the state of health services on Sergyar to which Alys and Simon were also listening. The radial fauna were still causing casualties among new backcountry settlers, especially children, and the even nastier vampire balloons were numerous, numbers peaking in some ecological cycle of their own. Miles shuddered and left them to it. Once he finished eating and was on his third coffee, however, he began to think he should exert himself as host. Gregor noticed his repletion and disengaged from the gothic problems besetting his Sergyaran subjects.

“Miles, I gather Captain Khourakis told you I want to ride to the village this morning. He says you vetoed horses and suggested Alys’s aircar.”

“I did. If we may, of course, Aunt Alys.” She nodded benignly. “I’m sorry, Gregor, there aren’t enough horses for your ImpSec team as well and you know riding animals don’t mix with lightflyers.” Gregor looked mutinous; Miles turned the screw inexorably. “I didn’t want to risk some loyal ImpSec chap with a hard seat and heavy rein preceding us into the village at a flat-out gallop.” Nor Laisa, who might have enjoyed ambling about the imperial gardens on a dainty (and heavily tranquilised) mare led by an Armsman with her imperial suitor strolling alongside, but was certainly not ready to ride a considerably larger, drug-free gelding on a four-mile round trip with steep gradients. Especially with three heavily armed and armoured ImpSec lightflyers hovering about. Miles’s gaze bored into Gregor. “This way the air escort can go up as usual and Khourakis will relax a bit on the ground.” Miles hated to use Gregor’s sensitivity to the strains he posed for his
bodyguards, but it worked. Why had he been so set on riding anyway?

“Oh well. Ekaterin, you’ll come? And Nikki.”

“Of course.” Ekaterin was smiling but Miles sensed dismay at an added ordeal. Nikki looked even less sure the village was his preferred destination for the morning, but Gregor’s company was a potent draw. So was the Viceroy’s.

“And Aral and Cordelia are coming too. Excellent. Alys? Simon? Helen? Georg? You will all be welcome.” All nodded. Apparently if Gregor couldn’t have horses he would have numbers. And if ten adults and Nikki were going, Miles reflected, he had better secure the Vorthyses’ aircar as well. Gregor turned to him again. “Miles, will Guy and Yuri be out riding much longer, do you think?”

“Oh … Guy went riding too?”

“Yes. He said he wanted air.” Gregor’s lips twitched. “I sympathised.” Miles wasn’t touching that one, but was pleased Gregor had talked to Guy, and presumably Yuri. It suggested things were coming along.

“As to how long, Gregor … do you know where they went, exactly?” Standing by the range, Jankowski coughed. “Yes?”

“The longer track to the upper woods and castle, m’lord. Admiral Vorlynkin asked about lunch. I told him it was at one and they promised to be back for it.”

“Hmm. Well, they won’t be back before twelve if they ride the full circuit.”

“Good. Thank you, Miles. Armsman.” Gregor was being oddly organising, Miles thought, though his eyes were warm. Why did he seem content the officers would not be a part of his great village expedition? “Then shall we say ten for the village? Does that suit, Miles?”

“Certainly. You’re very brisk this morning. Is there some other deadline I’ve forgotten?”

“No, not at all.” Gregor looked … what, exactly? In another man Miles might have said shifty, but that wasn’t like Gregor at all. He turned back to the Vicereine. “The thing is, Cordelia, coming here again, to this house, reminded me of those days with you and Sergeant Bothari in the mountains. I’ve been telling Laisa about it, and we wanted to burn an offering for him together. Will you come?”

Ah.

Miles relaxed, assuming the awkwardness had been uncertainty about his reaction to Bothari’s name. He didn’t mind that. But Gregor’s question, he realised, really was addressed only to his mother, who rose, smiling assent. For a moment resentments tried to return, but innate respect for the relationship between Gregor and his mother disbarred them. She also, he realised, wanted to talk to Laisa privately.

The three left, followed by Ekaterin, Nikki, and the Vorthyses, Georg having easily agreed to use their flyer and ImpSec pilot. Alys and Simon drifted out too, leaving only Miles and his father at the table. He swallowed. “Did you sleep well, sir?”

The Viceroy grunted. “Not very. I feel jumps more than I used to.” He smiled at his son. “I had a lot to think about, too.” Clearly conscious of the staff present, his father leaned forward and spoke for Miles’s ears alone. Outwardly relaxed, Miles felt his stomach churn. “Not least your remark about new good and old evil. Did you mean I might gain a new galactic sobriquet to eclipse my old one?”

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He obviously meant The Butcher of Komarr. Miles was greatly relieved. “Something like that, sir.”
His father stared at him. “Heh. Well, I am flattered by the thought. But my reputation can hardly be a concern in these negotiations.”

Miles stared. “On the contrary, sir, your reputation brings them to the table. And Gran’da’s.” He shrugged. “Ten years ago they heeded my name before they heeded me. It’s still true. So I think your honorary command will be a necessity.” A thought struck him. “Da, do you know how you are regarded by their command? They study Gran’da, as well, but you are the one they think about. Believe me, your presence is a powerful part of the deal.”

His father regarded him calmly. “And yours, I think. They have not forgotten Dagoola IV, by all accounts.”

“No. But even if they’ve worked Naismith out, they think the whole Marilac strategy was yours. Which it was.” He paused, wondering how close to the wind he could sail. His father waited, a sceptical look on his face. About half the truth would do, Miles thought. For now. He kept his own voice low, though Ma Kosti and Jankowski had left. “I grant you, cooling the Marilacans down again will probably be my next job, if this comes off. But it goes back to you and Gran’da. When you were born, they were still here in the Dendarii. Gran’da got them off Barrayar. You took Komarr, and held the Imperium together when Ezar died. Then you beat them again at the Hegen Hub.”

“Only because you discovered the threat.”

Miles waved away the courtesy he had dreamed of receiving from his father. “You beat them,” he repeated. “Then contained them with convoy escorts and the Marilac strategy.” He counted points on his fingers, low voice vibrant. “Any chance we have of a full peace is your work, Da. And the haut Fletchir Giaja knows it as well as Gregor. Nor was I joking about aesthetics—we really are dealing with the haut now, not just the ghem. Besides, name me another Barrayaran under whom their high command would be honoured to serve.” His father came close to fidgeting during this encomium, flatly true as it was, but smiled.

“Your mother was not happy at the idea of my returning to active military service.” The smile faded. “As for the rest …” He took Miles’s hands. “We shall see. But whatever happens, Miles, I am honoured.”

Miles squeezed back. You will be, if I get this right. The Viceroy released him, and stood. “I should go find your mother.”

They parted in the hall, and through the window Miles watched his father walk up the path to the family cemetery, Jankowski a pace behind. Though not just family—the Vorkosigans had taken it over with the house when the bones of the first eight counts became expanding, superheated plasma along with what had always sounded to Miles like a perfectly ghastly family mausoleum in Vorkosigan Vashnoi, so there were plenty of old District names behind newer headstones. Gregor, Laisa, and his mother must already have burned their offering, or were waiting for Aral, sitting on the low cemetery wall in animated conversation. Pym and a Vorbarra Armsman stood patiently by. He couldn’t see a brazier or any smoke. Miles’s eyebrows quirked. What on earth had Gregor said, Laisa grinning beside him, to make his mother laugh aloud? He heard Khourakis enter the hall behind him, and turned.

“Ah, Captain. It appears we shall be eleven for the trip to the village. That rather rules out house-visits, so we’ll go to the inn in the square.” He grinned at the ImpSec man’s frozen face and wondered if he’d be able to work those olive trees and their difficulties into his great scheme. He
liked the pictures he’d seen of Terran olive groves. “It’s actually the Vorkosigan Surleau Village Hostelry, as my Gran’da believed in functional naming, but everyone calls drinking there ‘going to the Count’, because he used to transact District tax business outside in summer, and by their fire in winter, so now it’s just ‘the Count’. We’ll be outside, I expect, on the shady side of the square. Eleven of us means two aircars, so we’ll use the Vorthyses’ as well. Please let the air escort know. Now, where would you like us to set down?”

Khourakis went an interesting colour.
In the event all went smoothly—largely, to Miles’s amusement and increasing curiosity, because Gregor in Vorbarra house uniform was exerting himself to ensure it did. One did not, after all, keep emperors waiting if one could help it, and even Nikki was inspired to be ready on time, dressed in his new house uniform to match his stepfather and step-grandfather. He went cheerfully with his aunt, uncle, and grandparents to the Vorthyses’ aircar while the others climbed into the Vorpatril’s elegant and spacious old boat.

Khourakis had all but beseeched Miles not to send word ahead to the village. As the captain had already sent five men to sweep the square yet again and occupy the inn, Miles agreed, knowing the mysterious osmotic process by which everyone in the village knew everything would already have combined with precise observation of those men’s bearing and evidently professional business. It had occurred to him several times he would not himself be popular when Vorkosigan Surleau and the wider District realised the Emperor had come and gone without leaving the great house, but he hadn’t wanted to impose on Gregor and Laisa such humdrum duty as a village visit amid dealing with Chandler’s galactic hypothesis. Galactic bombshell. Nor was Miles sure what prompted Gregor to instate the visit so decisively, but he was beginning to have an idea that both appealed and alarmed. Public opinion was not often sought on Barrayar, but the villagers of Vorkosigan Surleau were not the usual public. *It will be all right.*

As the aircar made the hop to the village Gregor pointed out to Laisa the ruined castle on the crags above the lake. “The house was originally a training barracks for the castle, wasn’t it, Miles?”

“Quite right. Middle of the Bloody Centuries. Galactic weaponry made the ground fortifications obsolete, of course, so the eighth count started a conversion and Gran’da finished it. More for the stables than the house, I think.”

Laisa laughed. “He really was horse-mad then, Count Piotr?”

“Oh yes. He always said he preferred beasts to men because beasts were honest, whatever their tempers. What he really liked was that he could train them.” Miles smiled acridly. “His passions for military order and dressage were at heart the same thing.”

Laisa was not deterred. “But you ride for pleasure too.”

Miles’s smile became genuine. “Ekaterin rides for pleasure. I just adore Fat Ninny. I held him as a newborn foal. I’ll introduce you, but you mustn’t expect anything like that astonishing mare Gregor found for you when he was courting.”

“Found?”

*Oops.* Was Gregor blushing? If so, Alys didn’t care. “He scoured half-a-dozen districts, dear, and had it flown in specially. Now, Gregor, before we arrive, clearly you are still being Count Vorbarra?”

“For purposes of protocol. Aral will do the honours, I imagine. Miles?”
“I would think so. The liegefolk like me well enough when he’s away, but with Counts Vorbarra and Vorkosigan present they’ll look to him.”

Both aircars and ImpSec lightflyers carrying Khourakis and more ill-disguised men settled by the lakefront, just along from the square. The ImpSec team wore mufti but as they spread out into escort formation there was no way to conceal what they were doing, and Miles saw the tallest of many watching youngsters slip round the corner into the square. By the time the sizeable party had disembarked, assembled, and begun to wander that way themselves, shepherded by a needlessly nervous Khourakis, interested villagers were beginning to assemble.

Sight of his parents, as well as Laisa and Gregor in house uniform, galvanised a real gathering. As the full extent and quality of the visiting party was assessed, teenagers were hastily despatched and soon began to return with the young and elderly infirm. By the time the Viceroy had his guests seated at two long outside tables pushed together in front of the inn, the square was crowded. Returning from hasty consultation with the innkeeper Miles saw a tiny woman so white-haired and wrinkled she must be nearing her century being carried at her own frequent and abrasive instructions into a good spot; one of the absent-on-Sergyar Armsmen’s grandmothers, he thought. Neither age nor youth had exemptions today. The ImpSec men at Gregor’s back and round the square seemed to gauge the crowd well and did not look alarmed, but Khourakis had the air of a man who would like to bury his head in his hands and weep.

“What did you order, dear?” His mother was smiling at him.

“Jugs of light cider and coffee all round. They’ll be a few minutes.” His father nodded, then surveyed the gathering with a raised hand. In a show of discipline Miles hoped Khourakis appreciated, silence fell swiftly. And for all the crowding, there was an elegance to the way the villagers fitted themselves into the space, family groupings predominant but the forty-year men, all in uniform, at parade rest together on one side. Laisa and Ekaterin, he saw with satisfaction, were looking excited and impressed rather than intimidated, as were the Vorthyses. The Professora looked as if she were breathing in yet more neat history, Alys as if she expected nothing else. Illyan’s face was blankly unreadable, even to Miles. Slowly his father rose, stocky body solid in his house uniform, and silence deepened.

“Liegemen and liegewomen. Friends. It’s good to be home.”

Instead of the immediate cheer Miles expected one of the forty-year men stepped smartly forward.

“And very good to see you here, my Lord Count, my Lady Countess. A most unexpected pleasure.” Then cheers were called and roundly delivered. His father smiled as the man stepped back and let noise ebb.

“Yes. I’m sorry you had no notice, but I know all here will understand the demands of security.” This produced polite glances at Gregor and Laisa, with sombre nods from the forty-year men and a scattering of others who knew just how many assassination attempts their Count and Emperor had survived. In the back of his mind Miles began idly to count them. “Some here are old friends but allow me to make introductions. My cousine, Lady Alys Vorpatril, will be familiar to most of you, as will former ImpSec Chief Illyan, but perhaps not Lord Auditor Vorthys and Madame Professora Helen Vorthys.” Count Vorkosigan gestured for Miles and Ekaterin to stand. “My son and Voice you know, but it is my very great pleasure to make known to you my daughter-in-law, Lady Ekaterin Vorkosigan.”

This time, to Miles’s unreserved pleasure, cheers were immediate and prolonged. His courtship and marriage, he thought ruefully, would have been as closely followed in the village as by the staff of Vorkosigan House, and even without Dr Chandler’s help in something very close, he was
melancholically sure, to real time. As the din continued the Count gestured to Nikki, sitting between him and Ekaterin, to stand, and effortlessly raised his voice into battle command mode to cut through the noise as if it didn’t exist.

“And her son, Master Nikolai Vorsoisson Vorkosigan.”

His Da had promised to handle this bit carefully, and put a hand on Nikki’s shoulder as the boy, proud and terrified, stepped forward, looked round, and waved uncertainly at the many faces inspecting him., Miles felt the hand he held trembling, but Ekaterin’s eyes were shining; this might not quite be the sort of Vor pageant she had desired as a girl, but to him it was the Vor pageant at its best. “Can you say a word?”

She nodded but as noise subsided her grip tightened painfully. Where was Tsipis? A familiar face would help. That had been the whole point of calling him so late. Even as he framed the thought the man stepped beaming from the crowd, carrying an enormous bouquet of red Barrayaran flowers. He waved for silence.

“My Lady, as it was my Lord Count’s pleasure to introduce you to us all, so it is mine to welcome you and Master Vorkosigan to Vorkosigan Surleau, and to the first of what we all very much hope will be many happy meetings. May you come to know and like us all, and may we come to know and serve you, my Lady, as well as we all deserve.”

Bowing, Tsipis presented the bouquet with a flourish. His father was looking at him with a half-quirked eyebrow; everyone else was beaming with admiration at—though not, Miles fancied, immediate comprehension of—Tsipis’s grammar. The Vorkosigans’ man-of-business kept a small house in Vorkosigan Surleau for convenience, but lived in Hassadar, where the District’s financial life was centred. And good as the village grapevine might be, it would not extend at this notice and in a heavily terraformed area to a bouquet alluding to the Barrayaran garden in Vorbarr Sultana where he and Ekaterin had stood in their wedding-circle. Then he forgot Tsipis as Ekaterin took a breath.

“Thank you, my Lord Count, Master Tsipis, everyone.” Another breath. “You do me great honour, and I will try to deserve it. But I am the one privileged, to be here as a Vorkosigan.” These cheers were flattering and he tried to catch his father’s eye, but Ekaterin smiled and gestured with the bouquet. Silence returned. “Master Tsipis here has probably told you I am a gardener. It’s true. I try to be a good one. But with your help, I hope to grow myself.” The cheering was louder this time, and Ekaterin again gestured for silence, but when she got it turned to the Count. “Please. The Count—my—father had not finished.”

Miles knew his father would be feeling the acknowledgement in her words, but the raspy baritone didn’t show it save in the vocative.

“Indeed, my Lady.” The Count motioned respectfully to Gregor and Laisa, who stood. “We are all most honoured to have two very special guests today. Count Vorbarra needs no introduction from anyone, but it is my duty and great pleasure to make known to you his lady, Countess Laisa Toscane Vorbarra.”

The Count did not raise his voice but the unusual, if expected, titles rang out clearly, and murmured acknowledgments ran through the crowd. The forty-year man—Jankowski’s father-in-law, Miles thought, though the name eluded him—waited for it to settle.

“Count and Countess Vorbarra.” The veteran bowed, and everyone standing in the square bowed or curtsied with him. “Be welcome, my Lord and my Lady, to the loyal village of Vorkosigan Surleau.”
He called cheers for each and rooves lifted. Gregor’s wedding had brought tears of relief to more eyes than his parents’. Komarran bride or no, Bararrayans knew exactly what their Emperor’s death without an heir would swiftly mean for their repeatedly war-torn planet. A pretty, tow-headed girl with a mulish expression in what was plainly Sunday-best was pushed forward, carrying a beautifully arranged bouquet of early roses. To his delight Miles recognised her strong cast of feature; this must be the village-dominating Jankoswski hoyden of whom Arthur Pym so feelingly spoke. Despite her stubborn look the bouquet was offered and accepted with grace on both sides.

“My Lady.”

“Thank-you, my dear. It’s lovely. Did you make it?”

“No, my Lady. My Ma did. She wouldn’t trust me making something flimsy like that.” Laughter rippled. With a glance at Gregor Miles stood and went to stand at Laisa’s side.

“It’s Lara Jankowski, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Deep blue eyes looked suspiciously down at him. Lara was already a strapping girl.

“I gather, Laisa, that Lara here prefers more traditionally masculine pursuits—weapons’ training, fieldcraft and the like.” Miles grinned at the girl’s calculating look as she wondered about his sources. “The Countess is keen to recruit female bodyguards and security staff, you know. You might put in for more than District training in a few years. Ask your uncle.” And I should like to see you get out of that one, Armsman.

“Truly, my Lord? My Lady?” The looks Gregor and Laisa were giving Miles were amused and thoughtful, respectively.

“Certainly, Lara.” Laisa spoke easily to the girl. Her grasp of what was necessary in rural Bararray already seemed no longer a lesson learned by rote and remembered in suppressed alarm, but proper regnal equality of care. “Lord Vorkosigan is quite correct. Female bodyguards especially are badly needed. Please do apply, if you wish. Thank you again for the beautiful bouquet.”

Looking back over her shoulder, Lara returned into the crowd where a woman Miles assumed to be her mother stared at him ruefully as he sat again at Ekaterin’s side. Sorry, Ma; ask your friendly in-house brother Armsman about it. He smiled politely back but shrugged; service was service, and if Arthur Pym was even half-right in his reports of young Lara’s prowess and tactical inventiveness on her own behalf, her service to the imperium would be welcome just as soon as it could be had. Clutching the bouquet in one hand while Gregor clasped the other, smiling as broadly as he was capable, Laisa looked around and the crowd quieted again.

“And thank you all for making me so warmly welcome. You know I was not born on Bararray, though I have become a Bararrayan, heart and soul. I know I still have much to learn.” She smiled and received smiles in return, with murmurs of deprecation. Some facts, maybe, my Lady; not much else. Last night had been interesting in more ways than one, Miles reflected. “But if there is one thing I have already understood most clearly—not that it came as a surprise—it is how much Bararray and the Vorbarras owe the Vorkosigans, and the loyal subjects in their beautiful district. I am honoured to be among you, and welcomed by you.”

She gave a sweeping curtsey and more cheers completed the formalities. Laisa and his father were sitting down, Khourakis was looking relieved, and the mixture of personal goodwill and civil pride humming in the square was palpable. But Gregor was still standing. Silence returned, edged with a different curiosity.
“Friends.” Startled himself, Miles felt silence grow intense. Khourakis was bolt upright, but his father merely looked interested, so Gregor must have warned him. “Plainly, this is no usual audience, and I would take advantage of that—but the day grows warm and your throats must be dry. I see the innkeeper waiting with our own drinks, so please, do not let me keep you from yours. But do not go away, for I require your witness, and I have a question for you all.”

A courteous gesture to the innkeeper brought him forward as Gregor sat, and after a short, intense surge of debate around the square a stream of people disappeared into the inn and shortly began reappearing with glasses and jugs of local cider for adults, juices for children and the sober-minded. Miles stuck to coffee, as did Gregor, but everyone in their party had cider to hand if they wanted to sample a local brew. On another day he might have indulged in maple mead, but the thought of facing Fletchir Giaja with a Dendarii afternoon hangover was a powerful deterrent. His mother and father leant down the table to speak briefly to Ekaterin and Nikki, reassuring them of having done well, and his father turned a wry look his way.

“That was Jankowski’s niece?”

“It was. You should ask Arthur Pym about her.”

“Ah. She was in nappies last time I saw her. A nice bit of recruiting, Miles. And has Jankowski perhaps erred lately?”

Really, Miles reflected, his father missed very little. It made keeping big things from him deliberately a thankless task. “I left him here on Wednesday to play point-man for Khourakis, but he did not, um, soothe things altogether as he might.”

“Heh.”

“What is Gregor up to?”

“Wait and see.”

That was very unsatisfactory, dammit. But drinks had been distributed, and Gregor, eyeing events with a suppressed smile, was on his feet again. Laisa rose to stand beside him. The square quieted. Gregor looked around, catching eyes and smiling. Then he looked at Miles and Ekaterin, and grinned—alarmingly.

“Kin, officers, and friends. It is rare for me to be able to get away from Vorbarr Sultana like this, and rarer still for these witnesses to be gathered.” His gesturing arm took in the Viceroy and Vicereine, Alys and Simon, the Vorthyses, and the forty-year men, no longer on parade but still grouped together, trailing out over the rest of the crowd. “And it is a special occasion for all of you, as well as Countess Vorbarra and I, with the introduction to you of a new Lady Vorkosigan.”

The crowd murmured happy agreement. Ekaterin blushed and smiled thanks.

“I am sure you have heard much of her most memorable engagement and spectacular outdoor wedding to Lord Vorkosigan last Winterfair. It was my privilege to witness both, and ours now to offer in summer light honour that should have been given before.” Beside him Ekaterin went rigid. What was Gregor about? Laisa was beaming. “The veterans among you will understand, I know, if I tell you that Another Man wanted to do this last year, and was told very firmly by ImpSec He couldn’t.”

Gregor’s voice calmly negotiated the imperial capitals, even as he drew his motley audience into the strange legal and social fiction of his incognito. The forty-year men smiled: youngsters might think
an emperor could do as he wished but they knew better what duty might mean to all. Aunt Alys, Miles saw with bemusement, was sitting up with shining eyes, and beside her even Illyan was letting surprise show.

“ImpSec was of course right, and there is much I cannot tell even you, even now. But I can say Lady Vorkosigan has already given more, and more unstintingly, to all of us than you can know. Finding herself last year without warning in the most dangerous circumstances, she acted with an exceptionally cool head, a swift hand, and unshakeable courage.”

*All gloriously true.* Miles, guessing the plan at last, was swamped with pleasure at Gregor’s audacious kindness, and squeezed Ekaterin’s hand, trembling in his own.

“The circumstances, necessarily, went unreported. But I can, I know, trust this audience”—Gregor’s gesture again swept elegantly from Viceroy and Vicereine to all—“to understand exactly what it means to take responsibility in an unforeseen crisis, to force yourself to think when your mind wants only to scream, and to know you must coldly take necessary risks with others’ lives and your own in the balance. Madame Professora Vorthys was a witness, and herself exhibited great honour with great courage.”

He bowed to Helen Vorthys, who went pink with embarrassment and raised her hand to her lips with an audible “Oh my”. Ekaterin, Miles saw, was as delighted with Gregor’s recognition of her aunt as mortified at his praise of her own actions during those terrifying hours as a hostage on the Komarran jump-station. Beside his wife, Georg Vorthys—who behind his rumples was, Miles bet, doing some rapid thinking about the line Gregor was treading—was beaming his own pleasure. So was Nikki, bursting with pride even as he was swallowed by curiosity.

“Lady Vorkosigan, will you please stand.” Miles thought for a moment he would have to haul Ekaterin to her feet, but with a slight wobble she made it on her own. “Madame Professora Vorthys, will you please join your niece.”

Pink but with grave dignity, Helen Vorthys rose to stand by Ekaterin. The forty-year men shuffled back into line, coming simultaneously to attention as if they communicated telepathically, and the crowd straightened, standing tall in what they clearly understood as special honour deliberately shared with them.

“Madame Professora Helen Vorthys.” Gregor’s voice was just as it would have been for a more regular investiture of officers. He drew two slim cases from his pocket and handed them to Laisa, who extracted the contents of the first. “It is my pleasure to award you a Silver Imperial Star, in belated recognition of your courage and service to Us and to the Imperium during a recent event. We owe you an unpayable debt.” With a practiced gesture Gregor took the medallion from Laisa and hung it gleaming on its dark ribbon around Helen’s neck, then shook her hand.

“Lady Ekaterin Nile Vorwayne Vorsoisson Vorkosigan.” He smiled gravely at her and Miles saw her breathe deeply. “It is my great pleasure to award you a Gold Imperial Star, for most valorous and selfless service in saving Barrayaran lives and livelihoods, during that same recent event. The Imperium is profoundly in your debt, my Lady, as are we all.” With the same flourish a ribbon was hung round Ekaterin’s neck, her hand shaken. Laisa embraced both women murmuring something Miles couldn’t hear but would bet was heartfelt personal thanks from a Komarran; had the plot Ekaterin foiled succeeded in re-isolating Barrayar, Barrayaran forces on the outer side would not have been kind to Komarr. His parents, Miles saw, were as pleased as amused, applauding with vigour; so were the villagers. Miles saw speculative looks among the veterans, as surprised as anyone by the impromptu ceremony but plainly of the opinion that Imperial Stars, however irregularly presented, meant what they meant and were not to be disrespected, especially with *that* citation from
that citer. Gregor had given them a quite different new Lady Vorkosigan to think about. By awarding to female non-combatants medals usually given only to serving officers but unquestionably within his personal gift, he had also, Miles saw, set a very interesting precedent. No wonder his mother had laughed sitting on the cemetery wall; she probably felt Gran’da turning in his nearby grave.

Applause died away as Gregor gestured first to Ekaterin and Helen Vorthys, then more gently to Laisa, to return to their seats. As she sank down by his side Ekaterin was still trembling, flushed with embarrassment and pleasure. He captured her hand and brought it gently to his lips. “Bravo, milady. This was well done.”

The look she gave him was in equal measure thrilled and exasperated. “Did you know about this, Miles?”

“No I—it’s all Gregor’s doing.” As she frowned doubtfully he saw Gregor preparing to speak again and had no compunction in compounding Ekaterin’s blushes and distracting her. “And very right of him too, but we are going to have to field some questions from Nikki.”

“Oh.” As Ekaterin automatically looked round to where Nikki was trying not to gape at her, Gregor lifted his hands a fraction. This time silence was immediate.

“I said also that I had a question for you all. It is a simple question, but the answer may be less so. And though I cannot explain my reasons for asking, I do not ask idly.” His gesture encompassed not just the gathering, but the whole District. “Nowhere on Barrayar suffered more severely during the Cetagandan invasion than the Vorkosigan’s District. I know in your courage you joke here about hill-stubbornness and endurance, but it was no joke then. General Count Piotr, whose hands were between mine for the last seventeen years of his long life, spent twenty years beating those invaders off Barrayar, and more than half his life struggling against their continuing threat. Viceroy Count Vorkosigan has kept them off our planet and far away, once by force and always by strategy. Here and elsewhere on Barrayar we now enjoy peace, and begin to enjoy prosperity.”

There were many nods and murmurs of agreement. Life in the mountains was never easy, but every adult here knew it had improved beyond measure in their own lifetimes. And that the cities now ran with money everyone knew.

“I will not say memories have faded. But wounds have healed. Few now personally recall the Occupation, even here where it fell hardest.” Gregor smiled without humour. “My Lord Auditor tells me Vorkosigan Vashnoi no longer glows in the dark, and plants return to the badlands. So it is, perhaps, in our hearts. And while all but our youngest have known much violence since those evil times, that has been of Barrayar’s own making.”

Older villagers, who like his father remembered Mad Yuri’s War as well as Vordarian’s Pretendership, smiled wry appreciation of that point. So did the Vicereine. Barrayarans!

“For their part Cetagandans have learned to respect us. We deal with them as we must and trade with them as we may. My officers who meet them in the course of their galactic duties have strict orders to respect all Cetagandans as we would have every last one of them respect us.”

Miles pursed his lips, but if Gregor had for the first time stretched truth in favour of cadence this was certainly neither the venue nor occasion to discuss covert ops. The growl of patriotic rhetoric in his last phrase also set emotions thrumming, and that line had to be walked.

“But they remain what I must call enemies.” Gregor looked around, and spread his hands. “Their greater size and need for space makes it inevitable they remain a threat we can never ignore. It is no
longer imminent but it is real. We contain it with constant effort, but cannot make it fade. So.”

He paused to let the summary point be taken. Watching the crowd in fascination Miles thought all followed the logic—Gregor was always clear and for all his gravitas as relaxed today as Miles had ever seen him in public. But even one or two ImpSec duty-men were allowing surprise to show, while the villagers, deeply flattered to be taken into their Emperor’s confidence, were also mentally bracing themselves.

“In such a situation we can try to be good enemies. That has been the Bararrayan way and we are masters of it.” More wry smiles came, including the Viceroy’s and Vicerine’s. “Or … we can try to be friends. My question is this. If opportunity arose, would we now be willing to make a proper peace with them? To accept them as our allies and partners?” He turned to acknowledge the Viceroy, who nodded, and back to the surprised faces assembled about him. “I know you would normally look to your Count for your lead in this, but I have asked him to forgo first place and speak later, that I may better hear what you truly think yourselves, and believe in your hearts.” He narrowed his gaze to the forty-year man who had greeted him. “Captain Penderecki, I believe.”

“That was an interesting sign, Miles thought—Penderecki had earlier observed the niceties of the Count-Vorbarra fiction with ease. And his father must have supplied Gregor with the name of the Jankowski in-laws that had been eluding his own twitching memory.

“May I ask you, once you have had a chance to confer, to speak on behalf of your service colleagues, and to make sure any others who wish to speak do so?”

“Of course, Sire. It will be my pleasure.”

“Thank you. Carry on.” Penderecki saluted, swung round to rejoin his veteran colleagues, and after a moment began crisply calling the names of senior men and women. A circle began to gather about him. Gregor watched them a moment, seeming oddly alone, then sat. He looked at Miles; so did the rest of the party. “Do you disapprove?”

“Not at all, Sire. It is your privilege.” Miles wanted to stick out his tongue but instead glanced around at the currents swirling in the square. “Though I’m not sure Captain Khourakis would agree. But I am surprised, I confess, Gregor. As are the villagers. You’re not going to start commissioning public opinion polls, are you, like those dreadful Betan politicians?”

Across the table his mother grinned reminiscently. After all, according to family legend even Miles had found difficulty believing before he saw the old footage, and still hadn’t dared tell Ekaterin about, Captain Naismith had once (admittedly in considerable confusion and distress, largely the man’s own fault) kicked an elected President of Beta Colony somewhere she really should not, especially that hard at a ceremony being broadcast planetwide.

“No, Miles, I shan’t do that.” Gregor’s voice was neutral. “The decision is mine alone. But I want to hear what these people have to say. They too will have to make this hypothesis work. And it’s not as if I have an ImpSec analysis to draw on today, even from your enterprising kitten.” Miles winced. “Besides—aren’t you curious, my Lord Auditor?”

“I am.” His father’s face was thoughtful. “Command, not consultation, has always been the Bararrayan way. And in a liege-village like this feudal and military traditions run deep as well as strong. But they know the world is changing; has changed already. Even in the forces, I am not in the least sorry to say, prolonged peace has greatly lessened the worst rigidities of absolute command, and here there are the effects of dawning prosperity to consider also.” His powerful, blunt-fingered
hands moved ambivalently in the fresh summer light. “So I shall be interested to hear what they have to say. And if this thing happens, Sire, we shall have to sell it politically to your subjects en masse as well as finagling the Counts and Staff.”

At Miles’s side Ekaterin was listening with fascination. Now she sat forward, as she would not have done a few months ago. Medals, he thought, had more than one use, though perhaps all came to the same thing in the end.

“You speak of our military forces, sir, and so of men. Can you tell me how those considerations are affected by consciousness of gender here? Will the village women speak also?”

“They’d better.” The Vicereine’s voice was tart. “I haven’t been coaching them for thirty years to have them all go shy on me now.”

Her husband grinned. “Indeed not, dear Captain. But you ask an interesting question, Ekaterin.” His eyes were distant. “The Occupation was a great leveller, but didn’t permanently alter our traditional gender prejudices in the same way it flattened the Vor into our wider class structure and made our forces meritocratic. Everyone knows the guerrilla war in the mountains was fought by all, no matter age or shape, just as the resistance war in the cities was, but Ezar and the Count-my-father did nothing to sustain the equality Cetagandans bred between the men and women who fought them.” He grimaced. “I doubt it ever occurred to either of them.”

“Not to Piotr, certainly.” For all his parents had been reconciled with his Gran’da when Miles was five, and the General later made it as clear as he knew how that he deeply regretted his late identity as infanticide manqué, Miles knew his mother never really forgave the old man and had liked him no more than he liked her. His father went on.

“At the same time, certainly here where the service ethos is binding, Vor traditions have extended to all classes. All the village girls are weapons-trained; no man here would doubt a woman’s armed competence, nor offer one casual insult.” The Viceroy smiled. “You needn’t worry about Lara Jankowski, Ekaterin. Miles is fanning flames not playing arsonist. You know we have an integrated militia and police-force on Sergyar, and two girls who came out with their families are already in ImpSec training for Cordelia’s bodyguard unit. They haven’t been able to come back here since leaving, I fear, but word will have percolated.”

“Oh. Good. I did wonder at the look her poor mother gave Miles.”

“I saw that too.” The Count grinned with a touch of wolf. “Don’t worry, my dear. Jankowskis understand recruitment, if sometimes little else. As to your excellent question, I think women will certainly speak. But”—a smile—“for all your efforts, dear Captain, I think they will be speaking because of the topic. Were it a strictly military issue, they might well not. But then, Gregor would not ask them such a question.”

“Hmmm.” The Vicereine sniffed. “Perhaps. But really, Gregor dear, when are you going to integrate the imperial forces as a whole? It’s—“

Gregor raised his hand. “Spare me, Cordelia. I know what it is. Has it occurred to you our present hypothesis might incidentally provide a most interesting opportunity in that respect also, for if it all happens we are going to be appallingly short of military personnel.” He gave a genuine smile. “One of my nicer thoughts so far about what might happen in the next two years is an image of the General Staff asking me in painful, pitiable panic to open the services to female recruitment.”

“Oh, now that is a thought.”
“Isn’t it just, dear Captain?” His father was nodding, not only in amused agreement. “This hypothesis just goes on ramifying, doesn’t it? Angles upon angles. It’s going to make life very interesting.”

“Indeed.” Illyan’s voice was dry as old bone; his gaze rested on Miles. “Still more dragons out of the hat. In Guy’s absence, Miles, perhaps I should thank you for thinking of ImpSec’s future needs.”

Miles glared back combatively at his old chief. “What Guy should do, Simon, as I’ve told him more than once, is get Drou Koudelka on the job.” A thought occurred to him. “And Delia Galeni. She’s as well-trained as all the Koudelka girls, and since marrying Duv she’s become a lot more politically minded. Olivia Vorruityer would help as well, I bet.” He switched his gaze to Alys. “What would you say to that, Aunt Alys?”

His aunt gave him a look in which distinct and only half-amused auntliness mingled with the forbidding weight of a lifetime spent calculating imperial needs and enforcing protocols of respect and civility. “Miles dear, I am losing count of how many social upheavals you are proposing. But”—long fingers tapped the table—“I must admit that is a very interesting thought, and one we should seriously consider, Gregor. There are two issues here—the Vor, where women have always been trained to arms but bound by needs of childbearing, and women’s rights and privileges in the Imperium as a whole now uterine replicators have become so commonplace.”

“The Koudelkas span that gap, though.” Helen Vorthys was on historical territory she knew with professional precision. “Their wedding in the Imperial Residence is a textbook example of change in Barrayaran society as a whole. There’s a picture in several books—a four-point wedding-circle in that room with the gorgeous mosaic floor, and on the points a retired sergeant, a grocer’s widow, the exceptionally blue-blooded Lord Regent, and the altogether mysterious Regent-Consort.” The Professora twinkled at his parents, who grinned back. “Though quite how old Vorlenski originally got hold of the image I cannot imagine.”

The Professora’s footnote was added in an undertone, but Miles was intrigued to see his mother and father exchange a swift and, he swore, mutually complicit glance. “Even then they were planning to set Barrayar by its ears? Where do they suppose I get it from?”

“And surely, Alys, with Delia’s marriage to Commodore Galeni and Olivia’s remarkable transformation into Countess Vorruityer, they continue to offer us positive models that blur your distinction.”

“They do exactly that, Helen, and it works in the cities. But our route to the rural areas of Barrayar is through districts and their Counts. Or discharged veterans.” Alys looked a question at Gregor, who nodded. “Even with Gregor’s backing, I cannot push aside either Counts or Staff. Even Cordelia has yet to manage that twice.” The Vicereine smiled acknowledgement, quirking an eyebrow. Not for want of trying and Barrayarans! both hung unspoken. “But Miles is right. Again.” Alys smiled auntishly. “I had given thought to the Koudelkas, dear, especially after Olivia’s very active role in protecting Dono from those thugs last year.” Her eyes glinted. “Having actually done the right thing for once Ivan was incorrigibly shiftiy about his part in it all. But Olivia’s, ah, prowess in combat made deep impressions that have since been smoothing her way, and the surprising Count Dono’s, in Vor circles not noted for liberal thinking. It has been interesting to observe. And you are right, Gregor, to see in this hypothesis a potential cover for formal change.”

“Good. We shall bear it in mind.” Gregor managed to make his voice at once imperial and friendly. “Thus may policy be made, Professora, though alas, you must wait to report it. Meantime”—his gaze sought Nikki—“I wanted to know what you thought of my question, Nikki.” He gave the boy a personal smile, the kind that buoyed you up and stretched you out at the same time. “Consider it a return for your question about Dorca.”
Nikki swallowed. “Do you mean, would I make friends with a Cetagandan, Sire?”

Miles noticed Ekaterin holding her breath. He found he was doing the same himself.

“Yes, if you like. That is at the heart of it, certainly.”

“Well, Sire, the thing is … I, ah …” Nikki’s hesitation was unusual.

“Speak freely, Nikki. There isn’t a right answer.” Oh isn’t there, just? “Only the truth of what you think and feel.”

The fact came from Nikki in a rush. “I already have, Sire. Made friends with a Cetagandan, I mean.” Gregor blinked surprise. Nikki considered him carefully, then went on without prompting. “I don’t think their ambassador to you has any children with him, so I can’t say about the haut, but his ghem-officers have family here, and one of their sons is in my class at school. Some boys were rude to him at first. There were two fights. Then they left him alone. I didn’t like them, anyway, the rude ones, and they called him … names I’ve been called.” Silently Miles applauded his stepson’s tact. Encouraged rather than stifled as he had been by his father, Nikki was proving ferociously intelligent. “So I spoke to him, and we became friends. It’s only at school because he’s dropped off and picked up by aircar everyday, as I am.”

When Nikki paused and Gregor said nothing, Ekaterin leaned forward, looking anxiously between Nikki and Miles. “Did you want to invite him to come over, Nikki dear? I’m sure it would be all right if we cleared it with the Ambassador. Or”—she looked uncertain—“for you to visit him?”

Miles shrugged. “I can’t see why not. The Ambassador might be jumpy about the Embassy though. Do your friend’s parents live in that building, Nikki?”

“No, sir. They have a house. Near the university, he said.”

“And do you want to visit him there?” Gregor was smiling, to convey his confidence in Nikki, but intent on the boy’s answer.

“Yes, Sire, I do. He said he could show me how his Da does that amazing face-painting. They have special brushes, but it sounds hard to get the patterns right. I wanted to try.” The eyes of every adult who heard him went bright with pleasure, but no-one laughed aloud.

Gregor looked at Ekaterin, whose anxiety had been quelled by her sense of absurdity. “You are full of gifts to us, my Lady. That was a very good answer, Nikki. I hope others will share it. And perhaps I shall be able to meet your Cetagandan friend. I should like that.”

Miles and his father were instinctively tracking activity in the square, and noticed Captain Penderecki beginning to reform the veterans’ line while family and civic groupings swirled colourfully into ordered knots. Many faces were watching the quasi-imperial party, and while they probably couldn’t hear much had plainly seen Gregor talking to Nikki with open interest. Good. His Da, with a half-wink at Miles, patted the bench beside him. “Come sit here, Nikki, and tell me about your friend and these rude boys. I knew some like that at school too.” Nikki went. The party turned to face the assembled crowd, and Gregor sat straight, with Laisa regal beside him.

“Captain Penderecki, my thanks for your efficiency.”

“Sire.” Penderecki bowed. “You asked a precise question—would we now be willing to make a proper peace with the Cetagandans, and accept them as our allies and partners.” The veteran’s voice was a clear tenor. “I speak first for myself, as an officer retired from your service, but all my military colleagues agree. Seven of us encountered or engaged Cetagandan forces during our careers. We
found them always hard and cunning enemies, ruthless in conflict, but men of their word. One of us said he would rather fight alongside a Cetagandan force than have his flank secured by Polians or Ashlanders, and we all agree with that. So our answer, Sire, is yes, we can imagine Cetaganda as our ally, and no longer our enemy.” He paused and swallowed. “For myself, Sire, I am glad you did not ask if we and the Cetagandans could be friends. But Regimental Sergeant Barnev here has a different point, and asks to be heard.”

“A white-haired, bow-legged man in Ranger uniform stood smartly forward. Miles did not know him well, but was aware Barnev had in his day been a fearsome senior NCO of the mess and could easily believe it.

“Please. Sergeant?”

“Sire. I don’t know as I can be so clear as Captain Penderecki, but I’ve a story I’d like to tell you if I may.”

“Please do.”

“Well, Sire. Last year, when you and the Empress got married”—he bowed to Laisa—“my grandson who is in your service in Vorbarr Sultana under General Allegre was assigned to look after two ghem-officers who came with their special embassy to you, with the haut governor and that lady in the force-bubble. It turned out they’d both lost forebears here in the Dendarii, killed by General Count Piotr’s guerrillas, and the bodies never recovered apparently, so they wanted to burn offerings for them. But where could they do it?” He paused rhetorically. “They couldn’t leave Vorbarr Sultana, and, begging your pardon, Sire, but all the festive flags and bunting in the city didn’t seem right to them.”

Gregor nodded, as did many in the crowd. “So what did they do, Sergeant?”

“Well, my wife and I were staying with our grandson, Sire, so we could enjoy all the fireworks and celebrations. And I was still there a few days after when he called me one night, and explained about these ghem. They were due to leave the next day, and a bit frantic to find somewhere for their ceremony, so they’d unbent and asked him where they could go. He couldn’t think, so he called me.”

“And how did you advise him?”

“I went to meet them, Sire, and talked to them a bit. They were in full face-paint, all black-and-white stripes like their imperial troops use, and I have to say it was strange talking to them like that. But they seemed sincere enough, and I couldn’t fault what they wanted. I lost my own Da young in the Occupation, you see, Sire, in Vorkosigan Vashnoi, and when I burn offerings for him at my Ma’s grave every Winterfair I think about his body not being there. It made me wonder what I’d do if he’d died and been lost on one of their planets.” The sergeant shook his white-maned head. “It’s a sad thing to carry. So I took them to the Occupation Memorial, Sire, that little courtyard behind the statue of Emperor Dorca.”

“I know it.” Gregor was intent on the story. The old Memorial, a project of Dorca’s in the short peace between formal Cetagandan withdrawal and his death from exhaustion, had not prospered under Mad Yuri and been perfunctorily completed by Ezar. Tucked away in river-edge terrain behind Vorhartung Castle it was one of the few places in Vorbarr Sultana that would not have been decked out in riotous colours for the imperial wedding. Miles hadn’t been there in years, but in his teens he’d been taken annually by his Gran’da with a few cronies from the old man’s time as the supreme guerrilla general.
“I told them it was where we remembered, though not many people go there now. My grandson had
forgotten it. It was all neat, of course, and quiet—the ravine blocks out noise there. So they stood
silent a long while, ten minutes I’d reckon, then burnt offerings, just as we would—locks of their
hair, and some they’d brought. Some pieces of paper, and a bit of incense that smelled expensive.
They were grateful and relieved, so we all had a drink afterwards.” Now the old sergeant drew
himself up and faced Gregor still more smartly. “And that’s the thing, Sire, for there was me having a
drink with two Cetagandans and enjoying myself, while a part of my head was asking what on
Barrayar I thought I was doing. What would my Da have ever thought? And while I was wondering
that, one of them went very formal and said there were a lot of folk he knew back home in the same
position as him, and he wanted to thank me for them as well as himself. I always thought they’d
recovered their dead well enough, but from what he said that wasn’t so, not hereabouts, anyway. At
least forty men he knew of had never been found—and that was mostly just officers. So I told him if
he gave me their names, and the relatives’ names, I’d burn an offering for them all down in the gorge
where General Count Piotr finally got that Colonel of theirs he always said was the smartest field-
commander he’d faced. And he did. My grandson gave it to me the next morning—a great sheaf of
names and titles. They must have been up all night at their embassy, compiling it.” A Regimental
Sergeant, Miles reflected, was in a position to appreciate quality staffwork. And this whole story was
gold-dust.

“And you made this offering?”

“Yes, Sire. On the last day of Winterfair.”

“ Alone?”

“My grandson was on leave, so he came to help read all the names. And I told my wife, but she’s not
so nimble anymore and it’s a bit of a climb. Otherwise we kept it to ourselves, though I’ve no doubt
everyone knew well enough what I was about. And I’m glad now to tell the story for all. I don’t
often disagree with the Captain here, but I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought there was one young
Cetagandan I’d be willing to call a friend.” He bent his head to Gregor. “That’s all, Sire. Except to
say I hope you and my Lord Count think I did right.”

“I do, Sergeant Barnev. Very right. And I’m sure Count Vorkosigan does too.”

“A deed of virtue, sergeant.” His father’s voice was warm. “I shall remember it.”

The sergeant visibly relaxed and stepped back. Gregor looked after him thoughtfully, then at Captain
Penderecki. “Who is next?”

Penderecki looked grim. “You did say, Sire, all should speak who would. And Ma Gordunov
would. But I will say before all, Sire, that she is ninety-six and famous as far as Hassadar for an
uncertain temper.”

“I see.”

The old woman Miles had seen brought into the square was carried forward in her chair by two
strapping men in their early twenties—great-grandsons, Miles thought. His father would know for
sure, and he noticed his parents looking resigned, even apprehensive. So were a number of faces in
the crowd, though others, adults as well as children, were indecently gleeful. The famous Gordunov
temper had clearly been liberally bestowed well before its redoubtable owner reached her present
geriatric seniority.

“Ma Gordunov.” Gregor did not raise his voice but Miles had no doubt the old woman could hear
every word. “What would you say?”
Ma Gordunov peered at him with eyes deeply recessed but bird-bright and indignant. “I remember you.” Gregor’s look didn’t change visibly but after a moment she added one word. “Sire.”

“Do you? From the Pretender’s War?”

“Yes. I lived in the mountains then. I only had to move down here because of my legs.”

“Ahh. And what do you remember me doing?”

“Making a mess of milking a goat. Sire.”

Breaths were drawn around the square, but Gregor laughed and tension patently eased. “I’m sure I was. It wouldn’t stay still. And I was only five, Ma Gordunov.”

“Huh. I could milk goats well enough when I was five.”

“I’m sure you could. But what of Cetagandan goats? Will you now learn to milk them?”

“Eh?”

“You heard me.”

“Yes. And I heard the old General too. Never trust a Cetagandan unless he’s dead. That’s what he always said.”

“Yes. I heard him say that too. I’ve also seen his signature on the treaty we signed with them to end the war and complete their evacuation.”

“A piece of paper. And he’d won by then.”

“Not just paper.” For the first time Gregor’s voice sharpened. “His oath as Count Vorkosigan, Ma Gordunov. A sacred thing. But it’s true he’d won. Nevertheless, he took and abided by his oath of peace, so I do not think his principle of war can stand. Have you a more recent point?”

More drawn breaths were audible. Miles would have loved to know what odds were mentally being offered on this duel. Ma Gordunov’s own eyes popped wider with reinforced indignation—perhaps she really had thought that Gregor could or would not answer her back.

“Yes, I do. Sire. A dog can’t change its nature. You asked, and I say it’s not right.”

“As is your privilege. Others will share your view. But tell me, Ma Gordunov, would you rather your great-grandchildren there grow old fearing the Cetagandan threat, or that the problem be fixed, if it can?”

“Fixed?”

“Yes. So they need not and do not know that fear.”

“Well of course I’d fix it. But it can’t be done.”

“That would be my problem. And I am answered.” Gregor looked around and smiled. “My Lord Count tells me my grandfather Ezar had a taste for plain-speaking. You make me aware of his legacy, Ma Gordunov, and I thank you for that gift.” While the old woman was working this out her bearers, more sensitive to imperial tones, hastily lifted her in her chair and carried her muttering back to her previous perch. Gregor turned again to Captain Penderecki, whose features remained studiously and admirably impassive but had the air of a man who would appreciate a proper drink.
“Captain?”

“Only two more, Sire. We agreed Master Tsipis should speak for us all. He knows us well, and is held in great store here. He is also our best speaker, we feel.” Not just yours. Tsipis was as exact in his diction as anyone Miles knew. “But the children have asked Madame Csarna to speak on their behalf.”

As he spoke Tsipis and a pleasant-looking woman in her late twenties came forward. Miles recognised her as a teacher at the local primary school further down the lake, a District-born woman appointed by his mother five or six years before to ensure a more comprehensive curriculum was taught than the previous, very long-serving incumbent had supposed necessary. He had heard her praises sung by village parents but only met her once. They stood side by side before Gregor, bowing and curtsying.

“Philemon Tsipis, Sire. It has been my pleasure to be my Lord Count’s man of business in the District these forty years, and to serve its good people. May I speak for them now?”

“Please do, Master Tsipis. I have heard your work praised often, both by my Lord Count and Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. It will be my pleasure to hear you.”

“Thank you, Sire.” A little pink himself, Tsipis marshalled thoughts. “The general feeling, Sire, matches that of your veteran officers. During the Occupation, clearly, Cetagandans were hated enemies, but that time is past. Military approval of them as hard and honourable enemies is shared, with natural reservations about the loss of Vorkosigan Vashnoi.” He took a deep breath and spread his hands. “The wives and mothers here are all realists, Sire. They understand duty calls their menfolk away, and they know the necessities of war. But they are also most properly thankful for peace. One said she would never give quarter to an enemy who attacked, but neither would she agree with an attack now on the Cetagandans nor anyone else if there were a peaceful alternative, and all saw the rightness of that.”

A ripple of sharp nods in the crowd supported him.

“There are bad memories still—how not?—but there is also plain sight for all of a future with better memories. Those who suffered most here have almost all passed on, and so must the great majority of those who made them suffer. Shall our children fight theirs over the memory? I can put it no more clearly, Sire, than in the phrase I heard many use as we talked. Let bygones be bygones. And those few who cannot see their way to such a philosophy for themselves see sense in it for others, and are content. So our collective answer, Sire, is yes, we would welcome alliance with the Cetagandans. We are ready.”

“Thank you, Master Tsipis. Madame Csarna?”

The woman swallowed. “Annika Csarna, Sire. I was asked by some of the older children to relay their concern.”

“Indeed? And what is that?”

“It is much the same as General Count Piotr’s, Sire, that Cetagandans are untrustworthy.” In neither look nor tone had the woman indicated anything but respect for the rural children she taught and represented, and Miles began to see why she was so well-liked. A dry edge crept into her voice. “They have been particularly well-informed about Cetagandan atrocities during the Occupation by a popular holovid series, so the idea of alliance was surprising.”

“I see.” Gregor’s voice gave equally little away. What struck Miles was that access not only to power
but to holovids was plainly normal for the children, which in hill-areas of the District had not been the case ten years ago, even in Vorkosigan Surleau. “Would that be the adventures of Captain Vortalon?”

Bullseye. Madame Csarna was for a second plainly taken aback—amused, as well as impressed, Miles thought, that the Emperor of Barrayar should know a children’s holovid.

“Why, yes, Sire.”

“And have you discussed that series with them more generally?”

“Once or twice, Sire. It does throw up issues children find engaging, and I find useful.” Gregor was carefully not looking round at Nikki, suppressing a smile of his own.

“Indeed. Such as Lord Vortalon’s problem with his cousin, perhaps?”

“Yes, Sire. That was an interesting sequence.”

“And what did they think of his dilemma over his revenge?”

“They were all for killing the wicked cousin, Sire. A Count had been murdered. End of story.”

“Of course. But I wondered, Madame Csarna, if they had seen the difference between blood-feuds and feuding over blood. Lord Vortalon’s discovery of betrayal by his kinsman enraged him. No-one likes a false friend. But with our enemies in war, we must eventually have peace, through victory or negotiation. And even victors must abide with their defeated enemies, living or dead—a point I believe Prince Xav made to Lord Vortalon.”

Miles blinked. Had Gregor used ImpSec to procure the relevant episode overnight? Or managed a quick debriefing of Nikki somewhere? Madame Csarna’s amusement disappeared under engaged respect—not her initial, slightly awed duty but a personal sense of the weight of the history the Emperor bore and the gravitas Gregor naturally breathed.

“He did, Sire. But he was speaking of the cousin, surely, not the Cetagandans? Trying to dissuade Lord Vortalon from his revenge on a kinsman.” Her face creased in thought. “You are saying, Sire, we must all live with ourselves—with our actions, and what they make of us?”

“If you like. I acknowledge vengeance. It is taken in Our name on all who are executed in justice for their crimes, as in another way on those whom We imprison. But the wild justice of revenge is another matter, and has long been taken out of Our subjects’ own hands. It is called a noble thing, but it is a bad habit of mind, and in the Bloody Centuries, and too many of the years since, we of Barrayar have drunk deep of our revenges—to the bitter lees of the cup and sordid dregs of the barrel.” Gregor smiled apologetically but not without humour. “This is a metaphor I must hope your charges do not yet understand from experience, but having begun to recover from the hangover, I do not propose we start drinking again just yet.”

Smiles and murmurs of adult agreement with that sentiment showed a slight easing of the tension generated by Gregor’s quiet intensity.

“And the doubt you reported deserves a better answer. How indeed could we ever trust Cetagandans? It is a good question. Yet an enemy may be true as well as false. And if we would have peace, how can we do so without offering and receiving trust? Surely we may be properly cautious and as well prepared as we know how. But you know the saying—if you would eat the fruit, first plant the seed. So it is with this.”
“Thank you, Sire. That is wisdom all can understand.”

“Thank you, Madame Csarna, Master Tsipis.” Gregor smiled at them warmly. Again, Madame Csarna curtsied and Tsipis bowed, before both took a step back. The Emperor turned. “My Lord Count. I did you the disservice of asking you not to speak first. Will you now speak last?”

As his father rose the crowd shimmered in anticipation, not only, Miles thought, because it was their Count, but because it was Aral Vorkosigan, Butcher of Komarr and the Barrayaran saviour at Escobar, the man who as Lord Regent for sixteen years and Prime Minister for fourteen more had been the public voice of ultimate Barrayaran authority—longer than anyone since Dorca the Just, and the first man since before the Time of Isolation to retire alive from that job.

“I will, Sire, with pleasure, for this was a very unusual occasion for Barrayar, and Vorkosigan Surleau. I am proud of my liege-men and liege-women today. I believe they answered you well—honestly and honourably. For my House I will add only two things.” The rasping voice deepened.

“You said the Count-my-father spent more than half his life beating the Cetagandans, Sire, and so he did. I was born on Occupied Barrayar, and my own life has with my wife’s unstinting help been dedicated in sickness and health to that same end. And though it is less widely appreciated, Lord Vorkosigan has borne this burden all his years, in his sickness, as in his welcome health. It has been a fight to save Barrayar and none could be more important. But I believe it is a fight we have plainly won. And if I honour the best of our Vor and Barrayaran traditions, I have no wish for the heaviest burden of three generations to descend to my grandchildren.” He beetled his brows in mock-severity at a breathless Miles and very thoughtful Ekaterin, artfully concealing from the crowd a half-wink. “Of whom I have renewed hopes.”

Again murmurs and smiles eased the tension of formality back, but with an icing of speculative exclamation. Miles’s heart slowed a little from the gallop started by his father’s open acknowledgement of his disabilities and strange, largely covert fighting career.

“My son contends the Cetagandans taught the Count-my-father one thing above all—that Barrayar must go forwards. I think that is true. He thought so as a commander in all the time I knew him, and I believe he would apply the lesson today as vigorously as he pursued all passions.” The older folk present nodded solemnly to conceal mirthless grins of agreement. “I know he would honour Sergeant Barnev’s motives and actions, as I do. And if my years of military and political service have taught me anything, it is that to be driven forward by the Cetagandans in war only to refuse to go forward with them in peace would be to dishonour our dead and lay up a fool’s reward for our unborn.”

Almost everyone, Miles thought, heard not only their Count but the miraculous Admiral, the Lord Regent who survived and Prime-Minister-turned-Viceroy who still led men and women by their hearts.

“To me, Sire, your question is answered in that truth. If there is a way forward from our present impasse with the Cetagandans, we must take it. Fearing their enmity never stopped us for a moment. Why ever should fearing their friendship stop us now?”

Gregor’s smile at this subtle bluntness was measured, eyes wondering. “Once again, my Lord Count-and-Viceroy, you cleave to the heart. Thank you. And thank all for your honest company this day. Vorkosigan Surleau renews my confidence. And Ours.” He did not exactly bow to the crowd, but his gesture encompassed them, his head inclined, and everybody in the square bowed or curtsied back. “We shall remember this visit with lasting pleasure. But all visits must end, alas, so perhaps you will now take pity on Our ImpSec guards and politely remove the redoubtable Ma Gordunov from Our return path to the aircars.”

The imperial voice carried dry amusement with its pointed pronouns but the absence of a smile
forestalled laughter, and after a moment produced a happily efficient bustle of departure amid murmured approval for an unanswerable thrust. *Emperors get the last word, Ma.* Khourakis, with a wounded look at his Imperial Master, did not need to signal his squad to redeploy, and the main party found itself on its feet alongside Gregor and the Count. It was an emperor’s effect Miles greatly admired but did not always especially enjoy experiencing. Gregor just smiled at them all.

“And now, I think, lunch is in order. Miles, if we may?”
There were rearrangements for their return flight to the house. Gregor commandeered Nikki and the Viceroy, joining an animated conversation about the Cetagandan boy at Nikki’s school and drawing both to the Vorpatril aircar, while Miles and Ekaterin went with the Vicereine and the Vorthyses. They settled in, but as the ImpSec pilot began to ramp up power his headset crackled, faint words sounding in urgent tones.

“Roger that, Control One. We await your go.” The pilot keyed his internal microphone. “My Lords, my Lady, Professora, we’re being asked to wait a moment.”

Miles tensed. “What’s up?”

“The air escort are tracking an unidentified lightflyer, my Lord.”

“Where?”

“South-eastern perimeter of the security zone, my Lord.”

Which meant in or very close to the mountains. “Huh. There’s still quite a few unregistered flyers in the hills. Is it old and grubby?” The pilot enquired. “So they say, my Lord.”

“Probably just home-brewed maple mead being run. It is Sunday. Unless he’s heading closer it’s not worth interfering.”

The pilot consulted again. “They’re waiting for it to clear the zone, my Lord.”

“Very well.” Miles settled back with an air of patience. The resistance of hill-families to such tedious legalities as proper registration of flying vehicles and the obligation to buy mead only from the meadery did District revenue no good, and was occasionally, as now, a minor menace, but also part of their independent character, not to be lightly impugned. So now they waited. Bah. Looking round, he saw Georg had folded his arms and was eyeing his diminutive fellow-Auditor with a dubious air.

“Tell me, Miles, how many of those extraordinary words in the square came as a surprise to you?”

Miles raised an eyebrow in return. “Almost all of them, Georg. I had no idea Gregor was in such a decorating mood. Heh.” He clasped Ekaterin’s hand and smiled at her aunt. His aunt too, now. Hmm. “And I only learned last night from Khourakis that he proposed coming to the village at all. Truly.”

Georg looked unconvinced. “Mmm. In that case I congratulate you on your … awareness of how people are feeling. I would not have expected such strongly positive responses to Gregor’s question. Not that I expected the question in the first place.” Miles waggled a hand but Vorthys did not pause. “Frankly, Miles, while I appreciate your security logic, I have been feeling—dragooned is the word, I think—since shortly after lunch yesterday. Jack Chandler’s maths is dazzling but the spectre of what it might do to Barrayar is oppressive. Terrifying, in fact. Now, though … I don’t know, but I am beginning to think you have gauged your moment to perfection, and created an opportunity better
than I can credit.” Georg rubbed his chin. “I’ve only been an Auditor five years, but I’ve never seen Gregor in anything like his mood today. Of course, yesterday’s events and revelations may be explanation enough, but I’m wondering what I don’t know.”

The Vicereine was also examining her small son thoughtfully. Miles resisted an urge to hunch. “I’m just reacting to events as best I can, Georg. Chandler came out of the blue, and he’s the one making us hop. With the Cetagandans we’re just making a virtue out of necessity. It’s a Vor tradition.” His mother raised an eyebrow, and he swept her a half-bow from his seat. “If there is a moment to gauge, it’s far more yours than mine, milady mother, and thirty years not ten days in the making.”

“Hmm. Thank you dear, but you are changing the subject.”

“No I’m not. Will you tell Helen where her Professor Vorlenski got his holovid image of Kou’s and Drou’s wedding, or shall I?”

“Oh my.” Looking at them both Helen laughed. “Did you really, Cordelia?”

The Vicereine grinned. “Yes, anonymously, because it was technically illegal to release an image taken in the Residence. Aral knew—he pointed out to me the change that wedding ceremony symbolised, and one of the ImpMil people I dealt with innocently recommended Vorlenski as an up-and-coming sociologist.” She sighed. “The Imperium was different then. Miles is right, Georg, that while Aral has worked on wider politics and structures, I have sought change from the bottom up. Health, education, access to the comnet, and uterine replicators, of course—thirty years ago Madame Csarna would not have been free so young to do the excellent work she does. So I did think, in the square, that we’ve made progress; it may even be enough for the strain we’re all about to be put under. But”—she turned to Miles—“Georg is also right. You are being evasive, dear, though I am not entirely sure about what.”

Miles offered a wounded shrug. Helen Vorthys shook her head slowly with a professorial look starting in her eye. “You know, Cordelia, I am beginning to realise you must have educated Gregor far more tellingly than the Academy. A good biography of you is a real desideratum.” His Ma rolled her eyes in what Miles suspected was not entirely mock-horror. “But whatever either of you incorrigible Vorkosigans may be hiding, the dynamics in that square didn’t feel under anyone’s control—even Gregor’s, for all he was acting as chair. The veterans’ attitudes were, I would say, generally predictable—fighting-men’s honour-talk and our Barrayaran admiration for an enemy’s courage—but Ma Gordunov was probably what we were all expecting to hear. That sergeant’s story was an eye-opener. Master Tsipis was interesting, too. I’m only sorry the whole thing wasn’t recorded.” Miles winked and patted the top-pocket of his tunic. “You didn’t, dear! That’s wonderful.”

“You won’t be able to use it for a while, Helen. If ever. And don’t look at me like that, Georg, it’s habit. I didn’t know what might be said, but I wanted a record anyway in case there was anything … heartwarming. And there was. What effect might Sergeant Barnev’s story have on the Cetagandans, do you suppose?” That produced a thoughtful silence.

“You don’t deal in sentiment?” Georg asked after a moment.

“No. But the ghem deal in honour, and like us are ancestor-worshippers.” Miles hesitated, shrugged again, and gave up fencing; making history of the kind he had in mind didn’t call for the same tactics as covert ops. “If things work out I’ll get you a copy of the recording, Helen. It may have to await posterity but I grant it should be preserved.” He gave a demure look. “Your investiture is certainly public record.”

“Oh my.” Helen went pink again, one hand going in surprise to the medallion gleaming on her
breast. “It’s quite something, isn’t it? And yours too, dear.”

She beamed at Ekaterin. The others laughed, and the pilot’s headset crackled again, followed by his crisp announcement “We’re cleared to go, my Lords and Ladies” and a rising whine of engines as the aircar lifted from the wharf. The academic mind was not so easily deflected. “But you know, Miles dear, Georg is right about your timing. Though when he says ‘moment’ I always suspect he means it in the engineering sense.” She smiled fondly at her husband. “I think more temporally, of course. Most of the time it’s hard to tell with Gregor, because he can make history just by speaking, and this whole weekend is so thick with obvious historical moments my poor brain is on overload anyway. But the sense of deep movements, historical movements, was for me very strong in that square. And if you didn’t exactly orchestrate it, Miles dear, it’s clear to a blind man that in the last day or so you have gathered into one hand the Emperor, the General Staff, ImpSec, and now apparently a hidden tide of public thought. It is … formidable.” She hesitated. “I am intrigued by the absence of any civilian politician.”

_In for a groat, in for a bushel._ “They blab. Both Racozy and Poincaré, who might be supposed to have a right to be here”—he named Gregor’s Prime Minister in succession to the Count-his-father and the current Minister of Defence—“also tend to think of delaying and weaseling all the time, which makes sense domestically dealing with the Council but won’t do with Cetagandans at all. Neither ghem nor haut.” He shook his head. “And in practical terms civil power is much more directly controlled by Gregor than military, despite his being Commander-in-Chief. All ministers serve at his pleasure. You couldn’t stage a coup now by seizing the Ministries but you could by controlling the Staff.”

“Yes, I see that. But you can’t really have feared a coup?”

Beside him Ekaterin was wide-eyed as her political horizons abruptly expanded yet again. “Oh, I don’t know. I agree it’s unlikely, but with _this_ hypothesis selectively leaked? Get the order of the technology and its implications for us and Cetaganda wrong in presenting them, and you could revive the old war faction fast enough. Think how close René Vorbretten’s reconfirmation was last year.” Miles brooded. “For men like Boriz Vormoncrief it was self-interested politics as usual more than anything else, attacking a Progressive vote in Council, but to hear some of his supporters you’d have thought René had been revealed as a degenerate traitor rather than one-eighth Cetagandan.”

“But the Council of Counts did reconfirm him.”

“Yes. One straw I saw in the wind to suggest Cetagandans no longer meant to us quite what they used to. _Vorhalas_ voted for him, you know.”

“Ah. And was young Nikki’s friend another straw? He hadn’t said anything about that to me or Georg.”

“Nor to me.” Miles looked at Ekaterin, who shook her head.

“Not a word. He did tell me he’d seen a fight where the boy being picked on beat his tormentors. But nothing about a Cetagandan.”

“Hmm.” Miles considered. “There could be many reasons. Most are harmless. Da and Gregor will be getting it out of him anyway, I imagine, but I suspect tact, not tactics. Nikki’s learned a lot about what _not_ to say. And when not to say it.”

“He surely has.” The Vicereine’s voice was mellow. “I liked his ‘names I have been called’. Tact must be your doing, Ekaterin dear. Not that Miles wholly lacks it these days, but it was never his strong point except when doing charm.”
Ekaterin smiled at her alarming mother-in-law. “Actually, I think it’s the time he’s spent with the Pyms.”

“That would do it.”

Miles, carefully not rising to his mother’s unusually provocative bait, had hoped his historical pleasantries would steer the conversation somewhere other than what he had and hadn’t planned for the present, but the Professora had an unfamiliar but to her plainly important scent in her nose and was relentless.

“I don’t know if it’s what was bothering Georg, but what’s intriguing me, Miles dear, is that you are being a perfect reciprocal of the way you say Count Piotr was. He played the crusty Vor, but according to you was really a ruthless radical. You play the radical, relishing iconoclasm, but for all its setting of precedents that scene in the square was as feudal as anything I’ve seen in years—and living neo-feudalism, not a dead hand of tradition.” She looked at Cordelia. “But that can’t be right, can it?”

The Vicereine grimaced. “You tell me, Helen. I used to think Miles learned more from Piotr and Aral than he ever did from me.” She smiled to take sting from the words. “Though of late I have begun to wonder about that.”

Miles shrugged. It had taken him a long time to understand the conflicts in his mother about Gran’da, and he thought even now the old general’s legacy was one of the very few subjects about which she did not think clearly. He smiled at the Professora who was looking at him with concern. “It’s not for me to judge. But I’ll talk to your promising student about Gran’da sometime, in general terms, if you like.”

“Thank you, dear. Though I’m beginning to think it should be a family biography, not just a proper book on Count Piotr.”

Now that was a truly alarming thought but fortunately the soft bump of landing forestalled any reply. As Miles handed out his mother, Ekaterin, and Helen he saw the other aircar had emptied; Gregor and Laisa, followed by Simon and Alys, headed into the house behind Pym while Nikki and his father were walking towards him trailing Banharov and Ruchinski. Pym might have been willing expediently to forego the presence of Vorkosigan Arsmen on an impromptu visit to Vorkosigan Surleau, but he wasn’t going to allow such unplanned dereliction to continue. Grinning potently at Miles, the Count slowed his step, letting Nikki continue forward to report.

“Mama, Uncle Gregor says he and Aunt Laisa will be down for lunch shortly.” Uncle Gregor and Aunt Laisa? When did that happen? Miles and Ekaterin looked at Nikki with bemusement. “And the Emperor said to tell you, sir, he requests and requires you to tell General Allegre and Admiral Vorlynkin that he gave Mama and Aunt Helen medals, but not to tell them about the rest of what happened because he will.”

Behind Nikki the Count was grinning even more broadly. Miles groaned to himself. “Did he, indeed. Then I better had. And did either Uncle Gregor or the Emperor say anything else?”

Nikki grinned, then frowned. “He said I wasn’t to pester either you or Mama with questions about her medal or Aunt Helen’s because it was all part of what happened on Komarr and you couldn’t tell me yet. But I should be very proud of them both.”

“And so you should, though you’ll find it rather flummoxes your Ma.”

The Count came forward to put a hand on Nikki’s shoulder; his eyes were curiously bright on Miles,
though his voice was calm. “Pym says Guy and Yuri are on the terrace, Miles. We’ll be along in ten minutes or so.”

After the shouting’s over. Miles nodded to Georg and Helen, kissed Ekaterin, gravely shook a startled Nikki’s hand, and stuck his tongue out at his father, who laughed. Then he went off to tell ImpSec and the General Staff of the latest revolution in their lives.

* * * * *

Guy Allegre had had an unexpectedly pleasant morning, and against all odds was a good deal more relaxed than the day before. He rarely got the chance to ride these days, and if his muscles were telling him he would before long regret this opportunity he was glad of the calm exercise brought him. In Count Piotr’s day the stables must have been something to see; Miles clearly kept fewer horses but those he did were handsome animals with easy gaits and friendly manners. And the ride had been beautiful, a long circuit taking he and Vorlynkin around the back of the crags topped by the old castle, through Terran woodland betraying the terraforming beneath and, to his surprise at this low elevation, an upland meadow of sorts. One of the vigorous streams that notched the hillside provided a pleasantly scrambling, splashy route upwards, before a military supply-path created long ago with extensive labour branched away to climb the hill’s natural glacis to a greensward surrounding jumbled stones and abandoned arches.

Vorlynkin, whom he had known for years but with whom he did not socialise outside the melée of General Staff dinners, had proven good company. Given their jobs both men were above all realists, and once they absorbed the facts of Chandler’s extraordinary hypothesis and Vorkosigan’s even more extraordinary response to the potentially deadly problem it presented, they saw no point in fulmination or regret. Cetaganda clearly had to be contacted and Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja would respond as he responded, after which their Imperial Master would do whatever He decided to do. Then the real work would begin.

Most of their conversation had been about the wonder that was Miles Vorkosigan. With Gregor’s approval Allegre had, after the strange meeting culminating in the plan for this weekend, provided Vorlynkin with Miles’s ImpSec file, for which he was of course cleared but had not since his appointment four years before needed to consult. Even knowing Miles had been in covert ops for a decade, closely connected with the persistently useful Dendarii Free Mercenary Fleet and in the redoubtable Illyan’s view an outstanding agent, the Admiral had been as floored as everyone who read the bizarre dossier zig-zagging from Barrayar to Tau Verde, the Hegen Hub, Eta Ceta, Terra, Dagoola IV and countless points between. Picking it over as they rode, they decided the two most astounding personal successes were initial seizure of the Dendarii and the great Dagoola prison-break—the third largest on record and in its dramatic effect on the Marilacan War undoubtedly the most influential.

“At least the man’s an escape-artist,” Vorlynkin pointed out, grinning. “It’s good to know. But what really gets me is the way he put himself on the line. The response of his command staff in understanding the orders he passed in all that doublespeak was very impressive—all Vorkosigans, by God, know how to pick people—and the evacuation itself was beautifully run by that Tung fellow. But the whole thing was driven by Vorkosigan alone, from an inside position of apparently complete powerlessness. Just like at Tau Verde, really—enter a war-zone with an untrained staff of four, take over, stop the war in its tracks, and dictate terms to all sides before going your merry way. And in less than four months!”
He had shaken his head so comically in disbelief at the outrageous military and political sleight-of-hand a teenage Miles had pulled off that Allegre laughed aloud, before pointing out thoughtfully that Miles’s mother was famous for cutting a war abruptly short, with its instigator.

“Perhaps he has more of his mother in him than one would think.”

After that the tumbled and scorched stone ruins had distracted them for a while. They identified fallen remains of an allure and machicolations; there was also intriguing evidence that outcrops of the crag on the side they ascended had been partly shaped as demilunes, though dense moss and more than a century of weathering made it hard to be sure. The tremendous view over the lake was also exhilarating. Returning in a higher sweep back round the hill views from horseback over sunlit terrain were equally fine, and later vantages over the house and grounds comfortably occupied by members of Khourakis’s team, saluting as he and Vorlynkin passed.

Now they each had a glass of the excellent local apple-juice and with the return of the aircars from this expedition of Gregor’s to Vorkosigan Surleau a prospect of lunch. On Vorlynkin’s lap, purring ecstatically, lay a grey-and-tabby kitten Allegre would have sworn was one of Zap the Cat’s infinite brood, last seen by ImpSec happily causing havoc with perimeter alarms at Vorkosigan House. Perhaps Miles was resorting to shipping the beasts about the country. Thoughts of lunch were more compelling. After a few minutes, though, Miles came out to the terrace alone, wearing his house uniform as Count’s heir.

“Good morning Guy, Yuri. Or afternoon, rather. Is all well?”

“Yes indeed, Miles.” Vorlynkin was enthused.

Miles inspected the kitten on his lap with a ruminative look. “You have hairs on your uniform.”

“Oh, never mind that. Friendly little thing, isn’t he? Fine horses, good riding country, a very interesting ruin to look at, a cat to stroke, and the prospect of another of your lunches. Nicest Sunday morning I’ve had in a long time.”

“Ah. Good. You went up to the castle then?”

“We did. Were those basalt outcrops behind the rear bastions deliberately shaped as demilunes?”

“Someone had a go at them once, certainly, but I’m not sure they were ever very serious about it.”

“Hmm.”

“Is all well with you and everyone else, Miles?” Allegre put in.

“Oh yes. We’re all fine.”

“Good.” On principle Allegre let a touch of acerbity enter his voice. “I hadn’t realised Gregor and Laisa would be leaving secured premises.”

“Nor I. It was Gregor’s desire. We followed full security protocol, of course—the air escort was up, and Khourakis attended in strength. Oh, and we had to wait coming back while air control tracked an unidentified lightflyer in the mountains but it went away harmlessly.” He grinned engagingly. “Probably unlicensed maple mead being privately shipped, but we tolerate that. Hill-folk don’t exactly believe in registering flyers.”

“No, I imagine not. Pym told me about the incident, and I agree it seems harmless, save to your District purse.”
Allegre had talked directly to air control as soon as Pym told him of the alert, and the duty-colonel commanding relayed Miles’s observations with news that the offending, less than airworthy flyer had hopped wheezily over a couple of ridges and vanished back into hills. As much a pragmatist as a realist and loyalist, Allegre was unconcerned, but Miles was looking at him very oddly. What now? Miles looked around to check Ma Kosti and the serving-staff were still in the kitchen, sat beside them, and lowered his voice.

“Um … would I be right, Guy, in thinking Yuri is in the need-to-know pool about events on Komarr?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then you’ll know, Yuri, that my wife and Helen Vorthys were held hostage.”

Vorlynkin nodded, as puzzled as Allegre as to where Miles might be going with this. “Yes indeed, Miles. A terrible thing.” The kitten purred under his fingers.

“And that that proved a very stupid move on the Komarrans’ part, as their defective hell-weapon got itself broken into lots of small pieces.”

“Yes, certainly. Your wife is undoubtedly a very resourceful woman.”

“She is, and more. A very courageous woman.” Allegre closed his eyes and entertained a brief, highly treasonable vision of strangling Gregor. He heard Miles’s voice continue softly, yet again floating the absurd into existence. “Ah. Guy knows what you do not Yuri, and has I fear made an inductive leap. Gregor, you see, was particularly grateful to Ekaterin, mostly I think because of the impact the terrorists’ plan, even misfiring, would have had on his wedding.”

“My word, yes, I can see that.” Vorlynkin’s tenor was still no more than puzzled. That will change soon. Miles was speaking rather briskly.

“So he wanted badly to give her a medal but Guy vetoed it because of the security risk from the curiosity any public citation would arouse. Now, however, Gregor requests and requires me to inform you both that he has this morning invested the Professora with a Silver Imperial Star, and Lady Vorkosigan with a Gold one.”

It could be worse. Contemplating the sun on his closed eyelids Allegre wondered what he would have done had Gregor chosen to bestow one of the awards for valour equally in his gift but traditionally given only to field-commanders on the recommendation of the General Staff. Could you strangle the same person twice?

“But …” Yuri’s tenor had dropped an octave. “But they’re …”


“Vorkosigan!”

At the fully baritone note and sound of the kitten’s scrambling departure Allegre reluctantly opened his eyes and gestured Vorlynkin to eye-popping silence. “Miles, are they going to wear them in public in Vorbarr Sultana?”

“I should think so.” Miles grinned. “But perhaps not yet. They are, though, going to wear them this afternoon, I should think.”

Allegre sat up, eyes wide and intent. “He’s decided.”
Miles didn’t pretend not to follow. “He has said nothing to me, Guy, but I think so, yes. It’s the only thing that makes sense of his mood. He’s going to try to sell Giaja and Degtiar the whole package. The Jackson’s Whole package. Heh. And if they buy it’ll mean the Joint Fleet, its HQ, and major civilian institutes as well. So Gregor’s really giving you a kind of warning with these medals.”

“What kind of warning?” Vorlynkin was still looking incensed, but his voice had risen back to low tenor range.

“Think about it, Yuri. Where are you going to find another quarter-million Barrayaran personnel? And rising. And for all you’re scowling, Guy, ImpSec already has a female section in all but name.”

It was true, Allegre had to admit, and he had thought privately, even before Gregor’s acquisition of Barrayar’s first Empress for more than half-a-century made it inevitable, that the expanding ad hoc female arm of the security forces ought to be properly integrated. He also suspected regular and space-based forces would have far less trouble in admitting women to their ranks than senior officers habitually supposed. Even so …

“That does not solve the security problem, Miles. When people ask why two women have Imperial Stars, how are we going to explain it without blowing the Komarr story wide open?”

“You will not need to lie, Guy. Yuri.”

Gregor came onto the terrace, a Vorbarra Armsman holding in the doorway behind him. As Allegre and Vorlynkin automatically began to rise he gestured them to stay seated and sat himself. “You may choose between exceptionally valorous service to Barrayar that cannot presently be specified, referring all enquiries to me, and formal release of a story that there was an attempt last year to take hostages on the jump-station that Ekaterin and Helen were caught up in and foiled—proper awards being delayed as a security concern, with the rest of the story, until after my wedding. I’m sorry not to have given you personal notice but I didn’t actually decide to do any awarding until this morning.”

He smiled gravely at them all. “I imagine you realise I have decided to make this Cetagandan peace, if I can. It is a risk, but all alternatives are riskier.” He paused. “I should also tell you, Guy, Yuri, before others join us, that I took a sounding in the village this morning—nothing specific, of course, just a formal question to those assembled about whether they could imagine Cetagandans as allies, rather than enemies. There were eleven forty-year men present, and others of all ages and wisdoms. Their answers came to a very clear yes.” Gregor glanced at Miles and somehow converted imperial neutrality into a bland look. “I dare say Lord Vorkosigan has a recording. You should listen to it as soon as you can—before the frame-call. I was already inclined to think domestic as well as military reception of a treaty would be broadly and sufficiently positive, especially with the new technologies to explain its necessity and compound people’s emotional responses. I now think I should have taken more steps with Cetaganda already. There is clearly consular work that could have been done long ago, as you will hear from Sergeant Barnev, late of my Imperial Rangers.”

Vorlynkin frowned. “Bow-legged chap with a shock of grey hair?”

“White now, but bow-legged, certainly.”

“Huh. I remember him from training-days. He was a damn good sergeant.” From the doorway the Armsman gave a discreet cough.

“He still is.” Gregor rose, and they stood with him. “We have a little over three hours before the frame-call. Once we have eaten, Yuri, Guy, please start thinking seriously about what you will need to do in the coming weeks if Giaja says yes. Now …”

He turned to smile welcome as Lady Vorkosigan and the Empress came onto the terrace, leading others, including a less weary-looking Chandler. The Viceroy and Vicereine, attended by Pym,
brought up the rear with young Nikolai Vorsoisson, as was; Master Vorkosigan now. Allegre had often had occasion as chief of ImpSec to observe Gregor’s seemingly effortless ability to switch conversational and mental modes from public to private, official to personal, at will. This time, as Miles simultaneously swung round and made an identical change without saying or seeming to do anything, Allegre was forcibly struck by just how much the Emperor and his odd foster-brother shared—not, he thought, groping to formulate it, mindset, exactly, but mental complexity of self-awareness. *Both are great men.* He shook his head to clear it, and set the back of his brain to working out what ImpSec might soon have to be doing while he enjoyed yet more of the Kosti woman’s remarkable food.

* * * * *

Walking onto the terrace beside Laisa Ekaterin was wondering whether lack of nervousness was some strange effect of being given a medal, or if her capacity for self-doubt had simply been so overloaded it had short-circuited. Perhaps neither, but the palpable goodwill she had felt so strongly in the village, radiating at her and Nikki like sunlight, or its underlying corollary, the decision she and Miles had made about their children-to-be and the fierce regard that produced from Aral and Cordelia. Not that her parents-in-law hadn’t been unflaggingly kind and courteous since the heart-stopping moment in the public gallery of Vorhartung Castle when she felt a polite tap on her shoulder and turned to realise that she had just proposed to Miles—and been accepted—not only in the middle of a full session of the Council of Counts, but in front of his Viceregal parents.

*Or perhaps you are a brave and competent woman who has found happiness and security, eh?*

Even that bold mental voice didn’t worry her any more, she noticed. With Pym’s help she smoothly distributed kin and guests to their places—a variation of yesterday’s dinner-seating with the Viceroy next to Laisa, the Vicereine beside Gregor—and signalled service to begin. Only a year ago she had been entirely confused by Miles’s casual determination that she should somehow escalate from hobby-gardening to planetary ecology, or possibly terraforming, but as security layers peeled back and she began to understand what he had spent the last ten years doing she ceased to find his casual expansiveness so alarming. And if he was going to graduate from merely changing worlds to changing the long-term political security arrangements of the Nexus, she thought she might after all manage rather well with a Barrayaran district. She could start this summer with the pleasant but less than imaginative gardens here and the interesting, extensive grounds where Vorlynkin and Allegre had lately been riding, and work outwards.

The conversation was easy and general until Jack Chandler, happily munching his way through an exquisite Ma Kosti salad with nuts, apple, and warm, crumbly fragments of local cheese, noticed the ribbons draped around her aunt’s neck and her own and the shiny stars hanging from them. He peered across the table.

“Those look most distinguished, my Lady, Professora. They are Imperial Stars, aren’t they? Are congratulations in order?”

Gregor replied, raising his apple-juice in a toast to her and her aunt. “They are, Doctor. An unfortunate incident last year saw Lady Vorkosigan and Madame Professora Vorthys endangered—but thanks to their courageous actions, only to the rapid disgruntlement and arrest of their endangerers.”

Ekaterin wasn’t sure that word existed but Gregor made it sound as if it should. As the toast was drunk Allegre and Vorlynkin offered their own congratulations. Vorlynkin’s voice sounded strained and Miles twitched amusement, spicing the genuine admiration in his eyes as he held her own. *Oh.*
That still flummoxed her, she discovered, but in an oddly reassuring way, like Gregor’s gaze. Chandler pursed his lips in a silent whistle and inclined his head to her and Aunt Helen.

“Most relieved congratulations, then. I see I must be careful never to underestimate Barrayaran women.” He nodded also to Aunt Alys, then Cordelia. “Nor Betan ones”—he smiled respectfully—“if even half the things I read are true.”

Her mother-in-law laughed. “I’m sure they’re not.”

“But, forgive me, my Lady, you did in fact end the War of Vordarian’s Pretendership by stealing into the usurped Imperial Residence, decapitating the Pretender, and making off with his head?”

“Yes, I must admit to that. I did not, however, do the decapitating myself, and my real concern was finding Miles and keeping him safe.”

Chandler swallowed the last of his salad. “Admirable as those qualifications are, my Lady, I’m not sure they do much qualifying.” Laisa and all the Barrayarans except Nikki grinned or smiled; he was staring at the Vicereine. “You were also a captain and astrocartographer in the Betan Survey, I believe?”

Salad bowls and sideplates were swept away, to be replaced by arrays of cold and smoked meats, vegetable proteins, hoummus, bread still warm from the oven, and an array of spiced chutneys and pickles in aromatic oils. After serving herself a healthy sample Cordelia looked again at Chandler.

“The Betan Survey I cheerfully acknowledge, Doctor. But why all this admiration now?” She seemed genuinely enquiring. *Can she not know?*

Chandler regarded the Vicereine steadily. “Because, my Lady, thirty-odd years ago you took on Barrayar and have survived both the experience and the changes you and your husband wrought. Just now I find yours a most compelling story.”

Both Gregor and Laisa, listening in, laughed aloud. “Now that I can understand, Doctor Chandler.” Laisa smiled impishly at the Vicereine. “Barrayar can be a most unnerving planet for an immigrant, and I am, like you, an avid collector of inspirational tales about the last Lady Vorkosigan as Regent-Consort.” Her voice became thoughtful. “It seems to have been taking decisive unilateral action on her own behalf, without regard for engrained proprieties, that really impressed the Vor, but I have had difficulty finding any equivalent, however slight.”

Cordelia smiled but her eyes were shadowed. “Unilateral, decisive, and violent—you mustn’t forget that.”

“Heh.” Her father-in-law reached across the table to grasp his wife’s hand a moment, and though she knew they had been married thirty-two years Ekaterin could see the therapeutic effect of his touch. “I remember clearly, dear Captain, how furious you were when you realised all that frozen courtesy the high Vor started showing you was profound respect. I don’t think I knew you were still cross about it.”

“Oh.” Cordelia smiled at her husband but waved a hand holding a piece of bread in frustration. “Killing’s easy. It’s babies that are hard.” Ekaterin saw Miles wince, and caught her husband’s eye to send him a return dose of reassurance. “I only told Bothari to cut off Vordarian’s head when the silly man started blethering about fighting on for ever, no matter what. He had no brains in it anyway, and I was sick to death of that ridiculous war threatening everyone’s life.”

Nine Barrayarans, a Komarran, and a Terran looked at Cordelia with raised eyebrows. Even Nikki
echoed the gesture, giving his face an oddly adult cast. Only her father-in-law seemed unsurprised at how Barrayaran his famously Betan wife could be. To Ekaterin’s pleasure Nikki broke the silence, putting down his knife and fork and speaking carefully.

“Is that really why you did it, Grandma Cordelia?” It seemed to be Nikki’s day for claiming his new adult relatives’ first names by bestowing titles. His new grandma looked at him with pleased surprise.

“It really was, Nikki dear. If Vordarian had lived through that shambles he would have had to be executed anyway, but he actually died of stupidity, not treason.” She looked in surprise at the piece of bread in her hand and began to eat it.

“Huh.” Nikki turned to Miles. “Is that like what you meant, sir, about your Gran’da turning to Emperor Ezar”—a sideways glance at Gregor—“out of a need for fealty rather than for revenge?”

Ekaterin, almost distracted by a chutney that must have fermented honey in it, felt a surge of pride at her son’s blossoming intelligence, not only remembering Gregor’s phrase but improving it. *A need for fealty.* The words spun in her mind as she watched Miles and Gregor stare at one another with surprising intensity for a second before Miles swung his gaze back to his stepson.

“Do you know, Nikki, I think it is.” Miles turned to his mother. “At dinner last night we were speaking of motives, and I contended that even if some very wrong or shameful action were unavoidable, because security considerations could not permit otherwise, it still mattered *why* one chose to do it. Nikki opened the discussion by posing a question arising from the actions of Captain Vortalon, of whom we heard earlier.” For the first time he looked directly at his father. “It’s a question I imagine you appreciate, sir. My own example was Gran’da’s reaction to Mad Yuri’s Massacre, which can look like simple revenge but was, at least, also a consequence of his need to take new oath to Ezar, and for oaths to remain binding after Mad Yuri shattered one.”

“That is a very subtle distinction, Miles dear.” Cordelia’s voice was guarded.

“Is it? I think in certain kinds of extreme circumstance it becomes as subtle as life and death. When, say, dishonour and survival are equally compelled.” Ekaterin watched Miles let his gaze drift apologetically to Illyan as Gregor’s gaze at him became sharp with warning. “Alas, I speak from personal experience. Of my own dishonours the worst was far more serious for its motives and revelations than intrinsic substance. And I have seen too many dishonours of others, in covert ops and latterly …. this strange Auditorial capacity I have been trying to understand.”

Though Miles had not looked at her nor gestured at all, Ekaterin knew most people in the room, including her concerned parents-in-law and even Gregor and Laisa, had with that last remark (and its calculated, dramatic hesitation) assumed Miles was thinking of her late husband Tien’s petty treason and utterly foolish, dishonoured as well as dishonouring death. Cordelia, she thought, would also recall the sordid dénouement of her daughter-in-law’s first marriage, her decision to leave Tien on the night he later died and acute difficulty in bringing herself to take a marriage-oath again. She had told her mother-in-law of those intimate things in the same heart-to-heart that garnered her a first-hand version of Vordarian’s decapitation, and she knew Cordelia had understood.

Ekaterin also knew it was all an irresistible, Milesian distraction, wrenching to itself any possible thought suggesting a quite different set of meanings in her husband’s words; and she found she did not mind in the least his shameless use of confidence tricks to stall and divert. She knew now what game he played and why, and if part of her was still shrilling shocked disapproval of more or less everything she now understood, the rest of her, in a comfortable majority, had decided not to care. Her eyes met Gregor’s, usually so calm but at this moment turbulent with worry, and willed him her contented knowledge of Miles and his ways. The idea of such communication struck her rational mind as absurd, but she had seen something so like it displayed around Gregor and by her parents-in-
law she could not doubt its possibility. Miles and Captain Tuomonen, she remembered, had to fast-
penta-brightened eyes had it too when she was interrogated on Komarr after Tien’s death. So she
stared back at Gregor as his always unsettling, now unsettled gaze bored into her, holding in her
mind’s eye a clearly visualised arch built from voussoirs of logic and the keystone of her happiness.
More than an arch—a bridge carrying them forward. And saw turbulence replaced by concentration,
calculation, and revelation. To her eyes, as to Miles’s and Laisa’s if they were looking, but not she
thought anyone else’s, even Cordelia’s and especially not Aral’s, Gregor’s secret alarm simply
evaporated. His usual imperial gaze, able to see right through to one’s spine and yet strangely to
hearten, shifted so strongly to pure heartening she almost bowed where she sat with his weight of
gratitude. Then as they reached for food to begin eating again and had to stifle a mutual grin, her
father-in-law leaned forward. Ekaterin had to concentrate briefly on breathing as well as chewing, but Aral’s smile was wry.

“Dishonours in the field are common enough, son, though perhaps trickier in irregular ops. Combat
has always been the grave of honour as well as its cradle. But I can see an Auditorial perspective
would be different.” He shrugged. “I’ll have to think about the Count-my-father. I see your case
about him, but as to my own …” Ekaterin’s eyes met Gregor’s again as Aral turned to the further end
of table. “Well, do you know, Nikki, I wasn’t much older than you are now when my mother and
brother were killed by Mad Yuri’s death-squads. And two years after that I found myself conscripted
for an execution, when Ezar made me put Yuri to death with many cuts.”

So that story was true. Ekaterin saw Aunt Helen’s historical ears prick. Aral again reached out to
take his wife’s hand momentarily, this time, Ekaterin thought, to take comfort. At least it was Mad
Yuri’s Massacre not Escobar he seemed to be thinking of. And how close is one story to the other?
Conscripted for an execution? Nikki’s eyes were huge as he watched his … Gran’da Aral, probably,
by now. A glance suggested her uncle and aunt were innocent of the subtexts flickering here, with
Nikki and Chandler, Allegre and Vorlynkin. Alys and Simon of course were not, faces tight with
concern. When her gaze crossed Laisa’s she saw hints of similar concern, despite what they had both
heard the night before. Cordelia’s face was unreadable as her husband continued.

“It was certainly called revenge, by Ezar himself, but his motives had nothing to do with honour and
everything to do with getting what he wanted. As always. But my motives … well, I can’t say I was
innocent of desiring bloody revenge. How could I be, when I had lost my little sister and seen my
mother and brother die? But with hindsight I would say my most powerful compulsion that day was
desire to conform, to do what seemed clearly expected of me by Ezar. I never knew if the Count-my-
father expected it too, or simply wouldn’t gainsay his Emperor in such a matter. He never spoke of it
afterwards.” Aral looked at his son with a grim smile. “How then, Miles, when not only the singular,
compelled action but also all motives reek equally of dishonour?”

“When our hearts fail us, sir, they fail us once for all. While we survive, there can be no irrecoverable
dishonour.”

“How so? Once lost is lost still.” The rasp was strong in Aral’s voice, and Ekaterin was sure he had
Escobar in mind, but whatever other self-analysis he offered he would no more speak of that in front
of Gregor than, than … strike a liegeman. Miles knew it. His voice hummed with passion beneath
cool civility.

“Only if honour is a groat or a bauble. Otherwise it must be acquired or spent in thinking and doing,
and can no more be permanently lost to the living than breath or food.”

“And your conclusion, sir?”

“You just go on. As all must. Life recovers—even in Vorkosigan Vashnoi.” Ekaterin knew Piotr had
left the irradiated badlands specifically to Miles, and pondered, as he did, the meaning of that gift. Now she wondered what glassy crater and poisoned hinterland meant to Aral, who would remember, just, the old District capital as it had stood. Was that why Miles ...? “That’s all, sir. We are used to thinking, we Vor, that ends justify means. And overwhelmingly they do; but that is the lesson of rule, not its guiding light.”

“Huh. You have that right.” Gregor’s heartfelt voice was rewarded by Aral’s smile as his eyes flickered with concern—the exact reciprocal, Ekaterin realised, of Gregor’s.

“Indeed. Dear Captain”—Aral took Cordelia’s hand yet again—“what do you think? Your experience of Piotr was more bitter than mine. Does Miles have a point?”

The smile his wife gave him was private and blazing. “You know he does, Aral dear. Poor Sergeant Bothari taught all three of us that, long ago. And I don’t think my experience of your remarkable father was more bitter than yours, only more concentrated in his age and vulnerable to the narrowness of his pride.” She tapped fingers on the table, looking round the company. “I’m sorry, Ekaterin dear. This has become a very elliptical conversation for most of us. It’s a poor showing at your table.” She half-frowned at Miles. “But as Simon once pointed out to me, oaths, unlike debts, are not necessarily obviated by death, and some Vorkosigan dead hold us to theirs; as Ezar does to his, of which there were many.” But you were never sworn to Ezar.

Or so her mother-in-law had told her in that heart-to-heart. Cordelia’s gaze rested on Illyan before moving to Gregor. “We began this—I did, anyway—with the proposition that killing is easy and babies hard. I think the only things that really matter are that both can be honorable, in their times, and we are presently taking the hard route.” She turned to Chandler. “You were asking, Doctor, for help in distinguishing the true among stories about me. And Barrayar, perhaps.”

“I was, my Lady.”

“Then let me give you two examples as guidance. It is commonly written, here and on Beta, that I killed Vice-Admiral Ges Vorrutyer in his cabin on the flagship of the Barrayaran fleet at Escobar. It is not true. And once again, while I saw Vorrutyer’s death, it was actually Sergeant Bothari who did the honours. I said this at the time, and since Bothari’s death to anyone who asks, but story-tellers take no notice at all.” Cordelia laced her fingers on the table in front of her. “Conversely, no work I have ever seen so much as hints I was once responsible for the death by nerve-disrupter of another Barrayaran mutineer, whose name I never knew. But that is true, or Aral and I would not be here.”

Her father-in-law’s brow creased briefly at this, then cleared. “In that engine-room.” It wasn’t a question. Which engine-room, and where?

“Yes.” Ekaterin wanted to hear that story from the horse’s mouth. A part of her brain began to assess odds of Cordelia telling her if asked directly by a broody daughter-in-law. Looking round the watching faces, she thought she and Miles could dine out on a positive result for some while. Even Chandler had to be curious but was after bigger quarry.

“A falsehood reported and a truth ignored. What conclusion do you draw, my Lady?”

Cordelia grinned, warmly enough that Ekaterin felt reassurance ripple through the company. All was well enough. “Besides the needs for healthy scepticism and an open mind? Only this, Doctor—that neither report nor ignorance matters a damn, only lives and deaths. I would not be known for either killing, but for what I have done with the time and opportunities those deaths afforded me.” This time it was Cordelia who briefly reached across the table to clasp her husband’s hand. “What Aral calls honour, I call grace.” She grinned again and wrinkled her nose at Aunt Helen. “There’s a line for your family biography, Helen.” Her aunt grinned back, uncertainly. “By which I mean, Doctor, that while stories about me sometimes remember to point out I am a theist, I have yet to hear one that
“Huh.” Aral, Miles, Illyan, and Gregor made identical noises in chorus, but only Aral continued. “So Ezar was right, eh, dear Captain?” He turned to the company. “When Cordelia was first presented to Emperor Ezar, more or less on his deathbed, he told her he had always thought theists more ruthless than atheists—a view drawn from him by her notion that great gifts are great tests.”

Illyan sat forward. “The gift in question being the regency?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” Illyan grunted again and straightened, holding her father-in-law’s gaze for a moment. “I always wanted to ask this, Aral, and never could find the moment. But now, if you’ll forgive me, Gregor … Ezar’s great gift must have seemed something of a poisoned chalice, at the time. Negri said as much to me, once. He also said Cordelia persuaded you to it. Is that true?”

The Viceroy shrugged, gaze wary as he took in Gregor’s neutral look. “True enough. There were many factors. I can’t say I didn’t want it—the power of rule is a strong lure, and I knew I had a chance to use it well. But if Cordelia had flatly refused to countenance it, I think Ezar would for once have lost at his great game.” The long look between her parents-in-law was unreadable to Ekaterin beyond layers of abiding love. “As to it being a poisoned chalice, Simon—"

“That is exactly what it was.” Gregor gave a fractional bow to Aral as he crisply interrupted him, neutrality gone. “No pretence about that is needed here, Aral, nor should it be anywhere. Perhaps all rule is a poisoned chalice. I think the Professora’s history books would tell us so. But that particular chalice had many poisons, old and new.” He looked around. Ekaterin held her breath. “Some of you could put a name to the worst of them. To those who cannot”—he nodded to Chandler, then Nikki—“I make no apology for leaving all unspoken. They are bygones.”

Well, that is a clear command. Ekaterin breathed relief. Gravely Gregor raised a glass of apple-juice to Aral, inspecting it as he did so.

“I cannot say, my Lord Viceroy, that in or from your hands the chalice became filled with wine of blessedness. But I received it from you, and drank. I am still here. And I am happy.” He did not look at Laisa but Ekaterin felt reassurance flow between them, as between her parents-in-law a moment earlier. As it begins to flow between Miles and I. She wanted to dwell on the thought, but Gregor was still speaking. “Any poisons I bear today I inherited for myself. And they have long been neutralised by three generations of Vorkosigans, with a lifetime of Alys’s and Simon’s help. ”He looked in turn at Viceroy and Vicereine, Miles, Alys, Illyan, and herself. “Thank you all. For everything. Now—” his voice became brisker and Ekaterin saw Miles signal Pym to clear glasses and serve coffee. “We have preparations to make in the next hours. The fullest display is called for in clothing, certainly. And there are a few matters we should consider with our coffee.”

While cups and aromatic pots began to appear, Ekaterin saw Miles catch Nikki’s eye. Damping resignation he nodded to his stepfather, made farewells as gracious as the night before but enlivened by kisses for his Aunts Helen and Laisa and Grandma Cordelia as well as her, and slipped out. After pouring coffee Pym and the staff withdrew, leaving the party with only a Vorbarra Armsman stolidly guarding the door.

“First things first.” Gregor’s voice was still brisk. “Miles, will you please take us through whom we expect to form the Cetagandan party.”

“Of course, Sire. Beyond Their Imperial Majesties the hauts Fletchir Giaja and Rian Degtiar, Handmaiden of the Star Crèche, who of course correspond to you and Laisa, ghem-General Dag
Benin informs me there will be”—he began to count fingers—“himself, corresponding to Guy, and the governor of Rho Ceta and his Planetary Consort, corresponding to my parents. He is the haut Raniton Degtiar, a cousin of the Empress; most of you will have seen if not met him at Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding. General Benin also. She is the haut Palma Robine, and as I recall unusually vivacious for a haut.”

“You’ve met her?” The sharpness in Aunt Helen’s voice showed her surprise. Miles smiled apologetically.

“Very briefly, Helen. About ten years ago, but unlike the governors, who are for security reasons limited to five-year terms, Planetary Consorts are for life. The haut Pel Navarr, Planetary Consort of Eta Ceta, who also came to Gregor’s wedding as Giaja’s personal envoy, is in addition to those capacities, um, executive secretary, I suppose, of the Star Crèche, and will also be present. Benin and I agreed she might correspond to Aunt Alys.” He grinned at his aunt, then Illyan. “You posed a problem, Simon, as Benin’s predecessor, the unlamented General Naru, made way by being executed for very high treason. I hope you won’t be offended that you will correspond to Benin’s most senior deputy, one General Ferrant Coram. Dag said Coram’s the man who holds the fort when he has to go off-planet, and suggested if he was now going to have to expect to do more travelling it would be good to have Coram with us from the beginning. He also said the man has a strong interest in Barrayar, though he didn’t say what, and is in general a thoughtful student of military and counter-intelligence history.”

Illyan smiled ironically, a glint in his eye. “I will of course be honoured, Miles. To what Cetagandan shall you correspond?”

Miles grinned again. “What lovely grammar you have, Simon. I was coming to that.” He turned to Vorlynkin. “As you know, Yuri, their Staff hasn’t the same structure as ours. The top man is still formally ghem-Admiral Har, but he’s not really in harness. So Benin suggested ghem-Admiral Halir Lhosh, very much in harness, available on Eta Ceta just now, and their most senior man to have avoided any taint of defeat at the Hegen Hub. He is tipped by Benin as Har’s successor in due course, and is apparently a student of Barrayaran space-tactics with particular admiration for you, sir.” Miles nodded to his father. “Lhosh’s wife is the haut Lady Imana d’Lhosh, awarded him more than twenty years ago, and perhaps a relation of Pel Navarr’s. As Lady d’Har used to, and probably still does, Lady d’Lhosh serves as an important go-between for the Celestial Garden and the highest military ghem-lords, so she will also be present, corresponding for the nonce to Helen.” He gave a nod to her aunt. “It isn’t very exact, I’m afraid, and for you, Georg, as the Cetagandans really don’t have anything even remotely like Lords Auditor, we went with your engineering eminence. Your opposite will be ghem-Artificer General Vanos Kariam, who is responsible for the very impressive state of their force-field technologies.”

Chandler was nodding and clearly knew the name. Uncle Georg whistled. “Kariam, eh? I’m flattered.”

“Which leaves Dr Chandler, Ekaterin, and I. Benin agreed Jack is supernumary, in his role here and as a Terran, so he has no correspondent Cetagandan. So far as Ekaterin and I are concerned, Benin said he would consult higher authority. Yesterday he told me that his Celestial Master was content Lord Auditor and Lady Vorkosigan should stand as Dr Chandler’s Barrayaran sponsors, also without correspondents.”

Illyan laughed. “The Emperor of Cetaganda thinks you and Ekaterin unique, eh? What a sensible man he must be.”

Miles inspected this and left well alone. Gregor smiled fractionally and proceeded. “So. Besides the
Emperor and Empress, that’s two Planetary Consorts and a governor, all haut, as is Lady d’Lhosh, and the three ghem-officers plus Benin. Protocols of address?

Miles blinked. “You’re asking me?” He shrugged eloquently. “What you and Giaja call one another you must work out your imperial selves. There’s no precedent anywhere in at least a millennium and none whatever in either imperium. For the rest of us you are of course all Your Imperial Majesties; they are also most formally Their Celestial Majesties. At need you might be imperial and they celestial. For direct address to Giaja the vocative below Your Imperial Majesty is Celestial Lord, but if any conversation develops sir will do for the rest of them, with ma’am for the haut ladies. For the rest we’ll all have to play it by ear.”

“Hmm.” Gregor’s hand was on his chin. “I am assuming, Miles, the Empress and planetary consorts will maintain their force-bubbles. The haut Pel did when presented to me last year. But if I understand correctly, Lady d’Lhosh will have lost that privilege with her marriage.”

“That is true—and almost all experience says you are also right about the others remaining screened.”

“Almost all, Miles?” Gregor’s voice had metal in it.

Her husband’s gaze found hers and flickered a wink before returning to the Emperor. “Yes. Haut women, even Rian Degtiar, will drop their force-shields in private, when it matters. Some of you know one of my odder Cetagandan experiences a decade ago was seeing all the planetary consorts together.” Ekaterin saw her aunt twitch with renewed surprise, but not her uncle, whom she knew had read Miles’s ImpSec file, including his (supposedly) full narrative of late events on Eta Ceta. She herself knew only the barest outline, but when she had asked Miles about haut women he told her of his experience in what he called in an ironic tone the Star Chamber. She remembered staring helplessly as the story unfolded. “And when Ekaterin and I met Pel at your wedding she ghosted into view for a second.” When Gregor’s eyebrows snapped upwards, Miles went on hastily. “A sort of haut courtesy, I think, because I’d seen her unmasked before. And I think it possible, in courtesy, that the Empress will feel obliged to appear to you and Laisa, and therefore the rest of us—in which case I would expect Palma and Pel to follow suit. If they do … well, it would be a very positive sign, which just might mean they’ll do it anyway as a gesture of … trust in mutual goodwill.”

Gregor’s indignation had been swallowed by concentration as Miles spoke. Around the table Ekaterin could see minds processing the thought. Dr Chandler, she thought, spoke for many of the Barrayarans, though he perhaps didn’t realise their collective gratitude.

“Lord Vorkosigan, I have never seen a haut woman. What should I expect?” An excellent question, but could words do any good? With a lurch in her stomach Ekaterin realised that Miles had turned to her.

“What did you see, love, when you saw haut Pel?”

Every eye was on her. She sat straighter and drew a breath. To her surprise words came easily. “An ageless face, of extraordinary beauty. All semblance of youth with an instant impression of long experience. Ironic humour in her gaze. Penetrating, deep blue eyes. Translucent skin. Astonishing straw-blond hair, very long, elaborately coiled and braided, some falling about her like a curtain. Long in body and leg. A rose-pink gown that was very simple, but hung beautifully though she was sitting.” Ekaterin deliberately looked at all the men in turn. “She was a living work of very high sexual art. In her case at least the rumoured effects of seeing the haut are true. They are sufficiently stunning to—stun.” She looked at all the women, Helen, Cordelia, Laisa, and Alys. “This was at the imperial wedding. I was newly engaged, very happy, wearing the most expensive, best-cut dress I’d ever owned and full war-paint. The haut Pel made me feel very young and horribly dowdy.” She met
Miles’s reassuring gaze. “For a moment I could not understand how Miles could look at me with admiration when he could see this … vision. The Star Crèche in session must be a dazzling thing.”

Vorlynkin blew out a breath. “Well, that is a warning to hear, my Lady. We must brace ourselves. But you say, Miles, if the haut ladies do unmask, it’ll be a good sign?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

Gregor also nodded sharply. “Very well. Thank you, Ekaterin. Does anyone have other questions?”

Allegre sat forward. “Do you know if Giaja will have Imperial Guardsman present, Miles?”

“He will not, by Benin’s agreement and personal word. Nor, by mine, will we have either Armsmen or ImpSec people inside the study. And remember, Guy, both frames are tuned to allow only visible light and sound, as Jack promised you yesterday.”

“Very good.”

Allegre sat back, nodding to Chandler, and Gregor looked around again. Ekaterin had the impression when his gaze passed over Cordelia’s of a fleeting, complex exchange. A foster-maternal enquiry about the Emperor’s state of mind, she guessed.

“Then there is only one more thing before we part to prepare ourselves. When the frame-link opens Miles and General Benin have arranged they will exchange courtesies, reconfirming for both sides all is as agreed. Giaja and I must then begin, and I assume that after”—a ghost of a smile showed in his lips—“my celestial cousins, my wife, and I have adequately greeted one another there will be introductions all round. Thereafter things will be fluid, but I shall ask Miles to outline the, ah, grand plan. And negotiations may well be between Giaja and Miles as much as my celestial cousin and I. My Lord Auditor?” He sat back as Miles leaned forward.

“Sire.”

The renewal of titular protocol was a reassurance to Allegre and Vorlynkin, Ekaterin saw, after this alarming grant of imperial authority to Miles; perhaps also to a surprised Alys and sardonically smiling Illyan. But the faces of her parents-in-law were serene, while her aunt and uncle were nodding. It had been Miles’s show all along.

“Two things.” Miles held up his hands. “First, I believe and Benin agrees, Giaja is willing to meet Gregor partly because the request came from me. A decade ago I had opportunity to do Cetaganda a service in Barrayar’s interest. Giaja saw fit to tie off the loose end I represented with an Order of Merit, a gaudy decoration in his gift and a severe embarrassment to me.” Smiles were visibly suppressed. Miles twitched. “As I spent a good many hours reassuring Simon and ever so many others it was an expedient answer to an occasional problem. But it nevertheless gives me a claim of honour on Giaja; more so as I also served the honour of the Star Crèche.” He shrugged at the bemused looks he was getting. “All this may give me something to work with if opportunity arises. But the second thing matters much more. Critically so.”

Concentration around the table became intense.

“Yesterday I described a hook for the Star Crèche. My greatest doubt is of securing their agreement to any genetic consultancy. For the haut this, far more than anything military or political, as we would see it, is a potential deal-breaker. The circumstances of my first meeting with Giaja allowed me to learn that in private argument about policy planetary consorts deal with him as equals and
address him by bare first name.”

“Truly?” Vorlynkin was plainly astonished.

“Truly, Yuri. But even Benin may not know that, nor other ghem present despite their rank, so whatever unity they show us we will be negotiating with two Cetagandan entities. Giaja called them the empire and the haut. He is the only true link between these halves, the keystone of their dual imperium, and that may be to our advantage.” His fingers drummed on the table and he smiled apologetically round the company. “But I have a fallback position I believe we should be prepared to accept. Pel once told me, you see, haut ladies work only in human material. Ghem-ladies, however, work with animal and plant genes, and are very good at it indeed. Ghem-lady assistance with botanical and zoological problems would be a significant boon. And, after all, if we can make a beginning, perhaps we can later make progress.”

Miles had fallen subtly into persuasive rather than informative mode. Ekaterin sensed heads beginning to nod at his reasonable minimalism. But Illyan’s eyes were mirror-bright, and unsurprised when Miles snapped his own growing narrative spell with a sudden, soft handclap.

“If I choose what seems a strange course in this, please remember the critical point is that any agreement by Rian Degtiar to make even botanical ghem-assistance available to us will not be a minor concession. It will be the public imprimatur of the Star Crèche, in as much as there is such a thing, and that controls the haut.”

“Are you sure of all this, Miles?” Vorlynkin did not look happy.

“I am, Yuri. Giaja rules the empire of the haut, which is necessary for the safety of the Star Crèche. But the Star Crèche governs the haut.”

Her aunt’s eyes were wide as she absorbed this analysis. Opposite Vorlynkin, Allegre stirred. “You are saying, Miles, that Giaja must agree, of course, but Degtiar has a veto.”

“More than a veto. But yes.”

“And though you didn’t say so, one reading of your Cetagandan report ten years ago would be that Degtiar owes her current position to you.”

This, Ekaterin saw, produced widespread surprise. Clearly not all those who had read Miles’s report had made such an interpretation. She herself had never heard the suggestion made but found with rich amusement she had assumed as much ever since Miles first mentioned to her his hopeless youthful infatuation with a woman who had since become an Empress. He makes everybody grow. On the heels of this came the idea that it was a form of compensation for his own stunted body, then that in truth he did only what his mother and father did. Before she could pursue either insight, Miles shook his head.

“No, Guy. At most re-confirmation for rather brilliantly handling an unprecedented problem. She was the haut Lisbet’s pro tem successor as Handmaiden before I ever met her.” His face grew thoughtful. “Actually, what is interesting is that Giaja didn’t see Rian’s use of a Barrayaran agent as at fault. I realised after a while that for him embarrassing me with an Order of Merit was just a side benefit. Giaja’s real purpose was revealed in his one discourtesy to me, the night before. When he dismissed poor Vorreedi and Ivan—and Benin—he said, in exactly these words, Haut Rian, you may keep your Barrayaran creature.”[1] As shock rippled Miles waved a hand. “No, no, that’s what he meant it to do, and what I thought. So the medal business the next day took me by surprise. But think about it. He said it in front of Benin. And to Benin it said the same thing as the medal next day. It endorsed Rian’s actions, emphatically and in haut terms publicly—even though Benin knew very
well she had admitted a male outlander to the precincts of the Star Crèche.” He paused reflectively. “Come to think of it, Dag must have worked out Pel got me aboard that flagship of theirs in her bubble, so he probably thinks they did that before, as well.”

After a moment Ekaterin saw Miles awake to the fascinated eyes resting on him from every seat. Tension climbed in him.

“And did they, dear?” Her own voice, cool and amused, surprised her. He tightbeamed grateful respect.

“Once. For covert ops force-bubbles are an absurdly flagrant opportunity.”

Illyan gave the strangest laugh. Gregor’s eyes narrowed, not only, Ekaterin thought, with amusement. “You really must provide an appendix to that Cetagandan Report of yours, Miles. Soon. And Simon shall review it for grammar.” Gregor was, after all, the elder of the foster-brothers. “My Lords, Ladies, gentlemen. Is there anything more that must come now? Aral? Then we await the event. Miles?”

At the opposite end of the table from her Miles caught her eye and stood; she rose with him. “The frame-call is scheduled for 16:30 our time. We are using the study as before. Please be in the hall outside by 16:25. Ladies’ maids and Armsmen experienced in valeting will be waiting outside your rooms.” He paused in surprise. “Aunt Alys?”

Alys did not feel Miles’s need to stand, but her voice was imperious. “Miles dear, I would like to advance your timing. Will everyone please assemble at 16:00, in full array. You as well, Gregor. Cetagand has the most refined sumptuary culture in the Nexus and certain adjustments to our Barrayaran couture may go a long way. Medals are plainly important here, in several cases worn with full House blacks.”

She frowned at Miles with some severity, but as she looked around the company gave Chandler the faintest wink. Ekaterin was reminded of Pym’s early morning report that Chandler, Alys, and Illyan had been left by the mass-exodus last night to a lengthy têtes-à-tête. Which reminded her she must find out when exactly Pym did such mundane things as sleeping. But Alys swiftly recaptured her attention.

“Had Ekaterin or I had sufficient notice of this event we might have managed something spectacular. As it is, we have done what we can with ladies’ garb, and as Lady Vorob’yev points out, even Cetagandans love a uniform because it relieves one of responsibility for personal sartorial display.” Miles, Ekaterin saw with a rich sense of fun, was standing bolt upright with surprise. His mind did work admirably fast, but then Mia Maz Vorob’yev had told her and Alys she’d met a young Miles on Eta Ceta, considerably enlivening the later stages of her courtship by the Barrayaran Ambassador. Both Allegre and, interestingly, Illyan were also giving Alys surprised and calculating looks. Ekaterin caught her mother-in-law’s eye and stifled a laugh as Alys concluded. “But there will doubtless be some fine tuning to do, so 16:00 sharp, please.”

Now she stood, even Gregor and Laisa half-a-beat behind. Miles, the only one besides herself safe because already standing, smiled in pure appreciation of his marvellous aunt. Swinging out from his place he threw Ekaterin one of his lazy, infinitely subtle and oddly informative half-salutes, this one sending her a step backward and sideways to Illyan’s side as Miles came round the table to stop by his aunt and offer her his arm.

“As you say, my Lady. Will you lead with me?”
Chapter 11

Helen Vorthys wondered, after that memorable exit with Miles, whether Lady Alys might somehow range the upper corridors of the old house while everyone changed, supervising maids and valets, but climbing the stairs beside Georg she saw Alys disappear into the study, presumably to attend to the final aesthetics of the physical space the Cetagandan Emperor and his party would soon see. Outside her dressing-room she found the maid assigned to her was a homely older woman, yet another local, lifelong Vorkosigan servant with intense loyalty and a welcome fund of village gossip. Helen had no memory of her face from the square, but either she had been among the crowd or the village network was in superlative form, for Lara Jankowski’s apotheosis and other events of the morning were already being happily digested with positive remarks about changing opportunities for women. There was a smiling compliment on Helen’s silver Imperial Star as she was helped to take it off, but Ekaterin’s gold award rightly drew greater admiration. And fascinatingly, while the woman openly admired the unusual gown the impressive Estelle had supplied, she also seemed unsurprised by its fashion and already practiced in the ways of the material. Lady Alys, Helen thought, really was exceptionally efficient.

She heard through the door Miles’s rapid steps, a knock, and muffled voices as he was admitted to the dressing-room next-door that Allegre and Vorlynkin were sharing. The walls of this old house were too solid to transmit much, but from what did come through she realised Miles was playing his recording of events in the square. Her nephew-in-law was astonishingly efficient as well, though he didn’t seem to want it known. But he certainly wanted something known. As the critical diplomatic content of this bizarre weekend unfolded yesterday she had, like Illyan, grown increasingly puzzled by her inclusion; Georg’s Auditorial work took him away often enough, and politeness to her grey hairs was hardly a concern at this security level. But Miles had said he would call on the particular skills of each guest and she had slowly realised she was truly present as an historian, and settled her mind to observing what passed.

The whole Cetagandan excursus, however, had come as a professional as well as personal shock. For her, as for any Barrayaran of her generation, the immense enemy imperium had always meant not just an oppressive but an unseen threat—an endless knowledge that if their hidden haut masters ever so chose the face-painted ghem-warriors could bring plunging plasma-fire and kinetic lances back to Barrayar’s skies. Under the stable prosperity of Aral’s Regency—and she felt a frisson at thinking of Viceroy Count Vorkosigan by his bare name with such ease—her middle-age blossomed with Georg, their children, and her career. Then the clear victory of Barrayar and its allies over Cetagandan forces in the War of the Hegen Hub eleven years earlier had, she thought, ended the psychic oppressiveness of the old enemy far more comprehensively than she had realised. Four years later the unexpected resurgence of Marilacan resistance after an entire division of PoWs was snatched from Dagoola IV, culminating in forced Cetagandan withdrawal from Marilac three years ago, had confirmed that lessened status.

Helen had wondered at the time, without for a moment connecting it to the Vorkosigans, whether the mercenary fleet apparently responsible for staging that remarkable rescue at Dagoola could really be named for the Dendarii Mountains of Barrayar, and, if so, who in the Nexus might have sufficient power and sense of historical irony to use a fleet of that name to jump-start a guerrilla war. Georg’s
revelation last year, after one of Miles’s dinners, that the diminutive new Lord Auditor had co-ordinated the whole prison-break operation from the inside, entering the Cetagandan camp as a prisoner, had been one of the greater professional surprises of her life—the point, she reflected, at which she had first thought that uniting biographies of General Count Piotr, Viceroy Count Aral, and Lord Auditor Miles Vorkosigan (not to mention Countess Cordelia) would stand a considerable amount of received Barrayaran history on its head. She increasingly believed Aral’s mother, Princess-and-Countess Olivia Vorbarra Vorkosigan, should be in there too—though in her case it would have to be largely a … a necrography, she supposed, charting the influence of a short life, an abrupt death, and a long, long dying in memory that was still unfinished.

Now even that thumping surprise had been comprehensively overtopped. The image of Miles cooking up some unimaginably brilliant scam to boost his father’s strategy of distracting Cetaganda by reopening a planetary front in what was for Barrayar the enemy’s rear did at least make sense—if one knew Miles well enough to lose the Barrayaran blinkers that saw his dwarfish body and other stigmata as declaring mutant incapacity. Even the obvious mutual respect between Miles and this ghem-General Benin—more than that, friendship; they had plainly been on first-name terms a while—was the sort of thing any Barrayaran could appreciate, especially a Vor, the compound of even-handed professional admiration and a male ethos of military service with honour sparking something more. But a Miles who a decade back had spoken privately to the Cetagandan Emperor and seen the highest council of the legendary haut women walk unveiled, and could call that Emperor and those women to attend him; who played apparently casual arpeggios on the shimmering strings of very different powers anchored in each of his parents, and in Gregor, counterpointing wise military restraint with civil advance and loyalist growth; and whose hilarious, heartwarming mirror-dance of courtship and love with her once so unhappy, then widowed niece had been transformed into a Vor weekend ritual of quite another kind, husbandry imbued with extraordinary powers of management and co-option that were fashioning history not only in front of her, but with her:—this Miles was a whirling paradox she could barely take in, never mind understand. A very long talk with Ekaterin was certainly in order, as soon as it might be managed.

The maid was done with her hair and Georg was finally ready, appearing from his adjoining dressing-room in what was for him a painful state of neatness. He had been more than surprised when Estelle took his measurements as well as his wife’s, and peered at the suit that had been delivered with expressive sniffs, for which he had the nose, and lengthy complaint about its lack of decent-sized pockets. But in it he looked wonderful, Helen thought, his usual cheerfully rumpled appearance transformed into vibrant power. In her dress traditional Barrayaran embroidered skirts were thinned and multiplied in delicate layers, each austerely beautiful and combining in dazzling display. In Georg’s suit the square lines and piped borders of Barrayaran tunics gave way to a more flowing outline, accommodating his comfortable girth while the material and subtleties of cut lent him height; superior work by someone on his wild grey hair produced a strong, flattering frame around his upper face. Around his neck hung his gold Lord Auditor’s chain and seal, somehow failing to disturb the fall of the material beneath. He looked noble, she thought, and her heart fluttered as he smiled at her.

“Oh my. Aren’t we quite the couple, dear?”

“We are, Helen. You look wonderful. But you’re not wearing your new Imperial Star.”

“No.” She laughed at herself. “I could hardly bear to take it off, you know.”

“Put it back on.”

“With this dress, dear? I hardly—”
“Yes,” he interrupted, “with that dress. The ribbon will go very nicely, and that plain, darker area on
the breast looks designed to offset the Star.” Without waiting for an answer he looked around,
scooped up the ribbon from the dresser where she had laid it aside, and before she could protest hung
it gently around her neck, centring the Star itself on her breast before kissing her forehead and
swinging her round to face the pier-glass. He was quite right, she saw—the Star was perfectly
framed and offset within the pattern of the dress, the dark silvers and greys of the ribbon picked up in
the gauzed decorations of the skirt. How had Estelle known? Or Lady Alys? She shook her head.

“Astonishing, dear. I hardly know myself.”

Georg smiled. “Then let’s go and meet some strangers.” Laughing at the unpredictability of their
lives, they went.

* * * * *

The party that assembled smartly at four in the spacious hall was sartorially dazzling—yet also,
Helen realised after a moment, deeply harmonious, the effect of the combining, individually austere
layers of her own skirts repeated across an entire diplomatic ensemble. Ekaterin’s less decorated
dress subtly drew attention to the gold Star hanging on her breast, and in its restraint managed to
signal higher rank—a motif continued in the gorgeously simple, flowing arrays of Cordelia’s and
Alys’s dresses. Laisa completed and crowned the pattern; in her dress the effect of layers was
transformed into an intrinsic quality of a single material in silvery white that shimmered with reds and
blues repeated by refracting light in her earrings.

The same material had been used for Gregor’s parade red-and-blues. The heavy tassles and ridged
seams of his usual uniform were subsumed into thin coloured bands where cloth seemed obediently
to gather and, on his shoulders, woven-silk insignia of his imperial crest. He was instantly
recognisable from holovids of ceremonial performance, but infinitely more elegant, invested with
sinuous style as well as absolute power. Around his neck hung the Imperial Seal.

Aral and Miles Vorkosigan, she saw, were both in the most formal version of house-uniform, the full
black that came out only for funerals and most solemn occasions. Seeing slanting afternoon sunlight
fall on Aral’s sleeve she realised this too was the same new material, bringing to the black deep
flickers of colour, like fires in an opal. Formal detailing was again softened and reduced, as on
Gregor’s tunic. Illyan’s, Allegre’s, and Vorlynkin’s uniforms were traditional red-and-blues;
Chandler stood out like a pigeon among peacocks—though even his apparently ordinary suit showed
the beautiful cut Helen associated with Gregor’s wardrobe, and his hair had been tackled with the
same successful vigour as her husband’s. As they lined up for inspection, grinning at one another,
Helen was surprised to see Alys go first to Ekaterin, merely glancing up and down her niece’s length
before smiling satisfaction. Drawing Ekaterin out to stand beside her, she turned them both to Gregor
and Laisa.

“What do you think, dear?”

Ekaterin’s hand came out to stroke the fabric of Laisa’s dress. “It works, Aunt Alys.”

“Yes, I think so.”

Gregor looked at them both. “You’re sure I don’t need medals on show myself? I do have some, you
know, and you’ve got Laisa in jewels.”
Alys batted this away with one elegant hand; Ekaterin smiled calmly at her emperor and seemed to pass him reassurance as she spoke. “You need none, Sire.”

*Oh my.* Helen had not previously thought of Lady Vorpatril as her co-aunt where Ekaterin was concerned but much was thereby explained. And though she had soon realised Gregor genuinely liked both Ekaterin and Nikki, she was not at all sure when her niece had become the sort of imperial intimate who could respond to a worried Emperor like that. Life was certainly filled with surprises today. Alys swiftly led Ekaterin first to Cordelia, then Helen herself, making minute adjustments where layers had rucked. She smiled uncertainly at this new niece and received a warm smile in return—reassurance for her, she thought, with mild irony and much appreciation.

The two arbiters stepped back and aside, turning to Georg, then Chandler, and looking beyond them Helen saw stairs and side-doors filled with the fascinated faces of a score at least of maids, Vorbarra and Vorkosigan Armsmen, Ma Kosti, even a hollow-eyed Khourakis, looking as if his capacity for shock was exhausted, perhaps permanently. Helen felt considerable sympathy. There was also a grey-and-tabby kitten she had not previously seen watching events with fashion-conscious approval from the top of the newel-post.

“Gregor, Laisa dear, Cordelia, Helen, Georg, Dr Chandler, thank-you. Gentlemen, side-by-side, please” Alys was silently obeyed, Aral, Miles, Illyan, Allegre, and Vorlynkin shuffling into line with mingled amusement and respect. Once they were ready Alys and Ekaterin stood a yard or two back and looked slowly up and down the line. “Hmm. A question of medals, gentlemen, as I said. And the rule is ‘less is more’. Pym!”

Alys had not raised her voice but Pym was abruptly beside her, a velvet-covered tray in one hand that had something large and glittering on it, while Jankowski appeared beside Ekaterin holding another tray. She moved to stand before Miles, smiling apologetically while he raised his eyebrows in mute resignation, and Alys went to Aral. Some swift unpinnings and repinnings later both trays bore an astonishing assortment of Barrayaran and galactic awards, and five once thickly spangled military chests had been reduced to blazing minimalism.

Each uniformed man now bore a single Gold Imperial Star, and one other decoration. Illyan’s was a heavy black ribbon Helen recognised as the rare award indicating critical service during the Pretender’s War, while Vorlynkin wore the equivalent green ribbon for the War of the Hegen Hub, and Allegre the grey-and-blue one of long ImpSec service. Aral had no second medal, but now wore round his neck the heavy golden starburst of the Sergyaran Viceroyalty. Miles’s chest alone bore an extra sign, for his second medal was his Cetagandan Order of Merit, its ribbon shortened to hang within his Lord Auditor’s golden chain and seal. The subtleties became plainer when it occurred to Helen that Alys was fully expecting the Cetagandans to identify not just their own medal but every ribbon they saw, and played a game as delicate as the old language of flowers in love-stories from the Time of Isolation. Male austerities matched the reducing contour of dress design that culminated in Laisa and Gregor’s own singly decorated chest. Cordelia, she saw, was watching with bemused admiration as the pattern emerged.

“Alys, dear, I will *never* understand how you do what you do. I saw you transform Drou all those years ago, but this is extraordinary.”

“Thank you, Cordelia. I’m not displeased myself. Miles was uncommonly elliptical even for him, but he knew I’ve always been interested by Cetagandan aesthetics. Such fluid lines.” Alys glanced sidelong at Ekaterin. “And I should not borrow praise. The aesthetic of combination is largely Ekaterin’s.”

*Oh my.* Helen’s were not the only eyes to turn to her niece with real surprise, more-or-less swiftly
concealed by politeness. Ekaterin didn’t seem bothered at all and spoke clearly, looking at Gregor.

“Forgive me Sire, but ours is the younger culture. In aesthetics this cannot be concealed. My brief was to maintain Barrayaran identity and traditions while offering the Cetagandans compliments and dialogues of design where I could.”

Gregor surveyed the party, ending with an appreciative look at Laisa by his side. Then he whistled cheerfully and grinned at them all. “Just think what effect this material will have on the Council of Counts.”

For a long moment everyone contemplated the notion of the sixty counts, in any case an eye-scrambling riot of colour when assembled in full house-uniforms, additionally shimmering in flowing elegance. Gak. Helen shook her head to clear it as Gregor spoke, eyes twinkling as he slipped into imperial plurals.

“Lady Vorkosigan, you have Our grateful thanks. And apparently a new job, for which We begin to think We should devise a title.” Ekaterin’s smile was as complex as anything Helen had ever seen on her niece’s face. What was she thinking in this strange moment?

“My duty was my pleasure, Sire, and I have all the titles I can bear.”

“I doubt it, my Lady. But let’s see what happens.”

“Yes. Let’s.”

Perhaps Miles signalled; Helen hadn’t seen it, but suddenly Pym and Jankowski, having spirited the discarded medals away to some safe haven, threw open the doors of the study and the party moved forward. Most of the furniture had been cleared out, as had several pictures, though a striking portrait of Count Piotr in late-middle-age still hung, thrown into prominence by isolation. A large screen stood on a low maplewood table with clean lines and rich colour, and much of the floorspace was covered by a huge, circular carpet in dark grey, edged and centrally decorated with the Vorbarra arms, that she had once seen in a private reception room of the Imperial Residence. The heavy, brocaded curtains were tied in exact symmetry, and slanting sun again fell to the rear of the room, away from the frame, backlighting them all. A faint smell of paint made her glance up, and she saw a ceiling freshly whitewashed, better to reflect light and pick out colours in their clothing. Along the walls standard-lamps, slim maplewood columns with opaque bowls, were already shining softly, interspersed with simple stands of Terran and red Barrayaran flowers. The effect combined austere severity with warm elegance. It was, she thought, the lesson of the clothing repeated. Miles obviously meant what he said about Cetagandans being aesthetes.

Fascinatingly, everyone, including herself, seemed to know what they were doing. She automatically took her place next to Georg as the party arrayed itself very differently from yesterday. Gregor and Laisa still held the centre, of course, behind the roundel of the great carpet, but on the far side were Aral, Cordelia, Miles, Ekaterin, and Chandler, while she and Georg stood outermost on the near side, with Alys, Illyan, Vorlynkin, and Allegre. Only Miles was standing askew from the sweeping crescent they formed across the circle of the carpet, to call briefly to Pym and Jankowski, who stood with a Vorbarra Armsman in the door. Pym bowed, Gregor nodded, and doors swung silently shut. It must be nearly the appointed time, but she had no chrono to consult. Nor, apparently, did Gregor, who was looking at Miles.

“My Lord Auditor?”

“Two minutes, Sire. There’s a chrono-display in the table under the frame. Dr Chandler?”
“Everything is ready, my Lord. Do you wish me to open the link as soon as the Cetagandans activate their frame?” Miles looked at Gregor.

“Please tell me immediately you know, Doctor, but await my command.”

“Yes, Sire.”

They waited together. Helen’s eyes at last found the chrono-display Miles had mentioned, a band of numbers below the stand of the frame. They sharpened as her pupils continued to adjust to the room’s subtle light. It was 16:29:08 here in Vorkosigan Surleau, 10:38:41 somewhere else—the Celestial Garden on Eta Ceta presumably. The Cetagandans must have an identical display, for at 10:39:33 (with part of her brain wondering what the Cetagandans made of such a precise time for a meeting) Chandler lifted his gaze from the remote control in his hand.

“Someone has activated the Cetagandan frame, Sire.”

Gregor glanced at him. “Thank you, Doctor. Deep breaths, everyone.” He took his own advice, then nodded fractionally to Miles, who walked forward several steps, and again, sharply, to Chandler, who swung to face the screen, stood straight, and presumably tapped a button. The hollow heart of the frame instantly filled with soft light, stronger at the edges because its centre was filled by a compact man in the blood-red dress uniform of the Cetagandan Imperial Guard. He wore insignia of a full general and was just drawing himself up straight. Benin. The ghem-general’s face gleamed with elaborate zebra stripes and red highlights, as at Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding, but close-to his eyes were a deep brown, alive with anticipation. The frame at the Cetagandan end must be considerably smaller than the one here, she realised. Benin’s voice was a vibrant baritone; he spoke in a descendant Terran language that had become a galactic lingua franca.

“Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. You come most carefully upon your hour.”

Miles smiled and bowed slightly, replying in the same tongue. “General Benin, we do.”

Benin’s eyes flicked around the Barrayaran party before returning to Miles with … was that appreciation?

“All is well?”

“Yes Dag, all is well. Our Imperial Masters are waiting.”

“So They are.”

With a look Helen thought ironic, Benin gave Miles a crisp salute. Miles returned it in kind, not with the strange, lazily eloquent movement he so often used, and Benin swung to one side, his curving arm allowing him to present a tableau. Years of observing fractious departmental meetings and political events coalesced in Helen’s mind and her vision expanded with the view in the frame. She saw the Cetagandan party reflected the Barrayarans almost as mirror-dancers should, symmetry completed by Miles ghosting back to his place in the Barrayaran crescent. The various opposite numberings Miles had listed formed a sweep of diagonals. The tall, dark-haired and hawk-nosed man in the Cetagandan centre could only be Fletchir Giaja; to his far side, where Benin took a place, His Imperial Majesty was flanked by three men, also in blood-red dress uniforms. Two had differing face-paints, one blue-and-yellow, the other an appalling orange-and-green rosette that glowed between white hair and a stiff tunic collar. Amid the uniforms, two places to Giaja’s left, stood a tall woman of impossible beauty whose red hair hung behind her to the floor, streaked with a deep silver Helen had never seen in a human being: the haut Lady d’Lhosh. Benin made a fifth on that side, beside a whipcord-lean man, also with a general’s insignia and showing the imperial black-and-white
design.

To Giaja’s right there were only four figures, or rather one and three force-bubbles tinted in lighter shades of the uniform blood-red and each occupying more space than would a standing person. Beyond them stood a tall, auburn-haired man who had to be the haut Raniton Degtiar, governor of Rho Ceta. Helen realised she could not begin to guess if he was nearer 40 or Giaja’s 84. Lady d’Lhosh might be anywhere in an even greater span. But Miles had plainly been correct in his analysis of the Cetagandan power they faced. On either side of Giaja haut and ghem ranged in their cohorts, only the tall figure of Lady d’Lhosh breaking that distribution. If the lady’s ghem-husband was the officer standing between her and Giaja, with vivid blue-and-yellow horizontal waves of face-paint, Helen saw with bursting delight that she towered over him by at least a foot; certainly more than Ekaterin did Miles. And Lhosh’s chest, like that of the other ghem-officers, bore only the gleaming ribbon of the Order of Merit, while the clothes of Giaja and Raniton inverted the Barrayaran female contour. Giaja was more splendid, in a loose body-suit under layers of overrobes that made a cloud of iridescent colours, Raniton a fainter echo in a smaller cloud, and neither bore any jewel or symbol of office. The room visible around them was despite the warm light a bare, infinitely subtle blue, devoid of visible vertices or ornament. So Alys and Ekaterin had also been superbly right.

In the narrow core of her vision Helen watched Gregor’s eyes meet Giaja’s for a long, tingling second before each emperor rapidly scanned the scene before him. As Giaja’s eyes passed across the Barrayarans she felt a razor-gaze of assessment and commitment to memory; it seemed to be slowed by Illyan, she thought, and more by the Vorkosigans. Celestial lips twitched, then firmed as Giaja registered Chandler. His gaze returned to Gregor, and Helen thought he would speak but as his mouth began to open she saw in his intense eyes a deeper perception of the cat’s-cradle symmetry the frames had revealed, and the aesthetics Alys and Ekaterin had wrought. He hesitated fractionally in appreciation.

Gregor spoke first, in highly formal Cetagandan.

“My Imperial Cousin, welcome. We are well met.”

Giaja’s eyes brightened and held Gregor’s again for what seemed an age but was only, she saw in the chrono-display, a few seconds, then spoke in the most beautiful baritone she had ever heard, and perfect Barrayaran.

“My Imperial Cousin, I believe we are. And not by moonlight.” What that meant Helen was unsure, but Miles had a smile on his face. Giaja’s eyes oddly went to one and another side, and Helen realised he was looking at the smaller frame he could see. “These are extraordinary devices, cousin Gregor. I offer my felicitations on your invention.” Giaja stayed in Barrayaran; so did Gregor, and the language was set.

“Thank you, cousin Fletchir.” Gregor stepped forward a few inches, symmetry magnifying his movement. “May I make known to you my wife, the Empress Laisa Toscane Vorbarra.”

It wasn’t a question and Giaja didn’t hesitate, stepping forward himself by the same fraction and inclining his head to Laisa in something more than a nod and less than a bow.

“My Imperial Cousine.”

Laisa too stepped forward, to Gregor’s side, and her dress shimmered in a faint but unmistakeable curtsey. “Celestial Lord.”

“My name is Fletchir. It would please me, cousine, were you to use it.”
Helen saw shock ripple around the circle these absolute monarchs and their delegations formed, thrumming in Barrayarans, ghem, and lone male haut alike. Only the force-bubbles of the unseen haut women and the face of Lady d’Lhosh showed nothing.

“It will be my honour, cousin Fletchir.”

“Good. My senior Empress is the haut Rian Degtiar.”

The bubble nearest Giaja winked out and the most astonishing woman Helen had ever seen rose from a float-chair to stand beside her husband. Rian Degtiar’s ebony hair was longer and fuller than Lady d’Lhosh’s, cascading behind her to trail on the floor. Her eyes were a glowing deep sapphire blue, her skin whiter than any Barrayaran’s. Lady d’Lhosh’s unearthly beauty was magnified in Degtiar as an intense power to amaze, and the back of Helen’s mind noted understanding of exactly what Ekaterin had meant, coating knowledge with renewed gratitude for the warnings and aesthetic protection her niece and Alys had provided. Beyond Degtiar other force bubbles also vanished to let occupants stand. The haut with blond hair and an ironic expression in her blue eyes standing next to the Empress must be Pel Navarr, the shorter woman beyond her with darker skin and tumbling black curls Palma Robine. They too were incomprehensibly beautiful; all wore dresses and gauzy over-robes in the same iridescent swirls as Giaja. Even as a woman Helen felt in the collective gaze of these three haut the power of attracting and compelling men that refined genetic engineering had harnessed and perfected over nearly a millennium. Vague memories of Terran legends floated in her mind, sea-women who lured ships to doom or ensorcelled voyagers to strange service, like the ugly Barrayaran witch Baba Yaga. How on Barrayar—or Eta Ceta—had Miles at the hormonal age of twenty-two survived meeting nine of these women in council? But he had—just as he had predicted this astonishing unmasking that had jaws of Barrayarans and ghem officers alike (with the solitary exception of Benin) literally dropping in shock. Degtiar’s voice was a warm alto very like Ekaterin’s, and as the Cetagandan Empress spoke Helen saw in the corner of her eye Cordelia became even stiller.

“Imperial Cousine Laisa.”

“Imperial Cousine Rian.”

The two looked at one another for the same eternal few seconds as had their husbands. Would both curtsey? Instead they exchanged slow, measured nods.

“My fellows are the haut Pel Navarr, planetary consort of Eta Ceta, and the haut Palma Robine, planetary consort of Rho Ceta.” The same measured nods were given and taken, though Pel’s look remained ironic. Then Giaja spoke again in his beautiful, intricately nuanced voice, addressing Gregor and Laisa.

“The haut Raniton Degtiar, governor of Rho Ceta, is known to you.”

“It is Our pleasure to see him again.”

The nods Gregor and Laisa gave Raniton were friendly acknowledgements as much as acts of honour. The bow he gave them was no obeisance, but it was a great deal fuller. The ghem-officers, Helen saw, had recovered their painted jaws and their eyes intently registered the relative flow of deference the Barrayarans had achieved. None appeared to have the slightest difficulty following Barrayaran. How many of our senior command speak Cetagandan? She hadn’t known Gregor did.

Giaja swung to the other side, naming Lady d’Lhosh and the ghem-officers. Helen stored away pleasure at identifications confirmed—short with blue-and-yellow waves was Admiral Lhosh; taller but quite as bulky as her Georg, with the appalling orange-and-green rosette, was Artificer General
Kariam; whipcord-lean sharing Benin’s imperial zebra-stripes with red accents was his deputy, General Coram. All gave respectful bows; all received imperial declinations of heads that plainly were acts of honour; all acquired thoughtful looks. Then Gregor began.

“Our Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar, Count Aral and Countess Cordelia Vorkosigan.”

Viceroy and Vicereine gave a respectful bow and curtsey. When both straightened they met Giaja’s gaze, and after a moment he inclined his own head almost as deeply as he had to Laisa. Lhosh, Coram, and Benin simultaneously gave deep bows, and Raniton waved a hand slightly, giving in turn a friendly nod of acknowledgement. The proximity of Sergyar and Rho Ceta and the volume of trade using that route between empires meant he and the Vorkosigans must have some contact, Helen deduced, and the three would have met at Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding.


“Celestial Lord.” Aral and Cordelia replied in unison.

Giaja’s eyebrows quirked slightly. “Cousin Gregor. I am not given to covetousness, but if there is one feudatory I envy you it is your Viceroy here. Your names, and if my ghem-Staff are not mistaken, your joint strategies, Lord Viceroy, Lady Vicereine, have occasioned me much thought during the last forty years.”

Without looking away from Giaja Aral reached for Cordelia’s hand, not ostentatiously but linking fingers with her. How he made his rasp so respectful Helen had no idea.

“Your most noble father, Celestial Lord, willed my wife and I a lifetime of work. If it has helped us all to this moment, I must think it well done.”

Had the faces of the haut women flickered with interest? Giaja’s was unreadable.

“Your son, I think, has been a tower of strength to you.”

Somehow the ironised cruelty the remark ought to carry was missing, and Aral’s reply was straightforward, merely prefacing Laisa’s calm voice. “He has.”

“Lord Auditor Vorkosigan is known to you both, cousins, but allow me to present his wife, Lady Ekaterin Nile Vorvayne Vorsoisson Vorkosigan.”

Miles and Ekaterin gave the same deep respects as Viceroy and Vicereine. Giaja and Degtiar were still as stone. Then voices flowed in harmony and sequence.

“Lord Vorkosigan. Your small weight has not sunk you yet, I see. And we do meet again, as improbably as before. Lady Vorkosigan, you have Our warmest regard. Was the Golden Imperial Star on your breast awarded on your wedding-day?” For her life Helen could not have said with certainty who had spoken what. Miles was gazing up at the frame with a pained look and a current of amusement sprang up among the Barrayarans, Benin, and haut Pel as they digested the question.

“Indeed not, Your Imperial Majesties. It was bestowed on me only this morning.” Ekaterin’s voice was as warm and friendly to a strange Emperor as earlier to the one who had lately become her brother.

“How curious.”

“And why was that, brave lady?” Degtiar’s voice really was like Ekaterin’s. Miles’s eyes were shining.
“Oh, a domestic matter, last year. But really, I think, to bolster me against Your Celestial regards.”

Degtiar smiled, dazzlingly, at Ekaterin, then Miles. “I am happy for you, Lord Auditor. We have followed your career, as General Benin pieced it together for Us, with grave interest.”

Miles managed to glow at them both respectfully, his eyes now guarded. “As I am happy Your Most Imperial and Celestial Majesty has so refined a taste in irony, and Your Handmaiden such vision.”

Miles bowed again, while two doubtless Most Imperial but presently less than Celestial haut gazes slithered over his back and rose to meet Gregor’s, Aral’s, Cordelia’s, and Ekaterin’s neutral faces and twinkling eyes. Gregor’s familiar voice was sounding more exquisite by the minute.

“How do you envy me this feudatory, cousin? I cannot claim your years but I assure you he has been occasioning me thought since I was five, and he unborn.”

The haut were still sufficiently human to have to suppress snorts of laughter, if with great elegance. Swiftly Gregor named the Barrayarans, each feeling in turn, Helen was sure, as she did while she curtsied, the weight of a quadruple imperial gaze. Again, only Illyan seemed to make Giaja linger; the ghem-officers also peered stiffly at the legendary former ImpSec chief. Then Gregor turned to Chandler.

“And this, cousins, is Dr Jack Chandler, until recently of Terra but now among my subjects, who is responsible for our present means of communication.” Chandler bowed respectfully but received no nods.

“Indeed. Your ingenuity can hardly be faulted, Terran. Artificer General Kariam has been eloquent in your praise. But General Benin wonders how a sample of your technology should so strangely appear in Our empire.” Those exquisite baritone nuances had as many edges as angles, but Chandler only stood straighter and offered a level gaze.

“Your Celestial Majesties. My first submission, of course, must be an apology. I have violated three subsections of your most august arrangements for the convenience of visitors to Eta Ceta. But I must beg your grace, for my choice was between so offending against Your Majesties and offending against my Majesties.” He bowed again. Face-paint made it hard to tell but Helen thought Lhosh, Coram, and Benin looked abruptly more thoughtful still; with the haut she could not tell. Giaja’s gaze went to Gregor’s.

“Of the feudatory.” Nor was this a question.

“His hands are between mine.” There was a pause. Giaja’s eyes went once to Degtiar’s as both turned their heads, but then held Gregor’s.

“Is it well, cousin Fletchir? Cousine Rian?” Laisa voice was as warm as Ekaterin’s had been,

“It is.” Again Helen found herself believing both Cetagandans had spoken, which seemed improbable, but whoever had it triggered relaxation around the full circle, Barrayarans, haut, and ghem. Chandler also relaxed, though remaining straight as Gregor again seized a moment.

“Cousins, it may be that many of Our subjects have infringed Our rules. Events have been so regrettably complex.” The imperial plurals floated beautifully, Helen realised, between a Barrayaran mea culpa and the shared understanding of emperors that even the most loyal subjects were of course sadly prone to misjudgement and mercy was an imperial prerogative. Giaja’s wintry smile and slight opening of one hand invited him to continue. “And once, cousin Fletchir, you saw fit to declare the merit of one small offender. It is a judgement I laud, for I have myself more recently seen fit to give
him a gold chain."

Degtiar’s pale mouth firmed slightly, as if resisting a twitch. Giaja’s smile remained. “Indeed, cousin Gregor. Your Auditorial system is always of interest to Us, and never more so than with that appointment.”

“It has its uses, cousin. Perhaps with these frames we might discuss such things privately sometime. But we are met now to discuss all that may make that possible. Lord Vorkosigan has brought us together here in timely fashion. Will you hear what he suggests?"

Giaja’s eyes turned to Degtiar for a humming moment, and to Helen’s surprise she spoke first in reply. “We will be pleased to hear Lord Vorkosigan, cousin Gregor. But perhaps we might first hear something from Dr Chandler, and Lord Auditor Vorthys, of what exactly frames are.”

“Also, cousin, of the material technologies We are told will follow the frames.” Giaja’s addition was not a request.

“By all means, cousins. Dr Chandler?”

Clearly and efficiently Chandler gave a minimal account of his hypothesis: the matrix, the nature of frames, the possibility of direct manipulation of matter with the logistical limits that would remain. He was heard in silence. When he was done Giaja stood very still, staring at him.

“Artificer General Kariam was right, I see, Dr Chandler. Frames are a most potent demonstration of your hypothesis. From what you have said, however, there is as yet no proof of the other, material possibilities?”

“There is not, Celestial Lord. To obtain such proof requires resources I have never had, on a scale that cannot be concealed. I have, however, provided Lord Auditor Vorthys with some pages of mathematics that constitute the matter to be proven.”

“Ah.” Giaja’s eyes flicked to Gregor, then swung to Georg. “Lord Auditor Vorthys?” Directed more nearly at one in person that baritone was truly remarkable; Helen’s ears rang with it. Beside her, Georg gave Giaja and Degtiar another deep bow.

“Your Celestial Majesties. As a scientist I cannot be certain, for no practical testing has been done. But the mathematical excerpts with which Dr Chandler supplied me are beyond question original, very deeply coherent in ways I perceive but cannot easily express in words, and support what he has said.” Georg’s eyes flicked to Gregor’s to receive silent assent, before returning to Giaja. “My Imperial Master is pleased I should make these pages available to you. Perhaps I might liaise with ghem-Artificer General Kariam?”

Giaja nodded. “You may, Lord Auditor.” To his right the orange-and-green rosetted face of Kariam moved forward. The Artificer General bowed to his emperor, then to her Georg; his voice was a bass rumble.

“I shall look forward to receiving them, Lord Auditor Vorthys, and to speaking with you. Your work is of great interest to me.”

“And yours to me, General Kariam.” Smiles did look odd under face-paint, Helen thought, and that rosette seemed to favour no expressions at all; even the slight frown that came to Kariam’s face as he turned to Giaja caused strange writhings among clashing colours while he spoke.

“Though I must confess, Sire, I do not quite see how I shall do as you command. We need more frames before we can proceed.”
“If I may, Celestial Lord?” The voice was Miles’s. Giaja’s eyebrows quirked above suddenly amused eyes and a very imperial nose.

“For you to ask permission to interrupt Us at this stage seems redundant, Lord Vorkosigan. You have anticipated this difficulty also?”

Miles gave no indication of rising to Giaja’s bait, though Helen saw Gregor’s lips twitch and Ekaterin offer an open smile taking in Miles and the Cetagandans. “A courier vessel with ten frames aboard will be able, with your permission, Celestial Lord, to enter Eta Cetan space tonight. This will provide links for Your Imperial Majesties, the Star Crèche, and each of these distinguished ghem-officers with their opposite numbers on Barrayar. And once links are established, though nothing material may be passed, laser-keys will allow transfer of data-files in any format.”

At the mention of the Star Crèche Giaja’s face froze, and it was not clear from Miles’s list, Helen realised, to whom he supposed that innermost Cetagandan cabinet might correspond. If Gregor and Giaja were to have a direct link, with whom would the Star Crèche be talking? Pel’s nominal correspondent was Lady Alys, and that, Helen realised, was the one link that cut across all the other diagonals of the mutual symmetry. 

Fascinating. Did Miles plan this too? The faces of Benin, Coram, Illyan, and Allegre were also still, perhaps at the idea of transferring data-files by frame—which was, she appreciated, a thought for a security man to ponder. But Degtiar laid one slim hand lightly on her husband’s arm, and after a moment he spoke again.

“Indeed, Lord Vorkosigan. Under the strange circumstances I must admire your commitment to our rapid progress in ... amity. Give General Benin details of this courier.” He turned to Kariam. “Are you answered, Artificer General?”

There must be more to this than the obvious, Helen thought, as Kariam looked as judicious as a man might with wrinkled orange-and-green circles covering his face. “I am, Sire.” He shrugged, massively. “As you have said, frames are a most persuasive argument.” Kariam bowed again, and stepped back into position between Lady d’Lhosh and General Coram. Giaja swung back to Gregor.

“Then let Us hear what Lord Vorkosigan proposes for Us, cousin, as you request.” The baritone found new depths of irony as Giaja employed imperial plurals himself. A thread of tension tightened Cetagandan and Barrayaran semi-circles as Miles cleared his throat.

“Your Imperial and Celestial Majesties. Honoured haut. Honourable ghem.” His hand sketched bows of precise declination. “I make no apology for mentioning, once, the unfortunate entanglements of Your Majesties’ imperia. The Nexus knows that for ninety-one years Barrayrans and Cetagandans have dealt in pain and grief. For each enmity has had rewards, in their season, but will any here say I lie when I declare we meet today not merely on Dr Chandler’s occasion but because our mutual losses, occasional and cumulative, have so long outweighed those rewards we would all forge something better, if we might?” No-one spoke. Giaja waved a hand, permissively. “Then my Imperial Master’s command to find a way forward is as congenial to us all as it was to me.”

The silence was briefly an absolute stillness, Barrayaran as much as Cetagandan. Had Gregor commanded this? Helen realised she had assumed, as so easily with Miles, that he was pulling the rabbits—make that dragons—out of the hat; but to whom would he have gone first with Chandler’s bombshell? It required finessing Allegre and Vorlynkin, and this weekend reeked of unseen imperial efficiency as much as Vorkosigan derring-do. Then she saw painted faces nodding and as Degtiar drew breath a faint smile appear on Pel Navarr’s slim face.

“You are remembered here with some admiration, Lord Vorkosigan, for your forward ways. I hope they can serve Us as well again.”
Miles bowed deeply, giving himself a chance, Helen imagined, to regain composure. The Cetagandans were straight-faced, though there was renewed astonishment in all ghem-eyes save Benin’s and a glint in the looks of Navarr and Robine. Strangled sounds came from several Barrayarans and, Helen thought with amusement, one Betan. Her niece tried valiantly to suppress it but gurgled briefly with laughter. At the sound both Giaja’s and Degtiar’s eyes lit with true amusement and tension palpably eased around the circle as Miles straightened. His voice was rueful.

“Your Majesty, I have been called many things, some by Your Celestial Self, but I can learn. Let me then heed my wife’s lesson.” He opened hands and arms. “The Imperia have peace. We would all have more of it. Dr Chandler’s hypothesis endangers it. We would have a solution. And to work, any solution must”—he began the familiar count on his fingers—“please all Your Most Imperial cousinages”—four imperial mouths and Illyan’s twitched as Miles blatantly pronounced his strange coinage—“be acceptable to the muscles and sinews of Your Majesties’ imperia”—painted ghem-faces and unpainted Barrayaran ones above dress red-and-blues nodded in time with imperial heads—“and offer no gross provocation to the nerves of any of Your Majesties’ subjects.” More heads joined the dance, including Georg’s and, she realised after a moment, her own. “In short, it must be fair and be seen to be fair. Now …” Miles took a moment to gaze around the circle of his intent listeners. “These first fruits of Dr Chandler’s hypothesis set us all by the ears. Who knows what may come next? And uncertainty, like pain, will follow the path of least resistance. But may I ask us all to consider what realtime communication and the ability to manufacture anything from anything will do to the viability of galactic real estate?”

Miles had acquired Chandler’s remote control and with his last words the Nexus model, smaller than before, appeared before them. There was also a projection at the Cetagandan end, a glowing bolus of starfields centred neatly within their semicircle, and an academic fragment of Helen’s brain made a note to ask Miles what assumptions about scales and distances he had made in calculating that distant yet immediately visible projection. The effect would work both ways, she realised—Barrayarans and Cetagandans alike could see each party saw exactly the same thing—and was itself a twinned symbol of unity.

Imperial planets and the snaky tubes of wormhole links began to glow, and Miles ran through the scheme of equal division and a joint fleet as he had yesterday. No surprises or unscheduled additions there, Helen thought, though in speaking of fairness he gave exact numbers of systems as they glowed into visibility. Colours had also been refined, losing the firework qualities that appealed to Barrayarans and acquiring subtler washes of shade and intensity; pride in her niece thrilled her. The final image, of balanced Barrayaran and Cetagandan imperia pressed against one another with thin grey sheets of the proposed neutral zone winding between, had also, she decided, been subtly enhanced to resemble bicameral human brains, without there being anything one could point to as distorted.

“Your Majesties. It is You who will be this space, these volumes, and You must do as You will. For the rest of us let me say there are room and resources for all; so much space will absorb ever so much energy, and on the bridge of a ship entering unexplored space one may learn just as well as in combat to appreciate and trust a stranger.”

After a moment Giaja and Degtiar both looked at Gregor, who looked back, clearly inviting them to respond. Celestial lips were straight and firm. “Lord Vorkosigan. How surprisingly … sensible a set of suggestions. I am almost disappointed. But I certainly hear in your notions a pleasant beginning in common sense.” He turned. “Admiral Lhosh, do you find this something you might in principle approve with honour?”

The short Lhosh stepped forward and bowed. “I think so, Sire. With Your permission I say plainly to all our firm policy for eleven years has been to avoid conflict with the Barrayaran Imperium, and
though we do not believe they have entirely avoided conflict with us, we neither desire nor intend to provoke future hostilities.” He shrugged. “This plan seems eminently fair, and Your Celestial Majesty knows it answers to core needs.” A slighter shrug and a pause. “The ghem will accept this, Sire, though like Your Celestial Self they will find it … a tame ending.”

“Thank you, Admiral” Giaja’s eyes went to Raniton Degtiar, and the man stepped forward a fraction, inclining his head to Lhosh.

“Admiral, you speak most rationally, for the rational ghem. What of those with more … emotional approaches to the arts of living?”

Lhosh gave a third shrug, the least yet, merely rippling his shoulders. “Lord Governor, they may yet learn wisdom. And few such now hold any true power.”

Plainly this exchange was staged, and Helen began to wonder just how much Miles had really communicated to Benin in advance. No-one had mentioned any formal Cetagandan agenda for this meeting but this resembled one. And the light the exchange must have started in Vorlynkin’s and Allegre’s eyes had started in her own. The ghem would deal. The mirror-dance symmetry of Miles’s negotiation held true for ghem, not haut, were the twins of the Vor—military, feudal, sexist, and honour-bound in the strangest ways—and they, like Vor, seemed to possess that military willingness to make friends of enemies as readily as enemies of friends. But resolution must lie with the haut and many issues had yet to be breached. Miles coughed softly and Giaja’s head snapped round.

“I find it hard even now to believe, Lord Vorkosigan, that you can audit this matter for me or ghem-Admiral Lhosh.”

“Of course not, Celestial Lord. But earlier today I heard an audit of our equivalent matter I believe You may wish to consider.”

Giaja’s face was still but after a second Degtiar spoke. “How thoughtful, Lord Auditor.”

Who was playing whom here? Miles bowed to both Cetagandans, and looked at Vorlynkin, who with almost comical disbelief—generated, Helen imagined, by finding Miles’s prediction that his morning recording might be needed coming so swiftly true—bowed, took a pace forward and produced a tiny recorder from his pocket.

“Please understand, Your Imperial Majesties, this was an impromptu event, this morning our time, in a village near this location. The voices You will hear, besides that of my Imperial Master, are those of two forty-year veterans of His forces—Captain Penderecki, late of my Imperial Master’s Security service, and Regimental Sergeant Barnev, late of His Imperial Rangers. They speak standard Barrayaran with something of a hill accent.”

Giaja waved a hand. “That should cause Us no problems, Admiral Vorlynkin. Let Us hear these men.”

He had switched entirely from irritation to interest, which suggested he believed Vorlynkin—who had spoken nothing but truth, though not, Helen thought, truth in which a suspicious sometime enemy might easily believe. It was clever of Miles to use Vorlynkin rather than producing the recording himself, but the real implication, she saw with curling alarm and fascination, was that for all his clear impatience with Miles’s impertinent disregard of propriety, Giaja trusted the little lord to be more than pertinent in matters of substance; even internal Cetagandan ones. Despite its size the recorder’s playback was loud and crystal clear.

Sire. You asked a precise question—would we now be willing to make a proper peace with the
Cetagandans, and to accept them as our allies and partners. Penderecki’s voice gave his reply to Gregor and was followed by Barnev’s moving story. As the recording played Helen was glad of the chance mentally to catch her breath. Penderecki’s soldierly preference for Cetagandan rather than Polian or Aslunder allies produced smiles from Lhosh and Coram, while as Barnev spoke all ghem, including Benin, grew intent; so did Giaja. Allegre and Illyan, like Vorlynkin and Aral, seemed to be studying all the painted ghem faces, as she had just been. Alya, Ekaterin, and Cordelia were exchanging long, slowly warming looks with the haut women. Miles, so far as she could tell, had one eye on each gender group. Beside her Georg seemed to be watching Kariam, but she bet most of his head was still tugging at Chandler’s disturbing maths. Chandler himself had not of course heard the story before and was as intent as the ghem. She wondered if his ear for Barrayaran in a Dendarii accent was as good as all the Cetagandans seemed to be.

That’s all, Sire. Except to say that I hope you and my Lord Count think I did right.

I do, Sergeant Barnev. Very right. And I’m sure Count Vorkosigan does too.

A deed of virtue, sergeant. I shall remember it. With Aral’s unmistakeable voice, rumbling reassurance for Barnev, Vorlynkin stopped playback, and bowed again, first to Giaja and Degtiar, then the ghem-officers. Her own head nodded in their direction, and she realised the whole Barrayaran party had managed to convey collective, ritual regret, not for Cetagandan deaths as such—they came here!—but for unhappy inheritances with which misfortunes of war might burden descendants of the brave. There was a long silence Gregor eventually broke, speaking in intimate mode to Giaja.

“Cousin, whatever else we may decide here today, perhaps we can agree now that some consular work is overdue.” He held Giaja’s eyes for a moment and something passed between them. Gregor nodded and turned. “Admiral Lhosh, you will find visa applications by Cetagandans wishing to make pilgrimages of ancestral grace are looked upon by My officials swiftly and kindly. Lord Auditor Vorkosigan will make arrangements in the Count-his-father’s District.” Lhosh bowed deeply. Gregor’s gaze went to Benin. “We are happy to trust General Benin to ensure none take improper advantage of the ancestral debt all owe.”

“Just so, cousin Gregor.” Giaja was also looking at Benin, who looked back, then at Gregor, and bowed.

“I gratefully acknowledge your directives, Your Imperial Majesty. And I will obey Your command, Sire.”

Helen could see why Miles liked Benin; the man was an artist with protocol. Gregor had meant seriously his trust in Giaja’s head of security, as Benin meant his declaration of obedience to be beyond countermand. Lhosh and Coram stepped forward as Giaja smiled invitation at them.

“Admiral Lhosh?”

“I wished, Sire, to express my own thanks to His Imperial Majesty.” He looked directly at Gregor and instead of bowing saluted, very crisply, for a measured second. So did Coram, in unison. “There are not a large number of such cases, sir. The forty officers mentioned by Colonel Lasedi to Sergeant Barnev represent the majority. But the issue has been very deeply felt, and Your Imperial Majesty’s … grace will be honoured by the ghem.” Fascinated by Lhosh’s solitary ‘sir’, which managed to introduce flexibility without losing respect, Helen also noted his immediate identification of the ghem-officer who had spoken to Barnev. Coram also addressed Gregor, but as he spoke nodded to Aral and Cordelia, then Miles and Ekaterin.

“Your Imperial Majesty, Lord Viceroy, Lady Vicereine, Lord and Lady Vorkosigan. With the
permission of General Benin and my Imperial Master I shall be an early pilgrim myself. It is my good fortune that my grandfather’s body was recovered after his battledeath on Barrayar—in what surviving reports call an ambush in a deep gorge of the Dendarii.” He gave a little shrug. “I cannot be certain, but I believe the ghem-Colonel to whom Sergeant Barnev referred as respected by Count Piotr Vorkosigan to be my grandfather. I will honour his deathplace, if I may.”

_Oh my_. Had Miles known? How could he? Perhaps the gods were favouring him today. Coram’s eyes were focused behind her and Helen remembered the lone portrait Alys had left hanging in view. Not gods, then, only Vorkosigans and perhaps Benin. The ghem, she thought with sharp professional interest, would favour military biography themselves. What might _Cetagandan_ archives offer a biographer of Count Piotr?

After a moment Aral spoke. “When you do, General Coram, you may of course have other duties. But if they permit, you will be welcome at my house in Vorkosigan Surleau. It is near the gorge, and the Count-my-father is buried there.”

With something like wonder in their eyes Coram and Lhosh saluted again and withdrew. Benin, she saw, had an air of sardonic admiration and Giaja seemed less than amused to see such senior military hearts-and-minds so deftly tickled. Not for a second did she doubt Aral’s sincerity, but it seemed his second nature to play symphonies on heart-strings. With exquisite timing Miles coughed again, even more gently. In narrowed preoccupation with Aral Giaja’s head almost snapped round, but he caught himself and turned with controlled grace, a single movement bringing eyes onto Miles and fractionally cocking one eyebrow.

“Lord Auditor?”

“_I do so hate to disappoint, Celestial Lord. And there is one more element to this equitable plan._” His hand gestured at the Barrayaran model of the Nexus.

“_One more, Lord Vorkosigan?”_ Degtiar’s voice was pleasantly pitched but steel rang in it.

“I meant so far as matters of _empire_ go, Handmaiden, though one thing leads to another.” The stress and qualifying cliché clearly mollified Degtiar, and in both models Jackson’s Whole began to brighten and pulse in that horrible yellow. “For if Your Imperial and Celestial Majesties would indeed have a joint fleet to supplement Your control of these volumes, it must have a headquarters _somewhere_. And there are serious disadvantages for us all to using either Sergyar or Rho Ceta.”

Giaja gave what sounded like a genuine laugh, ironies and nuance rolling together in an impossibly rich, corniced sound. “Now _that_ is more your stamp, Lord Vorkosigan. You propose We conquer Jackson’s Whole as a convenient headquarters.” He shook his head. “And why exactly should We wish to do that, _Lord Auditor_, besides gratifying what are doubtless hard feelings on your part towards certain Jacksonians?”

“Why _not_ do it, Celestial Lord?” Giaja smiled impatiently at this, but as he opened his mouth to speak Miles went on—not actually interrupting but cutting it fine. “After all, what _has_ stopped you these many years?” And just as yesterday with the Barrayans, indignation with trifling absurdity was suddenly replaced by cold re-assessment. “I cannot believe _either_ of Your Celestial Majesties has ever willingly tolerated Jacksonian political and genetic practice.” Miles paused, seeming to _allow_ Giaja and Degtiar a moment to look at each other and mesh mental calculations. “Any more than my Imperial Master and we of Barrayar have _willingly_ shown restraint. But beyond satisfactions of righteousness, Jackson’s Whole is best placed, given frame-technology, to serve as Your Majesties’ joint fleet’s main administrative base. There will, of course, be issues arising from Your joint fleet’s management of galactic access to the new volumes, and the position of Jackson’s Whole makes it well-suited to receive embassies to Your Majesties that bear upon the new volumes and
technologies.”

All the Cetagandans were intent, including, Helen thought, the haut women; certainly Pel seemed to have lost her irony. Giaja’s hands moved ambivalently, and he glanced at Gregor with a trace of surprise. “Yet again, Lord Vorkosigan, you strangely make sense. But … while Our ghem-commanders might welcome such a plan We do not believe We presently wish so to test and expend them.” He actually grimaced. “Street-fighting is exceptionally messy, as they found on Marilac.”

Miles’s smile blazed. “It is, Celestial Lord. Tedious, also. But may I remind You Dr Chandler’s frames transmit all waveform energy, including stasis-fields and tractor-beams. And that a small, thereby most potent frame may easily be borne in a small force-bubble. Like other things this remains to be scientifically proven, but I believe the nature of planetary annexation has, for Your Imperial and Celestial Majesties, changed somewhat. It would be fitting, surely, to give old ways a graceful as well as bloodless swansong.”

The lengthy silence was broken when Pel, eyes dancing as if she was swallowing peals of laughter, caught Giaja’s eye and with a slight frown was nodded to speak. “Your Majesty will recall Lord Vorkosigan once witnessed the capacities of a float-chair at … greater altitudes. Artificer General Kariam can confirm, I believe, he is correct to suppose frames might safely be dropped from orbit in force-bubbles. And if both stasis-fields and tractor-beams can indeed be … extended by frame from orbit to ground”—her beautiful voice became laced with a poisonous dislike that made Helen shudder—“the Jacksonian barons might be most satisfactorily taught proper humility.”

Giaja’s face was very still. Degtiar’s slim hand again rested on his arm. Why Pel should speak to a technical matter Helen couldn’t imagine, but no Cetagandan seemed surprised by it, nor the evident severity of the Star Crèche’s view of Jacksonians. Then the Cetagandan emperor turned to Lhosh and the other ghem, ferally agog at Miles’s first suggestion of planetary annexation but now looking more confused than anything else. Only Benin’s face, again, remained calmly thoughtful. The whole Barrayaran semi-circle, Helen thought, was holding its breath as Miles played out his strategy for Cetaganda in close echo of his previous strategy for his own side. And it was looking more and more as if there really might be only one side, after all.

“Admiral Lhosh.” How many layers of irony could that baritone manage? “I doubt it was quite what you had in mind, but would you care, for Our convenience and that of my Imperial cousins, bloodlessly to annex the planet of Jackson’s Whole with a force of … bubbles?”

Beneath his wavy blue-and-yellow paint Lhosh’s face was a very different kind of picture. “P-p-personally—” That had not, Helen thought, been a question, but Miles seamlessly took it as one.

“Actually, Admiral, I had in mind a joint-force, of course. Many hands make light work.”

Lhosh glared at him. “Under whose command?” Miles received no polite ‘Lord Auditor’ this time.

“Under all the circumstances, Admiral, I wondered if you and Your Imperial Master”—he turned to Giaja—“might be content with Viceroy Count Vorkosigan as the Barrayaran nominee for co-command.”

Eyes swung to Aral, who bowed to Giaja. “Celestial Lord, with my Imperial Master’s consent it would be my honour to be so nominated.”

Lhosh subsided into frowning thought but Coram looked positive and Benin wore a faint smile. As a security rather than field officer he perhaps had no great love for the belligerence of some fellow-ghem, and was ironically appreciative—make that hilariously appreciative, Helen thought, as she caught better sight of his eyes—of a plan that obligated them to wholly peaceful and no doubt
colourful conquest under the command of an Admiral who had beaten them hands down at every belligerent encounter. She appreciated it herself; her nephew-in-law was nothing if not inventive. And suddenly, seemingly, it was a done deal. Giaja clapped, and every Cetagandan became sharply upright, the ghem-officers at attention.

“Very well. We have one half of a most curious but workable design. It suffices for my appraisal of the concerns of Empire in the matter of this new technology. We must now turn to the concerns of haut. Ghem-General Benin, please escort your fellow officers and the hauts Lady d’Lhosh and my Lord Governor to the antechamber until I recall you.”

Miles was suddenly as tensed as a bearing cable. Helen went numb with surprise as all the ghem-officers and Raniton bowed to Giaja; Lady d’Lhosh curtsied, and all filed out of sight through a doorway that appeared to one side of her view. The tall haut woman had not said a word since her murmured submission to Gregor and Laisa, but as she walked silently past the other haut a look between her and Pel suggested information was and would be exchanged. All the Barrayarans except Miles, Gregor, and Ekaterin looked shaken, uncertain what was happening; even Aral and Cordelia seemed taken aback.

As the door closed behind Benin Helen saw to her amazement that both Pel and Palma Robine were moving swiftly and without invitation to Giaja’s side. Both had looked with interest at the Barrayarans throughout; now rigid deference to imperial protocols vanished and faces snapped from beneath icy reserves, as Degtiar’s and—oh my—Giaja’s had also done. All haut faces were suddenly mobile, flickering with traces of amusement and revealing burdens of concern. She felt shock hit everyone in the Barrayaran party as it hit her, even Gregor and Miles, though both had plainly known what was coming, and Miles at least must have experienced this before. Allegre’s and Vorlynkin’s faces were momentarily as glassy as the hauts’ had been; Illyan’s eyes narrowed; Chandler gaped. Alys and Ekaterin showed the common surprise but their eyes were gleaming and Helen heard Cordelia draw contented breath, as of fresh air. Behind his back Miles’s hand twitched fiercely at Gregor.

“Would my Celestial Cousins wish any of us to withdraw also?”

Fear of sudden exclusion from this amazing scene had barely time to flower in Helen before Degtiar spoke, her alto voice still warm but far crisper. “There is no need, cousin. We trust your people to say nothing.”

“You have my name’s word on it, cousine, and theirs.”

“Good. Lord Vorkosigan.”

“Ma’am.” Miles’s voice was silken.

“You have played for the ghem. Well and good. We are content with an imperial peace and ending the vulgarity of Jackson’s Whole is a bonus. But you mentioned the Star Crèche, and that is no business of yours.”

Vulgarity?

“Of course not, Ma’am. In the sense you mean.”

“In any sense, Barrayaran.” Robine’s voice was higher than Degtiar’s but carried the same steel. Perhaps she was as Miles remembered, usually vivacious, with her tumbling curls; now she only looked incensed.
Miles sighed. “Haut Palma, do you believe the Star Cèche wields power in the Nexus? Or only in the Celestial Garden?” The question seemed to arrest all three women and Giaja. “Because if it wields power in the Nexus, while it may remain hidden to all outside, it is our business here. I do not believe these new technologies directly affect the work of the Star Cèche at all, but indirectly they will swirl about everything. My Imperial Master requires some certitude that such indirect effects will be controlled.”

After a moment Degtiar inclined her head a fraction. “Go on.”

Instead Miles stepped aside a pace as Gregor came forward. “I am happy, cousins, ladies, to give you all my Word as Vorbarra that Barrayar recognises and accepts its utter exclusion from the inviolable secrecy of the Star Cèche. Lord Vorkosigan told us yesterday we would be fools to suppose, even after long and happy alliance, that the Star Cèche would reveal anything it did not choose to reveal. We have proceeded wholly in that belief, and as you trust our secrecy we trust your restraint.”

He stepped back, leaving the floor to Miles. Giaja’s eyebrows rose but he nodded. No-one mentioned bio-weapons. Degtiar smiled, equally briefly, before looking again at Miles. Her slim fingers were still tense. “That is all very well, but even if it is somehow your business, Lord Vorkosigan, what is our business here?”

“How surprising.” Perhaps it wasn’t so much how many layers of irony Giaja managed, but the weight of each layer there was. It occurred to Helen that this was like the way her own dress worked. Miles went on.

“I speak now not of what my Imperial Master desires, but again of what others will ask. A great alliance is formed and amity declared. Upon what is it founded? Equality of space. Fine. Fleet matches fleet. Fine. With the tractor-bubbles, if we get it right, we can also show the Nexus that as Barrayar brings to our partnership frames, so Cetaganda brings force-field technology—and the result is a weapon of most exquisitely bloodless precision and imperial mercy. Yes?”

Pel had apparently recovered her irony with a renewed vision of the coloured bubbles that might rain so potently down on the Jacksonian stew. She seemed in a strange way on Miles’s side, to Helen’s eye far more so than Degtiar, whom Miles had not seen for a decade; Pel had, after all, shown herself
at Gregor’s wedding only to Ekaterin and Miles.

“I think we follow your analysis so far, Miles. We might even accept it, for now.” As Pel spoke the bare name Palma glanced at her in evident surprise, but Giaja merely nodded, intent on substance, while Degtiar smiled fractionally.

“And what should Barrayar also bring to the party matter technology?” All four haut stared at him. “What greater precision and mercy may we then hope to blend in our nanoforges?”

There was a long silence, eventually broken by Degtiar. “And what do you suggest, Lord Vorkosigan?”

Again Miles stood back further, though his feet did not move. It was, Helen thought, an ability he must have learned because he had to look up at everyone, even Nikki these days, though he looked up to very few people, almost all present company. And Degtiar was among them.

“We of Barrayar cannot share the wisdom of the haut, nor their perfection. Nor, surely, their destiny. Nor their height. And we are content. But more than we would share, if we might, a little of their age and health. With the greatest respect to him and my Lady mother”—Miles somehow twisted in air and bowed to his stiff and listening parents—“the Count-my-father is, to the best of my understanding, only seven years younger than you, Celestial Lord.”

Helen saw no eyes move but knew everyone was abruptly aware of the contrast. Giaja at eighty-four was still entirely dark-haired, hawk-face unlined, body slim and effortlessly upright. Aral, at seventy-seven, was old—white-haired, stocky, and, like Helen herself, on his second heart, his heavy face deeply lined; the scar on his jaw was more plainly visible than it had been when he was Lord Regent.

“Which is, forgive me, where profit comes in, of more than one kind. It would, for example, be symbolically unfortunate for us all if the co-commander of the fleet at Jackson’s Whole were to suffer any medical incapacity. And if you all agree there will soon be one hell of a hole in the galactic market in longevity, plug it.” Miles studied his fingernails. Helen, shocked at his idiom, knew of no ruler who did not like the sound of treasuries filling; they emptied fast enough. “Barrayar expects a major income-stream to develop from the frame and materials technologies. It will pay our share of the joint-fleet, and more. The real profit with nanoforges, though, will of course lie in designs for what they make, and if those are in effect atom-by-atom assembly instructions for a product reverse engineering processes of design will be impossible.”

Of course. Helen could have kicked herself. The point wasn’t only Cetagandan profit, but preservation of their present, massive financial advantage against potentially extremely rapid erosion. More dimly she glimpsed the other critical implication Miles was making, that releasing designs for genetic or medical material, the product of secret bioscience and high art, need not break secrecy or compromise art. They were points Giaja and the women had clearly taken; it would require a holovid recording to track the glances flickering between them. The haut Palma Robine broke the silence.

“Let us be clear, Lord Vorkosigan. You suggest a package of human geriatric, immunological, and post-traumatic genetic measures be made generally available?”

“Be marketed.”

“Yes. Under a Star Crèche imprimatur?” All the haut were tense. Miles spoke with great care.

“All matters of publicity remain to be decided. I had thought a Barrayaran technological embassy to Joint-Fleet Headquarters might be matched by a Cetagandan genetic embassy. But perhaps we may
distinguish what is done from whatever it may be called.”

Pel smiled. The other haut were expressionless, eyes flickering, until Degtiar seemed to relax. She certainly smiled.

“What we may agree, Lord Vorkosigan, is that at this … unusual moment, certain symbolic gestures are certainly called for.” Now she seemed to study her nails. Pel spoke, irony again lacing her voice.

“Did you have any other such in mind, Miles?” Conscious of Cordelia’s quivering tension, Helen hardly dared follow the implications of this.

“Well … ” Miles looked up. “With apologies, Pel, you will recall you once pointed out to me the haut work only in human genetic material.”

“Yes?”

“We of Bararray have many zoological and botanical problems also. For example, in my own District, not far from where the Count-my-father hopes to welcome ghem-General Coram, the badlands around the crater of Vorkosigan Vashnoi still have unusually high figures for alpha-radiation in their plats.”

“Yes?” Pel’s voice was dangerously edged. The haut, Helen thought, did not care to be reminded of what their ghem had actually done to Bararray; abruptly she saw that what Miles was about now was, without ever calling it by name, negotiating reparations. The Bararrayan semi-circle was still as stone, though she heard Aral and Illyan take sharp breaths. Miles’s voice became brisker.

“As it happens, we are close to a novel answer—odd as it may sound, a variety of bug, bio-engineered of course, we believe can be persuaded to consume radioactive materials, bind them in a magnetic matrix, and regurgitate them for safe collection. A slight variation on Dr Chandler’s frames can rather ingeniously deal with alpha radiation, but there is of course beta-radiation also; and there are those interesting little creatures found by the Sigma Cetan expedition into local space.”

Helen felt faint. Was Miles really negotiating with the highest Cetagandan command about butter bugs? And what interesting little creatures from another part of Cetagandan space? She almost glared at him, but he was finding his nails again a source of fascination.

“And then, you know, olive-trees supply perhaps the oldest emblem of peace humanity has, but we just can’t grow them freely on Bararray. A matter of soil pH, I believe.” Where was this coming from? Helen’s backbrain scrambled to retrieve what she knew of the ill-fated olive-tree project, centred in … Vorharopulous’s District, surely, hundreds of miles from Vorkosigan Vashnoi. Miles’s head suddenly jerked up, a reflex mannerism he had largely lost since his marriage, and while she could not say his voice now carried the murderous undertones it had suddenly held the day before when first mentioning Jackson’s Whole, it nevertheless declared—what had he called it, speaking of his Gran’da?—a bottom line. From their expressions the haut heard it too. “Suppose, then, the Count-my-father, in hale age, could walk among olives at Vorkosigan Vashnoi?”

Aral, she thought, all but staggered as his son spoke. Cordelia gripped his arm with hands gone as bone-white as Degtiar’s, though squarer and more powerful. Gregor’s and Laisa’s eyes flashed as they watched. Helen saw Degtiar’s hands relax.

“We of the Star Crèche, Lord Vorkosigan, like all haut, can understand need for symbolism. Grant it were all as you suppose. What then?”

Miles was visibly trembling as he looked up at the Cetagandan Empress but his voice didn’t
acknowledge it. “Then, Handmaiden, we have what the soon-to-be unlamented Jacksonian barons would call a Deal.”

Another swift exchange of glances took place between the haut. Then abruptly Giaja turned to Gregor, ignoring Miles, who still stood, trembling. Ekaterin moved forward to lay a hand gently on his shoulder.

“On these terms, Imperial Cousin, spoken and understood, in spirit and in declared letter, are we agreed?”

“We are. Shall We have peace, Cousin Fletchir?”

“And prosperity, Cousin Gregor? We will.” Handshakes were impossible by frame, but two emperors did something equivalent with their eyes. Pel was already moving to the re-appearing doorway, and within seconds the haut Raniton, ghem-officers and Lady d’Lhosh were filing back in to the viewed room as haut women slid silently back to their places, gazes dropping and icy reserves re-appearing. All the Bararrayans instinctively straightened despite goggling eyes, and officers came to attention. As stillness returned to the reformed circle Giaja spoke formally.

“Let all haut and ghem know the proposed plan has been reconciled with the concerns of haut, as of empire. Our Imperial Cousin and We will have peace, on terms variously known to all present.” Helen was appreciating that ‘variously’ when Gregor took up the declaration, looking to her now quite experienced imperial eye as if he knew with quiet glee he wouldn’t get to speak such words very often.

“The unrighteousness of Jackson’s Whole will be ended, the planet annexed to Our mutual convenience. Amity and exchange will replace the unhappiness of Our past.” He held out a hand and Laisa stepped forward to take it. After a second Giaja ghosted a grin at him and his own hand flickered. Degtiar stepped to his side, and after a millisecond of silent imperial and celestial exchanges voices sounded as one, first in Bararrayan, then Cetagandan.

“Let it be done. Let it be done.”

Ekaterin stooped to hold a trembling Miles who clung fiercely to her. Aral and Cordelia were embracing; so, astonishingly, were Illyan and Alys. She found herself holding tightly to Georg. The sonorous imperial voices ignored them all.

“Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, General Benin, please ensure all necessary exchanges of information are made. Imperial delegations headed by the haut Lord Governor with haut Palma and by the Lord Viceroy and Lady Vicereine will depart as soon as may be. That is all.”

Palma sat in her float-chair and her bubble flicked on, but Pel had a hand on Degtiar’s arm, both staring at Miles, now standing free of Ekaterin, his gaze boring into Degtiar’s. He had taken from his pocket something he turned in his hands—a braided ebony oval that gleamed in the light. With unreasonable certainty Helen knew it had to be a lock of Degtiar’s hair, no doubt already floor-length a decade past. Which had, surely, been before she had been wedded by Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja.

Oh my. How much more could Miles gamble for? She had heard both Georg and Ekaterin say jokingly that the little Lord Auditor was unhealthily addicted to having the last word.

“Wait.” How strangely like Ekaterin’s that melodious alto was. “Fletchir, I believe we may be leaving something undone.”

“What thing?” Nor did surprise and impatience make Giaja’s baritone less exquisite.
“Lord Vorkosigan has, I think, risked much for Us. Would you grant him in my name an Imperial boon?”

Everyone became very still indeed. Giaja stared at his wife, “A boon is a potent gift, Rian.”

“Even so. It is not unearned.”

“No.” Giaja turned to Gregor. Ironies layered as deep as the ocean floor where all layers became rock. “Imperial Cousin, will you permit this gift?”

Gregor neither hesitated nor looked at Miles. “I will, Fletchir, with all my heart.”

Looks flicked like knives. Everyone held their breaths. Giaja slowly turned. “It seems, Lord Vorkosigan, We should grant you a boon. And We confess you have made Our coming days a great deal more interesting than We had supposed they might be. What would you have of Us?”

Miles was still trembling, but stood straight, voice clear and firm, “Your consent to a christening, Celestial Lord.”

Giaja sighed. “Explain yourself.”

“It occurs to me none of Your Majesties can wish to continue to refer to the wretched place as Jackson’s Whole when it is no longer wretched, but prosperous and just under … new management.”

Giaja’s lips twitched, but Degtiar, Helen thought, was holding her breath. “That is certainly true.” The baritone rolled with amusements and anticipation. “Do you have a suggestion, my Lord?”

Spines snapped straight at the lash in Giaja’s tone and feudal acknowledgement of his words, her own among them. Miles’s voice was oddly quiet. “As all else has been, Celestial Lord, a name should be fair, honouring both our traditions. May I therefore suggest Aralyar Ceta.”

In an odd way, Helen thought, floating, because it was a boon it wasn’t a question. Cordelia’s arm around Aral was taking most of his weight, to judge by lines of dress and muscle. Laisa seemed momentarily to support Gregor; more strangely, Alys was being held up by Illyan. Giaja’s eyes went to Gregor, then Aral. “Are you content, Lord Viceroy?”

“He is, Celestial Lord. We are.” Cordelia’s voice was openly strained, but clear.

“Then by Our edict this day, let the planet known as Jackson’s Whole from the day of its conquest be called by all Our subjects, haut and ghem, Aralyar Ceta.”

“And so called by all Our subjects, Vor and common.”

Two more force-bubbles snapped on, and the haut were moving, as were Gregor and Laisa, though Gregor paused to rest a hand briefly on Aral’s shaking shoulder. Doors opened without apparent sign or warning, imperial bodies passed. Miles and Benin were making their way to the frame, Miles extracting from an inner pocket a flimsy that must carry details of the courier that had left Barrayar at least a week ago. Around Helen a burr of Barrayaran conversation began to grow. Georg grasped her hand again but not as tightly as Cordelia still held Aral, and Illyan Alys. Ekaterin was staring at her parents-in-law with such relief on her face that tears came to Helen’s eyes as curiosity came to her brain. A very long talk with Ekaterin, she promised herself.

Then all was done. Miles and Benin nodded cordially and the frame winked into emptiness. The rich panelling behind it seemed amazingly bland. Then Vorkosigans were turning to one another, and
Alys and Illyan ushering everyone else towards doors held open by Pym and a Vorbarra Armsman. The lamps along the walls were shining brightly, and through the windows Helen saw gathering dusk. How long had they been in here? Trailing the others a little with Georg, she slowed in the doorway as Pym waited patiently to close it. Aral’s shaken voice sounded behind her.

“Boy, what were you thinking?”

“Of a peaceful way forward for us all. And of gaining you and Mama some of the years Barrayar has stolen from you both, to enjoy it in.”

For a moment Helen’s eyes met Pym’s. Breaking contact she saw the grey-and-tabby kitten slip behind the Armsman’s legs; she went forward and as he swung the door closed heard Cordelia begin to cry.

* * * * *

Gregor and Laisa left within the hour in an ImpSec aircar, taking Allegre, Vorlynkin, and Chandler; Khourakis and his squad trailed away behind them. Much would begin humming in Vorbarr Sultana that night, as in the Celestial Garden. Those who remained felt density or pressure slacken in the darkness as the lights of the aircar and its escorts dwindled over the lake. No Vorkosigans were seen while the Vorthyses with Lady Alys and Simon Illyan walked in companionable silence, enjoying cool summer dark and pondering what they had witnessed before insects drove them inside again. Nor were Aral, Cordelia, or Miles in evidence when Pym and Ma Kosti generated yet another delicious meal of soup, cold meats, and desserts filled with early summer fruits, but as the diners drank coffee and nibbled idly at biscuits and tiny apricot tarts Ekaterin appeared, smiling apologies for dereliction as hostess. Alys waved her words away.

“Nonsense, dear. Apologies are the last things you owe anyone today. Is all well?”

Ekaterin sank into a chair. “I’ve finally got sleep-timers into all of them, so yes, all’s well. Or will be when they’ve had a solid twelve hours each.”

Helen entertained a brief vision of her niece mothering Aral and Cordelia to bed; from the gleam in her eye Alys shared the thought. Two concerned aunts noted the lines of strain now showing in Ekaterin’s face and the redness about her eyes; so did Georg.

“And what about you, my dear? Are you alright?”

Ekaterin smiled at them all. “Yes. Very much so. I’m just tired.”

“I’m not surprised. Where’s young Nikki?”

“Ma Pym has him for the evening. I believe he and Arthur are watching Lord Vortalon make his decision again and jointly composing a letter to the scriptwriters that Miles promised them he’d send on his most Auditorial stationery.”

Everyone smiled. Georg looked as if he might continue, but Illyan beat him to it. “In my experience, Ekaterin, when Miles finished a mission he became rather irritable and depressed for a while. I hardly dare extrapolate to this, but you may find the same.”

She nodded gratitude for the warning as Alys offered support. “Cordelia will be herself again
tomorrow. She has been braced against losing Aral for so many years, and this … relief was very unexpected.” Suddenly Alyss grinned. “I doubt the planetary name bothered her. She once said Aral was the man she admired most in all the worlds and time, so she probably thinks everywhere should be named after him. But Star Crèche medical treatment to go with the fleet-command … I confess, I hadn’t seen that coming. Had you, dear?”

Ekaterin shook her head. “No, I don’t think anyone had.”

Illyan looked at her shrewdly. “But you knew about the name?”

“Only last night. Gregor used Laisa to get it out of him.”

“Ah.”

Helen’s brain was badly overloaded and she felt in need of her own bed, but this seemed to convey or confirm something to Illyan and Alyss beyond surface meaning, so she stored the impression away. Belatedly she realised she and even Georg might be obstacles to conversation: her own security clearance had necessarily been raised as a Lord Auditor’s wife, and in the last year had rocketed with Ekaterin’s marriage to levels she’d never expected to enjoy, but being allowed to know and actually being told were not the same. There were old imperial and family matters under the surface here, she knew, into which Ekaterin had had no right to admit her aunt and uncle unless in real need. But one thing tumbling in her brain might be brought to rest. “And the butter-bugs, dear? Did you know about them? I don’t know if anything in that whole extraordinary conversation surprised me more.” As she hoped, Ekaterin laughed and the strain-shadows in her face lightened while she spoke.

“Oh, the bugs. I’ve known about the idea since last year. So have you, Aunt Helen. Enrique seems to have thought of it almost as soon as he understood about Vorkosigan Vashnoi. He explained it all to me at length, very poetically.” Literally so, Helen recalled. She hadn’t actually read more than a stanza or two of the Escobaran’s proposal, cast in rhyme royal. “And he had such high hopes because of those strange bacteria the Cetagandans found that eat beta-radiation, but he couldn’t make it work at all, poor dear, because of high alpha-radiation and the bacteria having really odd genetics. So it was all stalled.” Beneath lines of strain Ekaterin’s face grew animated with her story, and Helen saw with shock and pride how her niece would look in thirty years, entertaining some high imperial gathering of the future with anecdotes of how the present disposition of things was achieved. A very great lady. Oh my. “I’d told Miles about it but wasn’t entirely sure he’d taken it in. You know how he is with Enrique, though the poor man has worshipped him since what Martya calls the Great Bugbutter Escape from Gustioz. Then last week Miles went to see him, out of the blue, and after he’d calmed him down and assured him Gustioz wasn’t back asked him what had stopped the radiation cleanup idea.”

Ekaterin gurgled with laughter, a lovely sound, as she had so improperly—no, most properly—done earlier, during a more critical conversation. Everyone smiled with her delight.

“As far as I can tell Miles airily promised Enrique he’d have the relevant laws of physics emended, then get him proper help with the bacteria. Now poor Enrique’s going to wake up one day and find not only has Miles done as he promised, but into the bargain he’s got haut Pel on his doorstep in her float-chair offering to consult.” Illyan snorted laughter with the others but looked oddly thoughtful, glad perhaps that the security implications of haut women swanning about Barrayar in force-bubbles would not be landing on his desk. Ekaterin sobered. “For me the olive trees were the real surprise. I don’t know where Miles came up with them.”

Alys smiled. “Captain Khourakis grew up in Vorharopoulos Athena, Ekaterin dear. His father’s an agronomy officer.”
“Oh, I see. Of course.”

Helen looked at her niece thoughtfully. *Of course?* She was going to have to ponder long and hard an approach to writing history that could combine necessary public narratives with the kinds of individual awareness and far-flung data-networks this weekend had shown her as at the cutting-edge of events. But that could wait its day, and when after a little more talk Ekaterin began to flag Helen took quiet pleasure in helping her niece upstairs to a sleeptimer of her own.

Lying beside Georg a little later in restful silence, holding hands, the dialogue in their eyes was bright with memories of the world they had seen changed, and grateful wonder at new hopes that unfolded. She slept like a log.

Breakfast was quiet. Aral, Cordelia, and Miles were all there, looking better for rest but still in a kind of shock. Helen had got on well with Cordelia since meeting her last year amid the disaster of Miles’s first dinner-party for Ekaterin, and had greatly enjoyed their conspiratorial relationship in shepherding manic son and wounded niece towards a wedding-circle. This morning, for all her usual Betan health, Cordelia showed the weight of her sixty-six years and said little, though her hand kept wandering to touch Aral’s and her smiles drifted between puzzlement and joy.

Miles and Aral were also silent. Aral, Helen thought, was more contemplative than anything else, but in Miles she saw the truth of Illyan’s warning and wondered what it must be like for him to have won so fabulously all he had refashioned reality to obtain. *Vertigo at apogee,* he had once said to Ekaterin, and Helen suspected he looked down from his new heights not in triumph but with queasy awareness of how much further he now had to fall.

Alys and Illyan left immediately after breakfast. Georg had to be back in Vorbarr Sultana by lunchtime so they did not linger themselves. For fun, and in genuine admiration of the man, she offered Pym her hand as she said goodbye, hoping to goose his deadpan morning performance in best butler mode. But with a warm smile he took it, asking if his Arthur might come with Master Vorkosigan sometime to see the Professor’s laboratory, and another little deal was struck.

Then there were embraces, Ekaterin whispering gratitude to her aunt and uncle, and suddenly they were aboard, their ImpSec pilot lifting the old aircar off the ground. As they slowly gained altitude Helen saw the foreshortened figures of Aral and Miles walking side by side towards the little cemetery, where headstones glinted in low morning sunlight. A small feline shape trotted behind them, leading Ekaterin and Cordelia in procession. Then her view of the ground below blurred with greens that turned to gleaming silvers and browns as the aircar moved out over the shore of the lake.
Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

How fast Miles’s panggalactic bombshell seemed to go off depended, Helen later decided, on who you were and what else you were trying to do at the time. As she anticipated, watching Gregor and his escorts leave Vorkosigan Surleau in haste that strange Sunday evening, some official matters were initiated very swiftly. A fast courier was despatched to Sergyar the same night warning them not to expect their Viceroy and Vicereine anytime soon; another left for Komarr. Within a day more substantial traffic began to hum in various directions, starting with an intimate imperial dinner-invitation at oddly short notice to the long-serving Cetagandan Ambassador, the haut Paramel Volusor, and his senior ghem-Colonels in security and chancery.

Establishment of individual frame-links between opposite numbers was equally swift once the courier had been escorted to Eta Ceta by an Imperial Guard frigate. On the Tuesday afternoon Georg, acquiring from somewhere both a frame for his basement lab and Dr Chandler, made contact with Artificer General Kariam, took a firm hold of Chandler’s collar, and was little seen for several days. ImpSec security around their house discreetly increased, Helen noticed.

After eight days she learned from Ekaterin by secured comconsole that the Viceroy and Vicereine had departed for Eta Ceta with a hastily assembled array of surprised senior diplomats, administrators, and soldiers—as, apparently, in their equivalent way, had the hauts Palma Robine and Ranimon Degtiar, for Barrayar. Helen wondered what Cetagandans finding themselves suddenly en route to Barrayar were making of it all and whether the ghem wore face-paint in private argument. The same call relayed edited highlights of Gregor’s animated, ironic report to Miles of a long, personal frame-call with Fletchir Giaja, entirely in the freer-speaking haut mode and at Gregor’s cue in Cetagandan, followed by one between Laisa and Rian Degtiar about which less seemed to be known, or could be said. Given their respective ages Gregor felt close personal friendship with Giaja was impossible, but the emperors seemed to have liked one another well enough as absolute rulers, made each other laugh at common frustrations, and found in one another uniquely qualified auditors. As Miles had hoped, Ekaterin added, leaving her aunt to wonder just how many agendas of his own the astonishing little man had really been advancing with his great galactic scheme. But perhaps, beyond serving his father—and there were several things about that Helen knew she hadn’t grasped at all—most of them came down to serving Gregor anyway, and provision of an understanding celestial ear was to Miles merely another wrinkle.

In her own life the bombshell’s detonation was both fast and slow, a private tide of news and excitements from Georg and Ekaterin qualified by a steady flow of year-end examinatorial duties. Professionally she also had a rising awareness of the vast Barrayaran public, sleeping through a notably warm early summer without the faintest suspicion of what was about to hit them, though there were a few early straws-in-the-wind as one or two news editors woke up to sharply increased traffic between Imperial Residence and Cetagandan Embassy. One Hassadar morning-paper she saw speculated with notable accuracy about possible links between tall tales from Vorkosigan Surleau about a surprise imperial visit and these suggestive diplomatic developments. A few days later the same paper reported Lady Vorkosigan’s Imperial commission, following widespread public acclaim for her beautiful Barrayaran garden at Vorkosigan House, to refurbish the gardens at the Occupation Memorial. Contacted with cautious congratulations, Ekaterin herself said smilingly only that she felt
horribly underqualified for the job and wasn’t looking forward to what her classmates might have to
say about it in the autumn semester, but it was a request she hadn’t been able to refuse, especially as
General Coram was expected sooner rather than later on his pilgrimage of ancestral grace and would
certainly wish to go there. Then she added with a different smile that Master Tsipis dealt with all
family press-releases in Hassadar. Helen had nodded and let her niece go, thinking there were
stranger ways for history-in-waiting to make itself known than preparation of a symbolic garden.

* * * * *

For Captain Lord Ivan Vorpatril the great bombshell took five days to explode fully, and was by
turns affronting, dismaying, irritating, heartstopping, and mind-numbing without ever ceasing to be
horribly confusing. He was enjoying his hard-earned Komarran posting and had privately decided to
extend it for at least one additional tour, but his fond plans were tossed aside with a full week in
Solstice still to go by urgent recall to Ops Command in Vorbarr Sultana. Dire invocations of what he
had been promised, rising volubly up his chain of command, made no difference at all, even when he
took a deep breath and invoked Gregor directly. After the tedious three-day, multi-jump journey to
Barrayar by fast courier, and a very late arrival following some unusual docking and transfer delays
suggesting heavy official traffic, he found himself met, welcomed, fed, washed, and sent to bed,
gritting his teeth, by his mother, who like the hovering Illyan seemed uncommonly pleased about
something. Next morning he reported to Ops Command, as required.

About an hour later, slamming into his mother’s office at the Imperial Residence, he found Illyan
again present, standing behind Alys with a hand on her shoulder, reading something on her
comconsole screen. After being politely requested by his mother to shut the door behind him, staring
wildly, and doing so with exaggerated care, he stood trembling, waving the papers clutched in his
hand.

“What is all this?” Ivan did not care how unreasonable he might sound. “How can I have been
seconded back to you? You promised. Gregor promised. What madness are you up to now?”

“You have been given your majority, dear. I thought you’d be pleased. You’ve already changed
your shoulder-tabs, I see.”

Actually, Ivan had had them changed for him by the general who had given him his orders. Left to
his own devices he would have known well enough not to swallow the bribe of a promotion before
at least trying to understand what he was being bribed to do—not that his majority wasn’t in his own
opinion long overdue, and especially satisfatory in restoring his superiority in rank to his annoying
cousin, who might be a Lord Auditor but had only made it to Captain by cheating with Gregor. He
spluttered with pure frustration.

Alys pursed her lips and pushed a switch to one side of her comconsole. Ivan felt the odd, flattening
pressure of a cone-of-silence damping-field come on, and looked up to see the distinctive triangular
generator-bud protruding from the ceiling. With nasty suspicion growing in his heart and a worse
feeling in his stomach he looked at his mother.

“You didn’t use to have one of those.”

“No, dear. I do now.”

He really didn’t want to know but found he couldn’t stop himself. “Why?”
“I’m helping to arrange something for Gregor and Laisa, dear.”

Visions of some hideous extension to the whole ghastly wedding rigmarole boiled in Ivan’s head. His first two months on Komarr had been entirely occupied by the second imperial marriage-ceremony, held in the bride’s home sector with more mercantile oligarchs attending than Ivan had known existed, all with enormous families. But even Gregor had been grey with exhaustion by the end and as mortally relieved as everyone to reach the finishing-line; surely he would not consent to anything more.

“I’m sure you’re helping them arrange half the Nexus, mother. Why am I here?”

“No, dear, arranging the Nexus would be your cousin’s responsibility. And you’re here so you can leave for Eta Ceta tomorrow.”

Miles! “I should have known.” Even to his own ears his voice was unpleasantly grating. “What has the lunatic dwarf been …”

Ivan’s voice trailed away, gratings and all. Had his mother just said she was sending him to Eta Ceta? That was … a Cetagandan planet. He’d been there before, when Miles had turned a diplomatic disaster into some kind of bizarre personal triumph. In the process Ivan had been assaulted, drugged, humiliated, drugged again, kidnapped, and left unconscious on the floor of the Star Crèche, before being expected as usual to save everybody’s bacon. He had resented it all very much and no-one had taken the slightest notice. His eyes narrowed. Illyan seemed to be concealing some powerful emotion. His mother was at her most dangerously bland.

“Did you say Eta Ceta?”

“Yes, dear, I did.”

Again Ivan found he could not stop himself. “Eta Ceta is a Cetagandan planet.”

“Yes, dear.”

Illyan suffered a setback in his struggle with emotion, a smile writhing onto his face. “Well remembered, Ivan.”

He glared at the man who had unaccountably become his … stepfather, he supposed, though without the benefit of anything so ordinary as courtship or marriage. Then he found a terrible insanity washing over his head as his mother spoke.

“While you were away, dear, kicking over your heels and cooling the traces, Miles met a Terran scientist who is rewriting the laws of physics, so he took the opportunity to get Gregor and the haut Fletchir Giaja to agree to a full peace treaty.” She smiled at him evenly. “We’re going to conquer Jackson’s Whole together as an ice-breaker. Aral and Cordelia have already left for the Celestial Garden with a sizeable mission, and we’re expecting their Cetagandan equivalents here any day.”

Illyan lost his struggle of concealment. The emotion was not amusement but an obscenely naked glee that made Ivan recoil. “We’ve agreed to rename it Aralyar Ceta after the conquest, by the way.”

“Anyway, dear, as I’m sure you can imagine there are a lot of other provisions.” His mother’s voice acquired a doubting tone. “Miles says you’ll understand perfectly, after a little thought, if I tell you the conquest looks as if it’s the ghem-lords’ end of the deal, while actually it’s the Star Crèche’s. So we have some business to pursue with the haut Pel Navarr, and as you already know one another she asked specially for you to serve as Gregor’s emissary.”
Ivan was too far gone in shock to be further affected by his troubling memories of the haut Pel. He was nevertheless aware that she was not only a woman possessed of the kind of beauty that made your raging desire for her as impossible to avoid or subdue as it was self-consciously hopeless, but also appallingly given, in as much as any haut could be, to an almost Milesian mania for gadgets and action. Distantly he felt himself shuddering. Things just went on getting worse.

“Miles is still resting down in Vorkosigan Surleau with Nikki and Ekaterin, I’m glad to say, but he’s sent you the general briefing-pack for those joining the need-to-know list, and some special instructions.” His mother frowned thoughtfully. “You know, when I spoke to her last Pel had a very nice young ghem-woman with her, a Lady Arvin, whom she seems to be grooming. It occurs to me, dear, that with this treaty and posting you may have an opportunity to set a trend and help Gregor with a Cetagandan marriage, so do keep your wits about you, please.”

Ivan’s emotions at that moment are hard to describe.

* * * * *

For Miles things were blessedly slow for a while. His obsession with contingencies and mute awareness of the mental state he would be in if all his plans came to improbable fruition had prompted him to have ready-and-waiting the bones of the briefing-pack that would be needed. Senior staff in special offices hastily established by Allegre and Vorlynkin could (and did) fill in the rest. He stayed in touch with the Residence and while his parents were on Barrayar Vorkosigan House, but events had their own momentum and he was done with pushing. After Gregor’s report of a satisfactory first personal exchange with Giaja and before Ekaterin had to begin work at the Occupation Memorial, a prospect that delighted him, he sent a discreet warning to the Csuriks in Silvy Vale and organised a back-country expedition for the days before Midsummer. He also used his seizure stimulator.

Ekaterin, who understood where they were going and why, was willing to fall in with his plans, though expressing doubts and some trepidation. Nikki, examining the horse he was to ride with unalloyed nearly-twelve-year-old suspicion, took more persuading that camping out was after all such an enjoyable notion. But the elderly mare was placid, her saddle well padded, and once they had cleared the hacking-paths of the estate and rising foothills began to screen out any other world, then to give way to a rockier landscape with higher-altitude flora and fauna and occasional panoramas, the natural fascination of exploring took over.

Miles saw no reason camping should be needlessly rough. Besides taking Pym (who remembered riding this way eleven years before and asked to come) and Roic, as well as a female ostler with a passionate knowledge of mountain flowers, he had arranged for tents, food, and cooking-gear to be lightflyered ahead. These arrangements, mollifying Nikki, relieved the need for pack-horses, of which Miles did not in any case have enough with six people to mount. Fat Ninny was old and slow, picking his way carefully, but Miles could not think of riding any other horse and his short body weighed little enough, surely. When the geriatric gelding whickered with pleasure as they set off he felt his heart lift and the exhausted depression he had felt for days fall away.

The great swathe of feral roses he remembered was still there, glorious with colours, and the sudden sight as she crested a rise in the trail brought Ekaterin the pleasure he hoped for. If anything the rose colony had spread, and by the time Pym and Roic hacked a way through, with experimental help from Nikki, everyone had scratched hands and the horses had all had a good snack. Sucking a thumb beaded with blood Miles reached out with his other hand, leaning more than he ought, to place a
rose-bud in Ekaterin’s hair and at her surprised smile knew another kind of contentment again.

A few miles further on they climbed steeply for a while and camped for the first night in a small meadow with a rocky stream chattering to itself on one side. This northern sub-alpine world was wholly new to Nikki and Ekaterin, and they wandered together about meadow, stream, and wood-edge with the ostler, pointing things out to one another and learning local names of flowers and the visible peaks and ridges of the Dendarii. Miles lay back against a flat rock to watch them and assemble his thoughts in the last of the sun, while both Armsmen pitched tents, and Roic (having drawn the short straw) made necessary entrenchments at a decent distance. Miles did bestir himself to gather wood, and then, to everyone’s surprise, once a fire was crackling merrily in the gathering dusk, to cook, drawing Nikki to help him set wrapped potatoes to bake in the heat of the fire’s edge and sausages to grill in a porta-oven.

The food was as good as outdoor cooking always tasted at day’s end with a sauce of honourable hunger, and there was pleasantly light wine for the adults as well as Nikki. The boy sampled a glass dubiously but with evident pleasure—more for the implicit maturity of the offer than the taste, Miles thought—before taking a bottle of his favourite juice, which Roic, on first watch, also preferred. As Miles and Ekaterin settled back, replete, with second glasses he deliberately handed the wine-bottle off to a surprised Pym, and in flickering firelight began to talk softly to Nikki of the District and its dominating mountains, the solitude of communities and Barrayar’s cruelly absolute Time of Isolation, Bloody Centuries no sooner ended than followed by twenty years of equally cruel Cetagandan occupation. Then he told stories of his grandfather and mountains, absurdly young guerrilla command, mature generalship, the bewilderments of peace, and the reactions of former guerrillas to Mad Yuri’s massacre of their general’s wife and children. Seated on the edge of the light Roic listened as silently at Nikki, but as Miles wound towards his own lifetime Pym began to offer memories of a District lowland youth, and with a little persuasion the ostler joined in.

Early in the evening Miles took care to mention without emphasis the persistent back-country fears of mutation, sustained with traditional responses to it by the genomic legacy of Vorkosigan Vashnoi. Ekaterin’s and Pym’s eyes flickered with Nikki’s in the darkness. As Miles wound on he subtly stressed progress made and yet to be made, prices District communities had paid for the provocations that led to the punitive annihilation of its capital and financial centre, and for proud Vorkosigan capacities that had forced the absentee landlordism on imperial service of successive counts and their heirs over much of the past century. This theme brought a gleam to the ostler’s eye and an oddly respectful expression to her face as she grasped the ironies echoing back and forth in his tales.

The morning was again fair, and after a slow, cheerful day of progress and side-excursions Miles chose to camp in the late afternoon a few hours short of Silvy Vale in a small glade he thought he recognised from the last time he rode this way with Pym. The lightflyer-crew delivered tents and food, and they followed the same routines making camp.

In a firelit half-darkness thickened by the encircling trees Miles again passed the wine-bottle to Pym, first filling hi’s glass and the ostler’s, watched in silence by Nikki and Ekaterin. Then, sitting back and stretching out a hand to Ekaterin, he began the story of his journey with Pym eleven years before, leaving out nothing he remembered, from the first appearance of a hollow-eyed Harra Csurik at the gates of Vorkosigan Surleau, full-breasted with milk that would never be wanted, and the revelation of her infant daughter Raina, born with the cat’s mouth and dead within a fortnight of a subtly broken neck, to Harra’s suspicion of her husband Lem as the killer, his involvement at his father’s command, and the night-attacks on Fat Ninny and his tent, winding at last to his eventual judgement as the Count-his-father’s Voice of Harra’s mother, Mara Mattulich, for multiple infanticides of her own babes and newborn granddaughter. When he spoke of his roiling uncertainties for most of his time in Silvy Vale Pym was heard to observe that while m’lord might be pleased to say so now he had not shown it then, but the Armsman’s few comments otherwise
supported Miles’s account, in sombre details of Raina Csurik’s makeshift autopsy and the reluctant, fascinated, ashamed community gathering that heard Miles’s judgement. On the edge of the light Roic again listened intently. When Miles finished that part of the story, the ostler sat forward, eyes moving between him and Nikki.

“I remember that judgement, m’lord. It was your first as Count’s Voice, wasn’t it? I heard Pym here tell that story the day he got back, in the kitchen, with his ribs all strapped up where poor Ninny had kicked him.” She grinned at the Armsman, teeth gleaming in the half-darkness.

Miles looked curiously at Pym. “I didn’t know you were in the habit of below-stairs recitations.”

“I’m not, m’lord, though I must say you are very good about providing temptations.” He sipped wine with a bland expression as Miles laughed. “But you and the Count were clear that judgement should resound throughout the District, so I helped it on its way.”

The ostler smiled mirthlessly. “Oh it *resounded* all right. I come from the High Vale, above Pierrotin village, and they were still talking about it next time I went home, a year later. The time after it was Ma Mattulich’s death and unmarked burial on everyone’s tongue. You said she should die without remembrance, m’lord, like the childless, but though you don’t hear her name spoken these days she’s remembered all right.”

“I know.” Miles’s voice was soft. “In the last decade reported infant deaths in the mountain sub-districts have fallen by more than half.” He looked at Nikki. “That’s one part of little Raina’s memorial. The other is the school.”

He spoke on, telling the rest of the story—sponsoring Harra Csurik to train at the teacher’s college in Hassadar, seeing her graduate during a rare leave from ImpSec, and his impromptu return visit on his thirtieth birthday two years before, with its revelations of Lem’s appointment as Speaker of Silvy Vale in succession to old man Karal and his visionary drive to create the vale’s new dam for hydroelectric power, the wooden frames of the health clinic being constructed under Lem’s supervision, and the busy two-room Raina Csurik School that Harra now ran. Both Pym and the ostler, as well as Ekaterin, wore smiles of satisfaction in the darkness but his last detail made them sit up.

“I’d really gone there that day, you know, to burn an offering for Raina, but where her grave had been was under the new lake, and Harra said she’d not been able to find a body to move. Raina just … went back to the earth. The only person left under the lake was Ma Mattulich, and by my own Word in the Count-my-father’s Voice no offerings can be burned for *her*. So I couldn’t do anything then, but later I did burn an offering for Raina, in the cemetery at Vorkosigan Surleau, by my Gran’da’s grave. Just a lock of my hair, and a little bit of his that I had, with some incense. It was very peaceful.”

Pym had seen him often enough at that graveside to appreciate what the gesture had referred to, and had once heard him say it outright all those years before, waiting in Speaker Karal’s house for Mara Mattulich to arrive. Ekaterin also knew from Miles’s own lips that his Gran’da had more than once sought his ‘mutant’ grandson’s abortion and infanticide. From the expression in her eyes the ostler, who would have served the old man, knew it too. But Roic and Nikki didn’t, so Miles told them.

In the silence that followed a grim-faced Roic built up the fire and the wine passed around, Miles offering Nikki another juice. He settled back as Nikki looked up from fiddling with the bottle-top and took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, sir”—the apology served more than one purpose—“but I’m not sure I understand. Are you saying your Gran’da and Ma Mattulich were alike?”
“In some ways. She was one who called me the Mutie Lord, certainly.”

“Like Alexi Vormoncrief.”

Miles was sufficiently satisfied with the idiot Vormoncrief’s permanent transfer to Kyriel Island that he no longer bridled at the name, but beside him he felt Ekaterin stiffen slightly. “Yes, but Ma Mattulich said it to my face. She didn’t lack courage.”

“What did she lack, sir?”

“Besides kindness and conscience?” He thought a moment. “I’d call it flexibility. Even under fast-penta she spoke of her misshapen babies as a punishment, and the need to keep the poison out by killing them. She would have had us all think, even then, that she only did her duty. But really she was afraid of the new ways and having to change her beliefs, not in love with the old ones.”

The ostler spat into the fire. “The old harridan never loved anything in her whole life. Heart of cold stone, the way folks tell it.”

“Just like the wicked mutants in the old tales, eh?” Miles’s voice was very soft, and the woman shifted uneasily.

“I didn’t mean—”

“No, don’t worry, you’re quite right. A heart of cold stone she kept in a little box. But a heart nevertheless. Your Grandma Cordelia, Nikki, if you asked her, would first tell you Ma Mattulich lacked the will to forgive herself for what she had felt she had to do, and was really punishing her daughter for not sharing mother’s guilt in her turn. If you pushed your Grandma a little she would also tell you the woman lacked grace, which she would mean in the religious sense, and if you pushed her a lot you might hear her say that all Barrayarans eat their own young, which she would mean more literally than you might think.”

Nikki stared uncertainly, unsure whether to smile at any of this, and sensibly decided to stick to his own guns. “But your Gran’da didn’t lack flexibility, sir, did he?”

“No, usually, Nikki. The Cetagandans taught him a whole lot of it, but Mad Yuri used much up, and so did our long road to Komarr. And then, just once when it mattered, it failed him. By the time he got it back again, it was too late—not for me, but for your Grandma and Gran’da Aral. He’d never have admitted it, but he walked scared around both of them for the rest of his life.” Miles let his voice carry some of the passion he felt, warming him to life again as they neared Silvy Vale. “Still, Nikki, he walked, and your heart has to beat to do that. You’re right that I’m drawing a comparison between him and Ma Mattulich but it points all the differences as well as the echo. If he’d been alive, and her judgement in his hands, she’d probably have thought herself safe, but he would have had her own neck broken for her. Bothari could have done that without blinking. And after facing my judgement, she died within two years. I thought she would. Hoped she would.”

Pym stared at his lord over the flames, not showing any of his shades of bland liege-man’s deference but a profound respect that had nothing to do with privileges and powers of rank save how you saw someone use them. Pym had replaced Bothari in the Vorkosigan Armaments’ Score, and he knew Miles had spared him executing Mara Mattulich partly because he was not Bothari and had allowed his acute dismay at the task in prospect to show. But he had not, even when he learned of the old woman’s solitary winter death, realised Miles had not so much held the formal sentence of execution he necessarily passed on Mattulich as changed the method, taking Bothari’s responsibilities on himself.
“But your great-Gran’da Piotr, Nikki, after facing your Grandma’s and Gran’da Aral’s judgements, and his own, walked on. He knew he’d been fatally wrong, that he’d never reach his son and daughter-in-law again, but first he reached back into himself, and then even though he’d forbidden them to give me his name, he reached out to me. He taught me to ride. He gave me Ninny. He taught me how to use his seal-dagger properly, and what the smear of blood on a Vor seal really meant. And in the summers he took me up into the mountains to meet his people. Bothari was always with us, of course, or your Grandma would never have let me go, but I don’t think she’s ever quite realised how completely Gran’da had reversed his position.”

He turned to the ostler, listening like Pym with narrowed eyes and new depths of respect.

“You’ll remember. He took me up through all the high villages, starting when I was ten. I could ride well enough, but my height and leg-braces and spine were plain to see. He saw the hexes people cast and heard the comments they made behind our backs, and ignored them, as I did. But he kept me with him whomever we met, wherever we went, and he let them see and hear me. Then he let them see his approval of my competence. That was all. How would you describe what he did?”

The ostler stared, then scratched her head, frowning. “I don’t rightly know, m’lord, though I understand you exactly. I saw you with him myself up in Pierrotin, nearly twenty years ago, and it was as you said, him showing he approved you as his heir’s heir. And you’re right it was more, because of … well, your braces and your spine and all, m’lord. We knew what change you meant to us. And we knew it for an order in his Voice, though you’re right again he never said it out loud.”

She grinned a little sourly in the yellow light. “If he didn’t have the words, m’lord, and you don’t, I don’t know why you think I can find some.”

In the silence popping embers and knots in the burning branches were clearly audible. Roic’s face, like Pym’s, turned slowly between the ostler and Miles. Ekaterin’s voice floated over the small sounds of the fire.

“He put his honour into you, for all to see. Not just the honour of the rank and the family you were both born to, but the honour he’d earned from the people here with his life. As you are putting your honour into Nikki now.”

After a moment the ostler smiled fiercely. “Yes, that was the way of it, my Lady.” Then in a fascinating aside, the only sign Miles had seen all evening that his wine had done its job, she turned to Pym. “You never said she was a gardener with words as well.”

Pym’s reply was swift and low. “No need, was there?”

“Huh.”

Much as Miles wanted to follow this up he couldn’t quite see how to do so. Beside him Ekaterin was, he thought, equally tenter-hooked between indignation, pleasure, and curiosity, but their attentions were sharply recaptured when Nikki stirred, turning his empty bottle in his hands so that flashes of light sparked on curves and edges.

“Is that what you’re doing, sir?” Miles said nothing. “I don’t think I really understand, but what Mama said felt right.” He looked up at Miles, his eyes clear. “I do understand about the missing third term, though.”

Speaking to his stepson about the Vortalon imbroglio, as he had shown him round the house the Friday night before the great weekend, Miles had explained the value, if two things that should make sense didn’t, of asking what a missing third term might be. He had used it then to explain Lord Vortalon’s question to Prince Xav about what Emperor Dorca would think; now his heart surged as
Nikki’s eyes went to Ekaterin’s face, seeking permission to speak freely of this last thing. Beside him she nodded firmly.

“Say what you will about this, Nikki dear. I can’t tell you we’ll have no secrets here. You know there are things none of us can say aloud. But we don’t need to keep this secret anymore, here or anywhere, if you don’t want to.”

“No, I can see that.” Nikki looked again at Miles, and turned slightly to look at Pym, Roic, and the ostler, sitting quietly on the far side of the flames. Then he took a deep breath. “My Da, my real da who’s dead, he was a mutant too. He had Vorzohn’s Dystrophy.” Surprise and dismay flashed on the faces of Roic and the ostler, but not, Miles saw, on Pym’s. No-one spoke, giving Nikki time to gather himself after the first plunge. “It’s not like Raina Csurik was. You can’t see anything, and at first there are no signs. But there’s this protein in your cells that doesn’t work properly, so when you get older you lose control of yourself or go mad, and die.” He brooded a moment. “I think my Da’s was starting when he died. But I didn’t know about it then. He never told me anything about any of it, and he wouldn’t let Mama tell me either, because he was scared of what other people might think. So he never got any treatment. What did he think would happen to us?”

This was not a rhetorical question, Miles realised, but a passionate address to Ekaterin. Her hand was tense in his, and her voice, warm to Nikki, had edges of anger curling underneath love.

“Tien didn’t think at all, Nikki dear. He didn’t want it to be true, so he pretended it wasn’t.”

“But that’s silly!”

“Yes, it is, and worse things as well.”

“I know.” Resolutely Nikki turned again to the intent faces beyond the fire. “Almost the first thing Mama did after my Da died was take me for genetic treatment. I didn’t understand then, but after Mama got engaged she and my stepda explained that even after the treatment the military would never take me for jump-pilot training. It was all I’d ever wanted to do.”

“But you’re alright now, aren’t you, Master Nikki?” Roic’s face was open with relief. “You won’t get this dystrophy yourself?”

“No, I won’t get it. I’ve been cured. It’s just my dream that can’t be fixed.” He looked at Roic for a moment. “But thank you for asking.”

Then he turned squarely to Miles. “What you’re telling me, sir, is that my Da was really a coward, like Ma Mattulich. Not because he was afraid but because he let it paralyse him and make him blind to truths he knew, so he couldn’t change when he needed to. Your Gran’da was scared too, you said, but he didn’t let it stop him at all. Nor did Ma Csurik, even when she thought her husband had killed Raina and no-one would listen. And you don’t ever let it stop you either, despite everything that’s happened to you.”

His face was sombre as he brooded again for a minute.

“But you’re also telling me I don’t have to be afraid like Da, here or anywhere. I can follow you into the mountains. I don’t have to follow him into an early grave.” The adult phrase, heard, Miles guessed, from his Vorsoisson relatives at Tien’s funeral, made everyone wince and Ekaterin’s hand twitched in his, but Nikki was still intent, his voice level. “And you’re saying to go on I have to face him, face my memory of him, and what he did to me because he was scared, and I have to forgive him, because otherwise I’ll be fighting myself all the time. I think that’s what Uncle Gregor was saying too, in the village, about blood-feuds and feuding over blood. So that’s what I’ll do.”
Abruptly he stood up. “Can I get some more wood for the fire?”

Ekaterin was clearly torn between Nikki’s understandable need for time alone and the darkness of the surrounding trees. With a very odd look that Miles doubted ‘Uncle Gregor’ had helped, Roic picked up a heavy branch whose end lay in the fire, and stood himself.

“Perhaps I might come with you, Master Nikki? I need to scout around before my watch.”

“Alright.”

Roic passed Nikki his hand-torch and they went together, the flaring brand, held high, and the swinging torch-beam showing Ekaterin clearly where they both were. She relaxed again beside him, and Miles thought with approval that Armsman Roic was coming along very nicely, since his unfortunate, confidence-destroying, and very bug-buttery entanglement with Enrique Burgos and Parole Officer Gustioz; he rather thought Taura might have had something to do with that, during his and Ekaterin’s first, brief honeymoon here in Vorkosigan Surleau. And Nikki was also doing well, very well; superbly, in fact. Pym and the ostler rose, nodding to Miles and Ekaterin, and moved back into the darkness. Pym went to check tent-ropes and pegs, while the ostler equally needlessly fiddled with horse-tethers and then began stroking Ninny and the other beasts who came crowding around her at the end of the little clearing. Taking advantage of their tact Ekaterin shifted closer to Miles, put her arm around his waist, and rested her cheek on the top of his head. Her voice was low, and full of wonder.

“I didn’t think he’d talk about it for years yet, if ever. He was so hurt and silent, crying inside the soul-trap Tien built for him. And you just walked him straight out of it, as if it were no harder than leaving that locked bathroom in Serifosa.” She kissed the top of his head and sat back to look at him. “You are the most amazing man, my love. And you are already a wonderful father.”

Now Miles leant over to snuggle into his wife’s arms, pillowing his head on her breast. “I had the very best model.”

* * * * *

It was late on Midsummer morning when they rounded the embankment by the little dam, rode up into the vale along the lake-edge, and wound upslope through brush and maples to emerge in the clearing where the Karals’ long wooden cabin sat. Zed Karal, neatly black-bearded, was waiting on his porch, face wreathed in a smile, and behind him were one-armed old man Karal and his wife, who since Lem Csurik took over the speakership had, Miles knew from his more recent visit, spent the harsh hill-winters down in Seligrad with their elder son and daughter-in-law.

“Lord Vorkosigan. My Lady.” Zed swung down off the porch and bowed to them, while his parents bobbed and ducked behind him. Miles and Ekaterin nodded in return, unable to do much more from horseback. “Don’t dismount. We’ve everything laid on up at the school. I’ll take you up, and my parents will follow on later.”

Zed’s horse was already saddled, and they swiftly headed out again, climbing further into Silvy Vale up the easy slope rising from the lake. As they rode through thickening stands of maple Miles made proper introductions to Ekaterin and Nikki, Roic and the ostler. Pym and Zed had met before, though not since Zed was twelve, and the Armsman eyed the strapping, cheery man with approval while Zed gave a stream of local news. The health clinic had been open for more than eighteen months,
and the Vale’s new resident doctor was a good man who’d fitted well into the community and liked it so much he was talking of staying longer than his required four-year stint. Zed thought he had an eye on Ma Doval, who’d been widowed young with a babe at the breast when her husband was caught in a bad rockfall, and wouldn’t be surprised if she had an eye on him from the way she was carrying on, so that was alright. And the new power supply was changing everything, from the holovids all the children watched so avidly and argued about, to the clinic’s diagnostic units, and comlinks that brought news of the outside world and precious new proximity to blood-kin and in-laws in other vales, notices of summer work available, and the order from the meadery for all the maple-sap anyone could barrel, promising a very good year financially. As he relayed this last Zed had a glint in his eye. “Not that we don’t know who to thank for it all, my lord.”

“Oh, it’s Lord Mark you should thank, Zed. It’s his factory in Hassadar that placed a big order with the meadery. They mix the mead with … well, they use it to flavour a product.”

Zed waved a hand at this, though his face showed curiosity at the mention of his Lordship’s odd brother, of whom he had doubtless heard strange and conflicting stories. “The Vale’s growing more than you’d believe possible, my Lord. Far as I can tell everyone’s having babies this year, and our power’s brought other folk in from the higher villages and Rossy Vale over the way.” He gestured to the ridgeline still high above them, and gave Miles a sly glance. “You’ll see more people here today, my Lord, than you ever saw in Silvy Vale before. Enough to warrant a visit from the Emperor himself one of these days, belike.”

Miles grinned at him. News from Vorkosigan Surleau had evidently spread fast enough. “Now there’s an idea, Zed. And what would you do if I did set down in your yard with His Imperial Majesty? Her Imperial Majesty too, of course. Had you thought of that? I could, you know, if you didn’t mind a nice Greek chap called Khourakis and about thirty ImpSec goons prowling about beforehand and squawking in alarm while they searched under every chicken. Though Gregor’s going to be quite busy for a year or two, come to think of it. But after that?”

Zed was by this point relieved to be assured Miles was unlikely to produce the Emperor at short notice, though his eyes were thoughtful. “Oh, I was only jesting, my Lord. But mebbe in a year or two we’d be ready.” His grin returned, no less sly for its brief chastisement. “Perhaps there’ll be a christening-tour he could come to.”

Miles snorted, and explained to a puzzled Ekaterin the old custom in some northern districts, including his own, of taking newborn heirs to the Countship round and about to be seen. “It’s what Gran’da was doing with me, of course, just a few years late and with the reason backwards. We don’t have to but it might be fun, especially if I could get Gregor and Laisa up here.” It really was an idea, Miles thought, though he wondered if there might by then be a larger imperial family than Gregor and Laisa to introduce and whether poor Khourakis would have to learn to change imperial diapers before he was done. Perhaps a quadruple christening-tour would be in order. Zed’s assertion about a baby-boom in Silvy Vale amused him—if the tour did happen it would all be babies being introduced to one another—but when the party emerged into the large, level clearing that held the school he was astonished by the packed faces on the long school-porch and all around, and there did seem to be an amazing number of pregnant women among the mass suddenly applauding him and Ekaterin.

Harra and Lem Csurik stood centrally on the porch, beaming beneath a hand-carved sign in flowing script that named The Raina Csurik School. On either side stood their living children, a boy who must now, Miles calculated, be six, and a girl of four. Raina would have been eleven. All the adults present seemed to have well-dressed children with them, and Miles realised some formality would be needed before all could relax. While Zed dismounted to hold Ekaterin’s horse and Roic came forward to help Nikki dismount, he tapped Ninny’s dressage-trained flank and as the gelding knelt to
command slid down neatly to stand by Ekaterin’s side. Taking her hand he mounted to the porch, Harra and Lem making way for them, and turned to face the encircling crowd.

“Good people of Silvy Vale, my thanks to you all for this magnificent Midsummer greeting. I know some of you from previous visits, and look forward to meeting more. All of you, I hope, know me. But none of you yet know my wife, Lady Ekaterin Nile Vorvayne Vorsoisson Vorkosigan.”

Lem stepped forward, very much Speaker Csurik. “My Lady Vorkosigan, thrice welcome, and three cheers.” He called them and they came. “And, my Lady, though I see you are not wearing it today, I am told by Speaker Penderecki of Vorkosigan Surleau you were recently awarded, by our Emperor himself, a Gold Imperial Star, for most valorous service to Barrayar and the Imperium. We understand security concerns mean none may not know what happened, but we beg leave to offer you our warm thanks, our congratulations, and three more cheers.”

Seeing Ekaterin’s mortification Miles flicked a finger at Lem and raised a hand as the sixth huzzah died away. “Thank you, Speaker Csurik, and thank you all for your kind words and cheers. If she wasn’t blushing so much I am sure Lady Vorkosigan would say so too.” He waited the laughter out. “May I also make known to you all my stepson, born Master Nikolai Vorsoisson, who has chosen with his mother to take the name of Vorkosigan.”

As Roic urged Nikki forward Miles reached down to pull him up on to the porch between Ekaterin and himself, turning Nikki to the crowd and putting an arm around the boy’s waist. Nikki’s shoulders were already out of his reach.

“On some matters Barrayaran law is clear, and Nikki will never inherit the Countship. His choice was made in honour and fealty, and schooling will keep him away from the District much of the time, save in summer, until he is older. But though I pray it be very long in coming, one day he may walk among you as my Voice, so we have ridden here from Vorkosigan Surleau, knowing the hills for their bones and their toughness, and I present him formally to you today—our son, Master Nikolai Vorsoisson Vorkosigan.”

Speaker Csurik stepped forward again, his expression grave though his eyes twinkled. “Master Vorkosigan. We of Silvy Vale would always welcome a Vorkosigan in fealty and admiration, but we have special reason to welcome your father here and so to welcome you. Be free of the Vale this day, and go always with our good wishes.”

All of which, Miles thought, smiling, was quite enough, and catching Harra’s eye he managed smoothly to draw her and Lem, with himself, Ekaterin, and Nikki, down off the porch to greet Pym and be introduced to Roic and the patient ostler. Buzz and movement in the crowd assured him formalities were over, and moving slowly round with Ekaterin, Nikki, and the Csuriks to greet and be greeted more personally he was pleased to hear the Silvy Vale band beginning to tune up, and see stone pitchers of maple mead begin to appear. That would soon take care of any excess curiosity. A satisfying aroma of food began to fill the air.

By mid-afternoon, Miles was replete and his first few careful sips of maple mead to the good. The band was rolling. Nikki had disappeared with Roic and a score of children to inspect a local bathing-pool, perhaps the one Miles had himself been shown two years before and approved in a voice of Vorish authority. Ekaterin was with Harra somewhere. Pym sat across from him, holding a glass of maple mead that Miles had thrust on him and ostentatiously failing to drink it. Somewhere or other lots of Barrayarans and Cetagandans were making peace. Ivan, thanks to the haut Pel’s perfectly splendid as well as wicked request for him, might already be making demi-ghem babies as well. He would be outraged, even so. Miles and Ekaterin would be doing some reproducing themselves next year. Life was very good. He felt a foot prod his shin none too respectfully, and opened his eyes to
find the sun lower than it had been. Ekaterin and Harra stood over him, grinning in such unison he wasn’t at all sure who had enjoyed the privilege of kicking him awake.

“Come on, love.” Ekaterin hauled him to his feet and propelled him back towards, then up onto the porch. Pym trailed behind curiously. At the door of the senior schoolroom they halted, but he found himself pushed forward again. “Go in and look.” He went. Rows of desks looked like rows of desks, but a memory tickled his brain and he swung round to look at the wall behind the teacher’s desk. As mandated by law official pictures of Gregor in parade red-and-blues and the Count-his-father in house uniform stared sternly down at him, and as he had seen two years before, his own thoroughly unmandated, smirking face and short body were alongside them, topped by the long-gone Ensign’s shoulder-tabs of his imperial dress greens. But all three were now higher on the wall, diminished by two much larger double-portraits—of Gregor and Laisa on their wedding-circle, his parents and himself visible on the star-points with the most enormous grins on their faces; and of he and Ekaterin also in mid-wedding, with his parents to either side of them and behind Ekaterin the towering form of Sergeant Taura, complete with gleaming fangs, in that staggering champagne velvet dress Alys had procured for her. Gregor and Laisa were also clearly visible in the front rank of witnesses. Miles knew the expressions of profound respect on their faces were for the symbolism of Ekaterin’s shining pearls, worn that Winterfair day in defiance of their arrival covered in a neurotoxin that would have killed her, but from the image itself you would have said for all the world that Emperor and Empress gazed at Miles and Ekaterin alike with looks of reverent admiration.

When Ekaterin and Harra, trailed by Pym, pushed in a few moments later they found Miles sitting in a front-row desk, looking up at the display with bemusement. The women sat smiling at desks on either side of him while Pym swivelled to follow Miles’s eyes and stood arrested at the loyal display, and far more than loyal.

“Where did you get them, Harra? Neither was officially released, and they must have different sources. I’ve never seen either before.”

Harra grinned smugly. “When Lem and I got your note we wondered what we might do to show our joy for you and your lady. Then we had the call from Speaker Penderecki telling us what all about events in Vorkosigan Surleau, and he had Master Tsipis with him. So I had a little word.”

“That might get you me and Ekaterin. Where’d you get Gregor and Laisa with all of us grinning like loons?” He saw Pym slip out the doorway.

“Oh, well, when I told him what I was about Master Tsipis went all thoughtful, and asked me if I’d hold a minute. Then after he came back on I found myself talking to the best-dressed woman I’ve ever seen who said she was your aunt and from what Master Tsipis said to her she thought she might have just the thing.” Harra grinned. “I have to say I found it all very intimidating but she was nothing but kind, asked me what size I had in mind, and Master Tsipis brought it with the other one by lightflyer a couple of days later. Is she really your aunt?”

“His father’s cousin’s widow. Lady Alys Vorpatril.”

Ekaterin answered Harra because Miles was … giggling, slumped in his chair. Harra to Tsipis to Alys. She’d have got to Gregor from here in three steps. Then Pym returned with Roic in tow and swung the younger Armsman around to look at the portraits. As Roic gaped and zeroed in on Taura’s image, Harra spoke again, as much to Ekaterin as Miles and with caution lacing her accented voice.

“We had them up before the end of the school-year, and of course the children asked about the, um, very tall lady with the teeth who seems to have been your second, milady. Master Tsipis said she was called Sergeant Taura, and a very nice woman, but that I must ask you about her. May I do that?”
Miles stood, pulling a wickedly grinning Ekaterin up with him.

“Ask Armsman Roic. He doesn’t know quite as much as I do, but he has no wife in front of whom it would be most indelicate to answer your question.” And leaving Harra to her own outbreak of giggles, Roic to his renewed gape, and Pym to a smile of matchless Armsman seniority, Miles pulled Ekaterin out the door and into the dancing that seemed to have started around the square during their brief absence.

There were a lot of mirror-dances, two long country-dances that for him rather awkwardly involved everyone passing under chains of linked arms, and what he thought was called a reel, not inappropriately. After what might once have been a gavotte, and was certainly exhausting, he escaped with Ekaterin back to chairs on the quieter side of the square. More food and drink flowed as the day drew in, and folk stopped by briefly to offer he and Ekaterin congratulations and loyal respects. Vada Rachov was there, and the elder Karals. Miles chatted for a while to the old veteran, who without saying anything explicit made clear he regretted the hear-no-evil, see-no-evil attitude he had taken as Speaker to probable infanticides, and welcomed the changes in the Vale that had flowed from Miles’s first, judicial visit. He also relayed the hopes of many in Seligrad that they might soon themselves enjoy a personal visit from their Count’s son-and-Voice and his bride—at which Miles smiled noncommittally, while privately admitting that smaller lowland cities of the District, Seligrad among them, had certainly been neglected.

Later still, replete again and beginning to feel the sips of maple mead, he found himself in a quieter circle, with Ekaterin, Lem, and Harra on the back-porch of the school. Ekaterin held her own glass of maple mead, into which she occasionally dipped a finger, sucking droplets with bemused respect for the qualities of what Ivan called the most disgusting, gut-destroying, guerrilla attack-beverage ever brewed by man, and even Miles admitted was an acquired taste.

As on the last occasion when he had sat talking with Lem and Harra, at the lakeside, both moons were high and clear, stippling trees and grass with thin light and cross-hatched shadows. After a silence while Lem passed the stone pitcher around Harra’s voice was fondly teasing.

“So, little man, you’re in a better state than last time you were here.”

Ekaterin’s eyebrows rose in the double moonlight as she absorbed Miles’s easy willingness to be called in private by Harra what he would take from no-one else, even Gregor.

“Yes. I just went on, as you said, and see what happened. So now I’m Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, a married man.”

“And dare I say fatherhood to come?” Lem’s voice was also teasing. “Not that you haven’t made a start with young Master Nikki. He’s a nice lad, that one.”

“Yes, he is. It’s not been easy for him. As to the other, well …” His eyes sought Ekaterin’s, who nodded and when his hand moved in invitation spoke herself.

“We’re going to have two children next year, a boy and a girl. Aral Alexander and Helen Natalia.” After the congratulations she smiled a little shyly. “I don’t expect there’ll be an official announcement in Hassadar until after Winterfair, but I’m finding I like telling people.”

“I don’t blame you.” But Harra was also, Miles saw, hurting a little, and took the pitcher from Lem for a moment before speaking softly, more to Ekaterin than anyone else. “Lem and me, we were hoping to have another kid, but I miscarried last year, and … well, the babe wouldn’t have lived, and the doc says he doubts I’ll quicken again.”

Miles was absorbing this, guiltily aware of the contrast between his and Ekaterin’s easy decision
about how many replicators to use at once and Harra’s struggle with the intractabilities of her body and the genetic damage that lingered in the mountains, when he felt Ekaterin’s hand press hard on his own and looked up to see an urgent question in her eyes. Not sure what it was—maple-mead did not help one think, dammit—he nevertheless showed assent and her grip eased.

“I’m sorry to hear it, Harra. Nikki was a body-birth, so I do know something of what you’ve been through. The thing is, Miles and I decided we would present uterine replicators to the back-country health clinics that still lacked them, like your new one here, as a bride-gift to the District. That’ll probably be announced after Winterfair too. So perhaps you and Lem could, um, inaugurate one for Silvy Vale.”

Lem and Harra stared, gazes shifting between the Lord and Lady become friends, who could so simply alter lives. “And the child would be … whole? With Raina that’s two of four I’ve had that weren’t … right.”

Miles had been scrambling to catch-up with Ekaterin’s swift thinking while resisting both temptation to whoop at the finesse that made her kindness acceptable to Harra and Lem, and the need to figure out where he was going to lay hands on very expensive uterine replicators by the … dozens, probably. But at Harra’s uncertain question he sat up.

“Oh yes. It’s not just using a replicator, Harra. They screen the zygote for problems and the blastocyst and embryo are monitored the whole time. I’ve been chairing an Auditorial Committee that’s going to recommend new laws about genetic technology, so I know the figures. There were more than four million births on Barrayar last year, nearly a third by replicator.”

Actually, come to think of it, Count Vormuir might be selling off some replicators he wasn’t going to be allowed to use any more to start laying up funds he was going to need for more than a hundred dowries for the daughters Gregor had declared Count-Palatine bastards. Miles also knew where seventeen old but high quality Escobaran replicators were stored at ImpMil, including one he had once inhabited. But that could wait.

“Truly?”

“Truly, Harra. If you want this, it will be well.”

“Oh.” The hillwoman buried her head in Lem’s shoulder for a moment, then took the pitcher again and raised it to Miles. “If you make us grow any more, little man, we’ll all have our heads in the stars.”

Miles grinned at them both. “Just you wait and see. There’s going to be a very unusual imperial holocaust sometime in the next few months, and believe me, you won’t want to miss it.”

* * * * *

After that night events began to speed up again for Miles and Ekaterin. The return trip to Vorkosigan Surleau next morning was much swifter than their leisurely outward ride, by aircar with the big stable airvan to ferry horses in relay. And from the string of messages waiting for Miles from Gregor, Alys, and even his parents, patched through from Eta Ceta via Gregor’s frame and comconsole, he soon realised his airy ‘next few months’ to Harra was going to prove optimistic. Or did he mean pessimistic? Either way, the next few weeks seemed more likely, or even, listening to Gregor, the
Nikki opted to remain in Vorkosigan Surleau with Ma Pym and Arthur, mostly, Miles decided with amusement, because the lure of District defence-training and fieldcraft classes shared with Lara Jankowski was a more potent attraction than anything his parents were likely to offer while busy in Vorbarr Sultana. Roic too would stay—an Armsman-bodyguard was not, strictly speaking, required for a Master Vorkosigan, but it allayed Ekaterin’s instinctive worry at being parted from her son, and would, Miles hoped, do yet more good all round. Nikki, who had met Taura at the wedding, had apparently managed to overhear Roic’s stammering praises of her to a fascinated Harra in the school-room, as a superbly fit fighting woman who even without adrenaline could bench-press two-hundred-and-fifty kilos and as a love-goddess somehow descended to Barrayar. In consequence the Armsman had risen in Nikki’s estimation, and as the youngest in the Vorkosigans’ Score was in any case the obvious choice for the job.

After setting the machinery of exodus in motion, washing in ways backcountry travelling did not allow, and eating lunch, he made holding calls to Alys and Gregor on the secured comconsole, promising swift return to the capital and his duties.

“Good.” Gregor, eating lunch with Laisa, was emphatic, even a trifle agitated. “I know you needed a break, Miles, but we need you back here. Too many people know about frames already, and it’s starting to leak. Come to the Residence as soon as you can, please.” Miles made soothing noises. “No, Miles, I’m serious. Someone’s gabbed to one of the news shows and they’re going to go with it first if we don’t act.”

“Gregor, calm down.” He thought for a moment, then shook his head. “This is absurd. You are an absolute ruler. Be one shamelessly for once. Guy should send a few too many guards to collect the owners and editor, and tell them in your Voice there’ll be an official announcement within a week or so and if anyone tries to publish anything ahead of time all of them will be arrested for high treason, to wit, disobeying your direct order in a matter touching the security of the Imperium. You throw your weight around so little like that they’ll all be shaken rigid.”

“Oh. Alright.” Laisa was managing to combine scandalised Komarran and amused Barrayaran looks. Miles winked at her.

“I’ll see you both this evening.” He cut the comlink and sighed. But he shouldn’t be surprised, he thought ruefully, if Gregor’s decisiveness was presently as strained as his own. He waited patiently, composing himself, and a few moments later the call he had expected from Allegre came in.

“Miles. Gregor says you—“

“Yes, I did, Guy. I know it’s not how we usually handle these things and a very bad long-term method but we don’t have a long term to worry about, only a week or less. I have to confirm what the Cetas want to do about an announcement—my parents are on that, I gather—but I can’t see any benefit in delaying much longer.”

Allegre grimaced, but nodded. “Yes, alright. I do see it’s not the time for fiddling.” He brightened. “And actually it’ll be rather enjoyable. He’s trodden a fine line with security before, that one, so it suits me well enough to scare him back for once.”

Miles grinned. “I thought you’d come round to that view. So tell me, Guy, how should we organise an imperial broadcast backed by an order in Gregor’s Voice for all his subjects to stop whatever they’re doing and listen up for ten minutes?”

Allegre stared. “You’re serious?”
“Oh, I think so. We shan’t need to drum up an audience for our later broadcasts, I fancy. But for this first one, now …”

“Huh.” After a moment Allegre smiled acidly. “D’you know, Miles, the only planet-wide alert-systems are for Invasion and Major Epidemics. They’re both designed to function even with power-grid and comnet down.”

Miles grimaced. “Not the Epidemic Alert, certainly. But the Invasion Alert … suitably adjusted. Hmm. It’s a personnel cascade, isn’t it?”

“Yes—signals or if necessary bodies radiating out from all imperial assets, military and civilian, with power of co-option over all other civil organisations and all subjects. With the comnet up it should be possible to reach 80% plus of the population in six-to-eight hours and 95% plus within a day.”

“That’ll do it.” Miles nodded sharply. “I’ll work with Gregor and Alys tonight on what our non-invasion alert will have to say, and how to present it. Alys can do a personal command to all high Vor via the Counts, the Ministers, and anyone else senior enough to warrant one. She can also tap the Residence’s access to the civil command net to get those big holovid projectors they use at Winterfair and Gregor’s Birthday put up in the major city squares. The Counts can be told to do that too for all District capitals and offices. Will you tell Yuri to expect an all-available-forces order sometime next week and ask Duv Galeni and Vidal Olshansky to organise cascades on Komarr and Sergyar?”

“Eh?”

“We can use interplanetary frame-links and go imperium-wide in realtime, you know, Guy. And for the, ah, Big Broadcast later on I wasn’t joking about going live Nexus-wide.”

Allegre stared, shaking his head. “You can only have had a few days more than me to assimilate frame-technology, Miles, but you think it already. I’ve got Komarran and Sergyaran frame-links here in my office, and so have Duv and Vidal, but using links like that would never have occurred to me. Which it should have done.” He shook his head again. “I’ll add a note to the end of my already very long list of next-most-urgent things to do that we need to update all alert procedures to allow for frames and any loss of frame-links.”

Miles grinned again. “Everyone’s going to have to update everything.” Why was Allegre frowning? “I’m sure all the Lords Auditor will be drafted to help out, so I’ll be in the same boat.”

Allegre’s frown deepened for a moment, then cleared in recognition of something. He looked at Miles. “Well, that’ll help, certainly. Did you know, Miles, that a young cat I am told you have had the impertinence to name ImpSec is presently looking at me over your shoulder?”

Ack. Gregor blew the gaff. Oh well. “No, Guy, I didn’t. But I’m not in the least surprised, and the name was a tribute to a surpassing ingenuity and omnipresence.” Sighing, he reached up behind him to grasp a grey-and-tabby scruff and deposit the purring beast on his lap. ImpSec was just reaching a gangly-legged adolescent stage and rolled onto his back, waving legs and tail at Miles as his stomach was stroked. “Actually, I almost recommended him to you as an agent after he managed to smuggle himself down here from Vorkosigan House. No-one admits to bringing him, and I saw no guilty starts nor heard no guilty stammers so I’m inclined to think he really did stow away successfully. He certainly ran rings round poor Khourakis as well as me.”

ImpSec sat up looking as smug as an odd-coloured and overgrown kitten can, and this time Allegre did smile. “Perhaps I had better give in, then, and officially issue him with an all-areas access chip. He seems to have one already.”
Miles sketched rueful acknowledgement. ImpSec accurately batted at his hand. Allegre laughed and signed off, cutting the comlink, and Miles rose, lifting the cat to a perch on his shoulder, and went to obey his Imperial Master’s summons.

Though somewhat taken aback by Miles’s modified-Invasion-Alert and pan-Imperial-broadcast plans Gregor and Alys saw his reasoning and entered into the purpose. Vorlynkin proved entirely willing, and like other senior Staff gleefully intrigued by using the rarely tested alert-system. Consulted by frame, at the Barrayaran Embassy in Eta Ceta and in Dag Benin’s office, Miles’s parents secured Cetagandan agreement to a date five days later, times at local convenience, and to the content of the broadcast—the existence of frames, a bare hint of nanoforges to come, and the fact of an upcoming peace treaty between the Imperia. Watch this space.

Feeds of each broadcast would be made available in all eleven main planetary systems, with a delay to preserve each emperor’s primacy in His Own imperium. Miles successfully argued for a frame-link between Vorbarr Sultana and Eta Ceta to be made visible during each imperial address: Barrayarans would see the Viceroy and Vicereine in an obviously Cetagandan setting, watching with their mission-staff and the embassy personnel, while Cetagandans would see hauts Palma Robine (embubbled, naturally) and Raniton Degtiar with equivalent support in a Barrayaran setting. The massed ambassadors of each capital would be invited to the respective addresses, taking care of formal notification to a further hundred odd polities of the Nexus. Also to be announced were Gregor’s invitation to Cetagandans who so wished to make pilgrimages of ancestral grace, and Giaja’s reciprocal invitation allowing Barrayarans to travel to Cetagandan planets with Celestial permission to his subjects to go to Barrayaran planets. It would end on both sides with news of the visit to Barrayar itself by ghém-General Coram and party.

Having accumulated Auditorial duties to discharge in chairing his damned genetics committee, Miles could not sit back and wait for the unprecedented alert to ripple across the Imperium. Instead he took care to schedule a committee meeting so the alert intruded upon their deliberations after about two hours, and with a little help from René Vorbretten, Dono Vorrutyer, and the hardcore medics on the panel, whose tolerance for aggrieved Vor blether was running low, he managed as the shock-waves of Gregor’s Command hit the assembled arguers to ram through half-a-dozen finicky decisions that had been holding things up for months. For once he left one of those interminable meetings early and with a rare feeling of administrative satisfaction.

The news-nets had nothing else on their holocasts that evening. A few bright sparks among commentators, Miles saw hopping channels after dinner, did wonder about recent activity at the Cetagandan Embassy and the rumoured presence of a haut woman, but the well-informed editor had clearly been well silenced. For most of the time all stations simply covered the progress of the Command blooming outwards from population centres across Barrayar’s continents, remarked its unprecedented nature, and showed the Imperial Residence and blank ‘vid screens being erected in presently empty squares and parks. Roving reporters repeatedly tried to interview deputed imperial messengers about their business, seemingly unable to realise that as yet no-one knew anything much save that their Emperor strangely commanded everyone’s attention on the morrow, and they trusted He wouldn’t do so if He didn’t have something to say that was going to be worth hearing.

The Barrayarans’ chosen time was early morning for the easternmost settlements of North Continent, which made it late morning in Vorbarr Sultana and still just a reasonable time of evening in the west of South Continent. Inevitably, two-thirds of the circumplanetary gore-shaped sectors of oceanless
Komarr did well enough, fortunately including Solstice with the Imperial Counsellor’s office, while in one-third folk would have to stay up very late or rise very early. Miles didn’t think they’d mind when they heard what it was all about; they’d also be too busy redoing financial calculations to factor in the advantageous tariffs on frame-technology they would soon be enjoying over non-Barrayaran planets—a view Laisa and Duv Galeni endorsed with laughter. Nor would Sergyarans object to what was for them mostly an early wake-up call when they finally found out where their Viceroy and Vicereine had been this last month and were given hope of vastly improved contact with relatives left behind on Barrayar and Komarr.

In keeping with the civic spirit Miles had a large holovid projector temporarily installed in the Barrayaran Garden Ekaterin had created next to Vorkosigan House for their marriage, use of which they had jointly presented to the city. Flower-beds were protected, sight-lines cleared as much as might be, and little repeater-screens placed wherever there were blind spots.

As the time neared next morning Miles, in his new, glittery house blacks and Auditor’s chain, and Ekaterin, wearing her own spectacular summit-dress and suppressing a demented desire to grin, solemnly led the equally best-dressed Pym, Jankowski, Ma Kosti and all house staff to prepared places. In Vorkosigan Surleau Master Tsipis and Roic would be bracketing Nikki in the crowded square outside the inn. Only the gate-guards remained at Vorkosigan House, with a repeater-screen of their own. They had, under extremely strict orders, detained ImpSec with a plate of fresh fish and a bowl of the sweetened milk Ma Kosti admitted knowing he liked. Followed by use of a stunner if necessary.

The progress of their little pageant attracted attention, including roving news-teams Miles had not quite expected. The garden and nearer streets were packed with people in nervous good-humour, eager to see in person the notorious young Lord Auditor with his intriguing widow-bride, and in a mood to be respectful not only of Gregor but of the Vor nobility from which he arose. Internally Miles nodded satisfaction—the wording he, Alys, and Gregor had wrought had induced alert excitement and internal bracing for surprise, but damped undue alarm.

Precisely at the appointed hour the holovid projector blazed into life and the Red Room of the Imperial Residence sprang into view, a dazzling tableau that drew exclamations from the crowd. Gregor and Laisa sat together on a daïs at one end, wearing their subtly sparkling summit-clothes; at a slight angle beside them stood a large, presently empty frame, while facing them were the Ministerial Cabinet, a dozen senior General Staff, including Vorlynkin, and every ambassador accredited to Gregor’s Court. Cetaganda had pride of place, followed by the Vervani, Polian, and Aslunder allies of the Hegen Hub Alliance, and the Marilacan, Betan, and Terran Ambassadors. No-one from Jackson’s Whole had ever been accredited. Slowly focus tightened until Gregor alone looked out at them, still and calm; the material of his new red-and-blues flickered with opalescent colour as he breathed. He looked good.

“Our Counts and Ministers, Our subjects on Barrayar, Komarr, and Sergyar, honoured guests. We call you together today in this unusual way to bring you unprecedented and very good news. We have the gift of a new technology—two new technologies—that will ease all our lives. And We have also to report an invaluable peace.”

The murmurs that ran through the watching crowd in the garden quieted as Gregor announced the invention of frames providing realtime interplanetary communication, whereby Komarr and Sergyar were also hearing him at this moment. Allowing a few seconds for that to be assimilated he gestured to the frame beside him, and it too sprang into colourful life to reveal the Viceroy and Vicereine with their mission staff, as well as Ambassador Vorreedi, his embassy personnel, and a stone-faced Ivan Vorpatril, seated in pre-dawn darkness in front of a beautiful, almost sculpted and stunningly lit garden-vista. It screamed of Cetagandan aesthetics and was, Miles recognised, actually a part of the
Celestial Garden—expedient security posing as a generous gesture. The men all wore Imperial dress greens, the women traditional full-skirted dresses with embroidered boleros, their collectively declared Barrayaran identity contrasting with the exquisite backdrop yet effortlessly absorbed within it. Beside him he felt as much as heard Ekaterin hum appreciation and interest. As framed Barrayarans rose, bowed or curtsied to Gregor and Laisa, and sat again, a brief Imperial exchange with Viceroy and Vicereine confirmed their presence on Eta Ceta and demonstrated the lack of delay in communication. All but one of the gathered diplomats were sitting bolt upright, gawping. Ha. Most satisfactory.

In the crowd around Miles and Ekaterin there was a moment of utter stillness, then a great, gusting sigh. One or two people, absorbing more rapidly than their fellows what frames would truly mean, or with special personal reasons to welcome them, had dawning looks of relief or joy. Gregor again allowed a moment, then raised a hand.

“This greeting from Our Viceroy and Vicereine of Sergyar on Eta Ceta tells you what Our other news must be.” His face became sombre. “For nearly a century Our Imperium and the Cetagandan Imperium of Our Celestial Cousin the haut Fletchir Giaja have been at open war or hostile odds. Millions of Our and Our forebears’ subjects have died in this conflict. So have many of Our Celestial Cousin’s and His forebears’ subjects. Yet of late Barrayar and Cetaganda have had an uneasy truce, and it was Our greatest concern that the gift of frame technology might renew Our conflict. There is also another technology arising from the frames that We must consider. But neither will be allowed to endanger Our peace.”

Tension eased again in another gusting sigh.

“Our Celestial Cousin and We have agreed We will fully cooperate in this. Much remains to be negotiated by Our loyal Counts, Officers, and Ministers, but We have each given Our most solemn Words that Our forces will make no hostile move, that We will replace strife with amity and courteous exchange.” As this sank in Miles saw some couples in the crowd embracing; other people were crying. “In token of Our agreement We decree travel-restrictions on Our subjects be immediately eased. Our Barrayaran subjects may travel to Eta, Mu, Rho, and Sigma Ceta. Our Cousin’s subjects may travel to Sergyar, Komarr, and Barrayar.” He lifted his hand slightly and the growing murmurs and movements ceased. “In particular, there are a number of Our Cousin’s ghem-subjects who wish to make pilgrimages of ancestral grace, to visit on Barrayar the places where their forebears died and were not recovered for the proper rites. No Barrayaran can fail to understand and respect such a purpose. A first, official party of such pilgrims, led by ghem-General Ferrant Coram of Our Cousin’s Imperial Guard, whose forebear died in the Dendarii Mountains, will arrive on Barrayar within a few weeks. They will be guests of Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, whose father’s District most wish to visit, and who has done more than any other to secure for Us these gifts of technology and peace.”

Awk. That had not been in the script Miles knew about, but beating Gregor on the head was going to have to wait. Around him the crowd were suddenly intent on he and Ekaterin, surprised and interested. He struggled to keep his face neutral. Even in the Red Room murmurs had broken out among diplomats, until Gregor and Laisa stood, drawing everyone in their physical presence and in the framed Eta Cetan party to their feet. Gregor’s voice rang with will in the silence that followed.

“We request and require every subject to extend to these pilgrims all courtesy and assistance, as We will.” No way for anyone around that, Miles thought with satisfaction, so organising—and policing—those pilgrimages had just become enormously simpler. “And We hope soon to summon you all again, to hear fuller terms of Our treaty with Our Celestial Cousin. In the meantime, honoured guests”—he gestured at the assembled ambassadors—“frames will be provided to link you, and Our Residence, with your home governments, so negotiations for licensing of frame-technology to all
may begin.”

Massed diplomatic relief was evident. For the last time Gregor looked straight out, making eye-contact with every subject who would make it with Him. His eyes twinkled.

“We imagine the rest of today may be somewhat irregular, and We request and require that you celebrate Our gifts of peace … peacefully. For now, that is all. Go then with Our thanks and blessing.”

The holovid winked out, and after a brief stillness a roar arose, of cheers, applause, exclamations, shouts, bellows, and what a deafened Miles thought he’d have to call ululations. Ekaterin was grinning at him, house-staff were smiling and applauding; in Pym’s and Ma Kosti’s eyes he could see churning calculation as they put together what they had gleaned from the summit-weekend with what they had just learned. Suddenly he was aware of noise dropping away behind him and Ekaterin’s hand tugging his arm. Turning, he saw an elderly woman, in her seventies perhaps, being supported by his wife while tears streamed down her cheeks. The crowd had seen her too, and were falling silent to hear what would be said. She stared down at him uncertainly.

“Your Lordship, I’m not of your District, and only visiting here, but it was you the Emperor meant, that’s made this peace for us?”

The old lady hadn’t stopped crying but stood straight, her voice level. Miles was spared his blushes by Ekaterin.

“It was. My husband is Lord Auditor Miles Vorkosigan, the son of Viceroy Count Aral Vorkosigan.”

“Then I’ll bless you in my prayers, my Lord. My father died in the Occupation, my husband in the Pretender’s War, and my elder son at the Hegen Hub. My younger son and grandson still serve in space, and it has been my terror that our wars would take them too.”

Miles bowed deeply to her, brain scrambling. “It is my pleasure and honour to serve you, ma’am, as you have served Barrayar.” Bother Gregor! The crowd murmured approval but plainly wanted more. How could he follow Gregor now? He couldn’t think what else to say until he recalled Ma Kosti in earshot behind him. Flicking a finger-signal to Pym he took Ekaterin’s arm. “Will you do me the honour, Madame, of joining us now for lunch at Vorkosigan House?”

Pym moved to the woman’s side, offering her a liveried arm. After a surprised second she took it with a trembling smile, and Miles and Ekaterin led the pageant back toward the House amid more cheers and a great babble of excited conversation.

* * * * *

Somewhat irregular didn’t cover the half of it, but the mood was uniformly jubilant and the street-police light-handed as a very noisy day and evening wore on. The old lady, Madame Ieskennis, was made warmly welcome, fed, listened to, and flown by Jankowski back to the grass-widow daughter-in-law with whom she was staying, while Miles settled down to absorb the news-coverage.

No-one on the streets or in the studios seemed sure if they wanted to talk first about frames or Cetagandans, so settled happily to doing both at once. From time to time someone remembered the other new technology Gregor had mentioned, but any speculation soon grew so wild the more
interesting discussions tended to concentrate on what was actually known. In the process, Miles saw with fascinated pleasure, an initial tendency to regard the treaty as a Barrayaran victory was tempered towards more realistic assessments in which Cetagandans figured more as new, powerful galactic neighbours with whom one obviously wished to be on good terms, than as an old, let alone defeated enemy. It seemed an odd, not entirely logical process, but he had believed conjoining news of technology and treaty would allow positive interference of some kind, and he had been right. Gregor’s mention of him had predictable consequences, spurring badly potted bio-clips and bringing groups of revellers to the street outside Vorkosigan House en route to the Residence. Every now and then they got up a chant calling for him, and even Ekaterin urged him to go out but he flatly refused. “Balcony appearances are imperial business, not mine. Not today and not ever.” Instead he got Pym in full livery to go out whenever it became too deafening, to tell the crowds he was sorry to inform them His Lordship was not in residence, but would, he was sure, thank them for their good wishes and return them. Eyeing the monitors, Miles gave orders to make water, food for children, and minor assistance freely available from the gate-guards. Ekaterin eyed him in turn with a judicious look of her own, but let him be and went to call Nikki.

The last thing Miles was waiting for came in late evening, when all ’vid channels simultaneously broadcast a repeat of Gregor’s speech and then, in yet another Barrayaran precedent for the day, the broadcast Fletchir Giaja was making on Eta Ceta. The Cetagandan emperor sat in sumptuary splendour in a state reception room, with no sign of Rian Degtiar or any other haut. His wording was even more formal and less informative than Gregor’s, but the content was the same, without mention of Miles, and the immediate audience in the reception room a close diplomatic match. The frame-connection—again large, but still within the stark metal simplicity of Chandler’s design, which the haut must approve—showed Raniton Degtiar, the mission staff, and the Ambassador standing around Palma Robine’s festively tinted bubble in the north gardens of the subtly lit Imperial Residence, an instantly recognisable outline behind them. All was still around the group, and Miles wondered how many Cetagandans would realise that was purely an effect of a large force-bubble, outside which was a racket of Barrayaran celebration. As the haut governor and planetary consort exchanged greetings with His Celestial Majesty, revealing the realtime communication with Vorbarr Sultana, more than a hundred ambassadorial jaws dropped in splendid synchrony. The treaty news after that produced more narrowed eyes than open surprise, but the presence of the Viceroy and Vicereine for so long could hardly have been concealed from the diplomatic community surrounding the Celestial Garden—not if they knew their business, anyway. Ekaterin watched it with him. At the Cetagandan end they would be broadcasting Gregor’s address immediately after Giaja’s. He let out a long, long sigh of relief, and Ekaterin cocked her head enquiringly. “Happy now?” “Yes, I suppose so. They’re both committed anyway. No going back from that.” “Why would they want to?” “Ah.” “Miles?” Ekaterin’s voice was sharpening. He smiled apologetically. “It’s alright, love. It’s just there’s one or two more little implications in Jack Chandler’s hypothesis that can now be put into small padlocked boxes somewhere very safe. I’m setting up a call between Guy and Dag that Jack and I will attend, and that can go to Gregor and Giaja as very much eyes only.” She studied him carefully. “Things that were a bit too … full of further implications, perhaps?”
“Yes. All very hypothetical but capable of distracting everyone beyond recall.”

“Alright. Will this interfere with tomorrow night? Aunt Helen’s expecting us both.”

“No, no. The call will be the day after, I think. Not that I wouldn’t mind dumping it on Gregor right now after that little unscheduled addition of his.”

Ekaterin grinned at him. “Why are you hating it so much, love? I thought you craved recognition.”

“I thought so too. It seems not. And Gregor’s wrong anyway. It’s Da and Gran’da who made this possible, over most of a century, not Jack and me in two weeks of scheming.”

“Ah, that. Well, you took comprehensive care of your Da’s fame. Gregor’s just taking care of yours. Besides, I don’t think he has much time for people who think he appointed you as a favour to your Da, so he took a chance to poke them in the eye.”

“Huh.” Miles was spared further response to Ekaterin’s shrewd remarks by a call on the secure comsonsole from the offending emperor himself, who was briskly unrepentant.

“Nonsense, Miles. You’re a Lord Auditor now, even if you are still addicted to covert ops. Anyway, you always said you hated never getting any credit for your achievements with ImpSec and the Dendarii, so you should be pleased.”

“Huh. And ImpSec’s another thing—you peached on me to Guy Allegre.” Miles stuck out his tongue and Gregor laughed.

“Oh, the cat. Actually it was Simon, and Guy was amused anyway. But sulk if you want. He’ll come round in a few days, Ekaterin. And by the way, who was that old lady you were supporting? It’s on several channels but I’ve not been able to catch the sound yet.”

Ekaterin had not been aware she had herself, with Miles, been featuring quite heavily in the holocasts. Nikki had not seen any coverage when she had talked to him during the afternoon—or rather, been talked to in high excitement peppered with clever guesses about their mystery weekend. Miles had seen the clips once, with deeply mixed emotions—besides the garden-footage, Madame Ieskennis, badgered out of her local-celebrity reception by a news-team, had achieved loquacious dignity—and thereafter hopped channels whenever they came on. Now, blushing, and batting at Miles’s arm much as ImpSec did when annoyed, Ekaterin relayed to Gregor the identity of their surprise lunch-guest and the gist of what had been said. He tapped himself a note.

“Poor woman. I’ll make sure she gets an invitation to the big bash—which is really why I called, Miles. Coram will be here in about a month, and I’ve agreed with Fletchir to do the fleet and volumes of influence treaty then. The main parts of that are sorted already, as are the secret clauses, and most of the rest is pragmatics that’ll have to await events anyway.” Gregor grimaced. “Trades and tariffs is going to take a lot longer. With so few people off Barrayar and Eta Ceta in the loop before today we’ve barely been able to start. But no matter.”

Miles calculated. “Treaty-signing on your Birthday, perhaps?”

Gregor smiled. “If possible, yes. Fletchir’s not keen, but I told him if I blew another working week with an announcement I’d have businessmen howling murder, and he laughed so I think he’ll accept it.” He fiddled with the ring on his finger for a minute, then looked at them both. “There’ll be something else just afterwards as well. Alys has been giving me looks ever since your other news that weekend, and so have your parents, Miles. I wanted to tell you both with Laisa, but she’s exhausted after a very careful but satisfactory frame-call with her parents.” Miles could imagine, but
his hand was tight in Ekaterin’s and imagining could wait. “Like you, a boy and a girl, whose replicator lids will be opened at the same second. Let the salic lawyers chew on that.”

Miles stared. Was Gregor serious about not presuming the prince to be his heir apparent? But even the appalling implications of allowing salic descent on Barrayar would have to wait. “Gregor, I’m delighted for you. We both are. We hoped you and Laisa would decide soon. And it’ll be welcomed everywhere. But forgive me, have you decided about names?”

“Yes.” Gregor smiled at them, rue, determination, and relief all mixed up with his happiness. “I don’t care what anyone says, I will not use Serg. So I asked your Da, who hummed and hawed a bit but said he would be delighted and was slowly getting used to the idea of having people and things named for him. The boy will be Aral Michael, for the man who is most truly his grandfather, and for Laisa’s Da, of course. And her Ma agreed the girl will be Kareen Cordelia.”

For the second time in one day Miles found himself speechless, though that didn’t stop the upper regions of his brain from admiring the political astuteness Gregor had brought to his dilemma. Miles had been painfully aware, without pointing it out to anyone save Alys, that the grandparental naming conventions of Barrayar were a major part of Gregor’s year-long delay in making this decision. Ekaterin, he thought, had also seen Gregor’s problem once she had somehow worked out what was driving him—with help from Alys and Illyan, he thought—but she was clearly not as dumbstruck as he.

“Gregor, that’s wonderful. Please relay our congratulations to Laisa. May I tell Aunt Helen and Uncle Georg tomorrow night? We’re dining with them.”

“Yes, do. I shall tell Alys and Simon next. But the two of them only, please, Ekaterin, and in the strictest confidence.” He glanced at Miles. “I don’t want to have to send ImpSec—not the cat—after any more news-editors before my birthday.”

Ekaterin knew about the swift and effective intimidation of the would-be leaker, and found she rather approved. “Of course. I don’t think they’ve other guests, and I suspect Aunt Helen wants to wax historical.”

“Oh.” Gregor looked oddly amused. “I rather think you’ll find they do have another guest, after a fashion, from what Georg has been telling me, so you might have to be more discreet than you suppose. But I’ll leave that surprise for them.”

He smiled farewell and was gone, leaving Miles and Ekaterin to the puzzle of his closing words, and their own celebrations of the day.

* * * * *

So far as Ekaterin could see no-one but her uncle and aunt was in evidence when they arrived at the Vorthyses’ house next evening, so once they all had drinks in hand she told them Gregor’s and Laisa’s news and decisions about naming. Pleasure and deeply felt political relief blossomed on Barrayaran faces, and hugs were exchanged all round.

“Oh my. It’s going to be quite a year for babies. And for names.” Aunt Helen was flushed.

“It surely is,” Uncle Georg agreed, “but we must be careful not to mention this in any way at dinner.” He sounded solemn but looked mischievous. “Come on. You’ll see.”
To Ekaterin’s surprise he led the way to the kitchen table, not the more formal dining-room where larger parties usually ate, and sat them in chairs arranged asymmetrically, with two on one side for them and the fourth side bare. A smiling Aunt Helen whisked a first course into place as her guests looked round in puzzlement. The only thing different Ekaterin could see in the familiar kitchen was a dull strip of metal set into the untenanted edge of the table. Then Uncle Georg, consulting an oversize chrono he took from one of his capacious pockets, produced a little remote-control and with a huge wink tapped it. Abruptly the empty place was filled by a frame-bright image of Artificer General Kariam, wearing a loose civilian body-suit with a simple overrobe around his girth, and without face-paint. He was also seated at a table, with a plate of food in front of him whose image appeared where it ought in the fourth place; around him was only a shiver of background.

Miles and Ekaterin froze in surprise, then Miles’s chin jerked up.

“Lord Auditor and Lady Vorkosigan. It is my pleasure to meet you both again.” Devoid of his distracting orange-and-green facial rosette the white-haired ghem-scientist was revealed as a genuine counterpart of Uncle Georg, Ekaterin saw, equally combining rumpled and cheerful, and while definitely second in the nose department would win on ears with ease. He was politely holding in amusement, but clearly pleased with the surprise; her uncle boomed laughter and Aunt Helen beamed.

“Vanos is a widower, you see,” Georg explained, “and I was making poor Helen into one with all the time I was having to spend on the frame in the basement. So we figured if two old engineers couldn’t rig up what they really wanted, who could?”

“Actually, Jack’s design makes this kind of adaptation very easy. And it was fun to do, as these meals with Georg and Helen have brightened my life.” Kariam’s basso gave meaty fullness to Barrayaran gutturals, and he was clearly at ease in the language. Miles recovered his wits.

“General Kariam. What an unexpected pleasure.”

“Oh, Vanos, please.”

“Vanos. We are Miles and Ekaterin. I’m sorry to hear you are widowed.”

“Thank you. A long time ago. She was a haut bride, and I am not permitted to discuss what happened. But I was not married before, and I want no other woman now. My work is enough.”

“And fine work it is,” Georg chipped in with elephantine tact. “You know, Miles, we do believe your absurd tractor-bubbles are going to work beautifully. Three field technologies and frames in perfect conjunction. Do you really want to be able to, what was it you said, march the barons out of their own front doors?”

“Oh yes. And line them up, and make them bend the knee to our Imperial Masters.”

Miles wasn’t joking but Kariam smiled broadly. “That is a good phrase. And I remember haut Pel approved the sentiment. So, that is what we shall do. Georg—”

For a few moments the engineers broke into high formal engineering mostly in mathematical mode about, so far as Ekaterin could tell, combining sufficient power to compel a body to walk and kneel with sufficiently fine control not to break or permanently squish anything vital while doing so. Beside her Miles listened with equal bemusement, but satisfaction at the positive trend, while Aunt Helen took their plates and served the main course, declining help. Suddenly the babble ended and both engineers turned to their food with gusto. After a moment Ekaterin plucked up courage.
“So, are the tractor-bubbles going to be able to do that?”

Her uncle nodded, still chewing. “Yes, my dear, they are.”

Beside her Miles developed a grin with a feral edge. Ekaterin forged on. “And, excuse me, Vanos, but will the force-bubbles be tintable, like the ones haut ladies use?”

Kariam stared at her in surprise and swallowed. “I hadn’t planned so, but there is no reason they cannot be. It is a superficial additional tuning to their real business.”

Ekaterin smiled at him warmly. “Then do you think, Vanos, you could remind haut Pel of that possibility? I had the impression you had some technical contact with her.”

Kariam nodded. “Yes. Like all haut women she is a bioscientist, not an engineer, but she has formal responsibility for Star Crèche equipment, including float-chairs.” He hesitated. “Forgive me, Ekaterin, is there an agenda here I should understand?”

“Only that it may be as important how it all looks as that it be truly bloodless. I believe Miles is rather hoping the whole thing can be broadcast live to the Nexus.”

Georg snorted and Kariam stared again, but Aunt Helen was nodding. “You said it to Vanos’s Celestial Master, didn’t you, dear. The emperors will both make speeches, of course, and would I be right to think, Miles, you expect your father to address … the whole of creation as well?”

Miles smiled acknowledgement. “You would, Helen. And Ekaterin’s right, Vanos. It really does matter that it be bloodless and … aesthetic in its goodness. And you must admit, the haut do aesthetic better than anyone.”

“Ha. That’s true. And I heard the tone of haut Pel’s voice as well as what she said, so yes, thank you, Ekaterin. I shall ensure the tractor-bubbles”— he smiled as he back-rolled the r—“are fully fielded and I shall be happy to relay your reminder to haut Pel. She speaks to your Lady Vorpatril also, at the Imperial Residence.”

All the Bararrayans grinned as Miles answered. “Yes—I think she must have liked my aunt when they were introduced at Gregor’s wedding. They seem to get on. It’s … scary.”

“Ha. Yes.” Kariam’s smile faded to a more serious expression. “While we are on this subject, forgive me, Miles, but Georg said he thought you would not mind. Please, I understand that your … agenda at the summit was far more than personal, but can you tell me a little of why you disapprove so strongly of … that planet. I found the speculations in the files I have seen hard to believe.” He frowned. “Or I did before that most surprising morning. You are, you see, our number one puzzle, in a way. An outlander who has an extraordinarily direct line into the heart of the Celestial Garden, and speaks compellingly to the concerns of empire and haut. I should say plainly I will be reporting your answer to many interested parties.”

Ekaterin held her breath, but her uncle did know Miles well.

“Ah. Well that would be a long story indeed, Vanos. I won’t ask why you’re not asking Dag Benin, who knows more answers than most. But I’ll try for some bones.” He ate and drank for a moment. “My clone-brother is cause enough. You know he was created there, a double to replace me in an absurd but vicious Komarran plot?”

“So the file said. But, forgive me again, your prenatal damage was teratogenic, no? So I do not understand how they created a double of you. Or … I do not want to understand.”
“Quite so, Vanos. Body-sculpting, massive biochemical and surgical intrusion, bone replacements, truly obscene conditioning as a spy-double and assassin. That last bit was the Komarrans, of course, but Baron Bharaputra knew whose money he took to supply the raw material.”

Kariam wore an expression of extreme distaste. “Yes. That is … infamous.”

“And then, well … I’m not allowed to talk about my, um, previous career, though I know Dag’s put some of it together and the Marilacans, bless ’em, did rather blow my cover wide open. As did the people in question, once, but that’s another story. Suffice to say I had dealings there, and beyond even their clone-murder business I came across cases of gene-servitude and technical serfdom that would cost you meals and sleep if I described them.” Miles shrugged, not with indifference. “When personal and outraged passion coincides with opportunity to … extirpate evil, why argue? For Mark alone, a part of me would like to hang the barons from a tree by their guts. But I will settle, oh yes, and gladly, for closing them down. Permanently. And Nexus-wide sight of their mass prostration before our Imperial Masters amid a perfectly dazzling display of cultural amity and justice is … a good start.”

Ekaterin smiled with grim pride. “I don’t mind adding, Vanos, that someone from there tried to arrange for me to die on my wedding-morning. May I suggest, if you are asked about my husband’s motives by anyone with whom you might prefer not to discuss friends, you tell them that, and point out what happened first to the immediate perpetrators, and shortly thereafter to their entire planet.” She turned to smile warmly at her aunt, who looked as if she was swallowing an oh my. “And it is nice to know one’s more cowardly enemies will pay a most exquisite as well as exceptionally high price for their malice.”

Everyone stared at her except Miles, who hissed something she thought was Truest Vor as he bent to kiss her hand, then straightened. His voice acquired a rumble of its own.

“So there you have it, Vanos. Take your pick.” His fingers drummed once on the table. Georg looked as if he might speak but at a glance from her aunt didn’t. “In return, may I ask what I hope is a lighter question? To answer, of course, only as it is proper for you to do.”

Kariam was still digesting with appreciation Ekaterin’s declaration, but slowly nodded. “Of course. Please.”

Ekaterin’s focus tightened. Could Miles work in the questions whose answers she needed, curling in her head since Kariam’s unexpected appearance?

“I said a lighter question, but I do not mean this lightly. Tell me, in all honour, what does face-painting now mean to the ghem?”

Her heart lifted and Kariam’s face lit up. “Face-painting? Ha! My own clan-design, of course, is perfectly appalling. My honoured forebears had no aesthetic sense at all. It’s why we needed the haut.” They all smiled but the Cetagandan’s humour ebbed. “But I hear your serious question, Miles. Yet it is a big topic. You must know its origins, in combat-display and clan-identity, so that cannot be what you want. Can you give me some parameters?”

“Four—but disconnected, alas. In no particular order … our son Nikki has a ghem-friend at school, and has expressed the desire to be shown how his friend’s father does that amazing face-painting in imperial black, white, and red with special brushes.”

No particular order, but Nikki was top of the list.

“Then, when I first saw ghem society on Eta Ceta a decade ago, there was a fashion among younger
ghem for reducing full face-paint to stylised cheek-emblems, and I’ve wondered if that … movement? sentiment? is reflected at all in their seniors.”

Kariam was nodding briskly. “That is two. And perhaps not so disconnected.”

“The rest are in the future subjunctive. I shall, of course, soon be escorting General Coram and others at some emotive times that may be unusually private and public all at once. And as you may know, Ekaterin has an Imperial commission to refurbish the gardens at the Occupation Memorial, which has just become more urgent.”

Miles’s hand opened on the table and Ekaterin cut in smoothly. I like our double-act. “There is a question, you see, Vanos, if General Coram is to burn an offering there, what exactly he burns it to? And how, if at all, our design might … honourably reflect our guests in that place.”

“Ah, yes. This is less my competence, but I see the point.” Kariam put his chin in both hands and visibly thought. “First, as to your son, I think most ghem would be amused, flattered, and indulgent, as I am, though it would be better to use the father’s clan-design than the Imperial Array”—he grinned—“as well as easier, almost certainly. So, face-painting is not so sacred a thing a young outlander cannot try his hand at the art with enthusiastic curiosity. And the movement to reduce and stylise it, on occasions when all older ghem would wear full paint, has grown considerably, but is still largely confined to powerless youth. No senior ghem-lord has ever shown the slightest endorsement of the style, though they are obliged to tolerate it.”

On Eta Ceta, Ekaterin knew, powerless youth meant pretty much everyone under sixty. Kariam moved his big hands ambivalently.

“More analytically, now. Private and public occasions at once, you said. And I have said it is an old tradition, from our days before the haut. Then it was all display and a means of identification at distance, or in combat. But what the ghem know now is what the haut teach, that it is both a display and a hiding. The display is obvious, and remains the same. But you ask, I think, Miles, about the fact that what it hides has changed over time. And if it changes again. But this is not easy to say.”

Kariam again rested his chin in his hands for a moment. Then his gaze on them shifted oddly in intensity though his expression remained cautious. “I think I am forgetting, perhaps. You all stayed with your Imperial Master when we ghem left the room that day, yes?” All the Barrayarans nodded. “And was there perhaps a … change that you saw?”

Miles nodded again. “Vanos, there are things of which we may not speak, but we have all here seen the haut talk among themselves, when no ghem is present.”

Kariam visibly relaxed. “Yes. Then you know their stillness is a mask, or an aspect.” He shook his head wonderingly. “Please, understand this is very strange for me. As I think you must realise, few ghem know—or at least, few have seen. Our children speculate about how the haut must be in private. Adults understand more cautiously that one could not live always as the haut appear to us. But very few have seen. I know only because haut Pel has a certain liking for tinkering with gadgets and appreciates my technical conversation enough to … change masks.” Miles and Ekaterin smiled appreciation of that point. “In any case, you all know. So this will make sense to you. Before us the haut are always still. Before the haut we always wear full face-paint.”

There was a meditative silence until Aunt Helen voiced what Ekaterin thought was in all their minds. “Vanos, dear, I see the analogy perfectly, but there is an imbalance, isn’t there? The haut are still only before the ghem, but the ghem do not wear paint only before the haut.”

“Perhaps so.” Kariam wasn’t going to give any more just yet.
Miles leaned forward. “I asked, Vanos, partly because of Nikki’s friend and Ekaterin’s commission, but also because I have been thinking about the pilgrimage. And imagining the pilgrims might well feel it their duty and their honour to be in full paint most of the time.”

“Certainly.”

“But sitting here, talking so unexpectedly and … easily with you, it has occurred to me forcefully that I know Dag Benin as well as I know any Cetagandan, and I’d call him my friend, but I’ve never seen his naked face.” He sat straighter. “Forgive me Vanos, if I say that most Barrayarans, certainly those in my District where most of the pilgrims will be, would feel cheated if their special ghem-visitors did not wear full face-paint for the major ceremonies.”

“Oh, no apology needed, Miles. It is a show, like your Counts’ liverys.”

“Heh. Quite so. But outside major ceremonies, in conversation over food with local people, like the old soldiers you heard on that recording … I do believe being, ah, face to face might be important.”

“Yes, perhaps. I can see what you mean, Miles. But this is not an easy thing. You were right to be cautious.” He fell silent, obviously thinking, with creases of concern in his forehead. Ekaterin saw her aunt and uncle also had shadows in their faces, and perhaps Miles did too for his voice became a little brisker.

“Vanos, something of this kind cannot of course be mandated, anyway. And I am sorry to take such poor advantage of a fellow-guest and use you as a messenger again, but might I suggest a couple of things for General Coram and the, um, more senior ghem among the pilgrims to consider over the next month or so?”

Kariam brightened with the briskness and smiled wryly. “Miles, Georg and I decided late one night we would probably listen carefully to your suggestions were you proposing perpetual motion, so yes, of course.”

Endearingly, Miles looked mildly taken aback at this, and as her uncle snorted Ekaterin had to stifle a giggle with what she suddenly realised was an Alys-like quirk of her lips. Is that what Alys is doing too? New vistas opened up. But Miles had recovered.

“Yes, well, the first is that this pilgrimage is primarily ghem business, and secondarily Barrayaran business. But how is it haut business? There will be no haut pilgrims, for no haut has the need.”

“Ha. The whole ghem nation knows you have that right.” The ghem nation? Would that imply that there’s …

“And second, we are not haut. On my word as Vorkosigan we do not seek to rule you, only to live beside you in peace. All have their secrets, and their privacy. But will you ask yourselves what you now need to hide behind your paint, as well as what you would display to us?”

Koram blinked, stared intently, then nodded. “Yes, indeed. That is a … ha, I don’t know if there’s a Barrayaran word for it—it means not just a good question, but an elegant one, a sharp one. Your Sergeant Barnev’s response to Colonel Lasedi is already known, and his speech has made very wide rounds and won much good-feeling—including his comment on the strangeness of face-paint, so that will help. He is famous now among the ghem.”

Miles grinned. “Huh. I’ll tell him. And thank you.”

Ekaterin moved in. “Vanos, you said the whole ghem nation.”
“Yes?”

“Would it by chance have its own face-paint colours, or all-clan emblem?”

Kariam’s eyes lit up again. “I am an idiot! Yes, it does. You are thinking of your garden—a small display of that symbol as a focus for the pilgrims, yes?”

“Something like that.”

“I do not have an image of it here, but I can send one to Georg later. It is what I believe you call a Coptic cross, in red on a green ground, and it is worn as face-paint only by specific officials on certain occasions. No outlander would be present. But a simple version is used on gravestones and memorials, sometimes, where many clans have members buried together. I will ask friends among the pilgrims, but I believe it would answer your need well.”

Ekaterin smiled brilliantly. “Yes, I think so too. Is it permissible for me to see a scan of such a memorial?”

“I cannot imagine you should not. They are in public places here. I will send a scan with the design itself, and any comment I receive.”

“Thank you.”

“It will be my pleasure. You see, Georg and I were right. This is a better way of doing business. We are free to ask without fear of offending, and all learn more of what they need.”

They drank to that, and the conversation gentled. Aunt Helen, Ekaterin thought, couldn’t quite decide if she was relieved or disappointed as the faint ozone-crackle of history Miles had yet again induced faded. Certainly she had a professorial glint in her eye, as much for her niece as her nephew-in-law and galactic guest. But when they reached the coffee-stage Kariam reminded them he was eating lunch, not dinner, and should set about relaying his messages. After the frame-projection blinked off, leaving an abrupt consciousness of space Kariam’s image had filled, Uncle Georg blew out a long breath.

“I’m sorry, Miles. I didn’t think he’d be quite so blunt, nor so quick off the mark.”

“No, no, Georg. If I’m not mistaken we’ve just done a power of good. If the pilgrims can unbend even a bit they’ll get us by our Barrayaran hearts, as Barnev got them by their ghem ones.”

Aunt Helen laughed. “Was that what happened, dear? And whatever will the poor sergeant think of being so famous on Eta Ceta?”

“Who knows?” Miles brightened. “Perhaps they’ll give him an Order of Merit too. It’d tickle the District no end. But no, of course, it’s a haut award, in Giaja’s gift. Maybe there’s some ghem medal that’d fit the bill, though. Helen, you have a horribly historical look.”

“Aunt Helen laughed. “Was that what happened, dear? And whatever will the poor sergeant think of being so famous on Eta Ceta?”

“Do I, dear? Perhaps I was thinking how appropriate it would be for my department to invite you to lecture on Cetagandan relations. You could use those ghem-scalps of yours as a visual aid.” Uncle Georg hooted. Miles looked horrified. Ekaterin favoured her aunt with a dry look and Helen relented. “But I’ll keep that in reserve. What I was really thinking, dear, was that there are two questions I want to ask you over coffee, and I don’t think you’re going to want, or be able, to answer either. Can I try you anyway?”

Miles looked wary. “No promises.”
“No. First, I know something of what Jackson’s Whole means to you, but what does it mean to your Da? And second, with apologies but it’s really beginning to bother me, why does Gregor so detest the memory of his father?”

Ekaterin tried not to freeze, but Miles just grimaced.

“Ah. Others will be asking that, too. And they will not be getting an answer of any kind. But here and now … the answer to your first question is he does not yet know, which with the greatest respect you may chew on.” Helen grinned. Miles didn’t. “The second is the tricky one, Helen. What do you know about Serg?”

“More than the official line, but there have always been holes in the record. I know there was at least one fatal duel, which suggests others, and he was certainly a vigorous philanderer before his marriage. But I can’t see he would have had much contact with Gregor at all—it’s pretty clear he and Princess Kareen were … distant after the birth.”

“Hmm. I really don’t think I can go very far here, Helen. Certainly no detail. But I think none is needed, so I will tell you in the strictest confidence that what fills those holes is slit-your-throat-before-reading stuff, not good for sleep. I take it you’ve never spoken privately to anyone who actually knew Serg?”

“Privately? No. I’ve interviewed most of the Counts who did, at one time or another.”

“I doubt many of them knew much, whatever they guessed. Serg’s true cronies were some of Grishnov’s invisible people, and Ges Vorrutyer. All dead, and a good thing too.”

There was still a lot, Ekaterin thought, that she didn’t yet know, but her aunt was nodding sadly with an enlightened look. “Ah. Like that?”

“More like it than itself. Try Ma some time you’re alone with her—she actually saw Serg once, though he didn’t know it and never saw her. She remembers he had Ezar’s hazel eyes. And she knows what they had looked upon, which was not martial glory.”

“Oh. So … Gregor hates the lie?”

“No. Well, yes, but the lie was always necessary, more than ever once Serg died in battle. What Gregor hates—fears, really—is his paternal gene-complement. His father had the Vorrutyer madness that ran in Yuri. It’s why he wouldn’t marry a Vor, Helen. Can you fill in the last piece now?”

Ekaterin, surprised Miles had gone so far but pleased, as always, by how well he got on with her uncle and aunt, watched Helen thinking down the line Miles pointed, seeing the shape of Gregor’s fears and his genuine dilemma. Idly she turned her fingers on the table as if using a comconsole and saw the arresting memory come to her aunt of the other inter-imperial frame-conversation Ekaterin had reported to her but not detailed—between two empresses, one very aware of her husband’s acute political need for children and the factors inhibiting his decision, the other probably the best and unquestionably the best-resourced and most secretive geneticist in the Nexus. Miles had seen realisation dawn in Helen’s widening eyes too, and smiled tightly.

“There you go. I think it’s obvious, really. And it’s not as if we want our children to be dealing with Mad Aral in sixty years or whatever. More now, I suppose. Barring accident, he shouldn’t inherit much inside his century, which is a thought.”

“Isn’t it just.”

“But don’t say anything about any of this out loud, Helen. Not ever, not to anyone. Just think what
can be tried politically with a charge of tainted blood or tampered genes. Which is, of course, why Gregor is ostentatiously going to ensure that Prince Aral’s and Princess Kareen’s replicator lids are cracked open simultaneously to the nanosecond, and then float a very convincing rumour he’s going to allow salic descent.”

“What?” Georg and Helen both sat bolt upright. No Barrayaran of their years could fail to understand what that simple change could do to the imperial throne and countships alike. Ekaterin laughed as she and Miles rose; it had taken Miles himself an hour of pacing and muttering before he’d figured it out.

“Exactly. Think about it.”

They made their farewells and escaped, each delighting in their synchrony, but in the groundcar Miles turned to her with what she recognised as his preparing-to-be-persuasive look. “I was thinking, love, if we still want to take that galactic honeymoon after your graduation, you should take a space travel and survival course at the Academy. And we’ll have another trip to make next year, unless we can combine them.”

Ekaterin had seen this one coming with trepidation ever since she had enthusiastically agreed to a far-flung honeymoon, and only later realised that Miles’s ideas of how Lord and Lady Vorkosigan would be travelling were on a considerably greater scale than she had quite imagined. But she thought she perhaps wouldn’t let on just now that she knew from some careful questions to Simon Illyan what that Academy course was actually called and what branch of the imperial service ran it. Some real training in certain matters might be very welcome, however wrapped.

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“Then with personal equipment you wouldn’t be dependent when we were travelling on the public emergency spacesuits ships provide. Or bodpods—I’m damned if I’ll ever let you end up in one of those wretched last resorts.” That rang with truth too, and she wasn’t going to object to its sentiment. “The course would be a week or so, all in Vorbarr Sultana. I mean to send Nikki and Roic along as well. It’s good, preventive security, y’see? And I think you’d like … having done it. Very much.”

“Almost as much as I will dislike doing it, you mean? Space travel and survival, eh? Well …” To her slow delight she found she genuinely liked the idea now it came to it, whatever trepidation it roused. Her confidence was up, Miles was delivering growth as usual, and with her he seemed incapable of thinking anything but big, as he had (according to Illyan) been incapable in his ImpSec career of not vastly exceeding orders. Big is his style. I knew that. But she hadn’t always been content with it.

“Alright.”

Miles beamed at her. “Excellent. Are you good with the Memorial garden, now? You think the national emblem thing will work for you?”

“I’ll talk to Aunt Alys in the morning, but yes, I do. Red on green is perfect. I’ll want you to look at a design very soon, maybe even tomorrow, and”—she hesitated—“I’m sorry to have to ask, love, but I need you to be Auditorial at one or two people who don’t seem to understand the timescale.”

Miles frowned. “You have Gregor’s commission. Who’s messing you about?”

“It’s the Junior Lord Keeper of Vorhartung Castle, under whom the Occupation Memorial falls, apparently. He badgers me all day, objecting to everything. A man called Vorbalakleets.”

“Oh, him. Yes. Thinks changing his socks is a dangerous innovation and has a genius for all that delays. I’ll have him stunned for you.” For a second Ekaterin almost thought Miles meant it literally, but he grinned. “No, though it’s tempting. Just expect visitors at the site tomorrow afternoon who
know how to push his buttons.”

“Thank you love. Oh, and can I commandeer Master Tsipis? He knows all the suppliers I used before and the work-sequence.”

“Commandeer whomever you will among Vorkosigan staff, love. You don’t have to ask.”

If her heart beat a little faster, her eyes gleamed. They travelled the rest of the way in companionable silence.

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The next afternoon, while Ekaterin and Master Tsipis, flown up from Hassadar, were greatly enjoying a surprise visit to the Occupation Memorial by the Lord Guardian of the Speaker’s Circle and his old friend Count Vorhalas, both to all appearances genuinely interested in her plans and strongly supportive, Miles was on another errand. Beside him Jack Chandler looked nervous as they were signed and scanned into ImpSec’s imposing HQ, but Miles steered him directly to Allegre’s office. As soon as they were inside Allegre activated a full cone of silence and a frame set into the wall opposite his desk. Dag Benin’s black-and-white Imperial Array appeared with the cluttered surface of his own desk.

“Guy, Miles. And Dr Chandler.”

“Hello Dag. Are you alone under a cone of silence?”

“As requested.” His brown eyes were bright. “What is today’s bombshell, Miles? I am almost looking forward to it.”

Miles smiled dryly. “Hold that thought, Dag. And let me scare you both properly by apologising for having kept this stuff back. But I think you’ll understand, and see why the record of what’s about to be said must be truly eyes only for our Imperial and Celestial Masters.”

Benin and Allegre both sobered at this. Allegre’s eyes glinted. “An apology in advance, Miles?”

“Yes. I owe you another, really, Guy, but I made sure no harm was done. You remember I said Jack had convinced me of his bona fides, but omitted to say how? Well, he had to do that before we got to frames. So he gave me a Terran ID that had a Barrayaran security code. From the PAG system in your inner lab.”

“What?” Allegre’s eyebrows were in orbit.

“Just so. And how do we suppose Jack managed that, eh? He is a great inventor, not a great spy.”

There was a brief silence. Then Allegre and Benin spoke in unison. “You only need one frame.”

Miles nodded. “Very good. It took me several days. Jack?”

Brown Cetagandan and blue Barrayaran eyes were boring into the Terran, who grimaced but nodded. “First, as this is going to my Imperial Master and His Celestial Majesty, let me again apologise to them and to all. I respected propriety as much as I possibly could.”

“Facts first, Jack.”
“Alright. With linked frames there are quantum structures and values that are matched, to identify
one another across space. But if you have a frame with tuning controls and a known distance, you
can try to match with atoms that are already there. Getting usable data is murderously difficult and
time-consuming. Very slow work.”

“And what usable data did you get, Dr Chandler?” Benin was very still, his voice a courteous
enquiry.

Chandler winced. “In your case, General, I had the great good fortune to overhear, with a lot of static
and some very limited visuals, a conversation you had with General Coram about Lord Vorkosigan.”

“And what was its occasion?”

“You had received a report about an attempt on Lady Vorkosigan’s life using a designer neurotoxin
linked to House Bharaputra. What caught my attention was your evident relief at her survival, and
inventive cursing of the Bharaputrans.”

Miles tipped Benin a lazy salute, which he ignored.

“Yes. As I recall my reaction caught Ferrant’s attention, and we managed to waste half-a-morning
while I showed him some of the more coherent bits of Lord Vorkosigan’s file and told him what I
might about events of ten years ago.” His face suddenly cleared a little and he turned. “Miles, I’m
sorry I unwittingly revealed so much of your file. You suspected when you first contacted me that Dr
Chandler might be my agent, yes?”

“I did, Dag. He had to have got some of his data from the Celestial Garden. But then you’d know I’d
know, which made no sense, and I didn’t know enough about frames to work it out. It’s all turned
out well enough in the end.”

Benin nodded. “Yes. I am happy though to understand this. There was an element that had puzzled
me.”

“So what did you get on Barrayar, Jack?” Allegre might be using Chandler’s forename but his look
was still chilly.

“Only the PAG system.” The Terran’s voice went grumpy. “This building is a nightmare to chart. I
only got to your lab because all descriptions agreed the secure labs were central—and by that point I
thought that would mean literally central. So I did the trigonometry from outside. The PAG system
was the first thing I heard about, and suited my need perfectly, so I got close enough to see how it
worked and crib the essential codes you were using. No-one else knows anything, and neither notes
nor any other record exists in any form.”

Allegre thawed a bit, whether at the surprise line-of-defence granted by the famously insane internal
design of the ImpSec building—the architect was a Vorrutyer appointed by Mad Yuri—or at
Chandler’s assurances of how limited his intrusion had been Miles was unsure. No matter.

Benin spoke, “If this kind of eavesdropping is so difficult, Miles, we are not talking about something
that can become a regular technique.”

“No, we’re not. Which is a very good thing as there would seem to be no possible shielding against
it. So let’s damn the temptation to try it at some tricky juncture, and put it firmly away in a tightly
locked box.”

“Can we?” Allegre was doubtful.
“Guy, everyone already knows you need two frames, just as you do two comconsoles or two wristcoms or whatever. And right now, the only people who know otherwise are present, while the only person who could even begin to do it or teach it is Jack, who won’t. So if both sides agree now genuinely to deep-six it, then yes, we can bury this.”

“I agree. And I will so tell my Celestial Master, as strongly as is proper.” Benin’s face was thoughtful. “I will also say formally, Miles, that I think you did rightly in this. You warned me some parts of the… hypothesis would be too distracting for both Vor and ghem until we had somewhere solid to stand together. Is there more?”

Miles smiled. “Oh yes, there’s more. That was the bad news. Now for the good. Jack?”

Chandler took a breath and spoke fast but clearly. “A wormhole is a spontaneous connection through space-time that occurs when certain quantum-signatures in distinct places randomly happen into a particular kind of identity. Natural wormhole termini occur in particular distance-bands from planetary and solar masses because the kinds of quantum-fluctuations caused in those bands are more likely to generate such happenings into identity.” He paused to let them see it coming. “Frame technology requires quantum-values be… enforced. I have created stable wormholes on nano and micro scales in my lab. Hypothetically, I can see no reason why stable interplanetary wormholes should not be equally created and maintained.”

For a moment Miles contemplated the spectacle of Benin going white beneath his Imperial Array. How was he doing it? He must get to see the man without paint. Guy was a nasty puce. Forwards.

Miles again made his voice brisk, and forced into it a confident drive he didn’t quite feel.

“Quite a thought, eh? And there’s no burying this for very long. But may I remind you both of two points? That we are about jointly to declare ownership of a whopping volume of very empty space, full of systems that need accurate mapping and are a long way away from any possible observers. And that a wormhole terminus is a highly detectable thing, gravitationally speaking, especially if it’s popping out of nowhere.” He paused briefly. “I suggest a small, joint team, monitored by frame from these offices only, should retire to somewhere suitably distant and get the practicalities sorted—to include, as a priority, the best possible detectors we can build together. Natural gravitational waves, by the way, are transmissable by frame, unlike artificial grav, so detection ranges can certainly be extended. Jack thinks sensitivity can also be significantly improved by adding a form of quantum response to gravitic anomaly he knows about.”

“Which is how I knew about the anomaly I mentioned to Lord Auditor Vorthys that weekend, General.” Allegre still looked strangled, but nodded at this. Benin frowned slightly and his eyes flicked to Miles, who waved a hand dismissively.

“Incidental and internal, Dag. Truly.”

“As you say, Miles. And once again I think I will buy your plan. Would I be right to think, Dr Chandler, that very large power-supplies would be needed for this process?”

“My best guess is smaller than most physicists would think possible, but for interplanetary distance, nevertheless, yes. Initially gigawatts at least, at both ends. Once they are established, much less, I think.”

“Good. Such power is also nicely detectable. And Miles, this actually is good news. Extraordinarily so. The Tau and Phi Cetans will party for weeks when they learn of it.” Benin’s face was for once openly admiring beneath his black-and-white stripes. “Though how you sat on it for this long amazes me. And”—his look sharpened again—“it also puts a very different complexion on the Imperial and Celestial permissions to travel. There will have to be a direct link between Barrayar and Eta Ceta,
and people will use it in much larger numbers than we had thought. Sergyar and Rho Ceta, too. You must have seen this."

“Oh yes, Dag. And Aralyar to everywhere—the biggest hub of all. I don’t mind anyone hearing me say I’m doing my damnednest to take the possibility of conflict between Vor and ghem off everyone’s list of options. Permanently. This will help, and is entirely in the spirit of our agreement.”

“So it is. And as mad and sane as those bubbles will be.” Benin laughed to himself. “Very well. Is there anything else? No? Then Guy, might I beg a private word with Miles before I take this sealed record to my Imperial Master and disturb his day yet again?” Allegre was still not altogether happy, but Miles had warned him to some degree, the straight-to-Gregor order relieved him of any decision, and he knew in any case that a solid agreement between this Lord Auditor and General Benin would carry the day. So he nodded, and escorted Chandler out to his ante-room, closing the door behind him. Miles and Dag looked at one another in silence for a moment.

“So, my friend, we come to the bottom of Dr Chandler’s barrel at last. For now at least. You have done well. But you have been hard on Guy, I think.”

Miles shrugged. “Guy’s brilliant domestically, but doesn’t think very galactically, and knows it. And thank you, Dag. Your praise means something.”

“The rest does not?” Benin’s voice was wry and curious. “I heard your Imperial Master name you in His broadcast. Mine laughed.”

“You watched it together?”

“Yes. I was surprised, but He invited me to be there with him and the haut Rian.” He studied Miles’s face. “Perhaps I should say that I know about your very interesting conversation yesterday with Vanos Kariam, and I too have seen. Not often, but as I have grown into this job you propelled me towards, my Imperial Master has seen me whole and given me His deeper trust. As you guessed.”

“Yes. Hoped, anyway. I know Gregor would have done, and I guessed haut genetics and strategy hadn’t yet overcome all the pragmatics of imperial rule.”

“Miles, Miles.” Benin laughed softly. “Whatever shall our Masters do with you?”

Miles stayed very straight-faced. “If your Master so desires, and as proper penance, send me to Marilac with a … strictly limited license for some private resurrection as necessary.”

“Ah. I wondered if you might make that offer if we waited. The answer will be yes.”

“Do I have anything concrete to offer them?”

“Once everything has quieted down, a treaty with the Alliance confirming their political boundaries in January 2789.”

Miles kept his face carefully neutral. That was just before the Cetagandan attack, so they were conceding in full the status quo ante, which was more than they needed to do. “Thank you, Dag. Early next year, then. Ekaterin graduates again just before Winterfair, and I’ll use our galactic honeymoon as a cover for the Marilacan visit.”

“Yes, that will work for us well. And now I shall tell you something I probably shouldn’t, Miles, but I believe I have the leeway and it may do you some good. You can regard it as thanks for obliging Halir Lhosh to become second-in-command of several million brightly coloured bubbles.”
Miles let himself grin this time. “Uh-oh. Do I want to know, Dag?”

“Perhaps not. But you will not be bored.” Dag’s face-paint shifted with his complex smile. “When I finally got the raw footage from Dagoola IV and saw you being thrown into that, ah, Lhosh-minded installation, I felt my heart lift with anticipation of how you were going to do it. Even after I worked out who your agents in our control must have been—and please give Admiral Quinn and Madame Bothari-Jesek my compliments—it took many hours to realise that you had come only for Colonel Tremont and, ah, upgraded horses in mid-stream; many more to isolate from a month of recordings the key phrases whereby you gave orders to Commander Tung.” He shook his head. “It still amazes me, Miles. Did you know there is much argument among military ghem about what happened at Dagoola, and how? That surprisingly accurate Marilacan ‘vid was universally dismissed, much to my amusement. It did overplay the religious ploy.”

Miles laughed. “They tried to hire Naismith as creative consultant. I declined with regret, and Elli sent a couple of troopers who needed a break and had been on the ground. But they also hired Suegar.”

Benin was laughing too. “I realised that. But what I was going to tell you, Miles, was that I made an edited version—still several hours, but compacted around some realtime chunks—and added an analytical report of exactly how, in my opinion, Barrayar’s ImpSec had removed 10,336 of our prisoners-of-war, and why that action would successfully deny us Marilac as a functioning satrapy within a decade. And this I gave to my Imperial Master, who is a far greater strategist than I.”

A silence stretched until Miles could bear it no longer. “And?”

“Do you know what the haut would call the highest virtues, Miles?”

“Tell me.”

“Indomitability and beauty, understood in wholly pragmatic terms. I believe that report may have been my best contribution to this treaty, and I think it will help you with Ferrant and his fellow-pilgrims to know why my Imperial Master is willing to trust you in … matters of style. And that he trusts you know what is decent between the Vor and … friends.”

Miles understood to the core. Giaja to Rian to Pel to Kariam to Dag, and back to Giaja. Can’t beat the man but he’s offering a draw. He bowed in his seat, and straightened to meet Dag’s amused eyes. “I live to serve. Like you.”

“Yes. And Miles, on that other matter …”

“Yes?”

“While Ferrant is away I am of course bound here. But my Celestial Master has agreed the Commander of his Imperial Guard should in this unexpected new condition of the Nexus properly make closer, personal contacts with such senior Barrayars as yourself. During your Winterfair, maybe.” He gave a sly grin. “Perhaps I could leave off my paint, then, for some of the time.”

“Oh.” Shy pleasure was not in either man’s repertoire, though a neutral observer might have been surprised to learn it. “Ekaterin will be very pleased. See if you can come to her graduation.”

“I shall make a point of it.”

Miles sketched another salute, and Dag broke the connection. Phew. It had been a long haul, but the vital trust had held—forged a decade before when he and Dag and Rian, whom he thought Giaja did actually love, had depended on one another for their lives. And even if his Gran’da had not been able
to approve the outcome, he would have honoured the means. Miles left Allegre’s office whistling.
Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

A week before his birthday Gregor again commandeered the comnet, this time with more warning and a request rather than a requirement to listen. His broadcast was at the same convenient Barrayaran time and again went out live to Komarr and Sergyar by frame. ImpSec later calculated from power-flow data that more than 90% of the population of the Imperium had tuned in, and orders of magnitude more viewers around the Nexus heard him as soon as they could. On Eta Ceta there was no live broadcast this time, only a detailed Imperial bulletin.

Discovered leaning elegantly in dress greens against the front of the desk in his large Residence study, a pose familiar to anyone who had visited him there, the Emperor explained that his birthday would be different this year. General Coram’s ghem pilgrims would be in Vorbarr Sultana, and the day would begin at dawn—the traditional ghem hour for ancestral observance—with re-dedication of the Occupation Memorial and an offering to the ghem dead, followed by breakfast and a reception at Vorhartung Castle hosted by the Council of Counts. In mid-afternoon, by frame-link outside the Imperial Residence, there would with his Celestial Cousin be a formal treaty signing, about which He now wished to give His subjects certain outline information.

Gregor paused, and across three planets people sat up and raised the volume. With great care the Emperor briefly and cogently explained the hopes for nanoforge technology and the combined effects on settlement policy of frames and such massively enhanced manufacturing capacity. Miles’s Nexus map, restored to Barrayaran firework colours, sprang up and went through its evolutions to the obvious equality of newly claimed volumes. Gregor capped that section with announcement of the border-zones, joint-fleet, and trade treaty to come. Then, in case all that wasn’t enough, He remarked that He found He liked the idea of giving the Imperium things on His birthday, and was happy now to announce that from the profits of the imperial monopoly on both technologies, as they were licensed outside the Imperium, He would provide subsidies in cash and kind for all Barrayaran and Sergyaran Districts and Komarran sectors, enabling rapid economic upgrades with the new technologies. In future years, as cash-flows settled, tax cuts might be anticipated.

The reception was everything Miles—and Gregor—could have hoped. The most diehard conservative could find nothing in very advantageous peace and new technologies, equal opportunity, or shared wealth that they dared complain about in public. Strong personal endorsements of both treaty and pilgrimage by Counts Vorhalas and Vorkalloner as well as Boriz Vormoncrief for the Conservatives, Falco Vorpatril as a leading independent, and all the Progressives, left no centre about which any opposition based on engrained cultural enmity for Cetagandans could form. Many commentators expressed surprise at this easy Conservative acquiescence in a Progressive coup, but to Miles that only showed how badly the Conservatives had explained themselves down the years. In practice both Counts Vorhalas and Vorkalloner, provided in closed Council session ahead of the first broadcast with the Nexus map, Allegre’s and Vorlynkin’s analyses, and a recording of events in the square at Vorkosigan Surleau, had sat utterly still for several minutes, ignoring the babble, then voiced complete support from which they had not wavered. Cautiously contacting Vorhalas to thank him on Ekaterin’s behalf for squashing Vorbalkleets, Miles was heard in careful silence before the old man nodded acknowledgement of courtesy.
“Glad to, Vorkosigan, even if the Lord Speaker hadn’t asked me nicely. Man’s a fool and your wife isn’t. That Memorial needs re-doing—it never was done properly. Besides, this thing has to happen, and however little I can bring myself to care for the ghem I see the need for these ceremonies.” He sniffed. “Did you think I’d lead opposition to the treaty?”

“Knowing you, sir, I did not. I did wonder if you might feel constrained to relative silence if some of your colleagues were, um, vehement on the matter.”

“No time for that now. I understand why we can’t call it a victory to the Cetas’ faces, but when I look at that Nexus map a victory is what I see. A great victory, with a permanent Cetagandan border light-years from Bararray. My argument with your father has always been about what to do here with the freedom our victories win us, not with winning them out there.” Vorhalas grunted, a little sourly. One mottled hand was trembling and he pressed it to his chair-arm. “Fourteen years ago when you infringed Vorloupulous’s Law with those space-mercenaries I made your father beg me for your life before you and Gregor. I was thinking of Carl and Evon, but I knew it as mean-spirited and have come to regret it. I also had a private conversation with Gregor in which he flatly swore to me he meant exactly what he said, that you wrought this. I cannot begin to imagine how but I will not be so graceless as to deny you my sincere congratulations and thanks, for myself and my liege-sworn.”

Moved despite himself, and knowing what that statement must have cost a man whose sons had died badly at odds with law early in the Regency, Miles had bowed. “May I relay what you have said to the Count-my-father, sir?”

Vorhalas gave a wintry smile. “I shall do so myself, when I have the chance.”

And that was that, politically, except for social infighting around invitations to the main events, and some galactic byplay. Interplanetary frame-links with all major polities of the Nexus were being established as fast as systems were reached by couriers carrying frames, gifted by Gregor to planetary authorities with the attention-grabbing provisos that they swore on oath to point on request a comnet vid-pickup at the frame and broadcast a realtime Nexus-wide feed, and that any and all provision of technology to Jackson’s Whole was strictly embargoed, the penalty being immediate cancellation of all trade privileges. No-one liked either firmly attached string, but they thought about frames, spoke via them to ambassadors on Bararray and Komarr, studied their stern-faced Bararrayan informants on the matter—a recording of Lords Auditor Vorhovis and Vorlaisner, flanking Prime Minister Racozy and Admiral Vorlynkin—and one by one decided not to argue. For Bararrayans with access to ImpSec’s galactic reports there was also the spectacle of Jacksonian Barons waking with alarm to the fact that the surprising new Cetagandan–Bararrayan alliance were not simply ignoring them, as the individual imperia had, but giving them a leper status that would make them unwelcome far beyond each imperium’s old sphere of influence. Miles evaluated this signals traffic with a feral smile. Let the bastards sweat. They have enough fat to lose.

He also received messages of congratulation from Bararrayan and galactic friends who had seen Gregor’s first broadcast, and in some cases clips of he and Ekaterin with Madame Ieskennis. The Csuriks called with a grinning Zed Karal from Silvy Vale, Master Tsipis from Hassadar, and Speaker Penderecki from Vorkosigan Surleau. Kou, Drou, and the Koudelka Commando were effusive but less so than Miles’s Progressive colleagues among the Counts, collectively knocked into a cocked hat by what their diminutive, unofficial leader had managed. Enrique Burgos wrote him an ode. More pleasingly, and briefly, an admiringly obscene limerick arrived from Elli Quinn, with a vid of bemused praise from Taura and Arde Mayhew. The Bothari-Jeseks beamed at him with little Cordelia, and so, in a less expected but very welcome vid, did Commodore Tung and his wife from the deck of their riverboat in—where was it on Terra?—South America, he thought. The old Eurasian strategist looked relaxed and well, expressing delight at what he said must have been tactics put to proper use. Most confusingly for Miles there was also a message of stunned congratulation.
from Mark and Kareen on Beta Colony, who had found themselves called with all resident Barrayarans into the Barrayaran Embassy at midnight, full of trepidations, to hear the first broadcast live on a new Ambassadorial frame linked to the Imperial Residence.

Mark’s weight had remained stable, though his face was settled into adult heaviness as well as comfortable padding. Kareen looked wonderful, as usual, happily holding Mark’s hand. Both were overwhelmed, if clearly as delighted as everyone by the promised treaty, and Miles, watching with a squirming sensation, wondered how Mark would cope when he learned of the secret clauses. He also wished the two of them would hurry up and marry: one of the very few distractions for his parents better than two grandchildren would be four grandchildren.

As messages piled up he did some hard thinking and placed a call to Gregor while his foster-brother was in a giving mood. Elli’s limerick produced a hoot of laughter and Taura’s ‘vid a melancholy smile, Gregor knowing as well as Miles that her runaway metabolism could not give her much longer. News of the Csuriks, who would have been astounded by how much their Emperor knew of them, left him deeply pleased. Miles took a deep breath and crossed his fingers behind his back.

“The thing is, Gregor, they all have as good a reason as I to deserve seats at the grand finale, better in some cases, so I was wondering where I could get them box seats. Then I wondered where you were going to be watching it from.”

There was a thoughtful silence.

“Good question, Miles. Do you have an answer?”

“Have you discussed this with Cousin Fletchir yet?”

“No. We implicitly agreed that actually meeting … there might be in order, but we’re crossing bridges as we come to them.”

Miles relaxed. “Hmm. I doubt he travels often but he must sometimes. What do you bet there’s a very impressive Celestial conveyance somewhere? And the Star Crèche has its own fleet.”

“No bet. Suggestions?”

Miles grinned evilly. “There’s a Princess-Kareen-class battleship just completing basic engineering—the main drives are in, and the deep-core command-net. They’re about to start hydroponics and life-support. Leave out weapon systems and with a little pushing she could be spaceworthy in a year. I think you should second your most flexible military designer, hire the best team Vorsmythe Industries has, supply all the labour they ask for, and turn it over to Alys and Simon with a brief to provide you with a properly secure and appointed travelling residence.”

Gregor stared, and to Miles’s delight actually spluttered. “Miles, the Staff will—“

“Tell the Staff they can have the next ten but you need this one. And if they still object ask in your iciest tone how, in that case, they propose to accommodate you, your staff, representatives of the Counts and Ministers, and several score guests aboard an operational battleship jammed with the newest weapons-systems while staging a reception for scores of Cetagandans including His Imperial Majesty and entourage, which will include lashings of highly observant Imperial Guards.”

Gregor was still staring but the splutter had vanished. A smile tugged at his mouth. “Miles, you are being very bad for me. First that news-editor, now this. I’m not quite supposed to commandeer a battleship as a … yacht, you know.”

“Battle-yacht,” corrected Miles firmly, “to sail above your battle-bubbles. And don’t you want to see
Ivan’s face when he discovers you’ve given Alys a battleship to play with?” For a moment the look between them was entirely brotherly. “I’m going to want lots of invitations.”

“You’ll get them. What shall I call her?”

“I’d vote for the Sergeant Taura. Or His Imperial Majesty’s Battle-yacht Wedding Bells. But I expect you’d prefer the Dr Laisa Toscano. Though Laisa’s got the soletta array already to bang a bottle on. Or …”

“What? Your face is unholy.”

“The Lady Alys Vorpatril.”

“Ooh. Yes, if Laisa agrees.”

“Good. There’ll be shuttles and tenders to name as well. But in all seriousness, Gregor, thinking about it, we’re going to need to spread the passenger load. Nearer the time, tell the Counts they must choose by lot representative observers from every district for certain galactic ceremonies, and make them sort out a ship for themselves and their chosen. That’ll take care of a lot, and we can charter one of Vorsmythe’s liners for Ambassadorial parties. Otherwise need-to-invites will squeeze out want-to-invites. This is only going to happen once, and there’s a lot of galactic money starting to come in already. Let’s do it properly.”

Gregor nodded. “Alright, Miles. I can go with that. And it sounds as if you have chosen your next committee, which will be rather smaller than the genetics one.”

Miles smiled sweetly. “Oh, I’ll consult by frame, Sire, but my next job is not a committee. It’s a pilgrimage. Then Ekaterin’s graduation. And then Marilac. You heard the recording.”

“Ah. You do have to do all that, don’t you. And I’m looking forward to the graduation. But you’d best make it a shorter honeymoon than you’ve been talking about, Miles, if the timetable’s really for a year from now.”

Miles nodded. “Fifteen months, maybe. It’s bound to slip a bit. But not much, I hope. We have the forces. And between us we’ve surely got the intelligence work.” He grimaced. “The place is crawling with us, in fact. It’s just manufacturing bubbles, and tactical planning, both well under way.”

“So I’m told by Georg and Yuri.” Uncharacteristically Gregor hesitated. “Tell me, Miles, what did you make of Dag Benin’s personal statement to you, about his Dagoola tape?”

“Almost certainly exactly what Cousin Fletchir wanted me to.”

“Which is what?”

Miles hesitated. “It’s hard to express. One part is that He sees me and chooses to allow me a Fool’s license as ... I don’t know, the Celestial Court Jester. I don’t really believe Dag about the beauty— though he might have meant it, and I do think in an odd way I fascinate the haut as much as I do backcountry Barrayarans, and for much the same reason.” Gregor winced; Miles shrugged. “There are peculiar symmetries involved. But the thing about indomitability might be a genuine compliment. Did you catch the remark about Dagoola being a Lhosh-minded installation?”

“I surely did. Not so good in the coming man.”

“No. But I think we were being reassured as well as warned. I don’t know how closely Fletchir
would have had to approve what the military ghem were doing at Dagoola, but I’m pretty sure that
place wasn’t a haut design at all. And I think at some level he genuinely appreciated what I did to
beat the psychology of the dome, so maybe the real message is that Lhosh’s position is less secure
than Dag implied at first.”

“Ah, that makes sense, actually, of something Fletcher said I’ve been puzzling over.” Gregor looked
at Miles and smiled wryly. “Shall I tell him you think of yourself as his jester?”

“If you like. I imagine he’d be amused.”

“Perhaps less than you suppose, Miles. I agree about the Lhosh subtext, and others you haven’t
mentioned, but for my money Fletcher’s admiration for you is genuine. It should be. Incidentally, talk
to Master Tsipis, when you have a chance. And now I must go and distress the General Staff by
being exceptionally high-handed. Again. Such fun. I’ll see you very early on the day.”

Gregor cut the com and Miles was left to his own thoughtful embarrassments, the prospect of his
seizure stimulator, and wondering with mild indignation what Master Tsipis had to do with anything.

* * * * *

The summer weather, keen to bless peace-making, co-operated with Ekaterin wonderfully. On the
day before Gregor’s birthday a cold front blew gustily through Vorbarr Sultana, bringing chill rain to
clean the air, wash dust from leaves and roadways, and refresh thirsty plants. Full sunshine and a
light breeze were expected by afternoon; the day itself began dry and mild under thin residual
overcast glooming the false dawn.

Lighting at the Occupation Memorial was minimal, rows of inset lamps kept to a dim glow, and the
live broadcast was eerie to see. It opened in the deserted site itself, shown in silence for several
minutes. Then, emerging from greying darkness without fanfare, Gregor and Laisa led in a small
procession of Counts and Lords Auditor, including Vorhalas, René and Tatyia Vorbretten, Georg and
Helen Vorthys, and Miles and Ekaterin, followed by senior General Staff officers, representatives of
veterans’ organisations and ImpMil, and Sergeant Barnev. All wore full blacks, making them look
disembodied as light picked out hands and faces. High beyond the faint illumination pooled round
the procession the rim of the eroded ravine was spotted with ImpSec guards, as were the battlements
and other vantages of Vorhartung Castle, precautions no more visible on the holovid broadcast than
the high, silent air-cover far above them all.

As they moved to prescribed places lighting brightened enough for viewers to see more clearly what
Ekaterin had done. The site was formed by a root of the crags on which Vorhartung castle stood,
where thrusting rock isolated an area between river-bank and the scree slope of the ravine. An
irregular scalene triangle, entered at the lower end of its short western side through a tunnel piercing
the crag-root, it stretched upriver until a great boulder on the water’s edge jutted inshore to force it
towards an apex. Within the triangle Ezar and Mad Yuri between them had shaped two courtyards
with low walls, a fairly spacious square centred on a statue of Ezar with an ugly, oversized plinth,
and beyond it a smaller, offset rectangle that was the memorial proper. This second courtyard had
been bare, but at its far end featured a higher wall with a beautiful, austerely carved tablet set into it
that was the best thing there, and read simply TO OUR BARRAYARAN DEAD / FROM THOSE
WHO SURVIVE TO MOURN AND HONOUR THEM.

Now everything was different, yet little had changed. The statue of Ezar had been moved to a low
plinth in a corner of the first courtyard, where it was partnered with a statue of Dorca that had until recently stood neglected in the south garden of the Residence. The old plinth was gone; in its place at the centre of the retiled yard the imperial Vorbarra arms were picked out from mellow stone in dull-coloured brick. Stone benches echoing the new plinths stood along the low walls, interspersed with fat stone planters holding mature dwarf Barrayaran trees that would provide shade to the seated, and now formed a backdrop to the people ranged along the three nearer sides.

This plainly was a place of meditation and rest. A wide opening in its further wall gave way to another newly paved area linking it to the smaller courtyard. The plaque had been moved to the long side away from the river, and raised at an angle in the rising side of the ravine itself. Around it, slowly gaining colours in the dawnlight, was a carpet of red Barrayaran plants interspersed with the tiny, grey-leaved and petalled Vor daisies that grew everywhere as weeds. The higher wall at the far end had gone completely, opening a vista over the steepening scree slope and river-bank, and leaving in isolation the humped boulder and deeply shadowed mound of earth built up against its inland side.

When Gregor had come to see things the day before, while the design was still receiving final touches, he had wandered round in silence, sat briefly on a bench, then gone to stand in the further yard for several minutes. Then he had walked straight to a nervously waiting Ekaterin, taken her hands, kissed her gravely on the forehead, smiled his warmest, most heartening smile, and left. Now as the last Barrayaran stilled he waited out a moment’s silence during which the light, natural and artificial, perceptibly increased and formal black uniforms and dresses gained definition.

“We are all Barrayarans here, and the truth of this place is in our hearts, as in our words.” Gregor’s voice was lower than usual, but vibrant. “By Lady Vorkosigan’s grace it is made anew, a place of beauty as well as remembrance. And we know it also as token and symbol of a great peace to come, that our dead have earned us and with which we honour them.”

He and every man present went for a moment to one knee, while the women curtsied deeply and stood with veiled eyes until the men rose. There was a short silence as light brightened further, though shadows in front of the boulder at the far end of the smaller courtyard remained inky, the flowers along its long inland side only tinged with colour.

“We know also that our many dead did not die alone, and that to the grieving reasons of bereavement bring little comfort. So this morning, even here, we welcome strange guests.” He turned back towards the dark mouth of the entrance-tunnel and the dull rock above. “Pilgrims of the ghem, be welcome to this place.”

Led by General Coram and a lady of great age with slow steps the ghem began to enter. More than a hundred had come, mostly elderly first-degree kin of their missing dead; direct descendants like Coram made up the rest. All wore by Celestial permission the full, blinding white robes of Cetagandan imperial mourning, startlingly bright in the dawnlight. All men wore full face-paint, a solid minority showing the zebra-striped and blood-touched Imperial Array while a profusion of clan-colours dominated, vivid and striking, some tasteful, a few as garish as Kariam’s. The women’s strong faces were bare, but many carried small clan-emblems in clasped hands. Immediately behind Coram and the centenarian widow walked a middle-aged man in the Imperial Array who bore a plain silver brazier and small wooden box. He kept in step behind them, slowly approaching Gregor, while behind him nimble nonagenarians and easy-moving adults spread out to allow everyone in faster, and began to form a loose block in the centre of the courtyard. Artificial lighting brightened markedly, catching at white robes and leaving only the inner courtyard in shadow.

In a few moments all were standing in a square facing Gregor and Laisa, who were flanked on one side by Miles and Ekaterin, on the other by Yuri Vorlynkin and Regimental Sergeant Barnev. There was no apparent signal but as one the ghem bowed and curtsied, Coram managing elegantly to
support the old lady as they dipped and rose. Gregor and Laisa nodded gravely back, and Coram spoke.

“Your Imperial Majesties. In this place there is room only for truth. Barrayar humbled the ghem as Your enemies. Now You humble us as friends, by Your grace. This day and all days henceforth the ghem-nation thanks and honours You, Emperor Gregor the Great.”

They all bent again, as the faces of Gregor and every Barrayaran froze in astonishment. Miles had to bite his tongue to keep in an ululation of his own. Yes yes yes. Coram returned to the vertical in perfect unison with the others, again deftly supporting the widow whose deeply lined face was a mask with tear-bright eyes. It was more than eighty years since her husband left her behind for the last time. The uppermost roofs and battlements of Vorhartung Castle were catching the sun from below as level rays flooded the horizon beneath the remaining overcast, looking almost as if they floated above the pilgrims.

“Your Imperial Majesty, where do you permit us to pay our lost forebears the debts of memory we owe them?”

In silence Gregor and Laisa turned slightly, Gregor’s arm moving in a gentle sweep to indicate the inner courtyard. As he did so and ghem-faces swung to follow his gesture a great wash of sunlight flowed over the flowers and paving and the world burst into brightness. Miles and his fellow Lords Auditor knew that Georg Vorthys, at Ekaterin’s urgent plea, had roared with laughter, donned chain-and-seal, and descended on the physics department of Vorbarr Sultana University to commandeer several large mirrors and an array of technicians. The dawn sunlight falling so strangely on them in the deep ravine was the same that lit the castle’s upper battlements, caught, channelled, stripped of heat, and flowing out again in a great splash of yellow-gold.

But knowing was one thing, seeing another. Around the courtyard Barrayarans sighed astonishment as ghem swayed with emotion. Along the long inner side of the Memorial the plants immediately surrounding the plaque revealed the deep, flaring reds of damnweed and goatbane. Towards the outer courtyard the angry, bloody colours slowly gave way to softer pinks and deep yellows, mixed with the greens of Terran ground-cover. On the far side, stretching toward the apex of slope and river, the deep reds also diminished as they became increasingly mixed with clumps of grey Vor daisies, which speckled the rougher ground beyond the line of tiles marking where the wall had been. On the near side, towards the river, Vor daisies thickened again, gathering into a dense mat over the mound before the boulder to form an even grey field that had like stone held the now banished shadows. Low in its middle was a perfect green circle of Terran grass, and within the circle, stained in the soft red of Poor Man’s Blood, was the cross of the ghem nation.

After a long, long moment in which the ghem returned to upright stillness, though tears glittered on some cheeks, Coram and the widow began slowly to walk forward towards the gap in the low wall. Their fellow-pilgrims quietly flowed past them to form an array facing their emblem in a taut semi-circle. As Coram reached the inner edge of the crescent he paused briefly to hand the widow off to an elderly son who had accompanied her, before taking two further paces forward himself, and standing slightly to one side. The officer behind him bearing the silver brazier and box also stepped out into the space before the emblem, knelt, and put the brazier on a small, unsurfaced stone set at an angle to the flagstones of the flooring.

Coram produced a tiny ceremonial knife, clipped a wisp of his cropped hair, and knelt to place it in the brazier. He also produced a small sealed and bound scroll, and a phial of a thick oil that as he poured it around the sides of the brazier released a rich and complex aroma with odd tangs to it. With a series of ceremonial gestures the other kneeling officer opened his box and held aloft first a thick curl of dark hair and then a small braided oval of ebony hair that gleamed in the rich light. Nothing
was said but a faint hum ran through the pilgrims as he placed Giaja’s and Degtiar’s offerings of 
honoured remembrance into the silver bowl where they too would burn. Then the kneeling men rose, 
turned to face the emblem, and for a full ten minutes the ghem all stood as if spell-stopped. The 
Barrayarans had been warned this was obligatory, and stood as still as their guests through a silence 
that stretched until it almost grew impatient, then matured into a deep calm. When, still in complete 
silence, Coram at last knelt quietly to light the oil and the sudden glow of the flames shone pale in the 
flooding sunlight there was a soft, collective sigh, and in a few seconds the flames were gone.

After another moment the ghem neatly reversed themselves, the officer lifting the brazier by its legs, 
and all collectively formed again behind Coram and the widow as they returned towards the outer 
courtyard where Gregor and Laisa waited for them.

“General Coram. We understand you will wish to linger here a little. Our Counts and Lords Auditor 
will stay with you, and when you are ready to break your fast, Our Lord Guardian with General 
Vorlynkin and Sergeant Barnev will show you up to the castle. We shall join you again later in the 
morning, with Our Council of Counts.”

Coram and all the pilgrims dipped yet again.

“Your Imperial Majesties. We thank You once more for Your grace.”

“There is no need, General. This must be a melancholy occasion, but We trust you may find in it 
some ease for long-haunted hearts.”

Gregor inclined his head, quite deeply, once, turned with Laisa and was gone, collecting a group of 
ImpSec guards loitering in the tunnel-mouth as discreetly as their own very rarely worn full blacks 
allowed. The ghem stared after him and Miles stared at them, trying to read their eyes. The haut, he 
decided, as he stepped slowly forward, had known exactly what they were about when they 
entranced the ghem with aesthetics, and Ekaterin had for a second time nailed a Barrayaran 
adaptation of the haut aesthetic dead centre. And Gregor was playing a blinder exactly when it 
counted. *Gregor the Great, indeed!* He would have fun with that; meanwhile a duty almost as 
interesting was waiting.

“General. If anyone would care to rest a moment the benches are available. So is water”—he 
gestured towards liveried servants who had appeared through the tunnel bearing trays of small 
glasses and carafes of water, adding on a slightly lower note—“and the broadcast ended ten seconds 
after my Imperial Master left us.”

Coram gave brief thanks, hesitated a moment, and began to escort the silent widow towards a bench. 
Miles let them go, knowing there were good reasons for the broadcast to end with the formalities, 
and turned to find Ekaterin watching in amusement and respect as elderly pilgrims made for Sergeant 
Barnev, flanked by veterans’ representatives, and began to wait patiently their turn to introduce 
themselves, thank and salute him, and shake his hand. Miles was amused too, as he was concerned to 
help René and Tatya Vorbretten find ease with the ghem, but his respect was presently all for his 
wife, so he took her hand and led her to the bench between granite Dorca and travertine Ezar.

“That, my Lady, was the best piece of public theatre since Gregor’s wedding, and infinitely simpler. 
Do you know you are a marvel?”

She softly batted his arm, again reminding him of ImpSec in the motion. “Don’t you start. It’s just a 
garden, really.”

“Oh no. It is a public forgiveness of sins on all sides. Mama will be very jealous that she wasn’t here 
today.”
Ekaterin stared at him. “Why?”

“Because she likes stopping wars herself.”

Any reply she might have made was lost as Coram came briskly towards them.

“Lord Auditor, Lady Vorkosigan. Madame Lustaine and others are seated and have water. I would think a half-hour will suffice the rest, though”—he smiled a little—“we may have to remind some that your good sergeant will be with us in your District, and they will have a chance I hope to talk to him them.”

“Indeed.” Miles gestured Coram to sit beside them. “General Kariam told me the sergeant’s story had made him something of a name among the ghem. He was not exaggerating, then?”

“Not at all. And he is so right here in this place.” Something that might have been a wry smile moved the lips beneath the paint. “Even after your most spectacular coups with dress and protocol at the summit I would not have expected you to understand, but this garden shows me wrong. To us the sergeant is like what you have done here. What he did for us through Colonel Lasedi combined the simple honour of stone with the green force of life. As this extraordinary garden does in a transposed register.” Now Coram’s expression looked rueful but oddly intrigued. His voice dropped to a murmur. “Dag and I have the aesthetics of the summit down as the work of Lady Vorpatril, with Lady Vorkosigan as her apprentice. But I think we have our order wrong, for this place is wholly of your making, is it not, my Lady?”

The possessive was almost inaudible.

“No.” “Yes.” Miles and Ekaterin looked at one another.

“I’ve only refurbished it a little, General Coram.” Coram smiled more widely. Miles smiled back.

“What Ekaterin means, General—and in private, please, we are Miles and Ekaterin—is that she is not yet used to thinking of Lady Alys in other than primary terms, and has yet a semester to go with classmates who might not appreciate what she considers premature distinction.”

“Ah, yes—Miles. And I am Ferrant.” Coram gestured at the inner courtyard. “The finest undergraduate work on record in the Nexus. We are well warned. And I am strictly commissioned by Dag to secure places for himself and the Ambassador at your graduation, Ekaterin.”

“Oh.” She was blushing but determined. “That will be lovely. But you are aware the ceremony is by tradition without applause or interruption? On that day I will be one among many. To detract from the honour of others is … no honour.”

Privately Miles thought he and Gregor might between them have something to say about that, but as he hadn’t yet told Ekaterin Gregor and Laisa were determined to attend he thought discretion presently the better part of valour. Coram, though, heard the steel in Ekaterin’s voice and nodded thoughtfully.

“As you say. We will of course observe all protocol. And perhaps you might now introduce me to Regimental Sergeant Barnev, Miles. He seems to be enjoying a lull while the other veterans take a turn.”

They all rose and walked slowly towards the old sergeant, who saw them coming and brightened.

“My Lord, my Lady. You’ve made a wonderful job of this, my Lady. Master Tsipis sold you very short in his praises.”
“He did, Sergeant Barnev, I agree.” Miles spoke over Ekaterin’s muffled squawk of protest. “But his penalties must wait. May I make known to you ghem-General Ferrant Coram, of His Celestial Majesty’s Imperial Guard, who leads this pilgrimage? His grandfather was that most determined Colonel who died in our Gorge.”

Barnev saluted, and Coram returned the gesture with punctilio.

“General, sir. My Lord’s grandfather spoke always of your forebear with what we called irritated respect. It is my honour to meet you.”

“No, sir, the honour is mine. You have done more than you know to bring this day about.” He bowed to Barnev, who looked nonplussed, then to Miles’s delight ceremoniously touched his lips. “With the permission of your Imperial Master I am commissioned by my Imperial Master to ask if you will accept enrollment in the Warrant of His House?”

Barnev looked even more confused, and Miles hastened to explain.

“A formal recognition, sergeant, of your kindness to His Imperial Majesty’s subjects. A high honour. Should you wish to accept, do so with my blessing, speaking both as the Count-my-father’s Voice and in my Imperial Master’s Voice.”

A flash of interest sparked in Coram’s eyes at this dual formula, but he nodded formally to Barnev.

“That is so. It grants you right of entry into lesser precincts of the Celestial Garden.” His voice at once gentled into encouragement and intimated deep respect—a striking trick in any language, let alone a recent enemy’s. “You will be welcome on Eta Ceta, sir, and honoured.”

Barnev seemed distressed. “That’s right kind of you, General, sir. But it doesn’t seem right to be honoured for doing only what was proper.”

“Oh, but I assure you it is. Your family and friends will be welcome with you in the Celestial Garden. You need not be alone.” Coram’s simplicity surprised both Miles and Barnev.

“Well, that’s kind, and my wife would be telling me she does like a nice garden …” Barnev’s voice trailed away in confusion.

“Then you must take her, Sergeant. I speak as one gardener to another.” Ekaterin’s voice was melodious with assurance. “And your grandson, I am sure, will receive leave to accompany you.”

Barnev’s gaze drifted helplessly to Miles in final query.

“Besides, sergeant, think of the tales you’ll be able to tell at the Count when you get back.”

“Well, that’s a thought, m’lord.” They waited, and after a moment Barnev shrugged massively and smiled slightly, before saluting Coram again. “Plainly, sir, I should accept, and I do—but on behalf of all who served in our wars, not for myself.” Coram nodded.

“My Celestial Master shall understand it so. Perhaps”—he turned to Miles—“there might be a small ceremony in Vorkosigan Surleau, or Dendarii Gorge, as you will, Lord Auditor.”

“Certainly, General.” Miles though neither Sergeant Barnev nor Ekaterin should be pressed much more this morning. For once the damping idea of extended food and chat with the massed Council of Counts seemed a welcome prospect. “Now, Ferrant, do you suppose Madame Lustaine might be ready for some breakfast up in the castle? And I must introduce you to Count and Countess Vorbretten.”
The mid-afternoon sun was all the forecasters promised. Standing behind Gregor and Laisa with Miles, her aunt and uncle, and other summiteers on the main platform (only Jack Chandler, mysteriously vanished after Miles’s special frame-call, was missing), Ekaterin could look out at the gathered witnesses and multitudes beyond, and was glad both of the breeze and the shadow under the pavilion-roof.

The structure was temporary, simple, and elegant, an open square in the middle of the old parade-ground adjoining the Residence, where Gregor and Laisa had married just over a year ago. The party on the daïs was deliberately limited, but arrayed around them in swathes of clashing colour were the Council of Counts with all their acknowledged heirs—about half in liveries of the new material, with the effects foreseen—and the General Staff in what became by comparison an oddly dulled blast of parade red-and-blues. Beyond and around were massed Lords Auditor, Ministers, and galactic ambassadors with deputies, as well as city mayors, village speakers (Penderecki and Lem Csurik would be somewhere, Ekaterin knew), judges, serving and retired officers and other ranks, street-guards, and civic worthies, all in best uniforms or festive attire. Medals, badges of office, and jewels gleamed and glittered. Vorbarr Sultana socialites and lightweight celebrities, whose howls over Gregor’s ticketing priorities had been loud, prolonged, and unavailing, had managed to infiltrate the throng but were in a distinct minority, dwarfed by the last major group—Coram and his ghem-pilgrims, seated next to a block of several hundred older Barrayarans, most though by no means all women. Madame Ieskennis was prominent in the front row.

These were people who had lost close kin in the line of duty in three (and in a few cases four) generations. Gregor and Alya had initially thought in terms of two generations but that list had run into tens of thousands. Even the three-generation list was considerably larger than this, especially if Vor were included, but many were too frail and some had not wished to attend. The majority who were here were strongly of a mind with Madame Ieskennis—many, like her, having relatives still serving in space. The long-term family effects of a sustained military calling were familiar to Miles, as to Gregor and all high Vor, but had shaken Ekaterin and Laisa, opening for both a new window on what the commitments of war over a century might mean to the quotidian life of survivors. Individual stories, featured widely in all media once word of their invitation had leaked, had the power to move anyone with accumulations of lost fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers, cousins, sons, nephews, and grandsons. With Occupation deaths there were plenty of mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and nieces also, for many of the families were those whose service discipline meant they had formed the heart of urban insurgency and mountain resistance, and paid the price.

Contacted with an invitation to the treaty-signing by Miles and her liege-lord—Count Vorruyster, as it turned out, to Dono’s delight—Madame Ieskennis had gone an alarming shade of pink and burst into tears. Recovering after a moment, and as in her ‘vid interviews finding dignity with evident effort, she had said she would not miss it for the world but looked intently wistful, until a smiling Dono made her day complete by telling her that while, alas, her grandson was in galactic sector V, too far away to recall in time, even by frame, he would be able to see her, and her living son, rather closer on Komarr–Sergyar patrol, would be with her on the day. Both were invited with other formal witnesses to the Emperor’s Birthday Party in the evening—an innovation, Miles and Dono forbore to point out, that Gregor hoped would inhibit some more traditional Vor celebrations, such as competitive vomiting and crawling races.

Knowing they would be too busy later, Gregor and Laisa spent much of the morning welcoming
these guests. Some accompanied them to the Counts’ reception, the rest were given lunch at the Residence and the frail opportunity to rest. The Counts escorted them to their places, acknowledging the debt all Districts owed such service. Madame Ieskennis’s son turned out to be a grey-haired senior warrant officer in fleet ordnance; they sat together, not speaking but with proud smiles of wonder at the pageantry of the scene, and curious stares at the massed high Vor and ghem-pilgrims.

Gregor and Laisa were seated slightly off-centre on the dais, with the others grouped behind them. Next to Gregor was a small chair and table bearing pen, ink, and seal, then a frame as large as and looking very like a doorway. Beyond it was a Cetagandan party led by the haut Palma, her bubble festively tinted in swirls of soft red and yellow, and the haut Raniton Degtiar in another iridescent outfit with the haut Ambassador, Paramel Volusor, and four senior ghem-officers from mission and embassy, all in the blood-red uniforms of the Imperial Guard and their sharpest Imperial Array.

The ceremony on Cetaganda, though broadcast, was being held without an audience save their weekend summiteers because so many of the high haut were necessarily watching on their own planets and satrapies, so the emperors had agreed to keep it simple and make their own protocol to their own satisfactions. While the Barrayarans waited for the set time the Residence’s military orchestra played in the gardens behind them, a slow, keening performance of the best-known dirge for the Occupation dead followed by a far more sprightly peace-march hastily commissioned for the occasion from the delighted elderly colonel who was the musical director.

As the last notes faded a light on the frame blinked warning, Gregor gestured with one hand, and both Cetagandans and waiting Barrayarans surged to their feet. One further blink and the frame blazed alight to show an iridescent Fletchir Giaja, with Rian Degtiar’s and Pel Navarr’s bubbles and the tall figure of Lady d’Lhosh surrounded by the painted faces of Kariam, Lhosh, and Benin. To one side were Aral and Cordelia with Ambassador Vorreedi. The Cetagandans too had in open view a table and chair with paraphernalia for signing and sealing a treaty.

It was the second time Barrayar had seen the handsome, hawk-faced haut Emperor but the first they had seen of a haut woman, and Ekaterin heard a rush of indrawn breaths, then a more distant murmuring swell as the image became visible on screens around the city. Giaja and his court-party were also outside, in a matching but exquisite open pavilion presumably set up somewhere in the Celestial Garden, against a verdant backdrop dazzling in botanical order and enchantment. She longed to see it in reality. Next year I will. The thought was only a little strange. Heads nodded formal greetings between Imperial cousins and cousines, then between wider parties, Miles and she smiling as warmly as they could at the Viceroy and Vicereine. Was Aral’s skin smoother? His scar was less visible. Rian stayed hidden in her bubble but her rich, melodious alto flowed unimpaired from a speaker somewhere—the first time in centuries, Ekaterin realised as little shivers ran through Barrayarans in view, that a haut woman had spoken in the public hearing of humans. Many ambassadors had open looks of astonishment and appreciation at the qualities of both her voice and then Giaja’s baritone.

“Cousin, we have each other’s signed copies of Our treaty of fleets and volumes.”

“We do, cousin. Let Us therefore complete these formalities.”

Even though she had known it was to happen it took Ekaterin a moment to process that Gregor had spoken Cetagandan, Giaja Barrayaran. Her basic undergraduate Cetagandan, studied in curiosity, had been hastily relearned and extended, so she understood Gregor though the ultra-formal inflections of this highest grammatical mode were a haze to her still. Miles had told her of the decision grinning like a loon, because the whole problem of language had boiled up directly to Gregor and Fletchir themselves, who listened, dismissed all advisers, spoke together in privacy for half-an-hour, and recalled everyone to announce Their decision and shock all into renewed motion.
On the public screens subtitled renditions of Gregor’s words were appearing as fast as an ImpSec translator could formulate, type, and proof them; what was happening on Cetagandan planets Ekaterin had no idea, but on Barrayar utter stillness descended, so thick it hurt. Gregor and Giaja sat at the tables, Benin and Allegre came forward bearing ceremonial books containing coded and initialled data-discs. Books were laid down and opened, signatures took only seconds and the ritualised procedure of affixing to each a second imperial seal about a minute. Then books were taken up and emperors rose, Giaja looking at Gregor with a faint but to Ekaterin sincere smile, and again spoke in his perfect Barrayaran.

“Congratulations on your Birthday, cousin. As you are to return it in kind We cannot call this a gift, but speak now to Our subjects with Our blessing, of what has passed.”

Gregor nodded to him and stood forward to face the frame squarely, speaking Cetagandan in what she thought was Giaja’s imperial grammatical mode. “Thank you, cousin. Honoured Haut. Honourable ghem. We have all seen this morning how long and deep the wounds between us have run, and how the scars they left have healed and may yet be eased. We understand more also of the values we share, and virtues we cherish. In this treaty of fleets and volumes to which We have with Your Imperial Master solemnly sworn there is for all honour and opportunity, a garden soil of peace. And with your Imperial Master’s agreement We say to you all now, Be you true to Us within its terms, as We will be true to you.”

From the ghem-pilgrims came in unison an unexpected hiss of assent. Barrayarans rocked with its force and stared. No haut or ghem on the platform or in the frame moved an inch. Nor did Gregor.

“All ghem who would come here on pilgrimages of ancestral grace will be welcome as Our guests. And all haut and ghem are welcome among us in peace. We have much to learn of one another, and time in which to learn it. So with you all We give thanks for the wisdom of Your Imperial Master, who will now address Our subjects.”

With one of his grave, deep nods, just as in the morning ceremony to General Coram, Gregor stood back and Giaja moved fractionally forward in His turn. Unlike the guttural weight of Kariam’s basso His beautiful baritone wove through the harshness of Barrayaran like a mirror-dancer, exact and light, supremely clear.

“Thank you, cousin. Honoured Vor and all most resolute Barrayarans.” He allowed a moment to gesture slightly with his hands in a way that acknowledged the strangeness of the chances that brought Him to this address. “For more than fifty years We have ruled Our Imperium, and yet Our wars with Barrayar were an inheritance from Our dead, not of Our desire or making. We could to Our regret find no earlier way to this day. But now it has come We welcome it in honour, and for your kindness to Our ghem-pilgrims of ancestral grace We thank you all. As subjects of Your Imperial Master you are welcome to visit all planets of Our Imperium, and We so endorse Our Imperial Cousin’s words of learning that Our birthday gift to Him this day is endowment in His name of an institute within the University of Vorbarr Sultana where the histories of Our wars and Our peace may be studied.”

Beside Ekaterin her aunt went poker-straight as her uncle half-suppressed what she thought would have been a magnificent guffaw. The academic infighting over that one would be an interesting spectacle, to say the least, and her aunt had cards to baffle and rout all opposition. Stealing a glance at Miles’s profile she suspected he had also been taken by surprise but would with surpassing rapidity be marshalling any number of persuasive reasons why he shouldn’t be expected, say, to give an inaugural lecture when the Institute opened. Giaja waited a moment while Gregor, clearly unsurprised and to those who knew him gleeful, murmured Imperial thanks. Giaja let his face grow graver.
“Our Cetagandan rituals of fealty are longer than yours, so with your Imperial Master’s agreement We will say only to you all now, as He did and using His words, within the terms of Our treaty Be you true to Us, as We will be true to you. By Our grace, and by the grace of your Imperial Master, the past is done.”

He didn’t actually slap his hands in the universal gesture of dusting off palms but His voice did it for him, and as He stood back a swelling roar became audible, cheers and drumming applause that swept into the nearer Barrayaran witnesses with the force of a wave. Suddenly only the parties on the main daïs and thunderstruck ghem-pilgrims were still; even some younger Counts and high Vor dignitaries were applauding, and lesser Vor had with the common erupted wholesale. Ekaterin had thought Gregor and Giaja would simply nod and close the link after the mutual addresses but the tumult arrested both, and for a fleeting second Giaja’s face showed genuine surprise. Then for several moments He had as little choice as Gregor, standing cool and remote with the faintest smile, while the din washed over Him. Has he ever been so cheered? And what is haut Rian thinking in her bubble? At last the noise quieted, and Gregor quirked at eyebrow at His cousin, whose lips twitched.

“Thank you. You are a most surprising people.” He gave a precise duplicate of Gregor’s nod, deep and firm, and Ekaterin felt as much as saw deeper bows returned, or curtseys like her own. The Barrayarans knew what that acknowledgement meant. Giaja turned to Gregor and Laisa “But We must leave you now, cousins, to your fireworks. Farewell.”

At his smile and slight gesture the frame silently blanked and the vista of the Residence gardens was restored. Beyond the parade-ground the roar resumed, but in Gregor’s and Laisa’s presences discipline held again, and the party descended from the daïs in silence to begin passing through the corridor of ImpSec guards back towards the Residence. Yet even as they went the cunning of a great crowd dictated a new chant, and as the urgent, repeating surge of ‘Sire! Sire! Sire!’ became audible veterans in the nearer crowd picked it up, followed by serving officers and Counts’ heirs. Gregor kept walking but let a smile wreath his face, and the sound followed them long after the little-used south garden gates opened to admit them to the Residence’s security and closed behind them to cut off the broadcast and the screens at which the crowds howled. As soon as their collective privacy was restored Gregor broke ranks and dropped back to walk with her aunt and uncle.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t warn you, Helen. I only knew myself last night. Fletchir insisted an outright gift was a necessity. And guess who is going to chair the Gregor and Laisa Toscane Vorbarra Institute for Barrayaran and Cetagandan History?”

Aunt Helen blinked. “Gregor, dear, I believe you mean historiography, and would that perhaps be the Miles Vorkosigan Chair of Interplanetary Connivance?”

As Gregor laughed and Miles, walking beside her, drew indignant breath to expostulate, Ekaterin grasped his arm tightly and slowed in step with her uncle to let her aunt and Gregor draw ahead.

“Spoilsport.” Miles’s voice was levelly amused. “You ought to be careful I don’t use your aunt’s discarded heart as a visual aid along with those ghem-scalps.”

“Heh. And with the blessings of every last one of her colleagues, I should imagine.” Uncle Georg looked over his shoulder and grinned very widely. “Miles, my friend, have I ever said knowing you is fun? My Auditorial raid on the physics department was bliss, but this is going to be an absolute joy. From Helen’s reports down the years I know the prissy-face historians better than they know themselves, and she is going to wipe the floor with every last one of them.” He shortled. “And do be nice to her graduate student, when you meet her, won’t you? She’s a sweetheart, and I swear Helen is going to use Vanos to get her into the Cetagandan archives, and Yuri to bend General Staff rules
just slightly. She’s even got Guy agreeing to think about declassifying older ImpSec files.”

Miles grimaced. “I would suggest you remember, Georg, that over the last several years my biography has intersected rather forcibly with yours. And that your wife, once on the trail, is uncommonly determined.”

Ekaterin laughed as her uncle looked thoughtful. After that, besides the almighty firework display that lit the night sky for over an hour and satisfied everyone, only four moments in the long, happy evening stood out in memory among the chatter and high Vor conviviality. The first, as soon as she entered the Residence, was the appearance of Aunt Alys, who with an odd look enfolded her in an entirely unexpected hug, leaving her discombobulated and making her realise as the party developed that others who had seen the Memorial broadcast that morning, including the Counts, were according her a new deference she wasn’t at all sure she liked. Alys also looked very dryly at Miles, thanked him for so inventively solving what she called the royal-box problem, and suggested his own design input was needed. Miles grinned, and Ekaterin took refuge from confusion in asking him what it was all about. He explained and she had a hard time keeping a straight face.

The second, soon after, was the equally sudden appearance of Drou Koudelka, to tell Miles in a very low voice that she and Kou had recently learned of the secret clauses in the treaty, and did Lord Mark know? He did not, and would not until it all happened. Despite their public position Drou knelt, rather than stooping, and leaned forward to take and kiss Miles’s hand. “Then let me thank you now, Miles, on Kareen’s behalf and mine, for everything. The Vorkosigans’ gift of miracles runs true.” She rose and vanished, leaving astonished stares in her wake, and the legends Gregor had boosted grew.

The third special event, immediately preceding the fireworks, was Gregor’s announcement of Prince Aral Michael and Princess Kareen Cordelia to be. Standing with Laisa he said nothing to explain the choice of names but amid the Vor roar of welcome and relief Ekaterin saw furrowing brows and sharp glances as the bending of grandpaternal tradition was digested. Perhaps to limit that line of thought Gregor also informed his guests that his children’s birthday next year would be the same as his own—which implied use of replicators and, as the Barrayaran tax-year was dictated by the reigning emperor’s birthday, ensured it would not have to change again for a very long time. Then the ballroom doors swung back to reveal the first ground-display fireworks, cutting short applause and questions, and the happy throng were swept outside by liveried Vorbarra Armsmen and ImpSec guards to enjoy what they knew would have to be an explosive show rivalling even last year’s magnificent wedding extravaganza.

The last thing came as Ekaterin and Miles, having made farewells all round, were preparing to leave. Gregor’s senior Armsman, Gerard, came quietly up and murmured a request to accompany him. He led them to a small reception room where they found Gregor and Laisa, and the haut Palma’s bubble. Gerard withdrew, and as the door closed behind him the bubble winked out and its occupant stood. The Rho Cetan planetary consort was indeed vivacious, but more in agitation, Ekaterin thought, than anything else. Miles bowed shortly and she ducked slightly with him. She noticed with surprise she didn’t feel intimidated or dowdy in a haut woman’s presence any more.

“Haut Palma.”

“Lord Vorkosigan, Lady Vorkosigan.” Palma seemed hesitant, twisting long hair in one hand. Miles looked at Gregor and Laisa, who shrugged fractionally, clearly puzzled themselves.

“How may I assist you, haut Palma?”

“I … this is awkward. I was speaking to Ferrant Coram, who was telling me about Sergeant Barnev. They talked at length during the reception this morning, after that … remarkable ceremony at dawn.”
Her face was an close to unhappy as a haut face could be and her next words seemed an abrupt non sequitur. “Is it true there is still uncorrected radiological damage to some of your human population, in the mountains?”

“Alas, yes, that is true.”

“From the … ghem’s atomics?”

“Oh.” Miles spread his hands. “Partly. As I imagine you know, the destruction of Vorkosigan Vashnoi was meant to be punitive. It succeeded. But we also have an older legacy, from the mutagen disasters during the Time of Isolation, that has inhibited … progress.”

Palma swallowed. “And there is still a practice of human infanticide?”

Everyone’s face froze, except Miles’s. He moved his hands again, his voice untroubled. “Yes, it still happens, but very little now we loudly call it murder. It might have happened to me, you know, but my mother was Betan, not Barrayaran. You must understand, haut Palma, the Occupation literally decimated our population, and scorched-earth policies before negotiated withdrawal destroyed much. It has only been eighty years, and we have had … distractions.” He smiled ruefully. “In the nature of our system, more I think than in yours, high Vor families in imperial service must inevitably neglect their Districts as they should not. More can and will now be done.”

Gregor nodded, and spoke for the first time. “That is especially true of Vorkosigans, alas. Much fault is Ours. But forgive me, haut Palma, what is your concern with this history now?”

Again strange unhappiness and uncertainty showed in her face, but she took a breath and spoke simply. “This time on Barrayar has been as surprising as it was unexpected. I have come to think we haut have been too … insulated for too long. I cannot say the Star Crèche did not know what happened here nor that we lacked intelligence of Barrayar, but I had not understood your situation well. Nor I think had my fellows.” She looked down at Miles. “I was suspicious of your designs at the summit, Lord Vorkosigan, but I see more clearly now what you asked of us, and why you could speak to us as you did. Does Rian know of these things?”

“I cannot say. I have never spoken to her of them. Nor directly to Dag Benin, but he certainly knows.”

“Ah, yes. Then … if you wish it, and it can be safely done, ghem and haut women geneticists will come to Barrayar, to help in this. Please”—she held up a hand to silence them—“you must understand, the general human medical package is one thing, that we can … franchise. This kind of specific intervention is quite another. Zygotes must be individually mapped and corrected, using techniques we will not release, before placement in replicators, or corrections will not be transmitted properly to further generations. So gametes or arrested zygotes must come to a central facility, secure to us, and each case will take some time. Will this be … acceptable to the parents?”

All the Barrayaran’s faces were alight with hope tempered by caution as they heard Palma’s reservations. Miles nevertheless nodded. “I believe in my own District it can be made so, with some care. And if it can be done in the Dendarii, it can be done anywhere on Barrayar.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. Tell me, haut Palma, would you be prepared to meet a woman whose firstborn was murdered by her own mother for having a hare lip and cleft palate? She hopes to be the first in her Vale to use a replicator, for her third living child, next year.”
Laisa looked blank but Ekaterin’s head filled with a vision of the haut Palma meeting Harra Csurik.

“You know this woman?” Palma was plainly astonished.

“Oh yes. I judged her mother for infanticide as the Count-my-father’s Voice, and Ekaterin and I are presenting a replicator to that Vale as part of my bride-gift to the District. If you were to accompany General Coram to Vorkosigan Surleau as my private guest? He is staying on a little after the ceremony in the Gorge while a few pilgrims go to other sites.”

“That might be possible, but …”

Miles’s voice had subtly inched towards persuasion. “She now teaches and leads change in all ways. If she is persuaded, much will follow.”

“Very well. I will contact you through the Embassy. Now I must go.” And she did, barely saying another word save a formal farewell to Gregor before sitting and vanishing again from their sight. After Gerard had escorted her bubble out, everyone collapsed into chairs.

“Well, well, well. That was interesting.” Miles’s voice was bone dry. So was Gregor’s.

“Wasn’t it just? Will you do a full analysis for me, Miles, as soon as maybe. What else will take a less insulated Star Crèche sufficiently aback to start them thinking, I wonder?” He frowned. “And what centre these geneticists can control? I take her point but …”

“ImpMil.” Miles’s voice expressed conviction. “A separate building, new if necessary, isolated from others. No proximity to sensitive military data on our side, fully secure perimeter already, and it’d mean the whole project can … heh, that the Celestial hand can be hidden as necessary in the Imperial glove.”

“Yes, very good. Will you liaise? Use Auditorial authority.”

“Alright.”

Enough was enough. Ekaterin sat forward. “Miles, dear, are you really going to introduce haut Palma to Harra Csurik?”

“Oh yes, if she’ll come to Vorkosigan Surleau. I wouldn’t drag Harra up here, and it’d miss the whole point anyway. Let the high haut go to her and learn what they can. Besides, I meant exactly what I said—if Harra says yes, and I think she will, the Vale will follow her lead and word will spread.” His face was blazing so that Ekaterin could only smile with him. “I thought it’d take another two generations at least to do it, but with this help we really can clean up the mountain genomes. Ma and Da will dance for this one.”

“So will I, Miles.” Gregor was also caught by the passion, but Laisa was still plainly at a loss.

“I’m sorry, Miles, but who is Harra Csurik?”

“Gregor can tell you. A woman whom life has made very strong and wise. Actually, Gregor, I was going to suggest you both come to Silvy Vale sometime. Zed Karal was teasing Ekaterin and I about making a christening-tour. I was in two minds, but if it was as much for Harra’s christening as ours …”

Gregor went thoughtful. “Yes, that’s an idea. You have a very sharp eye for potent symbolism these days, you know, Miles.”
Looking at Laisa, Ekaterin sighed. “Men!” Laisa grinned as Miles and Gregor looked astonished. “What you need to know, Laisa, is that Harra is a very progressive Speaker’s wife in the Dendarii back-country, entirely suitable to visit. She’s a lovely woman, very sharp, and tough as we come. She’s also the only person in the world Miles allows to call him ‘little man’.”

Laisa’s eyebrows rose and Miles grinned. “She is. But Gregor really can tell you about her, Laisa—it’s not a secret at all, just not stuff that gets mentioned casually.”

“But why do you let her call you that?”

“Oh it’s only in private. She’d never be disrespectful in public.”

“That isn’t an answer, Miles.”

There was a silence until Ekaterin smiled and stood. “It’s because she made him grow.”

Gregor looked thoughtful again, and, smiling, took Laisa’s hand and let them go. In the groundcar Miles smiled at her tiredly but with deep satisfaction and pleasure. “Now that’s a good day’s work. Forgiveness in word and deed, high ceremony, public joy, excellent fireworks, and two, no three, I suppose, entirely unexpected boons.” Ekaterin looked her question. “Giaja’s institute is the one I’m doubtful about. His sudden insistence sounds like face-saving to me, so we need to find out whose face needed saving and why.”

“What was the first boon, then?”

“Gregor the Great. Ha. I’m going to enjoy that one. At least three papers have it as their headline. I must tell Pym to get extra copies. The others are going with ‘Sire!’”

She regarded him with bemusement. “Well, I can see it was nice of the ghem, and a fine compliment, but why does it matter so much to you, love? I felt you go as tense as a wire when Ferrant said it.”

Miles grinned triumphantly. “It fulfils a promise I once made to myself, and to Gregor. I think I was six. It was very solemn until we were interrupted by guards looking for the Imperial seal.”

She kept a straight face, imagining a six-year-old Miles radiating his enormous love and—what had Nikki said?—his need for fealty. Gregor must have been incredibly strong, even at eleven, not to have been consumed by it. Or perhaps he was. Look what has come true. “Did they find it?”

“They did.”

“Were you in lots of trouble?”

“Simon wanted us to be, but as I believe I pointed out, it is Gregor’s seal, to do with as he will. Da never used it.”

“And you really told him he’d be Gregor the Great?”

“Oh yes. The alliteration was irresistible.”

Ekaterin sat back, thinking of words beginning with M though she knew which he would have chosen, and wondering anew at the force that reshaped her life, as it reshaped worlds and was reshaping the Nexus. Since the relief of events going so smoothly that morning she had flowed through the day on its tide, too busy absorbing the present to dwell on causes. But now there would be time. In a day or two she’d see Nikki again, for events in the Gorge, and then she would be free to do her assigned summer work in botany and biochemistry. Miles would have Auditorial work to
complete before her graduation, and she wasn’t sure if his genetics committee had just had its workloads increased or diminished. But that could surely wait for tomorrow.
The tide of events slowed again following the Birthday extravaganzas, and after the emotional intensity of the ceremonies in Vorbarr Sultana the pilgrims’ visit to Vorkosigan Surleau was quiet and restrained. With Coram’s strong support and Speaker Penderecki’s reluctant agreement Miles solved the accommodation problem by billeting pilgrims on willing villagers, with the distinct bonus of generating, in place of the banquet that would otherwise have been necessary, forty or so individual family meals with guests who agreed to leave off their face-paint and dress down after a tiring day. The impromptu ceremonies themselves went well, in the Gorge, where precision flying of ImpSec aircars supplied by Gregor made access possible for older pilgrims, and in the village square, where Sergeant Barnev was given the bound scroll of his Celestial Warrant by Coram, to warm applause and sly village grins. Coram himself, not obviously emotionally affected, had eyed the terrain with a military wince and clear respect for anyone who fought in it. Miles and Ekaterin left him and Barnev amid a knot of pilgrims and cheerful villagers outside the inn, collected Nikki, left Helen, who had come to observe, and headed back for a pleasantly quiet evening of their own.

The next day Cetagandan-speaking ImpSec diplomatic officers took over guidance of pilgrims who wished to visit other death-sites, liaising with appropriate Counts and authorities. Some ghem returned to Vorbarr Sultana; the rest accepted invitations to stay in Vorkosigan Surleau for a few days—an excellent sign, Miles thought. Barnev might yet have more company than he expected on his promised visit to Eta Ceta, if transport could be subsidised. Then he remembered he could do more than that, for the reason Gregor had told him to contact Master Tsipis was that he had assigned two points of the gross revenue-stream from Chandler’s technologies to the Vorkosigan Countship in perpetuity. There wasn’t yet much on tap, but there would soon be a very great deal. Tsipis had been beside himself, and Miles had been very grateful for his District while wondering what his Da would say at this access of profit. But he also found himself possessed of a great desire to talk about Gregor’s largesse with Mark, to whom money and its possibilities made instinctive sense.

After lunch Miles had just managed to divert Helen from his own biography with his Gran’da’s old muster-rolls, upon which Coram fell with a military historian’s interest, when the Cetagandan’s wrist-com lit up. After a brief conversation in very formal mode, Coram turned to him with a look of deep surprise. “Miles, did you know the haut Palma wishes to visit you here tomorrow?”

Palma had contacted him on the day after their conversation at the Residence to agree a date. Miles had taken advantage of her still evident discomfort to slip in a further request, and had yet another pending if the opportunity were to arise. “Ah, yes, Ferrant. There are some genetic matters on which we are consulting. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to warn you before but I was asked to wait on your own embassy.”

Coram nodded politely, and though clearly curious was not in the habit of questioning what a planetary consort decided to do. He did, however, take unobtrusive but Miles had no doubt very careful note the next day, after politely greeting haut Palma, when unmarked ImpSec lightflyers brought Harra Csurik and Enrique Burgos to discreet meetings with the geneticist. Harra emerged after an hour to look at Miles with a mixture of respect, wonder, and love that was like the heat of a fire.
“Not just my head in the stars, little man, but my womb with it.” Then she frowned. “She said the Emperor knows who I am.”

“He does, Harra. You are His pride, as you are mine. Will you and Lem do this? Do you see what it will mean, if you do?”

“Oh yes, we see, and we will do. And every child in the mountains will know and tell their mothers.”

After that there was Enrique Burgos to deal with, who emerged after rather longer spent with a very embubbled Palma to stare with bulging eyes, so astonished his awe of Miles was temporarily banished. “How did you do that, Miles? Who is she really? Why is she in that bubble? She’s amazing. She said the Sigma Cetan bacteria can be adapted as we need, using techniques I can’t begin to understand and she’ll send someone to do the sequencing work. And she said my equations were nearly right and she can correct them and my girls can grow their own internal frames if they’re given an iron source in ovo, but will then need tuning, which I don’t understand at all either. And she said—”

Ekaterin, amused at her vision of Enrique meeting a haut bubble on his doorstep coming so nearly true, gently guided him, still babbling, to a waiting Martya Koudelka. Miles went into Palma, who snapped her bubble off as he closed the door and looked at him with unreadable eyes.

“Thank you, haut Palma. Is all well?”

“Well enough. That man is a very intelligent geneticist for one with only Escobaran training.” Suddenly she smiled, face transfigured into the vivacity Miles remembered from a decade ago. “His whole bug idea is as peculiar a combination as your tractor-bubbles, but it’s clever and can be made to work. It will also, I suspect, prove very efficient, as living organisms tend to be. We of the Star Crèche must consider bio-cleanup of radioactivity more closely, and direct ghem research. There are other places that could use a version of this, particularly with frame technology to absorb particle energies, which he said was your idea.”

Miles bowed. When he straightened Palma had lost her smile. “But Harra Csurik is astonishing to me, in strength and focus. She has little technical vocabulary but her memory is exact and her turns of phrase vividly clear. If she is a fair sample of your mountain-people, no wonder the ghem lost so badly here. And her personal story … forgive me, I did not altogether believe what you had said, but it was so. The first-born child had a common morpho—”

“Raina. Her name was Raina.”

Palma stared at him, unused to interruption, then nodded. “Yes, you are right, she was human life. Raina had a common morphogenetic error, as I believe you understand. I would guess Harra’s childhood and gravid malnutrition were factors. The nameless embryo she miscarried last year, however, plainly had far more serious spinal morphogenetic failure, and with what is known of two of her murdered siblings confirms deeper genomic damage affecting her gametes. I will do the work for myself, as soon as possible, but I will have to check both gametes separately. I have told her what is needed. Will you arrange transport of the cryopackage to Rho Ceta through the embassy?”

“With all my heart.”

“That, I begin to realise, Lord Vorkosigan, is in your case an unusually large organ.” Miles blinked and Palma smiled again. “There was, you know, much dismay at your appearance in the Celestial Garden ten years ago, amid the wreckage of the Celestial Lady Lisbet’s plan.” Her voice lightly mocked herself. “An outlander male, and, forgive me, a damaged one at that, forcing us to face
political facts in our innermost sanctum, and to be thankful first for his intrusion, then his help. Since that day more of us than the Handmaiden have studied your file attentively, as it has grown ever thicker.”

Miles wasn’t at all sure what to say to that, so he bowed slightly, and when the silence continued shrugged. “That was then, haut Palma, and Admiral Naismith another man, suited only to past occasions. My file can now gather more dust and less weight.”

She laughed aloud, shocking him. “Hardly. After these last months it will exceed your father’s, I should think, and that is enormous. No outlander genome in the Nexus will be considered more thoroughly. And I should not be surprised, Lord Vorkosigan—Miles—if one of these days you find the Star Crèche has called you up. A human line than can do in only three generations what Vorkosigans have done is not to be ignored.”

He would not gape. To be called up for possible inclusion in the genome of the next haut generation was the highest honour possible for a Cetagandan, and that Miles had borne the force of emotions Palma obviously felt for Harra Csurik and the lives in his and his father’s care she represented.

“Speechless, for once? I must tell Fletchir.”

He recovered his wits and made a snap decision. “Surprised, certainly. You will know, I think, about my conversation with Vanos Kariam some weeks ago.”

“Yes.”

“I spoke of my brother, and spoke truly. But my deepest personal motives in this have far more to do with my father. And with Harra. It is because she kept my feet on the ground when I tried to float away that I have been able to look steadily at the stars. And there is another woman, also.” He produced a data-file and cryosample, and handed them to her. “Given her presence at my wedding, if nothing else, I would imagine your file on me contains information on Sergeant Taura?”

“The … large Jacksonian woman you collected eight years ago?”

Miles smiled mirthlessly. “It must be a good file. Yes. Taura was designed by Hugh Canaba for House Bharaputra in 2780 as a super soldier. To give her speed they set her metabolism astonishingly high but did not bother to correct for cellular effects. Dendarii surgeons and the Durona group have adjusted her biochemistry as best they can and bought her some years, but they are already beyond their limits, and she is close to hers. Is there anything you could do?”

“Ah. Maybe not. Such an altered genome is usually very fragile. But I will look for you.”

This time he bowed to her deeply, and then met her gaze. “Thank you, haut lady. Palma.”

The silence returned, more easily. At last Palma nodded slowly, her eyes smiling. “Damsels in distress. I mind me the Handmaiden said you once defended her to Fletchir himself, and flatly corrected him when he rebuked you. That was … bolder than you know. And though you speak of serving your father in all this, in doing so you serve your mother also, I think, perhaps even before him. I understand, by the way, that you will find Count Vorkosigan’s health much improved, though there are limits to what we can do.”

They parted on better terms than Miles would have thought possible after her sharpness at the summit. After seeing Palma’s unmarked Cetagandan embassy aircar leave trailing its equally unmarked ImpSec escorts, he returned well content to the animated historical discussion of his Gran’da’s irregular mountain cavalry that Coram and Helen had resumed in the library, with an
intrigued Nikki and more politely attentive Ekaterin as audience.

The pilgrims left next day, and would return to Eta Ceta within the week. Slowly late summer routines returned as his neglected genetics committee reclaimed his time in tedious capital meetings and hearings on fine points during the weeks. Ekaterin grew absorbed in Vorkosigan Surlael with summer schoolwork and plans for the gardens there. Nikki’s pairing with Roic worked out well, the Armsman giving village children classes borrowed from his training in Hassadar, while himself learning field- and woodcraft with them. Initially isolated in the village by his urban childhood and street-police background, he was now a favourite of children and parents alike, boosting self-confidence.

Haut Palma’s mission departed, to be replaced by a much larger, lower-ranking group to pursue with all and sundry the monstrous trades and tariffs treaty. At the same time his parents returned from Eta Ceta to Sergyar, to what his Ma, using her new frame-link from the Viceregal residence, dryly called a noisy frontier reception, adding that Chaos Colony was living up to its nickname and would he please refrain from dragging his parents away from it again in the near future? Both she and his Da were exhausted from the diplomatic strains of their long stint amid the alien corn; once news broke the curiosity of respectful ghem-officers wanting to meet Viceroy Count Vorkosigan had been sufficiently intense to become a burden. But his Da’s health was vastly better, beneath tiredness, and he admitted to feeling ten years younger. What exactly Rian had done not even his Ma was quite sure, but while the Empress had warned her miracles could not be expected it was clear that beyond powerful retrogenetic treatment of some kind cellular damage from long space service had been repaired, and there had been a resetting of Aral’s metabolic clock. Within a few weeks he looked better still and turned animated attention to interfering by frame in the military planning and construction formal announcement of the joint fleet had kicked into overdrive in Barrayaran and Komarran shipyards, as well as working quietly on inner plans for the invasion he would command.

University and school years restarted, drawing them back to Vorbarr Sultana. Nikki and his Cetagandan friend found themselves more popular in school than they would ever have believed possible, while Helen began to have what sounded like a very good time convening and chairing a committee to supervise setting up the new institute. Ekaterin, however, had a less joyful return, finding to her dismay that with few exceptions her classmates did not cope well with the fame summer had given her, nor the precise shaping of psyches and power they had seen in the dawn broadcast from the Occupation Memorial, now emotionally valued by both Barrayarans and galactics and fast becoming one of the most visited sites in the capital. After a few weeks her discontent spilled over one night, after Nikki’s departure for bed left her alone with Miles and a purring, almost full-grown ImpSec curled on his lap.

“It’s as if I’m not me anymore. They don’t even hear what I say, like that nincompoop Vassily Vorsoisson.”

Miles regarded her steadily. “Not quite. They have no power over you or Nikki.”

Ekaterin blinked. “Well, no. But—”

“And I don’t think it is the same, love. Vassily is a self-important young idiot, but nice enough when not having poison poured in his ears. When he looked at you he saw nothing, because he had no eyes to see. Your classmates are dazzled because they have seen you, and your power. They’ll settle. The important thing is not to change yourself one jot on their behalf. Just go on as you were.”

“Alright, that makes sense. But really, love—one of them has asked me for a job already.”

“And was it someone you would wish to hire?”
“What? No, not at all.”

“But it could have been. In which case you could have done. If you wanted. This particular person sounds crass, but the question is not necessarily impertinent.”

“Oh. Well, perhaps not, but I don’t want to hire any of them right now.”

Miles grinned, hands gently stroking ImpSec’s mottled head. “I’m not sure you can blame them for trying, though they score for tactlessness. But if you’ve gone off your classmates slightly this is probably a good time to tell you that as well as Dag and the Cetagandan ambassador, Gregor and Laisa are coming to your graduation. They insist.” She looked aghast. He ploughed on. “And Ma and Da, who are coming for Winterfair. Mark and Kareen will be back from Beta. Georg will be on the platform, of course, because it’s a science class graduating, but Helen will be with us. Simon and Alys couldn’t be kept away with stunners. Whom else would you like to invite?”

Ekaterin’s face was frozen. “I thought I was only allowed two guests.”

He looked at her lovingly. “Not any more. And it’s not unearned privilege, love. It’s not even privilege earned twice over. It’s a function of revealed power. You once said people constellated around me. But they are constellating around you now. You can’t stop it any more than you can stop plants seeking the sun. So use it.”

“How?”

“Up to you. Do you want to invite your Da and Stepma and brothers? Vassily? Tien’s mother? Enrique?” He fluttered eyelashes at her and drew a laugh.

“It’s all very well, Miles, but my poor Da would be—”

“Delighted?” He watched her as she struggled to accept that, however surprised and embarrassed, her Da, a most unimaginative and loyal rural Vor, would be delighted. Profoundly uncomprehending, and probably reduced to an even smaller conversational repertoire than usual, but delighted all the same. What parent would not be? He offered her the final straw, or last solace. “Do you know who, quite accidentally, fixed this notion in Gregor’s mind even before your coups of the summer?”

She gestured at him with an ImpSec-style bat of the hand, echoed from Miles’s lap, but suddenly looked thoughtful. “You mean Nikki.”

“Yes. He finds it hard to show you, but he is so proud of you it bubbles out all over when you’re not there. His Cetagandan friend is also very admiring, he says. From whose da, by the way, we can expect an invitation for some face-painting any day now.”

Maternal priorities kicked in, and Ekaterin slowly acquiesced. If she were honest with herself recognition wasn’t unwelcome, only flustering; residual vertigo from apogee, she decided, and let it go. She also had an upcoming space travel and survival course to consider, then survive in exhausted triumph. Her guest-list, though, once finally cooked-up, was unusual, including not only all those Miles had suggested but Ma Kosti, Armsman Roic and Sergeant Taura, Master Tsipis, the Koudelka Commando with partners and parents, Estelle, and Lady Vorob’yev (whose husband, urgently recalled from retirement, was on Eta Ceta). At Nikki’s insistence she added, for the party afterwards, his Cetagandan friend and the boy’s parents. Miles raised an eyebrow but asked no questions. The mixture appealed to him and one at least of her choices suited him well, he thought, as he made necessary arrangements with the Dendarii through Allegre. Otherwise, outside family, running checks on the progress of various plans, and such happy obligations as his seizure stimulator, his time
was spent hog-wrestling the genetics committee towards conclusion, until two weeks before Winter-fair and one before the end of the semester with its graduation ceremonies he made an appointment and staggered dramatically into the Imperial Residence to deposit five fat data-discs on Gregor’s desk.

“There you go, Sire. A 143-page law with more than 44,000 pages of citations, agreed in precise detail by every last one of the gurning lunatics you put on that committee, including me. It’s wordily dull and in spite of everything reliably sane. My mother will say Bararrayrans loudly, but secretly she’ll be quite pleased. In its provisions everyone is granted full ownership and control of their own genome, which means women’s legal standing is massively enhanced and you will have to deal with the implicit overturning of automatic paternal custody of sons and maternal custody of daughters in favour of individual assessment. Additionally, Vormuir is cooked several times over, René Vorbretten could not have been impeached without your permission, and Dono Vorrutyer would have had a much easier time of it. The new haut institute at ImpMil is not mentioned, anywhere. Don’t ever do this to me again.”

Gregor looked at him with little sympathy but much respect. “Thank you, my Lord Auditor. It shall be enacted as fast as We can sign it in Council. On the other hand, Miles, what exactly are you grumbling about? Do you realise you had the same effect on that committee as Vorhalas has had on everyone for the last thirty years when it comes to morals in politics?”

“I do, and used it shamelessly, not to mention illogically, especially with Counts Vorkalloner and Vorpatril, or we should all still be arguing about something on page two. Falco in particular cannot quite bring himself to address the finer points of embryonic biochemistry. Using myself in that way is exactly what I don’t want to do again. Ever.”

“Well, that’s pretty much what you have to do with the Marilacans, isn’t it?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks.”

Gregor grinned. “Naismith Rides Again. Does Ekaterin know it’s a busman’s galactic honeymoon you’re offering her?”

“More or less.”

“Meaning not at all.”

“Meaning more or less. She knows I have political business on Marilac, and that she’s getting a very personal tour of the Celestial Garden, followed by a nice long visit to Terra. She understands we’re taking a riverboat with Tung up something surprisingly long called the Amazon, and”—Miles found his sweet smile—“that on the way back, if the timing works, we shall be collecting passengers. Including Elena, Elli, Rowan Durona, and Taura, all of whom Ekaterin looks forward to meeting or seeing again. While Rian, of course, will be meeting us there. Beat that, Gregor the Great.”

Gregor actually doubled up laughing for a few seconds, and sobered only with difficulty. “Miles, I don’t have that many ex-girlfriends to try Laisa with. I wish. Though actually, come to think of it, rather you than me. When they all gang up on you, you’ll be toast.”

“A fate to which I look forward. In any case, there’s going to be a mighty show to distract them.”

“Heh. And I hadn’t forgotten you had improbably redeemed your promise of twenty-…six years ago. I believe I owe you, what was it? a shield with your choice of arms.”

“Yes. But I already have one. Several, in fact.”
“So what do you want?”

“Do you know, not much of anything more anyone can give.” Miles reflected a moment. “Though I have been wondering whether to ask you for permission to swear an Armswoman rather than Armsman for the next vacancy. Banharov wants to retire, I’m told, and Ekaterin deserves her own Drou, don’t you think? Most Progressives would acquiesce, and perhaps a few others. A bare majority, anyway.”

“Miles, if any Progressive didn’t agree to vote for Fat Ninny when you recommended it I’d be seriously surprised. And that’s a permission I’m happy to give.” He frowned. “Do you think it needs a Council vote?”

“Depends how you read the preamble to Vorloupulous’s Law. Check with the lawyers. You could get away with it just now, I fancy, but a vote might be better all the same.”

“Mmm. I’ll certainly put the question to the lawyers. Do you have someone in mind?”

“Sort of. But … it’s uncertain. Off all records?”

“Of course.”

“Taura. Palma Robine says even the haut can’t fix her as such, but they can give her a choice of sorts. If they slow her metabolism and disconnect it from physical speed, they can give her maybe three decades. She’d be a lot less voracious and would have to work hard to keep muscle mass in shape. She’d still be fast by ordinary standards but too slow for combat work, given what she’s been. But not too slow for this, if it was something she wanted. The problem, of course, is she’s not District-born, but then she wasn’t really born at all.”

Gregor absorbed this. “Would she want? And have you asked your Da?”

“Yes. He’s willing to stretch a point, and not just in gratitude for saving Ekaterin—he can see what a potent figure she’d be, in livery or out. What Taura will want, I really don’t know. But I owe her the choice, now I can offer it. And Armsman Roic might be an attraction for her.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They became lovers after saving Ekaterin, I think. They surely spent the days together, he certainly dotes on her, and it isn’t only wistful yearning I hear in his voice. Palma also tells me, which I was horrified to realise I’d never checked, that Taura would not pass on most of her problems to any children.”

Gregor whistled. “Brave man, Roic. And lucky man. Well, if she wants to become a Barrayaran she has my permission to swear allegiance to you in any capacity you think of, and bother the Council. Please tell her also, Miles, if she just wants a pension and a house they are hers for the asking. If ImpSec doesn’t pay, I will.”

Miles smiled love, gratitude, and uncertain, half-hoping sadness for Taura’s created fate. “That’s a deal.”

* * * * *
Ekaterin approached graduation determined to enjoy it. Her problems with fellow students had, as Miles thought, settled. She had also learned to distinguish self-seeking opportunists from those pushed by parents or friends to cultivate her acquaintance, and both from the fair number of classmates who genuinely admired her Memorial design for its beauty and power, and wanted to understand how she shaped space in her head.

On the night before the ceremony, when nerves might have caught up with her, she was nicely distracted by the arrival first of the Viceroy and Vicereine, this time with proper entourage, then of Taura. The first order of business was Estelle’s, to adjust a dress made to measurements on file from her memorable champagne-velvet wedding outfit. Aunt Alys, to Ekaterin’s relief delighted by the invitation to Estelle, met them with the stylist who had previously done Taura’s hair. Sitting and talking to Taura while she was looked after Ekaterin saw she no longer dyed her hair, allowing thick streaks of cruelly premature grey to show—but that was the only sign that at twenty-four she was already almost a decade beyond the life-span expected by her designer.

After dinner Miles and Ekaterin took Taura to his study, and he explained to her what the Star Crèche believed it could and could not do, and the choice she faced. To Miles it was a poor second to the life Taura deserved and he was, Ekaterin knew, possessed by senses of failure and impotence, but after a while it was clear Taura, uncertain what she should do, did not see it that way. They had both been unnerved to see tears flooding her tawny eyes and streaming down her cheeks, some running on to the huge canines that had been wished on her and dripping onto her lap. But her voice was wondering.

“That’s twice now, Miles, you’ve given me the chance and choice of life when I had none. And most of me hungers for it, for the time I didn’t think I could have. But what will I do if I can’t fight? I don’t think I could bear for weakness to make me a burden.”

Miles took a deep breath. “It never will. And you can do whatever you want. You can retire with a full pension and a house wherever you like, at ImpSec’s expense. Or I have Gregor’s permission to swear you as liege-woman in any capacity we decide. There will be a place opening soon in the Vorkosigan Score of Armmen, and if you become a Barrayaran my father is happy it be yours. So in principle is Pym, though I named him no names.” He hesitated. Taura’s eyes were huge. “And I’ve said nothing to him, of course, save that you’d be here, but I believe Armmen Roic would be delighted. Permanently so, if I understand him aright.”

Her reply was painfully uncertain. “He said nice things, and I liked him a lot. But Miles, how could I be a … wife, when I couldn’t …”

Ekaterin spoke firmly. “Taura, if you had children they would not carry your modifications. They would be big and strong, but their metabolisms and life-expectancies would be human normal.”

“And these?” Taura touched gleaming fangs with clawed fingers.

“No. Your makers altered you, but Palma was clear your gametes carry the underlying phenotype, not the modifications they imposed.”

“I …”

“Sleep on it,” Miles advised. “The graduation ceremony is tomorrow afternoon, but you’re free until then, as is Roic.” He rarely interfered with Pym’s organisation of Armmens’ schedules, but he had not left this fall of the duty roster to chance; not that Pym needed much persuading when he realised what his lordship was about.

“Oh. You are so kind.” Taura’s smile was huge. “Can I, Ekaterin?” And before Miles could work
out what permission had been asked and whether it had been granted he found himself engulfed in a hug that made him grateful synthetic bones were unbreakable and left him very short of the air he had been lifted into.

“You are the biggest man I’ve ever known.”

Then she charged out in search of Roic. Now, from her place among seated graduands Ekaterin heard murmurs of shocked surprise and turned to see Taura gliding tall in a stunning deep red dress, towering over Miles, Nikki, Aunt Helen, her frozen-faced Da and pale stepma; a head taller even than Roic, so smart in a civilian suit he gleamed. Behind them she could see Aunt Alys and Simon with Ma Kosti, Estelle, Master Tsipis, and Lady Vorob’yev, followed by a wide-eyed gaggle of her brothers and sisters-in-law with Vassily Vorsoisson, surprised and grateful to be invited. Massed Koudelkas followed, led by Drou and Kou; Duv Galeni in dress greens with Delia, Count Dono in house uniform with Countess Olivia, Enrique Burgos with Martya, and bringing up the rear Lord Mark with Kareen, come directly from the shuttleport, pausing only to change. Her former mother-in-law had declared herself too busy to travel so close to Winterfair, and for all she was Nikki’s biological grandma Ekaterin found herself happy to let connection lapse with anyone so sourly uninterested in their own grandchild.

Seats at the front were reserved for the whole vast party, thirty-one strong, and the signs, like thorough security checks of all entering, had drawn querulous comment as people settled in around the block of empty chairs. Now there were less resentful noises of surprise as Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, Lady Vorpatril, Captain Illyan, the notorious new Count Vorrutyer, and even Aunt Helen, made famous by the treaty signing, were identified. The noise intensified as the party settled in, carefully not looking around for her, and it became clear six seats in the centre of the front row remained empty and uniformed, lethally armed ImpSec guards as well as liveried Vorbarra, Vorkosigan, and Vorrutyer Armsmen with stunners were now visible around the room. She saw Pym, Banharov, and Captain Khourakis among them but did not try to catch professionally scanning eyes. When the advance guard of the Vice-Chancellorial procession could be seen waiting at the rear door of the dais the main doors were thrown back by Armsman Gerard.


Gregor’s name brought everyone to their feet with gasps from more provincial attendees, to whom Vorbarr Sultana was already an imperial treat and this unexpected nearness to their Emperor and new Empress icing on the cake. As the Viceroy and Vicereine were announced and became visible behind Gregor and Laisa, general murmuring broke out, quite against protocol and not so much, Ekaterin thought, at the fact of their being here, unexpected though it was, as at the renewed vigour rolling from Aral, reinforcing the impact of his physical presence and the impression of power in his every movement. Beside him Cordelia was also in blooming health and a spectacular dark green dress, roan hair piled high. But when Gerard announced the Cetagandans, and the elegant form of Volusor and stocky shape of Benin, wearing full blood-red Guard uniform and Imperial Array, came into view, protocol went abruptly west in an outburst of clapping and cheering.

At first Ekaterin thought it a reaction to post-treaty popularity of all things Cetagandan among pretty much the entire Barrayan public. But as she saw and felt glances flicker between the imperial procession and herself she realised many in the audience had made the connection, realising the galactics as much as her parents-in-law and the Emperor and Empress were here for her. Next to her Sylvie Labrun, fortunately a classmate she liked who genuinely admired her work at the Memorial, was grinning fit to burst and giving her a thumbs-up, though she would have the unenviable task of going up to the platform immediately after Ekaterin, and for the first time outside Vorkosigan Surleau
she felt a wash of concentrated public support and approval, appreciation and gratitude. Unable to
stop herself smiling she kept still, drawing goodwill into herself and trusting Gregor to control his
crowd, though she had long ago realised with resignation he felt obligated to do something during
the ceremony and no-one could stop him—even as he was the Chancellor. The conviction had
at least made one choice easy, and under her plain black graduation-robe she wore not only a new
dress by Estelle in the great material, but her Gold Imperial Star, again set-off by the colours and cut
of the bodice. It was the first time she had worn the Star in public and startled looks from those who
recognised it had been a pleasure she was slowly learning to savour. Medals, it turned out, were not
such useless things as she had once thought.

Reaching the little row of empty chairs the Emperor saw Laisa and his guests seated, and turned to
the audience behind him. He smiled briefly, nodded thanks, and raised one hand six inches. In the
abrupt silence he nodded again cordially, and wheeled to sit beside Laisa, collapsing the audience
back into their seats as surely as he had drawn them to their feet in the first place.

Finally the rear doors opened and brightly robed academics began filing in to their seats of honour
and formal witness. Behind the Vice-Chancellor and his functionaries a solemn-faced Uncle Georg
had a leading place, not on her account but thanks to the Lord Auditor’s golden chain-and-seal
glittering strangely against his scarlet-and-green robes. As the platform filled the weighty hand of
tradition regained authority, and the ceremony began in proper silence, each graduand proceeding to
the platform to receive the scroll of their achievement and hear formal words conferring degrees upon
them. Each had a brief moment to face the audience and find their own guests to smile at, but while
most had difficulty not gawping at Gregor and Laisa, whose faces must be tired with the warm
smiles they gave all who met their eyes, the procession was kept rapid, as it had to be given the
numbers.

When her own name was called in all its strange, titled and triple-Vor glory the audience’s silence
prickled with excitement. The familiar examination-feel of a knotting stomach while your legs carried
you remorselessly forward to your fate came as she walked down the aisle and climbed to the dais.
Then a scroll was in her hand, words in her ears. Turning to the packed hall she had eyes only for
Miles and Nikki, smiling with shining looks, until she heard movement and the Vice-Chancellor
come from his podium to stand at her side. He bowed to Gregor.

“My Lord Chancellor.”

Gregor stood, gesturing with a down-turned palm slicing sideways. The audience who had started to
surge to their feet dropped into their chairs again, hamstrung. To Ekaterin’s consternation Dag Benin
and Ambassador Volusor also stood and walked respectfully behind Gregor up to the platform to
join her and the Vice-Chancellor. Benin’s elaborate face-paint gleamed; the red highlights caught her
eye—because they were a new shade, she saw, closer to goatbane than the usual scarlet and clashing
with his dress uniform. It was a bizarrely personal compliment.

Approaching her Gregor saluted with wicked eyes, reached for a hand she involuntarily extended in
response, and bent to kiss it. There was utter stillness but as he straightened the hall erupted in a
pandemonium of cheers and whistles, including a rising banshee from Taura that made Simon Illyan
beside her flinch and brought admiring looks from younger people. Gregor let it happen, holding
Ekaterin’s hand and looking through her to the back of her skull in that way of his, with warmest
therapeutic reassurance flowing from touch and gaze. You can do this. Then he turned and again
conjured silence by raising one hand a few inches. Ekaterin could hear her own breathing and the
breath Gregor drew.

“Vice-Chancellor, Professors and Professoras, my Counts and Lords Auditor, your Excellency,
General, guests. Barrayar is strong on protocol and tradition, for good reasons, but also strong on
precedent, for better reasons, and today we make many precedents to honour. We salute all graduands here, respecting hard work and achievements, as is right. But with Lady Vorkosigan, who in my heart is my sister, I cannot pass in silence over achievements greater still than learning.”

*That* was not what she had expected at all. Ekaterin didn’t know where to look, and felt her legs trembling beneath her long skirts. Her Da, Stepma, and brothers were gawping, offering only continuing, shocked surprise at her recognition by judgements and authoritities so superior to their own. Her eyes sought Miles again and his strength flowed into her—not just his, she realised, daring to look, but Nikki’s, Aral’s and Cordelia’s, Taura’s, Aunt Alys’s, Aunt Helen’s, and Illyan’s, all her friends’ and marriage-kins’ as they regarded her with happy pride, sympathetic understanding of nerves, and desire to communicate confidence and share love.

“As some of you will have seen in the recent Imperial List, Lady Vorkosigan wears a Gold Star in her own right, not only surviving as a hostage of criminals but utterly defeating their vileness.” Calming as she gazed at Miles, Ekaterin found her sense of irony restored. Allegre and Vorlynkin had not exactly publicised the necessary announcement of her and Aunt Helen’s Stars, and from the burr of surprise in the hall she thought Gregor’s ‘some of you’ covered very few. Her brother Hugo’s mouth was a round O, and even the Vice-Chancellor was giving her the oddest look. “And all know of her magnificent, most important work this summer at the Occupation Memorial, on which account Ambassador the haut Paramel Volusor requested permission to accompany me today with ghem-General Benin, who commands my Celestial Cousin’s Imperial Guard. General Benin.”

Gregor’s hand on her arm gently drew her round, and Benin stepped forward, with grave dignity and a twinkle in his deep brown eyes. Before speaking he touched his lips in that odd ceremonial gesture she had seen him make once before, speaking to Miles at Gregor’s and Laisa’s wedding.

“Lady Vorkosigan, my Imperial Master, the Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja, charges me to convey to you in His Own Breath and Voice His deep respect and thanks for the honour and grace you did the ghem-nation. In recognition of your great contribution to the peace treaty, and with the permission of your Imperial Master, He charges me also to invest you with His Order of Virtue.”

What that was Ekaterin was unsure, but presumably it ranked below the military Order of Merit, or was a civilian equivalent. The ribbon Volusor ceremoniously held for Benin to take seemed to be blue with a white stripe, the medallion a golden oval. More to the point how was she to receive it? Benin was inches shorter than she even without her low-heeled shoes, and while she was used to stooping elegantly to kiss Miles she could rest a hand on his shoulder when she did so. But as she braced herself to bend only at her knees, hoping their trembling would not betray her, Gregor smoothly offered an arm on which she could gratefully rest a hand for balance. Benin carefully placed the ribbon around her neck and stepped back, repeating his ceremonial gesture. Golden oval and golden star lay side by side on her breast.

“In my Imperial Master’s Own Breath and Voice, Lady Vorkosigan, be welcome to your Order, honoured among the ghem and the haut.”

Both he and Volusor bowed and straightened. Gregor eased from her side to leave her standing alone. Attention in the hall was a growing weight. She knew she must speak and for a second thought she could not. Then simple words came, and less simple ones with them.

“Thank you, General Benin. Please convey my own respect and thanks to your Imperial Master.” He nodded formally. “And thank you, Sire, for your permission, and the honours you insist on doing me.” *Had she really said that?* From the laugh in Gregor’s eyes and rustle in the audience she must have done and her mouth was still moving. “But I am a mother and a gardener, and to have helped plant this peace is its own reward. Nor will I usurp honour in the presence of true movers and
architects.” As she had seen and heard Miles do she allowed fractional movement and shift of voice to broaden her audience from those on the platform to all. “Gardeners must be defiant, for the order we seek defies natural chaos. My Golden Imperial Star I claim, for the actions it honours were for good or ill of my own body and mind, but in receiving this Order of Virtue I know myself as my garden is, a symbol of others.”

For the third time in her life Ekaterin found herself commanding a large audience. In that memorable session of the Council of Counts she had been too angry with Lord Richars to worry until all was done. In the square at Vorkosigan Surleau the palpable goodwill of village loyalists had borne her up. Now it seemed easy and she knew exactly what she wanted to say and do.

“I do not mean only the family who nurtured me, though I love and acknowledge them now.” She smiled at her Da and Stepma and brothers, still presenting a row of astonished faces. “There is also the family that has received me. If you would take this honour as it is truly meant, you will not applaud me, but my Lord Vorkosigan, my Lord Viceroy and Lady Vicereine, and His Imperial Majesty, without all of whose lifelong efforts there would be neither peace nor treaty.” She felt emotions surge in the hall and swiftly held up a hand, tautening silence. “Nor in his presence can I ignore ghem-General Benin, whom I know to have acted for the Celestial Garden as my husband did for the Imperial Residence, and to whose wisdom and friendship I believe us all indebted. And now as then, he stands both for himself and his Imperial Master, the Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja, who in His grace honours me and whom I honour as a most Celestial Gardener, as defiant as any has ever been, and as truly rewarded as I am and all are with the peace of this new order.”

Words ran out with her grammar and there was only one thing left to do. Gesturing with both arms, to Miles, Aral, and Cordelia in the front row, and to Gregor and Benin on the platform beside her, she brought her hands together to begin the applause herself, deflecting pent-up emotions the sound released towards those who not only deserved but could endure their weight. Fascinatingly, Volusor read her intent, hands meeting only a fraction after hers, and before either could part them again the storm erupted, past and over her, hitting Benin and Gregor, who grinned with eyes alone, and knocking the Vice-Chancellor backwards. Benin’s eyes gleamed as Gregor crooked a finger at the Vorkosigans to join them. Their looks, even Miles’s, identically mingled deep amusement and interested respect for her performance. Even after all reached the platform the thunder of claps and cheers went on absurdly long, deafening conversation, and at its first ebb she wondered if her command would still work and raised a hand as she had seen Gregor do. The noise didn’t quite cut off as abruptly as for him, but fell away with satisfying rapidity all the same, and she turned to Gregor.

“My Lord Chancellor, will you return the stage to your deputy?”

“I will, Lady Vorkosigan.” His eyes danced. “Carry on, my Lords, Vice-Chancellor. Allow me to escort you to your place, my Lady.” Emperors, she thought, as she and Gregor led the file down from the platform, were not easily bested in matters of protocol, but he earned her renewed devotion after delivering her back to her seat by turning to the woman who had to follow her.

“Miss Labrun, I apologise for delaying your moment so long. Would you do me the honour of permitting me to escort you to the platform?”

With a look of terrified excitement Miss Labrun indicated she would, and their progress down the aisle restored a formality Gregor sustained by returning silently to his seat and bestowing approving attention on a resumed flow of graduands. It all took another hour but eventually the last name was called, the last scroll given, and ritual completed by all processing down on to the stage to receive collectively what should have been the only applause of the afternoon. There was again a distinctly raucous element, but everyone was beaming, even the Vice-Chancellor; Uncle Georg came to
embrace her. The problem of her exit when Gregor and Laisa began to move towards the door was solved by Taura, who simply picked her off the platform in a delicate grasp and deposited her beside a grinning Miles. Then to his utter surprise she did the same to Uncle Georg, putting him down in a billow of scarlet and green beside a startled Aunt Helen, and they all made their way out through yet more cheering and applause. Beyond the outer doors of the lobby a cordon of ImpSec guards and Armsmen surrounded a small fleet of aircars, that with everyone aboard rose to spin away after Gregor’s vehicle towards Vorkosigan House at the low altitude reserved for emergency and imperial traffic.

To Ekaterin it was far more surprising that Gregor had cleared the rest of his day than that he had wanted to attend the ceremony, but Miles had laughed and said once Gregor saw her guest-list he wouldn’t have missed the party for anything. It was her own version, apparently, of Drou’s and Kou’s wedding thirty-something years before, conjoining two Counts, officers from Commodores Koudelka and Galeni to Lieutenant Vorsoisson (besides Admiral Count Vorkosigan and Sergeant Taura), and representatives of many classes beyond the metropolitan high Vor, from the provincial Vorgeoisie of her Da and brothers to the raznochintsy artisans Ma Kosti, Estelle, and Master Tsipis, and Armsman Roic, whose da was a construction hand in Hassadar. Besides mingled Russian, Greek, and French contingents, Miles added with a sly grin, there would be Cetagandans to observe—not only Dag Benin as house-guest but haut Paramel, if he could be persuaded, and ghem-Colonel Alanor Epallo, father of Nikki’s friend, with his wife and son. Would they leave their paint off? Or would Paramel’s presence make it impossible? There had never yet, Miles concluded, been a party like it, on Barraray or Eta Ceta, so of course Gregor and Laisa were coming, and by that stage Ekaterin had become morbidly fascinated by conjunctions—not least of her Da and Stepma, tongue-tied when presented at her wedding-reception, meeting Gregor in a way that might actually force them to talk.

The aircars settled in a row in the drive of Vorkosigan House, and everyone emerged to fill first hall and, as tea with cakes appeared, the public reception rooms, library, and ground-floor study with cheerful groups. Gregor and Laisa settled in a corner of the library with Aral and Cordelia, while Roic and Taura slid away somewhere and Ma Kosti made a break for her kitchens; she could not be dissuaded from cooking, not that anyone tried, but had stern instructions to arrange a menu she could abandon to others to serve when eating started. Haut Paramel, much to Ekaterin’s surprise, needed only a hint to stay, promptly relaxed from stillness into a mode that seemed only ordinary diplomatic alertness, and soon seemed at ease talking to Mia Maz Vorob’yev, Simon, Aunt Alys, and Estelle in another corner of the library. Ekaterin tried to relax her spooked parents and brothers in the study, with help from Aunt Helen, Master Tsipis, and the Koudelka commando (nervously canvassed beforehand), until she found herself steered by Miles to the hall to stand before a relaxed, smiling man in an elegant bodysuit whom she didn’t recognise until she saw his brown eyes. Without his Imperial Array Dag’s face was thinner than it had seemed, careworn, perhaps, but also younger; he was still in his forties, she thought, very young for his post—as his Imperial Master had once been; as Miles was. His skin was olive, matching dark hair and lips sensuous with a curve zebra-stripes had distorted. He took her hand and kissed it with great propriety.

“Properly, you know, I should have kept the Array on to tell you I shall report your kind and clever words exactly to my Imperial Master, but for once I believe He would not mind my shocking lapse of protocol. The haut Paramel, who knows of that interesting conversation you both had with Vanos Kariam, has consented with a most intrigued look to be unstill, as I am unpainted. Colonel Epallo is apprised. Precedents to honour indeed. Though I am still trying to work out how I came to be applauded by the recipient of a medal, which seems the wrong way round. It is a great pleasure to meet you properly, and Miles tells me I must call you Ekaterin.”

“Yes, Dag, you must.” Miles was grinning up at them with real happiness in his eyes as she spoke. “And it was entirely the right way round. I meant every word—you too are a gardener.”
He looked at her steadily. Ironies glinting in his eyes were amplified by the bare, infinitely more communicative face. “I do some weeding, certainly.”

“Heh. I’ll bet.” Miles frowned. “But there hasn’t been any special need for that lately, though?”

“Oh no, Miles. Much astonishment and exclamation, but nothing of concern. Though before we go in I will take the opportunity to say, as I think you know, that you managed with fascinating finess to promote Admiral Lhosh sideways. Whether you intended this is a matter of hot debate in a few quarters, amused debate in many. His clan will not be happy when they realise his coming invasive triumph will cap rather than fuel his career, but they have already been out-manoeuvred.”

Miles quirked an eyebrow. “I would imagine so, given those doing the manoeuvring. Do we know whose career will be, ah, fuelled?”

“We do not, though my Imperial Master might. I would note Lhosh’s junior, Admiral Arvin, will gain interesting experience and kudos.”

Miles’s memory whirred. “Would he perhaps be a relative of the Lady Arvin my cousin Ivan met ten years ago, and who now seems to have attracted the patronage of haut Pel?”

“He is her most senior uncle.”

“Ah. Or perhaps I mean oh-ho. And should he, um, prosper with his kudos, we should be … cautiously pleased?”

Benin smiled. “You should be thoroughly delighted, Miles, and get your esteemed father to join with Arvin in establishing the regulatory code of conduct for the officers and other ranks of the joint fleet.”

Ekaterin felt her eyes widen with surprise as Miles went very still for a second. “Now that is a message I will surely pass on.” He hesitated. “You can of course tell him yourself anytime in the next few days.”

“I think I have said all I … should, for the present.”

“Ah, which I do mean this time. Let us then go in.”

When they did Benin was captured by Aral and Cordelia, friends after their long Eta Cetan stay in his security charge. Ekaterin’s afternoon remained very Cetagandan with the arrival of Colonel Epallo, bare-faced in Bararrayan mufti, with eleven-year-old Felari, or Fel, and wife Sheralza. The boy had been to Vorkosigan House before, visiting Nikki, who came galloping to say hello, but the Colonel’s embassy workload had for months been redlined and his wife urgently seconded to haut Palma’s mission and its aftermath, so though the four parents had met briefly at the school to eye one another curiously, shake hands, and clear mutual visiting rights for the two boys, it was the adults’ first social meeting. Gazing around both Cetagandans seemed on edge as well as socially nervous and for all his mufti the Colonel was on parade.

“Thank you, Lady Vorkosigan, we are honoured by your invitation. I brought my family to Barrayar because I wanted them to experience and understand another world than our own. Before the remarkable events of this summer it was proving harder than I had hoped to … fit in here, but now it is wonderful. So you have our greater thanks for that, also.”

“Yes, very much so.” Sheralza echoed her husband’s genuine pleasure, but her body was tense, gaze lingering on Ekaterin’s Order of Virtue. “The haut Palma was very clear the peace treaty was of your joint making but did not … encourage questions. And Alanor tells me General Benin himself is
Belatedly Ekaterin realised that the effect of Dag’s presence on the Epallos was exactly what Allegre’s, or better, Illyan’s, would be on a middle-ranking Barrayaran diplomat. Miles made the same calculation and grinned disarmingly at both ghem.

“Searching your minds for something to be worried about? Don’t—Dag Benin’s an old friend. His only formal duty today was investing Ekaterin with this.” Miles gestured to the golden oval on her breast. “Otherwise he really is here for a private visit. And, please, out of the public eye we are Miles and Ekaterin, as he will be Dag.” He looked around. “Nikki and your Fel have vanished already, and I’ll bet you they’ve gone to find Gregor and Laisa, who are also here, ah, privately.”

Despite the multiple ImpSec guards and Armsmen they had passed to gain entrance this was clearly news to Alanor and Sheralza, who looked panic-stricken. Ekaterin tried her new powers of instilling confidence, smiling warmly at them.

“Please don’t worry. They are good people, you know, and this is now a very informal gathering.”

Sheralza swallowed. “How should we address them?”

“One ‘Your Majesty’ each, then ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’ will be fine. Come on.”

Miles was proven right as they entered the library to find an amused Uncle Gregor and bemused Aunt Laisa, already introduced themselves, watching Nikki present a wide-eyed Fel to Grandpa Aral and Grandma Cordelia. Seeing the boy’s parents all rise in easy greeting, finessing the couple’s nervousness, and after a moment handing them off to Dag Benin, attentively observing Nikki’s cool handling of Fel and the four most senior Barrayarans there were. For Ekaterin the contrast of that social grace with her own family’s inability to rise to an occasion was as bittersweet as it had been in the great hall during the ceremony, and over the next hours her emotional mandala became more fractally refined than she would have believed possible as she watched her rulers and in-laws exert themselves to charm ease in her parents, brothers, even a subdued Vassily Vorsoisson. Despite complexities of feeling she still felt the secure balance that had come to her on the daïs, and moved easily between groups to support nervy blood-kin or allow a moment’s personal converse with one or other of the great among whom they so strangely found themselves. Gradually it worked. Her stepma Violie had a nephew on Sergyar and was gentled into conversation by Cordelia, while Gregor (who had a lapful of ImpSec, to Miles’s amusement) made the sacrifice of eliciting her Da Shasha’s opinions on the Southern District administration that had been his life’s work. As he spoke of a minor reform he favoured she heard enthusiasm and fluency enter his voice, warming her; she suppressed a thought that it would have warmed her still more had he ever shown as much interest in her or Nikki.

When tea began to be succeeded by wine Pym drifted up to her musing a request that at her earliest convenience she see Lord Mark and Miss Kareen privately in her study, and vanished before anyone could ask him more. As she slipped out a minute later Vorkosigan eyes tracked thoughtfully before meeting Koudelka eyes in sparking surmise. Smiling to herself Ekaterin climbed the stairs to find Pym showing Mark and Kareen into the study.

“How are you both? I’ve hardly had a chance to say hello properly. And thank you for being so patient with my poor Da, Kareen—he’s a bit overwhelmed.”

Both smiled and reassured her they well understood getting Vorkosiganitis, but like the Epallos seemed tense, and when she sat and asked them how she could help glanced at one another before Kareen spoke. “We were going to wait, because we didn’t want to steal your evening, but it’s not easy these days to get my family together, nor Mark’s, and everyone’s here now. So we wondered if
you’d mind us using it to announce our engagement but we’ll quite understand if you’d—.”

“Nonsense, of course you must. And congratulations to you both.” She rose to kiss and hug them, surprising Mark, she fancied, by the ease with which she could do so in his case, though she found his bulky unlikeliness to Miles disconcerting. Then several things struck her. “But let me warn you before you make any honeymoon plans for next year that you’ll be needed for something, oh, late in the year. Between Gregor’s birthday and Winterfair, say. I’m sorry, I can’t tell you any more”—she saw them understand her stress—“but I assure you, Mark, it will be something you would not wish to miss for the world.” She hesitated, then added “Please don’t ask Miles about it, though I understand the temptation. There are aspects that are what he would call slit-your-throat-before-reading stuff, and he is no more at liberty than I to speak of it. It’s just I’d hate for you to set your hearts on anything that, ah, clashed with this thing. Once you’ve told everyone I’ll murmur a word to him and Gregor that I’ve warned you in general terms.”

Unconsciously her voice was infused with the power she in fact wielded; Mark and Kareen had respectful startlement on their faces that shifted to acknowledgement of a different kind with her mention of Gregor. Mark had eyes blurred in wariness but nodded carefully.

“Thank you, Ekaterin, on all counts. I shall contain myself, the more so as despite a distinctive style you sounded uncommonly like my mother just then.”

“Didn’t she just.” Kareen was looking very thoughtful. “Ekaterin, if I may, I shall beg lessons from you in becoming Vorkosigan.”

“Oh.” She laughed at them. “It just happens, if you let it. I’m sure Mark’s told you. The only trick is to make sure you remain yourself. You won’t just be Lady Vorkosigan, but Kareen Koudelka Vorkosigan, and you’ll find you’re … amplified, not constrained or altered as you would not be. Now come on. Your poor parents were eyeing one another into a state when I left them.”

Mark’s brows drew down. “I asked Pym to be discreet.”

“He was, Mark, very. But he’d have to have been invisible and inaudible to escape notice on that errand. This is your Ma and Da, remember, not to mention Miles and Kou and Drou.”

She laughed again and urged them downstairs, but they didn’t have to make it the whole way for all four parents, with Miles, the other Koudelka sisters and partners, and Gregor and Laisa had managed to string themselves about the hall and the expectant silence that fell when Mark and Kareen came to a slightly glowering stop a few steps up drew everyone else from study and library, including Taura and Roic. After a moment Mark cleared his throat and made the announcement, after which it was again absurd, enjoyable noise and hearty congratulations all round. Even Duv Galeni and Kou seemed pleased, perhaps relieved now the engagement had actually happened, and Kou was certainly more concerned with giving a mild fish-eye to Enrique Borgos, grinning beside Martya, than to Mark. From her vantage behind Mark and Kareen Ekaterin could see calculation enter Miles’s eyes as he did the same calendrical sums that had struck her, so she slid past the couple to stand beside him, and as the cheering began to ebb twisted to murmur in his ear.

“Ah. Thank you, love. That was very smart of you.”

She squeezed his shoulder and turned to pass the datum to Gregor, who nodded fractionally as their eyes met and himself murmured it to Cordelia and Aral. Then Pym and others were passing glasses of champagne and after that they headed into the dining-room for a Ma Kosti special with the cook beaming among them and enjoying compliments. The champagne was succeeded by more ancient bottles from Vorkosigan cellars, and as these emptied and many, small courses flowed rapidly onto and slowly away from the table the party developed its own swirling style, people shifting places as it
pleased them and conversations evolved. Yet despite her measured consumption of wine and
multiple movements the evening did not blur in Ekaterin’s mind, as Gregor’s birthday had done
around its four memorable moments, but became instead a sharp-focus kaleidoscope of scenes she
could recall and consider at will.

A crisp Dono and amused Olivia told her brother Hugo their tale of the attack on Dono last year,
with consequences Hugo had partly witnessed at Vorhartung Castle; Hugo’s wife Rosalie listened
with him, wearing an expression of scandalised fascination. Nikki and Fel dragged her younger
bothers, each with a similarly dubious look plastered on their faces, to meet Taura and found
themselves in the middle of an amiable argument between her, Roic, and Drou Koudelka about how
best to disarm people under assorted conditions. Sheralza Epallo made a beeline to Ma Kosti’s side,
and respectfully offered a ghem recipe or two before circling round to earnest questions about one of
the sauces they had enjoyed with tiny medallions of vat-grown beef fillet. Kareen and Mark moved
constantly, sharing pleasure with family and old friends, taking care to spend time with those they did
not know. Cordelia and Laisa listened with intent interest to Estelle’s cogent professional analysis of
the new material and its ilk, Alys and Mia Maz Vorob’yev making occasional interjections from
experience of Barrayaran, Vervani, and Cetagandan aesthetics. Enrique explained the armoured,
radiation-eating butter-bug project to her pop-eyed stepma, mostly managing to avoid rhyme but
leaving Violie not much wiser until a laughing Martya spun polysyllables into clarity. Centrally in
her mind, her Da captured her as she passed to project through incomprehension and inarticulacy his
pleasure at her evident happiness and Vor pride in what had become of her. Centrally at the table,
and least changingly, Gregor, Miles, Duv Galeni, Kou, Simon Illyan, and Aral conducted with equal
friendliness and intensity probing exchanges with Dag Benin, haut Paramel, and Alanor Epallo,
weaving round older histories all were glad to see pass but by which all remained constrained,
sometimes darting sideways into current concerns and contrasting aspects of imperial cultures. Aunt
Helen and Uncle Georg, with Master Tsipis and a wide-eyed Vassily Vorsoisson, were a consistent
audience, sometimes joined by Nikki and Fel or others as they circulated.

As repletion was achieved and digested into comfort music began to be heard, and all adjourned to
the ballroom where Gregor’s military orchestra from the Residence seemed to have been installed.
The Colonel-conductor had been well briefed by someone, and knew her favourites were slower
mirror-dances. They began in the established pairings of couples, she leading with Miles above
Gregor and Laisa and Aral and Cordelia, but as dances succeeded one another and speed varied, the
circulating pattern of dinner reasserted itself and the mirror-line shifted as partnerships evolved. With
such varied backgrounds represented many knew moves unfamiliar to others—Master Tsipis and Ma
Kosti shared Greek ones, Roic had several no-one had seen that looked to derive from the
construction work his father did, and Shasha and Violie had a moment of glory with a series of
languid gestures reflecting the slower tempo of life during hot Southern summers. To her surprised
pleasure Nikki and Fel joined in once or twice, making faces and shaking legs, but were also playing
some game of their own and shot in and out of the ballroom so often and rapidly even Sheralza
Epallo gave up trying to keep an eye on Fel and settled instead to enjoying herself opposite her
husband, Duv Galeni, and to her consternation but swift pleasure at his skill, Gregor.

The real astonishment, though, was entirely unexpected and resonant with deeper meanings. Sitting
out a number too fast for her liking, she found herself talking to haut Paramel, in this relaxed mode
an engaging, lively man, who told her with a smile and eyes intent on moving couples that he had
requested posting to Gregor’s court because he had a lifelong interest in Barrayaran dancing.

“It was thought a frivolous hobby by my parents, but my Imperial Master wanted someone younger
than usual for the assignment, who could be in post a long time, so it proved a boon—much to their
surprise.”

“Forgive me, but how old were you when you came here?”
“Fifty-six.”

He didn’t look forty now but must be in his late sixties. “And what appeals to you in our dancing?”

“Oh, it’s a form of politics, really. The mirror-dance especially is a wonderful invention—easy yet demanding, simple but capable of infinite nuance. One of those a minute to learn and a lifetime to master ideas. And who would have thought it?” He gestured elegantly to the curious pairings of Simon Illyan and Mia Maz Vorob’yev next to Countess Olivia and Vassily Vorsoisson. “You can see the dance doing its work even as we watch and enjoy. I believe it a high art, like your gardens.”

Conversation drifted pleasantly on but she slowly realised his attention was on Taura, paired with Uncle Georg and absorbed out of self-consciousness in exercise of her speed and tremendous physical control. Once or twice as dances wore on Ekaterin saw Taura and Paramel pair one another, murmurs of appreciation sounding around them at the fluid control both showed. The explanation had begun to push into Ekaterin’s mind, but she was still taken aback to see them eagerly seek one another as partners when the last, traditionally slow-starting but constantly accelerating mirror-dance was announced. Even in the first tempos there was an intensity about them as a pair, exactitude of movement and balance that caught the eye, and as the orchestra moved into middle tempos more and more couples dropped out to watch. At first both their moves were drawn from traditional repertoires, embellished with flourishes and variations of hand and fingers or combining several elements into a new whole, but as the tempo climbed and the floor cleared to allow Taura and Paramel space expansiveness entered their exchanges, then duelling inventiveness. For one long sequence Paramel generated moves Ekaterin recognised as alluding to gardening, that began to form a narrative of sowing and reaping, cooking and serving. Taura’s concentration was intense, and though not habituated to the uses of spade or spatula she was able to duplicate Paramel’s precision and, increasingly, his haut grace. Eyes gleamed around the room as it sank in that what they saw was not simply talent, but the call-and-answer of deliberate genetic modification, enhanced muscular reflex and control with acuity of vision.

In the final, racing section, Taura took the lead and with a wicked look began a swift sequence of sharply functional movements using both hands. Beside her Miles hummed appreciation and at Ekaterin’s touch on his shoulder murmured from the side of his mouth “She’s stripping down a plasma rifle,” and then, as the sequence ended and began to repeat at the next, almost impossible tempo, “for decommissioning”. Whether such a task had ever fallen to Paramel Ekaterin had no idea, but the haut ambassador must have learned immediately from the duplicating set and rhythm of his hands what the motions meant, and entered into their speeding repetitions with a will and a smile of his own. In the end it was the perspiring Colonel-conductor who took pity on his musicians and topped out, generating from his brass section a rising note that signalled a final repetition abruptly reverting to the first and slowest tempo. With extraordinary grace and an overwhelming sense of contained power two more plasma rifles were stripped and stored with exquisite, slow precision, and as the last note died away both dancers simultaneously made identical gestures of coding a lock shut, dusted off their hands, and came to rest. The day’s final outburst of applause, in which Ekaterin saw Armsmen and guards joining, rocked the ballroom.

Dag Benin, standing beyond Miles, whistled softly to himself. “Well, well. That was a thing to see.” He turned to them. “The sergeant is a most intriguing woman. I was struck this afternoon by her whistle, and delighted by her, um, swift solution to getting Ekaterin and her uncle down from the platform, but this was … another grace to the day.”

“It may also have been a swansong.” Miles’s voice was laced with pain. “If she chooses time she will lose the speed.”

“But not the grace, love.” Ekaterin rested a hand on his shoulder. “In any sense.”
Dag nodded. “That is correct, I think. But I am sorry for the inevitable melancholy. The dance was joyous.”

As the noise died away the party began to break up, Gregor and Laisa taking their leave closely followed *en masse* by the Koudelkas, saving Kareen, and all who were not being accommodated at Vorkosigan House. Perhaps because of the dance two things that actually happened next day were in Ekaterin’s mind always associated with the party, shuffled among other vignettes. After seeing her blood-kin depart in the morning she had walked in the garden a while, and returning to the house been caught by Nikki’s voice coming from the library. Standing quietly just inside the doorway she listened for a moment to her son’s conversation with Dag and Miles in one of the bays. The subject, of course, was the Occupation as seen by Lord Vortalon, and Ekaterin could hear in Dag’s measured replies to Nikki’s questions his underlying opinion of the ghem-generals’ tactics on Barrayar, but he clearly understood both why they had thought and done as they did and the place the less-than-accurate holovid series claimed in Nikki’s imagination. Uninterested herself in the military detail that beguiled her son, she was filled with admiration and yet another little bubble of astonishment for Miles’s capacities: teachers like Madame Csarna might discuss Lord Vortalon intelligently with children, and some parents too, but there could be no other who in response to his son’s interest procured as interlocutors first the Emperor, to discuss emperors, then the chief of Cetagandan Imperial Security, to discuss Cetagandans. Smiling, she joined them.

The other thing was altogether tenser, and came late in the day when Pym sought her out to ask her to join his lordship with Roic and Taura in the study. By the time she got there her stomach was knotting, and seeing Miles she knew he was as taut inside as she, wondering what had been decided. To her surprise Pym came in with her, and at Miles’s questioning look Taura spoke.

“I asked him to stay, Miles. I think he should.”

Miles nodded. “As you will.”

“Thank you.” Taura too was tense but more with determination than nerves. “I find the price high, in a strange way, which seems ungrateful, but I want the life you offer me, Miles. But I can’t be your Armswoman. Roic and I, well”—she smiled at him, sitting beside her—“we’d like to try to be together, but who knows? Perhaps we’ll drive one another crazy in a year. And we can’t know how I’ll be, or even who I’ll be. But if it worked for us and we were both your guards…”

She looked at Pym, who seemed unhappy but determined. “When you asked if I would mind an Armswoman, m’lord, I said I wouldn’t and I meant it. I strongly support it, and unless I miss my guess recruitment to the imperial forces will be opened to women very soon. But I can’t support a husband and wife in the same Score. If they were on duty together and something happened there’d be a clear conflict of interest. One of my nightmares has always been a situation that simultaneously threatened one of you and my wife, or Arthur. Would I do the right thing? And if I made sure a husband and wife didn’t share duty they’d not see much of one another, and rarely see their children together. I’m sorry, m’lord, but it’s not right.”

At his mention of children Taura and Roic blushed, but nodded firmly. After a moment Miles nodded too, wearily. “Right you are, Pym. I should have seen it myself. Taura, what do you want to do?”

“I’m not sure.” Her frown was impressive above her fangs. “I think I want to study a bit. I only really know weapons and soldiers. But if I’m going to have to exercise as much as you said the haut Palma thought I will, just to maintain muscle-tone, I think I have to find a really active job. Something strenuous and stretching, outside, to cut down the gym hours.” Her practicality made the problem appealing, and she looked around at them all, smiling fondly at Roic. “I don’t really know what there
is here, and we’ve both been at a loss trying to think of something.”

Miles drummed his fingers on his chair-arm. “Alright. You should go to Rho Ceta as soon as possible, then we’ll see. Helen can sort out the university end, if that’s what you’d like, though come to think of it you’d readily command a teaching position at Gregor’s institute—there’s few who know as much as you do about what’s been happening at the sharp end galactically for the last decade. I bet ImpSec and the forces would welcome combat instruction too.”

Taura looked alarmed at the idea of lecturing but pleased by training classes. “Some sergeanting would be nice. I know I can do that.” She gave them her alarmingly fangy ‘hello-small-recruit’ smile, making Ekaterin grin and Miles laugh. “But it’s the exercise problem that concerns me. I know I have to lose my speed but I don’t think I could bear to lose my fitness.”

Pym coughed gently, wearing a bland look, and everyone regarded him, Miles’s eyes narrowing as he took in the excess of loyal-retainer mode.

“Do you perchance have a cunning plan, Pym?”

“Not in the least, m’lord. I was going to ask leave for Armsman Roic to accompany Sergeant Taura to Rho Ceta.”

Did Miles blush? He certainly looked guilty as he waved permission. “Of course. Though I must warn you both that treatments and any hospitalisation are likely to be in Star Crèche facilities, and they won’t let Roic into those, so you may be separated for more of the time than you’d like. You should be prepared to explain that you have something quiet to do, Roic, as well as sightseeing—it’ll make their security happier, as will a word with Dag Benin.”

“Thank you, m’lord. I’m right grateful to you.”

Both Roic and Taura seemed content, but Pym wasn’t done and he did have a cunning plan. “It occurs to me, m’lord, that Jacques Parandre, who flies the high vales postal route out of Hassadar, is nearing retirement. I’ve heard him complain there’s quite a few dwellings with nowhere he can land, so he does a central drop and people come to collect. But if the sergeant were to do those deliveries by hand I think the climbs would offer a fair workout.”

Taura perked up. “Running up mountains sounds nice.” Her face fell. “But would they accept me? I’ve thought about having my fangs removed, but I’m used to them. And my claws.”

“It’ll be alright, Taura, with care.” Miles’s lips compressed a little as he thought of a Dendarii schoolroom where Taura’s portrait accidentally hung. “And I know just the woman to introduce you.”

Ekaterin laughed. “Miles, dear, you sounded exactly like Aunt Alys.” He stared at her in consternation.

* * * * *
meet the ghem-geneticist Palma sent to assist Enrique with betaradiophagic bacteria. A week later Gregor and Laisa left for a second official visit to Komarr, advanced in their schedule because of the economic impact the treaty and new technologies were already having. Nikki restarted school and came under the familiar care of Ma Pym, with whom he would stay at Vorkosigan House in his parents’ absence. After making arrangements with the medteam who would soon start Aral Alexander and Helen Natalia in their replicators, Miles and Ekaterin planned to slip away quietly on their long-delayed galactic honeymoon, but the day before he and Laisa left Gregor summoned Miles to the Residence and put the kybosh on that plan.

“Two things, Miles. The first is that, however discreetly, you are being an envoy plenipotentiary, certainly on Marilac and I suspect elsewhere before you’re done. So I don’t think arriving by liner is on. The second is security. You know Guy has picked up at least a dozen Jacksonian intelligencers already, trying to get in through Komarr. Dag said Ferrant’s nabbed a few as well.” He frowned. “I don’t think they’ll get anywhere near the truth, but on a public ship they could certainly get near you. And Ekaterin.”

Miles winced. “Point taken. What do you want us to do?”

“Borrow the General Vorkraft.” Gregor looked at his raised eyebrows and grinned. “Well, you’ve only yourself to blame if I’ve started thinking of battlecruisers as yachts, Miles. Besides, it solves the communciation problem, because they’ve equipped her with frames, and a select crew will gain a great deal of experience following your itinerary. As you won’t need assault troops you’ll also have room for the many passengers you intend to collect on your way back from Terra, though I’ve left a small detachment of Marines on board for guard duties and the like. I might add Cordelia is greatly relieved and Aral amused that you will de facto command one of his old ships. It’s the one with the infamous engine-room, of course.”

“Heh.” The story of Cordelia’s first exercise in ending mutinous conflict had taken a while to prise from her, but Ekaterin eventually succeeded and Miles had been able to dig out his Da’s less than complete report on the event. “Alright, Sire, and thank you. How is the Lady Alys Vorpatril coming along?”

“Very nicely, I believe. I’m only sorry I can’t use her tomorrow. Laisa’s da has a very well appointed yacht, aboard which we shall doubtless dine and about which he can be … a trifle annoying, I find.”

“What are you taking?”

“The Princess-and-Countess Olivia with her support group.”

Miles considered the Princess Kareen class of battleship, still faster and heavier than anything else in the Nexus though that would be changing as Chandler’s technology developed. The Terran was still out in very uninhabited deep space with the wormhole-research group, and according to Allegre reporting very good results indeed. When the Toscanes learned Gregor controlled a wormhole-generating technology they’d want to give him the yacht and whatever else they could think of for a slice of the pie. Meantime … “Is Vorpelletier still in command?”

“Yes.”

“Good, he’ll play ball. Get yourself and your in-laws invited to dinner in the gunroom, with Vorpelletier and his second. They won’t have enough room, so give gracious permission for tables to be set up in the forward weapons-sphere.” It was impossible to shield the force-coils of gravitic lances when they discharged, and a very bad idea to stand beside a working x-ray or maser cannon, so all were operated remotely, and the walls of the sphere that contained them and their dedicated secondary power-units bore the necessary cladding. But lances and ground-strike weapons had to be
fully retractable for jumping and maintenance that required heavy lifting, so when all weapons were
extended in normal space and the cranes above them recessed into their housings, a large area could
be cleared. “You’ll have to warn Komarr control lances and cannon will be run out or they’ll have a
fit, but your guests will be able to see them on approach and you’ll get a venue no Toscane ship can
match. The power-housings are very impressive and the cascabells look pretty good—they’ve
always made me think of those way-old sailing ships that had gunpowder cannon, even in the
captain’s cabin as I recall, so you can pass off using the sphere historically as well.”

“It’s definitely an idea.” Gregor grinned. “I’ll bear it in mind if I feel too put upon by Michael. In any
case, have a good honeymoon. The Vorkraft is ready whenever you are. And I’ll see you both …
there, I expect, not too long after my Birthday.”

The General Vorkraft was indeed waiting on Miles and Ekaterin in Barrayar orbit, and had had all its
wardrooms shifted down, displacing the ensigns and freeing what had been the officers’ mess as a
suite for Miles and Ekaterin. It also had a set of security codes provided by Dag Benin that would
allow them, after Komarr, to take the hitherto closed trans-Cetagandan route first to Eta Ceta, then
via Xi Ceta to Marilac. A few days after Gregor they made their farewells and with Pym and
Jankowski in tow headed to the spaceport, and then out of Barrayar’s system to the chirp of good
luck messages from busy orbital shipyards and patrol cruisers.
On Eta Ceta they kept a low profile for their fortnight, but Ekaterin received her personal tour of the Celestial Garden from haut Pel before a private and unexpectedly amusing evening with Their Celestial Majesties. Attended only by neuter Ba servitors, whom she found unnerving, the haut at play were something else again, and the Celestial line in what she supposed she’d have to call teasing, of Miles for so shortly troubling the counsels of the great and of her for marrying him despite Barayaran law about women, had been cleansed of embarrassment though neither of them were quite sure how. Rian’s fond gratitude to Miles surely had something to do with it, but Fletchir Giaja’s true opinion of his outlandish court jester remained an ironised mystery to them both. The Imperial Guards who saw them in and out with rigidly blank expressions and popping eyes did not help.

They also dined at Vanos Kariam’s house, Aunt Helen and Uncle Georg attending by table-edge frame to give Ekaterin reassuring reports of Nikki, and news of Arthur Pym and Denis Jankowski, now friends of Fel Epallo, to pass on. One other dinner was given for them, quietly managed by Ferrant Coram in a tucked-away pavilion in the Celestial Garden where senior ghem-pilgrims who had visited Vorkosigan Surleau formally repaid hospitality. Representatives of ghem-veterans’ organisations who had seen the Memorial broadcast lined up to thank Ekaterin personally and congratulate her on her Order of Virtue, as their fellows had Sergeant Barnev (after whom enquiries were made). Pym and Jankowski were also made welcome and saw the Celestial Garden for themselves, an experience that left both round-eyed and deeply thoughtful for some days, as it did Ekaterin. Admiral Lhosh, Coram blandly told them when they arrived, was too busy to attend and had deputed Admiral Arvin to deal with the sentimental occasion, so Miles had an interesting time getting to know an officer who, as Dag intimated, admired his Da as much for strongly humanitarian command as for political strategies and space tactics.

Ivan had passed them en route to Barayar on haut Pel’s business, sparing Miles pained remonstrance from that quarter. He did, however, have to endure an evening with Vorreedi, no less sardonic than a decade before about the propensity of Vor lordlings to interfere with diplomatic and security business. The saturnine ambassador was the most hostile Barayaran Miles had met since the treaty, not because he disapproved of it but because his disapproval of Miles from ten years before had not lessened one jot, and his amour propre had been badly dented by not being deemed to need to know before his abrupt afternoon summons to the Celestial Garden. Warily, Miles pointed out that Giaja or Benin could have turned to Vorreedi at any point, had they so wished, and that the haut Paramel Volusor had also been excluded until all was a done deal. He received a snarl in reply, and reflected he had previously had to bypass Vorreedi for much the same reason he’d bypassed him this time, that the man wanted his old spymaster’s rights of interference without seeing the bigger picture. He’d been a superb second to Lord Vorob’yev, but had proven less skilled in the primary role. After a frame-call to his parents Miles also called Gregor to suggest he find out if cousin Fletchir or Benin had any idea of whom they would get on with better, and when possible recall Vorreedi.

Miles’s real business on Marilac was also kept discreet but his official welcome—as Gregor’s emissary rather than Admiral Naismith, hero of Dagoola IV—was a planet-wide blaze of publicity for them both in which Miles was forced to wear the Marilacan Cross of Glory awarded Naismith and play his Vorkosigan identity as if it were a fictional incognito as transparent as Count Vorbarra,
observed in courtesy but believed by none. Even the honour-guard in imperial dress greens from the *General Vorkraft* did not seem to make any impression. The adulation of Miles astounded Pym and Jankowski, even after Eta Ceta; they knew their lord had had a mysterious galactic career and contact with the powerful, but had not quite appreciated that planetary deliverance was among his accomplishments. After the first shock it warmed rather than alarmed Ekaterin, but there was a persistent undercurrent of surprise at Miles’s shape that under the circumstances she didn’t understand.

After a week or so, when media interest ebbed, he took her with him to an isolated country venue where senior ministers and army chiefs had gathered, including the former Sergeant Oliver and Lieutenant Tris, veterans of Fallow Core and Dagoola, whose *de facto* command of the Resistance Army that with Barrayaran-supplied finance and arms expelled the Cetagandans had secured both early retirement with the crossed batons of Field Marshal’s rank. The necessary communication in Gregor’s Voice was brief—the Barrayaran Imperium remained absolute guarantor of Marilac sovereignty, and the new alliance would soon offer a joint treaty in which Cetaganda would concede the remaining areas of mutual dispute and restore Marilac as a polity to what it had been before their attack fifteen years ago. It was all the Marilacans hoped for and their relief was evident, but Miles and Ekaterin spent a long day encouraging them to show as much graciousness to the Cetagandans as they could muster. It was in this that Miles had suggested she could most help, and she found she enjoyed the effects of her crisp commentary on the practical advantages of finessing Cetagandan sensibilities and appealing to the malleability of both haut and human memory. Miles followed with a privy warning that whatever might *seem* to be happening with Joint-Fleet command, Admiral Lhosh—who hated on Marilac for his early successes against them and responsibility for the PoW regimes on Dagoola and elsewhere—was headed for early retirement. What exactly might come of it all Miles confessed to Ekaterin he wasn’t at all sure. Marilac’s scars were more recent than Barrayar’s, and there were people in the room who’d spent three hopeless years on Dagoola, not his busy month, but he’d made the effort as promised, and they certainly left the Marilacans who counted most having a thoughtful argument about what finessing of haut and ghem they might manage themselves. Miles also took away, which pleased him no end, a great scroll of thanks to the Dendarii Fleet, signed by all Marilacans present, to deliver to Admiral Quinn when he saw her, with a renewal of the open invitation for a fleet state visit.

Ekaterin’s reward for her diplomatic efforts was a day with Tris, Oliver, and a wildly enthusiastic Suegar, learning while Miles’s ears burned much that horrified and entranced her about what exactly Admiral Naismith had done to rescue 10,336 PoWs from Dagoola. She also secured from Suegar two copies of the vid drama the Marilacans made about the event that Miles had thus far managed to keep not only from her but with Allegre’s help unreleased in the Imperium. Seeing it sharpened her understanding, for while it was (as Miles ruefully confirmed) accurate enough on the sequence of events, the actor who played Naismith, if on the short side, was vid-star handsome and athletic, so in watching it did not seem to Ekaterin to be about Miles unless she reminded herself whom the actor was playing. That, she realised, explained the surprise at Miles-in-the-flesh during their initial reception; Marilacans had not quite cared to acknowledge that their epic rescue had been by a slightly hunched dwarf. Cordelia, she knew, had watched with palpitations some of the original camp surveillance tapes, and she did not think she’d try to access those herself. The second copy of the vid she slipped to Pym, who took it with a dubious look and next day breathed startled thanks in her ear.

The landscapes and flora of Marilac were a delight to Ekaterin, a riot of improbable forms and colours explored over a genuine honeymoon fortnight that made her think with self-mockery of her high excitement at her first-ever trip off Barrayar, to the windless and claustrophobic domes of Komarr. It had been barely three years ago, in another life; she’d been exhausted with packing and Tien’s indifference to her nerves, and everything had been so strange and new, from shuttleport to station and the ship itself. She remembered struggling with safety drills while trying to help Nikki,
her trepidation in approaching their steward to ask about getting Nikki his desperately desired meeting with the jump-pilot and visit to the bridge, her relief at the man’s cheerful cooperation. Now she was ImpSec certified as a spacesuit user, possessed custom-built equipment, and could wander as she wished onto the bridge of a battlecruiser as it skipped away from Marilac down the further side of the long horseshoe-route they would have used to avoid Cetagandan space, from the Zoave Twilight to Tau Ceti and through the western Orion Arm, where they branched off for Terra. That was what happened to you when you hitched your wagon to Miles’s, and it filled her with love for his crazy expansiveness, the sheer force of growth he induced.

The handpicked crew of the General Vorkraft also seemed pleased with their assignment. She could see the attraction of new space and wormhole routes and the efficient training function—at each station or planet Miles was careful to allow as much shoreside leave as possible, and secured meetings between officers and local authorities. But crew and officers alike were also, she slowly realised, genuinely proud to be ferrying her as much as Miles, and regarded the whole trip as not only a treat but a professional compliment from Gregor and Aral, whose command of the ship thirty years before they had all, apparently, researched. In the days of normal-space travel between jump-points she and Miles were favoured with frequent invitations to gunroom and wardroom, as well as the captain’s table, and after quiet enquiries through Pym, to ratings’ and troopers’ messes as well, where they were greeted with marked deference that gradually relaxed to let through an intense curiosity about them as people and the new order they were understood, she realised, jointly to have midwived. Miles’s physical oddity they dealt with by turning him into a mascot of sorts; some seemed more surprised she had married him than at his achievements. Sometimes men were very strange, but so were women, and accepting invitations almost every evening Miles didn’t have to use his seizure stimulator made the travel-time buoyant. Still more congenially, the station hydroponics facilities she was able to visit were a source of constant fascination and efficient variations of technique any gardener would want to note.

Gregor’s prediction that Miles would need plenipotentiary status elsewhere than Marilac was swiftly confirmed. At every stop from the Zoave Twilight onward they found high functionaries awaiting them with urgent invitations to drinks and dinner from whomever was atop local command, and she heard Lord Auditor Vorkosigan give in his Imperial Master’s Voice a variety of cautious assurances and minimal agreements—her own diplomatic training. The bottom-line was always simple enough, formalisation of friendly relations with the new Alliance as the largest unitary force in the Nexus and a promise that wider licensing of frame and nanoforge technologies would soon be forthcoming. In return Miles secured promises of full cooperation with any reasonable request and small concessions over this or that; in some lesser stations, with the usual conditions attached, he presented as Gregor’s gift frames providing links to Barrayaran or Komarran frame-hubs, and so access to the growing Nexus-wide frame-net that was exponentially slamming everyone into realtime communication with everyone else. Ekaterin’s Imperial Star and Order of Virtue were discreetly scrutinised and her acquaintance subsequently cultivated by men and women of power in ways that educated her in human possibility, and produced from Miles when they were alone hilarious political commentaries and cutting analyses that expanded at ferocious speed her understanding of the starscape through which they travelled.

That leg of the trip culminated after nearly a month of jumping at Terra, connected to the frame-net in the first wave of gifts but until now unvisited since the treaty by any high-ranking Barrayaran or Cetagandan. Though a rich centre of galactic culture and art, disunified Terra was not militarily or politically important; faced with frames and nanoforges in the hands of the new Alliance, however, most of the planet’s larger polities had senior representatives waiting in London, where Miles and Ekaterin first landed to check in with the Barrayaran Embassy. Tediously diplomatic days followed, enlivened by receptions at Cetagandan and Marilacan Embassies, as well as a ball thrown for them by the Barrayaran ambassador, a cousin of René Vorbretten. When all that mattered was done Miles
took the opportunity to unleash a fractious debate by delivering a collective invitation from Gregor to
send with him when he left a single observer for some major joint-fleet exercises being planned.
Then they were free to leave the Terrans arguing and be tourists for three months, while the General
Vorkraft embarked on exercises with Cetagandan ships in local space followed by generous
planetary leave for crew and officers.

Drifting north in a borrowed governmental airship brought Miles and Ekaterin to snow and the
improbable pastime called skiing, at which Jankowski proved better than any of them; drifting far to
the south again took them to lands where spring was gaining strength and early flowers poked
everywhere from warming earth. For the first time Ekaterin spent some real money, and not only
huge numbers of seeds but a formidable variety of young and mature plants all the way up to fruiting
and blossoming trees made their way to the General Vorkraft, where hydroponics techs were
assigned to their care. Some delightful wooden furniture and enough rugs, kilims, tapestries,
chinoiserie, lamps, tiles, crockery, polished fossils, haberdashery, music, old printed books, pottery,
carvings, statuary, and paintings to fill several houses also made their way spaceward. On Barrayar
summer was peaking, but in Terra’s northern hemisphere autumn advanced in another riot of colour,
and they watched the Midsummer festivals in Vorbarr Sultana amid a glory of dying vegetation on a
portable, multi-tuned frame Miles had to access the General Vorkraft’s comcentre. With reasseurances
about Nikki and the foetal progress of Aral Alexander and Helen Natalia in their ears, a first desire to
go home in their hearts, and the urge to buy exhausted, much to Pym’s and Jankowski’s relief, they
made their way to a place called Belem, where Ky Tung and his wife Esmerelda met them with
enormous smiles in their 50-metre hoversloop, sailed round the Isla de Marajó, and set off up the
Amazon feeding them fresh fish and (as Tung happily boasted) the best moo shu pork they’d ever
had.

For all four Barrayarans—and Ekaterin was fascinated by the egalitarian respect with which Tung
and his wife assessed her as well as Pym and Jankowski, and by his evident fondness for Miles—the
winding upstream journey was an astounding experience. The great river-basin of Amazonia had,
they knew, suffered badly in Terra’s self-poisoned collapse that drove the Alpha and Beta colonial
expeditions, but sheer size had given it resilience and enough survived that in the centuries since
ecorecovery began large areas had been reclaimed for rainforest and wildlife. Sailing among
enormous river-liners and automated freight-barges in long convoys they passed Obidos and days
later reached Manaus and confluence with the Rio Negro, to stop a few nights before continuing
through nearly a month of leisurely days among smaller vessels to Iquitos, and eventually Achual
Point. Evening moorings on the upper river produced encounters with members of the Tungs’ family
and a chance selection of friends made in their seasonal journeys up and down its many branches and
tributaries. Conversations were wonderfully varied, and she had fun collecting recipes from
Esmerelda for Ma Kosti to try. There was also an emotional evening when Miles brought out the
frame and they watched Gregor’s Birthday celebrations, drinking toasts at Prince Aral’s and Princess
Karen’s decanting from replicators; contacted privately later, Gregor and Laisa beamed in complete
distraction and held up squalling infants for inspection. The emperor had used the occasion to
announce that all imperial recruitment was open to women, answering a pressing need but fuelling
immediate chatter about salic law that set Miles laughing so hard he got hiccoughs. With Tung,
thought, talk usually circled into reminiscent tidbits of military history that after a while Ekaterin
identified as bait Miles was laying out. Pym and Jankowski, as much as she, were attentive listeners
and questioners, but to Miles’s frustration Tung wasn’t biting and seemed to anticipate a proffered
disturbance to life he would reject with amused thanks.

As the river’s navigable end at Pongo de Manseriche at last neared, more than four thousand
kilometres from the sea where they started, Ekaterin was unsurprised when Miles, after his regular
check-in with the advancing Alliance plans, put in a call to the Barrayaran Embassy in London,
discovered with a grin that the Terran polities were still unable to agree on a single observer, and
requested the ambassador let it be known he’d take two—if they were Commodore Ky Tung (ret’d) and his wife, citizens of the People’s Democracy of Greater South America. Then he went back to reminiscing with a relaxed ease that brought a calculating look to Tung’s eyes. The following afternoon calculation turned to bewildered surprise as a series of urgent calls from high-ranking diplomats and politicians, including the Tungs’ own PDGSA President, requested that he and Esmerelda represent them at upcoming military manoeuvres by the Alliance. Finally disconnecting the comset to silence it, both came with deeply suspicious looks to stand glowering at Miles, who had been taught to steer the hoversloop and was showing off to Pym and Jankowski.

“Alright, laddie, what are you up to?”

Miles smiled sweetly at his old mentor. “I can’t say, Ky. But I promise you it won’t take long, and that if you don’t come you’ll regret it.”

“This isn’t some Dendarii Reunion, is it? I like them all, but—”

“No. There will be a reunion of sorts—we’re picking up Elli, Elena and Baz, Arde, and I hope Bel at Beta, among others, but the Dendarii bit is incidental, and I couldn’t use politicians to lean on you like this for a purely private end.”

“Yes you could. But I don’t think you would.” Tung scratched his chin. “I don’t miss space, you know, Miles. I’m happy here on the river.”

Miles shrugged. “Alright, two further temptations and I’ll leave it. The invitation isn’t only from me—it’s from my Da as well, who remembers you from the Hegen Hub and would like to see you again.” Tung the military historian considered Admiral Lord Vorkosigan’s *Komarr Report* the most succinct and best operational memoir in existence, and he blinked at this datum. “And I can promise you a show of fleet-strategy you will appreciate.”

Tung’s eyes blurred for a moment as his forehead creased then cleared to wide-eyed understanding. “Ye gods! You and your new friends are going to knock somewhere off. Where?”

“Wait and see. Here or there.”

Tung actually gnashed his teeth and Ekaterin involuntarily loosed one of her gurgles of laughter, bringing an odd look to his eyes and a rueful smile to his face.

“How do you stand him all the time, Ekaterin?” He sat on a locker-bench, pulling Esmerelda down beside him and glaring at Miles. “I haven’t felt like this since he highjacked me and stole my ship back in 2790.” Ekaterin’s ears pricked for she had often wondered when exactly Miles had taken up highjacking things as a hobby and the nightly conversations had avoided the Tau Verde war. “I couldn’t stop him then either. Oh well. Esmerelda love, do you fancy a free space trip to meet some old mercenary friends of mine and see what must be an invasion?”

His wife’s lips twitched. “I can’t say it’s been an ambition of mine, but I know how you feel about Viceroy Vorkosigan, Ky. And if you don’t quite trust Miles, I think I trust Ekaterin and her laugh, though it makes no sense to me. Still.” She frowned. “Will we be expected to do all that absurd my lording and ladyling you Bararrayrans believe in?”

Miles grinned as he heard acceptance in that will. “Only if you meet an emperor. Or two.”

That drew him straight looks but with his desire secured Miles declined to explain further. Both Tungs were more resigned than excited as they made calls, moored and stored the boat, and watched the arrival of a large governmental aircar. But once they all lifted from the High Andean Shuttleport
to the General Vorkraft both were absorbed by the warship’s ebullient atmosphere and found themselves showered with curious invitations to wardrooms and messes. The crew had secured and avidly, repeatedly watched the Marilacan holovid about Dagoola, so Tung’s role as battle-commander under Miles was known and he found himself plied with subtle or less subtle questions and listened to intently even when his answers deviated into earlier military history. Esmerelda meanwhile fell into a moo shu pork competition with one of the cooks who thought his family recipe unbeatable, and won hands down, or rather up, by mass demand for more of her cooking.

* * * * *

Their stop at Beta Colony was brief but busy and for Ekaterin, if not Miles, unexpectedly tense. Gregor had sent Beta a direct invitation to provide an observer for the exercises, wording it more tersely than was his diplomatic wont. There had also been pointed Barrayaran refusals in negotiations for licensing Chandler’s technologies, so when Miles and Ekaterin were invited to drinks with the President to meet the observer, Commander Branson of the Astronomical Survey, the ground was primed. Never less than graciously Miles made it plain over the driest sherry that his Imperial Master was fed up with the continuing inability of His Vicereine to visit her ma because Dr Mehta (whom Cordelia assaulted with a fish-tank during her escape from enforced psychiatric treatment thirty-three years before) still had charges on file and on Beta diplomatic immunity did not cover anything involving violence.

“But Dr Mehta is a private citizen now,” wailed the President. “There’s nothing the government can do.”

“Then I regret to inform you, Mr President, there is nothing my Imperial Master can do to expedite your access to new technologies.”

“But it was all so long ago.”

“Exactly, Mr President. My grandmother is approaching her century, and has seen her daughter, off-planet, only three times in thirty-three years. Oh, and I should warn you that my Imperial Master will be filing suit on the Vicereine’s behalf against both your government and Dr Mehta, in your courts and the Citizens’ Rights Adjudication court of sector I, alleging, let me see, false imprisonment, illegal administration of drugs, failure to provide proper treatment, deliberate communication of falsehoods, conspiracy to persecute, malicious slander and libel, evident revenge, and unreasonable abrogation of constitutional rights to information, communication, free speech, and familial access.”

The President went white. “That’s absurd.”

“Is it, Mr President? Have you read the file? I’ve never seen yours, of course”—a lie, Ekaterin knew, as both Miles and ImpSec apparently hacked at will into Betan databases—“but there must be some interesting pages where Dr Mehta explains her unshakeable conviction that my mother was a Barrayaran deep penetration agent. Perhaps you can find there the credibility both commonsense and events deny Dr Mehta; my own belief is that the courts will find a more cogent clue in the angry embarrassment of your esteemed predecessor after his attempt electorally to use my mother’s heroic return from Escobar had, ah, backfired so unfortunately because he chose to ignore her traumata.”

The President went whiter still.

“In any case, Mr President, both my Imperial Master and His Celestial Cousin the Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja are no longer prepared to accept this treatment of Vicereine Countess Vorkosigan. They cannot understand why the matter remains unresolved when it offers both Their Majesties such
patent insult, and will enter no new trade agreement with Beta Colony until a satisfactory answer is found or the court cases resolved.”

“That’s blackmail!”

“No, Mr President, it’s a line drawn by two emperors. You must resolve your priorities in the matter, and we shall abide by the consequences.”

After they departed with an alarmed Commander Branson and regained the privacy of their suite on the General Vorkraft Miles went white himself and let rage show, not at Mehta’s old idiocy but the pretend-helpless Betan politicians who abrogated rights at need or desire as much as every other government—where were Cordelia’s rights as a Betan citizen?—but even in private were pathologically unwilling to concede plain truth.

“Why is Gregor pushing it now?”

“Oh, opportunity, mostly, thanks to Jack Chandler and Fletchir. The Betans are such self-satisfied technocrats that being off this cutting edge is the most effective threat we’ve ever had over them. And stalling new Cetagandan as well as Barrayaran trade will hurt Beta far more badly than either of us.”

“And Fletchir agreed?”

“Immediately, Gregor said. He was aware of most details—they hack the Betans as easily as we do—and likes my Ma, I think, as well as being willing on principle to tweak the Betans’ tail. So fingers crossed.”

Miles had no doubt pragmatics would prevail—if the matter went public mercantile pressure on Mehta and government alike would be astounding and the ammunition that could be deployed on his Ma’s behalf almost unlimited—but their conversation was interrupted by the General Vorkraft’s commander, Captain Monides, informing them that the small mercenary cruiser and Imperial corvette his lordship had said to expect had both signalled arrival in Betan orbit and requested permission to send parties aboard. The Dendarii group arrived first, led by Elli Quinn who reacted to Miles and the unexpected presence of Ky Tung with whoops of pleasure. Ekaterin knew Elena and Baz Bothari-Jesek and Arde Mayhew from her wedding, but it was the first time she had met Elli and they shook hands with intent mutual assessment. Miles had meanwhile been distracted by arrivals unknown to her as they emerged from the airlock—a pretty woman a little older than her who must be Rowan Durona, and a stocky, grey-haired figure with an oddly epicene face, the Betan hermaphrodite Bel Thorne. It was accompanied by an ivory-skinned woman with short dark hair in a float-chair who seemed—Ekaterin blinked—to have four arms rather than no legs.

“Nicol? Is that really you?” Miles’s voice was more than pleased and surprised. “How in space did you get here?”

For a moment Ekaterin wondered if this were yet another of Miles’s ex-girlfriends whom he had for some reason omitted to mention, and her mind began to boggle wondering if four-armed Nicol had overlapped with giant befanged Taura, but from a rising babble of explanations she soon gathered Nicol was a quaddie, of whom there was a nation somewhere, had once been rescued by Miles from Jackson’s Whole—aha!—and was now Bel’s partner at somewhere called Graf Station in quaddie-space; she had been invited to come with Bel by Mark when they managed to contact him through the Dendarii. Nicol’s profession of music explained the arrival of strange-shaped cases in her wake, closely followed by the Barrayaran party—Mark oddly clutching a bag and a nervous Kareen, with a very wide-eyed Harra and Lem Csurić followed by Taura and Armsman Roic in full livery. Taura looked cheerful and well, as delighted as Miles to see Nicol and her closer friends, but to Ekaterin’s
eyes, and she thought those of Elli Quinn and Arde Mayhew, there was a new deliberation in the huge frame, as if Taura’s density had increased when her metabolism was slowed. Roic was absorbed in the introduction she was making to her old comrades, including Nicol, and Miles was with Mark and Kareen, so Ekaterin went to rescue Harra and Lem, doing their best not to stare at Bel and Nicol.

“How are you both?”

“Well enough, thank you, my Lady.” Lem was clearly conscious of the presence as bemused observers of the General Vorkraft’s captain and officers. “A bit confused is all.”

“Has anyone explained anything to you?”

“Oh yes, my Lady.” Harra was smiling. “Lord Mark explained he had strict instructions from Lord Vorkosigan to bring us by hook or by crook, for the same thing all the Districts had to choose observers for. And Sergeant Taura explained she hopes to become postwoman in the high vales and will be marrying Armsman Roic. We’re looking forward to both those things very much. Oh, and Miss Kareen said Lord Vorkosigan promised it won’t take very long and we’ll be back well before our babe needs to be … released.”

Ekaterin’s congratulations and the exchange of personal news as well as introductions to the various strange people calmed Lem and Harra, and Miles, she saw, had remembered to pass the Marilacan scroll to a surprised Elli Quinn, but all conversation was interrupted by a rising, very loud rrraaoo that seemed to come from Lord Mark’s bag. After a moment Miles smiled thinly at his brother, who was shuffling his feet.

“Mark, I was going to thank you for inviting Nicol, and I do, but you seem to have brought another guest. Would you by some strange chance happen to have ImpSec with you?”

“I swear, Miles, we don’t know how he got on board. He just turned up about an hour after we’d broken Barrayar orbit. On the bridge.”

“That, alas, is all too plausible given his track-record.” Miles turned. “Captain Monides, I’m afraid I shall have to trouble you to accommodate a most persistent and ingenious cat as well as all these good beings. His name is ImpSec and as it happens he has an all-areas pass from General Allegre, so security isn’t a problem unless your cook is preparing fish. But some, ah, equipment for his use would be a boon.”

Turning back, he took the bag from Mark, set it down, and crouched to open the top. A familiar grey-and-tabby head shot out with a pleased mmrrt and looked around with an interested expression before ImpSec hopped out, gave Miles’s hand a vigorous lick, and uttered an enquiring quack. Had fish been mentioned? From the side of the room Pym stared with what Ekaterin thought was mostly admiration undermined by memories of ImpSec’s various nighttime encounters with tanglefields and wall-alarms at Vorkosigan House. Watching officers and the crewmen detailed to lug bags were failing to conceal grins, though Captain Monides succeeded nicely.

“Certainly, my Lord Auditor. Doubtless the service regulations about pets are in any case sadly outmoded.”

Miles looked him up and down, his hand rubbing ImpSec’s head. “They won’t appear in the new joint-fleet regs, I fancy, Captain. Most Cetagandan ships seem to carry cats. Or dogs. Or wolves. And in one case Admiral Arvin mentioned a gene-tailored tiger. In any case ImpSec is not a pet, he’s a pest and an accredited member of the organisation for which he is named. Besides, Gregor likes him.”
Monides let a grin show and Miles straightened, slinging a purring ImpSec round his shoulders. “If that’s everyone and everything I must also trouble you, Captain, to break orbit and set course for the Escobar jump-point. Before you jump, though, you must contact Barrayar control by frame and obtain some special security codes they have for you.”

“At once, my Lord. Excuse me, then.”

Monides wheeled and was gone, and the last hurrah was finally underway. From the company’s first assembly for drinks and food the journey became quite the oddest Ekaterin had yet experienced, partly in strange pairings of experience and conversation constantly produced, as by the mirror-dances at her graduation, but also through slowly climbing tension and Miles’s adamant refusal to say where they were going after Escobar. No-one seemed to think Ekaterin would know, so she had no difficulty keeping her counsel. The Betan observer, Commander Branson, was drawn into their ranks by shared ignorance and Miles, who made clear his respect for the Survey and the confinement of Barrayar’s irritation to governmental weaseling. The man was plainly fascinated, as well he might be, by Bel’s presence, and by Nicol and Taura, especially after Nicol’s demonstration of her quaddie variety of hammered dulcimer—a musical revelation that left Ekaterin melted with pleasure. Lem and Harra were for the most part quiet, fascinated listeners, seeming content to be so, and her own conversations, after a long, reassuring talk with Taura about her treatments and inner state, were largely with Kareen, Rowan Durona, whom Ekaterin liked very much, and Elli Quinn, a more complex personality to assess. Elli was distracted by Tung, clearly as beloved by her as by Miles, and by the presence at all jump-points after they left Betan space of Barrayaran patrol-vessels. The last but one jump before Escobar led to a short normal-space traverse of a small binary system, and before they made it Miles arranged everyone in the senior officers’ wardroom, where repeater-screens showing the bridge telemetry had been installed.

“The show doesn’t quite start yet, but once we’re through this jump the curtain should begin to rise.”

Miles’s voice was calm but his hands busily stroked ImpSec, recently retrieved for the fourth time from one of the anti-grav shafts whose operation he greatly enjoyed but did not yet entirely understand. A few moments later the jump klaxon sounded and Ekaterin felt the brief disorientation of transit as telemetry whited out. Then screens renewed themselves and she blinked as Tung swore inventively at displays showing scores of warships, large and small, and dozens of troopships strung across the system in loose defensive formation. Among them were a dozen of the largest Vorsmythe and Toscane freighters, and three liners. The further jump-point was guarded by a huge ship and a group of smaller ones, and to one side a small cluster of merchant vessels lay with dimmed lights beside another Toscane freighter.

“Is that the Crown Prince Serg on the jump-point, Miles?” Tung was peering. “It looks like her.”

“No, the Princess-and-Countess Olivia. Same class. There’s five more in the pack, including the Serg.”

“Are there four more princes?” Mark scratched his head.

“The Prince Xav, the Princess Isabella, who was Xav’s wife, and for his other children the Princess Isolde and Prince Georg. Isolde was Ivan’s paternal grandmother. She and Georg died in the Occupation.”

“More to the point, Miles, why are they here and where are they going?” Elli Quinn was as intent on the screens as Tung and Commander Branson. “Exercise be damned. That’s an invasion fleet or I’m still a trainee. And what are those merchants?”

“Folk outbound from Escobar who are being detained until what they have seen doesn’t matter.”
“Then where’s their guard?” Both Tung and Elli were frowning.

“They need none. That freighter and the others like it are packed with generators, and do you see the little drone satellites behind each merchant? Those contain frames, through which a stasis field that could stop a small moon is being relayed.”

Tung swore again, this time with what sounded like delight. “Remote application of stasis? And tractor-beams, in that case. Oh I think you were right, Miles. I am going to enjoy this.” He frowned. “Though not if the target’s Escobar—they don’t des—”

“No, no, not Escobar. We needed to pass through it but didn’t want to spook them with a rendezvous in their space. And we’re doing things to reassure them, as you’ll see in a moment.”

The assurance brought more frowns but of concentration rather than alarm. In Mark’s and Taura’s eyes, as well as Elli Quinn’s, Ekaterin saw growing surmise, but Escobar connected through Jackson’s Whole and Kline Station to a dozen polities as well as Cetagandan space. Turning back to the screens she saw they were already past the merchants and approaching the further jump-point.

“The liners are carrying a fair number of Counts with observers from all districts, a perfectly appalling number of diplomats, and, um, bits of a government-in-waiting. There are also, Commander Branson, observers equivalent to yourself and Commodore Tung from Hegen Hub Alliance nations and others. Oh, and while I doubt you’re still a trainee, Elli, it’s only half an invasion fleet. The other half comes courtesy of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja and will be meeting us … there.”

Tung’s and Elli’s voices overlapped. “Another half the same size?”

“Pretty much,” Miles nodded.

“Gods. What needs that kind of strike power?” Tung shook his head as if to clear it or deny a possibility.

“Oh it isn’t that. We have this desire to do it all bloodlessly, you see, and it turns out a lot of energy is needed and a lot of techs. The big boys are along for their power-plants and to discourage interference. With all the VIPs involved no chances are being taken. Ah, now then …”

The Princess-and-Countess Olivia had moved aside to let them close the jump-point and the klaxon sounded. Once more telemetry vanished with the disorientation of jump, reappeared as focus returned, and they were in Escobaran space. Both a Barrayaran and an Escobaran cruiser exchanged security codes with the General Vorkraft and moved aside to let them boost towards a cluster of Barrayaran vessels in high planetary orbit. The smaller ships looked similar in make-up to the Princess-and-Countess Olivia’s support group, with the addition of three General-class battlecruisers; the great central ship was clearly of the Princess Kareen class, but instead of the normal dull metallic colour shone brightly in imperial green with lines of decoration resembling piping and braid at the angles of nacelles and round the projecting curves of weapons-spheres. The vessel’s upper profile was altered by a long additional curve Ekaterin knew from Miles allowed greatly enlarged reception and dining rooms, and as they neared the ship, changing the angle, she could see on the extended surface of the curve an enormous, full-length portrait of a politely smiling and exceptionally well-dressed Vor woman.

“What and who is that?” Tung spoke for many, though Taura, Roic, Pym, Jankowski, Mark, and Kareen, as well as Elena, Baz, and Harra, were grinning with surprise, and in Kareen’s case giggling.
“That is His Imperial Majesty’s Battle-yacht the *Lady Alys Vorpatril*, which should tell you who as well, Ky. She’s my aunt.”

Elli stared at him. “The formidable hostess one?”

“Just so. One could not name anything more appropriate after her. The colours and portrait were actually Simon Illyan’s idea—he being her partner these days. They look good, don’t they?” All of the Dendarii who knew Illyan had been Admiral Naismith’s secret employer were grinning, including Elli, though calculation had not left her eyes. “Now, Gregor and Laisa are paying a state visit downside today, with my Ma in tow, and will among other things, Ky—you might also note this, Commander Branson—offer a rather advantageous deal on frames and nanoforges by way of further reparations and final apology for that criminal and idiotic attack thirty years ago. It helps close the circle, which is partly what all this is about. But they’ll be back aboard late tonight, and we have a collective invitation for breakfast tomorrow, after which the real fun will start, so we’ll be there a while. And do you know, Nicol, I think you should bring your dulcimer. It’s going to be a grand party.”

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The experience of arriving in full fig aboard the *Lady Alys Vorpatril* next morning reduced everyone except Miles and ImpSec to wondering observation. Even those familiar with the *Princess-Kareen* class were dumbstruck. One hold had been converted into a VIP docking-chamber, so they left the shuttle not through the usual freefall tube but down an elegantly curved ramp in full gravity and pleasantly fresh atmosphere. They were met by Lady Alys herself, an epitome of graciousness to all with warm smiles for those in need of one and special words for Taura and Harra, who won an enquiry after the portrait of Gregor. Alys shook hands with Bel and Nicol without so much as blinking, and merely raised an eyebrow when Miles explained that a hammered dulcimer of unusual design was being toted behind them. Only ImpSec produced any visible pause, but a polite *mmrt* and inclination of his head was accepted with a quirk of her lips. While Miles introduced everyone more official ImpSec guards ran scanners over them all from top to toe, or in Nicol’s case top to finger as well as carefully inspecting the insides of her float-chair while she was held by Taura. Then Alys led them along a wide, carpeted corridor to a large lift, and they rose for several minutes through the height of the ship to emerge in what was clearly an ante-chamber featuring more carpet, wallpaper, ovolo mouldings softening angles, a selection of antique furnishings and art from the Residence, and half-a-dozen lethally armed ImpSec guards and marines at parade rest. On one side double-doors were closed; on the other a matching pair gave onto an enormous, elegant space dominated by an equally enormous dining-table already half-filled with people tucking into what looked like every food-group in existence. Gregor rose to meet them, waving his other guests to keep eating.

“Miles, Ekaterin. You’re well? Have you had a good trip? Little Aral and Kareen are thriving.” He was relaxed and cheerful. “The Betans have been screaming blue murder almost as loudly as Kareen since you gave them the ultimatum. I hope you enjoyed it. I’m letting Cordelia compose a variety of polite replies, which may be why she isn’t here yet.”

Miles grinned. “We are, we did, that’s excellent, I did—though that President of theirs is as pointless a creature as I’ve ever met—and that’s good of you. Before you ask, yes, that is indeed ImpSec making a beeline for your kippers. Mark claims he found him on the bridge of their corvette an hour after breaking orbit.” Gregor laughed. “And I have, quite by chance, brought you someone who can give us some music to invade things to. Let me introduce those you haven’t met.”
He did so while Gregor as much as Alys exerted himself to put people at ease. Branson was formally greeted and subtly assured of personal welcome; the deliberate grace was a form of imperial carrot to Miles’s diplomatic stick. There was a fascinating moment when Gregor took Ky Tung’s hand, murmuring that it was a pleasure to meet him again and be able to express his thanks properly. As he turned to Esmerelda Tung’s eyes raced with calculation, then popped as wide as Miles had ever seen them when he remembered his brief encounter at the Hegen Hub with ‘Greg Bleakman’. Miles saw Ekaterin’s eyes also snap to attention, and reflected that one more secret of Gregor’s was blown. Elena alone received, against all protocol, a brief hug, but the meeting that truly gripped Miles was Gregor’s grave handshakes with Harra and Lem Csurik.

“It is my honour to meet you both at last. I know how much you and poor Raina mean to Lord Vorkosigan, and I have greatly admired your work in Silvy Vale. Is all well with your child-to-be?”

Their faces were a picture Miles would long remember, which gave him an idea, but the practical question helped Harra to an answer in which Lem joined. Gregor saw both to places at the table before returning to greet Bel Thorne with Hegen Hub warmth and Nicol with open curiosity, steering them back to sit beside him and introducing an equally fascinated Laisa while a steward hastily cleared room for Nicol’s float-chair. Meanwhile Miles and Ekaterin smiled and waved at people round the table, including Laisa’s nervous-looking parents, Georg and Helen with a passel of Lords Auditor, Counts Vorvolk and Vorrutyer with their wives, and Delia and Duv Galeni, before slipping into seats next to a smiling Kou and Drou, and opposite Alys, Simon Illyan, and a glowering figure in dress greens.

“Hello, Ivan. How are you?”

“I am not talking to you.”

“You just did.” Ivan was not appeased by this logic. “Um, what exactly are you cross about?”

“Everything.” The glower continued. “Absolutely everything. Including freak accidents happening right now a thousand light-years away.”

Miles sighed and began to eat. Ivan would come round. Or be brought round. Opposite him Ekaterin looked at Ivan consideringly.

“Including the bits that are about to happen?”

Ivan smiled sourly. “Knocking that place off is, I grant, an outrageous act of virtue. Everything else is simply outrageous. I am still officially seconded to my mother’s command, and in practice my boss for the last year has been a drop-dead gorgeous lunatic who cannot decide if she is more obsessed with genes or gadgets, and is in either case even more dangerous than my dearest mama. To whom Miles persuaded Gregor to give a battleship as a toy. I shall never forgive him.”

“Yes he will.” Illyan was straight-faced but his eyes were alight. “Ivan is merely put out because he has discovered that in ghem culture women may propose as well as men”—Ekaterin received a broad smile—“and he is finding that in one case at least he is not entirely sure he wants to say ‘no’. Or perhaps two—the ghem, of course, also practice polygamy.”

Ekaterin covered her mouth with a hand as Miles swallowed laughter with his bacon. Ivan went back to gloowering, not that he had stopped.

“You don’t say, Simon?”

“I do, Miles. I, on the other hand, am tolerably pleased with you. It had not occurred to me to try my
hand at redesigning battleships for diplomatic purposes, but I have found the process absorbing.”

“Heh. I live to serve. It’s a limited market, alas. But I suppose Ma and Da might need one.”

“You’ve certainly done a wonderful job between you.” Ekaterin’s voice was teasing. “What do you think of your portrait, Aunt Alys?”

“I am not altogether displeased.” Alys’s lips quirked. “Like Simon I found the business of naval redesign more interesting than expected, and the outcome very satisfactory. I almost incline to think, Miles dear, I have finally taught you something about doing things in a proper way.”

Miles had thought Ekaterin remarkably bold to tease Alys at breakfast, but at this sally he grinned at his aunt and conversation broadened to their trip and the most positive outcomes of yesterday’s state-visit to Escobar. Ivan removed himself, muttering, but Vorthyses, Koudelkas, Vorrutyers, and Galenis drifted down-table with Mark and Kareen to say proper hellos. Miles was deep in a witty account of Jankowski’s prowess at skiing when his Ma slipped in beside him.

“Hello son.” She gave him a maternal kiss, then a rarer hug. “Ekaterin, dear. Are you both well?”

“We are. How is Da?”

“Blooming.” She smiled radiantly. “The efficiency of haut gene-treatment astonishes me, and I’ve rarely seen him happier.” She looked round the table and laughed. “Miles dear, besides intimidating my homeworld for me—and I am enjoying the undiplomatic correspondence—you appear to have brought along a harem who all seem happy with you and one another. I’m not at all sure how you manage it, nor how Ekaterin must feel. And is that really a quaddie next to Gregor?”

Miles explained Nicol and after introducing her and Bel wandered round the table with his Ma, introducing her to the Tungs, Lem Csurik, and Rowan Durona—to his expected but nevertheless severe discomfort the recipient of most sincere and for his Ma distinctly emotional thanks for surgically rebuilding and reviving him from cryostasis. He watched her delight encompass everyone, as well as her real pleasure at seeing Elena and Baz, to whose daughter she stood as godmother, and Harra—last met in person when she had come barefoot to Vorkosigan Surleau to report Raina’s murder. His own heart was bursting with her happiness and his own, yet was eased and all its commotion in his chest somehow without effect on his calm demeanour. The work had been done, surprise was complete, technological and every other advantage overwhelming, the intent as moral as personal. It was enough. It was pretty good, actually. And his Ma and Da were well and happy, and like to remain so.

While they stood chatting to Rowan an officer entered and crossed to Gregor, who listened, stood and clapped his hands before smiling gravely at them all.

“It’s showtime, folks. If you’d all follow Laisa and I—”

He helped Laisa rise and led them across the antechamber and through the opposite set of double-doors into an even larger space, the main part of the additional volume. There were no windows, but across the curved further wall were an array of screens of all sizes surrounding a huge central frame; it was blank but various displays showed space and ships around them with the crescent of Escobar behind. The room itself could clearly be reconfigured but was presently a vast lounge, the rear wall lined on either side of the doors with alcoves and padded benches, and the floor space filled with small tables and comfortable chairs. Gregor and Laisa took a central place, and Vorbarra Armsmen guided the rest of them, the ranking Barrayaran observers and Commander Branson on one side, Vorkosigans, Laisa’s parents, and other personal friends around the centre, and the Dendarii with Miles’s miscellaneous guests on the other. He was happy enough with it as a first arrangement—the
whole set-up was designed to be flexible—until Gregor commandeered him by one arm and turned them to face everyone, looking around the well-dressed but motley assembly.

“There are too many titles of honour to enumerate, so forgive me for omitting them all. What is about to happen will be self-explanatory, I think, but as this day is very much Lord Vorkosigan’s he will provide initial guidance and take questions that occur.” Gregor looked across to the doorway where an officer waited and nodded. Behind them the frame lit up and Gregor turned back to his seat beside Laisa, winking at Miles who sighed as he walked to one side out of people’s lines-of-sight. The frame-image split in three, still with a dark centre, and he let the noise subside before speaking.

“The left image, as some of you will have seen, is of the Bararrayan fleet in the small binary system one jump towards Beta. The right is of the Cetagandan fleet, in a corresponding position in the other direction. Military observers among you will note the unusual fleet-formations of unequal columns in relation to the freighters. You will also see both fleets have launched a drone-satellite, each of which is about to disappear, somewhat oddly. There. And now the middle image will shortly show you”—he waited a few seconds until the dark third of the frame abruptly filled with a starfield—“where the fleets are about to go.”

After the sharp rustle of bodies sitting up and forward there was silence. In the frame a small planet was visible at some distance, bright ice-caps gleaming at each pole and only one continent showing, in the temperate zone. In geostationary orbits rode a small group of warships between two large weapons-platforms, and well separated from them four scattered freighters of differing designs but considerable size. In slightly higher orbits were a few smaller merchant ships. Closer to their viewpoint a fifth large freighter was apparently drifting as if it had just halted after setting off for one of the jump-points; inset images showed all three, each with a small warship and jump-station guarding it, and a little way off, as if waiting to jump, another freighter. He saw pleased recognition slip into Rowan Durona’s eyes and fierce triumph in Taura’s, then Nicol’s, but Mark had gone white and was looking at his progenitor-brother with feral eyes. Miles wasn’t entirely sure how many sub-personalities Mark had these days, but he was willing to bet every last one was intent on him now. With what was clearly immense effort and a convulsive grab at Kareen’s hand Mark relaxed his jaw enough to speak, though his voice vibrated rustily.

“Miles, that is Jackson’s Whole.”

“Not for much longer.” Miles thought his own grin was probably feral too. “We’ve agreed to rename it Aralyar Ceta after the conquest.” He ignored the burst of noise from Bararrayans who hadn’t known, his gaze locked with Mark’s as he raised his voice to cut through the sound. “To honour whom there will, we hope, be not a single death. No Escobaran stupidity. No massacres. Just Vasa Luigi and every last baron on their knees, every gene-slave and techno-serf delivered, and the whole damned abattoir permanently out of every business except being Joint Fleet Headquarters.”

Abruptly he realised Mark probably couldn’t move, so amid continuing noise he walked toward his clone-brother, feeling his mother’s and Ekaterin’s concerned gazes. Reaching Mark he pulled him to his feet, but only so he could embrace him and rest his head on Mark’s shoulder.

“Cetaganda is the means,” he whispered. “You and Harra showed me the end. In an old, secret way it’s also for our Da. I’ll tell you when I can.”

Mark’s arms tightened hard around him for a second. “Thank you.” The voice was not quite Mark’s, colder and flatter even in its whisper and deeply chilling. As the hair stirred on his neck Miles thought it was probably the last voice Ry Ryoval ever heard, though not, he imagined, saying the same thing. Much more of Mark’s personality poured unevenly back into his voice as he added, “For another debt I can never repay.”
“Oh no.” Miles pulled back to arm’s length and stared into Mark’s clouded eyes. “This makes us all square, for the first time. We can move on, with Ekaterin and Kareen, and all the children-to-be. We don’t have to take that place with us anymore. You taught me that, too, defeating Ryoval.” Mark’s eyes were clearing, pleasure dominant, and Miles risked a grin, squeezing his brother’s shoulders. “Mess with the Chance Brothers at your peril, eh? Luigi will bend the knee, all will be well, and everyone will see it.”

He walked back past Ekaterin and his Ma, who met his eyes with benison, and turned to face everyone again. “Incidentally, these images are now being transmitted to all polities in frame-contact, where they are by formal Alliance request being put on planetary holovid nets. We estimate the audience at 500 billion and rising.” He smiled cheerfully at Nicol. “If you felt like, um, expressing your feelings about, say, Baron Bharaputra on the dulcimer we can plug you in Nexus-wide as a soundtrack, including, I believe, Graf Station.” Nicol was wide-eyed, Bel snorting laughter, and Gregor gazing at him with a strange expression, but then he hadn’t yet heard Nicol play. Tung, however, like Elli and the military minds, was intent on the screens, his voice deadly dry.

“Miles, the audience thing will be interesting when I have time and spare capacity to think about it, as will Nicol’s astounding music. But humour me, and tell me why all those warships are lined up as if to use jump-points that are not there?”

“Because they will be. The jump-points, I mean, not the ships. Though of course the ships will be too.” He smiled and Tung took a deep breath.

“Are you telling us, Admiral”—Barrayaran eyebrows scooted upwards at Tung’s slip, though most probably didn’t understand it—“that Barrayar can create wormholes at will?”

“I am, Commodore. It is the third arm of frame and nanoforge technology. As you can see, just now.”

On left and right screens columns of ships began to accelerate in a hypnotic display of precision command and manoeuvring, but that was nothing to the fact that they also began to vanish at about twenty-second intervals as the lead ships in each column reached a point close to one of the freighters, and reappeared after a few seconds equally close to one of the freighters in the middle images of the screen. Sprinting out of eight new wormhole-throats Barrayaran and Cetagandan capital vessels spilled into the Jacksonian system to surround the jump-stations and small fleet—Baron Fell’s ships—clustered between the weapon-platforms. From first and second ships through each wormhole, Princess-Kareen class and their nearest Cetagandan equivalents, came scores of rocket-driven satellites wrapped in protective force-bubbles that accelerated at immense speed towards Jacksonian facilities. The third ships through were freighters, and as soon as they were clear of the wormholes enormous stasis-fields snapped out of the satellites closing on Jacksonian targets, glowing in overlaid tac-display; all were already near enough for fields to reach and immobilise Jacksonian ships, weapons, and personnel. It was less than seventy seconds since the first warship had emerged in-system. Miles heard Tung swearing in his familiar, inventive way, damping his voice in strangled deference to company while Gregor and many others strained to hear him.

Rotating and braking as fast as they had accelerated, ships took positions that built into formations covering all Jacksonian facilities with bristling, unfired weapons. Hold-doors opened and shuttles swept out towards immobilised stations and ships, cutting through stasis-fields with impunity to shoot armoured grapnel-clamps into their targets and haul themselves in to complete forced dockings. A soundtrack intermittently cut in as anonymous Barrayaran and ghem voices began reporting ships, installations, and prisoners secured, after which the stasis fields snapped off and freighters manoeuvred into positions above the dense cluster of warships, great and small, beginning to mass in arrayed geosynchronous orbits over the visible continent. Once local-space control was fully
established—it had taken all of twenty-three minutes—troopships and the liners carrying the counts, haut- and ghem-lords, and ambassadors began to jump in, moving slowly to high orbit but using side-thrusters to maintain positions above the fleet; they too carried extra generators that could be tapped.

Tearing his eyes away from the show Miles swept attention over the audience. Everyone with military and space experience was rigidly intent on unfolding events, even Ivan, as were those with personal reasons to curse Jacksonian barons—Elli, Elena, Bel, Nicol, Mark, and Taura; even his Ma. But in one case explanation was needed, and he slipped between tables to crouch by Lem and Harra, sitting with Taura and a wide-eyed Roic.

“The Jacksonians are gene whores, and worse. They made Taura and Mark and a hundred thousand others as disposable weapons, uncaring of their lives. They sell genetic services up to clone-transplant and murder to the highest bidder, as well as arms and tailored bioweapons. They tried to murder Ekaterin, and they did kill me, for a while. But it is they, as much as your Ma, Harra, who will be buried without remembrance.” He gripped her hand. “I invited you because I wanted you to know in more than words that your fight in Silvy Vale is not isolated, it’s one end of a big battle.” Harra and Lem were staring, and the sound of her name had brought Taura’s and Roic’s gazes round to him. “This is the other, to cleanse the wider Nexus as you have cleansed the Vale. We can’t end the evil, but we can by God take a big bite from its head today.”

Harra stared at him in silence, but Taura reached a long arm to touch his cheek gently, then Harra’s. He left them to digest his words, checked the screens, where deployment continued but the next phase had not yet been reached, and looked around again. From this angle he could see ImpSec crouched behind Gregor’s chair finishing a stolen kipper, laughed to himself, and found his eye caught by Vorkalloner among his auditorial colleagues. Nodding, he detoured to the door to ask Pym to notify the comm section Nicol might need a sound-pickup to patch into the frame-broadcast, and to see her dulcimer brought to her, adding careful instructions. Then he went to the block of Lords Auditor, not only Georg with Helen and Vorkalloner, but Vorhovis, Vorlaisner, and Vorgustafson—wiith himself a full house since the deaths of General Vorparadijs and Admiral Valentine.

“Miles.” Vorkalloner was trying for dryness without much success. “I confess I had doubts when I found out about all this, but that was a beautiful surprise-strike, and as you said bloodless. It would serve emphatic notice as stale news, and as a live broadcast … well, perhaps Commodore Tung’s ‘Admiral’ was not so misplaced.”

“A bit outside the usual Auditorial brief, though.” Vorhovis kept a straight face. “Treaties, invasions …”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Miles kept a straight face too. “I’m just finishing off the Vorbataille case. My report did say there were several loose ends as the neurotoxin was not manufactured on Barrayar. I take my job very seriously, you know, and as the penalty for attacking a Lord Auditor or his kin has always been death on a generous scale I’ve been rather restrained, I think.” Five Lords Auditor stared at him, Georg and Helen with fey smiles. “I imagine we shall soon be able to mark some other Auditorial reports properly closed, as well. At least a dozen criminal ones, for starters; the ground administration people in the second wave have a long list of names on our wanted list with biometrical data, though we’ll have to share the ones we get with the Cetagandans. Then there’s the nastily angled report some years ago into ImpSec finances that questioned the value of Dendarii raids on Jackson’s Whole and Dagoola, which could bear a coda, I fancy, and of course my own as Ninth Auditor into Illyan’s para-assassination. There’s also the ImpSec reports on my clone-brother’s manufacture and Ser Galen’s other plots, though those of course are extraneous, Auditorially speaking. On the other hand there’s going to be a lot more for us all to do for some while, so I think we must urge Gregor to appoint Auditors to the vacant posts, even a ninth if we see a job for one,
which I imagine means our offering him a shortlist. Or three. But if you’ll excuse me—"

From the corner of his eye he had seen the last ships of the joint-fleet moving into orbital position, and leaving his pleasingly wide-eyed fellow Auditors and Helen to what he hoped would be a productive bit of brainstorming—a Lady and a non-Vor auditor would be popular—he went back to his spot. ImpSec was on Gregor’s lap, washing with a satisfied look, and Miles shook his head before speaking.

“What you are about to see are frames within force-bubbles, through which we will effect initial ground control. This phase will take longer, and I see stewards are available to take requests for refreshments.” Nicol’s dulcimer was being brought to her in its case. “I might add that if Jacksonian reactions seem a trifle uncoordinated and inept, you should consider the presence on-planet of substantial Barrayaran and Cetagandan assets who will be seeing to it that com-links go down, armouries won’t unlock, aircars are immobilised and so on. They’re also relaying a great deal of realtime targeting intelligence.”

Tung and Elli were softly applauding the plan and its execution so far, but fell silent as the screens changed, all three sections joining to show a panorama from below the massed ships, whose bellies were visible, still well above atmosphere. The sky was clear, the grey-black blur of the sprawling Jacksonian conurbation visible under the carpet of ships. The fleet was too distant for detail to show, but twinkling clouds began to fall. Some passed close enough to the transmitting frame for the forms of bubbles and hints of colour to appear, but the greater impression was of numbers, bubbles in tens of thousands moving steadily down to pass into upper atmosphere and sink towards the ground.

After a while the display shifted, the image of the ships moving to the left-image while the middle and right began to show a mosaic of lower views from just behind some large bubbles leading the descent. As they neared the ground they swerved towards specific targets, larger facilities with gun-emplacements and hangar-doors, baronial palaces, and shuttleports, and from kilometres up stasis-fields again slapped out, mapped in the images by tac-displays as they grasped buildings and personnel in a vice of immobility that strengthened as the large bubbles came to rest just above roofs and towers. Smaller bubbles in vast numbers flowed past them, untroubled by their fields, entering doors and windows that were pulled open or exploded outwards to let them pass.

“Those are tractor-beams clearing them in, Miles?” Tung’s voice was soft, delighted.

“Yes. The small ones will take control of individual stations and people.”

He would have continued, but from across the room came a triumphant ripple of sound as Nicol hammered joy on her dulcimer with all four arms, and Miles whipped his head around to catch the eye of a comm-tech standing behind her, who nodded hastily at him. Other heads were turning as the music continued, settling after that first undisciplined blast into an improvisation that strode and danced. One of Nicol’s lower hands struck a rolling, bassy ostinato that Miles took as corresponding to the capital ships in orbit, while the other lower hand played tumbling arpeggios to the bubbles and their fall. Her upper hands conjured dancing melodramatic accompaniments to unfolding action, becoming more melodically and rhythmically complex as what was visible evolved and individual squads of Jacksonian security-men, then groups of employees, were seen immobilised and shunted together. Echoes of the triumphant opening chords resonated and grew as stationary bubbles holding people began to glow in luminous and delicate shades of the colours of the Celestial Garden, a rainbow spreading with all the bright promise of the original. Shaking his head and pinching himself to lessen the spell, Gregor caught Miles’s eye and crooked a finger; on his lap ImpSec was bolt upright, head cocked attentively to the music as he stared at the frames. Miles slid silently into a crouch between Gregor’s and Laisa’s chairs.

“Music to invade things to, eh?” Gregor’s whisper was almost inaudible. “Miles, you never cease to
amaze. Is this going out live?"

“Oh yes,” he breathed back, “or I’ll have that comm tech’s guts for garters. The pickup’ll only take
music, not voices. And I told ’em to pipe the Cetagandans a private feed.”

“Oh, good. If he hears this Fletchir will want to meet Nicol. And—” He was interrupted by the
sharpest ripple of triumph in the music yet, and as their eyes quartered the screens Miles gave a hiss.

“It’s Vasa Luigi and Lotus.” One of the techs running the broadcast must have known too, for the
small image in the mosaic of scenes blossomed to fill the middle third of the screen with Baron and
Baronne Bharaputra, held fast by a royal blue bubble behind them, being slowly marched down a
grand staircase, presumably in their palace. The stasis-field left their faces free and both were
shouting, but no sound was relayed and there was in any case no-one free or willing to do whatever
they were trying to order. Though a Durona, Lotus’s contorted face bore little resemblance to
Rowan. Miles’s hands clenched with satisfaction. _Sell me to Ryoval, would you, Vasa Luigi?_ His
only regret was that he couldn’t stand before the Baron right now to laugh in his face, but as the
struggling couple reached the foot of the staircase and began to shuffle forwards across a wide hall
one of the high windows exploded outwards and a middle-sized bubble in the soft rose-pink haut Pel
favoured spun lazily down to drift backwards in front of the Bharaputras. Once it had positioned
itself pink faded from the bottom up to be replaced by the brown and silver of a Vorkosigan House
uniform, and atop it the image of his own, evilly grinning face. The Baron’s sculpted features creased
in rage and the stasis-field slapped up a foot, freezing his muscles in their rictus as he and Lotus
continued to be walked forward by the blue bubble behind them, and the Miles-bubble swayed and
spun before them. Nicol’s dizzying music inhibited vocal noise but Miles saw Gregor and Laisa were
transfixed, and felt his own richly amused contentment reflected by almost all present. Commander
Branson still looked too appalled by the whole thing to worry about refinements and Henry Vorvolk
wore the stunned look he favoured but there was an implacability in the satisfied joy filling the room.

A few moments later the Bharaputras shrank to the lower half of the middle third, and above them
another couple in duress appeared—Baron and Baronne Dine, Miles recognised, a minor but still
very nasty gene-house—then others, Hartman, Cosano, Alsuda, Bushry, Holding, and dozens more,
eventually including a baronne-less Georish Stauber, Baron Fell, an arms-dealer better than most and
Rowan’s half-uncle. Miles glanced at her in momentary concern, but her face bore only a serene
smile of pleasure in Nicol’s music, and his attention returned with delight to the screens. Before each
baron and baronne a picture-bubble danced, not always showing Miles. His father’s face was there,
Mark’s, and Taura’s, complete with shining fangs; on one bubble Miles saw, doubtless to some
baron’s complete puzzlement, an image of Harra. Ghem faces he didn’t know also occurred—that
would be an interesting analysts’ job—but most bubbles were white, spun with slow dignity, and
bore stern-faced double-images of Gregor and Fletchir Giaja. He must think of a really good present
for Pel, whose fun this was. As the number of captive barons passed a hundred, individual images
dwindling in a mosaic of complete Alliance victory, strands of Nicol’s music came together in a
finale filled with tonal resolutions and full major chords that melded into one, sustained for a long
moment before quieting away.

Standing in the momentary hush Miles again caught the eye of the comm tech behind Nicol, at
whom Bel was grinning, and the young woman nodded at him as she cut the feed and took a pace
back. Then cheers and applause broke out all round him, and he could make his way past Ekaterin
and his Ma, both with tears in their eyes, to a blushing, beaming Nicol. He flapped a hand for
silence.

“Thank you, Nicol. That was wonderful.”

“Thank _you_, Miles.” She was still blushing. “I don’t know about playing to the Nexus, but this was
very satisfactory for me. I have dreamed of ends for that place, but I never expected to see it happen.”

“Your pleasure was ours. And you have just played to the Nexus. That all went out live.” He grinned at her confusion and Bel’s cackle. “I’ll ask Gregor to instruct our ambassadors to file for property rights on your behalf in their polities. You should do rather well out of it.”

Gregor spoke over his shoulder. “I’ll certainly do that. You have my astonished thanks and congratulations, Nicol. And I’m sure Fletchir will want to meet you.” He broke off and Miles twisted to see Armsman Gerard whispering in his ear. “In fact he’s calling now. Miles, this will still take a while, yes?”

“Oh yes. Hours before they’ll call it fully secured. But Da’ll report before he sends ground-troops—another hour or two for that.”

“Very well.” Gregor turned and raised his voice. “My lords, ladies, gentlemen, and guests, I must ask you to excuse me while I speak to my Celestial Cousin. Things will continue much as they are for some hours.” He turned back to Miles. “Will you and Ekaterin please help Laisa steer folk to lunch by and by? And deal with Branson and Commodore Tung in their official capacities? I’ll be an hour or so, I think.”

“Of course.”

Trailed by Gerard and collecting guards at the door Gregor went, and the room dissolved into quiet conversations. Laisa went with her parents, Ekaterin, his Ma, and Aunt Alys to offer a flustered Nicol thanks and congratulations. He stood with them a while, then began to drift round, checking all was well. When he reached Tung, whom Elli and Vorkalloner—an Admiral before he became a Lord Auditor—had joined in a high-command knot of professional analysis, the old Eurasian looked up at him and gave a lazy salute.

“Once again, Miles, I must thank you sincerely for press-ganging me into this. How do you do it? That was strategic and tactical poetry in motion, not that the Alliance wasn’t given every single card to play. The report will be a gem. I take it your Da is on one of those gentle giants now in orbit?”

“He is.” Miles glanced over at Commander Branson, and waved him to join them. “As official observers for Terra and Beta, let me inform you of the agenda. We’re expecting a preliminary report of local space and all major ground-facilities bubble-secured before troops begin landing in an hour or two. Then we’ll jump ourselves, as will the Cetagandan imperial party, but I’m betting at least a day, probably two, before Viceroy Count Vorkosigan, who commands the Joint Fleet, is willing to call the place secured on the ground, and another to set up an audience square, after which Their Imperial Majesties will go downside to receive the planet from him and address the Nexus. The interim will be filled with imperial receptions given by Their Majesties for one another, and who knows what diplomatic dancing. Your duties end with the imperial broadcasts.” Signalling Tung for silence in the old Dendarii way, he raised eyebrows at Branson. “Any comment on events to date, Commander?”

The Betan smiled cautiously. “None negative, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. This invasion is of course illegal under Betan and most galactic law, but I imagine with the two emperors involved it cannot be so in Bararrayaran or Cetagandan law, and Jacksonians have none. Nor many to mourn them I think; I know I shall not. Have casualties been reported?”

“None I know of, and we expect none—though heart-attacks may claim one or two more obese and physically frail barons, of course. Or seizures of indignation.” Branson smiled wryly. “You will grant us civilised aggressors, then? And careful ones?”
“Certainly, on this evidence. Jovial ones, too, with that extraordinary music and those taunting … face-bubbles.” Branson’s eyes tightened. “But my government will not be the only ones deeply concerned. This bubble-technology threatens all, and as for the wormhole technique …” His voice trailed away as he tried to encompass what that was going to do to ruling sensibilities.

“But my government will not be the only ones deeply concerned. This bubble-technology threatens all, and as for the wormhole technique …” His voice trailed away as he tried to encompass what that was going to do to ruling sensibilities.

“Ah.” Miles moved his hands placatingly. “I must not anticipate my Imperial Master, nor His Imperial Cousin, but I am permitted to assure you that bubble-technology will not be being licensed to anyone, though planetary-governmental applications to borrow Joint-Fleet detachments for highly specific and occasional civil purposes will be considered. The wormhole-technology, however, which for permanent use needs power-plants at least as large as those freighters at both ends, will be licensed to all, as will vastly improved grav-detectors. And though you must of course await my Imperial Master’s Word, you have mine as Vorkosigan that this is strictly a one-off operation. Both imperia have particular reasons to want Jacksonians permanently out of their criminal businesses, not to mention our hair. Most polities will appreciate our motives, especially as there will be a promise in the broadcasts that no further act of annexation is contemplated.” Branson stared at him as if he had turned into a spitting cobra though his face registered relief. Miles smiled enigmatically. “We have become a force majeure you must live with, and serve notice that conspiracy to murder any of us will attract a permanent and comprehensive response, but short of that we shall be frighteningly well behaved, as forces majeures go.”

“Thank you, Lord Auditor.” What was that in Branson’s eyes? “I think I will accept your Word now, and advise my government as strongly as I can to accept it also in every relevant matter. Would it be possible for me to contact the office of my President now?”

“Thank you, Lord Auditor.” What was that in Branson’s eyes? “I think I will accept your Word now, and advise my government as strongly as I can to accept it also in every relevant matter. Would it be possible for me to contact the office of my President now?”

“It would.” Miles regretted not being able to eavesdrop on that exchange. “Other observers and diplomats who will also receive discreet reassurances over the next few hours will ask the same question and get the same answer. But your government is not to make any public statement or permit any leaks whatever concerning the content of the broadcasts ahead of time, or things will go very much the worse for it. Do you accept my word on that also?” Branson nodded, as did Tung with an amused look. “Then ask one of the stewards to guide you to the comm deck, and they will put you in frame-contact with Beta via the Imperial Residence on Barrayar.”

Branson nodded, rose, remembered to bow, and left. Tung looked after him and laughed softly.

“You’ve got slicker at that. My politicos can wait. It’ll do ‘em good. What I’m really beginning to want though, Miles, is a political briefing for myself about this show. From the way they’re using them I can militarily put together wormholes and bubbles, but the good Commander reminds me of the political supernova you have just set off. Everywhere at once. Your reassurances are a good start, but what are you going to do with the Jacksonian population, and how are you going to manage the shock-waves in the Nexus?”

“Can’t tell you yet, Ky, but it’s a good deal for everyone. The imperial broadcasts will not lack content. And my Da may have something to say, as well, in a broadcast afterwards.”

“Nexus-wide?” Tung’s eyebrows were up again, as were Elli’s.

“Yes. I’ve been trying to persuade him to be less shy, you know? Oh, and I should tell you, Elli, that while the Dendarii will be losing that chunk of operations that have been anti-Cetagandan in one or another way, you will be gaining permission to transit Cetagandan space. No shore leave, I’m afraid, but I thought right-of-passage would be useful, if only to visit Marilac more easily when you want to be fêted.”

“Whoosh!” She grinned at him. “I confess I hadn’t really got round to implications, Miles, because I’ve been making up limericks, but that sounds good news. The Jacksonian Barons were sure / they
could show Admiral Naismith the door but the supersize titch’s made ‘em bubble their breeches and bugged ‘em blind by the score.” She smiled with salacious enthusiasm, Tung coughed, Vorkalloner struggled not to laugh. “When Lord Miles was determined to save all his exes from boredom, he gave ‘em a hareem invasion as the ultimate suasion and the fuck’y revenges they crave.” Vorkalloner surrendered against odds. “And I’ve been meaning to ask you for your list of words that rhyme with ‘Ekaterin’. I bet you have one.”

“Elli, dear, as and when you have invaded”—Miles hurriedly added a number—“three planetary systems yourself, I will consider giving you that list. Maybe. If it exists. In the medium term I believe I shall introduce you to Dr Enrique Burgos, another promising rhymer. In the short term, I am surprisingly glad to say that unless Armsman Gerard has developed a strange new tic, lunch is served. Shall we?”

He swept them to Laisa and led them through with her while Elli fell in beside Ekaterin with a grin. The food was splendid but practical in a lunchly way, so progress could be rapid, but before they were half-way through Gregor returned in glittering parade red-and-blues with the imperial seal round his neck, and took his seat beside Laisa at the head of the table. Cordelia, Alys, and Simon were beyond Miles and Ekaterin, and the quietness of Gregor’s voice drew them into a private knot.

“Fletchir does indeed want to meet Nicol, and was like a cat on hot bricks about it. I think we can safely call her performance today aesthetic bullseye number three. Pel was in raptures, his word, and I’m not sure she wasn’t controlling some of those picture-bubbles herself. The ghem, Fletchir says, were also transfixed. They’re already making copies of the feed, vid and soundtrack, and he immediately promised proper payment for Nicol.” He looked at Miles consideringly. “Just how spontaneous was this, Miles?”

“As it gets, truly. Bel never answered its wedding invitation, and I had no idea it’d hooked up with Nicol, though that isn’t a surprise. Bel chose to bring her, on Mark’s say-so, and Nicol chose to bring her dulcimer. But I know what she escaped on Jackson’s Whole and so does she, so I played a long shot and put the techs in place in case.”

“Then the gods are smiling on you, and on this.” Gregor’s voice was less than solemn, but his Ma’s was sunny for all its quietness.

“Oh yes. Why this is grace, nor are we out of it.” Cordelia smiled. “Grace of a very unnerving kind, but isn’t it always? And thus far, at least, bloodless, very pretty grace, however muscular. Miles, dear, you have bettered me there, bless you.” She paused thoughtfully while Miles attended to his plate. “Gregor dear, would you ask Pel if I can have one each of the Miles, Mark, and Aral bubbles. Oh, and a Miles one for Nikki. I expect Harra and Taura would each like one of theirs, too.”

_Huh?_ Miles stared. Gregor shook his head, not in refusal, and nodded with a strange look that Illyan shared before laughing softly.

“I heard you say years ago, Cordelia, that one great benefit of Kou’s and Drou’s nuptials was turning ImpSec into wedding caterers. Ekaterin tells me on Komarr Miles was in the habit of sending us to get carry-out. Now we have an accredited cat and facilitate provision of a superior soundtrack for planetary invasions, while taunting and superfluous war-bubbles are become trophy beach-balls. Despite the difficulties, and without denying you, I shall stick to calling it living with honour, which may also be redeemed.”

The Vicereine grinned at him. “You can argue the toss with Aral. Speaking of whom, Gregor …?”

“About fifteen minutes, he thinks.” Gregor was eating with neat speed. “The younger and frailer among the immobilised need relief soon, but there were a couple of uncharted warrens that have
taken time to bring under control. The first wave of troops are embarked.” He spoke normally, and Alys and Simon made sure the datum passed down the table. Miles, though, leaned across and lowered his voice.

“Is the aesthetic thing a problem, Gregor?”

“No, not at all. But”—he was looking very thoughtful—“I think allowing our allies a free and, um, appreciated hand with the audience square groundside might be … graceful.” Miles saw, and nodded. “Tell me, do you know about Cetas and cats? My metaphor was not accidental. Guess who came to say hello to Fletchir while we were talking, passing unnoticed through several security layers in the process?” Miles rested his head in his hands. “No, no, it’s the gods again. Fletchir took one look, whistled, and summoned from somewhere not one but two … haut cats, whose names are Shuang-Mei and Don Pierrot de Navarre. There’s presumably a joke about Pel in there, but he didn’t explain and I haven’t had time to look it up. Both had a long conversation with ImpSec but found frames a frustrating medium given feline priorities. I told Fletchir ImpSec’s proper surname as a feudatory was Vorkosigan, and he seemed, what? unsurprised while amused. No, more than that. Charmed.”

Ekaterin and Laisa were looking gleeful, but Gregor seemed on more than one level perfectly serious.

“Ghem-Admiral Arvin told me,” Miles said carefully, “that Cetagandan warships carry mascot-animals of various kinds. Cats are common but didn’t seem dominant. He did, however, mention in pride of place a ship that has a tiger. I don’t think even ImpSec could compete.”

“Perhaps not. But he seemed to get on well enough with Shuang-Mei and Don Pierrot, not to mention Fletchir, and is sufficiently like you to have promoted himself straight to the top at an early age. I doubt we could keep him out of the reception here tomorrow, but I think he may have earned himself an invitation to events downside. Fletchir said he always travels with his pair.”

Miles stared, aghast. “Gregor, ImpSec is considerably less predictable than Nicol, and infinitely more likely to, um, wash. Or worse, as I imagine Shuang-Mei to be a queen. You might well get a noisier version of Ivan’s ice-rabbits at our wedding. Live to 800 billion people, adult animals by frame.”

Laisa and Ekaterin had hands over mouths, but Gregor only smiled. “Alys would object, so there’s no danger of that. I think I shall go on trusting gratefully in small presumptions, Miles, and see what happens.” All three of them whisper-chorused the last words with him and his smile twitched.

“Which I must apparently point out is not a license for lèse-majesté.”

“IT’s definitely an encouragement, though, love.”

Laisa was somehow keeping a solemn face; Ekaterin wasn’t, and Miles decided he wouldn’t, especially as Elli’s anapaests were proving contagious. “When ImpSec intruded upon / the talk of two emperors, one / was entirely delighted, / and the other excited / to more feline imperial fun. I promise to keep my limericks clean, but I’m not sure Elli is capable of that.”

Ekaterin seemed to be having difficulty breathing, Gregor’s fork had stopped en route to his mouth, and Laisa failed to stifle an unimperial hoot. Faces looked around and hurriedly away as Ekaterin was heard to say in an impressively severe tone ‘Miles, stop it’. “Too late now,” he murmured, and turned again to his plate; seeing Gregor’s fork set to work again he relaxed until it stopped two forkfuls later, but a glance reassured him this was because Gerard had drifted in to murmur in Gregor’s ear. Suddenly all Emperor, Gregor rose as Gerard clapped his hands sharple twice and stood back.
“You will all be welcome to return shortly for whatever further refreshment you desire, but We have a report to receive. And though by grace this day has so far been bloodless, We have nevertheless exerted Our will by force, so sobriety becomes us all.” Rather more dryly he added, “We shall all also be on live broadcast, so remember please who is witnessing the witnesses.”

Chairs shirred on the carpeting as people rose. While they formed up an alarmed Elli circled swiftly to Miles’s side. “Should I drop out, Miles? If I’m seen it’ll blow the Dendarii connection with Barrayar. The others are retired and have known connections with you already, but it’ll brand me.”

“Up to you, Elli. There are advantages as well.”

“Not for someone with my face and life, Miles.”

“I said your call and meant it, Elli. No broken words today. And no-one will take offence in any event.” He considered a moment. “Guy would agree with you about your life, or rather, your job, which need not be one and the same, even for you. As far as your beauty goes, I plead personal incapacity.”

Her very lovely, rebuilt face screwed up in concentration. “I’ll come to the downside ball, if I’m invited, but I’ll pass on this. I think I’ll regret either decision, but I also think I’ll need a ‘no’ now in negotiations to come, of which there’ll be a lot.”

Miles nodded and hastened to his place in the crocodile behind Gregor, muttering an explanation as they crossed the antechamber. Gregor shrugged. In the further room tables and chairs had been moved to leave a space before the frame. With Gregor and Laisa in the middle they flowed into a double-line, Vorkosigans, Counts, and Lords Auditor closely flanking the Emperor and Empress, others arrayed to either side with expressions ranging from Mark’s and Taura’s deep satisfaction to Lem’s and Harra’s shock at what they had become part of. As soon as all were still the frames’ images shifted from a mosaic of groundside events to a new configuration. A band of mosaic continued at the foot, but the triple division returned, the left third showing themselves, the right third the equivalent Cetagandan scene, with a sumptuously dressed Emperor the haut Fletchir Giaja standing amid an array of haut lady-bubbles, haut lords, and ghem-officers. Lady d’Lhosh was present. The middle third showed his Da in a new uniform, glittering imperial green flecked with red-and-blues to match Gregor’s but piped in iridescent whites to match Giaja, and clearly cut by Celestial Cetagandan tailors in a style that lent beauty to power and motion. Command blazed in him.

He stood on the bridge of the Princess-and-Countess Olivia, his Barrayaran second, Admiral Vorlightly, to one side, Lhosh and Arvin in the Imperial Array to the other. Gravely all bowed twice, first to their own emperor, then identically to the other, at an angle making clear they looked at the same triple image. As they did so they must have noticed ImpSec at Gregor’s side, intent on them with tail neatly curled around him, and on either side of Giaja the most superior cats Miles had ever seen, jet-black and snow-white longhairs with the longest legs and most banner-like tales, even furled. Had more than one mouth quirked?

“Your Imperial Majesties.” His Da sounded wonderful as he rasped Barrayaran gutturals. “I beg leave to report local space and all major installations secured. May I proceed to land ground troops?”

“Please do, my Lord Viceroy.” Giaja’s baritone was melodious as ever, free of obvious irony in Cetagandan. “The curule chair is yours today.” Seamlessly the Viceroy switched languages, though Cetagandan was not a tongue nor its highest form a grammatical mode to reward rumbling.

“Thank you, Celestial Lord.” Aral nodded aside, and after a few seconds another mosaic band appeared across the lower screen, showing drop-shuttles beginning to fall by dozens from warships and in scores from the orbiting troopships. “The first quarter-million troops are on their way. One
hundred and thirty-one Barons and two hundred and sixty-four Baronnes are in custody, as well as
some two thousand baronial blood-kin and about fifteen thousand senior personnel. We estimate four
million persons and an unknown number of genetic creations remain subject to blanket stasis, but this
number will fall rapidly as troops land. No fatalities have been observed or reported. There are some
minor injuries and medical conditions.” His eyes moved briefly to Nicol, then back through Gregor
to Giaja. “It was a surprisingly melodic and picturesque event.”

“We thank you, Admiral Count Vorkosigan.” Giaja sounded deadly serious and spoke Barrayaran.
“As We thank Madame Nicol. Our economy of elegance in this is a lesson for all.”

As he named her Giaja nodded in Nicol’s direction, but the last word hummed out to the wider
Audience of billions. Aral inclined his head, and Gregor made a curious, effective gesture evoking
Both blessing and caress before speaking in Barrayaran.

“We thank you also, my Lord Viceroy-and-Admiral, as all should.” He switched to Cetagandan.
“Please keep Us closely informed of any difficulties with your deployment. Contrary to myth,
today’s bloodlessness has been most refreshing.”

“Indeed, We join with Our Imperial Cousin in commending your exact obedience to Our command.
We also congratulate Admiral Vorightly.”

“As We commend Admirals Lhosh and Arvin. Please carry on, my Lord Viceroy.”

Emperors nodded, admirals bowed, and cats smiled at one another before the frames reverted to
Showing multiple images of drop-shuttles arcing downwards and, after a few moments, coming in to
Shuttleports, whatever roads or squares were wide enough, and any other convenient open space.
Within seconds hatches popped, ramps extended, and columns of troops began to emerge in double-
time, form into squads, and radiate outwards while shuttles took off to allow the next landing. From
Barrayaran warships came Marine and Ranger battalions, from Cetagandan ones Imperial Guards and
ghem-marines, and from troopships regular Imperial and ghem-forces in tens of thousands. Shuttles
in the second wave carried tech-groups and engineers, and in the third cargo, becoming hives of
Activity as field-equipment was unloaded and lightflyers began to provide air cover for disseminating
troops. Everyone was caught for a while by the hypnotic precision and repetition, but as ground-
scurry spread and smooth operational success was clear Gregor took himself back to his meal, Laisa
followed, and the party broke into individual gatherings. Still thinking of food himself, Miles began
to head that way but found himself steered by a determined Kareen Koudelka to an alcove where
Mark sat with Taura and the Csuriks.

“Miles.” Mark was back to his usual sardonic look. “We are forming a Bewildered Appreciation
Committee for Lord Auditor Vorkosigan’s Activities. The acronym is in your honour.”

Miles thought about this. “Baclava?”

“Yes. Too many layers, lots of honey, and altogether nuts.” Miles grinned; Mark didn’t. “More to the
Point we each have a question for you. I get to go first. What is going to happen to the slaves and
Sers?”

“Ah, that.” Miles lowered his voice and they drew round, Taura’s eyes as concerned as Mark’s. He
Should have foreseen this and made a swift decision. “You mustn’t tell anyone until the Imperial
Broadcasts, but they’ll all be freed, of course, and will have choice of full subject rights and duties in
Either imperium, or delivery with family, personal goods, and some cash anywhere they want to go
That’ll take them. It’s hard to be precise without numbers, but no-one will be made or left to suffer
Alone save those convicted under Barrayaran or Cetagandan law—Barons and Baronnes mostly, but
Some among their blood-kin, security forces, and contract employees.”
Mark visibly relaxed as Miles spoke, Kareen with him. “Thank you, brother. That is generous. My supplementary question is where the devil those picture-bubbles came from.”

“How the devil, whom Gregor will ask for souvenirs.”

“Very good.” Mark grimaced. “And I can hardly deny this is a better raid on the clone-crèche than I managed. If I weren’t so pleased I would be galled.”

Miles appreciated that but Kareen poked Mark in remonstrance and glanced at Taura, then spoke herself. “My question doesn’t matter as much, Miles, though I shall be delighted to have one of those bubbles. They were fun. But I was wondering if you knew why Ivan is being so sour. He positively hissed at Mark and I for no reason at all.”

“Were you discussing wedding-plans, by chance?” Mark and Kareen stared and nodded. “You should ask Simon, but as well as blaming me for, um, disrupting his life with all this, I understand he has received several proposals of marriage from ghem-women on Eta Ceta, and is endeavouring to choose between his happy bachelor state and interimperial polygamy. Next?”

Lem and Harra looked puzzled, not knowing Ivan, but both Mark and Kareen went an interesting colour with strangled looks, and Taura, who had met Ivan, grinned. Then her smile faded.

“My question was the same as Mark’s, really. I just want to go help with the gene-lab crèches. I remember how scared I was most of the time, and how little I understood about anything when you rescued me.”

“I’ll tell them to let you onto the comm deck to see what’s happening there, and if there’s anything you don’t like, buzz them. A suggestion from anyone aboard this ship will carry weight, and you can call me if there’s need.” Her fangs flashed relief and pleasure. “Did you also have questions, Harra, Lem?”

Both Csuriks were contemplating him with small smiles and reserved looks. Harra’s smile widened at his enquiry. “Only a million, my Lord. Sergeant Taura and Lord Mark have been telling us about these Jacksonians and what they do. Or did. I don’t understand how it all connects with Silvy Vale but I don’t have to.” She laughed to herself. “You know, when I came to Vorkosigan Surleau it was the farthest I’d ever been from Silvy Vale. Then when I got back from Hassadar I thought myself very well-travelled. Lem had his trip to Vorbarr Sultana last year for the treaty signing, and I’d hoped to see the capital one day, and that beautiful garden.” She gestured around. “And here we are among the stars as the Emperor’s own guests. It’s amazing, but it’s not like home.”

For Harra only the whole truth would do. Always. Miles leaned forward to take her hands. “That first morning at Vorkosigan Surleau, Harra, I didn’t want to be troubled with you. I was twenty, a new-fledged Ensign, and my head was in the stars. There’s no excuse, but I think you’ll understand a lot of my teenage dreams were about getting away from Barrayaran attitudes to my deformities.” She blinked at his rare self-description. “And I’d already seen the star-lanes, so I knew what was out here. I remember I was thinking about a red lightflyer I wanted as a graduation present. You know you and Raina changed all that for me.” Her hands tightened on his and he squeezed back. “You made me focus on my true responsibilities to you and Raina, and to my Da and the District. To Barrayar and Barrayaran.” He took a deep breath. “But for me the life that was stolen from Raina, the possibilities she should have enjoyed, wasn’t just a life in Silvy Vale. It was a destiny that might have taken her to the stars. That’s what your Ma denied her, with everything else. And here on Jackson’s Whole many have been similarly denied their futures—human children and creations who are born and die as disposable slaves, made for spare parts or sold at whim, or just flushed away as errors. Now all that stops, and among your children’s possible destinies are postings here, with the Joint Fleet serving a better Nexus, just as much as good lives in a better Silvy Vale.”
Had he helped? She was shaking her head, not, he thought, in denial or refutation. “How can you see so much? I can’t take in the scale. Or the reality of this invasion with joyful music and those pictures of you.”

“Well, I’ve never been on an invasion before,” he said cautiously, “but I don’t think they’re usually like this. And you and Lem, as much as the observers from every District, witness for all Barrayar that we behave with grace and honour before a Nexus that respects as well as fears us.” He risked a smile. “If Taura does decide to be our postwoman I hope your task of introducing her to the mountains has just become rather easier. Pretty much everyone will have seen you both with Gregor.” Her smile turned wryer at that thought. “Your pupils will be thrilled.”

“I’m sure they will, my Lord. I’ll try to take the rest in, but you’re making my head burst.”

“That happens with Miles.” Taura was smiling at them both. “But it’s always better afterwards.”

The jump-klaxon sounded, and Miles let go of Harra’s hands and sat back until the wave of disorientation had come and gone. Screens cleared to show the fleet assembled below them, and gliding into pair-position with them a slightly smaller but astonishing ship that flared golden wherever sunlight glanced from it and had an unusual, swept-back look and fiercely elegant design. Giaja’s yacht drew whistles from those still watching, as around both imperial ships support vessels slid into a double-globe of protective formations.

“I must go.” He stood. “But please, don’t forget to enjoy yourselves, and ask stewards for anything you want. It’s now officially imperial reception time until the landing’s complete. Oh, and Lady Alys has assigned you all cabins, where you’ll find, um, additional wardrobe items for the big bashes.” He pointed to Giaja’s golden ship. “He’ll come here first, then we go there, assuming there’s room, then we all go downside. In two rather nice drop-shuttles, much quieter and far better appointed than the ones soldiers are used to, which Gregor, incidentally, has named the Sergeant Taura and Lord Mark Vorkosigan.” Appreciating his own incidentally, for once actually meaning something, he grinned at three gaping faces, bowed to Lem and Harra, and went in search of Ekaterin.
Four days later, waiting to board the Lord Mark Vorkosigan in yet another astonishingly designed, elegantly cut, and confidence-bestowing dress that Lady Alys had produced, apparently at Gregor’s cost, Helen Vorthys fingered her Imperial Silver Star and wondered how much more history she could safely absorb. Colleagues in the nascent Vorbarra Institute were aboard liners with the counts, ghem-lords, ambassadors, and political observers, and she badly wanted their perspectives to supplement her own, which she thought had probably been imperially skewed. Just slightly. She also felt distracted by side-play, not only in the sumptuous receptions each emperor had thrown for the other, but in individual preoccupations and densities of people she was beginning to know and like, as well as respect. Harra and Lem Csurik were altogether a remarkable couple (and she should clearly get a graduate student into Silvy Vale as soon as might be) but made her feel she could no longer see events from outside. Lord Mark, conversely, however saturnine and delightful to see with Kareen, like Taura made her feel she lacked understanding of what Jackson’s Whole had truly been, the horrors and moral nullities lurking behind such handy labels as genetic entrepôt and clone merchants.

A searing glimpse of those horrors had unexpectedly been afforded her late on the evening of the invasion, when she had at last dragged herself away from images of Imperial and ghem troops releasing bewildered Jacksonians from stasis to process them, of barons and baronnes slowly assembled by bubbles that did indeed march them through their own streets. The Nexus-wide broadcast continued, and while people must sleep sometime they seemed to be leaving holovids on, and the estimated audience was hovering around 750 billion—a historical event to ponder even had the content of the broadcast been drying paint, but that dimension would have to wait. Finding Miles and Ekaterin on their own in a morning-room attached to the guest accommodation area, she had propelled them into a corner and clarified basic matters about his colourful guests and their reasons for being invited. Fascinating. Did Miles know how much he revealed of his deeper motives in his patent knight errantry and forcible, hyperextended rescues of women in distress? Looking at Ekaterin’s smile she thought he did and, arraying in her mind Elena Bothari-Jesek, Elli Quinn, Taura, and Rowan Durona, with Harra Csurik and the haut Rian Degtiar, began to think better of her niece’s strongly romantic-and-botanical theory of Vorkosiganity at large and its Milesian variant in particular. Conversation was drifting to interesting things Ekaterin had done and seen on honeymoon —Helen especially wanted to hear about Marilac—when a bustle heralded the arrival of Gregor trailed by an alarmed Laisa, Cordelia, and a string of sweating guards.

Miles had told Helen once that Gregor did everything quietly, even rage, but his quiet rage could fill a room like sea-water, palpable pressure making breathing difficult. Helen didn’t know if this was rage exactly, but even with her back to the door she felt weight envelop her, and as Miles and Ekaterin rose turned to see Gregor standing there, face dead white, eyes burning. Cordelia, coming to a halt behind him, was trying to mouth something to Miles, but he didn’t seem to need it. He flicked his hands, and Cordelia swung to sweep the guards back out and close the door. By the time she turned again Miles had reached Gregor and enfolded him in a hug, one arm summoning Laisa and Cordelia to join them, then Ekaterin, holding Gregor close in a circle of human family warmth. Helen sat frozen with her mind whirling until after what seemed an eternity Miles pulled Gregor over to a seat and squatted in front of him, still holding his foster-brother’s hands.
“What did they find?” Gregor said nothing; unnervingly, Helen saw tears in his eyes. “The Bharaputras’ deep labs?”

“Yes.” Gregor’s voice was a cracked whisper. “You knew?”

Miles grimaced. “I could only imagine details but I knew what there must be, somewhere. So did Pel. And Rian.” He peered closely at Gregor and spoke intimately, though everyone could hear him. “I know you, brother. And just now you are bitterly hating yourself and the world because you felt bilious horror at Bharaputra’s and Ryoval’s monsters, as well as overwhelming rage for them and a deal of personal relief.” Behind Gregor Helen saw Cordelia’s and Laisa’s mouths form Os of understanding, but Miles didn’t seem inclined to a Betan psychotherapeutic route. “Two things, Gregor dear. Don’t be silly. Of course you did. Anyone sane would. Even I do.” Helen could detect no irony in his voice, and part of her brain seized as he continued. “And don’t you dare.” Miles’s voice hit Gregor like a slap. “Mark taught me this. Remember the man who made worse than you’ve just seen held Mark for five days we cannot imagine. Then Mark killed him, and has never allowed any of us to know or pity what he somehow endured, because free of our pity, which is shame in disguise, his victory is complete and his healing possible. So shall yours be, and I will not let you erode it from within.”

As Miles spoke colour came back to Gregor’s face and focus to his eyes. A hand sought Laisa’s as she knelt beside him. Miles gave them a moment, exchanging a glance with his mother and a briefer one with Ekaterin; when his gaze rested on Helen she felt an assessment at once passionate and distantly analytical before he turned back to Gregor and Laisa, speaking intimately again, not caring if Helen heard.

“Some combat wisdom you might not have been able to learn from Cavilo, brother, sister.” Helen, wondering who in the Nexus Cavilo might be, saw Laisa’s and Cordelia’s glances flick sharply at Miles. “Lose the horrors in a warm body, soon. If you don’t you’ll be trying to lose them in the bottle or worse before the week’s out.” He gave them another few seconds and stood, hauling Gregor up. “What’s happening with the lab?”

Gregor swallowed. “The Star Crèche are sending a team down to … do what they can.”

“And what they must, yes. So leave it to them, for now.” Miles guided Gregor and Laisa towards the door Cordelia opened; guards snapped to attention in the corridor. She left briefly, but returned to collar Miles and Ekaterin for what Helen suspected, as she made her way to her own cabin, would qualify as a debriefing. Uninterested in revelations of the imperial bedroom, if not of the imperial mind, she had glimpsed with force a mental world known to her only in theory, save perhaps in those hours as a prisoner on the Komarran jump-station; and thinking of that experience and her own reactions to it she went in search of Georg.

The other distraction, for a putative biographer of Miles, was Lord Ivan, and in his case one puzzle had replaced another. In previous encounters Helen had found Ivan a pleasant, handsome, and amusing if self-centred high Vor lordling, and slowly came to understand his affable idiot strategy as strategy—one she had to admit made sense if you were, while Miles, Mark, and Gregor were childless, third in line to the Vorkosigan countship, and via Aral and Miles arguably third in line to the imperial throne. What Major—or probably Colonel—Lord Vorpatril would do when the present spate of Vorbarra and Vorkosigan babies had distanced him from these grim possibilities she looked forward to finding out, and his unexpectedly loutish ill-humour had been the first puzzle. Then yesterday, as she was talking with Georg, Miles, and Cordelia about Nicol’s wonderful music, which the ship’s captain by popular demand and imperial permission was playing twice a day over the comm, Ivan passed them with something close to a sneer and she had seen Cordelia’s face crease in concern. Waiting until he was a dozen paces past Miles abruptly excused himself and shot after his
cousin. Catching up he had done something that brought Ivan to one knee with a gasp as Miles gripped his shoulders and began an intense whisper. What exactly he said Helen had no idea, but it sent Ivan by turns a dull red, bone white, and a deeper red, interspersed with glances at Cordelia from lowered eyes. When Miles let him go he had risen, limped back to them, made a strangled apology, mostly to Cordelia, and departed the way he had come. Rejoining them Miles smiled blandly and said nothing, despite a pair of sharply raised maternal eyebrows, but since then Ivan had seemed more himself, as if the mask of polite cheer Miles forced on him was having a genuine effect.

Then there had been the imperial receptions. The more fascinating for her had in most ways been the visit to Giaja’s ship with its extraordinary combinations of luxury and austerity, hundreds of flowering plants in exquisite ceramic pots with the subtlest curves and monochrome glazes, and gliding among them intensely disturbing Ba servitors; the circulation of what seemed dozens of haut lady-bubbles in festive colours, and vocal melodies that exquisitely engineered voices floated through a bubble of conversation; the reserved pride and countervailing, intense curiosity about the Barrayarans of the haut; the food, oh my, the food, course after course following rich, haunting choral music sung by a ghem-choir who with Giaja’s permission dedicated their performance to a stunned Nicol; the presence of a cheerful Jack Chandler, just returned from what she realised must have been work on the wormholes and evidently forgiven by the Cetagandans; and the unexpectedly few military ghem present, closely attentive to Miles, markedly deferential to Ekaterin, and including Vanos Kariam in delightful person.

Gregor’s reception had been the more dramatic, however, from the moment Giaja had swept out of the lift from the docking-hold to clasp Gregor’s hands for a long minute in the antechamber while Rian’s and three other bubbles waited behind him with the rest of his party and the emperors assessed one another in the flesh. Rian and the other haut women—Pel and two planetary consorts new to Helen—remained embubbled, though conversing readily, until food was served and the imperial parties withdrew to a private dining-chamber. Rather to her surprise Helen and Georg were invited to this, with other original summiteers including Miles and Ekaterin, Lady Alys and Simon Illyan, and Cordelia and Aral, though not Chandler, and on the Cetagandan side a tense Admiral Lhosh with his haut lady, planetary governors attached to the additional consorts, and a very relaxed Dag Benin.

Entering the room beside Georg she was taken entirely aback to hear Giaja’s beautiful voice ask Gregor where ImpSec was, and chuckle at being told he was being kept out of the kitchens by two Armsmen equipped with fish and stunners. When Giaja asked for him to be summoned Helen belatedly realised the haut emperor meant Miles’s cat, though how he knew of the animal was a mystery that grew when ImpSec arrived in Armsman Gerard’s arms, greeted Giaja with a pleased mmrrt and a firm push of head into hand, then leaped to the floor and made a direct line for Rian’s bubble, uttering a loud miaow. As if on feline command the bubble snapped off, revealing not only haut Rian but also, perched on the arms of her float-chair, the magnificent, long-haired black and white cats Helen had seen flanking Giaja when Aral had reported local space secured. Both leaped down, tails bannering behind them, and simultaneously went nose-to-nose with Rian’s bubble, uttering a loud miaow. As if on feline command the bubble snapped off, revealing not only haut Rian but also, perched on the arms of her float-chair, the magnificent, long-haired black and white cats Helen had seen flanking Giaja when Aral had reported local space secured. Both leaped down, tails bannering behind them, and simultaneously went nose-to-nose with ImpSec, shorter and stockier, a triple cat-greeting of a kind Helen had never seen and that seemed to go on for a long time. The Barrayarans were distracted by Rian and the other haut consorts, whose bubbles also disappeared—even more mind-numbingly beautiful in the flesh than they had been by frame, and all, despite the presence of Lhosh and Benin, in their open, emotive mode—but Helen was watching the emperors, and they were watching the cats with satisfied smiles. Miles, drifting up behind her, murmured that the white tom was Don Pierrot de Navarre, the black queen Shuang-Mei, and both names a puzzle neither the human nor feline ImpSec had yet been able to solve, adding that as she might remember him remarking at the summit force-bubbles really were purrfect for covert ops. Glaring at his grin she was overtaken by a sense of absurdity that expanded while becoming more serious when he added that all three imperial familiars were invited to the ceremonies downside.
The great cat conundrum continued throughout the meal as the animals, between occasional stretches to imperial arms for portions of their own, continued what seemed for all the world an intense, silent triologue. It was nevertheless shunted aside in Helen’s mind by observing both emperors clearly enjoying themselves and talking mostly with Aral and Cordelia, and both empresses, on whom Helen, remembering the spinning implications of Miles’s conversation the night she and Georg sprang Vanos Kariam on him, kept a special eye. Warm to one another from the first, Helen rapidly realised from Laisa’s and Rian’s conversation that what had happened between them was not a haut gift but an exchange—Laisa’s razor-sharp business acumen and understanding of markets in return for Rian’s genetic knowledge and abilities. It was in effect reciprocal consultancy, she realised, Laisa hired by the Star Créche and Rian by House Vorbarra, mutual need and convenience forming the basis of what appeared genuine liking. As the meal wore on Helen also thought a shared gratitude to Miles, profound but short of love and with sharply mixed feelings, was also at constructive work, and found herself reflecting that the more dangerous and celebrated knights errant in literature were those who chivalrously—or otherwise—fell in love with queens, and that if one was Miles’s size and shape to take them as models was at once cunning and self-confident to an insane degree. Then again, as this meal was proving over and above his remarkable party of guests, the man had made it all work, for everyone.

Other conversations clamoured for attention, especially the delicate fencing-match between Illyan and Benin, enjoyed on both sides, and the astonishing discussion of male genetics and protocol conducted by Alys and Pel, who also seemed to have become friends. But her memory of both was fragmentary, overlaid by what happened after the emperors emerged back into the larger party, cats padding neatly between them. That Giaja and Degtiar had both known who Harra and Lem CsuriK were, presumably from haut Palma, and went out of their way to greet them and ask after their child-to-be, was as surprising to Helen as to the CsuriKs, though Miles had a satisfied look and Harra rose to the occasion with vivid thanks and natural dignity. But Helen and Georg then found themselves recruited as a barrier of sorts, helping to shield Giaja, Degtiar, and Benin within a loose circle while Miles and Ekaterin brought Dendarii guests, from a polite but wary Elli Quinn to a stunned Ky Tung and a delightfully if alarmingly beaming Taura. The main purpose seemed a brisk, business-like exchange between Benin and Quinn about fleet-transit of Cetagandan space, Giaja and Degtiar benignly looking on, and then a much more surprising exchange about the Dagoola IV prison-break. After some exact questions from Benin and Giaja, answered at Miles’s nod with equal precision by Elli, Elena, and Ky, Giaja spoke with those stone depths of irony in his gorgeous voice.

“Alas, We can hardly reward sometime enemies for defeating Us, but you have Our sincere admiration for your feat. And at need, Admiral Quinn, you may call on Our ships for any non-military assistance. General Benin will give you the necessary codes.” When Miles’s eyebrows as well as Quinn’s jerked upwards Giaja smiled faintly and spoke to Miles directly, dropping his imperial plurals. “I trust that will help you rest content, Lord Vorkosigan, when I tell you a certain artfully edited holovid about Dagoola IV is in wider circulation than hitherto. I understand your grimace, but you understand, I believe, the value among the ghem that the surprising truth about Dagoola can have. What you perhaps are commendably inhibited from understanding, in as much as you are inhibited about anything, is its value among the haut, to whom the holovid, attested as truthful, is in itself a compelling reason to honour you even had pursuit of war with Barrayar otherwise been a priority.”

At the end of this twisting encomium Miles looked as surprised as Helen had ever seen him, though Gregor was grinning, and she saw both Pel and Benin slip tiny data-discs to Alys and Illyan; Rian’s hand also rested a moment in Elli Quinn’s as she took her leave with Giaja a moment later. Soon after that the Cetagandans left, and cautious application (after a little thought) to Elli produced a late-night viewing-session with Georg, both Tungs, and other Dendarii in the sitting-room of Elli’s suite. During the holovid sometimes raucous commentary from those involved helped her to piece together
what had happened—though if you have it all straight in one viewing it’s a miracle—and kept her from shrieking; afterwards, trying to get her mind around what Miles and the Dendarii had in cold reality done, she had not known whether to laugh or weep at his insane courage and bravura improvisation, and did both. Now, breaking her thoughts, a politely muted klaxon sounded, the line she and Georg were in began to move forwards into the pleasant surroundings and silver-trimmed brown décor of the Lord Mark Vorkosigan, and the curtain rose on the final act.

* * * * *

From outside, walking with Georg in the slightly low gravity of Jackson’s Whole and realising the hem of her dress had been subtly weighted for good reason, Helen could see only the great curving wall of an enormous force-dome, but even the approach felt Cetagandan. A covered, richly tiled walkway wound broadly between arrayed plants screening buildings, leading to a gate manned by ImpSec and Imperial Guards in contrasting green and red uniforms. As they passed into the dome Helen saw it was generated over a large, open square before a handsome, rather brooding building, presumably a baronial palace, in front of which stood an enormous frame. On two sides tiered seating was already filled with people arrayed in witness. On the fourth side was what at first looked like a transplanted fragment of the Celestial Garden with a host of decorative Barrayaran, Cetagandan, and Terran plants; then she saw in its central space three slightly raised areas, two behind and one before, and realised this was where the emperors and Aral would stand. There seemed to be a further subtly marked place to one side. Vorbarra Armsmen guided her and Georg to seats in the tiers nearest the imperial podium, beside the block of Lords Auditor and Counts who had come in person—among them Dono Vorrutyer, René Vorbretten, and Vorinnis for the Progressives as well as old Vorhalas, Vorkalloner, and Vormoncrief for the Conservatives, and the lightweight Vorfolse with Falco Vorpatril, snowy mane gleaming, for the Independents. Faces turned to the arriving party with murmurs of curiosity at towering Taura, epicene Bel, four-armed Nicol in her personal floater, and the grey Dendarii uniforms that even Elli Quinn, resigned to fame, was wearing. Beyond the counts were chosen observers from districts of Barrayar and Sergyar and sectors of Komarr—more than a hundred ordinary couples in painfully best dress looking astounded, excited, nervous, and proud, with supernumaries among them. She saw Sergeant Barnev and Mia Maz Vorb’yev, as well as institute colleagues and faces she recognised from the multi-generationally bereaved veterans at the treaty-signing; then there were the diplomats, row on row.

In the opposite tiers were yet more ambassadors accredited to Eta Ceta and observers brought by the Cetagandans; diplomatic suits were soberly dull beside scores of ghem showing what must be every clan-design there was and almost as many uniforms, the women striking and bejewelled with long hair elaborately wound on their heads. There was a solid block of tall haut men, glittering in festive colours. Closest to the podium she could see a Cetagandan party equivalent to her own being seated, including planetary governors, Benin with two ghem she didn’t recognise in Imperial Array, Lhosh in his blue-and-yellow with his wife, Vanos Kariam behind his awful orange-and-green rosette, and four lady-bubbles swirling with colour. Outside it was cloudy, the overcast through which they had descended thick, but under the dome all was sunlit, yellow rays without visible origin falling at a morning slant across faces, bubbles, and foliage to carpet the great flagstones of the square with traceries and curves of shadow. There was also a faint, pleasant breeze that rippled plants and filmier outermost layers of haut clothing. As the last bubble, presumably Rian’s, glided into foremost position Helen saw below her Lord Mark enter with Kareen, set face covering nervousness, then Miles with Ekaterin, Cordelia, and Laisa. As they reached their places silence fell. A soft chime and flickering light in the upper bar of the frame signalled the broadcast had begun, and with part of her mind Helen tried again to assess the simultaneity that would be central to any account of this event, but right now she was at its heart, not watching remotely, and the moment more compelling than its future record.
A single note sounded, low and brassy, and two uniformed figures walked to centre-stage, Armsman Gerard in full black Vorbarra livery and a Ba servitor in black uniform without any apparent emblems. Each announced their Imperial Masters with a full list of titles in his or its language, and as they finished everyone save the occupants of the haut bubbles and, interestingly, Laisa, rose to their feet. As Gerard and the Ba withdrew the wall at the rear of the podium seemed to dissolve for a moment and the emperors were there, red-and-blue and iridescent white, walking evenly forward to the raised spots while all bowed or curtsied and came straight again. Between them, unannounced, walked ImpSec, Shuang-Mei, and Don Pierrot de Navarre, stepping fluidly in unison with one another and the emperors as if their exit from the dinner aboard the Lady Alys Vorpatril had been a rehearsal. A ripple ran through the audience but both emperors and all three cats stared straight out for a moment, waiting for stillness, before Giaja turned his head to where Aral now stood to one side of them—that was what the extra place was for—and spoke in Barrayaran.

“My Lord Viceroy-and-Admiral Vorkosigan.”

Aral inclined his head. “Your Imperial Majesties.” His right arm lifted slightly, gesturing all to look, then curved in summons, and Helen swivelled her head to see emerging from the palace and passing under the frame into the square a column of captive barons and baronnes. The taunting face-bubbles no longer preceded them, but behind each couple coloured captor-bubbles floated, shoving them forward step by step, dishevelled and dirty, ragged mouthed, in a grotesquely lurching shuffle. None could even struggle, though a few were clearly being propelled while others had surrendered to the inevitable and seemed to be walking on their own within narrow, permitted parameters. Helen had never seen anything remotely like it, yet like her first exposure to haut women it summoned vague memories of myths or bad dreams involving sorcery, as if barons and baronnes were a host of corpses raised from their graves by Baba Yaga to serve her need. In the frame-broadcast, she realised, the column must be emerging remorselessly from the bottom of the image, protruding slowly into the square like a discoloured tongue.

The captive Jacksonians were led by a stout, sweating man, a freer walker she recognised from Taura’s comments during the invasion as the arms- but not gene-dealing Baron Fell, followed by the vile Bharaputras, wholly propelled by tractor-beam. As processing bodies entered between the tiers and approached the podium where two emperors, three cats, and Aral watched with stony faces, Fell came straight on but the Bharaputras were angled to come up beside him when he halted almost level with Helen. Others were pushed right and left and behind the front rank the rest were arrayed in a square, columns tightly packed but ranks separated by ten feet, until the last shambling pair reached their place in the rear corner and halted, swaying. Then without any word or sign Helen saw every last Jacksonian magnate silently dropped jarringly to his or her knees, raised both arms, and fell prostrate, faces barely saved from the brunt of their fall by hands smacking painfully onto stone. Behind them bubbles sank and brightened in colour for a second before dimming to subdued earth-shades. Georg sighed softly to himself with professional relief, and around her Helen felt intense satisfaction she realised she shared to a surprising degree. The image of Gregor’s white face and burning eyes came to her as the symbol of what she knew these fallen men and women to have done and condoned.

Gravely Aral walked to the spot before the emperors, turned to face them—and so, Helen realised, turned his back not only on the fallen barons but on more than eight hundred billion viewers—and bowed twice. As when she saw him at Ekaterin’s graduation vitality glowed in his fluid, prowling movement, strangely like the cats’ and reminding Helen sharply of how he had been when he first seized the Barrayaran’s loyalty and imagination nearly forty years ago at Komarr. He spoke in Cetagandan.

“I beg leave to report that Your Imperial Commands have been obeyed, without loss of a single life. I now deliver into Your Imperial Hands the planet of Jackson’s Whole with its criminal plutocrats and
their possessions, including all who have been their slaves and serfs.” He bowed briefly, and stood waiting.

Gregor spoke, also in Cetagandan. “My Lord Viceroy-and-Admiral, you have Our admiring thanks for a necessary task most mercifully, efficiently, and elegantly performed.” Giaja’s hawk face nodded sharply and all three cats turned benign gazes on Aral before returning to supercilious inspection of the prostrate barons. “Please await now Our further pleasure.”

Aral bowed again and returned to the side-position, giving the barons not a single glance. Both emperors stared out again for a moment, directly into the frames, before Giaja began, this time in a high Cetagandan Helen was sure carried for haut and ghem more nuance than she could discern, but made hair bristle on her neck in its edged tones and implacable cadences. The cats knew it too, especially Shuang-Mei and Don Pierrot, who glowered outward as their Master spoke, ImpSec lending bare-fanged support as new imperial plurals hovered beautifully.

“Our subjects. Guests. Outlanders who watch. In answer to the crimes and abominations of its erstwhile owners this planet is hereby annexed jointly by Us. Our peace is a peace for the Nexus, as for Ourselves and Our own; though We have done so bloodlessly We do not break it lightly. And while this planet shall serve Our convenience, We do not and will not act for territory. We act because the merchants of this place, beyond personal indulgences of vileness, repeatedly aided for gain or themselves undertook murder of Barrayarans and Cetagandans, haut and ghem, Vor and common. Now these merchants pay, and many among them will stand trial in Our courts for their lives.”

Gregor took over in Barrayaran, and it seemed the emperors were playing a form of stern parent, forgiving parent. “All who have conspired against Us, all who have done murder or sold bioweapons, will face Our justice, but We know many here are blameless, born into gene-slavery or technical serfdom. All living beings on this planet are hereby freed from any such condition. They may choose to become Barrayaran or Cetagandan subjects with all attendant rights, privileges, and duties, or be taken with family dependents and personal possessions to any polity they desire that will promise Us honourably to accept them as subjects or citizens. Those who wish to remain here will be accommodated.”

Diplomats sat straight with calculating looks at imperial liberality. There were no suddenly freed and empowered Jacksonian slaves and serfs present to cheer, though Helen knew the ceremony was being broadcast on-planet as well as off, and many would hear. Giaja was still being remorseless though his voice softened, and his supremely elegant cats were more relaxed, sitting neatly together with ImpSec.

“Yet this planet will also become the headquarters for Our joint fleet, and nothing will remain of what it has been. In Our treaty We claim substantial new volumes and many systems made practicable by Our new technologies. We understand many will desire access to these volumes for trade and other exchange, and as Joint-Fleet headquarters this planet will serve as Our place of embassy in those matters, whence all polities accredited at Our courts may send new ambassadors.”

Diplomats sat straighter. Plum business, thought Helen, but allowed their goodwill and serious purpose too.

“Embassies will be jointly received, but Barrayar will establish here a technical institute to which applications for licensing new frame, nanoforge, and wormhole technologies may be addressed. Bubble technology will not be licensed.”

Diplomats sat straighter yet, if that were possible. The technical institute was a new proposition, and Giaja leaned into the silence Gregor wrought. “Cetaganda correspondingly will establish a genetic
institute, where We will license to Our peaceful friends a human antigeriatric package very much safer and more effective than the murderous clone-transplant technologies We now utterly suppress.”

Rigid spines shivered. As Miles had, the diplomats immediately understood this as news to dwarf even invasion, as well as superb political finesse. The loathed if envied privilege of an amoral financial elite was at a stroke replaced by virtuous possibility for all, and for that almost everyone hearing this would have sold the Jacksonians downriver in a second. Throughout the audience heads turned to stare at one another, but the emperors were not done and Gregor’s voice snapped those heads round to face them again.

“One thing more. We take from this planet the name of opprobrium it has borne, and in honour of Our Alliance and its conqueror, Our faithful feudatory, We name it Aralyar Ceta.” Save Giaja’s fierce nod stillness was absolute, haut and ghem as transfixed as Barrayarans, though Helen saw some Counts’ eyes bulge dangerously. “Viceroy-and-Admiral Count Vorkosigan, will you address your debtors?”

“I will, Sire.”

Aral moved forward to the third position in front of the emperors, bowed, and turned his back to them, facing outward to the audience and the Nexus. Helen wasn’t sure if Cordelia’s hand was before her mouth at the immense force Aral projected, to which she had been so passionately drawn all those years ago, or because as he turned ImpSec stood and moved smoothly forward to sit by his leg, neither seeming to expect nor receiving notice. Whatever cellular effect had lessened the visibility of Aral’s scar had smoothed his appearance, reducing lines but not the impression of age; his face remained massive, potentially brutal in the heavyset jaw and power he exuded were it not for the eyes, alive with intelligence and humour as well as driving will. Helen hoped the broadcast was offering a close-up so those eyes could be seen, and half-remembered Miles saying that would be so. Without speaking Aral let his gaze move slowly around the square, ending with his own family, then rake across the prostrate Jacksonians. His right hand moved sharply outward, fingers straightening in scornful dismissal, and as one prone bodies were jerked upright by bubbles that brightened and rose before spinning captives around and beginning to hustle them back the way they had come. From all tiers came a hum of appreciation—Aral had called and prostrated them; now he despatched them. Behind the frame Helen saw green- and red-uniformed troops ready to receive prisoners, and Aral waited until the last was clear of the broadcast area.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish.” The ironised, homely satisfaction took almost everyone by surprise, Helen thought as her gaze came to rest momentarily on Cordelia, and made the commanding icon before them abruptly a living man. “Your Imperial Majesties, fellow Barrayarans, honoured haut and honourable ghem, citizens and subjects of the Nexus, I am a man under authority, as I have always been.” That line had a ring Helen suspected Cordelia could explain. “In my life I have participated in three planetary invasions. For my part in Barrayar’s conquest of Komarr you collectively saw fit to give me the sobriquet of the Butcher, though the only life I took myself in that action was of the man who ordered the Solstice Massacre, whose neck I broke for his trouble. But I commanded, and I take responsibility, as I have lived with your gift of a name and burned my offerings at the Solstice Shrine.”

Aral’s irony was less layered than Giaja’s, Helen thought, but had the same kind of stony truths compressed within it. In the tier below she could see around Delia that Duv Galeni’s face was very still and wondered what he felt at this moment; what Laisa felt. But Komarr had been only the first act of this drama.

“In our criminal and stupid attempt to conquer Escobar my part was only to save what lives I could from a disaster already achieved, and my Imperial Master has this week heard my further apologies
on our behalf to Escobar, and offered generous final reparations. Now there is this, a truly bloodless annexation of a hellhole and arrest of its vile masters, to whom you of the Nexus have collectively given no brand of shame but only your custom.”

After Aral’s strange opening about authority and references to older history, news of a new Escobaran apology and concessions had brought frowns to Barrayaran faces, but his last, remorseless sentence and the moral slap in its ending were more welcome. On the other hand, while Aral had been speaking of Komarr and Escobar, to Helen’s ear with old pain in the rasp of his voice, ImpSec leaned his head briefly against a uniformed leg, but with the ending he too curved upright again and returned to his minatory glare at the frames and the billions beyond.

“I was born on Occupied Barrayar, and I have survived two civil wars, seventy-eight years of galactic conflict, and a dozen assassination attempts. I have known military and personal disgrace before, after, and in the very midst of military and personal triumph, for reasons I acknowledged and reasons I did not. And here I stand before one emperor whom I have spent half-a-lifetime serving, and another with whom I have spent a whole lifetime in contest.” Something close to a grin lit Aral’s face, transforming it from within as if the intelligence in his eyes and his humour were one. “Who’d have given me odds on this swansong even a year ago, never mind sixty-six?”

The implied date, Helen knew instantly from her own age, was 2739, the year of Mad Yuri’s massacre, and she knew Aral was thinking of his dead mother and siblings, but it was also a reminder that he had in his time hacked another emperor to bloody fragments in revenge for those murders. The historical wheel was turning and though connections were missing in her mind she sensed the patterns had come round again, but also that everything about this bizarre annexation promised this would be the last iteration of its particular kind, as in its bloodless joy it was already signally distinct even from Komarr.

“So—we have learned and will learn more together. Today I am honoured, but honour is a strange thing, and like love and grace cannot be given but must be made, in our living and our dying. So if the honour of this naming is to be real, let those who serve the Joint Fleet that will be headquartered here remember always that as military men and women they serve an instrument of peace, not war. Let all who hear me in the Nexus remember it also. The velvet aggression of these last days is a fruit of the peace two emperors have in their grace and greatness made, and you have all heard of more ripening—gifts of ease and life, to which our past conflict was inimical. Be sure to take care of your own peace as you seek advantage in what my Masters have wrought.”

His face was stern, and for Helen as for all older Barrayarans there was a strong sense of the Lord Regent they had known, holding them together and—what had Georg said?—cajoling a whole culture forwards. But the stern look was succeeded by a wryer, more introspective one, a face Helen had come to know only because Ekaterin’s remarriage had brought her so unexpectedly into Aral’s personal circle, and she could feel surprise wash through Barrayarans around her immediate group.

“One thing more I will say while I have this chance, learning from the grace of my daughter Ekaterin.” Oh my. “I have commanded here for my Imperial Masters, but mine is a lesser contribution to this day. It is my fellow admirals and their officers and men who have laboured and still labour here, some in scenes of genetic mayhem that would bring bile to any honest mouth.”

Bleakness momentarily deepened Aral’s voice before he consciously sloughed it. “But those who have made the labour possible are my son Miles, ghem-General Benin, and my Imperial Masters.” For the first time Aral glanced down to his side at ImpSec, and as the grey-and-tabby head cocked to look up at him, flicked a finger slightly. Impsec flowed swiftly back to his place beside Shuang-Mei and sat neatly, while Aral, with military precision—no, that was wrong; nothing about this was military, but the grace of movement was founded on service discipline—with fluent ease, half-turned and took a pace backwards, so that he could address both the emperors and the full audience, local
“Your Imperial Majesties, in both our cultures You are solitary pinnacles. From You honour descends to all, and we return it as we may—not always so well, perhaps, though those among our listeners who affect to despise absolute rule might consider very carefully events of the last two years. In neither of our systems, however, is it easy to render You personal respect, and that opportunity I seize.” In a blinding moment Helen saw Aral was reversing the effect Miles had so potently invoked at the summit, and for all Giaja was seven years older than Aral his youthful appearance suddenly worked against him, allowing Aral to address both emperors as the foster-father he was to Gregor.

“I have known and studied four Barrayaran and two Cetagandan emperors. Your ghem-pilgrims, Celestial Lord, saw fit to call my Imperial Master Gregor the Great, and I laud their estimate. He towers over all his forebears save only Dorca the Just. But I believe also in You, Celestial Lord, who like my Imperial Master came to Your duty very young and have proven a greater ruler by far than Your late father.”

Both imperial faces were still though Giaja’s eyes were very bright. A flickering glance—she didn’t dare take her eyes off the tableau for any longer—showed ghem faces mostly frozen but some sharp nods and a few dry smiles among the haut.

“As Lord Regent I also ruled an Imperium, and I know the poisons in that chalice to their bitterest dregs and most lingering consumptions. You do me personal honour, but to purify that chalice in substantial measure is for me the real achievement of this day, and it is in great part Yours. You do me honour, Sires, but Your greatest gift to me is the untainted pride I may at last take in my Masters’ honours. As I am exalted, so I am humbled; all that remains is to offer my sincere thanks for Your commands and intents to which I have been obedient.”

As Lhosh had at the summit he saluted both Gregor and Giaja, holding each ritual gesture for a full count of three, then bowed fractionally to a space between them and walked slowly back to his place at the side. Both emperors were as frozen as the audience but the cats could be heard purring, and as Aral reached his place and turned to stand in it a sudden clap from the Cetagandan tiers broke the audience’s dam and applause crashed out, from ghem and haut driven by the approximate origin of the single clap, as much as from wondering Barrayarans. To Helen’s ears that clap sounded oddly amplified in the fractional time before it was drowned out, and she remembered one of the bubbles below housed haut Pel. In any case license was taken to be granted and tensions found noisy release.

As applause and cheering continued unabated Helen saw a swift exchange of imperial glances, followed by half-turns, arms extended to invite Aral to return, and when he reached them, passing through cats who stepped politely aside, to move between and exit before them. The cats fell in behind, tails suddenly lifting high, so that the last she or anyone in the Nexus saw of the imperial party was a triple, sashaying feline moon of unconcerned departure as the wall through which all had passed resolved into solidity.

Those present who watched carefully might have seen, some minutes later, a grey-and-tabby head appear under the raised platform, and followed by the rest of ImpSec slip between an Imperial Guardsman’s legs and trot over to Miles with a noise Helen couldn’t hear but knew must be a highly self-satisfied mmrrt. The reply, she thought, was probably much the same.

* * * * *
Late on a memorable if hazy evening, sitting in one of Baron Fell’s studies and having drunk more than one glass too many of what had probably been his wine, Helen found herself listening while Georg and Vanos, neither entirely sober, explained to one of her colleagues from the institute what the bubbles had actually done. They were otherwise alone though people drifted by the door from time to time. The colleague, a sharp-featured southerner called Rocher with a gift for political analysis, had grasped the technical details he could be told first time round but waited his elders patiently out.

“Thank you, Lord Auditor, Artificer General. But I actually asked if you knew who determined that the former barons should be humbled in that most striking manner? And where did the bubbles so memorably showing Lord Auditor Vorkosigan and others come from?”

Feeling less than clear-headed Helen tried to work out if either question was officially unanswerable, and looking at them thought Georg and Vanos were as uncertain as she. She also saw Rocher’s head swing round and felt as much as saw a lady-bubble glide through the door. It must have been the alcohol but as she turned to look she had an impression of the bubble also looking round, and suddenly, though no-one was within five feet of it, the door swung shut with a thunk and the bubble winked out to reveal a grinning Pel.

“The face-bubbles were my contribution.”

Rocher recovered his jaw with commendable speed and bowed in his seat. Helen felt herself sobering under the impact of the haut woman and saw Georg was too, but Vanos, though he straightened, only bowed gesturally with one hand as Pel spoke again.

“Vanos. Georg and Helen, if I may, it is a pleasure to meet you both again, more proximately.” The ironies were minimal, and Pel seemed entirely sincere as well as pleased with herself.

“The pleasure is ours.” Her voice was miraculously unslurred. Pel smiled at her, offering a slim hand with a firm grasp, and raised an eyebrow in enquiry.

“Dr Samevin Rocher, it is my honour to make known to you the haut Pel Navarr, Planetary Consort of Eta Ceta, and as she says the authority responsible for those particular bubbles. I would suggest you address to her your first question also.”

“What was that, doctor?” Pel’s eyes were glinting.

Rocher swallowed. “I was wondering, ma’am, who had determined the barons should be so … spectacularly humbled, and why. The signal had such amplitude I cannot tell its frequency.”

“Ah. I have heard nothing untrue today, so I shall say plainly it was determined by Lord Auditor Vorkosigan and I, each for our own reasons that are in the end the same. If you know your Terran history, the form of the sometime barons’ obeisance needs no commentary. As to why … I think I will perhaps provide you with a list of ghem whose faces appeared on bubbles. For the identities of the Barrayrans, if you need them, you must apply to Lord Auditor Vorkosigan. And I shall arrange for you, tomorrow, to see the laboratories we found and meet some of the creations we have liberated. It should be clearly known. Bring a colleague with a strong stomach, Dr Rocher, for you will not believe your own eyes. And not Helen, please.” Pel did not explain her request, but Helen knew she would accept the excuse, and dreaded what she would still have to learn afterwards from Rocher’s report.

Warily Rocher thanked Pel, tapping fingers on his chair-arm thoughtfully. “You make it sound a matter of private vengeance, ma’am.”
“Both private and public, as it is personal and impersonal, joyous and outraged. The faces satisfied the need for the barons—and others who watched and will analyse—to know bluntly that they have fallen because of the way they approached genetic engineering.”

“Which was?” Mentally Helen applauded Rocher’s tenacity.

“Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, and kindless covers it, I think. They had no business making what they made, nor selling what they sold, and now they have no business at all.” As Giaja’s voice had slapped the past away at the treaty signing, Pel consigned all barons to deserved oblivion. “The rest amplified the point in a pleasing spiral of ironies you might sum up as puppets puppeted and dealers dealt with. Beyond that it’s straightforward political wisdom given the cultural engineering we are attempting in the lee of these new technologies.” She grinned again. “I will say also that private satisfactions are not the icing on the cake, nor even the yeast in the dough. It was Lord Auditor Vorkosigan’s genius in this to make the private the bearing skeleton of the public. How odd for a man with hardly one of his own bones left.”

Helen had to raise a hand swiftly to her mouth at the deadpan words baser than humour but alive with wit. Rocher was taken aback, eyebrows climbing; perhaps he did not understand the treatments Miles endured as a young adult but he could hardly ask haut Pel about them. Georg’s and Vanos’s eyes were glinting, as her own must be, and after a moment Rocher offered Pel a commendably sardonic smile, renewed thanks, and excuses. As the door closed behind him Helen let a wry smile appear and found herself waving a finger at Pel.

“My lady, that was wicked of you.”

“Oh, Pel, please, in private. And no, not wicked; merely a trifle mischievous. He was very solemn.”

“Hah. Of course he was, with you popping out at him like a vengeful siren.” Vanos’s voice was amused, and to Helen’s delight Pel stuck out her tongue at him. “What are you doing here, Lady?”

“I don’t really know, Vanos. Celebrating, and looking for someone to talk to.” Pel produced a glass from the arm of her float-chair, and Helen hastened to pass the bottle. “Hmm. Fell had some decent wines, as Miles said. I was supposed to be doing diplomacy with Fletchir but he’s in a mood I haven’t seen since he was about six. Or perhaps never.” Her laugh was gorgeous, with something of Ekaterin’s gurgle. “He bunked off the reception without a word, told me to do whatever I wanted, sent a summons to Viceroy Vorkosigan, and disappeared with Rian. Oh, the fluttering there will be in the diplomatic dovecotes.”

Six? How old was Pel? Helen was sure she hadn’t spoken but Pel glanced at her knowingly.

“One hundred and three, standard. For reasons I really can’t talk about I brought Fletchir up for some years, and have been in post since shortly after he came to the throne in 2745.” She gave that laugh again. “It was Miles’s good fortune to meet me in my naughty nineties. And mine to meet him.”

The opportunity beckoned irresistibly. “Um, within whatever limits, Pel, what did happen a decade ago?”

“The limits are tight, I’m afraid, even tonight. But I will say he saved us from ourselves. In retrospect I have come to believe he not only saved Rian’s life in the short term, but mine and all other Consorts’ in the medium term. Fletchir’s, too, and he knows it.” She cocked an eyebrow. “You have seen Dag Benin’s Dagoola holovid?” Helen nodded. “Then understand also that Fletchir’s personal admiration for Miles is wholly genuine, and catalyses his hardwired strategic and nurtured tactical intelligence with unprecedented potency.”
That sentence Helen filed in an altogether sober memory for prompt report to Miles or Gregor himself. Her attention must have shown, for Pel smiled ironically and Helen thought a change of subject wise.

“Thank you, by the way, for sparing me tomorrow, though I shall have to read Dr Rocher’s report. The labs must be very bad, but I’m not sure why you were sparing me.”

“The Bharaputra labs are appalling.” Pel’s voice was edged. “Some creations that can communicate are begging mercy and we shall probably have to provide it. Others we can save, perhaps. But it is an uncheerful matter. I spared you tomorrow, Helen, because I have a proposition for you, if you are indeed professionally considering, as Miles darkly implies, a conjoined biography of three Vorkosigan generations, with their wives.” Helen nodded, glimpsing what was coming. “I am a scientist of course, not a historian, but your plan does raise the issue of genetics.”

“It does. I have been wondering how to approach it.”

“Well, as it happens there is a new draft Star Crèche report on that particular genome. I fear much would be suppressed by both sides, and you cannot take away a copy, but the more general parts might be of use to you, and we would greatly appreciate a concise historical assessment from someone familiar with recent events, to place beside our genetic one. Rian is happy to trust my discretion with genetics and your Imperial Master to trust yours with history, if you are willing.”

“Of course.” That was easy, though concise assessment of any of grandfather, father, and son would not be, let alone of all three. Helen laughed ruefully. “I warn you, Vorkosigan nature and Barrayaran nurture are bad enough before one throws Cordelia’s Betan mind and soltoxin damage into the mix. And though we are not blood-kin, I don’t think I can biographise my niece, who is I fear another argument for nurture.”

“Oh I don’t know.” Pel eyed her thoughtfully. “Detachment is overrated, I think, though I grant the soltoxin problem. Cordelia tells me Miles was immobilised in a body brace from two to five, which explains much that intrigued me about his charm and adaptations of movement. But I can see the underlying somatype would have his father’s power of movement. Did the grandfather have it?”

Helen thought not and a fascinated Georg was definite. “Not in the same way. Count Piotr had great authority, ability to project himself, and many of the same gestures as Count Aral, but not the force he showed today.” He hesitated but went on. “It’s not my business of course but your treatment has greatly restored him, and I thank you for it. His power had not gone, but was diminished by age and injury. Today he made me think of how he was when he took Komarr, and in the early years of his Regency. The Pretender’s War began to drain him, I always thought. Now he seems filled again.”

“Today he was beautiful.” Vanos did not seem self-conscious of his word but flicked a bright glance at Pel. “I shall long treasure the praises he offered my Imperial Master.”

Pel … cackled, Helen decided, was the only word, and they all smiled.

“So shall we all, Vanos. The most gracious and potent impertinence. I saw Dag earlier, already trying to analyse just how that was done and trying not to laugh. Artistry with protocol always appeals to him, and he said it was a close repeat of what Ekaterin did at her graduation.” Her voice became dry, “I would tread carefully for a while, though, Vanos. The last person to speak to Fletchir like that was his grandfather, and I expect him to be … unsettled for a while.”

Vanos nodded and Helen tried to recall what she knew of the last but one Cetagandan emperor, wondering, not for the first time, why the reign of Fletchir Giaja’s father had been so short—dates eluded her but it had been less than twenty years.
“I hear you, Lady.” Vanos’s eyes were shrewd. “Our Master was truly flattered then? That seems right. But who will flatter you, Lady?”

“Oh Miles has done that.” He has? Vanos, Fletchir has invited the Minchenko Ballet, the zero-g quaddie company for whose orchestra Nicol plays, to tour the Empire? She promises they’ll come next year.”

“Really?” Vanos’s eyes lit up. “That will be fun. I suppose I’ll have to build zero-g auditoria for them.” He glanced at Georg. “I wonder how they do it?”

“I’m not sure. Why don’t you ask Bel Thorne?” When Vanos frowned, Georg added, “The Betan hermaphrodite, Nicol’s partner, will have seen her perform often. It’s a retired Dendarii ship-commander so it ought to know its engineering.”

“Ah, thank you, Georg. That would be helpful. And I meant to ask, do you know where quaddies come from?”

“A commercial experiment.” Pel’s voice was strongly disapproving. “Just after uterine replicators were invented they were designed for free-fall work. And just after they were designed artificial gravity was pioneered, so the quaddies were abandoned. They fled with one of their engineers—the real sort, not a bioscience dabbler—called Leo Graf, and wound up in a wholly asteroidal system out in sector V.” Vanos raised an eyebrow and Pel smiled. “There’s a ballet about it, Nicol told me. It was actually a Terran company that was responsible, but what it did was very like the no-rules bioscience of Jackson’s Whole.”

Helen had looked up quaddies after meeting Nicol and was still trying to work out the flattery bit. She gave up. “But how has Miles flattered you, Pel dear? Did you mean just by bringing Nicol?”

“More. Nicol bears his commission to a quaddie choreographer she swears by for a ballet set to her Invasion Impromptu, to be called The haut Pel’s Grace to the Fallen.” Pel’s voice had gone dreamy as she imagined floating quaddie-forms enacting the invasion; Helen felt her own mind spinning, not with alcohol. “I have given Nicol the bubbles Cordelia didn’t want, and her company will premiere this piece in the Celestial Garden. Miles and Ekaterin will be there, of course, so I expect they’ll bring you and Georg, but I’ll send you a personal invitation. Tell me, Georg, do Lords Auditor have ships at their disposal? Miles seems to, but I didn’t think it necessarily followed.”

Georg grinned. “Miles had more resources than most. But we all have couriers, bigger ships if we need. You realise as Gregor’s Voices we outrank everyone except Gregor himself when we have our hats on.”

“Good. Then that’s settled. Helen, I’ll contact you tomorrow about the Vorkosigan Report. Now I think I should check on those diplomats in their dovecotes. Goodnight.”

The bubble popped back on, the door opened—Pel must have loaded a tractor-beam into her chair somehow—and it sailed out, leaving Helen and Georg slightly breathless and apparently committed to a trip to Eta Ceta to see people with four arms premiere a ballet in zero-g. After a moment Helen reflected this was how Ekaterin reported her experience of being casually translated through orders of personal magnitude by Miles, over lunch or otherwise in apparent passing, and then realised Pel had taken the bottle.
Eventually even the diplomats were exhausted. Aided by frame connections more deals had been done than Miles could shake a stick at, and on an hundred worlds ambassadors were being chosen while not one protest had been filed. In effect the Nexus had watched the Jacksonians’ fall, considered imperial statements, and seen that it was good. On Aralyar Ceta proper administration was being established; joint engineering teams and a Cetagandan architectural task-force were already planning demolitions and buildings. Some capital ships had departed for other duties, but with the emperors present substantial forces remained; tomorrow they too would go, and Miles had guests to return to their points of origin—as well as two babies, almost ready to leave their replicators, awaiting him and Ekaterin with Nikki in Vorbarr Sultana.

Tonight, however, he had one last matter to attend to and the innermost circle could close. Plans were carefully laid. Elli and his Dendarii guests had with Nicol accepted invitations from Dag Benin to a farewell party, which they understood Miles refusing, especially when he pleaded unspecified imperial business. Which I have, sort of. Dono and Olivia Vorrutyer, bless them, were looking after Lem and Harra Csurik. ImpSec was on a date with Shuang-Mei, though Miles doubted his ideas of the mechanics of feline hybridisation were the same as Pel’s. Certain social diaries had been quietly kept clear beyond a given time, and as Gregor’s final reception for Counts and observers ebbed Ekaterin rounded up Alys and Simon for him while he gently steered his parents into one of the private reception rooms concealed in the extra volume of the Lady Alys Vorpatril, and sat them down. Leaving Ekaterin to keep them penned he collected Mark and Kareen to add to the fold, and caught Gregor’s eye, receiving a nod. Mark peered at him suspiciously.

“What is this about, brother? You are looking … very you-ish.”

“This is the end of it.” He slowed as they passed a quiet corner. “One thing first. I’m assuming, Mark, Kareen knows whatever she has to know about you. Yes?”

“Yes.” Mark’s voice was guarded, as well it might be. Kareen looked concern at them both. “Why do you ask?”

“Because the fate of Ry Ryoval is going to be germane.”

“Oh. Yes, I told her about … the end of that.”

“Good. All it is, Kareen, is that this is a family meeting, and that’s now you. But we’re doing a history final, and I wouldn’t want to spring on you news that Vorkosigans are killers. Even Ma, you realise, and certainly the sons of my father.”

Kareen swallowed. “I know Mark killed Ryoval bare-handed. Like your Da did that political officer at Komarr.”

“Bare-footed, really,” Mark murmured. “It wasn’t pretty.”

“You had no choice, love.”
“No. Not if I would live.”

“The how doesn’t matter. Only the fact, and some aftermath,” Miles smiled gravely. “I didn’t want to cause a complication. I want to close something down. Come on.”

He ushered them into the reception room and took his own seat as they found places. From a curving sofa his parents and aunt considered him apprehensively, Illyan in perfect harmony. After looking carefully at Mark and Kareen, then Ekaterin, his mother finally turned to him.

“Well, dear, here we all are. And you are looking … I don’t quite know what, but I am reminded of something …”

“A day late and a dollar short, perhaps?” Aral had a rueful air. “I feel it too, dear Captain. It hasn’t quite unfolded yet, though what more there can be at this stage I shudder to think.”

“Actually, we’re not all here yet.” Miles looked around. “This is family, and we’re two down. But there’s one thing we can deal with now, and must. Da, there is an old, no longer quite so secret secret to do with Escobar that by my reckoning is known for certain to two people here, and has been guessed by six more. Of the missing two one guessed, and told the other, so it’s time to lance the boil.”

Aral’s face was frozen but his eyes were hot and twisted around the room, locking on Alys and Illyan. “You both understand this?” His voice was harsh. “How?”

“Negri’s files.” Illyan’s voice was flat. “He knew about the plasma mirrors. I put it together in the end with what I’d seen.”

“Simon told me, after Ekaterin made us think.” Alys spoke with her usual force, directly to Aral. “But in my heart I knew when I first saw you after Escobar, before Cordelia came. I could not then read your wound, but its existence was plain.”

Aral’s head swung round. “You understand, Ekaterin?”

“Yes. Your pain was reflected in Miles.”

As the hot eyes returned to him Miles rose and went to his Da, and took his hands. “Da, Gregor knows. You know he found out about Serg’s horrors. He worked the rest out after the Hegen Hub.”

The grip on his hands was crushing, the gaze scorching. “You have spent thirty years terrified your true son would find out, and he has spent a decade terrified his true father would find out he’d already found out.” Despite painful hands and roiling stomach Miles gave his Da a sad smile. “It worked for a bit but it can’t go on. The only thing that matters is for you to know his knowing has only increased his love and sense of your honour.” His Da’s grip was still painful but he sensed his Ma’s concern lessen with a perception he couldn’t fathom. “I swear on Gran’da’s grave all is well, Da. Only two of us do not know, and must. Will you tell them?”

“They must?” Aral’s voice was low.

“Yes. Once into the light. Once only, but once.”

“Very well.” Miles felt his hands released and went back to his seat, reaching for Ekaterin’s hand, as his Da reached for his Ma’s and Alys for Simon’s. Aral took a deep breath, face white. “Kareen, my dear, it seems I must tell you and Mark my deepest shame. You know I am a soldier. Mark knows I am a killer. What neither of you knows, and I had hoped no-one but Cordelia ever would, is that I was the instrument whereby Emperor Ezar contrived to assassinate Crown Prince Serg. He made me create the need for a Regency and clear my own way to Gregor—not that I saw it then—before
forcing me down the path I’d made. It was his final guarantee I would never take the throne myself, as making me kill Yuri with my own hands was the first.”

Kareen was frozen, but Mark opened his mouth, closed it with a snap, and whistled, eyes whirling with calculation.

“Hoo. My congratulations, sir. Ser Galen never got a whiff of that one but from what I know it must have been a doozy of a plot. An … orrery, all lining up.” Miles and Cordelia both stared at him, then each other. “What? Sorry, am I being too Jacksonian? I’ve never heard a word from anyone about Serg, but Gregor plainly hates his memory so it sounds like a good thing you did, Da.”

Cordelia’s smile was a strange mix of austere and wondering. “It’s not that so much, Mark dear, as your orrery. I though of Ezar’s plot exactly that way thirty–three years ago, when I first worked it out. And from Miles’s look …?”

“Yes, two years ago.” I wonder what Pel would make of that? “An orrery of betrayal within betrayal, all perfectly lining up for one shot. The necessary over everything else. Do you see, though, both of you, what that necessity meant to Da?”

Mark considered, but Kareen nodded at once. “Yes.” She turned to Aral. “It must have been awful for you, sir. But why did Emperor Ezar want to kill his own son? The books all say he’s a hero, but no-one who knew him ever says anything.”

“He was a a sexual sadist, dear, a human monster in a small and vicious way.” Cordelia’s voice was firm. “As emperor that would have become a large and vicious way. I only saw him once, very briefly, but I met one of his friends, and just about the only thing I never doubted in all this wretched Barrayaran mess is that taking out Serg was one long step towards sanity, and replacing him with Aral a longer one. Ezar was a devil, but he wasn’t a fool. Serg was both.”

Kareen’s mouth was an O but Mark was nodding briskly; so were Alys and Simon. Kareen looked at them, and Alys met her gaze.

“Yes, dear, I agree with every word. Serg was monstrous and grossly unfit to rule. It could have been the Bloody Centuries all over again.”

“Would have been.” Illyan’s voice was still flat. “I am yet oath-bound to Ezar, but believe me, you want no detail. I was never told at the time, but knowing what I now know I would have approved.”

“So,” Mark’s voice was careful, “everyone thinks it a good thing, even you, Da, but having to do it was a … problem, no, a gall for your honour. A poison in memory. Is that right?” Aral nodded slowly, and Mark went on. “Much begins to come clear. Miles, you said this was all for Da, and you meant it, didn’t you? Let me see,” Mark counted on his fingers in a way so like Miles he smiled despite himself, “renaming is to cancel Sergyar, extravagant bloodlessness answers the use at Escobar of corpses as cover, there’s new technology in both that must line up somehow, and … there’s something else, which must be what now is about.”

Miles grinned and clapped softly. “Four out of four, brother. This time technology reduces casualties, not increases them. The Alliance scoops up stuff from Gran’da and Komarr, too.” Everyone was staring at him except Ekaterin and his Ma, who looked at him as they usually did. He hunched slightly. “What?”

“I don’t think we’d seen it quite so clearly, Miles dear.” Alys’s stare became thoughtful. “It does beg questions.”
“One or two.” Illyan’s eyes narrowed, his voice no longer flat. “I had resigned myself, Miles, to your Auditorship giving you access to every file in the imperium and realised long ago restricting your security clearance was in any case fruitless. But you didn’t put this together since you found Jack Chandler, or he you, nor since you’ve had your seal.”

“True, Simon. I stole most of your codes long ago.”

“How? I was damned careful you couldn’t see my keyboard over the rim of my desk and you made a point of looking away.”

Miles grinned at his old chief. “Of course I did. It was what you wanted. And from my height your hands were reflected in the glass of Gregor’s official portrait on the sidewall.”

Illyan looked satisfyingly chagrined, and as Miles hoped his Da gave a laugh—a brief Heh but a laugh all the same. Miles turned to him.

“And I remember, sir, the ones you were using when you had me on your knee.” This produced a faint smile. “Though actually—”

He was interrupted by a soft knock and swiftly rose, seeing his Da’s face tense again. Do this quickly, Gregor. When he opened the door on a set-faced Gregor and nervous-looking Laisa, Gerard and several ImpSec guards forming a perimeter, he received a sharp look of enquiry and nodded, flicking his eyes. Taking the hint and leaving him to see Laisa in, Gregor slipped past and by the time he had shut the door and turned had reached Aral. Not waiting for him to rise, with a fluid movement that hinted at Fletchir Giaja’s influence, Gregor stooped to embrace his foster-father, whose hands slowly came around him, then tightened.

“Thank you, Miles.” Laisa’s voice was a whisper. “Is your Da …?”

“All shall be well.” He saw her to a seat and busied himself for a moment pouring two glasses of water while Ekaterin watched him with what he thought was a suppressed smile. He put the glasses on the table nearest his Da and Gregor, and sat, taking Ekaterin’s hand. Mark and Kareen, like Alys and Simon, were tactfully absorbed in one another, but his Ma, after a long exchange of looks with Laisa turned to look at him. He met her gaze, and after a moment she surprised him considerably by suddenly smiling and giving him a discreet thumbs-up. Then her gaze returned to his Da and Gregor, who eventually let one another go.

“I’m sorry, boy. I hoped to spare you this knowledge.”

“Be sorry for nothing.” Gregor took one glass to hand to Aral, who muttered thanks, the other for himself. Taking a place beside Laisa he drank deeply and visibly composed himself, as Aral was doing with Cordelia’s hand on his shoulder. Miles gave both a moment and began the last story, as it had been the first.

“Just before you came in, Gregor, Laisa, I was confessing that before I had an Auditor’s seal I gleaned data by using security codes I, um, liberated from Simon and Da. But I was about to say that after a while I realised I was looking in the wrong place and had made a serious mistake.” He sat back, settling in, and saw others curve into their seats, becoming intent. “You could say I learned my first real lesson about intelligence work by getting Sergeant Bothari killed. That story doesn’t matter now, but afterwards, while I understood exactly why neither of you”—he nodded to his Ma and Da —“ever told me about Elena’s mother, I also knew I could have put it together if I’d tried, and if I had he’d be alive today. So when you did tell me the bones, I thought I’d better put it together properly for myself—only the more I tried, the more I realised there were bits missing around Escobar that no code I had was helping me find. The shape of it was wrong somehow, but I couldn’t
tell how. And that’s where I made the mistake. Can you see it, Simon?”

“I’m not sure, Miles. Maybe”—his fingers drummed once in an achingly familiar gesture—“you thought you were looking for something we weren’t telling you, when actually it was something we didn’t know.”

“Yes.” Miles smiled ruefully. “It took me six years to see that, as well as your requirement to beef up Dendarii Fleet Intelligence.”

“Ah.” Illyan was nodding. “Yes, that was a piece of advice you did take to heart, I remember. And I suspected after a while there was a fair amount of data in Dendarii files that wasn’t making it to ImpSec.”

“A lot of it’s trash but yes, some. I passed on anything with operational bearing, and gave the Joint Fleet a lot of data for this show.” His Da nodded, having been surprised by just how much detail of Jacksonian activity and organisation he’d been able to provide to the planners. “I had the Dendarii doing deep research with higher priority since 2796 and ’97. Those were key years because holes in briefing files dropped us right in it—on Jackson’s Whole, then Dagoola. After that every Dendarii had orders to pass on everything they and theirs knew and learned about the barons and the ghem, and I had a lot of people on it. They knew we’d left both the Cetagandans and Ryoval foaming and coming after us, so they put their backs into it.” He drank some water. “Then Mark came into our lives.”

He put down his glass, grinning at his brother. “These events, you can imagine, made me wonder what else I didn’t know because we didn’t know. I started suspecting my mistake too, but couldn’t confirm it until four years ago, when Mark did the Nexus great service by killing Ryoval. That and his Deal with Baron Fell shook Jackson’s Whole hard, and things fell out—among them a bunch of Ryoval’s more independent creatures Fell thought he’d locked down in his takeover.” This was new to everyone and Miles saw Illyan’s and his parents’ eyes sharpen; so did Gregor’s and Laisa’s. “They got some financial codes and one of Fell’s couriers and ran all the way to Pol, where they had the misfortune to decide they’d smuggle themselves through Komarr with the Dendarii, not understanding quite how large a database on Ryoval I had.” He grimaced. “Of course I wasn’t being much use just then, but besides shortening poor old Vorberg I did manage a little Deal of my own with Fell.”

“On what terms?” Mark was frowning, as was Illyan, but Miles had long looked forward to this moment.

“The codes they’d stolen were worth about thirty million Betan. You said Fell shortchanged you in your Deal by eight million, so I sent him back twenty-two with the thieves, his ship, and a note thanking him for the residue of your payment and requesting a copy of Ryoval’s files, minus references to himself, for the decade before 2774. Which he promptly sent. And before you ask”—he slipped a hand into his pocket—“here’s the bank disk. Seven million Betan, plus four years’ interest at Escobaran standard rates. I gave the other million to the Dendarii medical fund. Happy wedding.”

Mark’s and Kareen’s faces were a delight to behold, and his mother’s attention had as a good Betan been riveted by a piece of plastic worth seven-and-whatever million dollars in real money, and more than twenty-five million Imperial marks. Nor was anyone immune except Gregor and Laisa, both suppressing smiles. Illyan had always been prone to crogglement at large sums in private hands, despite years of handling massive budgets, but even Ekaterin was giving him a look suggesting he’d better have a good explanation as to why, and how, he’d managed to keep this from her for so long. It had not been easy, but it had been well worth it. Mark turned the disk in his hand so it caught the light.
“How unexpected. You are making it exceptionally difficult not to be pleased with you, brother. But this surprising largesse is incidental, no? I thought so. Let me then use it to solve another problem and interestingly complicate while simplifying both our lives.” He turned. “Gregor, do I owe any tax on this?”

Gregor stopped trying to suppress his smile. “Legally I haven’t the faintest idea, Mark, so I declare you don’t. My treasury’s doing well enough these days.”

“Thank you.” He gave the disk to Kareen, who took it with a frown. “Love, as the District is receiving its own largesse, and the company is in excellent health, would you please take that, which will be worth about eight-and-a-half million Betan by now, and split it six ways between yourself, your sisters, your Ma, and Ekaterin, in your personal names. Your Da’s too stiff-necked to take money from me directly, but your Ma will if everyone’s getting the same. Ease all round. It should come to about five million marks each.”

Ekaterin and Kareen had gone white but Cordelia and Alys were applauding silently and grinning as broadly as Gregor and Laisa. Miles thought it was time to move on, and couldn’t resist anyway.

“Good, that’s settled.” Ignoring glares from his wife and sister-to-be he settled again. “So there I was with a nice new database to look at—terabytes of it. And the only clue I had, Da, was that it had to be something you didn’t know about. That made Komarr very unlikely, and seemed to rule out Escobar. But between the two, after that idiot trial in 2769, Ezar stashed you in your service leper colony. And by the time you found out about Escobar, which you told me once was when you came off patrol three months after Midsummer 2771, it was rolling. So, where did it come from?”

Aral frowned, as did Illyan. “I never knew for sure but always supposed Grishnov, with pliant military support from Ges Vorrutyer. Simon?”

“Grishnov, yes.” Illyan shrugged. “Probably. Smash-and-grab was his style whenever he could afford it. But I think Miles has other ideas.”

“Ma, you and the Survey found Sergyar through a long jump-route via Antares, didn’t you? A route now broken?”

“That’s right, dear. Early in ’72.”

“And we found it through Komarr, of course, which means after ’68. So the exploration vessel had to find Sergyar, then its Escobaran wormhole, word had to get to Grishnov through the Political Officer, and he had to have his bright idea, then get Serg and Ges Vorrutyer in on it, followed surprisingly rapidly by the rest of the old War Party. The credibility rather depends when exactly that wormhole was reported—and that is on file. Six weeks after Midsummer 2771.”

“What?” Illyan’s brows beetled. “That’s hellish tight timing, Miles.”

“Isn’t it just? Almost too tight. The report was from the General Lutrow, lost at Escobar, making it hard to check. And as you may recall, its Political Officer was Grishnov’s nephew. So I had my doubts, and when I got Ryoval’s files I started in on 2770–71. Guess what I found?” He had no takers. “Simon, do you recall a junior Vormoncrief, an ImpSec analyst of Negri’s? You got rid of him fast.”

“Vaguely. He’d been bought by someone. He gambled.”

“He did and had. He had a month’s leave after Komarr in ’68, spent on Escobar, but wound up passing through Jackson’s Whole, where he lost a sum larger than he could ever pay. Guess who
to?” This time he needed no takers, though Illyan was frowning.

“I don’t recall that from his file. Is it there?”

“No, it was faked at the Escobaran end. But it was in Ryoval’s file with ‘vids and detail. So there was interesting datum number two— in 2770–1 Ryoval had an agent in ImpSec handling galactic signals. But the real gem was something else and I could have kicked myself. In all seriousness, I’m not sure how Negri missed it.” He turned to Gregor. “This is it, brother. I have to go there now.”

Gregor nodded silently, and moved one hand slightly.

“Tell me, Simon, what was Serg’s position like in 2770? Domestically, I mean, after Komarr. Did he know Ezar was moving against him?”

Illyan went still for a moment, thinking, then frowned. “I’m not sure, Miles. I was very junior. But I’d have to think so. Even when Aral was forced into political eclipse after Komarr the War Party had been dealt a heavy blow and knew it. I’ve always thought Grishnov leaped at Escobar because he was desperate, and I know it puzzled Negri that he was so dismissive of military risks. Coming up he was known for habitual caution as well as sporadic brutality that became frequent with achieved rank. So I’d guess Serg’s political protection thinned then, by comparison with the years before Komarr when Grishnov was first riding high. And that’s when Serg started trying to assassinate Ezar.”

Gregor’s lips were compressed, Kareen’s again forming an O.

“Yes, I noticed that. Serg’s tastes were full-blown by then, and gratifying them on Barrayar became harder. Hence interesting datum number three—Grishnov’s cover-up strategy for Serg, which was burying female bodies amid political ones, stopped working. And yes, I think that’s exactly where Ezar got the idea for Escobar.”

Gregor’s voice was sharp. “Serg turned to Ryoval?”

“Yes. Where but Jackson’s Whole do you go to procure partners to torture and kill? Two long visits in the summers of ‘70 and ‘71, when he supposedly went to one of the Vorbarra estates with some playmates. The ImpSec minders with him were all Grishnov’s people, save one.”

“How many girls?” The hand holding Laisa’s was white.

“Five dead, a lot of injured. Ryoval was delighted, and had images. I’ve destroyed the copies, and under Auditorial seal strictly quarantined all client data seized this week from Houses Fell and Bharaputra which should include anything else.”

His Da grunted understanding. “I wondered about that. I thought it might be Dendarii stuff, but I’ll take care of it.” Miles smiled thanks.

“Save one.” Illyan’s fingers drummed. “Which would be Vormoncrief?”

“It would. A report for reconditioning. Serg left the week before Midsummer. Vormoncrief went with him. And I think the General Lutrow had already reported the wormhole, because a day before Serg arrived Ryoval was planning to extort money from him, but a day after he was making arrangements to be generous instead. Mark, you’ve researched Escobaran biotech for your Durona investments. How was it in 2770?”

“Riding high. The invasion attempt knocked them back badly.”
“Yes. And Barrayaran victory would have been worse still. So the final datum is that about a week after Serg arrived on Jackson’s Whole he went back to Barrayar for three days. The communication he must have carried to Grishnov was not on file, nor a reply, but the earliest reference by Grishnov to the invasion I’ve found is dated less than a week after Serg’s visit.” He took one more breath, looking round nine intent faces. “I can’t prove it, exactly, but I knew it and acted accordingly. The orders for Escobar came from Ryoval, backed by a threat to expose Serg. Then Ezar took advantage. So Mark took care of more than he knew when he killed Ryoval, and more fittingly. I’ve added the Bharaputras, on Taura’s and Ekaterin’s accounts, but really I’ve just been tidying up, and I hope I’ve been neat because there was one more thing in Ryoval’s files. Or rather one more enormous file, on the haut.”

He looked curiously at his Da and Gregor. “The ghem-faces on Pel’s bubbles were Star Crèche agents who tried for Ryoval or his father and died on Jackson’s Whole, or Imperial Guardsmen who met the same fate. If you know I don’t imagine you can say much, but have either of you heard anything to suggest Ryoval père was a renegade haut?”

Gregor shook his head, but his Da nodded. “Yes.” He gave a ghostly grin. “In my private audience with Fletchir, after the speeches, he told me a bit about it. Not who the father was, nor why he ran, but he avoided detection by having his brain transplanted to a human body on Jackson’s Whole. They found him through Ryoval, who became obsessed with reclaiming haut heritage and used something he found on file after killing his father to breach Cetagandan security. They tried for him repeatedly, without luck.”

“I thought it must be something like that. And it means, Mark, your deed as much as Chandler’s invention made all this possible. They won’t want fuss, but I think you should come to the premiere of Nicol’s ballet next year. You might get your own Order of Merit or something.”

His Da nodded with a funny smile that eased Miles. “Something, yes. I spoke, Mark, partly because Fletchir did ask me to convey thanks to you and I’ve been wondering how. Let time pass and he will welcome you.”

“MPVK can become the first truly inter-imperial company.” Miles grinned as Ekaterin batted at him. “Dag said Maple Ambrosia would sell like fury among the ghem, and you’ll soon have radiophagic glorious bugs to offer as well. And geneered olive trees, and whatever Enrique dreams up next to realise with ghem assistance.” He gave a truly unholy smile. “If Aunt Alys agrees, perhaps you can find it in your heart to offer Ivan a job in your Eta Cetan branch, should he turn out to need one.”

Illyan snorted laughter, but Alys looked thoughtful.

“I’ll bear it in mind, brother.” Mark’s voice was breathy. “Damn it, you meant it about being square, didn’t you? So Cetagandans are just like Barrayarans, in the end. Style is good, but kill someone theatrically and you really get their attention. Huh.”

There was a silence broken in the end by Cordelia.

“I confess I hadn’t thought of it quite like that, Mark dear, but you have a point. On the other hand, Miles has upped the stakes to not killing someone theatrically, which I think we must admit as progress.”

The silence returned until Gregor spoke. “So is that truly it now, Miles? Through Serg Ryoval procured Grishnov to attack Escobar, his intent being to impede a challenge to his business on Jackson’s Whole?”

“And own a Barrayaran emperor who would be a very good customer.”
“Yes.” Gregor shuddered. “Then Ezar took advantage, Aral took care of Serg, Negri’s mobs took care of Grishnov, Mark took care of Ryoval, and you’ve taken care of Jackson’s Whole.”

Miles considered briefly. “Yes, that covers it.”

“Nonsense.” Ekaterin’s voice was a breath in his ear audible to all. She laughed. “It covers it, Gregor, only by excluding everything that looks forward—greatly improved security, life expectancy, and convenience for pretty much everyone in the Nexus, a solid peace which will be one of the glories of your reign rather than an uneasy cessation of war, and a whole series of personal medical treatments that ensure your and Laisa’s children, and ours, and Mark’s and Kareen’s, will grow up to know their Gran’da and Taura and the Csuriks’ youngest.” She laughed with the gurgle he loved richly present in her voice. “Just like the Vor lord who jumped on his horse—Fat Ninny, of course—and rode off in all directions. One came full circle.” Miles felt a soft kiss on his head, and smiled at his family. “All the others are still moving forwards.”

END

End Notes

There is a passage in the epilogue to ‘Barrayar’ that I once wanted to use as an epigraph to ‘Forward Momentum’, before deciding that in isolation the critical sentence lost a bit too much punch, and gave away something I couldn’t afford to do more than hint towards if the early chapters were to have any suspense at all.

"Good," said Miles. "Can I have my own horse? Can I have that one?"
"No, not that one," said Piotr indignantly. Then drawn in, added, "Perhaps a pony."
"Horse," said Miles, watching his face.
Cordelia recognized the Instant Re-Negotiation Mode, a spinal reflex, as far as she could tell, triggered by the faintest concession. The kid should be put to work beating out treaties with the Cetagandans. She wondered how many horses he’d finally end up with.

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