A Deeper Season

by lightgetsin, sahiya

Summary

Take one Miles, a hapless cousin, Cetagandan social politics, a galactic conspiracy, a scientific discovery, a lot of firepower, and an unexpected declaration. Mix well and step back quickly.

Notes

Thank you to significantowl, jadedfrenzy, and AJ Hall for beta reading.
There were a great many things, Miles decided, that weren't nearly so dreadful as he had imagined. Lazing about Vorkosigan House over the Winterfair season, for one, even with most of the household gone to Sergyar. It wasn't nearly as mind-numbingly boring as he had once thought. True, there were a deeply unhinged number of parties and dinners and balls, but Lord Vorhovis had let Miles in on one of the hidden benefits of his new rank: the ability to turn anybody down with impunity, claiming vague, unspecific Auditorial business.

Not that there was any business afoot at the moment, Auditorial or otherwise. At least not for Miles. He suspected someone, probably Gregor, had manufactured this period of grace for him in the aftermath of Haroche's downfall. At another time, in another life, Miles would have chafed under the inactivity. But the newly minted Lord Auditor Vorkosigan appreciated it. He had been very tired, and for one of the first times in his life, he felt the need to take his time, to feel his way with care under the weight of his new and awesome responsibilities.

Miles gave a last settling tug at the tunic of his formal house uniform, and stepped back from the mirror. Through the windows of his suite he could see the snow-muffled shadows of a rapidly-falling Vorbarr Sultana winter night. He'd been dragging his feet too long, and he was stretching late beyond the bounds of fashionable and straight on into rude.

As if in answer to his thought there was a quick rap at the door, and Pym stuck his head around.

"The groundcar, m'lord," he said.

"Thank you," Miles said, cast one more look in the mirror, and hurried out the door Pym held open for him.

He settled in the Count's grand old groundcar with some relief. That South Continent vacation was sounding better and better as winter progressed in Vorbarr Sultana. Ivan might like to come, or perhaps he would go alone. The thought of having all that uninterrupted time to himself would have once bored and unsettled him, but at the moment the idea had a certain appeal. He wasn't as soul-tired as he had been just a few short weeks ago, but he still felt somehow fragile, his emotions new and untouched like the first fall of fresh snow. An appropriate metaphor, Miles decided, as Pym piloted them expertly and quickly through the streets of Vorbarr Sultana towards the Imperial Residence. Not long ago, attending a party given by the Emperor, Miles would have worn his parade reds and blues which, dueling laws or not, still included a ceremonial sword. The thought elicited only the echo of an ache. Good.

Pym dropped him at the foot of the main steps, before taking the car off to one of the underground parking garages reserved for just such occasions. Where, Miles reflected with some envy, he and his Armsmen comrades would sit around and gossip the night away in a much more convivial version of the proceedings within the grand Residence ballroom. A somewhat soberer version as well, Miles trusted; after all, that was half the point of an Armsman driver.

Miles followed the all-too-familiar route through the Residence, noting the various house uniforms
as he went. The social reconvening of the Council of Counts a few weeks after the birth of the new
year was something that people took great care not to miss. And as late as he was, most of them
would be at least halfway to sloshed. There was nothing quite like a roomful of inebriated Vor. Oh
well, Miles thought, and snagged a glass of red wine off a passing tray as he stepped into the
ballroom. No use being the only sober one here.

"Miles!" a familiar voice called just as he was surveying the appetizer table. He cringed. He'd
almost slipped in unnoticed.

"Hello, Aunt Alys," he said dutifully.

She took him by the shoulder and steered him away from the food. Miles looked back mournfully
over his shoulder. Gregor's master cook, though no Ma Kosti, was truly excellent. "I was starting to
think you weren't going to come tonight," Aunt Alys said, pulling his attention back to her.

"What made you think that? You know I can't get enough of these high Vor gatherings." Miles
took a long sip of wine and looked away so as to avoid Alys's slightly disapproving gaze.

"Well, it's a good thing you did finally show up. Gregor would like a word at some point."

"Ah?" Miles said. A word with Gregor could mean any number of things, but Miles had the feeling
that his time of rest and recuperation was just about over. So much for the South Continent, he
thought, but with only a mild pang of regret. "All right then. Just let me know when he's ready."

Alys let out a long-suffering sigh. "I think that he would be ready at any point. Tonight he's
escorting Patricia Vordovan."

"Tall, thin Vor beauty number one hundred and seventy-three?" Miles said, and craned his neck in
vain in an attempt to catch a glimpse of his Emperor over the heads of the other, much taller
guests. "Is he not enjoying her company?"

Alys paused diplomatically. "He has . . . a certain expression."

"What would that be?"

"Like he's thinking of different ways to kill himself," Ivan supplied as he appeared suddenly at
Miles's shoulder. "Hello, Lord Auditor Coz. Nice of you to show up."

Alys frowned. "It's not funny, Ivan. Gregor is thirty-five years old. He has to get married sometime,
and sooner would be preferable to later." She shook her head. "He keeps telling me to be patient,
that he'll decide when the time is right, and that he refuses to marry some high Vor, incredibly dull
twenty-year old heiress who comes complete with certified pedigree papers."

"He does have a point," Ivan said. "Have you seen holovids of some Old Earth monarchs?
Frightening things happen with inbreeding."

There was a momentary, chill silence, where Ivan looked like he wanted to swallow his tongue.
Miles controlled a visible wince. After a moment, however, Alys simply looked askance at her son
and said, "We do have gene-scanning these days, Ivan. Pity we didn't have it thirty years ago. We
would have eliminated your tactlessness, had we but known."

Luckily for Ivan, Gregor must have signaled to her just then, because she smiled gracefully,
nodded, and began steering Miles toward the door of a side chamber that Gregor sometimes used
for private audiences during more public occasions. She deposited him inside and said, "He'll be
along in a moment. Do try not to take too long."
"Yes, Aunt Alys." While he waited, Miles took a turn around the room, which was hung with a ring of paintings depicting some of Gregor's less controversial ancestors. Ivan might be tactless, Miles concluded after a few moments, but he also might be right. Some of the old Emperors were really ugly sons of bitches.

Gregor entered, and gestured him silently to a seat in one of the armchairs. He took one for himself and crossed his legs; Miles had the impression of someone who was trying to appear at his ease.

"I have instructions from Lady Alys not to keep you too long," Miles said, a bit formally. He still didn't know in what capacity he was here.

"Hmph," Gregor said. "One would think she was running the Imperium."

"No, just your social calendar."

"God knows I don't want to go back there and listen to Patricia Vordovan talk about - oh, I don't even know what she was talking about." He made a quick, unhappy gesture, an uncharacteristically frustrated clenching of the hands that set off a few faint alarm bells in the back of Miles's brain. Then the hands unclenched, laid themselves flat on the arms of the chair, and Gregor sat back.

"What if I asked you to keep me the rest of the night?" he asked lightly.

"Sorry," Miles said. "Aunt Alys scares me more than you do."

Gregor sighed. "I command the armies of three planets, but Alys Vorpatril is more intimidating. There's something sad about that. Or possibly reassuring." He shook his head. "In any case, I asked to see you, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan" - ah, there was the answer to Miles's question - "because I have a job for you. Your first assignment as an official and fully empowered Imperial Auditor."

Miles managed not to gulp. That was ever so slightly intimidating. "Yes, Sire?"

"The Imperial Science Institute was broken into before Winterfair," Gregor began.

"Good bit of work, that," Miles said, with mixed alarm and admiration. The Imperial Science Institute, epicenter of Barrayar's research and development interests in every field imaginable, was generally considered to be almost as impenetrable as ImpSec HQ.

"It gets better. A lone intruder got in at night, and held one of the department heads - biochemistry, it was - at nerve disrupter point for nearly fifteen minutes, demanding access to all sorts of classified information. He then managed to get back out of the building, after the alarm was raised. And then, even more troubling, entirely off planet."

Miles whistled. "ImpSec must be having quiet spasms. What about the scientist?"

"He's fine," Gregor said. "Between his description and footage from a few security cameras the intruder didn't disable on his way in or out, we have a pretty good picture." He pushed aside the antique wood top of the table between them, revealing a comconsole. A few quick taps produced an image of a bland young man in his mid twenties, which rotated slowly above the plate.

"Interesting," said Miles, studying him. "And you want me to get on his trail?" It seemed a bit unusual as Auditorial assignments went, but then again to hear the other Auditors tell it, there was no such thing as usual.

"Oh, no," Gregor said. "We've got him. Well, I should say, the Escobarans have him. They caught him going through customs last week."
"Oh," said Miles, blinking. "Who is he, then?"

"We don't exactly know. He's using the name Reynold Daley, but we can't seem to find anything on him under any name. In any case, the Escobarans are holding him, and they're a little reluctant to give him up. I'd like you to extract him for me, please."

Miles raised an eyebrow. "There must have been some hot stuff in that lab."

Gregor nodded. "How to save individual lives from disease, and how to kill everyone en masse," he said wryly. "At least that's what's usually going on there, as far as I can tell." He shrugged this away. "They were quite shaken up over there - that man of yours, the one who helped Illyan, had a great deal to say on the subject."

Miles grinned. "Dr. Weddell. I bet he was a royal pain in ImpSec's ass."

"Hmm," Gregor said, with a slight smile. "In any case, I'd heard from your mother that you were considering a trip to Escobar anyway, to see if those clone friends of yours could help you with the seizures. Two birds, one stone and all that."

"Yeah," Miles said. "I'm not sure they'll be able to do any more than ImpMil, but I figure it's worth a try. There must not be much of a rush on this, then, if you're all right with me visiting the Duronas while I'm there."

"No," Gregor said. "It doesn't appear Daley actually found what he was looking for in the labs, or at least nothing was missing. But it would be nice to know what he thought he was doing." He paused, frowning. "Unfortunately, he has a fast-penta allergy."

"Induced or natural?"

"Induced."

"Huh."

"Quite. In any case, take your time with the Duronas, see if they can do something. Stop and see your parents on Sergyar for a day or two if you want."

"All right," Miles said, suddenly thinking that this sounded almost like an off-planet vacation, all expenses paid by the Imperium. It wasn't like extracting Daley was something that a random ImpSec agent couldn't do, better than Miles probably. True, he did have his Auditor's seal, which was good for overriding, well, just about anything, but that wasn't nearly as useful in Escobaran territory as it was within the Barrayaran Empire.

"And I'm sending Ivan with you," Gregor added suddenly.

"Um . . . why?"

"You'll need an assistant. Someone you can trust."

"Er . . . all right. Gregor, are you not telling me something?"

"Don't be paranoid, Miles. I wouldn't send you into an assignment without all the information. There's a bit more, of course, but you can read it on the way."

True enough. "Okay. Anything else? I bet Aunt Alys is having kittens - speaking of which, would you like a kitten?"
Gregor stared at him for a moment, and then actually seemed to think about it. "Not . . . at the moment, thank you." He blinked, collected himself, and halted Miles's move to rise with a small gesture. "There is one other thing. I'd like you to come for dinner tomorrow night, if you can."

Miles frowned. "I thought this was your last ball of the season?"

"It is, thank God. Tomorrow is a private dinner. Unstaged. Non-political."

"It's never non-political, Gregor."

Gregor's mouth tightened, just a little. "Perhaps not," he said, with a shade of bleakness. "But that doesn't mean I can't try."

"All right, then," Miles said. "Of course."

"Thank you." Gregor stood up and took a deep breath. "Into the breach?"

"I suppose we should."

Gregor paused for a moment before hitting the door release, and stood there silent, almost brooding. Marshaling the forces, Miles was sure, preparing himself to be polite and friendly yet utterly unreachable for the rest of the evening. A sudden resentment toward his aunt took Miles by surprise. Unfair in the extreme - the existence of holiday balls was not entirely her fault. But it was nothing, he thought suddenly, to what Gregor must have felt, unexpressed, for over a decade.

They parted as they entered the ballroom, and Miles spent the rest of the evening in and out of Ivan's orbit, claiming his share of dances with the Koudelka girls, and drinking perhaps a tad too much red wine. District pride, he justified as he made his slightly unsteady way out to the groundcar and awaiting Pym. Gregor had provided Vorkosigan wine, after all.

Vorkosigan wine, as it turned out, imparted Vorkosigan headaches as indiscriminately as any other. Miles grumbled his way out of bed in the morning, resenting the stiffness of cryo-damaged limbs. The reminder was not something he particularly liked waking up to. He paused a moment, feet swinging over the edge of the bed. Was that it, then? He'd spent months coping with all the consequences, everything that had followed his death like the trail of a particularly devastating comet. Had he done all that only to discover that the real problem was dying in the first place? No, Miles decided, standing. He was alive now. Alive, reasonably healthy and, yes, strangely content. That would do.

A packet of data from ImpSec arrived via comconsole just after lunch. Miles perused the pertinent details in under a minute. An ImpSec courier ship would be awaiting his pleasure tomorrow morning, the Barrayaran ambassador on Escobar was blah blah blah. It was perfectly, beautifully simple. Miles's neck began to itch. *A bit overly suspicious, boy? No, I really don't think so.*

Ivan called a few minutes later, smiling with what Miles identified after a moment as gratitude.

"And here I thought this Lord Auditor business would only be useful next time you roped me into committing treason," his cousin said cheerfully.

Miles made a lightning quick calculation and decided that, on balance, there was nothing really wrong with letting Ivan assume Miles was responsible for his latest duty assignment. One good turn, even an imaginary one, deserved another, and Ivan could make himself useful in so many ways. "We leave tomorrow at 1000 hours," Miles said. "And we'll be stopping by Sergyar for at least a night."
Ivan's smile dropped. "Uh," he said uneasily, "are you sure they've really dealt with that worm problem? Vorline's parents emigrated, and he has the most awful scars..."

Miles waved an airy hand. "Got them out, didn't they?"

Ivan made a small, disturbed sound, and Miles grinned. "Don't be late," he said, and cut the com.

Pym took care of most of the packing. Miles rattled uneasily around his rooms, getting in the way and irritating the cat. He found that now that there was something to do, he was impatient to get to it. Such as it was. Ah well. He'd always known he just wasn't cut out for a proper life of Vor leisure. He watched Pym pack the seizure stimulator, and brooded hopefully upon the prospect of discarding it in a few weeks time when - if, dammit, don't do this to yourself - the Duronas’ combined medical know-how could figure out a way to fix him up. He wondered how much Ivan would howl if Miles called him and told him they were leaving in an hour. But no. One did not stand up the Emperor of Barrayar.

Miles lingered a moment over the issue of wardrobe as late afternoon edged into evening. He finally shrugged and settled on neat but comfortable street clothes. Gregor hadn't said who all would be joining them, but Miles had gotten the strong impression of an intimate, friendly gathering. No one to impress in that category - they all knew him far too well already.

He was much more prompt tonight. Pym dropped him at the South wing entrance just shy of eight, and the waiting Armsman whisked him up to the third floor, towards the wing of the Residence housing Gregor's own apartments. They fetched up in a small glassed-in balcony off Gregor's private sitting room. The Armsman bowed and silently withdrew, and Miles's eyebrows rose as he took in the table set for two only. Gregor had not yet arrived, and Miles restrained his curiosity as he stepped to the glass. Snow flurried past, only a few centimeters from his nose, not fresh powder brought by yet another storm, but simply old snow driven about before the powerful north winds. It was going to be a very cold night, Miles could already tell by the aches in artificial bones that his doctors insisted were entirely psychosomatic. But the balcony was a haven, a warm bubble of sheltered stillness.

Gregor's arrival was heralded by only one quiet footstep. "Sorry I've kept you waiting," he said, pausing a moment in the doorway, then bypassing the table and joining Miles at the glass wall.

"Anything important?" Miles asked automatically.

Gregor's lips compressed, and he shook his head. "No business tonight, please, Miles," he said, leaning his forehead against the glass. "Let's talk about something else."

"Of course," Miles said. Gregor did look tired, just a little worn around the edges. He was probably after a simple, uncomplicated evening in good company. Miles could give him no less. He waited a polite moment for Gregor to supply his topic of choice, but the Emperor was silent, face still and pensive as he looked out into the snow. Miles shoved his hands in his pockets and waited some more. Snow. White. Probably very cold and wet. What in the world could be so fascinating out there?

"You know," Miles said finally, "I used to think you were utterly off your high Vor rocker."

Gregor turned his head, eyebrows rising. "Used to?"

"It was that thing you did," Miles explained, squinting in recollection. "When we'd go to Vorkosigan Surleau, mostly. You'd just sit on the dock and stare into the lake for hours on end, thinking only you knew what."
"You used to splash me to get my attention," Gregor said, lips curving up. "And you'd pull me into the water by my ankles and drag me off on whatever hare-brained scheme you'd come up with that day. I don't think it ever occurred to you that I was simply exhausted from trying to keep up with you in the first place." They laughed quietly for a moment, content in the flood of shared memories. Then Gregor pushed off the glass and turned towards the table. "Dinner?"

The food was served in what Aunt Alys would have called "unseemly taste," all three courses and dessert laid out on the table in chafing dishes at once. Gregor dismissed the waiters with a flick of the fingers and served the salad himself. Miles sipped his wine, a simple, rather dry white, and controlled his impulse to babble. The more paranoid portions of his brain began concocting disastrous scenarios - Gregor fatally ill, Count Vorkosigan dead in some horrible accident, Miles's newly acquired Auditor's chain and seal to be revoked for some unthinking crime. That last would matter to him a great deal, Miles realized with some surprise as he forcibly calmed himself. He hadn't committed any crimes as bad as all that - well, at least not recently - his father was fine, Gregor was fine, and Miles needed to eat his salad and make nice, soothing conversation.

He drained his glass in a few quick swallows and contemplated another. Gregor made a quick, abortive gesture, and Miles followed his frown down to his own stubby hands on the table's edge.

"What happened to your hands?" Gregor asked, a strangely sharp edge to his voice.

Miles relaxed, turning his hands and flexing them in the light. "Kittens," he said succinctly. "Kittens everywhere."

Gregor eyed the vivid, red scratches with disfavor. "And you wanted to give me one of the things?"

"Oh, they're perfect darlings when you get them alone," Miles assured him. "It's just right now they're traveling in a pack. Predators with a herd instinct. Ugh."

"Ah," said Gregor, then paused in visible calculation before deciding to go on. "I was worried for a moment that you weren't as, ah, satisfied with things as I had thought - and hoped - you were."

Miles withdrew his hands from consideration and put them to good use about his plate. "I don't know if satisfied is quite the word," he said after a pause. "I really haven't done enough of my new job to be satisfied in it."

"Haven't you?"

"That doesn't count," Miles said.

"On the contrary, I think it counts a great deal. As unpleasant as it was, don't you feel the satisfaction of a job well done?"

Miles leaned back, his lips twisting. "No," he said. "No. I just felt . . . tired. I was too worn out after everything."

"Felt?" Gregor repeated. "What about now?"

"Now . . . I'm adjusting," Miles said. "My mother says I'm integrating. It's as good a word as any. I'm getting to know myself." This was true, he realized suddenly. He wasn't so much a new person now as a reconstituted one, fragments long torn apart for their own protection finally reunited into something different than any could be separately.

"And what do you think of yourself?" Gregor asked.
Miles was reminded at just whose Betan knee Gregor had picked up that unnerving habit of going straight for the heart of everything. "I . . . think I'll do," Miles said slowly. "It's simple logic. Take something you disliked and feared too much and mix it with something you loved and prized too much, and you ought to get something more balanced, something better than either. Lord Vorkosigan is . . . growing on me."

"I'm so glad," Gregor said, and Miles looked up in time to see deep and genuine relief cross his face. "We all worried," he continued. "I was afraid of . . . well. Of quite a number of things. I'm so glad you decided not to leave us, by any method."

Miles nodded mutely, thinking of Gregor's request, the notable lack of a direct order, not to flee to the Dendarii, not to abandon Barrayar forever. An order would not have held Miles so irrevocably as the simple knowledge that, if he had found the will to go, he would have been allowed to. "Thank you," he said quietly.

They chatted about inconsequential things for the rest of the meal. Miles was careful to keep the flow of talk relaxed and rather aimless as he covertly observed his companion. Gregor was outwardly the same as always, mild-mannered, charming in a low-key sort of way. Miles wasn't quite sure how he came by the idea that his Emperor was tensed to the point of snapping in half, but the conviction was unshakeable.

"We've got two weeks of member grievances coming up," Gregor said over coffee. He looked as though the prospect of the traditional space given at the beginning of every year for individual counts to air their concerns with their districts, Barrayar at large, and oftentimes each other, was giving him a headache. No servant had appeared to clear away their dishes, Miles noted.

"I get to miss it," Miles said, with perhaps a bit too much smugness.

Gregor's lips twitched. "I could always send someone else," he said.

"Hmm," said Miles, spotting an opportunity but not entirely sure how to phrase the question. "About that. Why exactly am I going, again?"

"I think it will be . . . necessary," Gregor said, then closed his lips on anything else.

Miles waited hopefully for something further, but nothing seemed forthcoming. He decided to take the hint at last, and sat back. "And what over bred, undernourished, high-Vor bud will be gracing your company for the next few weeks, since Lady Patricia did not suit?"

"Oh, someone or other's daughter," Gregor said, mouth twisting in distaste. "I've never met the girl, but I can tell you now she will be charming, subservient, and quite taken with the idea of being Empress of Barrayar. In other words, all things I do not want."

"So you want a difficult, challenging, power-hating wife?" Miles asked, raising an eyebrow. "Gregor, do you realize you're describing my mother?"

Gregor laughed into his cup of coffee. "Not quite," he said, setting it down and laying his hands flat on the table as he gazed at Miles. "Close, but not quite."

"What do you want, then?" Miles asked, curiosity piqued. Gregor had not so much as alluded to the prospect of an Imperial marriage for over a decade, not since he had confided his lonely fears after that nearly disastrous attempt to run away from his life. If Miles could slip a clue to Aunt Alys, maybe he could make the whole thing just a little easier for her, and for Gregor. "Or don't you know?" he added, frowning.
"Oh, I know," Gregor said. "That . . . knowing has never been the problem." His fingers drummed rhythmically on the table for a moment, and then stilled. "And yourself?" he asked.

"Mmm," said Miles noncommittally. "Quinn and I . . . well. Our differences caught up with us, I suppose. And now, I don't know. I've never had much luck with Barrayaran women." He winced, recalling some of the more outstanding examples of his particular kind of luck. "I'll miss Quinn, though," he added reflectively. "But that's part of missing . . . everything else that went along with her."

"I'm sorry for that," said Gregor.

Miles waved this away. "I made my own bed, as it were."

"Yes," said Gregor thoughtfully. "You did, and quite spectacularly at that. Then again, I have come to think that no mistake can ever really occur in a vacuum. A failure in one person must in some way also be a failure in those who care for him." Miles blinked, unsure how to respond to this. "In any case," Gregor continued, smile returning, "have you considered Barrayaran men? You might have better luck there."

"Uh," said Miles, who was beginning to develop a case of conversational whiplash. "I can't say I have, no. I rather doubt Barrayaran men would consider me, anyway." He reached for the wine. Better than coffee, at the moment. "But what about you?" he hazarded, in attempts to push the conversation back to more fruitful ground. "You never did tell me exactly what it is you're waiting for."

Gregor shrugged. "Sanity," he said lightly. "An opportunity. A miracle. Just time, lately." He leaned forward and took a careful breath, as if gathering himself, and when he looked at Miles again, all humor was gone from his face. "I want someone who will want me in return, who would want me with or without the Imperium. I want someone who could be my equal. I want to know someone as deep as the soul, and be known in return. I want . . . I want to lay my hands between another's, for the first time."

Miles's breath caught. That was a powerful metaphor, a strange choice of Gregor's - surely it was a metaphor.

Gregor paused for one more breath, then reached across the table and took Miles's hands. His touch lingered for a bare, nearly tender millisecond over the kitten scratches, then he turned Miles's palms inwards towards each other, and slipped his own hands between them.

Miles stared for one blank, astonished moment, watching his smaller hands press automatically inward on Gregor's larger ones. He should probably clean his nails, he thought. Then realization arrived as if on a time delay, and Miles felt a hot rush of color flood up his neck and into his face. He snatched his hands back and grabbed the edge of the table like an anchor to reality.

"Are you out of your over-bred, under-nourished, high Vor mind?"

Gregor sat back, a shadow of a smile turning up his lips, then vanishing. "Yes," he said simply. "Very much so. It's . . . glorious."

Miles stared at him, appalled and fascinated. He didn't think he'd ever seen Gregor look so . . . alive, ever seen that much true expression on him. Gregor's eyes were alight with a quietly vulnerable look, a simple, breathless hope. He's wide-open. This is - this is him.

"Gregor," he began, then ran out of sentence. Somewhere in the back of his brain the automatic
panic switch had been flipped. A stream of distracting babble flooded through his consciousness, and he was dimly grateful that for once it did not connect automatically with his mouth.

"I had hoped that maybe you knew, that you'd guessed," Gregor said. "I had hoped it wouldn't be quite such a . . . shock."

"I had no idea," Miles managed. A sudden thought floated by in the murk, and he grabbed at it like a life preserver. "I'm going to Escobar tomorrow. Why are you sending me - why did you tell me . . . ?"

"Because I rather thought I would shock you," Gregor said. "I wanted to give you time away, a chance to think. Time away from Barrayar." He took a breath, and a part of Miles's awareness noted the way his hands knotted over each other on the tabletop. "I do not request anything of you," Gregor said, catching and holding Miles's eye. "I do not - I would not - require. I simply ask that you think, that you consider whether you could learn to, to feel as I do. Please. Forget about," he waved expressively around them. "Forget the Imperium. Let me worry about that. Just take the time to consider whether I am someone you could learn to . . . care for. If," he swallowed but held Miles's eye steadily, "if you decide - if you wish never to speak of this again, it will not be spoken of. I give you my word that there will be no . . . consequences, should you choose to forget this conversation."

Miles breathed in, carefully discarding an assortment of responses, some for sheer incoherence, others for inappropriateness (he rather thought Gregor wouldn't appreciate being called "Sire" right now). Finally, he settled on a jerky nod. "I believe you," he said truthfully. Through everything else, Miles could still feel that Gregor's word was unnecessary on a matter such as that.

Some of the tension eased from Gregor's shoulders. "Thank you," he breathed, and swiped a hand quickly across his face. "You'll take the trip to Escobar? You'll . . . think about it?"

"Yes," Miles said, nodding again. He rather suspected he wouldn't be able to turn his poor brain off ever again. Gregor asked . . . Gregor wants . . . my God. Retreat. Re-evaluate. Regroup. Miles reached for the comfort of habit, but had to cut the old drill dizzyingly short. He couldn't even consider 'respond' right now. His eyes flicked instinctively towards the door.

Gregor followed the look and rose at once. "You should probably go," he said. "You have a long trip ahead of you."

Miles stood and ducked his head, feeling suddenly and utterly transparent. He was sure that Gregor had heard his silent mantra as clearly as if he had spoken out loud. "Uh," Miles said. "Yes. Thank you for, uh, dinner."

Gregor nodded, started to say something, then changed his mind. Miles stood rooted for a moment, then jerked into motion and stepped around the table. He was nearly to the door when Gregor's voice reached him.

"Miles?"

He paused, glancing back almost reluctantly. Gregor still stood by the table, posture straight but eyes dark and worried.

"I will see you when you return from Escobar?"

He's afraid I'll run. He thinks he's scared me as bad as losing Admiral Naismith did. Has he?
"You'll see me," Miles said with conviction.


Miles nodded, controlled a reflexive, casual salute, and ducked out.
"So how long do you think this will take?" Ivan asked as he and Miles stood at a shuttleport window, watching as their minimal luggage was loaded onto a ground-to-orbit transport. "Long enough to, say, miss the rest of winter?"

"I'm not sure," Miles responded absently.

"The weather in Nuevo Santiago is supposed to be wonderful. Did you ever get to Escobar while you were . . . you know?"

"Once or twice." Miles dragged his mind reluctantly into the present. "The weather is very nice."

"Much better than this snow and sleet shit." Ivan sounded infinitely satisfied. "Hey, have you thought about dropping in on Elena?"

Oh. The thought of seeing Elena Bothari-Jesek was almost more than Miles could handle at the moment. "No," he said. "I, er, I hadn't really thought about that."

"We should," Ivan said. "I haven't seen her in a long time." Miles made a noncommittal noise, but was saved from having to reply when Ivan straightened from his casual lean and said, "I think they're ready for us."

They rode up to the courier, and were docked within half an hour. Roic was waiting for them, Pym having been left at Vorkosigan House, much to the relief of Ma Pym. This was the first solo assignment for his newest Armsman, Miles realized. Roic had come highly recommended, fresh from a rather heroic incident down in the district, but Miles had yet to form an opinion of his own. The Armsman showed them to their cabins, side-by-side virtual closets, courier ships having been built for speed and efficiency, not comfort. Miles's luggage was stored over his bed, and he spent a brief moment considering what would happen if they were to make a sudden attitude adjustment. That's why I'm bringing Ivan and Roic, to pull me out from underneath my luggage if need be. It said something about his current state of mind that the moment spent picturing his unfortunate, untimely, and rather ignominious demise beneath his own baggage was actually a welcome respite. Miles briefly considered staying inside his cabin for the duration of the trip, but in the end he couldn't quite bring himself to do it.

He made his way to the bridge, which was rather crowded between Ivan, Roic, himself, and the two ImpSec agents, a Lieutenant and a Sergeant, who would get to do the actual prisoner hauling. I used to get these sorts of assignments too, boys. Bet it'll be more fun this time.

Their pilot, already installed in his chair with headset in place, looked young enough to still be in school, to Miles's eye. But he was swift and efficient as he initiated the departure procedures, and he shifted them out of orbit smoothly. Miles didn't think that Gregor would send him out with a green jump pilot, anyway. In eight days ship time they'd be on Sergyar. Two days beyond that, Escobar.

"Thanks again, Lord Auditor Coz," Ivan said, interrupting Miles's safe, non-Gregor thoughts. "I've been itching to get off-planet." He paused. "Er, what exactly are we doing?"

"I'll give you the rundown later. It's not very exciting."

Ivan nodded and started to open his mouth. Miles beat him to it, though, and added, "I think I'm going to go to my cabin for a bit. I didn't sleep very well last night. Get me for lunch, all right?"
He fled before Ivan could say anything, and shut himself firmly in his cabin. He sat down on his bunk, took his boots off, and then laid back. He'd tried, dammit. Maybe in a couple of hours he'd be able to handle other people's company a little better. Especially if he slept.

Oh hell, who was he kidding? He wasn't going to sleep. He was going to lie here and stare aimlessly at nothing and replay the surreal conversation with Gregor in his head. Again and again and again. He wasn't entirely sure it had really happened, to be honest. He was starting to think that maybe it was all just a figment of his imagination. Maybe I've finally lost it. It's really happened this time. I've gone and cracked up and I just think that Gregor is . . . is . . . Gah.

And oh, how much easier it would be if that were true.

He had spent the entirety of the night working his brain around the sheer enormity of it, getting used to the idea. Gregor wanted . . . well, Gregor had never exactly said what he wanted, but being the man he was, Miles could make a good guess. Gregor would never have risked speaking if he didn't want something . . . permanent. Good God, what the hell was he thinking? He was the Emperor of Barrayar, and he had a duty to produce the next unlucky sod who would bear that title. Miles's brain shied away from the remembrance of stories, of a few Vor he himself knew, and at least one current Count he was sure, who produced a proper child or two with an accommodating wife, but seemed oddly more attached to a close male friend. No. He couldn't handle anything that complicated right now.

Inevitably, his thoughts circled back to the moment of revelation, the feel of Gregor's hands sliding between his. That had been . . . unexpected. Powerful. Thank God there'd been no one around to witness it. By Barrayaran law, forcing the Emperor's hands between your own was an act of treason. Miles wondered a bit dizzily what it was when the Emperor did it voluntarily. Dammit, Gregor, you are insane.

Too much. Miles's head started to ache, so he switched tactics, tried to look at it from Gregor's point of view. This had obviously been coming for a long time. Was he really so oblivious? When had Gregor started to feel this way? Why hadn't he said anything? Why had he said something now?

Aunt Alys is going to murder me. Miles made a small, helpless noise, smashed his pillow over his face, and resisted the urge to write Gregor a long, extremely manic, entirely incomprehensible letter.

And he was going to see his mother in a few days. Shit.

The eight days en route to Sergyar went by entirely too fast. Miles eventually achieved some semblance of normal behavior, though it took him long enough that Ivan began acting nervous, particularly after Miles told him what they were doing on Escobar.

"That's it?" Ivan said. "We're collecting this guy and you're getting help for your seizures. Are you sure there isn't anything else?"

"Very sure," Miles said firmly.

Ivan studied him with deep suspicion. "You're not hatching some plot, right? That little crack about you persuading me to commit treason, that was just a joke. Really."

"I assure you," Miles said dryly, "it's all on Gregor's orders."

"It's just, you've been acting a bit strange, Miles, even for you. I thought for sure something more
"No, nothing more," Miles said, and sighed inwardly. He needed to make more of an effort to act normally. "I give you my word as Vorkosigan. There is nothing more to this assignment than what I have just laid out for you."

Ivan looked somewhat mollified, though still a bit worried.

They made Sergyaran orbit in the middle of the night, ship time, on the eighth day. Miles, who wasn't asleep anyway, dragged Ivan out of bed and into the shuttle with Roic. It was three o'clock in the afternoon in the capital city - such as it was - where his parents lived. There was no use putting it off, and if they showed up early then maybe his parents wouldn't be too upset if they left early, too.

Miles peered out the window of the shuttle and down at the planet, still largely undeveloped all these years after its colonization. He wondered how it had felt to his parents, to come back to the place where they had first met, neither of them having any idea that it would change their lives. Rather like Miles had had no idea what going to dinner at the Residence the other night would mean. Might mean. Didn't have to mean. Bugger.

*He said he'd never speak of it again, if you didn't want him to.*

No. That was unthinkable, impossible. Of all the scenarios he had considered over the past eight days - and they were many and varied, from the unrealistically wonderful to the completely disastrous - simply pretending nothing had happened had not come up. He needed time, and he was infinitely grateful to Gregor for recognizing that and giving it to him, but eventually they were going to have to deal with it, one way or another.

"You ready, Miles?" Ivan asked, and Miles was startled to see that they'd landed.

"Yeah," he said, and followed Ivan into the station and out to the waiting groundcar. There was thankfully no welcoming party of parents and Armsmen and retainers, but only because Miles had not called ahead from orbit to let them know he was coming early. He'd sent a message by tight beam from Bararrayar before leaving, of course, which should have arrived nearly a week ago. It had been succinct: *On my way to Escobar on business. Stopping by Sergyar for a day or two. Leaving tomorrow. See you soon. Love, Miles.* That had been before dinner with Gregor. Now he was going to have to try his best to get out of here within twenty-four hours. As much as he would have liked to see more of his parents, it was going to take his much too perceptive mother about two minutes to figure out that something was going on, and if he was there a full two days, she just might convince him that it would be a good idea to tell her what the problem was.

Not that she thought she'd disapprove. On the contrary, Miles thought his mother would be bloody delighted at the news. She was so Betan sometimes, though. She'd probably try to give him manuals and how-to books and, oh lord, he was flashing back to The Sex Talk they'd had when he was ten. His mother had talked and shown him diagrams and pictures and his father had sat there red-faced and trying not to laugh. The mere memory could still make Miles blush.

No, his mother must not find out. And as for the-Count-his-father . . . Miles wasn't even going to think about that.

"I didn't realize that Sergyar was still so . . . rustic," Ivan commented, looking out the window as they made their way through the city streets toward the Viceroy's Palace. "Or that it was going to be so warm."
"It's summer in the northern hemisphere here right now," Miles said. "Mother says it gets pretty bad in the winter though. Worse than Vorbarr Sultana."

Ivan shuddered. "When I retire, I'm moving to the South Continent, I swear."

"They have winter there, too, you know," Miles said with a smirk. "Or have you forgotten winter training on the Black Escarpment in your captainly old age?"

"Get stuffed, you're older than I am." Ivan looked thoughtful. "Perhaps I'll marry a wealthy Vor woman and have two houses, one on each continent, and never have to endure winter again."

"Good luck finding a wealthy Vor woman. They're in short supply these days, or so I understand." Miles grinned suddenly. "I know, you can start asking Gregor's castoffs. There's certainly enough of those."

"Hmph. I'm not nearly rich enough or titled enough for them. You are, though."

"Ha," Miles said. "Right. Like any of them would look twice at me for any reason other than if you can't be an Empress, you might as well be a Countess."

The groundcar pulled up outside the Viceroy's Palace, and Miles frowned, thinking of his many allergies to Barrayaran vegetation. He hoped that he wasn't about to go into anaphylactic shock from being inside his parents' home. Or from breathing the Sergyaran air, which he hadn't really done yet.

Ivan also seemed to be hesitating. "Are you absolutely certain they fixed the worm problem?" he asked.

Miles rolled his eyes and took one last deep breath of filtered groundcar air as Roic opened his door for him.

The thing about not seeing his parents very often, Miles had discovered, was that when he did see them, they were so glad that he was still in one piece that they didn't tend to grill him about the nitty-gritty details of his daily life the way they would if he saw them every day. He hugged his mother, hugged his father, assured them both that things were just fine at home and on Barrayar in general, and that his assignment really wasn't all that important. Ivan kissed the Vicereine on the cheek, shook the Viceroy's hand, and told them that his mother and Simon said hello. Miles was rather proud of Ivan for saying "my mother and Simon" in the same breath without looking ill. Perhaps he was starting to adjust to the idea.

The Viceroy's Palace was, as his mother had once told him, not quite as grand as its name. It was roughly half the size of Vorkosigan House, built entirely out of a certain kind of Sergyaran wood, which his Betan mother still seemed to have reservations about. The Viceroy and Vicereine took Miles and Ivan on a short tour of the house and grounds, showed them to their rooms on the third floor, and then took them out on a tour of the city. On Barrayar it would have been considered more of a decent sized town. The colonists stopped and waved at the groundcar as it drove by.

"You seem very popular," Miles commented to his parents.

His mother smiled. "Half the population of this city followed us from the district. We don't worry very much about revolts."

"Give them another generation or two," the Count advised. "They still think of themselves as Barrayaran."
By the time they got back to the palace, they had encountered no worms and had no allergic reactions, and Miles was feeling pleasantly relaxed. He was making a very good show of pretending nothing was going on, he decided. He had only noticed his mother giving him one or two appraising glances, and he was fairly certain that those were just the normal motherly sort.

"How long can you stay?" she asked him over dinner. "Your note was rather cryptic."

"I'd like to leave tomorrow afternoon," Miles said.

His mother looked disappointed. "I was hoping you could stay longer. There's hardly time for us to talk if you leave tomorrow."

Exactly. "Sorry. We really should be going."

"Could you stop again on the way back?" his father asked.

Miles shook his head. "It's not very likely. We're going to have company on the way back." He briefly explained his assignment to them. And then, because the expression on his mother's face was making him feel guilty as only his mother could, he added, "But I'll try to make it back out here within the next few months. Or maybe you could come to Barrayar for Midsummer." His mother seemed satisfied with that, and Miles breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that perhaps he had successfully run the maternal gauntlet.

* *

Miles went up to bed early, leaving Ivan lounging in the informal parlor with the Vicereine and Viceroy. The windows were thrown wide open, allowing the warm, humid summer air to blow through. He was drinking a glass of chilled local wine and not reading the book he had open on his lap when he suddenly realized that the busy sounds of Uncle Aral reviewing reports and Aunt Cordelia working on her comconsole had stopped.

Ivan looked up to find both of them staring at him. "What?" he asked, trying to figure out what he was doing wrong.

"Ivan," Uncle Aral began, at the same time as Aunt Cordelia said, in a thoughtful tone, "Have you . . .." They smiled at each other, and the Viceroy made an after you gesture.

"Ivan, have you noticed Miles acting a bit . . . strangely?"

Ivan considered replying with a glib, "Stranger than normal, you mean?" But then he thought better of it, and nodded. "I've been trying to figure out what about him has been bugging me these past eight days," he said, sitting up on the couch and setting his glass of wine aside. "I'm used to Miles, you know, and he's not . . . ."

"Manic?" the Viceroy supplied.

"Insane?" the Vicereine suggested.

"Making me fear for my life and the lives of other innocent bystanders," Ivan finished. "But yeah, both of those, too. To be honest, it's sort of comforting when the little git's bouncing off the walls. When he gets thoughtful like this, that's when I start to really worry."

Aunt Cordelia nodded. "I was hoping you might know what was going on. As his parents, we get . . . slightly abridged versions of events."
Uncle Aral snorted. "When we get them at all."

"Sorry," Ivan said. "I don't know anymore than you do. But he spent a lot of time holed up in his cabin on the trip out here, and even when he came out, it was like he was a million miles away."

"Hmm." Aunt Cordelia threw her husband a speculative look.

"You don't think he'd run off and join the Dendarii now, do you?" Uncle Aral asked.

"And take me with him? I hope not!" Ivan said, wishing that he'd never made that stupid comment about treason. Talk about things biting him in the ass.

"No," Aunt Cordelia said. "I think he likes being an Imperial Auditor. If not better than he liked being Admiral Naismith, then at least as much. Don't you think so, Ivan?"

"Yeah," Ivan said slowly. "I do. But he's definitely thinking about something. I just have no idea what."

"This assignment," the Viceroy said. "It doesn't seem to be the sort of thing an Imperial Auditor would usually draw."

"That's what I thought," Ivan said. "He swears there's nothing else going on with it, though. I'm just hoping that I'm not going into some ridiculous combat situation with blinders on."

"Well, there obviously is something else," the Vicereine said. "If not with the assignment, then with Miles." She paused. "Is there someone back home Aral and I should know about?"

"He hasn't been seeing anyone, as far as I know. And my mother would have known and she would have told me, even if Miles was trying to keep it hushed up." Ivan paused, thinking. "I saw him two days before we left, at a ball at the Residence, and he seemed perfectly normal then. Or at least what passes for normal, with Miles."

"He wasn't escorting anyone?" Aunt Cordelia pressed.

"No," Ivan said. "We took turns dancing with the Koudelka girls, same as we always do."

"You're not going to be able to do that forever, you know," the Viceroy said. "They're bound to get married eventually."

Ivan grimaced. "I know, believe me. My mother reminds me of that every chance she gets." He shook his head. "I don't think it's that, really."

"Hmm," said Aunt Cordelia, cogitatively. "Miles has a particular look . . . I've seen it only a very few times before and it generally suggests . . ." she trailed off, keeping the completion of the thought to herself.

"Are you that concerned?" Uncle Aral asked her with a raised eyebrow.

She shook her head thoughtfully. "Not yet. But he's had so many life shake-ups recently, with his discharge and the seizures and the new job."

"Not to mention dying," the Viceroy added, a shadow of pain flitting across his face.

"Yes, exactly. I'm just worried that it's starting to catch up with him, now that it's all finally settling down."
"Well," Ivan said, "I'm afraid I can't help much more." He paused, and finally added, "The only out of the ordinary thing that I can think of is that Mother did mention that Gregor had him to dinner the night before we left. Made her cancel something for it, I can't remember what, but she was quite put out with him."

"Hmm," Aunt Cordelia said yet again.

The Viceroy crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing yet," she said, then shook her head. "I was going to try and talk to him tomorrow, but perhaps on second thought, I'll just leave things alone. And we can see what happens."

_You mean that I can see what happens_, Ivan thought a bit morosely. Innocent bystander. Really, that's all he ever wanted to be.

* Miles managed to extract himself and Ivan around noon the next day, much to his surprised relief. Both his parents grumbled about the brevity of the visit, but Miles repeated the promises about coming back out, and his mother made some ominous noises about a visit to Barrayar. By Sergyaran dinnertime, they were making their way out to the jump for Escobar.

Ivan roped Miles into a game of Tacti-Go to wile away a few hours. Ivan seemed cheerfully unperturbed at his first rapid trouncing, though the second coming in quick succession did make him pause a little.

"You know," Ivan said as he set up the third round, "you've got all these scars with these great heroic stories to go along with them. 'That one's from the covert mission to wherever, during which I was forced to wrestle a giant, gengineered, man-eating snake.' 'That one's from the time I was shot with a needle grenade.' Don't you think it's sort of embarrassing to be acquiring scars from kittens?"

Miles glanced down at his hands, where the vicious red gouges were fading to thin, pink lines. He didn't know what the damn thing's problem had been, he'd been trying to be friendly. Cats were supposed to like being stroked and scratched and all that mess. At least, they did if it was anyone but Miles.

_He put his hands between mine. The look on his face . . . I could hurt him so badly._

Miles lost that round.

They made Escobar orbit in good time. Miles, who was somehow still thinking like a free mercenary, had to blink a few times when orbital control diverted them to a prime vector and allowed them clearance ahead of the vessels that had been waiting before them.

"Huh," Ivan said. "I should start taking you with me to the theater in Vorbarr Sultana. It's hell finding a parking place."

There were a few minutes of debate over just who would be going down to the surface. Miles finally settled it by the simple expedient of telling Lieutenant Pires that he was just going to have to go on vacation if he wanted to see Escobar, because he had to stay aboard with the pilot to be ready in the unlikely event that Miles accidentally started a war and they had to run very fast. _I'm not that bad of a diplomat. Really. Just sort of . . . new._ Sergeant Yiven, however, would be required to handle their prisoner should they manage to extract him quickly. Personally, Miles would rather leave the blighter for the Escobarans to worry about until he'd settled his other business, but he still wasn't sure just how much of a hassle a bureaucratic extraction was going to be. So work first it
was, followed by a visit to the doctor. And then, if they had time, Ivan would probably insist on tracking Elena down.

They were met by a reception committee of three at the shuttleport. Roic, at Miles's shoulder and firmly in body guard mode, shifted uneasily until he spotted the glittering ImpSec eyes on the collars of two of the men.

"Lord Auditor Vorkosigan?" one of the ImpSec men inquired, looking in some confusion from Ivan in his undress greens to Sergeant Yiven, to Miles and Roic in Vorkosigan House uniform.


The third man, an older fellow in civilian dress whose face Miles dimly recalled seeing around the Vor social circuit some years ago, accepted Miles's hand readily enough.

"Likewise, likewise," he said, nodding a greeting to Ivan.

"This is Captain Vorpatril, Armsman Roic, and Sergeant Yiven," Miles introduced.

"Colonel Oswold, and his second Lieutenant Brade," Vortinde returned.

"You're ranking on Escobaran Affairs?" Miles asked, nodding to the Colonel. Barrayar could hardly sustain the sort of closely scrutinized sector control on Escobar that it could in its own domain, but it did keep a well-staffed outpost on the planet, both for the use and protection of the Barrayaran ambassador and any other citizens passing through, and also as one small link in the vast net of information gathering and intelligence activity that spanned practically the entire known nexus.

"Yes, my Lord Auditor," Oswold confirmed. "I spend most of my time downside these days. We have enough agents to have a presence on all the jump point stations, so I can concentrate on other matters. Speaking of which," he reached into his pocket and withdrew what appeared to be a standard comlink on a wristband. Miles accepted it, eyebrows rising. His parents had worn these during the Regency, and Miles himself had been similarly subjected a few times in his life. "The emergency button is linked directly to a pager I will be carrying at all times," Oswold explained. "At least within the city limits, if you press it, we should have a squadron at your location within three minutes."

An awful lot can happen in three minutes. "Are you expecting trouble, then?" Miles asked, slipping the comlink around his wrist below his secure link to Roic.

"No," Oswold said, with the sort of grimace that Miles's former ImpSec eye easily parsed as reasonable, if not sufficient doubt. He suppressed the urge to demand the exact analyst statistics - if they'd pegged the chance of an incident at more than five percent, he'd be getting a lot more than an emergency wrist com right now.

He satisfied himself with a simple, "Ah," and fit the com more snugly to his wrist.

"If you'll come this way, my Lord Auditor," Ambassador Vortinde said, gesturing them towards the corridor. "I have an aircar waiting."

"What's the status with the prisoner?" Miles asked, deciding not to waste any time.

"Rapidly improving," Vortinde said, lips twitching. "Barrayar and Escobar are reasonably cordial at the moment, but the wheels of Escobaran justice turn notably slowly. You know how it is - they know we want him, so they're holding out a bit just to be difficult and to see if they can get
"Let me guess," Miles put in. "We caught one of theirs not long ago and did the same thing."

"But of course," Vortinde said.

“They're also lording it over ImpSec,” Oswold added sourly. "That they got one we missed." The reality of this obviously rankled.

"I'd been working on prying him loose for a few weeks when the word came that you were on your way,” Vortinde continued. "After that, the Escobarans became much more cooperative. I'm thinking of suggesting that next time they simply threaten to send an Auditor but don't actually trouble one about it - just the idea seems to have done the trick." He paused a moment, glancing curiously down at Miles as they emerged into the crisp air of an early Escobaran spring morning. The Escobarans had a long history of extremely foresighted environmental controls, which had left their planet, centuries after settlement, a near paradise of clean air and sweeping, undisturbed forest. Even here, in the heart of the capital city, trees grew evenly spaced along the pavements, and there was a crisp, green flavor to the air. Miles suppressed a sneeze and inwardly groaned.

An aircar was indeed waiting, and Roic moved forward to hold the door as they all settled in. "If I may ask," Vortinde said as they lifted off and moved into the light city traffic, "exactly why were you sent, Lord Auditor Vorlgsigan? This hardly seems a matter that would require you to come all the way from Barrayar."

Out of the corner of his eye, Miles saw Ivan perk up with interest. "Ah," Miles said, sitting back as a little devil of mischief took over. "I'm afraid that's classified, Ambassador."

Ivan threw him a triumphant, slightly nervous look, but then subsided with an eye roll when Miles only winked.

"Ah," the ambassador said, eyes widening a little. "I understand. Ahem. Well then, my wife and I would be honored to have you stay with us in our home tonight, and as long as you are here on Escobar. Would you rather go there first and rest for a time, or would you prefer to head directly to the District Adjudicator's office?"

"Adjudicator, please," Miles said instantly. "Let's get this done with."
Chapter 3

As it turned out, Vortinde's reading of the situation was dead accurate. Miles had only to present himself to the adjudicator, complete with formal sounding phrases about the Emperor's Voice and the wishes of the Imperium for the entire process of extradition to put itself on fast-forward. It was nice to know, Miles reflected, that though he had no legal power on Escobar, his position and Barrayar itself were taken seriously enough for the adjudicator not to want to bother making a fuss for a matter this small. They waited only half an hour while all the appropriate documents were produced, Miles deployed his seal and signature at the relevant places, and it was all over.

"This was what I was trying to avoid," Miles muttered to Ivan as they waited for the prisoner to be transported from the local lock-up. "Now we're going to have to worry about securing him for however long we're here."

"Send him topside," Ivan said, shrugging. "Not much he can do from a locked cabin."

At that moment the man himself appeared, escorted by two burly Escobaran security officers. He was a slight fellow, younger than Miles had been expecting. He blinked uneasily around him at the people waiting, his eyes widening a bit when he spotted Oswold and Brade's pins.

"Ah," Miles said genially. "The man himself. We've come to escort you back to Barrayar, as I'm sure you know. Care to tell me what you were doing at the Imperial Science Institute?"

He was met by a surly silence.

Miles shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask," he said. "We'll get it out of you eventually. Though with that allergy of yours, it might . . . take a while."

The eyes widened a little, but the lips remained stubbornly sealed.

"All right," Miles said with a sigh. "Sergeant Yiven, please escort the prisoner back topside and secure him. Don't worry about any sort of interrogation - we'll leave that to the boys at home."

Yiven nodded, saluted, and took charge of the prisoner with cool efficiency.

"What will ImpSec really do with him?" Ivan asked curiously, watching them go. "I mean, can they really, you know, use other methods?"

"Well, it wasn't a small incident," Miles said. "I'm sure they're very eager to find out how he managed to get into the Institute, let alone off Barrayar. I'm quite interested in knowing what they eventually get out of him, actually. What could he think he was doing? And where is he from? He's not Escobaran and not one of ours. The name didn't pull up anything in the security files. Ah yes, thank you," he added, as the adjudicator began ushering them pointedly towards the door. "So nice doing business with you."

They all fetched up on the sidewalk outside the adjudicator's office, and Miles glanced at his chrono, surprised to see so little of the morning spent.

"Ah, Ambassador Vortinde, could we possibly trouble you for your car?" Miles asked. "I have a few errands I'd like to run. We can drop you at your office, of course."

"Certainly," Vortinde said. "My driver can take you to my residence as soon as you're ready."
As it turned out, ImpSec Escobar held its offices in the same building as the consulate, so they shed Vortinde, Oswold, and Brade all at once.

"You don't have to come along if you don't want to," Miles said to Ivan as the canopy closed again. "I imagine it will be quite boring."

"Actually," Ivan said, "I'm curious. The only clone I've ever met is Mark, and he's hardly what I'd call a normal specimen. I'd like to meet some more."

"Well, I wouldn't be expecting normal," Miles said dryly, and gave Vortinde's driver directions to the Durona Clinic, located in the outskirts of the capitol.

The building was bright and modern, at least twelve floors occupied solely by the Duronas. They were, it seemed, doing better than their wildest hopes.

Miles had called ahead from orbit, and though he hadn't spoken to Rowan directly, he'd been told to stop by anytime. The receptionist passed them straight on up to the sixth floor, where Rowan herself met them, trailed by two more Duronas, one older and one younger.

"You look much better than when I last saw you," Rowan said, shaking Miles's hand with a minimum of awkwardness.

"Being alive agrees with me," Miles said, and introduced Ivan and a slightly wide-eyed Roic.

"This is Willow, and this is Astor," Rowan said, gesturing first at the older Dr. Durona, then the younger. "Willow specializes in neurology, and Astor in nervous system disorders."

"Ah," Miles said, slightly daunted. It was unnerving, he reflected as Rowan showed them to a combined office and examination room, to think of one's body in bare physical terms of its parts. Where exactly, in the flow of neurotransmitters and the sparking of nerves, did Miles Vorkosigan come from?

The three doctors grilled Miles briefly for more details about his seizures. He'd brought his stimulator along to show them, and they examined that, too, with judicious nods of approval. Miles rather wished Ivan had waited outside, but his cousin sat, unmoving and attentive, and Miles could hardly ask him to leave now.

Finally, Rowan sat back and steepled her hands. "So," she said, glancing at her colleagues, "let's get started. A complete neurobiological mapping first, I think."

Miles sighed, and submitted with as much grace as he could manage. Tests. How had he known?

He spent the next several hours in a variety of uncomfortable positions, usually with his head clamped between two padded blocks while various machines whirred and beeped over it. Ivan did come in handy then, keeping Miles entertained and distracted with a steady stream of chatter and anecdotes and off-color jokes. Miles was grateful beyond reason.

Rowan finally released him in mid-afternoon. "We've done everything I think we can do," she said, helping Miles sit up.

"Anything useful?" he asked hopefully.

"Hmm. I really can't tell yet. I have a few ideas, but I'll need to look at all the test data much more closely. Are you staying on the surface?"
"At the Barrayaran ambassador's residence," Miles said. "Uh, do you have any idea how long . . .?"

"At least a day," she said. "I'll call you tomorrow afternoon whether I have something or not, just to check in. There's a possibility you'll need to come back in for a few more tests, but I'm not sure yet."

"Thank you for doing this," Miles said, accepting his comlinks and tunic from Roic and slipping them back on. "I know you must be busy. You all seem to be doing very well for yourselves."

"We are," Rowan agreed, moving to walk out with them. "We had so little money when we first got here that we had to devote all our resources to practicing. But now that we have a solid and rather exclusive client base, we've been able to return much of our attention to research."

The lift tube doors opened as they approached, and a younger Durona rushed out. "Oh, there you are," she said, spotting Rowan. "Lily needs you. She thinks she's got something."

"I'll be right up," Rowan said, her eyebrows rising.

"What's that about?" Miles asked, as they all piled into the lift.

"Oh," Rowan said absently, her mind obviously already upstairs, "our newest research. It's fabulously exciting. We're not entirely sure yet, but we think we've found a viable procedure for androgenesis." She rolled her eyes a little at their blank looks. "A way to combine two male genetic codes."

Miles blinked. "Combine . . . you mean in a child?"

"Well, we're certainly not ready for that yet," Rowan said, laughing a little. "But potentially, in the long-run, yes."

"You've figured out a way for two men to have a kid together?" Ivan said, startled.

"In a uterine replicator," Miles said quickly, seeing the disturbed look on Ivan's face. "Right?" he added to Rowan, a little uneasily.

"Oh yes," she said, smiling in bemusement. "They haven't tried a physical modification of that nature even on Jackson's Whole. No, this procedure would potentially occur entirely in the lab, just the same as any replicator fertilization. A bit more complicated than the norm - there has to be much more finite control and manipulation of almost every gene complex - but theoretically it is possible. Researchers have been trying to make it work since the advent of the uterine replicator, in fact."

"You're making history," Miles said as they reached the ground floor.

"We're nowhere ready to go public with it yet," Rowan said, walking with them to the outer door. "But yes, someday, perhaps. It's all very exciting." She bid them absent-minded farewells and hurried back to the lift. Watching her go, Miles hoped a bit uncharitably that she would manage to redirect some of her enthusiastic abstraction onto Miles's own problem, and quickly.

"What now?" Ivan asked, blinking in the bright sunlight. "I'd like to find a com number for Elena, if there's nothing else to do today."

"Let's go to Vortinde's residence," Miles said. "We should probably have dinner there - the politic thing to do. And Baz and Elena live up on one of the orbital stations, I think. We probably won't be able to see them until tomorrow."
They were received at the ambassador's comfortably airy residence by his equally comfortably aging wife. Miles left the details of the next day's activities entirely to Ivan, and spent a pleasant afternoon and evening in the house library, taking a break only to eat Madame Vortinde's excellently prepared dinner with the ambassador and several other notable Bararrayans currently on planet. He retired early, politely evading the prospect of hours spent sipping brandy with the ambassador and company.

He rousted Ivan, who had sat up for hours drinking brandy and had the bleary eyes to show for it, early the next morning.

"We're not meeting Elena and her husband until lunch," Ivan said through a yawn. "What in hell do you want with me now?"

"Nothing," Miles said, throwing the curtains wide open and watching Ivan moan and dive for the covers like a vampire before the flood of sunlight. "Just a little entertainment."

Ivan was more himself by the time they departed for the central city park where they were to meet Elena and Baz. The place was a treasure trove of healthy growth to Miles's Bararrayan eye. He wondered if the Escobarans knew just how lucky they were, possessing a planet which both supported ample native vegetation, and sprouted earth-types with almost no prompting. One day, far beyond Miles's lifetime, Bararray might look like this.

They settled around a table at an outdoor café to wait. Miles rested his chin in his cupped palms, letting Ivan and Roic's conversation pass him by as he people watched. He wondered what would have happened if, by some strange trick of numbers or tactics or just luck, Bararray had taken possession of Escobar. It probably wouldn't be quite such a pleasant place, he thought cynically.

It took him at least five seconds to realize that the couple striding towards their table was Elena and Baz. They were both dressed in the Escobaran style for one thing, loose, flowing garments in bright colored fabrics. For another, they simply looked different. Not really any older, but with something indefinable underneath. *Is that what settled happiness looks like?*

He rose at the same moment Elena spotted him. She broke into a run and in the next moment they were hugging like their lives depended on it.

"My God," she said, stepping back and staring down at him. "I'm furious at you - not a word since we left - it's so good to see you."

Miles grinned, looking up at her with delight. Seeing her again was like hearing the melody of an old song, something so basic and beloved it was nearly engraved into his psyche.

Miles shook Baz's hand, and watched as Elena and Ivan hugged, said a few nice things to each other, then fell directly into a bickering match which had apparently been on hold for over a year since they'd last seen each other. Roic was silent and wide-eyed, watching Elena with curious awe. The legend of Armsman Bothari, Miles suspected, still a presence in Vorkosigan House, was making Roic a bit nervous.

They settled around the table and ordered lunch. Miles watched Baz and Elena as covertly as possible, although why he wasn't entirely sure. Was he checking to make sure she was happy? Curious about the lives they had made for themselves? Jealous?

He apologized profusely for his long, unforgivable silence, and brought them up to date on the changes in his life in a few brief sentences. Amazing, he thought, how few words it took to say, "My life has changed. I have changed. It wasn't easy. I'm not done yet."
When he was finished, Elena sat silent for a long moment, studying him. "I hope you won't take it the wrong way if I tell you I'm relieved," she said at last.

Miles's eyebrows shot up. "I wasn't that much of a menace to the galaxy," he said, a bit indignantly.

"Oh yes you were, and you know it," she said, waving that away. "I meant I'm glad you were able to get out without doing it in a body bag. Again." The shadow of that time fell over the table for a moment, and it took an effort to shake it off.

"You and Baz did it all right," he said. "Why couldn't I?"

"Huh," Elena said. "But you have always insisted on being utterly yourself, and that usually involves high drama. Besides, Baz and I had each other. That made it infinitely easier." And Miles had no one, not then and not now. Was marriage really all he was coming to believe it could be? His own parents made it seem as easy as breathing, but they were... them. The Admiral and his Captain. Miles had never quite believed in his own ability to have something like that, but if Elena and Baz could manage it... 

"We have news," Baz said, possibly sensing the awkwardness that trailed Elena's last words.

"Oh?" Miles asked, intrigued.

The two of them exchanged an entirely private look, then Baz dug into his pocket and produced a holocube. He turned it on, studied it for a moment with a strange smile on his face, and then passed it across the table to Miles. Miles took it, frowned, and squinted in incomprehension.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

Elena scowled at him. "Our daughter," she said severely.

Miles looked again at the strange mass of... something. Yes, now that he knew what to look for that could be a head, and those small, barely formed arms. "A bit undercooked," he said judiciously.

Elena made an outraged sound and reached for the cube. Miles whisked it out of her reach, staring in subdued fascination. Finally, deciding he'd messed with Elena enough, he passed it to Ivan.

"She's beautiful," he said, having no doubt of the eventual truth of that. Any child of Elena's, of Baz's, of theirs, would have to be. "How long...?"

"Almost three months," Elena said, taking the holocube from Ivan and hugging it close, her eyes shining.

"Are you nervous?" Ivan put in curiously.

"Oh God, yes," Elena said. "It's terrifying. Humbling. It's like my place in the universe has moved. I'm not just myself anymore. I'm a mother." She paused, a little self-consciously. "I can't wait."

Miles reached for his water. He suddenly couldn't speak through a wave of sharp, poignant longing. He'd been looking for a Lady Vorkosigan for a very long time. Have I been looking in the wrong place? What do I want? I want... I want an equal. I want balance, someone to hold me to the ground when I need it, but who can also lift me into heaven. I want to know someone to the soul. I want to be known.

He took an inordinately long time over his water, then bent his head when he set the glass down.
His heart was thumping mysteriously fast in his chest. *Have I been wrong, all this time? Could I have just not known what I wanted? Or did I know after all? Gregor feels that, exactly that. Except he thinks I'm the one who can make it happen.*

Elena and Baz took them on a stroll through the park after lunch. They stopped at the Escobaran memorial to the Barrayaran invasion, which Miles had never actually seen before. It was poignant, yet somehow serene, a monument not only to the dead on both sides, but to the great progress of healing that had occurred since then.

Two men brushed by, arm in arm, obviously lovers. Miles's eye catalogued them in a way it might not have before, looking for clues or enlightenment or just plain data. The shorter blond glanced down, and Miles thought he saw the light of startled recognition in cool blue eyes. He blinked, taking a second look, searching for an echo of recollection, perhaps someone Admiral Naismith had once encountered. But there was nothing, and the man passed on, already asking his companion where they should go next. *Stop staring, boy. You've seen their kind before, many, many times.*

"Do you like it here?" Miles asked as they moved on up the path. "Escobar, I mean?"

"We don't actually come down too often," Baz said. "The station is surprisingly spacious and comfortable."

"I'm sort of surprised more Barrayarans don't end up here," Miles said thoughtfully, glancing around. "It has everything - advanced technology, lots of space, a growing economy."

"Beta's more fun," Ivan said. "A lot more screwing there."

"Just more public screwing," Miles said absently. "Really, though," he continued, "I think this is an excellent place to send young Barrayarans for their education. I never spent enough time here before to really appreciate it, but I'm rather growing to like -"

Behind him, Roic made a sudden movement which, though Miles had his back turned, had the feel of alarm. He glanced up, reflexively scanning the path and the trees on either side. Then suddenly Roic slammed into his back, knocking him face first onto the ground. Miles had only one instant of horrified understanding as Roic's weight landed atop him, barely a millisecond of recognition. *I know that. I've seen that before. The last time I saw that-*

There was a horribly familiar buzzing, seeming to pass right over Miles's head, and then a sound like a hundred axes striking a log at once. Roic's stunner was suddenly right at Miles's eye level as he fired up from the ground. Miles sucked in a lungful of air, coughing a little on the dirt, and wriggled, extracting his own weapon with some difficulty under Roic's greater weight and bulk. He tried to lift his head, but Roic yelled something incomprehensible and mashed his face back down. Miles spat dirt and sighted along Roic's firing line, adding his stunner to the mix. Somewhere off to his left he heard more stunner discharges - some of them were still alive, then.

"M'lord!" Roic shouted, scrabbling at Miles's wrist.

Oh, right. ImpSec. Miles twisted his hand, stabbed at the button once, then again. What had Oswold said? Three minutes. They could all be dead in three minutes. He risked another lift of his head, more cautiously this time, squinting through a haze of dirt, and were those fragments of wood showering down on them? One caught him across the cheek with a sharp sting. Where the hell was the target?

"The treeline, m'lord," Roic panted into his ear. "Roll to your left on the count of three, and don't
stop until you fetch up against the trees. One, two -" and before Miles could protest that he couldn't
very well fire from that angle Roic had shifted off him and given him a mighty shove. Miles
skidded across the path, landing with a thump against the trunk of a tree whose girth he couldn't
have circled with his arms stretched wide. He turned back at once, sharp-focused and quick with
adrenaline. Roic was coming across the path at a crouch, still firing up into the treetops to Miles's
left. He caught a glimpse of Ivan rolling in the opposite direction, stunner in hand, and Baz and
Elena farther back, just scrambling into the tree cover across from Miles's position. To his right, on
the opposite side of the path, the twisted remains of what had once been an oak tree stood in the
center of a still settling cloud of nearly pulverized wood fragments. The last time I saw one of
those, Miles's thought finished, I died.

"I think he's gone, m'lord," Roic said, arriving beside him and pushing him farther back. "Either
that or I got him and he's unconscious over there, but I don't think so."

"He was in the tree top," Miles said. "Did you see him?"

"Not really," Roic said, still scanning the path with hyper alertness. "Just the movement, and then
the grenade launcher."

Miles glanced back to the remains of the tree. "Nice reflexes," was all he could manage. It's okay.
They missed. Everyone's fine. He stared up the path one way, then the other. He was just beginning
to shake in reaction.

"You're bleeding," Roic said sharply, looking at him for the first time.

"Just a little cut," Miles said, gingerly touching his cheek. "Just a piece of wood, I think, not . . .
you know." He glanced across the path to where Elena and Baz had taken cover, tried not to
imagine coming back to Barrayar with an orphaned uterine replicator.

The sudden roar of a motor overhead had Roic pushing him around the tree and moving into cover
position. Miles waited, stunner in hand and pointed at the sky, as an aircar came in for a landing
fast enough that the engine nearly stalled. The canopy popped, and bless their quick-reacting little
hearts, a crowd of uniformed ImpSec guards boiled out.

"It was a needler from the tree top," Roic shouted, rising to his feet and gesturing with his stunner.
"I fired, but I don't think I got him."

Roic sounded upset, Miles realized with the part of his brain that was still noting these things. "It's
all right," he said automatically, but his Armsman didn't hear him, as he was still filling the ImpSec
agents in on the . . . the good God, the assassination attempt. Miles moved forward to stand next to
Roic, and was instantly surrounded. Tall Barrayarans, damn all of them, cutting off Miles's view as
a small group broke off and began cautiously working their way into the trees where Roic had
directed.

"Miles!" Ivan called. Miles looked up to see his cousin shoving his way through the circle of
ImpSec guards. "Get out of my fucking way, I don't give a fuck about your goddamn eyes, move
your ass NOW. Oh thank God," he said, coming to an abrupt halt as soon as he saw Miles standing
there, very much alive and unbloody, except for the scratch across his cheek. "I couldn't see," he
explained breathlessly. "I dove the other way, and I couldn't see."

"I'm fine," Miles said. "So are Elena and Baz, I saw them go -" He broke off and gestured.

Ivan peered over the heads of the ImpSec guards and nodded. "I see them. They can't get through.
Hold on." He began pushing his way towards them, back through the crowd.
"My Lord Auditor." Oswold presented himself in front of Miles. "The assailant appears to no longer be in the area. However, we did find this."

It was the blunt-nosed, silver needle grenade launcher, suspended in a transparent evidence sheath. "Does it have a serial number?" Miles asked. Good boy, you know how to do this. Keep at it and maybe you won't think about how close you came to ending up as one of the Duronas' projects . . . again. Or have a seizure. Miles winced at the very idea and tried to take several deep, calming breaths.

"Yes," Oswold said. "We're attempting to trace it right now. We need to get you inside, my lord."

Miles nodded jerkily and then stopped. "Wait," he said, "Ivan, Elena, Baz -"

"We've got them. Please, my Lord Auditor."

"I want to come back," Miles said stubbornly, even as Oswold loaded him into the waiting aircar. Roic stuck to him like a limpet, still looking around as if he expected an army to descend upon them. "After your lot is done, I want to look around the scene myself."

"I promise you that we're doing everything we can," Oswold said patiently, and signaled to the driver to pull out. Miles leaned back in the seat and willed his heart to return to its normal pace. Someone had just tried to kill him. But . . . but why? I'm not doing anything worth killing me over at the moment! That was not, of course, strictly true. Lord Vorkosigan had his fair share of political enemies, both personally gained and inherited from his parents . . . though not that many who would come all the way to Escobar to assassinate him. Especially when he'd just spent four months in Vorbarr Sultana, attending every ball and social gathering he couldn't weasel his way out of.

There were other possibilities, of course. On an Imperial Auditing assignment, there was always the chance that someone would get their nose bent out of shape over something. Perhaps whomever Daley worked for wanted Miles out of the way. But that didn't make much sense, really, since Daley would have eventually been extradited to Bararray with or without Miles. If that was the reason, then it had been a very, very stupid thing to do, since an attempt on the life of an Imperial Auditor was tantamount to one on the life of the Emperor himself.

And then there was the third, and potentially the most frightening, possibility. That the attempt had not been because of Miles himself, but because of Gregor, and Miles's prospective . . . relationship to him. Picking off an emperor's . . . lovers was a sufficiently popular pastime on Bararray to nearly make it into a sport. But no one can know yet, right? I barely even know!

Miles shook his head and stared out the window as the city blew by below. He was going to have to wait on the serial number, he knew. In the meantime, he could go back to the scene as soon as Oswold would let him, see if he could find anything that ImpSec had missed, unlikely as that was. He'd probably make a huge nuisance of himself, but right at that moment, he didn't give a shit. Someone had just shot at him with a needle grenade, and he wanted to know who, dammit, and he wanted to know very, very quickly.

He was hustled into ImpSec Escobar headquarters, where he found Baz, Elena, and Ivan waiting for him. One of the agents politely requested that Miles stay in the waiting area (which had no windows) until further notice, saluted crisply, and took his leave.

"Sorry," Ivan said quickly. "I went to get Baz and Elena and then they wouldn't let me back through."
"It's all right," Miles said. "They just shoved me into an aircar." He looked at Elena, who was white as a sheet, clutching Baz's hand. "Are you all right?"

She didn't answer. "We're fine," Baz said quietly. "It's just . . . we didn't expect this. This isn't our life anymore."

"I know," Miles said. "I didn't expect it either. I'm sorry."

"If - if they had . . . oh God." Elena looked on the verge of tears. Miles realized with a great deal of discomfort that it had been years since he had seen her cry. "Miles, I'm sorry, but I think Baz and I should go as soon as they let us. I can't . . . I'm a mother now. This is why we left the Dendarii."

It stung, but Miles had expected it, had thought of it himself. "I know," he said with a long exhalation. "And I agree. It shouldn't be more than a couple of hours." He grimaced. "At least I hope not." He glanced at Roic, who hadn't made a peep. "It's all right," he said. "You did very well."

"I should have gotten him," Roic said, shaking his head. "I had a clear shot at one point, I think. I should have had him."

"You were shooting from a very awkward angle," Miles said. "And you did what you needed to do, which was shove me out of the way. Leave the rest to ImpSec." Roic still looked unhappy, but there wasn't anything more Miles could do about it.

"What about you?" Ivan asked. "You're sure you're okay, right? You're not going to have a seizure?"

Miles shook his head. "If I were going to have one from the stress, I'd have done it by now. I'll need to induce one soon though, either tonight or tomorrow."

Ivan nodded, looking relieved.

A medic arrived to tend Miles's cheek with disinfectant and liquid sealant, over his protests that it was nothing. Miles decided, for the sake of ImpSec's collective blood pressure, not to mention the numerous bruises and aches he was just beginning to feel. Roic was quite a heavy fellow.

Oswold came for them much more quickly than Miles had anticipated. He allowed Elena and Baz to go after a short questioning. They hadn't seen anything more than anyone else, having been too busy diving for cover. Miles hugged Elena good-bye, and apologized again. She told him it wasn't his fault and that everything was fine, but he could see in her eyes that she was eager to leave as soon as possible.

"Bring little Elena to Barrayar someday, all right?" Miles said, just as they were leaving. "I know you hate the place, but it's in our blood. We can't escape it."

Elena gave him a sad half-smile. "You can't. I did, and I'd be perfectly happy to never go back. But someday, maybe, so she'll know where her parents came from."

"Did you trace the needler?" Miles asked Oswold as soon as Baz and Elena had gone.

"Yes, My Lord Auditor. And the results were very interesting. If you'd like to come up to my office . . ."

"Yes," Miles said, relieved to be out of the windowless cell.
Oswold’s office was standard ImpSec issue, no frills. Ivan and Miles seated themselves in front of his desk. Roic remained standing by the door. "Who owns it?" Miles asked without preamble.

"The grenade launcher was bought on Escobar, by a man named Harl Teppin," Oswald said. "A known Cetagandan galactic intelligence agent, according to ImpSec files."

Miles’s eyebrows rose. "A Cetagandan? Are you sure?"

"Yes, my Lord Auditor."

"What rank?"

"A ghem-captain."

"That’s . . . strange." Miles said, suppressing several stronger adjectives. What the hell did the Cetagandans think they were doing, trying to start a war? An attack on one of the Emperor’s Auditors could very well be the opening shot of hostilities. "Diplomatic relations between Barrayar and Cetaganda are unusually good right now, or so I thought," he added after a moment.

"They are," Oswold said in agreement, clearly as perplexed about the situation as Miles.

"I want to go back to the scene," Miles said firmly.

Oswold suddenly looked as if he was developing a headache. "Perhaps, my Lord Auditor, it would be better if you waited until tomorrow. My agents won’t be through there until almost dark, and you looking over their shoulders may prove . . . distracting."

Part of Miles wanted very badly to press the issue. He could, after all, demand to be taken back to the scene immediately. But it would not endear him to Oswold, or to the other agents, and they were after all trained ImpSec operatives. They knew what they were doing, and Miles thinking that he could do it better was nothing but hubris. But still.

"All right," he finally said, to Oswold's visible relief. "Tomorrow morning. At 0800 hours." On his right, Ivan gave an almost silent sigh, but Miles couldn't tell whether it was relief at not having to go back today or annoyance at the early hour.

"Yes, my Lord Auditor. Now, if you'd like, I can have a car take you back to the ambassador's residence. We will, of course, be increasing the normal complement of surveillance and personal guard, on your person as well as the house. I have," he sighed, "a large stack of paperwork to do, and I want to send my report on the incident to Barrayar as soon as possible."

"I need to send a report as well," Miles said.

Oswold nodded. "Of course, my Lord Auditor."

Miles, Ivan, and Roic returned to the ambassador’s residence shortly thereafter. The ambassador and his wife, who had, of course, been informed about the incident, were concerned and accommodating. After dinner - and after telling Ivan that they were leaving to investigate the scene at eight o’clock sharp, so lay off the brandy, please - Miles went up to his room and sat in front of the comconsole. He briefly questioned his impulse to send a personal message. Would Gregor read it as a tacit declaration of his decision? And for that matter, was it one? I need more time, dammit. But no. He would have sent a personal message as a matter of course even before that momentous dinner. He was just overthinking. He straightened his shoulders, turning towards the comconsole and trying to look healthy and unharmed. He didn't have any idea what to say, so finally he opted for short and to the point, since his only other option was long and rambling.
"I'm sure you'll have read my report," he began, "and Colonel Oswold's too, but I thought I'd send this as well so that you can see for yourself that I'm fine." He paused. "Don't worry, all right? Everything is under control."

He waited a moment for inspiration, then ended the message with no further words. Whatever he was eventually going to say to Gregor, it shouldn't be over comconsole.

He then spent an hour composing the most succinct report he could manage - which wasn't all that hard, really, since he'd been face down in the dirt for most of the incident - and sent it and the other message to Oswold, who would forward them both out with his own. Since the messages were traveling by tight beam, they should hear back from Barrayar in a day or two.

He tested his neurotransmitter level before going to bed, as usual. It was on the high end, as he had expected, but having already made plans to investigate the site early the next morning, he decided to wait and induce a seizure tomorrow night. Or perhaps, he thought with cautious optimism, he might not have to, if the Duronas had found a solution that could be implemented quickly. If a solution that simple were possible, ImpMil probably would have found it already, but one never knew.

They left for the scene promptly the next morning. Oswold picked them up in an armored groundcar. Roic rode up front with the driver, while Miles, Ivan, and Oswold sat in the back. Miles reviewed Oswold's report of the assassination attempt, a copy of which was already on its way to Barrayar. He did a quick calculation and decided that all the reports should be in Gregor's hands by late that afternoon. He hoped that the personal message he'd included would be reassuring, but he feared it might have the opposite effect.

It appeared that the agents had found little of use at the site. They had traced the assailant's escape route through the heart of the park and to a waiting groundcar on the other side in a sparsely populated part of town. A pedestrian had seen someone emerge from the park and get into the car, which was of nondescript make and color, but hadn't been able to provide a description or a license number. In other words, all they had to go on was the serial number of the needler, and that was making Miles twitchy.

"What do you think, my Lord?" Oswold asked when Miles finally snapped the folder closed.

Miles sighed. "I don't know what to think. It's . . . it's much too easy."

"Tracing the serial number to a Cetagandan, you mean." The certainty in Oswold's voice indicated that he'd thought of this as well.

"The Cetagandans are a lot of things," Miles said. "But unprofessional and sloppy . . ." He shook his head. "No. Never. But at least it's a place to begin."

Miles spent an hour combing the site with Ivan's help while ImpSec guards kept watch around the perimeter - not that it was very likely that Miles was going to be attacked again in the exact same location. He followed the trail of trampled grass, and stood and stared at the partitioned off parking spot where the assailant's groundcar had been waiting. It failed to reveal any answers to him, and finally he gave up and allowed Oswold to take him back to the ambassador's residence.

"I didn't actually think we were going to find anything," Miles said to Ivan over lunch. "But I'd hoped."

"What do we do now?" Ivan asked, finishing off the last of the whipped cream on his chocolate cake. The ambassador's cook was not quite as talented as Ma Kosti, Miles had decided, but still
very good.

Miles grimaced and set his fork aside, though he was only halfway through his own slice. "We wait. I hate waiting."

Ivan looked worried.

Rowan called that afternoon, while Miles was pouring over Oswold's reports for the fourth time, hoping that something would jump out at him that he might have missed the first three times through. When the comconsole chimed, he jumped up immediately. He thought he might actually welcome the news that he had to come in for more tests, when the alternative was staying at the ambassador's residence and twiddling his thumbs.

"Ah, good," he said when Rowan's face appeared above the vidplate.

Her smile held genuine warmth. "I'm very glad that you're well this afternoon, Miles." The assassination attempt had, to ImpSec's annoyance, made the major Escobaran news sources. Get used to it, boys. Barrayar will have an organized news media someday, too.

"So am I," Miles said with sincerity. "It was another needler gun. I have a bit of a phobia about them, as you can understand."

Rowan nodded. "Barbaric weapons."

"Are there any that aren't?" Miles asked, a bit philosophically, and then said, before Rowan could respond, "Have you . . . found anything out?"

Rowan frowned. "Not as of yet. I've ruled out a few possibilities. It's all very idiosyncratic. Fascinating, really."

"I'm so glad," Miles said dryly.

"I might know more by tomorrow." She paused. "There is, however, the possibility that we won't be able to do anything for you."

Miles nodded. "I've been prepared for that from the beginning. But I thought this was worth a try."

"Of course."

"Do I need to come in for more tests?" he asked, a bit hopefully.

"No, not yet anyway," she replied. "I'll let you know if it becomes necessary. Do you know how long you're going to be on Escobar?"

"Not exactly. At least another three or four days, though."

"All right. I'll call tomorrow if I know something. Otherwise, I'll check in again in two days."

Miles nodded. "Thank you," he said.

"You're quite welcome," she said, and cut the com.

Miles had Roic spot him that night. He could have had Ivan do it, but Ivan had never witnessed one of his seizures before, and he preferred as few people as possible see him in such a state. He didn't know for certain what it looked like, of course, but it couldn't be very flattering. He did it lying on the floor of the guest bedroom he was staying in, so when he regained consciousness afterwards all
he had to do was spit the mouth guard out and allow Roic to help him the two feet to his bed. Just before he fell asleep, he thought about what Rowan had said, about preparing for the possibility that there might not be a solution.

*If they can make it so two men can have a kid,* he thought blearily and somewhat bitterly, *then they should be able to stop my brain from short-circuiting.*
Chapter 4

Ivan ate breakfast by himself the next morning, since Miles was still sleeping off his seizure hangover, the ambassador had left for work already, and Lady Vortinde had gone shopping. He watched an Escobaran news channel and ate Barrayaran-style groats with butter. At half past nine, the doorbell rang, and one of the ambassador's servants appeared with a package, which turned out to be copies of all the replies from Barrayar decoded from tight beam onto comconsole disks, along with one document that was obviously an original download. That one did not bear the ImpSec seal, but rather the Vorbarra coat of arms, along with the words *Do Not Duplicate* in startling red letters.

Ivan set the copies aside and stared at the small disk. A personal message from Gregor? For Miles, Ivan decided quickly. They would all just have to wait until Miles saw fit to make an appearance. He turned resolutely back to his groats and newsvid, until a tiny corner of his conscience, which often spoke in Miles's voice, informed him that the message might hold urgent instructions, in which case the results of a short delay could range anywhere from unfortunate to disastrous. And it wasn't directly addressed to Miles . . . just like him to oversleep the one time Ivan actually wanted him in charge (and in line for the blame) on this blighted trip.

The comconsole in the ambassador's study was secure. Ivan slid the disk into the machine with a vague but unsettled feeling. A few seconds later, the familiar face of his Emperor, looking more worried than Ivan had seen him in quite some time, appeared over the vidplate.

"Miles, I hope you know that telling me not to worry and that you have everything under control does not reassure me. I won't even go into the dozens of other times that you have supposedly had situations 'under control,' which by your definition seems to mean 'falling just short of disastrous.' I won't tell you that you could have been killed again, which I'm sure you know quite well, and I won't tell you to be careful, because it won't do any good. I will say that I am . . ." Gregor paused, as if editing himself. "I am relieved beyond words to know that you are all right. I hope - I hope I am not overstepping my bounds by saying so. I do not . . . presume. I thought I was sending you into a very safe situation so that you could have time to think. I never anticipated - if I had, I would not have sent you. Part of me is tempted to call you home immediately, though I know you would be furious if I did." He grimaced. "Another part of me wants to leave for Escobar as soon as humanly possible. My better judgment stays my hand in both impulses." Gregor paused again, an unreadable and distinctly odd expression on his face. "However, I would like to increase your security. I want two ImpSec agents with you at all times. I know you won't like it, but if you won't do it for your own safety, please do it for my peace of mind. I thought . . ." He stopped and seemed to prepare himself with a deep breath. "I thought that I lost you once. I never, ever want to repeat that experience."

The message ended there. Ivan skipped backwards and rewatched the last few seconds. "I thought that I lost you once. I never, ever want to repeat that experience." He froze it, and stared at his Emperor's face, trying to read the emotion in Gregor's eyes. The dawning comprehension was almost too much.

*It's a love letter. It's a fucking love letter from . . . from Gregor to Miles.*

Ivan suddenly felt very dizzy. Perhaps he ought to go lie down. Of all the things he had suspected . . . he didn't think even Aunt Cordelia could have imagined this.

Footsteps on the stares alerted him to Miles's presence. Ivan ejected the disk and went into the dining room, where he found his cousin surveying the groats, still hot in the chafing dish, with a
"Good morning," Ivan said, trying to act as though his world had not just been tipped over onto its side.

"Morning," Miles said, and spooned a small portion of groats into a bowl. He sat down to eat. "Was there a messenger?"

"Yeah," Ivan said, and handed Miles the copies of the official reports.

Miles flipped through the small stack once, and then a second time. "Is this everything?"

Aha, Ivan thought with a sinking feeling in his stomach. "No, actually." He withdrew the other disk from his pocket. "This came as well. A personal message from Gregor."

Miles stood up much more quickly than Ivan would have thought him capable the morning after a seizure. "Please give me that, Ivan."

Ivan tapped the edge of the table lightly with the disk. "As soon as you tell me what's going on."

Miles froze for a split second, and then regained his composure. "Nothing."

"I don't believe you." Ivan got up and closed the door to the dining room. "Something has been weighing on you since we left Barrayar. At first I thought it had to do with the assignment, but now I don't think so. Miles, are you..." He paused long enough to wince. "Are you sleeping with Gregor?"

"You had no right to view that!" Miles snapped. "And you have no right to ask me that!"

He pulled up short, as if realizing only after how revealing the words were, hanging in the air between them. He sagged, looking rather pitiful, but Ivan refused to relinquish any ground on this. "Answer me."

Miles sighed, and then said, simply, "No. I am not sleeping with Gregor. May I please have the disk now?"

Ivan handed it over. Miles left his bowl sitting on the table and went into the study. A few minutes later he returned, looking very subdued. He sat down at the table and began pushing groats around in his bowl. Ivan watched him and waited.

"He told me right before we left," Miles said at last. "I never saw it coming."

"What did he tell you?"

Miles sighed. "That he's in love with me. God, Ivan, I don't know what to do. I never considered this. Never. I mean, imagine the political disaster. He told me not to think of it that way, but..."

"But that's not possible," Ivan managed. He was quite proud of himself for forming a complete sentence right then.

"No, I don't think it is. It's like what Elena said - the danger and the risk - that isn't their life anymore. But it's never going to not be mine. And it's certainly never going to not be Gregor's. He and I couldn't... have something and not consider the Imperium. If nothing else, he has to produce an heir someday, and I'm obviously not going to be much help there. Though I suppose if the Duronas..."
"Miles, don't you think you're getting a little ahead of yourself here?" Ivan interjected.

"I have to think about these things. Gregor doesn't want me to, he just wants me to think of the two of us. But I can't. God, your mother would have my neck in a noose."

*And mine, if she ever finds out that I knew and didn't tell her. "But . . . do you really think you could? With Gregor? With - with a man?"

Miles looked a bit startled. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, "I - er - that is . . ."

"You haven't before, have you?" Ivan asked, hardly able to believe he was having this conversation.

"No," Miles said. "Of course not."

"Have you thought about it?"

"Not really." He frowned uneasily. "Bel Thorne was . . . interested. I said no, because - well, because I didn't think I could. But with Gregor . . . I don't know, it's different. Or it could be . . . We've known each other forever."

"And he's the Emperor. Which is a lousy reason to get involved with someone."

Miles's chin jerked up in an old, familiar gesture. "He said that he would never request or require anything of me in this."

"Of course not. But still. . ." Ivan trailed off uneasily. Obeying Gregor's will was so natural as to be almost reflex. It wasn't a very nice position Gregor had gone and put Miles in, Ivan realized.

And, all right, so Miles'd had a little something with a Betan Herm, which was more of a departure from the straight and narrow than Ivan would have given him credit for. Gregor . . . well, you couldn't help wondering a little about a man who had that much nubile Vor maiden flesh thrown at him without so much as a flicker of interest. But Miles liked his women, and he liked them tall, dark, terrifying, and incontrovertibly female. Gregor seemed to be missing the essential element there. But it would be just like Miles to go plunging off into unexplored waters cheerfully unafraid, just for the hell of it, or maybe because he couldn't get his adrenaline fixes the old fashioned way anymore. And if that were the case, and if Gregor really . . . well it was hard to say who would be whose victim, after all.

No, Ivan thought, watching Miles sitting across from him, thinking. There was something distinctly fearful in the set of his cousin's jaw. Determined, but afraid. *Good. He should be afraid. I sure as hell am.* Briefly, Ivan let himself contemplate the resulting political chaos - anarchy? - that would result if they went ahead and got found out. Chaos that could, conceivably, have Ivan himself at the center, if some fool decided that Ivan was qualified for Gregor's job by dint of being the first person in line for the Imperium who was heterosexual and under the age of seventy.

But Ivan quickly let go of those thoughts, though he had the notion that once he let them take hold they'd be hard to dismiss. Miles had said nothing so far to make Ivan think that this was a sure thing. Quite the opposite, in fact. Sad as that would be for Gregor, Ivan was not particularly ashamed to admit that he'd breathe a sigh of relief for himself.

"I don't know," Miles said at last. "I love him already. It's not the same thing that he feels for me, but . . ."

"We all do," Ivan said. "He's . . . Gregor."
Miles nodded. "Exactly. But this . . . he wants something more."

Ivan swallowed. "Could you give it to him?"

"Well," Miles said quietly. "That's the question, isn't it?" He sighed. "That's harder than all the other questions, about propriety and heirs and the Imperium. Which is probably why I haven't wanted to ask it." He looked at Ivan. "Do you think it could work? Me and Gregor?"

"God, you're asking me? I have no idea. You're both a couple of nutters, that's for sure." Ivan grinned, and Miles returned it, though he looked a bit uncertain. "But you do have a way of getting what you want. And I think that if you decide that this is what you want . . ." Ivan shook his head and swiped his hand over his eyes. "Not that it wouldn't be a bloody nightmare for all the inn -"

"Innocent bystanders, yes, I know. Well, I've always been hazardous that way." Miles looked away, abstracted. Ivan watched him, wondering just what was passing through that unbalanced, inscrutable, utterly brilliant mind.

"Come on," Ivan said finally. "We should look and see what else the ImpSec fairy brought us today."

Miles started from his reverie and pushed his bowl away as he stood. Ivan let him go first into the study, covertly observing the stiffness and uneven gait Miles couldn't quite conceal. Dammit, why had Gregor dropped this on him now?

Miles settled in the comconsole chair, and Ivan hung on the back of it to read over his shoulder. There were three separate disks with the ImpSec seal and stamped with various cautions and outright threats about security ratings. Miles blithely ignored the lot, much to Ivan's relief as he himself wasn't cleared to view at least one of the disks.

That one turned out to be ImpSec's complete file on the Cetagandan captain, Teppin.

"Is it just me," Ivan said, skimming rapidly, "or is this the exact same information Oswold already had, just worded differently?"

"Not just you," Miles said. "Not that there's much to know. Just name, rank, and a few reports of seeing him hanging around Escobaran local space. Probably a low level observer and operative in the area. ImpSec has them too, of course, people with a talent for blending in with the locals. Mostly good for just watching, but they can also be useful in an emergency when you want something done."

"Like, say, shooting at a Barrayaran Imperial Auditor?" Ivan suggested.

"Mmm," Miles said morosely. "I wish we had some information about his factional loyalties." He sighed and ejected the disk.

The next was ImpSec's, and Gregor's, official response to their report. They were to maintain their position on the planet unless the threat of further assassination was judged too high. In which case they were to abandon the courier they'd come in on and hop out of the system on one of the smaller, less easily identifiable ships the local ImpSec office had access to. In the meantime, they were to wait for further word, either from Barrayar itself or Cetaganda.

"I hate waiting," Miles muttered rebelliously, sticking in the third disk. This last one contained a copy of Gregor's official . . . Ivan supposed it was technically an inquiry, though it sounded quite a bit more like a demand, addressed to a number of contacts on the Cetagandan general staff as well as in the Celestial Garden itself, asking to know in quite blunt terms what the hell they thought
they were doing.

"He sounds annoyed," Ivan murmured.

"Shooting at me now is a lot more complicated than it used to be," Miles pointed out. "Much to the dismay of many, or so I'm told."

"Oh yes," Ivan said dryly. "Is that what's got that extra sharp edge of Imperial outrage going?"

Miles didn't answer, but Ivan could see a slight flush creeping up the back of his neck as he turned away.

"Well," Ivan continued after a moment, as Gregor's face disappeared from the vidplate. "Looks like we get to hurry up and wait."

"Delightful," Miles said, stood up with some difficulty, and stomped away. Ivan watched him go, and witnessed the unconscious way Miles patted his trouser pocket, as if checking that something important still lay within. Gregor's personal message disk was notably absent from the comconsole table.

Ivan sank into the comchair and cradled his head in his hands. Trust Miles to get himself into a mess like this. Though Ivan certainly wouldn't have expected it of Gregor-what could he possibly be thinking? Giving Miles time away had been the decent thing to do, but judging by the man's current state, Ivan had to wonder if it would ultimately only make things more difficult.

"Stupid bugger," he muttered resentfully. "Now I've got to worry about him going and getting his heart broken. Or worse. Typical." He tried once more, as he had been for the past half hour, to imagine the two of them... together. The mind boggled. At least his did. Gregor's apparently didn't. And Miles... who knew what his twisted little psyche could wrap itself around.

Ivan sat up, resolved. Emperor or not, he and Gregor needed to have a little chat. As soon as they were back on Barrayar, Ivan promised himself, trying not to quail at the thought of confronting his lovesick liege. But someone had to say something, to make sure... well, to do whatever sensible thing Miles would naturally never even consider. Figured it was going to have to be him. Even when he wasn't trying, Miles still managed to drag him into the middle of his Milesian disasters/miracles. Usually so close to being one or the other, Ivan thought. What would it be this time?

*

Miles hated waiting the way a fanatical Komarran terrorist hated Barrayar - passionately, occasionally violently, but ultimately futilely. He spent the next several days after the arrival of the data packet from ImpSec doing... waiting things. Colonel Oswold got a pained, 'why do you do this to me?' look on his face whenever Miles made noises about doing anything outside the house. Which was amusing for a while, but eventually the novelty wore off. He went to the ImpSec offices a few times, to look over people's shoulders and generally poke into things, but Oswold quickly caught onto him and started delivering daily reports on every facet of the case directly to the house. Not that there was much to report - nothing else had emerged from the scene, and despite an all agents alert, the would-be assassin had not surfaced anywhere.

Miles spent his days alternately rooting around in the ambassador's library, and finding new and interesting ways to annoy Ivan. Though that, too, was quickly becoming less amusing as time passed. Ivan only had to look at him a certain way, with a sort of thoughtful, speculative gleam in his eye to send an utterly infuriating rush of heat into Miles's face. He wished Ivan had never seen
that damn message, not so much so that Ivan wouldn't know about what was happening but so, well, so he wouldn't have seen the message. The opening up of the impenetrable Vorbarra reserve in the recording reminded Miles of the transparent emotion Gregor had displayed over their dinner. He didn't like the thought of Ivan, or anyone else for that matter, seeing that. It was a tremendous trust, he knew, from someone as self-contained as Gregor. It was a trust meant for him alone.

Gregor had not, Miles noted with some interest, included the two permanent bodyguards in the official orders. Just how conscientious was he going to be about this no requesting and requiring business? Miles supposed he wouldn't have felt overly ... pressed if Gregor had insisted, but it was nice to know that, even in a matter only tangentially related to his feelings, Gregor would be scrupulously honest. After some consideration, Miles settled on one ImpSec guard and Roic, who wasn't about to leave his side anyway. His newest Armsman was more than earning his keep on this trip, Miles reflected, making a mental note to pass along his favorable appraisal to the ever-skeptical Pym.

Five days after the reply from Barrayar, Oswold delivered another package.

"It's coded for you personally, Lord Auditor Vorkosigan," he said, extending it a bit dubiously.

Miles took it, dug out his seal, and opened the case. There was a single disk inside, printed with the seal of the Celestial Garden itself. They must have sent word by tight beam to the nearest Cetagandan held jump point and then forwarded a physical message. Paranoid, boys.

"Ah," Miles said, waving the disk at Ivan. "What do you want to bet this disclaims all knowledge or responsibility, and promises to track down those responsible and eliminate them?"

"No bet," Ivan said sourly.

Miles stuck the disk in the ambassador's secure comconsole and skimmed the brief, if not downright brusque, message.

"Huh," he said.

"What?" Ivan demanded, rocking forward on his toes.

Miles sat back. "They're sending an envoy, an investigator one assumes, as we speak. We are rather forcefully requested to, guess what? Wait for him."


Miles somewhat pessimistically expected this wait to last several weeks. One had to account both for the time it would take even the fastest ship to reach Escobar, and also for the widely known Cetagandan tendency to mess with one's mind. He was, therefore, thoroughly if pleasantly surprised to be roused several hours before dawn exactly a week after the message had arrived.

"It's Colonel Oswold, m'lord," Roic said, slightly wide-eyed. "He says the Cetagandans are here."

"In orbit here?" Miles asked, having worried visions of a party of invading ghem overtaking the ambassador's living room.

"Yes m'lord," Roic said. "They want you to come up."

"Not likely," Miles muttered, and reached for his tunic.

Oswold waited on the com in the study. He looked a bit untidy around the edges, as if he too had
been roused suddenly from sleep.

"My Lord Auditor," he greeted Miles.

"They seriously think I'm going to go up on their ship with them?" Miles said without preamble. "Do they think I'm stupid? Someone in the Cetagandan Empire wants me dead, and that pretty much always means someone higher up in the Cetagandan Empire told them to want me dead."

"Ah," Oswold said, rubbing his chin. "That's the thing. They, uh, they seem to know you. Personally, that is."

Miles blinked. "They whom, exactly?"

"Ghem-General Dag Benin and the haut Pel Navarr."

Miles sat up, eyes wide. "What the hell are they doing here?"

"So you do know them?"

"Oh yes," Miles said, brain turning over and beginning to work. "Oh yes." He paused a moment, calculating. "Tell them I'll take my own shuttle up and to expect me in an hour."

"My lord!" Oswold yelped.

"Er, and you're really not going to like this next part," Miles continued apologetically. "It will only be myself, Captain Vorpatril, and Armsman Roic going up. Sorry, it can't be helped," he added, overriding Oswold's protests.

"They tried to kill you!"

"Not them personally," Miles said. "That, at least, I can be sure of. Look, I do know them, and I trust them. Well, I trust Benin. Pel, I mostly trust."

Oswold sighed. "There's no way I could possibly talk you out of this, is there?"

"Your objections are properly lodged," Miles said. "I promise if I get blown into tiny pieces up there I won't blame you."

Oswold didn't appear to find that at all amusing.

"That's awfully . . . pedestrian, for a Cetagandan ship," Ivan commented, as they emerged from the atmosphere.

"Especially for one carrying a planetary consort," Miles agreed, studying the small, if sleek, craft they were rapidly approaching. He quickly glanced at Ivan, checking the finite adjustments needed for docking. Either Ivan could fly them, he'd told Oswold, or they send up an ImpSec pilot, who the Cetagandans would insist took himself off before anything important was said. Took himself off, Miles had added ruthlessly, with the shuttle. This way the Cetagandans had to let them stay docked. I don't trust them that much. Just enough. Just slightly less, in fact, than he trusted Ivan's ability to pilot the shuttle. His cousin's cushy Ops job didn't give him much opportunity to practice such skills, but Miles knew it was still better than him having a seizure in the pilot's seat. He'd mostly kept his mouth shut so far, though Ivan had glared at him once or twice for watching the controls over his shoulder.
The neutral voice of the Cetagandan pilot sounded, and Ivan hunched over the controls, concentrating. A minute later there was a surprisingly gentle bump, then the distinctive sucking sound of the seals locking in.

"Right," Miles said, standing and checking his stunner. "Are we ready?"

"No," Ivan said. Roic looked as if he perfectly agreed, but he remained politely silent.

"Excellent," Miles said, "let's go."

Somehow, in the shuffle for the hatch, both Ivan and Roic ended up in front of him. Miles suffered this in silence, suppressing the urge to poke them in the backs with his stunner. They emerged from the shuttle into a cramped docking bay, adorned with the bare minimum of the usual Cetagandan aesthetic niceties. The economy model? For a planetary consort?

"Ah," he said, ducking under Ivan's arm and presenting himself. "Ghem-General Benin. You're looking . . . battered." He blinked up at the tall, red-clad figure, wincing in sympathy at the vicious lines of shock-stick trauma visible beneath Benin's face paint. The marks were just beginning to fade from purple-violet to a sickly yellow, but they still had to hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. Miles should know.

"Lord Auditor Vorkosigan," Benin said, bowing. "Congratulations on your promotion."

"You, too," Miles said. "Chief of Security for the entire Celestial Garden at your age. Impressive. What the hell happened to you?"

"A work-related incident," Benin said, touching his cheek gingerly. "All straightened out now, thankfully."

Miles's eyebrows rose. He controlled the urge to ask just how often Benin's post at the heart of the Cetagandan Empire involved being tortured. It wasn't like he'd get an answer, anyway. "Ah, you remember my cousin, Captain Ivan Vorpatril," he said.

"Oh yes." Benin nodded coolly.

"And this is Armsman Roic," Miles finished, glancing up to find Roic doing his best impression of a menacing statue. He'd probably never met a Cetagandan before in his life. Miles suppressed a grin, wondering what would happen when Roic saw his first haut. Speaking of which . . . "Did the haut Pel truly accompany you here?"

"Yes," Benin said. "She is waiting to receive you. If you'll follow me."

Miles and Ivan exchanged eyebrow twitches as they obeyed. The ship was indeed small, and though it was more elegantly furnished than most Barrayaran ships not specifically designed to carry the Emperor, it was utterly drab by haut standards. Miles bit his tongue hard. They would get answers soon enough. Or they'd better.

Benin gestured them ahead of him into a comfortable sitting area, which, on another ship, would have been a conference room. Lady Pel sat in her float chair, minus force bubble, awaiting them with what Miles had privately dubbed 'standard Haut expressionless face number 1.' She didn't rise to greet them, but returned their bows from her chair.

"Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, Captain Vorpatril."

"Haut Pel," Miles returned, cutting off any pleasantries about nice to see her again. It was nice - Pel
was as brain-numbingly beautiful as ever, even at her advanced (very advanced) age - but he wasn't
going to exert himself if she wasn't. He and Ivan settled on a couch across from her, and Benin and
Roić spent a moment politely jockeying for the most advantageous position next to the door. They
finally compromised, one on either side.

"So," Miles said, rubbing his hands on his trousers in a brisk gesture. "Why was one of your people
trying to kill me?"

"Oh, he wasn't trying to kill you," Pel said. "Just get your attention. We apologize for any
inconvenience he may have caused."

"Any incon - he used a needle grenade!"

"He missed, didn't he?" Pel asked in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice. "He had orders to make it
seem as realistic as possible."

"Well, then he deserves a medal," Miles snapped. "Who gave these orders, by the way?"

"I did," Benin said.

That'll teach you to be sure about anything, boy.

"I see," Miles said. "Did it occur to you that if you wanted to get my attention, perhaps a
comconsole message would have suited just as well?"

"No, it would not have," Pel said.

Miles ground his teeth. He'd forgotten how much being near Cetagandans made him want to shake
them until they flopped. "Why?" he asked, at his most mild. Beside him, Ivan twitched uneasily
and shifted a few inches further away.

"Ah," Pel said, appearing almost embarrassed. "Ghem-General Benin suggested it."

Miles swiveled his head and pinned Benin with a well-aimed eyebrow. "Why?" he repeated.

"Both to gain your attention and to keep you on Escobar, and also as a pretext under which the haut
Pel could leave Eta Ceta," Benin explained.

"Ah." Miles sat back and laced his fingers together. Three different hooks there, but only the last
had managed to catch him up. "A pretext. An excuse. That implies that haut Pel has particular
business outside of Cetagandan territory, and that it is important to not make that business public.
Am I right?"

"You are," Pel said. "It is not widely known on Eta Ceta that you and I were once . . . acquainted,
but enough of those principally important to this situation recalled the events to make my choice in
coming here upon your Emperor's request . . . reasonable."

"That's odd," Miles said. "Because the way I remember it, the only ones who know that we were
acquainted with each other were the other planetary consorts, the Empress haut Rian, Emperor
Giaja, and ghem-General Benin. Benin is here, and you are here, so who do we have left?"

"It would have been . . . difficult for me to leave Eta Ceta at this time without a reason," Pel said
coolly. "The Council would not have objected, but I suspect my movements would have been
closely observed."
Miles sat up again, his interest fully engaged. "A disagreement in the Council?" he asked, a little disbelieving. "I didn't know the Council did disagreements."

"We don't," Pel said, her lips pursed tightly. "Recently, however, the Council has made a decision which I find inconsonant with the goals of haut."

"Uh-huh," Miles said slowly. "Tell me, if you go against the wishes of the Council, is it treason?"

Pel's eyes narrowed. "In this matter, I believe not," she said frostily. "Indeed, to do as the Council wishes might itself be treasonous. I refuse to make the same mistake twice."

"Right," Miles said, beginning to lose his patience. "Why don't we start at the beginning? What exactly are we talking about? What did you disagree about, and why are you here?"

Pel clasped her hands in her lap and studied them for a moment. Miles was just preparing himself to stand up and make as if he would leave when she finally began speaking. "It has come to the attention of the Star Crèche," she said slowly, "that there exists here on Escobar the rudiments of a technological advancement which, if brought to fruition, could potentially change the very meaning and existence of haut. The rest of the Council wishes to see this technology, and all evidence of it, eradicated. I . . . do not concur. I believe there is a tremendous opportunity for haut here, and it would be wasteful, indeed treasonous, to destroy it."

"What sort of technology?" Miles asked. "And why did you want me involved? You do realize that when I helped you out last time, it wasn't actually because I was out to do good things for the haut, right?"

"I believe that it would be in the interests of Barrayar to aid Cetaganda in this matter," Pel said. "Oh, God. Intergalactic politics. Miles resisted the urge to cover his ears with both hands and sing very loudly. "By aiding Cetaganda you mean aiding you?"

"Yes."

"Ah. And the technology?"

"It is a new genetic procedure," Pel said with obvious reluctance. "Potentially, if carried to its logical conclusion, it could allow two male -"

"Oh, you've got to be joking," Miles broke in.

"Beg pardon?" Pel said, frowning severely. Miles wondered when someone had last dared interrupt her.

"Why wouldn't the Council want to be able to create new genetic strains between two men?" Miles asked.

Pel's eyes sharpened. "So you do know of it. Where is it?"

"Hold on," Miles said. "Answer me first. And while you're at it, tell me just how much the Council wants this . . . eradicated. What measures would they be willing to take?" He had sudden, horrible visions of the crisp lines of the Durona clinic cracking, then shattering in a ball of fire.

Pel considered him a moment. "I believe the Council will be . . . most insistent," she said at last.

"And do they have any idea where to look?" Miles asked intently.
"No," Pel said. Miles began to relax. "Only I knew to look on Escobar," she added.

Miles's heart began to pound. "Are you telling me that you came out here on an obviously transparent excuse that the Council won't buy forever, if they ever did in the first place? You're leading them right to it!"

"Well, I couldn't just let them destroy it," Pel snapped. "Besides, if it's in my possession, they won't dare do anything."

Miles had his doubts about that. He could personally attest that the planetary consorts as a body could be astonishingly determined, and ruthless, in pursuit of their goals. "Fine," he said, starting to rise. "Wait here. I'll be back."

"What are you going to do?" Pel asked, a small crease forming between her brows.

"Try to arrange passage for over thirty people off planet within the hour," Miles said. "We'll have to message Barrayar en route for a grant of asylum." He paused halfway to the door. Was he making a mistake of horrific proportions by moving so quickly? Could he, by bringing them all to Barrayar, also be bringing to bear the formidable wrath of the planetary consorts? "Just how sure are you that the ladies won't hurt you?" he asked, staring hard at Pel.

"To kill another haut, to hurt me in any way is utterly repugnant to them," Pel said.

"They won't risk open war over this?" Miles pressed.

"No," Pel said instantly. "Not with Barrayar. This is not a matter to be . . . warred over."

"Right," Miles said, thinking that, for the planetary consorts, war was probably only the most crude of the methods at their disposal. But he couldn't worry about that now. Right now, the priority was to get the Duronas and their ticking time bomb off planet.

"Our ship can take several more individuals," Pel said. "If you think it would be better -"

"Yeah," Miles said, waving vaguely over his shoulder. "Don't go anywhere. We'll be in touch."

"Miles," Ivan hissed as they hurried back to the docking bay. "Miles, what the hell are you doing? We can't take something like that to Barrayar."

"As weird as it seems," Miles said, "that might be the safest place for it. I get the strong impression this is something the ladies don't want spread around. And how'd they hear about it in the first place, I wonder? But anyway, they couldn't swat a fly on Barrayar without provoking an intergalactic incident. I get the feeling from Pel that that's the last thing they want. Come on - get this thing flying while I get on the com."

"Who are you calling?" Ivan asked with a resigned sigh.

"Oswold first," Miles said. "To tell him to scramble at least two couriers for us. Then Rowan, and Lily if I can get her. Lily's good - she'll handle things from their end."

"You know," Ivan said, carefully detaching the shuttle from the ship's dock, "you're a lot like an automated bulldozer sometimes." He winced. "ImpSec is going to love this - a Cetagandan planetary consort taking refuge on Barrayar."

"I don't work for them anymore," Miles said, waving a dismissive hand. "Was there a landing pad on top of the Durona clinic?"
Ivan hunched. "Yes." After a moment, he added a nearly plaintive, "Bulldozer. Cetagandans. And me in the middle. Typical."

Four hours later, Miles had bulldozed his way through several layers of red tape and one very aggravated ImpSec colonel. Oswold had objected strongly to the idea of taking any Cetagandans, but especially a haut and a ghem-general, to Barrayar, but in the face of Miles's Imperial authority, could ultimately do nothing about it. Miles had spoken briefly to Lily, who understood immediately the danger they were all in. As a scientist, she had both the utmost respect and the utmost fear for the haut's capabilities, and knew all too well that if they wanted to, they could wipe the Durona Clinic off the face of the nexus.

They took the Duronas up to the waiting couriers in two waves. Lily, Rowan, and one older Dr. Durona went on the Cetagandan ship. Miles was somewhat startled to discover that the entirety of their research materials could be compressed to a single, smallish data case. The rest of the Duronas, including the appallingly adorable dark eyed children, crammed themselves into two ImpSec courier ships. Given Daley's presence, Miles thought it best not to bring any of them along with himself, Ivan, and their various hangers-on.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Colonel," Miles said to Oswold as he was about to step on board the shuttle for the last run up.

Oswold looked as though he were in a hurry to get Miles on board and out of his hair. "My pleasure, my Lord Auditor," he said dryly. "I do hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I," Miles heard Ivan mutter.

They sent a tight beam message to Barrayar with the details of their arrival as soon as they were on their way. Miles wished that he could see the look on Gregor's face - not to mention General Allegre's - when they received it. A haut Lady asking for asylum on Barrayar. The poetic irony might almost make up for the diplomatic nightmare.

Miles hesitated before including the details of the Duronas's research in his report. Finally he put the details - or at least what he knew, which really wasn't much - in a separate message coded for the Emperor's eyes only. Let Gregor decide what to do with it. Miles declined to include any comments on the extraordinarily appropriate timing. Gregor could reach his own conclusions there.

Not that it would truly solve anything for them, Miles admitted to himself. The fact that they might someday be able to produce an heir together would not do a thing to convince the conservative element of the Council of Counts (which was most of the Council of Counts, it seemed sometimes) that Miles would be an appropriate... Empress.

And then the messages were sent, and there was nothing to do but wait. Miles slouched on his bunk, wishing he'd written everything more slowly so he'd still have stuff to do. Maybe he should have gone on Pel's ship. At least then he could have bothered her for more answers, or followed Benin around, or even bugged Rowan to keep working on a solution to his seizures. Which, he realized suddenly, had been completely forgotten in the insanity of the last day and a half. He hoped that Rowan had brought her files with her, but thought it might be rude to send her a comconsole message. She had more important things on her mind just now.

Ivan, Miles thought suddenly, and jumped up. He could always bother Ivan.
I think I liked it much better when he was brooding, Ivan decided three days out. He was lying on his bunk, having passed the hyperactive little shit off to Roic for the time being. He was thoroughly sick of being trounced at strategy games. At least Roic was compensated for it. Ivan was just familially obligated, and that was wearing very thin at the moment.

And he still wouldn't talk about anything having to do with Gregor. Ivan sighed, wondering if Miles was worrying about that half as much as he was. It was impossible to tell with Miles whether the ridiculous amount of energy was just forward momentum with nowhere to go, or nerves over returning to Barrayar and Gregor. For himself, Ivan thought that he might be worrying about the situation to a slightly unhealthy degree. It probably wasn't normal to spend so much time fretting over someone else's sex life, even if that person was your best friend and the person he was tangled with was your emperor.

Ivan wondered more than once if everything might be solved by sending Gregor off on a courier ship with Miles for a few days with nothing to do. See if you can stand him then. But then he realized that if he were sent off with a woman he was pursuing for a few days on a courier ship with nothing to do, he'd be more than happy about the situation. And that led to more unhealthy contemplation.

Finally he couldn't take it anymore. He waited until Miles came knocking, as he inevitably did. This time, he didn't let Miles drag him off to play more strategy games, but hauled the little twit inside, closed and locked the door, and made him sit down in the comconsole chair. Ivan sat on the bunk and looked at him.

Miles began to squirm. "What?" he finally said.

"Gregor, that's what. You're going to see him in a few days. Haven't you thought about that at all?"

"Been trying not to," Miles replied with a glare.

"Too bad. You're going to talk to him, right?"

"Yeah."

"And? What are you going to say to him?"

Miles shrugged, looking like a sullen teenager being taken to task. "No idea."

"You mean you haven't decided?"

"Ivan, what do you want me to say? It's an impossible decision!" Miles jumped up and began pacing. "Either I say no and break his heart or I say yes and - and -" He gestured wildly and collapsed back into the chair. "And I don't know what that would mean," he finished in a small voice.

"Well, it has to be one or the other," Ivan said logically, and was rewarded with a withering glare. "No one has to find out yet, you know," he hazarded after a silence. "Or ever."

"I thought about that," Miles said. "I'd hate that. For us to both get married to women we weren't really in love with, and who were only willing to be accommodating because it meant they got to be a countess and an empress. Sneaking around our entire lives. It'd be awful."

Ivan thought that did sound pretty awful. Plus, there would always be the possibility that someone would find out and try and use it against them. Better for it to be all out in the open, eventually anyway. "But for now," he persisted. "No one has to know. What if it was just you and Gregor?"
Miles started to object and Ivan put up a hand to stop him. "I know it's not realistic, but just for a minute. If it was just you and Gregor, and you were just two regular Barrayaran subjects . . . what would you do?"

Miles was silent for a long time. Silent and still, Ivan realized, which meant that most of the nervous energy had been coming from this. He breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that this conversation might put an end to the ridiculous mania he'd been putting up with for the last few days.

"It's no good," Miles said quietly. "I can't - hypotheticals are no use. We are who we are, and it is how it is."

"Yeah," Ivan said, feeling suddenly very sorry for both of them. "But what are you going to do?"

"It's like a bloody splinter," Miles said resentfully. "He put this idea in my head and now it's just sitting there, and it won't stop pricking at me, and I can't get rid of it."

"Oh," said Ivan, who had ample experience of what happened when Miles couldn't get an idea out of his head. "So what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking . . ." Miles voice grew abstracted, his expression distant. "I'm thinking that it's . . . very strange," he said at last. "Not easily forgotten. Fascinating, really."

Ivan paused, waiting for more, but there was nothing. Finally he said, "You do realize how it all works, right? With men? You realize you have to put it - "

"Ivan!" Miles yelped. "Yes, I realize!"

"All right," Ivan said placatingly. "I just thought I'd ask."

"Well, don't," Miles growled. "Where I put my - it - is none of your goddamn business."

"So you'd want to try, at least," Ivan said, turning the conversation back to safer topics after a moment of awkward silence. "If there was nothing else to worry about."

"Sure," Miles said dryly. "If I was not me, and he was not him, and basically everything was completely different from how it is, I would try. I mean, what the hell, you know? You only live once - er, twice. But that doesn't really help me."

"Doesn't it? It's not all about the Imperium, Miles. Aren't the two of you allowed to be happy?"

"Do you think Barrayar would allow us to be happy? We don't live on Beta Colony. And are you - are you arguing for this?"

Ivan opened his mouth, and then clamped it shut. "Um," he said, trying to separate out his own unfounded but selfish political fears and dreads from how he actually felt about the matter. I don't . . . know. I'd rather not have to plunge you into any more ice baths. And as for Barrayar . . . well. We've come a long way since the Time of Isolation, you know. I know I'll regret saying this, but you - you and Gregor - could do great things."
"If we aren't murdered in our sleep first," Miles muttered.

"Exactly," Ivan agreed, and then added quickly. "And I'd like to point out that if it goes badly, it's very likely that I'll also get screwed up the -"

"Yes, yes," Miles said hastily. "If it goes badly, it won't be good for anyone." He sighed quietly. "But if we didn't try, I'd always wonder. That's what keeps me from saying no. It will be so difficult in so many ways" - will, Ivan noticed, not would - "and it'd be much easier to say no. But I'd always wonder. What does he see that I don't?"

"What about your perfect Lady Vorkosigan?" Ivan asked. "I thought you wanted that."

"I thought I did. But I never went for women who would ever be willing to be that for me, did I? Elli would never have come to Barrayar for me, and we both knew it. Taura - heh, I think Barrayar would have an easier time with Gregor and me. Rowan . . ."

"Rowan?" Ivan asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It was brief," Miles said quickly. "Right after I was . . . hurt. But none of them would have fit on Barrayar." He paused, looking melancholy. "Maybe I don't fit on Barrayar. I used to think I could change so I would."

"Maybe it's time Barrayar changed to fit you."

"Maybe." He sighed heavily and swung one booted foot against the leg of the chair. "I think . . . I can't not try."

Ivan nodded. "See?" he said after a moment of silence. "Aren't you glad we had this little chat?"

Miles groaned. "I always know things have sunk to a new low when I find myself following your advice."

Later, after Miles had departed, looking calmer than he had since they'd left Escobar, Ivan lay on his bunk and thought seriously about what he might say to Gregor once they were back on Barrayar. He knew that Miles worried about breaking Gregor's heart, but Ivan wondered if Gregor had any idea that he could break Miles's as well. Two such admirable men, each brilliant in his own way, and utterly, completely fragile when it came to each other.

_Oh God_, Ivan thought. _I'm turning into a sop_. Really, his level of obsession with this was not healthy. But then he sighed, remembering the expression on Miles's face when he'd said that he'd want to try if everything were different, the look of surprise at admitting it to himself - possibly for the first time - and of relief at having said it out loud.

_Be careful with each other_, he thought, and decided that might not be a bad thing to say to Gregor. _Just . . . be careful._
The replies from Barrayar caught them just as they were about to make the first jump out of Sergyaran space for Komarr. Gregor's official message was polite and Imperial, granting the requested asylum and inviting haut Pel to a banquet in her honor upon her arrival. Miles forwarded that one to Pel, and, with a sense of mingled curiosity and dread, opened the private message that was for his eyes only.

Gregor did not mince words. "A haut? A planetary consort? Miles, are you out of your mind? Do you know what this could do to our diplomatic relations with Cetaganda? Never mind, of course you do. You also have an entire city in your district that will be unlivable for generations, so I won't remind you what the Cetagandans could do to us if they wanted to. I just hope you know what you're doing." People seemed to be saying that to him a lot lately, Miles mused. When would they learn that he didn't talk out of his ass all the time? "In any case," Gregor sighed, "I don't see any other options. This is a pretty mess, but I can conceive of a number of outcomes that would be to Barrayar's advantage." He took a deliberative breath, and Miles didn't have to try very hard to imagine the things he was electing not to say. Gregor rarely spoke a word whose weight he hadn't thoroughly measured beforehand. He had given Miles his sworn word, and he would not break it with the slightest intimation. "In any case," Gregor concluded, "we can discuss these things when you arrive. I look forward to hearing your thoughts."

Good. They could talk then. He could say . . . whatever it was he needed to say, however he needed to say it. Somehow, without having any concrete answers, he felt indefinably ready. If he lacked clarity, he'd at least gained . . . balance. Scope. Thanks, bizarrely, to Ivan.

Their arrival back on Barrayar was a subdued circus. Miles got the impression that ImpSec was attempting to keep Pel's arrival on planet quiet and out of the public eye, while protocol required that some sort of fuss be made. The result was that the retinue that met them was small, but impressive, including General Allegre, two of the Emperor's closest advisors, and Gregor himself. Plus the small army of ImpSec guards that followed Gregor wherever he went. Looking around after disembarking, Miles was reminded of Gregor's admonition about security. He wondered what sort of circus an Imperial Consort would have to drag around, and sighed at the very idea.

"Haut Pel," Gregor said, stepping forward and bowing. "It is my pleasure to welcome you to Barrayar."

"Thank you, Emperor Gregor, for your gracious hospitality. I look forward to my stay." Pel was concealed behind her bubble, turned a pale blue today, but she dimmed it to transparency for a moment as she bent her head. The expression on her face in that quick glimpse was somewhat ironic, but then again, so was that on Gregor's.

Gregor glanced up, and his eyes met Miles's across the crowd. Miles flipped him an analyst's salute, and after a moment of careful scrutiny, Gregor returned it. Checking for damage? Then Pel spoke from within her bubble, and Gregor turned away, caught up in the crowd as it shifted and started for the exit. Miles glanced back over his shoulder, some fastidious part of him insisting he see his mission through to a literal close. But there was no need - Daley was already on his way down the ramp, flanked by burly escorts, and looking very unhappy to be back on Barrayar. You've got some remarkably unpleasant days ahead of you, boy.

Pel left with Gregor's party for the Imperial Residence, where she would reside for the duration of her stay. The Duronas were whisked off to ImpSec HQ, where they'd be installed in several of the underground apartments. Lily, Rowan, and one or two of the others would be attending the banquet.
tonight. Miles hoped that someone thought to help them with the issue of wardrobe.

A Vorkosigan groundcar, manned by Pym, awaited them outside the shuttleport.

"Did you have a nice trip, m'lord?" Pym asked as they pulled out into late afternoon Vorbarr Sultana traffic.

"It was . . . very interesting," Miles said. "We, er, may have a few more people joining the household, incidentally."

Pym caught his gaze in the rearview mirror and raised an eyebrow. "Did you meet someone, m'lord?"

"Meet someone - oh!" Miles said, realizing suddenly what Pym thought he meant. "No, nothing like that. Someone sort of . . . shot at me. With a needle grenade. Gregor's a little twitchy about my security right now, that's all." Though really, there was no particular reason to be, now that they knew what had happened. Which Miles intended to point out to Gregor at the first opportunity. But then again, if he were to accept . . .

"Are you all right, m'lord?" Pym asked with genuine concern.

"Yes, yes, of course," Miles said, waving off the question. "Frankly, Pym, there aren't really injuries with needle grenades. There are misses and then there are messy, bloody deaths. I was the former - thanks in large part to Armsman Roic." Roic stirred, flushing uncomfortably at Pym's considered, approving nod. "But we'll likely have a few more guards joining us soon."

"Ah," Pym said. "I shall alert Ma Kosti. She'll be pleased."

They finally reached Vorkosigan house at 1800 hours. The dinner was at 2000 and it wouldn't do to be late for this one. Miles climbed the stairs to his suite, feeling the slight agoraphobia he always had after spending a great deal of time on a courier ship. Everything was just so big in comparison.

He showered and dressed in his formal house uniform, taking only a moment to linger over his dress greens. He wondered if he'd ever stop doing that. He considered getting rid of them, and was hit with such discomfort at the idea that he discarded it immediately. After all, his father had been retired from the Service for years now, and all his old uniforms still hung neatly in a closet in his parents' rooms, one floor above. Eventually Miles wouldn't even notice them anymore. Probably.

The flow of cars into the Residence was considerably smaller tonight than it usually would be for a dinner in honor of a visiting diplomat. Miles was directed to one of the smaller receiving rooms, where everyone was standing and talking still, grazing the appetizer table and waiting to be seated for dinner. Miles didn't see Gregor or Pel, but he spotted Ivan chatting with Aunt Alys and Illyan, and made his way over.

"Hello, Aunt Alys, Simon," Miles said, kissing his aunt on the cheek.

"Hello, Miles. Ivan was just telling us about your . . . interesting trip to Escobar." Alys pursed her lips and shook her head.

"Yeah, nothing like being shot at to really liven things up."

"Has ImpSec found out who it was yet?" Illyan asked.

"No," Miles said smoothly, as that drifted too close to topics that were not for public consumption. Not that Illyan was public, exactly, but nor was he the chief of ImpSec anymore. Here and now, he was Alys Vorpatril's date.
Lady Alys, perhaps sensing that Miles would prefer not to talk about Escobar anymore, politely steered the conversation onto more pleasant matters. "We met Haut Pel just a few minutes ago," she said. "What a . . . remarkable woman."

"Technically she's not a woman," Miles corrected. "She's haut. They're not really human, you know."

"The Cetagandans never fail to astound me," Illyan said. "I've met a fair few over the years. They're the most stunningly beautiful and utterly bizarre people I've ever encountered."

"They have kitten trees," Ivan put in, looking disturbed by the memory. "Kittens. That grow on trees. It's sick."

They were saved from having to reply by a servant appearing to shepherd them all into dinner, which was served in a small but formal dining room with a long table set with the finest Imperial china. Miles checked the place cards and saw that Lily was seated to Gregor's left, and Miles to hers. Pel was across from Lily, on Gregor's honored right, with Benin next to her. Ivan, Aunt Alys, and Simon were all further down the table, mixed in with the Prime Minister and a few other integral parts of Gregor's inner cadre. Miles stayed standing next to his chair, as did everyone else, until a palace guard appeared and announced Gregor and Pel's entrance. Gregor took his seat, waving them all down as he did, and a still bubbled Pel drifted to the space left for her. She was apparently not planning to eat, Miles noted, thinking not for the first time that life in a bubble was probably not all it was cracked up to be.

His stomach rumbled, and Miles tried not to sigh. Before any of them got to eat, there would be toasts. Many of them. And probably more throughout the night. Small sips, he reminded himself, not wanting to be half-drunk by the time Gregor was ready to speak with him.

He was right. By the time the salad was served, Miles had heard more about mending the past and building the future than he had truly ever wanted to. Personally, he thought that Barrayaran-Cetagandan relations should in theory be quite simple: They don't invade, we don't retaliate. But of course, one couldn't say that here.

The food was delicious, the wine was plentiful, and as the dinner went on, Miles found that the seating arrangements, which could have been awkward, were nothing of the sort. Lily and Pel had apparently bonded over biology on the way from Escobar, and Lily spoke freely andanimatedly about the Duronas' work, though not about the new reproductive technology.

Gregor was quiet throughout, listening intently and not contributing much to the conversation. Miles kept a subtle eye on him and saw that he, too, was not drinking much at all, perhaps a few sips with each course. They exchanged a few polite words around Lily, and Miles felt a low buzz of constant awareness as the evening wore on.

After dinner, there was dancing in one of the smaller ballrooms. Gregor opened it with Lady Alys; it would have perhaps been more correct under normal circumstances for him to partner Pel, but apparently the haut didn't engage in human activities such as dancing. Miles glanced around and saw no one he particularly wanted to dance with. The Koudelka girls were not present, and now that he was looking Miles found a distressing gender imbalance. Probably couldn't be helped in a gathering as exclusive as this one, but it left a surplus of men circulating around the edges of the room. Miles did a little circulating himself, stopping to chat when the mood struck him.

He fetched up close to the small orchestra, shoulders propped against a convenient pillar. It was the best vantage for surveying the whole room, and Miles was unsurprised when General Allegre joined him after a few minutes. He'd seen Colonel Lord Vortala the Younger running security
earlier, but he knew from personal experience that Allegre could hardly turn the reflex off and leave it all to everyone else.

"Evening, my Lord Auditor," Allegre greeted with a nod.

Miles returned it, thinking that if anything, the mess in the winter had permanently placed him on the list of those the new Chief of Imperial Security respected. Or possibly feared. "How are you finding your new job, General?" he asked curiously.

"Complicated," Allegre said candidly. "It's not easy following up someone like Chief Illyan, but I try to think of it as an inspiration."

"Wise," said Miles. "You have two quite . . . disparate examples to work from, in recent memory. You can't go far wrong, steering down the middle."

"I hope so, every day," Allegre said, then coughed. "I wasn't particularly prepared for the appointment, you know. We - Olshanski and I, that is - had assumed it would be yours."

"Ah," said Miles, making a face. "No, thank you. I don't think I would take to that sort of work."

"So it was offered to you?" Allegre persisted.

"Er." Now this was awkward. How to diplomatically convince the man that he wasn't second choice? Or third, if one counted Haroche. "Gregor didn't expect me to accept it," he settled on. "It was a courtesy, I think. And more to Simon than to me."

"Oh," said Allegre. He didn't change expression, but Miles had the feeling he was relieved. They pondered the room for several beats as the musicians played and the dancers whirled. "My analysts have been working around the clock on this," Allegre said at last, jerking his head towards the soft glow of Pel's bubble. Lily was seated beside her, Miles saw.

"It's certainly sticky," Miles agreed. "Anything interesting come up yet?"

Allegre grimaced. "Nothing conclusive."

"Can't reason before your data, and you can't get the right data until you've reasoned," Miles said, nodding. That paradox of intelligence work had always struck him as particularly nerve-jangling.

"I was thinking of pulling together a scientific team to, ah, assist the doctor clones," Allegre said. "That galactic fellow of yours comes to mind - the biochemist."

"Oh, he would be just thrilled," Miles said, picturing Dr. Weddell's response to being called into service once again. "Might want to hold off on that a bit longer though," he added contemplatively. Another paradox. "Until we know what we're doing, we really can't do anything."

"Right," said Allegre. "For the best, perhaps, anyhow. Dr. Weddell found his way clear to rather hefty compensation for his services last time, and I shudder to think what he'll demand if we trouble him again."

"Did he?" Miles asked, surprised. "Surely he didn't submit a bill." Then again, this was Weddell - he might have just had the temerity.

"Not quite," Allegre said. "He did insist, however, on being allowed to go off planet to a prestigious biomedical conference on Beta Colony. It was quite an endeavor. There's always the chance his former employers could catch up with him."
"Ah," said Miles, with heartfelt sympathy. "Let's hold off on calling in the scientific cavalry, then. At least until Gregor's had a chance to review everything and make some decisions."

"Quite," said Allegre. He lifted an apologetic hand to Miles as his wristcom beeped, and Miles left him to his report from Vortala with a will. No, he reflected, drifting up the room, that was most definitely not a job he would have fit comfortably in. He much preferred living within the storm itself, not circling endlessly in the center eye.

Speaking of ImpSec . . . Illyan sat alone, glass in hand, watching Lady Alys partner her son with a fond smile playing about his lips.

"Ah, hello, Miles," he said when Miles took a seat next to him. "How are you doing?"

"All right," Miles said with a shrug. "This is a . . . strange party."

"Mmm," Illyan agreed. "It's a strange situation. When I took over ImpSec, this would have been impossible, having a dinner like this for a Cetagandan. And now, well. There's still so much bitterness over the wars."

"With good reason," Miles muttered.

"Quite. In any case," Illyan continued, "Gregor and Alys were faced with the question of how to make a fuss without actually making a fuss. I thought Alys was going to tear her hair out before it was all over." He slid Miles a sideways glance. "But that wasn't quite what I meant when I asked you how you were doing."

Miles felt a flutter of panic in his stomach. Had Illyan noticed something at dinner? Had they been obvious without realizing it? "Oh?" he managed.

"That needler must have shaken you up," Illyan said gently.

Miles's breath rushed out of him. "Oh, that," he said. "I mean, yeah, it did. But they missed."

"No one was hit in the crossfire?"

"No, thank God. A tree took the fall." He paused. "Elena Bothari - now Elena Bothari-Jesek - was there, though. She lives on Escobar now and we were visiting with her when it happened. It shook her up pretty badly. They're going to have a daughter soon, you see."

"Elena Bothari," Illyan said in wonder. "A mother. I am old." Miles started to object, but Illyan only chuckled. "Will she be bringing the young one to visit any time soon?"

"Maybe," Miles said. "She doesn't hate Barrayar with the passion she once did, that's for certain."

"Barrayar does seem to inspire that in people," Illyan said thoughtfully. "Passion, I mean. One way or the other."

"My mother used to say that Barrayar eats its children. It makes them give and give until there's nothing left. I think she was quite afraid that it would eat me."

"We all were," Illyan said. "On more than one occasion. You had so much to prove. You are so like your father, and he . . ." Illyan stopped. Miles looked at him in confusion and saw that he was frowning. "He gave everything to the Imperium," Illyan said at last. They were both silent for a moment then, thinking of the same man. Miles wondered what his father would say if he ever found the courage to tell him that he was not quite willing to give up everything for the Imperium,
and neither was Gregor. "He told me once that after he met your mother, serving in any capacity was the easiest thing in the world," Illyan said musingly. "He said he could give everything he had, and she would just give it back to him. I suppose, in that way, even their marriage was service." His lips quirked. "Though an often unwanted one, from Barrayar's point of view. Barrayar owes a great debt to your lady mother, you know. For a number of things."

"I know," Miles said, then fell silent. Why did Gregor separate the two - us from the Imperium? Why do I keep doing it?

"I'm glad you're all right," Illyan said at last.

"Thank you."

"Did you -" Illyan began, but whatever he was about to say was lost when a Vorbarra Armsman appeared at Miles's shoulder.

"The Emperor would like to speak to you now," he said.

Miles nodded. "I'll see you later," he said to Illyan.

The Armsman showed him into the north wing, to Gregor's private office. Business, then. But that made sense - Miles didn't think Gregor would be, could be the one to initiate any other sort of conversation. That was up to Miles.

He glanced around as they walked, taking a moment to consciously appreciate the Residence. His memories of living here were mixed - some cloudy and pain-hazed, others unbelievably wonderful. His father had served to the utmost of his ability, had given and given and given, was still giving. And he was repaid with a son like me. The thought would have once been a bitter lash, resentful and destructive. Now it kindled a low burning satisfaction in his belly. Why must service always be a sacrifice? Must giving be the same thing as giving up? I love Barrayar. When did that happen? He raised his chin and lengthened his stride.

Gregor waited behind his desk, head bent over a thick stack of flimsies. "Thank you, Flavion," he said, looking up and waving the Armsman out.

Miles took a few steps further into the office, prickling as Gregor's eyes settled on him. "You called for me?"

Gregor shifted forward in his chair and pressed a control on his desk. Behind Miles, the office door slid shut. "This," he said, slapping a hand on the stack of flimsies, "is a copy of the preliminary analysts' report on our current, ah, situation."

"Oh?" Miles asked brightly. "Anything interesting?"

Gregor pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose. "No," he said flatly. "Nothing at all."

"If it's any consolation," Miles said, dropping his grin, "I honestly don't think the other consorts are in any position to be a threat to Barrayar. They think differently than we do. They think differently than other haut do. They have bigger goals, believe it or not. War is not something they're at all interested in, and I don't see how they could do anything against Pel, or Lily for that matter, that wouldn't start a war."

Miles did, turning one of the chairs to sit in it backwards. "What now?" he asked.

"Don't tell me you don't have a few ideas about that yourself," Gregor said, passing the question back to him with a flip of the hand.

"I do," Miles said slowly. "Maybe. But I feel . . . underfed. I don't know enough to, well, know enough. Not yet. I need to talk to Pel. Better, I need to talk to Dag Benin. I could always get somewhere with him."

"You think there's somewhere to get?" Gregor asked keenly.

"Yes," Miles said. "I had barely ten minutes with Pel before we left Escobar. Just enough to realize we needed to get out of there. There are a great many things I'd like to ask her."

"I spoke to her earlier," Gregor said. "She was most . . . elliptical."

"Believe it or not, she's one of the most adventurous of the consorts," Miles said, feeling a reminiscent smile curving his lips. "She once dropped off the side of a kilometer high building in one of those bubbles. Of course, she didn't bother to tell me beforehand that they can do this controlled glide thing. I nearly had a stroke on the spot."

Gregor's mouth twitched. "Thank you for telling me that," he said sincerely. "I'll keep it in mind the next time she's coming across all . . . haut. It'll help. Any advice for the ghem-General?"

"That's another thing," Miles said thoughtfully. "How did he get mixed up in Star Créche business? That's not the normal order of things. He's Pel's personal security force, obviously, but why him? It's most curious." He paused, contemplating. "He has a highly developed sense of honor. And he's good at what he does. The combination can make a lot of things happen."

"That it can," Gregor murmured, watching Miles through half-lidded eyes. "In any case," he added, "we will simply have to have a frank discussion with our guests. We cannot host the haut Pel forever. Something will have to be done."

"Has Eta Ceta said anything?"

"Hmm, not yet," Gregor said. "ImpSec suspects they don't actually know she's here. That will change quickly, however. And then . . . then we'll see what happens." His lips curved. "One prisoner," he said, glaring half-heartedly at Miles. "One insignificant, uncomplicated, unpolitical prisoner transfer. That's all I asked for. And what do you come back with? One prisoner, one haut planetary consort, one chief of Celestial Garden Security, and thirty-six clones."

Miles shrugged philosophically. "Just think of it as service above and beyond the call of duty."

"Hmm," Gregor said mildly. "Something tells me that's not what Simon would have to say about it - what Simon has said about similar situations in the past. In fact, as I recall -"

"There's no need to dig up the past," Miles said hastily. "Really."

"Your service record is quite astonishing, you know," Gregor said contemplatively. "You should take a look at it sometime. You can request all the files now." His lips twitched. "Some of Simon's personal reports are most . . . entertaining."

"Maybe someday," Miles said. "Not now, though." He paused, then continued, prodded by Gregor's inquiring look. "There are things in there that I remember with pleasure, even if they weren't necessarily a joy at the time. And there are others I would rather never think of again.
Either state is . . . difficult right now."

"Ah," Gregor said, sitting back. "I think I understand. And how is my Lord Vorkosigan feeling tonight?"

"Status check?" Miles asked, bemused. "Want to know if you need to sic Ivan and fifty gallons of ice water on me again?"

Gregor's eyebrows rose. "Ice water?" he asked interestingly.

"Forget about that," Miles said, waving it quickly away.

"So?" Gregor said. "What's going on in your head right now?"

"I'm thinking about Vorkosigan Vashnoi," Miles said honestly.

Gregor blinked. "That . . . doesn't sound very cheerful," he said carefully.

"It's not supposed to," Miles said. "But that's all right." He paused, ducking his head a little and resting his chin on his arms crossed over the back of the chair. "I've been carrying it around in my head for a long time," he said. "Vorkosigan Vashnoi. Ever since Gran'da died. Before that too, a little. He left it to me, you know, personally, I mean. It was . . . characteristically cryptic. I thought for a long time that it was simply the most permanent way he knew to remind me what I was. A blighted land for a blighted heir."

Gregor made a quick, negative gesture. "Your grandfather loved you so much, he practically remade himself for you," he said with conviction.

"Yes," Miles said. "I know that. Somewhere. I just can't remember most of the time." He sighed. "The old man, he was a clever one, but I was actually over-thinking it. I think it was a lot simpler than one last insult. It's a reminder all right, but it's not about being . . . a disappointment to him."

"What's it about, then?"

"It's . . . Barrayar," Miles said. "It's Dendarii. It's people who didn't know how to sign their own names, but who held the mountains against Cetaganda like a fortress. Because they could do nothing else. It's the place you find when everything else is gone - taken away or wasted or just neglected - and all you have left is the one thing that will not be taken, that will not be wasted, that outwaits neglect." His eyes found the Vorbarra coat of arms, displayed on the wall behind Gregor's desk, even here, out of the public eye. "He wanted me to remember that I'm Barrayaran," he said, finding the right words at last. "It used to be, serving Barrayar was a method, not a goal. It was just the best bargain I could strike at the time. We've got to make do. Gran'da did with me, and he didn't want me to forget that. But it doesn't always have to be that way, I think." He paused, trying to control the flow of his ramble. "Anyway. He left me Vorkosigan Vashnoi to remind me who I am. The only problem being that I didn't know much about that at the time. It was just so typical of him to leave me that great blighted hole in the ground instead of just sending me a damn posthumous letter like a normal person."

"It seems a fitting legacy," Gregor murmured.

"I suppose," Miles said. "Took me long enough to figure out, though." He coughed a little. "I've, uh, I've never told anyone about that before. Not that there's really been anyone - it was when Simon was ill, you see. I'd gone back to the hills for my birthday on a quest for . . . something. And I found Vorkosigan Vashnoi in my own head."
"And then you came back here and walked into my office, and left thirty minutes later with an Auditor's chain around your neck," Gregor said. "I think I see."

"Yes," Miles nodded. "I rather thought you would." He paused, took a deep breath, and met Gregor's eyes. "I've considered," he said.

Gregor went utterly still, not even blinking. "What have you decided?" he said after a beat, voice perfectly even.

"I've decided that you underestimated me," Miles said. "Not on purpose. You probably did it because you didn't want to scare me off, I don't know."

"I don't follow," Gregor said. "But if I have . . . offended, I apologize. Abjectly, if necessary."

"It's all right," Miles said. "It was a perfectly reasonable mistake to make. I made it myself, for years and years and years. You forgot that I am Barrayaran, and I am Vor, and I am Dendarii hillfolk, when it comes right down to it. I will serve Barrayar, even if our Barrayar is not quite the one we inherited from our parents."

Gregor's face tightened. "I do not ask for service," he said lowly. "I thought you understood that."

"I do," Miles said hastily. "I do. But you did ask me to imagine the world without the Imperium, without Barrayar. You probably thought it would be easier that way. I don't think you intended to ask me the hardest question first."

"I was apparently wrong," Gregor said.

"Well, yes," Miles agreed. "Not that the thought of being your consort isn't mind-boggling." He paused, heart thumping as he spoke the word out loud for the first time. By the arrested look on Gregor's face, it had struck him just as deeply.

"My consort," Gregor repeated, as if tasting the words.

"My mother told me once that I've been serving Barrayar since the day they put me in the uterine replicator," Miles said. "I didn't believe her at the time, I didn't really care at the time, but it's come to mean something to me now. I think I could serve Barrayar in this, too. A service it maybe does not want, but, well. I've not always stopped to ask before."

"Oh," Gregor breathed, shifting as if to reach across the desk and take Miles's hand. Then he controlled the movement and sat back, face rearranging itself into neutrality once more. "You said it was a hard question?" he prompted, in the tones of a man bracing himself for a blow.

"It was," Miles admitted. *He has been nothing but honest with you. You owe him truth.* "I spent most of the past six weeks thinking about the Imperium because believe it or not, that was actually a little easier. It's just . . . I think I'm finally learning how to serve Barrayar with all of myself. There's enough of me to really do it, and for the right reasons. I know how to do that - I think I could learn to be your consort." He paused, licked his lips. Another new word, this one alive and sparking like a midsummer firework. "The thing is, I have no idea how to be your lover."

Gregor was playing statue again. His lips barely moved when he spoke. "Is this . . . do you wish to forget - I understand if - no." He straightened suddenly, chin rising. Miles knew, with unshakeable certainty, that Gregor had his own Vorkosigan Vashnoi somewhere in the back of his brain, and he was thinking of it right now. Gregor came up out of his chair, stumbling a little as he rounded the desk. He halted before Miles, and there was a strange, almost frightening moment when Miles thought he would drop to his knees. But instead he only leaned against the desk as he took both
Miles's hands in his. His grip was too tight, painfully so, but Miles didn't mind.

"You're not sure about me," Gregor said. "Let me convince you?"

"Yes," Miles said instantly. It was astonishingly easy. "Yes. That's what I want. Let the Imperium come when it will, and we'll deal with it then. I think we can. Well, I know you can, and I hope I can. For the rest . . ." He squeezed Gregor's hands. "I feel . . . I think I would always regret not trying. I'm sorry if that's not exactly what you were hoping for, but -"

"It's enough," Gregor said. "It's more than I ever expected." A slow, wondering smile was beginning to spread across his face. "Trust you to bypass the thing that terrifies me the most as if it weren't even important."

"It is important," Miles contradicted. He had a funny feeling that he was grinning like an idiot. I didn't know it would feel so good, just like that. "It's important. But it's not what I'm most afraid of."

"Yes," Gregor said. "You're not afraid to give everything to Barrayar. And I . . . I have come not to fear giving everything to you. Perhaps, between us, we can learn not to be afraid at all."

Miles nodded, touched by the uncharacteristic flow of words. Perhaps I can make life better for him. Why didn't that occur to me before?

Gregor's smile widened, and he leaned forward. Then he paused, blinking hopefully. "It is . . . traditional," he said, half question.

"Hold on," Miles said. He tugged his hands free with some difficulty, and began scrambling up to stand on the chair. Gregor was instantly there, all eager, helping hands. It occurred to Miles that under most circumstances, if someone tried to help him stand up, he would bite them. Just at the moment, however, he couldn't seem to find it in himself to mind. Finally he was upright, holding Gregor's shoulders and looking down from an unaccustomed few inches of height advantage. He quashed a sudden, irreverent impulse to check and see if Gregor washed behind his ears.

"So," Gregor said, sliding an arm around him. "Tomorrow night. Come for dinner?" He grimaced a little. "We'll have to eat with the Cetagandans, but we can get rid of them early, I promise."

"I'll be here," Miles assured, making a mental note to prepare Ma Kosti's nerves for a future Imperial guest. They were neither of them shrinking Vor damsels, and this courtship business was not going to be one-sided, not if he had anything to say about it.

Gregor tugged a little plaintively at him. "You're up here for a reason, you know," he said.

"Oh, right. The pursuit of Vor tradition."

"We must obey tradition," Gregor agreed solemnly.

The kiss was careful, tentative, not entirely chaste. Miles's eyes slid closed under a rush of simple animal pleasure at the feel of Gregor's mouth beneath his, gentle yet fervent, taking only what was offered in return. Somehow, before they parted at a silent, mutually felt signal, Gregor's other arm had slid around him. They blinked at each other, adjusting to a new, close-up perspective.

"Hail tradition," Gregor whispered. He held on for another moment, then stepped back. Miles accepted his hand to jump down, and neither of them bothered to let go. Gregor glanced over Miles's head and sighed. "The party is probably breaking up," he said.
Miles looked over his shoulder at the clock, surprised to see that so much time had passed. "Do we need to . . .?"

"You don't," Gregor said. "I, however, should say good night, at least. You look exhausted," he added, quelling Miles's protest.

"I was a bit . . . I was in one of my moods on the way home," Miles admitted.

Gregor grimaced in understanding. "Go home and get a good night's sleep," he urged. "May I walk you out?"

"Sure."

They walked out to the side entrance in a comfortable silence. Miles called Pym from the north wing, and by the time they arrived the car was waiting. Pym, bowing formally to Gregor, held Miles's door open.

"Tomorrow night," Gregor said.

"Cetagandans," Miles agreed. "And . . . so on."

It wasn't until he was in the car and Pym was pulling away that he realized just how . . . rapt he had been. He forgot sometimes, how overwhelming Gregor could be, just sitting and looking at you. _Gregor and I. Me and Gregor. How can it seem so easy now?_

He leaned back in the seat, letting his eyes fall shut. As if Gregor's observation had conjured it, he was suddenly bone weary. The release of tension, he realized, that's what it was. The release of tension and stress and a great deal of uncertainty. And in their wake? A quiet, simply contented tiredness. _I made the right decision. God help me, Ivan was right, in his own way._

He'd forgotten about Ivan, he realized absently. Ah well, he could tell Gregor about him later. There was no rush.

* *

Ivan was making the palace guard a little nervous, he knew, lurking like this. He didn't much care, though. Gregor had emerged a few minutes earlier from his talk with Miles, made the rounds among his guests, saying good night and such. He was currently speaking quietly with haut Pel, their voices too low to be overheard. Ivan's mother and Simon had already gone, and soon it would just be Gregor, the guards, and himself.

At last Pel and Benin left, and Gregor turned around, as if surveying the room. He spotted Ivan and started. Ivan set down his glass of dessert wine and strode across the room to his Emperor.

"Ivan," Gregor said, "this is a . . . surprise. You don't usually linger after these things."

"I was hoping to have a word," Ivan said. "If you're not busy."

Gregor raised an eyebrow. He could probably count on one hand the number of times Ivan had ever asked for a word with him. "Of course."

Gregor led him back to his private office and gestured him into a seat. "Is everything all right?" he asked, perching on the edge of his desk.

"Yes, it's just . . ." Ivan hesitated, took a deep breath, and plunged in. "Gregor, I know. About you
and Miles. I'm sorry, I -"

Gregor held up a hand. "It's all right, Ivan. I expected you to find out."

Ivan's mouth dropped open. "You did?"

"Yes." Gregor cocked his head to one side. "That's why I arranged for your assignment. Miles was very agreeable, of course, but I thought it would be a good idea. You know how he is when he's thinking about something."

"Yes," Ivan almost growled. "I do. And that little sneak - he let me believe he was doing me a great favor." He sat back in his chair, trying to refocus. "How are you tonight, Gregor?"

"I am . . ." Gregor paused and looked a bit - God, Ivan didn't want to think it, but it couldn't be helped - dreamy. "I am wonderful," he said at last. "I have a haut staying in my guest house, a diplomatic nightmare on the horizon, and an intergalactic incident to avert. And I am wonderful. Better than I've been in years. Possibly decades."

"I see," Ivan said. He hesitated. "I'm happy for you. Really."

"But?" Gregor prompted.

"But I do hope you know what you're doing. Good God, Gregor, of all the times to spring this on Miles. He was dead just over a year ago!"

"I know," Gregor said, and Ivan was taken aback by the steel he heard in his liege lord's voice. "I know that all too well. His death . . . shattered me." He rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes. "And then, he was alive again. And I felt that I'd been given a second chance, one that I would not - could not let slide by."

"I understand," Ivan said. "But I still . . ." He sighed. "This puts me in an incredibly awkward position," he said plaintively. "I am wonderful," he said at last. "I have a haut staying in my guest house, a diplomatic nightmare on the horizon, and an intergalactic incident to avert. And I am wonderful. Better than I've been in years. Possibly decades."

"Ah!" Gregor said. "That's the second time tonight I've heard a reference to an incident involving you, Miles, and ice water. I had better hear this story at some point."

"Maybe later," Ivan said with a slight smile. "I just want you to - to be careful with each other."

"For the sake of all innocent bystanders?" Gregor asked dryly.

"Of course," Ivan said, smile widening. "I'm always looking out for innocent bystanders." His expression became more serious. "But also for your sake, and Miles's sake."

"Thank you," Gregor said quietly. "Your concern means a great deal." He quirked an eyebrow. "How was he, anyway? On the trip, I mean?"
"He was insufferable," Ivan said, scowling. "Until I finally found out what was going on, I thought he was hauling me off to commit treason with the Dendarii."

Gregor chuckled. "I think those days are over for Miles."

"I certainly hope so," Ivan sighed.

A serious look fell across Gregor's face. "And, uh, you are the only one who knows?"

"Yes," Ivan said. "Though I think Cordelia suspects something."

"Of course she does." Gregor paused, looking thoughtful. "I imagine she'll be one of the first to know, once we start telling people."

"Ah - speaking of that," Ivan said nervously. "Gregor, when are you planning on telling my mother? If she finds out that I knew and didn't say anything . . . God, my head would be on a platter."

"I'll tell her . . . soon," Gregor said, a response which did nothing to assuage Ivan's fears.

"Gregor, I'm serious. She's been trying to set you up for years. The least you can do is tell her that it isn't worth trying anymore."

Gregor waved the question away. "I'm going to have a bit of fun first, I think."


"I will tell her, Ivan. Of course I will. Just not right now. I don't think Miles would - not right now."

"But soon?" Ivan said, a pleading note in his voice.

"I hope so," Gregor said, quietly fervent.

"All right," Ivan said. "And, uh. Good luck. You'll need it."

"Thank you," Gregor said, sliding off the desk and extending his hand. "That could not have been an easy trip for you."

Ivan rose and shook his hand. "It was . . . interesting at times. But it turned out all right in the end."

"Mmm," Gregor replied. "That remains to be seen."

Gregor moved to walk Ivan out. His hand was on the door release when Ivan spoke up again. "I do hope everything works out," he said quietly. "You deserve each other." Then, realizing how that might sound, he added, "I mean, you're . . . you're worth each other."

Gregor smiled, a rare real smile that reached his eyes. "That is a great compliment, Ivan. Thank you."

"And despite the, ahem, difficulties," Ivan added, suppressing a grin, "I do like you much better than Rowan."

Gregor looked extremely confused. "Rowan Durona? What does she have to do with -" He broke off, eyes going wide.

"Don't worry about it," Ivan said, while the evil voice in his head - which sounded remarkably like
Miles at times - cackled. "He said it was right after his cryo-revival. Probably it was part of his physical therapy or something."

"Thank you, Ivan, for this . . . fascinating piece of information," Gregor murmured, pinning him with a look that said quite clearly that he knew Ivan was enjoying this.

"No problem," Ivan said, then paused, considering him. "You're not as pretty as Elli Quinn, though. And I never met Taura, but I hear she's quite spectacular. He does go for tall, doesn't he?"

"Good night," Gregor said firmly.

"Good night," Ivan said. Feeling satisfied that he'd accomplished what he'd wanted to on all fronts, he slipped out the door.
Miles slept late. When he finally clawed his way, first out of a black hole of exhaustion, and then his covers, he found the sun creeping inexorably towards noon out his window. He blinked muzzily at it, scrubbing at his face as he laboriously worked his way up onto an elbow. Gregor was right - he had been utterly exhausted.

Miles's elbow abruptly gave way, and he landed back amongst his pillows with a thump. *Good God. I actually said yes to him?* He had a moment of sudden vertigo, still lying down. *Me and Gregor. Gregor and me . . . where's the coffee?*

With the preternatural timing of a first-class Armsman, Pym chose that moment to rap at the door and then enter, bearing a tray containing assorted pots and bowls and plates redolent of wonderful things. *Ah. Ma Kosti. Need to start bringing you with me when I travel.*

"Morning, m'lord," Pym greeted cheerfully, setting the tray down on the bedside table. "Sleep well?" He courteously, and quite sensibly, offered Miles a cup of coffee straight away, before expecting any sort of answer.

"Like a log," Miles said, after scorching his vocal chords back into working order.

"We took a vote," Pym said. "Me and Roic and Jankowski, I mean. We decided your normal wake-up call shouldn't apply, seeing as how you'd just gotten back on planet and looked so tired and all."

"How democratic of you," Miles said wryly. "It's fine, it's fine," he added, bestirring himself to sit up. "I was too tired to tell you I wanted to sleep in. Sure sign I needed to. Thank you."

Pym nodded, but did not withdraw. Miles blinked at him, still hovering at casual attention at the foot of the bed.

"Something else?" he asked.

"Yes, m'lord. As of this morning, the gate guard has been increased, and two agents have been assigned to the house itself. One of them is in your sitting room right now."

"Ah," Miles said blankly. "I . . . see." He wondered idly on what pretext Gregor had justified the move to General Allegre. On one hand, he was in the middle of an unofficial if highly sensitive case, but on the other hand . . . For a moment, Miles contemplated the viability of arguing that extra guards were actually more dangerous than no guards. A difficult, self-compromising decision, that. His new . . . position required increased security, to protect against a leak, a discovery, and all the things that would come after. Yet security was a change, might itself be the first clue. Miles had a feeling that his personal preference and Gregor's personal preference on which way to jump would not be aligning on this issue. "Thank you," he said finally, recalling the still waiting Pym. "Oh, and tell Ma Kosti not to worry about dinner for me - I'll be dining at the Residence again."

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said, and withdrew.

Miles sat a moment on the edge of the bed, bare feet dangling. His thoughts, mercenary to the somnolent contentment of sleep and the warmth of the sun on his neck, were maddeningly tranquil. *Glorious? Not that. Not yet. But oh Gregor, you have certainly infected me . . .*

He lingered over his brunch, then dressed without calling for Pym. The thought of the number of
messages and tasks and invitations that would have piled up in his absence was somewhat quelling, but Miles squared his shoulders in the face of it and went out to meet his fate. True to Pym's word, there was indeed a pleasant yet unobtrusive young man stationed in the sitting room. Miles nodded a vague greeting, and headed straight for the comconsole.

Am I actually getting good at this? he wondered several hours later, sitting back. His father made the job of Count look as easy as breathing, an expression Miles deeply mistrusted on the basis of personal experience. Yet Miles knew like few others just how much was involved in doing the job, and more importantly, doing it well. It was a future he had once anticipated with gloomy dread. Could he have been wrong about that, too? Was he mellowing in his old age?

He opted for semi-formal street clothes that evening. The etiquette of dining with a haut lady was just going to have to bow to the reality of Pel's new situation. That, and Miles's lack of interest in being confined in stiff formalwear just now. And speaking of Pel's new situation . . .

One of the ImpSec men insinuated himself into the groundcar with him, and Miles spent the ride ignoring him and plotting his assault upon the blockade of haut intractability. Pel was just going to have to explain some of those sensitive, not for outlander barbarian ears, Cetagandan matters. And if she wouldn't, there was always Benin, for whom Miles had a completely different set of questions.

As it turned out, however, little preparation was necessary. Gregor arrived in the small parlor where Miles, Pel, and Benin had been deposited, practically on Miles's heels. His mouth was set in a grim, displeased line.

"The Cetagandan Empire," he said without preamble, "would like to know exactly what we think we're doing."

"Ah," Pel said. "And what have you told the Cetagandan Empire?"

"I blinked a lot and tried to look stupid," Gregor said, opening both hands. "But that was over tight beam. I imagine they'll eventually get around to sending someone in person." He paused a moment, eyes narrowing at Pel. "They didn't exactly mention you, though," he observed. "It was just a general . . . chastisement."

"It's quite embarrassing," Miles put in, when it looked like Pel wasn't going to volunteer anything. "Misplacing a planetary consort. And ghem-General Benin, as well." He cocked his head to one side, considering. "Now that's a point. Why are you here, anyway, General?"

"I am security for the haut Consort," Benin said. He was wearing his face paint, Miles noted. Interestingly, or perhaps just practically, Pel had decided to go without her force bubble.

"Yeah," Miles said. "I figured that. But it's sort of funny. Haut Pel could be gone for quite a while and not be widely noted. She only has contact with a few select haut, anyway. The same can't be said for you. This little, ahem, adventure, struck me as a strictly Star Crèche concern - how'd you get mixed up in it?"

"Ghem-General Benin has made himself very useful to the Star Crèche in the past," Pel said coolly. "It is customary for a person of his rank and skills to accompany any haut traveling outside the Empire."

It was also customary, Miles noted to himself, for a haut lady not to travel at all.

"Shall we go in to dinner?" Gregor said, smiling blandly all around. Their eyes met for the first
They ate at a small, intimate table just off the parlor. He was at Gregor's right hand this time, Miles noted. Opposite him, Benin appeared perfectly collected beneath his face paint, though Miles knew for a fact that being sandwiched between an emperor and a planetary consort had to be rather novel for him. Miles followed Gregor's lead and kept his side of the conversation very general and unthreatening. This was not hard, for he had forgotten just how much he genuinely liked Benin. Though they'd exchanged a handful of highly formal communications during the past seven years, they had not spoken face-to-face since the old dowager Empress's death. Benin, Miles found, was as subtly brilliant and palpably upright as he remembered. He wondered if he could uncover that elusive, downright wicked sense of humor he'd encountered a few times before. He felt only a little bad for effectively cutting Pel out of the conversation as he and Benin got onto the topic of galactic military strategy and were off and running. Pel, as Miles recalled, had little knowledge and less interest in anything military, or even political. Her centers of power lay elsewhere.

Gregor participated sparingly in the conversation, dropping the occasional comment to Miles and Benin, or drawing Pel out for a few words. Often, when Miles glanced up, he found Gregor's eyes on him, a simple, contemplative gaze that automatically straightened his posture and lifted his chin.

It wasn't until dessert arrived that Gregor took control of the talk once more and moved it back to where Miles had originally been steering it.

"It will be at least four days before another tight beam message can arrive," he said during a lull, leaning back in his chair. "I suspect we'll have another round of that, and then get a more substantial visitor. In the meantime, I imagine the ambassador will be making some inquiries as well." He paused, lips pursing. "A most interesting problem, this, practical as well as diplomatic. Tell me, haut Pel, do you have any long range plans?"

"Certainly," Pel said. "I wish to first ensure that my efforts will not be wasted, and then I would like to return to Eta Ceta to discuss the future of the haut with the rest of the Council."

"I see," Gregor murmured. "As I said, the practical does rear its unwanted head." He glanced at Miles, eyebrows rising.

"I think it will get messier before it's over," Miles said slowly. "I was imagining what I would do, if I were in the Star Crèche's position." Pel made a small, disbelieving little sound that Miles decided to ignore. "I'd send out a feeler," he continued. "Something to both see what exactly we know, and as the reopening of communications with haut Pel. I might, for example, suggest that Barrayar had stolen something from me - a new and valuable genetic procedure. Or I might not bring it up at all, and wait for the opportunity to speak to haut Pel in person." He cut himself short before anything about outlander barbarians could slip out. "It could go any number of ways," he concluded, "but the point is they don't know what we know, and they need to find out without actually asking."

"Accurate enough," Pel said, a bit grudgingly. "I had not quite pictured events occurring as they have. I suspect I shall have to make my case to the Council from here."

"That might take a while," Miles observed.

"Yes," Pel said, frowning. "The thought of being away from my duties so long is . . . disturbing. But it appears there is no help for it."
What exactly had she been hoping for, Miles wondered? She'd roped him in and then shown up at Escobar as if she expected her prize to fall simply into her lap. It all felt very unplanned, very haphazard to him. Pel was the most freethinking of the consorts, but that hardly meant she was careless. And that was another thing - she'd said the other consorts had heard of the existence of the new procedure. They didn't themselves have it yet. A bargaining chip to keep in mind, not for the Cetagandans but for Pel herself, who obviously intended to secure not only the safety, but also the possession, of Lily's new discovery.

Benin stirred, pulling Miles's thoughts back to the moment. "I, too, do not like waiting," Benin said. "My duties are pressing, and I do not like leaving them in the hands of my new second."

"What happened to your old one?" Miles asked, distracted.

Benin's lips pursed. "He met with an unfortunate accident not long ago," he said. His hand on the tablecloth twitched, and Miles was sure the man was suppressing the urge to touch his now-healed face. A story there, and one he could pry out of Benin some other time, when Pel wasn't around to disapprove.

"Androgenesis," Gregor said thoughtfully when the subsequent pause stretched. "That is the focus of the matter. It's been a goal for centuries, and some said it was impossible. It seems almost miraculous that someone has finally cracked it. A second miracle of life, as it were. But now what to do with it?"

"Miracles," Benin murmured, "by their very nature, must break in from outside. We don't carry them in our pockets."

Miles nearly choked on his wine. He covered it with a cough, and pressed his napkin to his mouth as he recomposed himself. Benin stared blandly at him, face impenetrable. Miles stared back, eyes narrowing.

"Excuse me," he murmured, reaching for his water glass. He checked surreptitiously on Pel, but if she had caught that, she was doing a damn good job of acting oblivious.

Calm down, boy. You knew this would happen. It couldn't last forever. Dammit. I need to talk to Benin alone. How long had they known? They had recordings of Dagoola, of all of it.

He deflected Gregor's inquiring look with an insincere smile. Admiral Naismith was effectively dead. ImpSec had long anticipated the day Cetaganda would see through the smoke and mirrors with Mark and two or three other imaginary clones. And yet hearing his own words, spoken halfway across the nexus in a place a great deal like hell, was shocking.

They adjourned to the parlor once more, and the conversation drifted back to more neutral topics. Well, as neutral as they could be when Pel and Gregor were uneasily circling each other's observations on their respective sociocultural climates. Miles contributed as best he could, but his mind was absent, to say the least. Gregor's assurance that they could get rid of the Cetagandans early was proving a bit difficult, he noted.

Finally, nearly half an hour past the point when Gregor had not-so-subtly inquired whether Pel was tiring, the haut sat back in her float chair and reached for the controls.

"I thank you for a pleasant evening," she said, nodding coolly to Gregor and sweeping a glance to Miles. "But I think I shall retire soon. Please don't feel that you must entertain me at every pass - I imagine I shall be occupying your guest house for some time, and there's no need to excessively disturb either of us."
Gregor's mouth twitched. "Certainly," he said, at his most blandly polite. "I shall, of course, inform you when the next communication from Cetaganda arrives."

"Thank you," Pel said, and Miles belatedly scrambled to rise as Benin accompanied her to the door. He offered a few perfunctory good nights, trying in vain to catch Benin's eye. But Benin was either avoiding his gaze or simply fully engaged in bodyguard mode, and Miles sank back into his chair, disappointed, as the door slid closed behind them.

"Am I supposed to be offended or relieved that she would rather avoid my company, I wonder," Gregor said, returning to his own seat.

"Go with annoyed," Miles said. "It means I'll have a harder time prying Benin away from her."

"Nice fellow, for a ghem," Gregor observed thoughtfully. "I knew you liked him, but I didn't quite know why. You do find the most unusual people . . ." He trailed off, eyeing Miles thoughtfully. "Simon told me once that he was never sure whether you collected people or made them to suit."

Miles frowned. "How could I make people?" he asked. "You can't make someone something they aren't already. Benin was just surprisingly competent, and perfectly placed for my needs at the time."

"Hmm," said Gregor noncommittally. "In any case, we have at least four days, probably longer, to come up with a better solution to this little problem." He grimaced. "You know, you'd really think that superior races wouldn't be so . . . superior."

"Yes," Miles agreed. He'd had that precise thought seven years before, during the mess on Eta Ceta. "In theory, you'd think a more advanced race would be, I don't know, more benevolent. They're supposed to be making themselves better, and somehow one expects greatness not to be so . . . annoying."

Gregor sipped his wine, then sat back, hands folded in his lap. "Perhaps they have evolved a different definition of greatness."

"That's what they would say, I imagine," Miles said. "That their thoughts are beyond our understanding. The funny thing is, it always seemed to me that their thoughts were incredibly . . . short. It almost seems that their ambition ends simply in existing. They are born and they live, and therefore they are great. And they make another generation of themselves and die. It just seems so . . . boring."

Gregor laughed. "You do realize that describes most people, don't you?"

"Well yes." Miles waved this away. "But that's just the thing. You'd think the haut, being higher beings or some such, would be . . . better. I don't know. I don't think existing is an end in and of itself. Seems rather a waste." He paused, contemplative. "The haut ladies, though. They're the ones whose minds leave me a little dizzy. They're the ones steering the whole circus, to wherever it's headed."

"I've almost always dealt with the ghem," Gregor commented. "Very occasionally the governor of Rho Ceta. Believe it or not, this is the first haut woman I've met."

"Hmm," said Miles. "Then perhaps it is a shame she wants to be left alone. Barrayar as a whole has rather missed the point of the Cetagandan Empire, I've come to believe. The haut ladies can be most enlightening. Our prejudices blind us, and that's dangerous. They're incredible, really - eight women working in concert, with almost no interest or connection to the military or politics, yet still
at the heart of the thing. The entire Cetagandan Empire isn't going anywhere they haven't approved first, and what it is today can be laid at their feet." He grimaced. "Whether that's to their credit or not. But they're the ones doing the moving."

Gregor listened, nodding slowly. He was silent for several moments, and Miles let him be. Gregor, he knew very well, would not be rushed in anything. "Sometimes," Gregor said at last, gazing off beyond Miles, to something only he could see. "Sometimes, I feel as if the universe is a mountain, and Barrayar is a boulder, and I'm the poor sucker who gets to roll the boulder up the mountain."

"I've heard this one," Miles said. "You keep pushing and pushing and pushing, but you're doomed forever to keep on doing it because you can never reach the top."

"On the grander scale, I know we've come a long way," Gregor said. "Since the Time of Isolation, anyway. We're better than we used to be." His fingers drummed a restless beat on the arms of the chair, then stilled themselves. It occurred to Miles not for the first time that one of the cruel ironies of Gregor's life was that by being the center, the confluence, and the only, there was by definition no one else who could truly empathize with him. Miles had found himself the confidante of choice for just these sorts of reflections more than once in the past, and it generally left him feeling small and helpless, and very happy just to have to read the theory on these things. Tonight, however, he felt a deeper chord resonate somewhere inside, struck and sustained by Gregor's mood.

"Yeah," Miles said, feeling the old, unsettled bitterness. "Now we kill the babies in secret, not in public. Sorry," he added, at Gregor's look.

"No," Gregor said. "It's all right. Please don't - you know I value your thoughts a great deal. Even the unpleasant ones." Miles nodded. That had always been true, and there was a world of reasons why it shouldn't change now. "Barrayar is going somewhere," Gregor went on after a pause. "But it's not a stopping point. It's just . . . a better vantage. A more peaceful one. A safer one. A less frightened one. It just seems like we won't know where that is until we're there." He paused, studying his hands. "I have a certain amount of sympathy for the haut ladies," he said. "Is that strange?"

"No," said Miles. "I've always thought it's one of the more redeeming qualities of the haut. They don't know where they're going, but they're on their way just the same."

"I sometimes don't understand conservatism," Gregor said. "Not political conservatism, though that certainly has its moments of incomprehensibility. But conservatism of the soul. A way of thinking that considers the now the only desirable way to be. How can people not want to move forward? How can they not want to live better?"

"Because then they're stuck on the side of a mountain," Miles said wryly. "And there's this boulder they've got to move."

Gregor opened a hand in acknowledgement. "Quite. At least the haut have achieved unanimity of motion. Or of purpose, at least." He contemplated the wine bottle, then appeared to discard the idea. Probably wise, Miles decided, studying the level in his own glass. *In vino rambling . . . *

"I suppose so," Miles said. "As a race, yes. As people . . . once the sparkle and dazzle of their daily existences wears off, you're left wondering just what they do with themselves." He hesitated, searching for words. "Do you think there's something intrinsically incompatible there? In the long view, I guess, and the short view?"

"I hope not," Gregor said with spontaneous honesty. "It seems to me one should slot into the other like those funny little statues with another statue inside."
"Yes." Miles nodded. "That's it exactly. Logically, you'd think the grand view of, of progress would just be the sum of all the little views of the lives on the way there. But somehow it doesn't work out that way."

"It's a problem of perspective, perhaps," said Gregor. The fingers of his right hand curled and twitched, and Miles's brain distractedly glossed the gesture as the unconscious reach for a pen. Gregor had told him once that he thought best on paper, though to Miles eye he was no slouch at any time. "In history, it's easy to lay people's lives along the arc of change like perfectly graphed points, because the curve has already been drawn. But we have only the vaguest of ideas what the future is going to look like." He huffed out a breath. "It all seems to run to the same question," he said. "How can you direct your life to a larger goal, when you don't know what that goal is? How can you direct the mass of others? The problem isn't really going somewhere, it's the not knowing where that is."

He'd put a lot of thought into this one, Miles could see the ranks of sleepless nights behind his eyes. "It's easy," Miles said, before he could stop himself. "The answer is 'very, very carefully.' And how'd we get onto this stuff, anyway?"

"The cosmology of Cetagandan existence," Gregor said gravely. They eyed each other for a solemn moment, then laughed.

"I think we should surrender to entropy for the evening," Miles said, letting himself sprawl back in his chair. He could feel a smile playing about his mouth, and warm, amused contentment was stealing into his awareness. It was funny about Gregor, he thought absently. He was brilliant and careful and sort of strange, and it took you until he was done with you to realize just how much you actually liked him.

"You're quite right," Gregor agreed. "Come on. Let's go raid the kitchen."

"Um . . ."

"It helps if you take off your boots."

Miles followed his lead, first with the boots, and then out of the parlor. His cosmic mood became rapidly overwhelmed by a slightly giddy amusement as they stole through the quiet, mostly darkened halls of the Residence down to the equally dark and silent kitchen. There were guards and monitors somewhere, there must be, but it was easy to forget that as they paused together in the doorway to the cavernous kitchen, looking for observers, then slipped in together.

"My cook is a terror," Gregor murmured, declining to turn on the bank of overhead lights. "He insists on making everything I eat from scratch, by hand, with the finest ingredients in the galaxy. But sometimes . . ." He crossed the room and plunged head first into one of the cabinets as tall as himself. He emerged a minute later, slightly disheveled, but triumphantly clutching a few bags of forbidden, off-the-shelf, instantly artery-clogging snacks. "Sometimes I just want something spectacularly bad for me."

"You're going to love Ma Kosti, I think," Miles said. "She makes these desserts that will have me in an early grave. Or looking like Mark."

"I've heard about your cook," Gregor said with interest. "From quite an astounding number of people, actually."

"She's mine," Miles said hastily. "Preemptive strike," he added, off Gregor's raised eyebrow. "I've had enough trouble with Aunt Alys trying to tempt her away."
"One of the assistants leaves this stuff for me," Gregor said, hitching himself up to sit on the edge of the high work counter. "I stumbled into her stash, you see, when I was a teenager on the prowl for anything edible at one in the morning. I don't think she knew who kept pilfering her snacks, so finally I left her a note thanking her. She's kept me fully supplied ever since. Covertly, of course. Come on. Need a boost?"

Miles used the rungs of a nearby stool as a sort of stepladder and levered himself up beside him. Their socked feet swung, Miles's several inches above Gregor's.

"You do this often?" he asked, accepting a 'super crunchy!' morsel with some wariness.

"Once a week or so," Gregor said. "It's more fun with company."

Miles was struck by an echo of depressive clairvoyance, the bleak emptiness of those weeks alone in Vorkosigan House, just before and after he was fired, wondering if this was how the rest of his life would be. He felt a keen stab of sympathetic loneliness for Gregor, left alone every night in this great, gusty memory box, servants and guards everywhere and no one to talk to. He shifted closer, squeezing Gregor's forearm, heart aching. Gregor blinked confusedly at him, but covered his hand at once, squeezing in return.

"What was that at dinner?" Gregor asked into the silence. "I thought for a second you were going to start hyperventilating."

"Ah." Miles withdrew his hand. "Some not unexpected bad news. Seems the Cetagandans finally straightened out the mess with me and Mark and Admiral Naismith and all our various clones and permutations. Benin was letting me know they know who Naismith was. I said that, you see - the thing about miracles. Naismith did, I mean."

"When?"

"At Dagoola IV," Miles said. "They have recordings of the entire thing, you know. So do the Dendarii, come to think of it." And, by extension, ImpSec. The thought was vaguely discomfiting.

"What happened?" Gregor asked keenly.

Miles shrugged. "You read the reports."

"No, actually," Gregor said. "Well, I mean, I did, but they didn't say much. If I'm remembering rightly, that was just before you vanished for two months, and then there was the mess on Earth with Mark, and then some other minor catastrophe -"

"Lady Vorvayne and her children being held by pirates," Miles supplied.

"Yes, that's it. Oh, Simon was positively green for about six months straight there. It's amusing now. Not then, though. Anyway, as I remember it, all I ever got was your initial report, barely a paragraph of summary. Simon said later he debriefed you in person, but so much had happened by then we never got around to the whole story."

"Ah." Miles studied his fingernails. "There's not much to tell, really. I went in as the advance, just after the one man. Turned out he was, well, dying, so I decided the best alternative - better alternative, really - was to get everyone out. Ten thousand angry soldiers are better than one, right? It was just a matter of waiting for the Dendarii to show up, and coaching the prisoners without letting the Cetagandans know what was coming."

"And you said that?" Gregor asked. "Miracles, by their very nature, must break in from the outside.
We don't carry them in our pockets."

Miles shrugged again. "I was getting my intentions out to Elli and Elena, who were monitoring. That, and it took a bit of, uh, persuasion, to get the prisoners moving. That place . . . it sucked the soul right out of you, after a while. It just took everything until all you had left was the dome and the light and the certainty that you would never get away." He stopped, startled that years later, he could still tap a vein of the old exhaustion and anger and pain. *Never get away, indeed.*

"How did you persuade them?" Gregor asked. His voice was low and calm in the dimness.

"Propaganda," Miles said, waving a hand. "Religious, mostly. I told them they could live better. I told them they needed to be ready for the miracle, when it came. I told them heaven was for everyone."


Miles's chin jerked up. He looked for mockery, found none, relaxed. "That was sort of the idea," he said. "Uplifting by the bootstraps. Except I had no boots. Or pockets, either, come to think of it - I was naked for much of the persuading, you see."

"Were you?" Gregor didn't quite smile, but Miles felt a flush prickling up his face under the suddenly increased weight of his gaze. "Maybe you can tell me the whole story sometime," Gregor murmured after a pause. "I imagine there's quite a bit more to it."

"Maybe," said Miles. "Can I have another one of those things?"

They crunched in silence for a few minutes. "Beer?" Gregor asked

"Please."

Gregor hopped down and crossed to the fridge. Miles leaned an elbow on his knee and let his chin rest in his palm as he watched. Gregor was thrown into sharp profile, a tall, upright figure outlined against the line of light as he opened the refrigeration unit. What did it mean that the only awkwardness he could feel between them now when things had changed was that there was no awkwardness? He'd done so much panicking before the fact, and he had little doubt that Gregor had experienced worse upheaval, and probably longer. Shouldn't this be more . . . difficult?

Gregor returned with a single bottle and an apologetic smile. He leaned against the counter next to Miles and twisted the cap off the bottle before handing it to Miles.

"Probably better," Miles murmured, accepting the first cool, foamy swallow. "Proper dinners can be positively devastating for those of us with low tolerances, you know."

He passed the bottle and Gregor sipped, his mouth moving at the lip just where Miles's had. Accident? Hard to say. A prickle of curiosity was spreading through his brain, and Miles knew himself well enough to realize that he would not be able to resist. No reason to, anyway.

Gregor extended the bottle, but Miles only set it down on the counter out of the way and reached again. Gregor's breath caught, and he stepped forward, one hand coming around to clasp the back of Miles' neck.

There was very little that could be called chaste about this kiss. When they finally came up for air after a dizzying interval, Miles found himself wrapped around Gregor like a clinging vine. Indulging an opportunistic streak Miles had been previously unaware of, Gregor took ruthless advantage. Miles let him. He wondered distantly whether Gregor would catch him if he slid right
off the edge of the counter. He started only a little when Gregor's mouth found one of the still vicious scars where his throat had been cut for cryo freeze. They made him strangely jumpy, and Elli had learned to avoid them after his return. Gregor lifted his head, eyes questioning in the dimness, but Miles forestalled him by angling for another kiss. They leaned forehead to forehead for untimed minutes, breaths automatically synchronizing as they learned the textures of each other's mouths in increasingly intimate kisses. Finally, just as Miles was beginning to worry that events were approaching critical mass - and a rather ill-advisedly premature melt-down it would be, he was sure - Gregor pulled back.

"I think," Gregor said lowly, and had to pause to clear his throat. "I think it might be best for us to, ah . . ."

"I should go," Miles cut in, saving him from an undoubtedly polite, but excruciating, euphemism. *You know what they say about curiosity.*

"Yes," Gregor said, managing to sound relieved and disappointed at the same time. They disentangled, and Miles hopped down. "You're . . . okay?" Gregor asked, looking a bit anxious.


Gregor walked him out again. They refrained from a good night kiss, though Gregor did squeeze his shoulder right before he climbed into the groundcar. Miles twisted his neck to see him, four guards surrounding him and looking extra nervous, standing just outside the west entrance as they pulled away. When he turned back to face the front, he found Pym looking at him in the side mirror. Perhaps it was just Miles's imagination, but he thought his Armsman's face looked . . . extra bland.

"What?" he asked, a bit testily.

"Nothing, m'lord," Pym said.

*Miles jerked awake, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. His hands were clenched in painful fists, and it took him a moment to relax enough to take a deep, shuddering breath. *You are not in a Cetagandan POW camp. You are on Barrayar, in Vorkosigan House, completely safe.* The shaking began to subside, but he still felt cold and hollow, like he had for days after finishing that mission. He wished there were someone there to warm him up, someone tall and solid and comforting. The thought was enough, after the first panicked moments, to slow his heartbeat back to something resembling normal.

He leaned back against his pillows, wide-awake and not ready to try and sleep again. Dagoola IV. What a nightmare. They'd gotten everyone out in the end - almost everyone. Still, that mission had ended up in the pluses category, in the mental tally he'd kept for ten years. And, at the very least, it had taught him the value of thinking big. Really, really big.

He caught his breath, astounded by a flare of insight as sudden and stark as lightning. Could it be that simple? Could it be that he was so used to keeping secrets and working on assignments that were so classified they practically had to invent a new level of classification for them, that he'd missed the obvious? He examined the idea carefully from every angle. It would get androgenesis off Barrayar, get the Cetagandans off their backs, and protect the Duronas, all at once. The perfect solution.
Miles threw off the covers, stumbled to the comconsole, fumbling about in the dark for his access card. After a moment he was staring into the face of Gregor's night butler, who passed him through with only one mild inquiry about the hour. Thirty seconds later Gregor appeared, sleepy and mussed.

"Miles, it's three o'clock in the morning. Is everything all right?" He straightened suddenly, taking a quick breath. "Your father isn't - he's - Miles, what's going on?"

"What - oh." Too late, Miles realized that most people assumed the worst when they received comconsole calls at three in the morning. "No, no," he said quickly. "My father's fine, at least as far as I know. I just had an epiphany and, er, didn't think long enough before calling."

"Ah." Gregor looked very relieved. He dashed a hand across his face and said, "Well, you may as well tell me now, since I'm awake."

"I had a dream about Dagoola IV," Miles said. "And it occurred to me afterwards that that mission was a success only because it was such a miserable failure to begin with. I decided that the only way to make it worth anything was to just - blow it up. Heaven is for everyone."

"Right," Gregor said. "We talked about that tonight. What does that have to do with your epiphany?"

"We need to do the same thing with androgenesis. We can't hide it - we shouldn't, because the longer we confine it, the more likely that the Cetagandans will find it and try and destroy it and anyone who knows about it. But if too many people know about it . . ."

Gregor's eyes widened. "Then everyone is safe."

"Right."

Gregor straightened from his awkward hunch over the vidplate and sat down in the comconsole chair. Behind him, Miles caught a glimpse of a dimly lit bedroom. "So what do you suggest we do?"

"Beta Colony. No one messes with them, no matter how many strange things they come up with. I think we should send all the Duronas to Beta Colony. Let the scientific method take its course, as it were. And no better place for it. We're blameless, Pel is blameless, and we all get what we want."

"Except the Star Crèche, of course."

Gregor nodded slowly. "It would take some preparation. And I still have to deal with Cetagandans."

Miles waved that away. "By the time the Cetagandans get here, the Duronas will be gone. They'll collect Pel and Benin, and we'll be Cetagandan-free once more."

"And androgenesis will be on Beta Colony, where anyone in the galaxy can have access to it . . . well, if they can afford it."

"Yes," Miles said, feeling a flutter of incipient panic. They had not yet discussed the implications of androgenesis for themselves. Whatever existed between them was still too new and tenuous to quite bear up under the weight of the future. Soon, though, they would have to talk about it.

"I'll discuss it with General Allegre tomorrow - today," Gregor said, and yawned. "But for now - go back to bed, Miles. I certainly am."
"Right. Er. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He smiled and bowed fractionally, still seated. "Day or night. You know that. Good night, Miles." He cut the com.
Chapter 7

The next several days were spent in preparations. It was decided that a small frigate, usually detailed to system patrol, would take the Duronas as far as Sergyar, at which point they would pass out of Barrayar's direct circle of influence and might need more protection. A tight beam message was left for the Dendarii Free Mercenary Fleet, currently in orbit over Vervane. They would meet the Duronas in Sergyaran orbit and escort them to Beta Colony. This made Miles feel much better about the entire situation, though he was glad that he wasn't going to have to go with them and risk running into an ex-lover or two. He had quite enough to deal with at the moment in that department, thank you.

He invited Gregor to dinner three nights after the evening with Pel and Benin. Ma Kosti might have strangled him if he'd sprung the Emperor on her with any less warning. She almost did anyway, despite Miles's assurances that whatever she made would be delicious, a downright culinary miracle, in fact. She glared and huffed and harried him out of the kitchen with a sandwich in one hand and a kitten in the other. The kitten batted its paws and looked up at Miles adoringly, and somehow managed to filch half the vat protein out of the sandwich before he had realized what was happening.

_Dangerous little beasts_, Miles thought fondly as it scampered away to join the rest of the furry spawn.

Dinner was the complete success Miles had, with only mild trepidation, anticipated. They forewent the echoing emptiness of the formal dining room in favor of a small table and a warm fire in the yellow parlor. Gregor, prepared for Ma Kosti or not, spent a great portion of the meal smiling in apparent delight. Miles, who was feeling remarkably mellow even before his second glass of wine, smiled back and hit mute on the part of his brain that was always calculating strategic contingencies and which, in recent days, had been emitting a lot of alarmed howling noises. They ended the evening on the sofa, necking while a displaced cat glared at them from the windowsill.

This time Miles walked Gregor out. They were forced to restraint by the presence of nearly a dozen listeners from both their entourages, but Miles found - not really to his surprise - that Gregor could say a great deal in the blandest of phrases.

Afterwards he trotted up the stairs, whistling tunelessly and thinking of not much at all. Pym met him just outside his suite door, melting out of the shadows of the darkened corridor from the direction of the yellow parlor.

"Did you have a good evening, m'lord?" Pym asked.

"Yes," Miles said cheerfully. "An excellent evening."

"I'm glad," Pym said, and coughed. "May I speak to you privately, m'lord?"

Miles paused, then nodded, gesturing Pym through the door after him. He turned the comconsole chair backwards and straddled it, and after a moment Pym settled in the armchair across from him.

"So," Miles said, crossing his arms over the back of the chair. There were any number of reasons why his senior Armsman would need to speak to him privately, but Miles's gut was telling him that this wasn't about a difficult issue of house staffing.

"An Armsman comes to know his liege very well," Pym said. Miles got the impression that he'd rehearsed this opening. "Better than almost anyone, sometimes. It's part of his duty."
"You've been with my family a long time," Miles said.

"And you personally, m'lord," Pym agreed, nodding in some relief. Miles thought perhaps he'd stolen some of the man's lines. "I just wanted to remind you, m'lord, that my oath to the-Count-your-father and to yourself includes silence on all matters on which you command it," he said. "That's all."

"Ah." Miles was up and had made one circuit of the room before he even registered the impulse to pace. Pym sat patiently in the armchair, head bent a little. He was right, of course - an Armsman's oath to his liege was one of the most forcefully binding relationships in Barrayaran law, even stronger than marriage vows in some respects. Not only was it treasonous for an Armsman to attempt to harm his liege, but no one short of the Emperor himself could impel an Armsman to speak one word or take one step that his liege did not permit. Miles's pacing took him to the garden windows, and he stood a moment, gazing into the night. Then he let out an explosive breath and turned to face Pym. He rather thought the script was supposed to end here, but, well. Pym was right. He knew Miles better than almost anybody. "Just to be clear," Miles said steadily. "We're talking about Gregor and me?"

Pym started a little. "Er, yes, m'lord."

"Right," Miles said, drumming his fingers on the seam of his trousers. "You - er - haven't talked to anyone about this, have you?"

"Of course not, m'lord," Pym said, sounding shocked at the very idea.

"We're not telling anyone yet. You understand why, of course. It's a very . . . sensitive situation."

"I'd say that's a bit of an understatement," Pym said dryly. He paused, and blinked. "Yet?"

Miles shrugged uncomfortably. "I . . . it's sensitive," he repeated, and this time he meant rather more than the security of the Imperium. He took a deep breath. "In any case, I expect that you not discuss this with anyone else except myself. And Gregor," he added, almost as an afterthought. Pym's spine straightened, and he acknowledged with a crisp sort of purpose strangely flavored with relief. Now he won't tell if General Allegre himself holds a nerve disrupter to his head. Miles shivered a little. He imagined, quite nonsensically, that he could hear the measured steps of his new guards echoing around the house. He crossed his arms over his chest, paralyzed for a moment by the sheer scope of potential disaster. This was not the sort of fear he was used to. Not this. Not yet. I'm not ready. Miles clenched his teeth and jerked his chin up. "On that note," he added, consciously dropping his arms and retaking his seat. "I'd like you to keep an ear open for me. Report back if you hear anything you think shouldn't be in public - or not so public - circulation. Anything at all."

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said. "I think you're safe for now. Armsmen take their oaths of loyalty seriously. We may gossip from time to time, but no Armsman of yours would betray a trust such as this. And the same goes for the Emperor's Armsmen, I'm sure."

"I certainly hope so," Miles said. He hesitated, studying his hands for a long moment before asking. "And - and what do you think of it, Pym? Be honest, please."

Pym didn't answer for a long time. After a few seconds, Miles started to feel a bit nervous and sneaked a glance up at him. He found Pym looking back, uncharacteristically intent.

"It's my job - my duty - to keep you safe," he said at last. "I think I can do that, with a fair amount of certainty. But I have always thought it's also an Armsman's duty to see his lord happy, and your
"Oh," said Miles. "Well. Um. Yes. I see." Pym raised an eyebrow, and Miles shrugged self-consciously. Whenever he tried to ask someone how it looked from the outside, they always just threw the question right back at him. You're going to have to answer eventually, you know. But not now. Not after three days. "That isn't entirely what I meant," he said, looking back up at Pym. "What do you think, not as my Armsman, but as an Imperial subject?"

"I think . . ." Pym stopped. "I think that's a much more complex question."

"I thought it might be."

"I consider myself a fairly enlightened man," Pym said, a wry tilt to his mouth. "And yet I was . . . boggled."

Miles sighed. "It's all right, Pym. I realize - better than you, even - that it's a difficult idea to adjust to."

"It is," Pym said. "But I think that given enough time, people could. If it were done up right."

"Do you think so?" Miles asked. He bent down and began to remove his boots. "I'm not so sure."

Pym shrugged. "The Emperor is a very wise man," he said simply.

"Yes," Miles agreed. It took him a few seconds to realize that had been, in a very direct way, a compliment to him as well. "Thank you," he said.

"Of course, m'lord. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm all right." Pym vanished out the suite door with an unusually formal bow, and Miles sighed. He wondered if Gregor realized how transparent they could be to someone who knew where to look, or if he was just so used to having no privacy whatsoever that it hadn't occurred to him. He remembered their first dinner, with no servants and no Armsmen in the room, and thought that Gregor had at least wanted it to start out just the two of them, even if it could never stay that way.

A messenger arrived just before noon the next day, with a comconsole disk bearing the newest communication from Cetaganda, as well as a plastic flimsy that read, Watch it and let me know what you think. It was unsigned, but Gregor's handwriting was distinctive.

The communication was predictably annoyed. They did indeed assert that Barrayar had stolen a new and valuable technological development from them. Since Emperor Gregor seemed not to know anything about the situation, they were going to send someone in person to explain it to him. Several persons, actually. A "diplomatic delegation," they called it. Miles gulped, imagining the furor that would surround an influx of Cetagandan ghem lords into Vorbarr Sultana.

He called Gregor immediately. "We need to get them off planet now," he said without preamble.

"I agree," Gregor said. "I was expecting one more Cetagandan, not a platoon."

"How soon can the Duronas leave?"

"I'm waiting on a reply from our Betan ambassador. He's handling things on that end. I anticipate
receiving it tonight or tomorrow morning. The Betans are, of course, delighted to play host. They'll
do almost anything to keep their spot at the peak of galactic technological advancement." He
grimaced. "We didn't mention the little matter of possible Cetagandan interest."

"So . . . day after tomorrow at the earliest?"

"It appears that way."

"I can let them know," Miles offered. "I have to ask Rowan whether she's come up with something
for my seizures, anyway." He felt a little flutter of nervousness as he said it. No matter how much
he'd tried not to, it seemed he'd managed to get his hopes up.

"Thank you," Gregor said. "And good luck." He paused briefly. "Alys has suggested that we have a
farewell banquet for them."

Miles sighed. "She's probably right." The Duronas were potentially powerful allies, and it didn't
hurt to remind people when they owed you.

"Tomorrow night then," Gregor said with a nod.

Miles hesitated. "Actually, there's something else I wanted to talk to you about. I keep meaning to,
but it seems we always get, er, distracted."

Gregor gave him a lopsided smile. "But being distracted is so much fun."

Miles grinned in agreement. "Yes. But . . . I wanted to discuss my security with you."

Gregor sighed, sitting back in his chair. "I expected this to come up much sooner. I know you're
not happy about it, Miles, but please humor me on this."

"Actually, they've been remarkably unobtrusive. But I was wondering how you were justifying it to
ImpSec. Don't you think it might look a bit . . . suspicious?"

"You're an Imperial Auditor now, Miles. And there was an attempt on your life not so long ago."

"Well," Miles said, "to be fair, he wasn't actually aiming to hit me."

"Nevertheless," Gregor said, mouth perceptibly hardening, "I think an increased ImpSec presence
around you would be understandable even if we weren't . . . distracted."

"Hmm," Miles said neutrally. "It's just that I'm worried about it tipping people off, if you start
treating me differently. I mean, Pym has already figured it out - and oh shit, I forgot to tell you.
Ivan knows."

"I know," Gregor said. "He came to talk to me the first night you got back."

Miles frowned. "He did?"

"Yes. He was a bit concerned." Gregor paused minutely, eyelids dropping. "He also had the most
fascinating piece of information about you and Rowan Durona."

Thanks so much, Ivan. "It was right after my cryo-revival," Miles said with a sigh. "And it didn't
last long. I'm far too hyperactive for her tastes. A few days locked in solitary confinement with me
and she was more than ready to smother me with a pillow." Gregor looked only marginally
reassured by this. "What was Ivan concerned about, exactly? I hope he didn't have some strange
idea about defending my virtue. Such as it is."
Gregor smiled. "No. It was actually rather . . . sweet."

"Sweet?" Miles repeated dubiously.

"Yes. In any case, it was only a matter of time before some of our Armsmen started noticing things. I wasn't expecting it to be quite so soon, though." He paused, piercing Miles with a searching gaze. "I really don't think that it would cross most people's minds as even a remote possibility," he said, almost gently.

"Hiding in plain sight," Miles said, resisting the impulse to look away. *Am I that transparent to him, really? He can't be understanding forever - he can't control everything, and there'll come a time when he can't wait for me anymore.* "I certainly didn't see it coming," he added, then shook himself. "I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"I look forward to it."

Miles smiled and cut the com. He called Rowan immediately. The young woman who answered - who naturally looked exactly like Rowan, but ten years younger and with her hair in a short bob - said that she was in the lab and patched him through. Considering that the Duronas were currently housed in a full level of the nondescript, agoraphobia-inducing ImpSec apartments that Miles was all too familiar with, this gave him some pause.

The comconsole in the lab (one of the drab living rooms stocked with scientific equipment set up on boxes and extra tables) rang for some time before Rowan finally answered, looking harried. When she saw it was Miles, though, her expression became less annoyed.

"There's been a bit of a diplomatic snarl with Cetaganda," Miles said after they had exchanged pleasantries. "We want to move your departure date up to the day after tomorrow to have you off Barrayar by the time their 'diplomatic delegation' arrives."

"Ah," Rowan said. "Yes, that would probably be best." She sighed. "And I'm very much looking forward to having a real lab again. And on Beta Colony." Her eyes shone with scientific ecstasy at the idea. "I was there recently with Lily. It's incredible. So far removed from Jackson's Whole and where we started. We've got several projects going right now that have been stalled for lack of resources, but on Beta Colony where they really appreciate scientific exploration -"

"About that," Miles interrupted hesitantly. "Have you found anything for my seizures yet?"

Rowan bit her lip and shook her head. "No, Miles. I'm sorry. I have been working on it as much as possible, and perhaps in a real lab I might find something. But so far I haven't come up with anything."

"Ah," Miles said, trying not to appear too disappointed. "It's all right. That was always a distinct possibility."

"I can keep working on it," Rowan offered. "Right now we have to pack everything up again, but after we get to Beta Colony, I can continue to look into it and let you know if I discover anything."

"Thanks," Miles nodded. "I would appreciate it, Oh," he said suddenly, "I almost forgot. There's going to be another dinner at the Imperial Residence tomorrow night, with haut Pel and ghem-General Benin. Probably the same crowd as the first night you were here."

"Oh," Rowan said, suddenly looking tired. "I suppose it would be very impolite not to attend."

"Is everything all right?" Miles asked.
"Yes," she said with a sigh. "I was just hoping to get to sleep early the night before we leave. I've been up half the night the last couple of days, working on your seizures and on androgenesis."

"How are things going with that?" Miles asked, suddenly very curious. "I mean, what exactly do you have? And how will it work, anyway - in layman's terms, I mean? Do you have any idea how long it will be before you can go public on Beta?"

"Whoa," Rowan held up a hand. "You're such a soldier, Miles. Scientific discovery doesn't run on a time table, you know."

"Neither do most covert operations after the first ten seconds," Miles muttered.

Rowan's eyebrows twitched, but she only said, "You would know better than I." She paused, glancing off to one side. "And as for the actual procedure, well. We have . . . a general idea. It will be a normal replicator gestation, for the most part. The trouble lies first in the mechanics of the fertilization process - we have to reverse engineer an ovum, you see - and in genetic manipulation. It's a bit more involved than simply ensuring the fetus doesn't end up with two Y chromosomes. We need to worry about hormonal adjustments, basically tinkering with the entire biochemical structure. Sex selection is the simplest problem - boys will be twice as likely as girls, but we can control for that, of course." She huffed out a breath. "We're not there yet, though. At the moment we have a lot of simulations."

"And the time?" Miles pressed.

She shrugged. "Who knows? We still have so much work to do - some of the data is nearly incomprehensible. Much of it is well over my head. Lily's reveling, but even she gets lost now and then - I just don't know."

"Well, I'm sure that your combined brilliance is more than a match for it."

"Thank you. And I am sorry," she added soberly. "About the seizures, I mean."

"It's all right," Miles said. "You did your best. And I have you to thank for being alive at all, which in itself seems a remarkably good thing right now."

"I'm glad," Rowan said, sounding like she meant it, and cut the com.

Everyone complained about the heavy, relentless spring rains, but Gregor had always privately found the torrential downpours oddly refreshing. Then again, there weren't many vagaries of the often ill-tempered North Continent climate that he didn't appreciate. He found something deeply soothing in the depths of the frozen winters, in the winds and storms of fall and spring, in the oppressive heat of summer, cut by the occasional thunder storm of awesome proportions. It was a sort of subsumption, Gregor decided, laying both palms flat against the glass wall of the balcony off his sitting room. He liked feeling small, unnoticed, insubstantial in the face of a force so much more vast than anything he could command. Beyond his hands the water streamed, smearing messy rainbows down the glass in the backwash of the lights from the room behind him. A small, ever practical, never sleeping part of Gregor's mind noted the possibility of flooding, and began running down a checklist of procedures the municipal guard would be putting into place about now. But they hadn't bothered him about it yet, so it was nothing life-threatening to anybody. The rest of him just enjoyed the subdued thunder of the rain hitting the glass roof over his head. Not an auspicious way to start the morning, most people would think, but he couldn't help liking it.
There came a discreet cough from the door behind him. Gregor turned, with only a bit of reluctance.

"General Allegre, Sire," Flavion said. "Shall I bring him up?"

"Yes," Gregor said, subsiding back against the glass. He normally received his morning security briefings in his office downstairs, but he felt oddly reluctant to leave the balcony just now. Flavion was always good at reading the nuances of his moods, Gregor reflected as the Armsman silently withdrew. And well he should be - the man was well over seventy, and he'd spent the last twenty years of his life in Gregor's closest personal service.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the glass, feeling his mouth curve in a reflexive smile. Perhaps not such an odd reluctance, after all. It had been here, in the still snow-encrusted first weeks of the new year, that he'd slid his hands between Miles's and watched the shock chase the disbelief across his face. That had been . . . so incredibly easy. Like stepping off a cliff and just smiling and breathing all the way down, because no matter what happened at the bottom, he'd made that step in the first place. The compulsion to speak, grown nearly overwhelming over the past year, had spent itself with startling ease, leaving him uncharacteristically giddy. The disasters of the winter, of the year as a whole, no longer dragged at him. Miles had made his mess, and rolled around in it for a while, then picked himself up and moved on. And in the sharp, frosty midnight that marked the last moments of the year, with the bonfire roaring up into the sky and fireworks painting rainbow patterns over Miles's face, Gregor had decided quietly, unhurriedly, simply, that if he was ever to speak it should be now.

Gregor felt his every movement, even his every thought, to be an exercise in infinite delicacy. Barrayar was in many ways a china shop, Gregor its trained bull, and he would be damned if he'd move so much as a muscle without calculating every angle first. But then there was Miles, burning and furious and worried as he watched Simon unravel, and then there was Miles in the aftermath, settling into his new life with a strange peace hovering about him, a still acceptance which had both surprised and unexpectedly thrilled Gregor. And there was Miles, small but upright on one knee before him, eyes fervent and sure as he repeated his oath and lifted his chin to receive his official Auditor's chain. Miles could do his own bit of calculating, and if he wanted to dodge an oncoming bull, he damn well could.

Gregor had spent the weeks during Miles's sojourn on Escobar in a state of suspended patience, oddly untroubled.

Until the news had come, days after the event, and a shock of icy fear had reminded him that indeed, the universe could in fact be that cruel, and Miles might not have been so lucky. There was not much that could shake him from the foundations up, but he had learned a year and a half before that spilled Vorkosigan blood could hit him like an earthquake. The reports from Escobar, even after the fact, had been a dark echo of that time, the months when the search for a survivor had changed to the search for a body, and Gregor had gotten through it the same way he had before, hunkered down and barricaded tight in his own head until Miles had come home. Come home, and come to him.

And now, well. Now he was learning a lesson in excess. No longer did he function on a sufficiency of ease, a utilitarian contentment that took him through every day and week and crisis and miracle, but no farther. He'd thought loving Miles in silence had been self-sustaining, strangely peaceful, and it had been for a long time. More fool he, not to suspect that watching Miles's eyes growing soft with wine and firelight could be a redoubled happiness when he was watched in return.

Gregor lifted his head at the sound of a throat clearing in the doorway. Allegre hesitated until he
knew he had Gregor's attention, then bowed his good morning. Gregor waved him to a chair, and moved away from the rain-streaked glass to take one himself.

"Anything interesting happen overnight?" he asked, settling in.

Allegre's lips twitched. "But of course, Sire."

They were adjusting to each other, Gregor reflected as Allegre began with critical issues - the messy aftermath of a cruiser detonation in orbit, accident or sabotage they still didn't know, the discovery of an ill-conceived but no less ingenious plot on Gregor's life involving, of all things, a traveling circus troupe, and so on and so on. Adjusting to a new face after thirty years of Simon had been difficult, but he and Allegre were both making do. Gregor was momentarily distracted by the rueful recollection of his now dashed hopes to see Miles in this post one day. That had been an error, plain and simple. Though to be fair, one Simon had bought into with relieved agreement. Gregor had looked forward to the day when Miles himself would greet him every morning to dispense the news good and bad with a wry smile and a few tidbits of advice. It had seemed a heavenly prospect after the sometimes endless waits to hear the latest word from Simon about where he was now, what he was doing, who he was pissing off this month. And he could trust Miles as he trusted Simon, to do the moving for him. But Miles had dashed that plan twice over, and looking back on it now from the vantage of a new path, Gregor could see the flavor of self-interest which had allowed him to plan a life for Miles that the man himself didn't want. So then. Enough planning. It was all up to Miles now.

Gregor pulled his attention back to the moment with a merciless wrench. He'd discovered an astounding and previously unknown tendency to daydream in the days since Miles had returned, and he was not yet sure what to make of it. Needless to say, his endlessly distractible thoughts had no place here and now.

"... see what the Komarran Viceroy has to say before we take any further steps," Allegre was saying. Gregor nodded, wished briefly for coffee, wondered if Miles was awake yet, chased a momentary vision of a sleep-cobwebbed Miles stumbling about in his pajamas, and suppressed a sudden urge to pinch himself. Who knew he had the capacity to be this utterly ridiculous?

"Any movement on the Cetagandan front?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"Nothing decipherable," Allegre said. "We don't have records on any of the group they've dispatched. Odd, but not alarmingly so. As much as we try we can't tag every one of their intelligence people, and they're very cagey about their diplomats." His gaze flicked over Gregor's shoulder to where one of the guest houses was just visible, nestled in the garden. "As for our guests, there isn't much to report. The ghem-general took a walk outside the grounds yesterday. He was followed, of course, but he lost his escort briefly." He frowned unhappily.

"Might not be anything," Gregor said, shrugging. "He's your counterpart over there, as close as I can gather - evading a tail might just be second nature by now."

"Yes," Allegre agreed, straightening his shoulders. "And on that subject, I must urge you, Sire, to reconsider your decision. Keeping them here so close to you is a clear risk when they might be targets of Cetagandan retribution."

"I know," Gregor said. They'd already had this discussion twice, and he felt no need to reiterate his position yet again. Allegre was having visions of Cetagandan assault teams breeching the Residence, or perhaps more frighteningly, Cetagandan biological warfare brought home for the first time. That was his job, and it allowed Gregor to think of other things, like the diplomatic niceties and keeping their guests out of sight. "Let's try not to lose track of the ghem-general
again," he said, avoiding the whole thing. "It wouldn't do for him to turn up dead in an alley somewhere."

"I've seen to it," Allegre said. He shifted in his seat, and produced a data disk which he slid across to Gregor. "An interim analysts' report," he said, tapping it absently. "On Cetagandan-Barrayaran relations and androgenesis."

"Thank you," Gregor said, retrieving it. He'd been anticipating this document with a degree of intent curiosity that rarely accompanied the receipt of the massive, data-packed, epic analyst reports. "Any immediate conclusions?" he asked.

"Nothing we didn't know already," Allegre said. "There's a lot of cultural information in there - an exploration of why exactly androgenesis is so worrying to certain Cetagandan factions. The Star Crèche's concern in particular is easy to understand. We've found Lord Auditor Vorkosigan's reports from his visit several years ago to be most helpful. His observations suggest that the planetary consorts are concerned not only for their powerful role as genetic manipulators, but also for their own genetic continuation. They're a . . . different sort of people, the haut." He paused, and Gregor recognized the minute hesitation as the unease of a man who was still not accustomed to being able - encouraged, even - to question his Emperor's decisions. "Sire," he said, shoulders visibly straightening, "there are a number of reasons why Barrayaran involvement in this matter is not the wisest course. We risk the wrath of the Star Crèche - not a body to irritate, by all accounts - and that's only one of the potential problems."

"Ah," Gregor said, letting his chin come to rest in his cupped palms. "I'm well aware. But we are honor bound, at this point. From the moment Lord Auditor Vorkosigan crossed paths with the haut Pel, he was at risk. He speaks with my Voice and he acts in my name. The Imperium is by definition at his service in all things, particularly defense." He sighed, straightening up. "Honor trumps reason more often than not, sometimes to our gain, sometimes . . . otherwise." Entirely true, and one of the few things stopping him from calling the whole thing off as an ill-considered exercise in self-interest. But no. They were on this path now, and withdrawal at this point had the potential to be as disastrous as anything that lay ahead. All they could do was wait and see what happened, and act when they must. And will honor be trumped in the end by one of the few things that can? So much Barrayaran honor and so much Barrayaran blood - we are such fools sometimes in pursuit of our principles."

"Yes, Sire, of course," Allegre agreed. "I did not mean to suggest that Lord Auditor Vorkosigan's actions were improper."

Gregor inclined his head, reflecting that there was a healthy amount of respectful fear there. He couldn't say he minded. After Haroche, after an outwardly spreading nimbus of rot which had swept up Simon and then Miles, having a Chief of Imperial Security who was not perfectly secure in his position was oddly soothing. Gregor's hand flexed on the data disk at the reminder. He had not been that angry in a very long time. Like fear, his anger had a threshold necessarily high. A waste, he told himself, not for the first time. A waste of energy and strength and focus on something which could not be changed now. His life was the sort that inspired great passion, whether for good or ill. It was inevitable that a man like Haroche should be allowed so close to the center, a man who could not resist the pull and whose self-interest hid cowering beneath a mask of duty and honor. And, as he knew so well, it was inevitable that his nearest and dearest kept would be the first victims. The things Haroche would have done to Miles - the things Miles would have done in return . . . Gregor breathed in once, then out. With the breath he expelled those thoughts, the oft-tread spiral of reflections that ultimately led nowhere good. If he must wallow, he would do it later.
But no. Gregor controlled a smile even as it surprised him. Later, after most of the day's work was done, there would be dinner, a farewell and a bit of a good riddance to the doctors Durona. And there would also be Miles. For just a moment, Gregor let that particular spiral of thought play itself out, a sort of mental balancing act in compensatory pleasure, before he once again drew his attention back to the moment.

"I appreciate your concerns, and will keep them in mind," he told Allegre. "But for the moment, there's nothing to be done but what's already been set in motion."

Allegre nodded and closed his folder. Gregor rose, settling himself mentally for the day ahead. Minister Van was scheduled for this morning, as he recalled.

General Allegre escorted him downstairs to his office, then excused himself off back to his own domain. Gregor wished him a heartfelt good day. The relative tranquility of each of their days had a large impact on the other's, after all. Then he settled in behind his desk and let the well-oiled machine run on around him.

Lady Alys popped her head in ten minutes later as Gregor was finishing up a small breakfast and his first cup of coffee. She came bearing a fond good morning and last minute arrangements for the gathering that night. She was visibly nonplused by his cheerful acceptance of all she prescribed, and Gregor made a startled mental note to tone it down just a little bit. Alys knew perfectly well that he'd rather spend the evening in the peace of his apartments with a good book, and not much at all got past her. He diverted his mind from any considerations of disclosure. Not now. Not yet. Don't push it. Wait. Events will unfold regardless - let them. You'll be wiser after. He'd done his part. It was Miles's turn now. All Gregor had to do was keep his head, and not lose all sense and patience in the nearly devastating reality of having a chance. He sat back in his chair a moment, closing his eyes and consciously relaxing. If it took a great deal to frighten or anger him, it didn't take much to please him. It was enough for now, more than enough. He could, if only figuratively, keep his hands to himself. He'd waited a long time, and he could keep right on waiting.
The groundcar was unusually occupied on the way to the Residence. One of the ImpSec agents had piled into the back with Miles, and one more sat up front while Pym drove. Miles was silent, devising plans to ferret Benin away from Pel without the haut lady noticing. There were just too many things left to assumption or guesswork - bloody Cetagandans. They were leaving something out, and he wanted to know what it was. He would never get it out of Pel, he knew that for sure. But if he could just get Benin away from -

There was a sudden, unidentifiable buzzing, then the unmistakable odor of something scorching. The car lurched, then jerked to a halt. Miles' hand moved reflexively towards the canopy release, then stopped. They were either having mechanical trouble, or someone was trying to kill him again. Be a armored target in the car, or an unarmored one out of it?

They'd left the partition between the compartments down, and he could hear Pym swearing.

"What -" Miles began.

Pym's head swiveled suddenly, his eyes widening as he tracked something out his window Miles couldn't see. "Go!" Pym shouted, lunging for the controls and hitting the canopy release. "Get out -"

There came a gentle, innocuous little thump, as of something small landing on the roof of the car. Miles needed no urging. He rolled straight out of his seat and onto the pavement through the widening gap as the canopy rose, hissing a little as he skidded. Behind him he could hear the lieutenant scrambling across the seat to come out on his side of the car, trying to stay with him. Miles kept right on rolling, sparing only a millisecond to check and be sure he wasn't about to commit particularly embarrassing suicide under an innocently passing motorist. But the way seemed clear, and there was a dizzying succession of pavement sky pavement sky. He could hear his own breathing, and then there came the pounding of boots on the pavement, desperation fast.

And then the groundcar exploded. Miles saw it go out of the corner of his eye, and for a moment his view of the sky transformed from a delicately pale blue to a nightmare of geysering flame and flying debris. The shock wave combined with his own momentum, and Miles yelped into the pavement as he skidded a few painful feet on his face. He rolled once more, ears ringing, trying to look back and see how bad it was. But then a shadow fell across him and Pym landed on top of him with a teeth-jarring impact. Miles lay still, and there was a sudden, profound silence.

"What the hell?" Miles gasped when he had enough air to talk. "Pym -"

Pym swore. "He's gone. Whoever he was, he's gone now." Miles tried to get up, but Pym shoved him roughly back down. "I'm sorry, m'lord, but seeing as someone just tried and nearly succeeded in killing you, I'd appreciate you staying low to the ground for just awhile longer."

"I thought you said he was gone," Miles grumbled, but did as he was told. Within seconds the area was swarming with ImpSec agents, blocking off the street and examining the blackened groundcar. Only then did Pym let Miles sit up. He touched his face gingerly and his hand came away streaked with blood. "It's just my nose," he told Pym, and accepted the handkerchief his Armsman offered. He glanced around, blinking at the nearly supernatural ImpSec response time. But then he recognized where they were, just a block from the Residence, only a few short feet from the east garden wall. Shit. Someone tried to kill me on Gregor's doorstep.
Pym rose to his feet, shouting at someone, and Miles scrambled up himself. An armored car materialized in the still smoking street, and Miles found himself in the back, crammed between Pym and a pack of grim-faced, Horus-eyed men.

"Take me to the Residence," Miles said, still holding the now blood-soaked handkerchief to his nose. "It's closer than Vorkosigan House and it's where I was going anyway. And could someone tell me what the hell happened?"

"Assassination attempt," one of the ImpSec guards said shortly.

Miles rolled his eyes. "I figured that out, thank you. I meant, how?"

"Jury-rigged explosive, from the looks of it," the guard said.

"The Residence hasn't been compromised, has it?" Miles asked, the thought belatedly occurring that he might not have been the primary target.

"No," the man said tensely, one hand coming up to tap distractedly at the receiver in his ear. "He's conscious and coherent," he added, apparently to the empty air, in response to an inquiry from his superiors, Miles assumed.

Pym turned with difficulty in the tight quarters and began checking Miles over, feeling for broken bones and poking here and there. Miles put up with it for a minute, and it wasn't until Pym's mouth tightened in worry that he realized he was trembling all over.

I didn't have a seizure last time. Why should I now?

He gritted his teeth and insisted on exiting the groundcar and climbing the front Residence steps under his own power.

"Are you all right, m'lord?" Pym asked as they came into the entrance hall.

"I - yes, I think so." Miles took a deep breath. His heart was still pounding wildly, and he couldn't seem to stop shaking. He didn't want Gregor to see him like this. "That was . . . unexpected. What about you, are you all right?"

Before Pym could reply there came the clatter of many booted feet on the marble stairs. General Allegre hurried down first, followed by Ivan and a tight-lipped Gregor. They would have heard the explosion, Miles realized, and they wouldn't have known what was happening until reports started trickling in. Gregor's eye found him at once, and he faltered for a moment on the last step, visibly shaken. Miles suddenly became aware of how he must look, streaked with blood and road grit, probably white as a sheet. "I'm fine," he said, though he didn't think anyone could hear him over the babble that had started up. If only he could get the damn shaking under control, maybe Gregor wouldn't look quite so frightened. Stop looking like someone just tried to kill your lover, Gregor, and start looking like someone just tried to kill your Imperial Auditor.

"I'm fine," he said again, a bit louder. He'd caught Gregor and Ivan's attention, at least. Neither of them looked like they really believed him, though. Miles wasn't even entirely sure he believed himself. "It's just - oh shit." Green fire, a shower of confetti in front of his eyes, and then blackness.

He woke with a muffled groan, head already throbbing.

"Is he . . . back?" a worried voice asked.

Miles slitted his eyes, squinting through lights that were much too bright. Not still in the entrance hall, he could tell from the ceiling, and he was far too comfortable to be on the cold marble floor. There was something in his mouth, and he turned his head to spit it out.
"Son of a bitch," he slurred.

"Ah," said Ivan, sounding enormously relieved. "There he is."

"Thell?" Miles asked, forcing his eyes open wide and squinting until things swam into focus. He was on the sofa in Gregor's private sitting room, with Ivan and Pym hovering anxiously over him.

"You were shot at," Ivan explained. "On your way to the Residence."

"I know that," Miles snapped, his vocal chords beginning to work. "Pym?"

"Six minutes," Pym said, checking his chrono. "Bad one," he added clinically.

"Please tell me I'm hallucinating the part about having a seizure in front of a dozen people," Miles said, staring hopefully at Ivan.


"You're still shaking," Gregor said suddenly. Miles jumped, only then becoming aware of the fact that his head was resting in Gregor's lap, and there were gentle fingers making circles over his temples. Oh, God. Gregor saw that. Excuse me, everyone, while I curl up in a little ball and scream.

He tilted his head back and found Gregor, very white around the mouth, watching him closely. "It's all right," he said. "It'll pass in a little while. Uh, how did I...?"

"Pym carried you," Ivan said. "After you stopped, you know." Stopped twitching like an electrocuted cat, Ivan? Is that what you were going to say?

He tried to sit up, and all three of them reached to hold him down. Miles ground his teeth, contemplating the efficacy of biting someone. Pym's hand was closest. Hmm.

"Uh," Ivan said. "I wouldn't do that. You're sort of... gray right now."

"What's going on?" Miles demanded, deciding not to argue the point yet. He wasn't all that excited about it, anyway. "Did they get him?"

"No," said Gregor, in a tone that the uninitiated would mistake for untroubled but which, to Miles's ear, came across as barely restrained fury. "They found where he was shooting from - the top of one of the stone walls along the garden. But no weapon and no assassin."

"My poor groundcar," Miles mourned.

"Er." Ivan looked away uncomfortably.

"What?"

Ivan opened his mouth, then shut it. He cast a pleading look at Gregor.

"The lieutenant in the back seat with you didn't make it out in time," Gregor said.

"Oh." Miles squeezed his eyes shut. He had to suppress a childish impulse to block his ears, too. How many people did this make now?

"Sire?" An Armsman stuck his head through the door. "General Allegre would like to speak to you. He has detained the Cetagandans, as you ordered."
"Um," Miles said diffidently as Gregor slid a cushion under his head and rose. "Just a thought, but why would the Cetagandans want to kill me now? And like that?"

"I don't think it's them, either," Gregor said, smiling in what was probably supposed to be reassurance. "But the last time someone shot at you - and not too long ago, I'll remind you - it was a Cetagandan game. I'm just covering all the options." He bent, fingers ghosting down Miles's cheek. Miles winced a little, only then becoming aware of the low throbbing pain encompassing jaw and mouth and forehead, and the brighter spot of agony that was his nose. "I'll be back in a few minutes," Gregor said softly. "Please don't get up until Pym says you can." He shot a narrow-eyed look at Pym, who returned a grim nod. Miles groaned inwardly.

The Residence physician arrived as Gregor was leaving, and Miles submitted to being examined and sterilized and scanned with little fuss. His head really was pounding. He'd been due for a seizure, anyway, a bit overdue even, and it was actually sort of surprising that the shock and stress hadn't taken the top of his head right off. Which, Miles reflected as the doctor spread antibiotic cream over the scrapes on his jaw, was just a bit too apropos an image.

He was finally allowed up, but only to shuffle off to the bathroom to wash the excess street grime from his face and hands. He must have looked quite terrible, he thought, squinting into the mirror, if this was what it was like after treatment. His nose, the doctor had assured him, wasn't broken, but it was still swelling spectacularly. The whole left side of his face was scraped raw, and cut very deeply in some places, from chin to mid-forehead. He wondered gloomily if all the surgeons' careful work not to leave any scars on his face had just been ruined.

"Miles?" Ivan appeared in the bathroom doorway. "Why don't you come back out here and lay down."

Miles straightened, decided that his Vorkosigan house uniform tunic was an utter loss, and shucked it. The white dress shirt beneath was relatively unbloody, and Miles fancied the stunner strapped to his ribs made him look a little more formidable than his previous state of battered street waif.

"Right," he said, leaving the tunic where it fell, "let's go."

"Go?" Ivan repeated, trailing him worriedly back to the sitting room.

Miles bypassed the couch and headed straight for the door. "Where did the Emperor and General Allegre go?" he asked the guard stationed outside.

"The Emperor's private office, my Lord Auditor. But the Emperor said-"

"Thanks," Miles called, taking off up the corridor.

There was a scramble and some muffled swearing behind him, and Miles had to suppress a grin. It hurt too much to smile just then, and most of his energy was going into walking in a straight line. Damn, but that had been a bad one.

Ivan, Pym, the doctor, and two guards caught up to him at about the same time, all requesting that he return to the sitting room with various levels of stridency. Miles's only real concern was Ivan, who unlike any of the others probably wouldn't hesitate to carry him bodily, if he was sufficiently provoked.

"I'll lie down after I make sure it wasn't the Cetagandans," he said.
"Your word?" Ivan demanded.

"If you insist."

They met Lady Alys and Simon Illyan just then, coming up the hall arm in arm. "Ah," Miles called. "Good. Simon, tell everyone I'm all right, would you please?"

Simon frowned deeply at him. "I'd be happy to. Are you?"

"Of course," Miles said, and ducked past them before Simon could start grilling him. Illyan, he had found, sometimes didn't take well to being left out of the information loop.

They arrived in the outer office, and Miles shed the guards and the doctor as he knocked at the inner door, then entered without waiting for a response. A circle of startled faces turned to meet him: Gregor, Pel and Benin, Allegre, and the guard who had been in the front seat. Gregor half-rose, mouth tightening with displeasure.

"Right," Miles said brightly. "Where are we so far?"

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence, then Gregor subsided, resigned.

"We were just being detained without provocation," Pel broke in, before Gregor could speak.

"Ah," Miles said. "About that." He turned to Benin. "Did you happen to get someone to try and kill me just now? Or somehow manage to do it yourself, then beat me back here and not be missed?"

"No," Benin said immediately.

"Excellent. Thank you. And you, haut Pel?"

"No," she snapped. "Such a crude thing."

"I quite agree," Miles muttered, fingering his jaw, which still hadn't entirely numbed. He just barely caught a *sotto voce* murmur of, "And yet, last time . . ." from Ivan, standing behind him.

"Well then," Miles said, glancing around the room. "Everybody satisfied?"

General Allegre coughed uncomfortably. "I don't mean to question the word of our guests," he began.

"You can't fast penta them," Miles said reasonably. "First, it's kind of rude, and second, it wouldn't work anyway. They had no discernible motive, and less opportunity." He paused, frowning. "I take it there's nothing else to go on?"

"No," Allegre said grimly. "We've cordoned off the area for a kilometer around and are combing it carefully, but so far nothing."

"What was it, anyway?" Miles asked.

"A high powered plasma arc first," Allegre said. "To slow the car down. It couldn't penetrate the armor plating at that distance, but that wasn't the point. Then, well. There's not much left, but it looks like he just tossed a buggered cartridge from a stunner."

Miles winced, thinking of a half dozen dead fish slowly floating to the surface of the lake at Vorkosigan Surleau. That little trick wouldn't be nearly as much fun anymore, he suspected.

Ivan coughed pointedly. "Miles?"
"All right, all right," Miles muttered, wishing he hadn't given his word, however adroitly. He glanced up at Allegre. "Keep me informed, please. Sorry about this," he added to Pel and Benin.

Pel was stonily silent, but Benin nodded. He, at least, understood the necessity.

There was another knock at the door, and Lady Alys and Simon stepped through, still arm in arm. Out of the corner of his eye, Miles saw Ivan's reflexive twitch.

"Gregor," Lady Alys said, keen eye taking in the tableau. "What do you want to tell the guests? They're getting rather restless, and more than a little worried."

General Allegre lifted a hand. "We're still on lockdown. No one is coming or going for another hour at least until we finish a full security check."

Gregor, who had gone expressionless somewhere in the past few minutes, rose to his feet. "Please move everyone in to dinner," he said. "I'll be down in just a moment. Haut Pel, General?" He nodded a sober acknowledgement to the silent ImpSec agent, the pleasant young man from the very first morning, Miles realized. "Do you want me to send up a tray?" Gregor asked, pausing before Miles.

Miles winced. "No thanks," he said. "No food."

"I do," Ivan said plaintively.

Gregor nodded and moved on without another word, posture contained and distant. Miles blinked after him a moment, then shrugged. He was too worn out to worry about whatever was going on in Gregor's head right now.

He let Ivan escort him back up to the sitting room and settle him on the couch. It wasn't until he was lying down again that he realized just how tired he felt. It was going to be one hell of a hangover.

A servant delivered a tray for Ivan, who stayed despite Miles's broad hintings that he could just as well go downstairs. Miles finally settled back, exhaustion overwhelming him. *Who wants me dead that badly? Who do I know who's that professional?* It was a disturbingly long list.

He didn't know he had slept until he woke, prodded to consciousness by the murmur of low voices. Gregor was back, just shedding his boots by the door.

"... been asleep the whole time," Ivan was saying. "He gets a sort of hangover after these things, you know."

Gregor crossed to the sofa and stood over Miles for a long moment. Their eyes met, but he did not smile.

"Thank you, Ivan," Gregor said.

Ivan dithered, reluctant to obey the obvious dismissal. "Uh, do you need -"

"No," Gregor said, not taking his eyes off Miles. "Thank you. Good night."

"All right, all right," Ivan muttered. "Good night, Sire."

Gregor remained standing for a few moments after Ivan departed. Then he seemed to fold up
before Miles's eyes, sinking to his knees and dropping his head to rest on the pillow next to Miles's own. The rush of a quiet sigh whispered against Miles's cheek.

"Hey," Miles said. He ran a hand down the back of Gregor's neck and across his shoulders. His muscles were palpably knotted, the set of his posture projecting tense misery.

Gregor sighed again, then turned his head to regard Miles from only a few inches away. "Hey. You look terrible. How do you feel?"

"Terrible," Miles admitted. "It'll pass."

"Do you need anything? Water? Painkillers?"

"The doctor gave me something. It's really all right. I'll be perfectly normal again by morning." He paused, waiting for the obvious joke, but Gregor did not oblige. "You look terrible, too, you know," he hazarded after a moment. Gregor did, in a restrained, nearly invisible way. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone just tried to blow you into tiny pieces," Gregor said flatly.

"Um," said Miles. "Yeah. That happens sometimes."

"Don't be flip," Gregor snapped, eyes narrowing. "I really don't think -"

"Hey." Miles moved closer, kissed him tentatively with his half-swollen mouth. "Hey. I'm fine, okay?"

Gregor kissed him back, exaggeratedly gentle. Miles was pretty sure that restraint was the last thing on his mind, though. There was a roiling, undirected energy in Gregor, he was beginning to feel. Like a flash storm massing so fast it was raining before you realized the sun was gone.

Gregor pulled back and considered him again, one hand sliding down his throat, fingers deliberately tracing the scars on either side. In spite of his greatest efforts, Miles tensed, and Gregor's eyes darkened.

"Let me see," he said suddenly.

"See? . . . Oh." Gregor's fingers were already working at the top buttons of his shirt, but he paused, only the collar open, waiting for permission. "All right," Miles said. "Yeah. Here."

They unbuttoned the shirt together, and Gregor folded it gently back. Miles watched his face closely, and he knew the exact moment Gregor had his first glimpse of the scars. There was a spasm of something, too fast to really see, and then more of that disturbing blankness. He stared a long moment, and Miles looked down, tracing the familiar snarl of damage across his chest. It was as healed now as it was ever going to be, and the Duronas really had done an excellent job, all things considered, but they'd only had so much to work with. Gregor reached to touch, fingers gentle enough to almost tickle. Then he pressed his palm flat over Miles's heart, eclipsing the scars.

"Do you remember it?" he asked, not meeting Miles's eyes.

"Yes," Miles said.

"What . . ." Gregor hesitated.

"I don't know," Miles said. "It was . . . I saw it coming, and I looked down and I saw it happen. It hurt, and I thought . . . something, I don't remember what. And I died."
Gregor flinched visibly. "When I heard," he said, then stopped. Miles waited, but Gregor only hunched, dropping his head to lay over Miles's heart. He rested there for a long moment, and Miles stroked the back of his neck, trying to think soothing thoughts. It occurred to him for the first time in a number of years that Gregor had as much potential as anyone to get lost in the deep dark places of his own head.

Gregor sat up and began rebuttoning Miles's shirt. Finally, when he was done, he raised his head and met Miles's eyes.

"I've been thinking," he said. "I want you to move in here." He said it so casually that it took Miles a moment to process.

"You think - Gregor, have you lost all sense of reality? I can't move in here."

"Why not?" Gregor asked, in an utterly reasonable tone of voice.

"Because - because it would be a bit transparent, don't you think?" Miles sputtered, going for the most obvious objection. And if that one didn't work, he had a whole pile to get through.

"I don't care," Gregor said, shrugging that off like a casual irritant. "You'll be safer here."

"Not for long," Miles said, voice rising. "I may not remember the War of the Pretendership, but I know you must."

"I do," Gregor said, calm finally beginning to fracture. "Why do you think I'm so - you'll be safer here."

"No," Miles said firmly. "I'm not moving in here. Absolutely not."

"I didn't say it was up for debate," Gregor said.

Miles drew back, stomach going cold. "I see," he said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"Do you defy me?"

"No," Miles said, hearing the anger gathering in his own voice. "But I would resent the hell out of it." He paused, glaring. "You gave me your word."

"Dammit." Gregor sprang to his feet and paced once across the room, turning sharply on his heel. "Why won't you be reasonable about this?"

"I think I'm the most reasonable person in the room right now," Miles said. "I have no desire to be the cause of someone trying to depose you. Or worse. And don't tell me it won't happen - we both know it could."

"Let them," Gregor snapped. "I don't care."

Miles sat up. His head was pounding, but he was too frightened to cater to it. "Well, I care," he said. "And I know you do, too. You're just not thinking clearly right now -"

"Look who I'm related to," Gregor said, lips peeling back in a jagged laugh. He turned suddenly, strode across the room to Miles, and went to his knees. "Everyone always talks about Mad Yuri. They forget my grandfather was Ezar Vorbarra, who would give anything - do anything - and my father, who -."

"But I'm sure in the morning you'll see it my way," Miles continued, speaking over him. His heart
was thumping, his blood surging powerfully. No, Gregor, don't do that. It wrecks me when you do that.

But Gregor didn't listen. He caught Miles's resisting hands, pressed them together, forced his own between them. "There," he said, looking up at Miles with an exalted grin. "There. I'm giving you everything. Do you understand that? Everything. Barrayar is - I am yours. Do with me what you will. If you want me to leave all of this - just don't you dare die on me. I won't abide it. Don't you dare."

"Don't!" Miles said, jerking his hands away. "God, Gregor, you can't say things like that!"

"Why not? What are you so scared of?"

You. Miles leapt up, stung. He stumbled a little, then regained his footing and retraced Gregor's line from one side of the room to the other. He turned there, pressing his back to the wall, feeling strangely cornered even with all the space between them. "Don't do that," he said, his breath rushing. "Don't ever - I can't be your -" He snarled wordlessly, dashing a hand across his face. I can't be your everything. There's not enough of me. "I won't move in here," he said finally, picking his words with deliberate cruelty. "I can't, and I won't. And don't tell me I'll be safer - your mother wasn't."

Gregor went white. The only thing Miles could hear for a long moment was his own ragged breathing. He felt, for the first time in a long time, like running and running and not looking back.

"I'm going with the Duronas," he finally said. It was the only thing he could think to do, to get off Barrayar as quickly as possible. "Not for good," he added, as what little color remained in Gregor's face drained right out. "But I need to get away."

"From me," Gregor said flatly.

"Yes." No point in being gentle now.

"Fine. But I request and require that you go no farther than Sergyar."

Miles glared. There was sense to that - he was a potential target of Cetagandan vengeance, and he would be safer inside the Barrayaran Empire, Within ImpSec's reach and by extension, within Gregor's. "Fine," he managed through clenched teeth.

"Your word."

"I give you my word as Vorkosigan. Sire." There. Twist that knife a little deeper.

Ten minutes later Miles was in a borrowed groundcar on his way home. It was a tense, silent ride, everyone scanning the tops of buildings for unexpected movement. It wasn't until they were waiting beneath the port cocheré for the house to be cleared that Miles turned to Pym and said, "I'll be leaving for Sergyar early tomorrow morning."

Pym blinked, startled. "A new assignment, m'lord? Now?"

"Not . . . exactly."

His Armsman gazed at him for a long moment, then nodded. "I'll begin packing, m'lord, right away. For myself as well, I think."

Miles frowned through a deep sense of relief. Pym had quietly become a solid pillar of his
existence, competent, thoughtful, and trusted, a distorted but no less valued echo of Sergeant Bothari. "Ma Pym -" he began.

"Will understand this time, I think," Pym said firmly. He glanced over Miles's shoulder to the house. "We can go in now, m'lord. Perhaps you ought to go up to bed if you plan for an early start tomorrow."

Miles became aware that he was swaying with exhaustion. He allowed Pym to take his arm and guide him into the house. Too much, he thought. It had been years since he'd run away from anything - usually he just ran straight at whatever was in his way. But it was all too much right now. He thought he would probably beat himself to death on it if he tried.
This, Ivan decided, was exactly the position he'd feared getting stuck in from the beginning. Talk about a rock and a hard place. By the time he'd gotten Miles's message, the cryptic little shit was already up in orbit, and he'd be well on his way to the first Barrayar-Komarr jump by now. Safely, and somewhat uncharacteristically, out of range.

Ivan thanked the driver of his commandeered Ops groundcar, and strode on up the front walk of the Residence. He'd been running too late that morning to do anything but listen to Miles's message, discover his groundcar was emitting black smoke from both ends, catch an autocab to work, and stew about it all day. He'd considered taking off on his lunch break, but he had a funny feeling he shouldn't be pressed for time during this little interview. After work, he was supposed to be getting ready for an evening of scintillating conversation and just plain scintillating with Ambretta Vorkeres. But instead here he was, charging in where apparently even Miles feared to tread.

"Good evening," he greeted the Armsman who met him as he moved out of the public areas of the Residence. "I'd like to see the Emperor as soon as possible."

The Armsman checked his ID. "Do you have an appointment, Lord Ivan?"

"No. But if you tell him I'm here, he'll want to see me."

The Armsman looked rather dubious, not to mention faintly disapproving, but he escorted Ivan to a waiting room. He disappeared through a discreet side door, leaving Ivan alone with his thoughts. He could count the number of times he'd deliberately sought out Gregor's attention on one hand; usually he'd wonder where he fell on the priority list, but today, Ivan suspected that he'd be bumped up several notches.

The question, Ivan reflected as he waited, was just whose head he was supposed to be pounding right now. His first instinct was to say Miles - it was generally a good bet - but Ivan had been the one who'd pointed out that Gregor could cause his fair share of disasters in this matter. Besides, Miles was out of reach for the moment, though Ivan still hadn't given up the idea of taking an emergency leave of absence and chasing the hyperactive little twit all the way to Sergyar, if it became necessary. So, who's the rock and who's the hard place?

He was admitted to Gregor's private office after a gratifyingly short wait. Ivan restrained himself until the Armsman had left, closing the door behind him, before advancing to stand in front of Gregor's desk.

"What," he said without preamble, "the hell?"

Gregor looked up from his fixed contemplation of his comconsole. "There's no need to hover threateningly," he said with discernible weariness. "Sit down."

"Miles?" Ivan persisted.

"Is on his way to Sergyar right now."

"Yes," Ivan said. "I know. The thing is, he didn't happen to mention why he was fleeing into the night."

Gregor twitched. "You . . . spoke to him?"
"Well no," Ivan admitted, unbending in the face of Gregor's obvious misery. "He left me a message. Said he was going, not to worry - ha! This is him - and that he needed to be off planet for awhile."

"How did he look?" Gregor asked.

Ivan took a careful inventory of him, eyes narrowing. "About as bad as you do," he said finally. "Except you're better at hiding it. Give him military secrets and he can lie like a rug, but get him tied in knots over somebody and he's tragic eyes all over the place. He really needs to get over that," he added thoughtfully.

Gregor deflated, the edges of his composure visibly cracking. "I screwed up," he said.

Ivan decided it was time to take that seat now. He pulled it up close to Gregor's desk and leaned his elbows on the edge, chin in hands. "How bad?"

Gregor opened a hand. "Fleeing into the night, Ivan."

"Okay," Ivan said. "Yeah. That's bad. Really bad - I don't remember the last time Miles ran away from - er. That's beside the point. You can't tell me it was all your fault. I mean, this is Miles. He had to do his share of... of... what happened, anyway? First fight?"

"Um," said Gregor. "We didn't so much fight as... implode." Ivan lifted an eyebrow and Gregor shrugged. "I wasn't thinking all that clearly and I said some things, and he told me I wasn't thinking clearly, and then I said some more things, and then, um."

"Implosion?" Ivan suggested.

"Yes."

"And now he's on his way to Sergyar, and he'll be gone for at least a few weeks."

"Yes."

Okay. Both their heads.

"So," said Ivan, crossing his legs and sitting back. "What are you going to do about it?"

"...do?" Gregor repeated blankly.

"Yes. Do. As in action that you will take to fix it. Miles tends to... act. He'll appreciate the same in return."

"There's nothing I can do, not right now," Gregor said. "I'd like to send a ship after him, say... something. But I rather think that would be ill-advised."

"Very," Ivan agreed. "It's better to let him sulk in peace, believe me."

"I don't think you quite grasp -"

"Oh yes I do," Ivan said. "I've seen Miles in every emotional state a human being can support at one time or another. If he was mad enough to walk, he's progressed to sulking by now."

"He wasn't," Gregor said quietly.

"Wasn't what?"
"Angry. At least not, not directly. He was . . ." Gregor hesitated. "I think he was scared. Which is why I can't, as you say, act: Anything I do at this point will only make things worse."

"Oh." Ivan fell silent.

"What?" Gregor demanded after a moment.

"I was just figuring odds," Ivan said. "On what he'll do, I mean. Miles, you know, for such a bright guy he can have the emotional maturity of a turnip sometimes." Gregor's eyebrows inched up. "I should know," Ivan added. He considered Gregor for a speculative moment. "I'm just taking a guess here, but my bet is you cornered him with just how completely loony you are over him - why, I still don't know - and he reacted like he always does when someone corners him before he's ready."

"That's . . . close enough," Gregor said, a bit grudgingly.

"Hey," Ivan said, lifting a finger. "I'd be nice to me if I were you. I'm the guy with all the information. Besides, by all rights I should have decked you by now."

"You can, you know," Gregor said, sounding almost hopeful.

"No," Ivan said, relenting. "You don't need the wrath of vengeance."

"I don't?"

"No. Just a clue. And some patience. And possibly a gravitic imploder lance - this is Miles."

Gregor's mouth twitched for the first time since Ivan had entered. "I think I can refind my patience, if it is required," he said. "And there's a gravitic imploder lance downstairs in the armory."

"Really?" Ivan said, diverted. "I've never seen it."

"Not the public armory."

"Has it ever been used?"

Gregor coughed. "Not for, uh, traditional combat." Ivan waited. "I, uh, had them use it to demolish the old clock tower," Gregor admitted finally.

"Really? And you didn't let me come watch? How was it?"

"Most satisfying," Gregor said reminiscently. "I felt purged for days. Anyway," he continued after a beat. "Do you think you could help me out with the clue? Please?"

"He'll go one of two ways," Ivan said. "Either he'll come back with that damned full forward momentum of his and have everything he wants exactly how he wants it within the year, and if that's you, God help you."

"Or?" Gregor asked, eyes alight.

"Or," Ivan said more slowly, "Or he'll come back still scared, maybe more scared, and he'll break your heart in the nicest way he knows and be a perfect angel about everything. In which case . . ." He paused, then finished quietly, "In which case, God help you, because nothing else will."

Gregor sat back, going neutral again. "And the odds?"
"I really don't know," Ivan said honestly. "That's the thing about Miles, he's a slippery little bugger. Just when you think he's the smartest, bravest person you've ever met, he goes and does something like, oh just for an example, lying about a medical condition. And then sometimes, when you think he's had enough and he can't - no one could - take anymore, he stands up and he gets that look in his eye like a Dendarii hillman who's had too much of that awful maple mead and . . . things happen. I just don't know."

"Thank you," said Gregor. "I appreciate your honesty."

"No problem," Ivan said, rising. "This one is for free. Next time I just might deck you for my trouble."

"Patience," Gregor murmured, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Right."

"You've got at least two weeks to practice," Ivan said cheerfully, and left. If he really scrambled, he wouldn't even be late picking up Ambretta. Arranging Miles's life, he decided, wasn't all that difficult. He didn't know why Miles was continually having fits over it.

He emerged onto the front steps of the Residence, then paused, swearing under his breath. He'd dismissed his groundcar without thinking about it. He considered asking one of the guards to call a cab for him, then shrugged the idea off. It was a delicate, painfully beautiful early spring evening, and it might actually be faster just to walk the few blocks out of the no traffic zone surrounding the Residence and pick up a cab himself. Besides, most of these streets bordered the Imperial Gardens or ran through one of the numerous parks in the area. He could probably find a few stray spring blossoms along the way with which to soothe the lovely but certainly not sweet Ambretta.

He struck off, hands in pockets, whistling. It was a great relief to know that he couldn't probably shouldn't - do any more for Miles. It was all up to the hunchbacked dwarf himself now. Leaving Miles to his own devices wasn't always the safest thing, Ivan reflected, but in this case it seemed the only option.

Ivan's steps slowed as he turned away from the Residence, heading south. It must have been about here that Miles had been attacked, barely a day ago. All the activity had died down, but Ivan fancied he could still catch the acrid tang of scorched metal and plastic and rubber from that old behemoth of a groundcar. Indeed, if he squinted, he could make out the outline of fresh pavement hastily laid down to repair the damage from the explosion, and the wall a few feet further along still looked a bit worse for wear. He shivered a little and glanced around. The street was bordered on one side by a high stone wall surrounding the outermost projection of the Imperial Gardens, and on the other by a flat expanse of park where military reviews and exercises were sometimes staged.

*If Miles were here, he'd be poking around this place by now.* Ivan paused, turning a full circle, trying to think like Miles. Twisty-minded, illogically logical, paranoid beyond belief. These streets were technically open to the public, though there were visible checkpoints on every corner. All unofficial vehicle traffic was routed off around the palace, ground and air alike. A person could have come in on foot and set up, but it would have been tricky. Especially the part where they'd then slipped back out, right through ImpSec's grasping fingers.

A cold chill snaked down Ivan's spine. *He could get through ImpSec security if he was ImpSec.* Was this what it was like to be Miles? Being paranoid was not nearly as much fun as he made it look.

Ivan stood a moment longer, then shook himself and hurried on. There was no point speculating about that just yet. Allegre was good, and professionally paranoid, and Miles would be back soon enough. Ivan could pass that particular disturbing idea off on him then and be done with it.
He turned the last corner, and stepped suddenly from quiet preserve to bustling metropolis. Groundcars zipped past on the street, and soberly dressed civil servants and businessmen hurried along the sidewalks, ducking in and out of the high rising modern buildings that characterized this sector. Ivan turned right, intending to make for the next corner where he could more easily hail a cab.

A hand closed over his arm and Ivan wheeled. He had sudden, Milesian visions of someone waiting for him with a nerve disrupter or a needler or possibly just a knife. But no. No one wanted to kill Captain Ivan Vorpatril. That was one of the nicest things about being him. Ivan glanced down, blinking at a slight blond man, whose clothes clearly marked him as an offworlder.

"Lord Ivan," the stranger said.

"Yes?" Ivan said, though it clearly had not been a question. He took a closer look at the man, discarding his first notion of a lost tourist.

"May I have a word?" the man said, then drew Ivan with him into the shelter of the entrance to the nearest building without waiting for a response.

"Who're you?" Ivan asked, trying unsuccessfully to place the odd accent.

"What have you done with the androgenesis project?" the man returned.


"The Cetagandans want it," the man said. "I am . . . not a friend of Cetaganda. What have you done with it?"

"How do you know about it?" Ivan shot back. Whoever this fellow was, he shouldn't know about Lily's research, and Ivan wasn't about to tell him where it was off to no matter how public the eventual outcome. Miles's plan depended on secrecy up until the very last.

The man stared at him with disturbingly intense blue eyes. "It's no matter," he said after a small silence, the beginnings of a smile chased by a deep frown. He cocked his head, obviously contemplating. "Tell Admiral Naismith that his plan may not work," he said, just as Ivan was gearing up for another round of questions. "Tell him the Durona women may arrive on Beta Colony, but it is almost certain their research will not."

Ivan's mouth opened, then snapped shut. Don't let him know he's right. And how did he know? And why did he ask if he already knew? "I don't know what you're talking about," he finally settled on.

The man waved this away. "Tell Admiral Naismith to help the Cetagandans if it comes to that. It may be necessary, in the end."

"I thought you weren't a friend of Cetagandans," Ivan said.

"I'm not," the stranger - damn it, who was he? - returned cooly. "But we do what we must. And those earnest ghem revolutionaries do have a special appeal. Tell Admiral Naismith that even if the Duronas' work is lost, there is still hope. There's another copy somewhere." He brushed a hand over his forehead, as if smoothing away a tension ache. "We just have to find it."

"What the hell," Ivan began, but the man was already moving, releasing Ivan's arm and ducking out of the archway they'd been standing in. In the short time it took Ivan to step back onto the sidewalk, he was gone.
Ivan stared helplessly one way, then the other. The whole conversation had taken less than three minutes. *Miles, of all the times for you to go running across the Empire . . .*

He stood a moment, indecisive. To ImpSec, or not to ImpSec? Ivan's philosophy of life was constitutionally opposed to his cousin's. Miles preferred not to report in when he could avoid it, thus ducking any pesky orders that might come down for him. Ivan could never understand this. Orders, he firmly believed, were wonderful things. If something went wrong, you could always blame the person who'd told you to do it in the first place. And yet . . .

And yet the chill moment of paranoia lingered.

He considered heading straight back to the Residence to report the incident to Gregor, but common sense stayed the impulse. Nothing the man had said or done had indicated that he was dangerous - just strange. Gregor had enough on his mind at the moment, Ivan finally decided. He couldn't arrest the man, for he hadn't done anything illegal. That he knew about Admiral Naismith was odd in the extreme, but as long as he wasn't a friend of Cetaganda . . .

*Hell.* Ivan blew out a breath, and began moving up the sidewalk again. Miles would be back in a few weeks. The whole bizarre thing would just have to wait until then. In the meantime, Ivan was going to be late. nbsp;

*#

By the time they made orbit over Komarr five days later, Miles had begun to regret his hasty decision to come along. He spent much of his time pacing the narrow corridors of the ship, trailed by the long-suffering Pym. He saw most of the Duronas only at meals, where the universal mood was becoming progressively darker as time went on. He took that to mean the research was not going well.

"I don't understand!" Rowan burst out over dinner on day six. She and Lily and another Durona, who looked to be about Rowan's age, were pouring over a stack of plastic flimseys. "It says *right here* . . . but it's not working. Nothing is working."

"Rowan," Lily said softly as she glanced up and met Miles's eyes. Rowan jerked her head up and followed Lily's gaze.

She sighed and stood up. "I can't do this right now, Lily. You're the geneticist, you try and make sense of it." She pushed back her chair and hurried out, shoulders hunched. Miles stared for a moment, then pushed his own plate away and went after her, waving Pym back to his meal.

"Rowan," he called once he was in the corridor. She stopped and turned reluctantly to face him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, and wiped her eyes with a quick, covert flick. "Just . . . frustrated."

"Ah." Miles paused, a bit hesitant, then added, "Would you like to vent over a glass of wine? Good wine, I mean, not that thin-as-piss stuff they served at dinner." He was taking several different vintages of Vorkosigan District wine to his parents, but it wouldn't hurt to open a bottle or two.

"I don't usually drink," Rowan said, in a talk-me-into-it tone of voice.

"One glass. It might make things seem less frustrating."

"True," she said, and fell into step beside him.
Miles keyed open the door to his cabin and bowed her inside. She sat down on the small sofa that took up so much room it was barely worth having, but which was the only thing to differentiate his quarters from anyone else's. He'd said that it wasn't necessary, but the ship staff had seemed to think otherwise.

He selected his favorite vintage and poured them both glasses. She sipped and made approving noises.

"I'm sorry to hear it's not going well," Miles said, sitting crosslegged on the bed.

"Thank you," Rowan said. "It would be ironic, wouldn't it, if we went to all this trouble and nothing came of it." She sighed. "And I don't understand why, that's the most frustrating thing of all. Logically it should all be coming together, according to everything we have. I don't know. The data is so complicated."

"But surely you understand the data itself, don't you? I mean, you came up with it."

"Mmm," Rowan said, and suddenly seemed to find her glass endlessly fascinating.

"Mmm?" Miles repeated, blinking.

She sighed deeply. "You see, that is the crux of the matter. We didn't come up with it."

Miles blinked slowly. Everything suddenly made a great deal more sense - and, now that he thought about it, none of them had ever really said that they had come up with it. No, they'd always talked about it like frustrated students trying to understand someone else's theory. "Then who did?"

"Ah," Rowan said, looking up finally to meet his stare. "That's the other issue. We don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Lily and I were sent it anonymously at a conference. We have no idea where it originated. We didn't even know what it was at first."

"I see."

Rowan sighed. "It was not complete, the data we received. We hope to complete the research ourselves - or at least we did. The last eight days have been very frustrating. Everything had gone well to that point, and now every simulated trial we run ends in failure. I just don't know. Perhaps the data we were given is simply wrong."

Miles didn't answer. This certainly put a new spin on things, though it didn't really change what needed to be done. "So you've been trying to decipher someone else's work."

"Yes. Decipher is a good word for it." She grimaced. "Whoever originated it is brilliant, but their note taking system is bizarre. And then we're trying to build on it, of course, but if the original data is false then there's not much hope of that."

"Why didn't you mention this before?"

Rowan shrugged, flushing. "Well, it's not the most ethically sound thing we could be doing. I mean, we're handed this data at a conference, no strings, no name attached. We don't know if the originator themselves gave it to us - perhaps because they ran into the same problems we have and hoped that we could figure it out better - or if maybe someone stole it and handed it out, to ruin this person's chances of publishing and being credited. Not even to mention the astronomical market..."
value. Lily and I both had our misgivings, but it was so fascinating and then when we realized what
it was . . . we couldn't leave it alone."

"I see."

"I mean," she said, sounding a bit defensive, "we weren't even sure if we could do anything with it,
and we thought that we'd cross the bridge of how to credit someone with the early work if we ever
even got that far. And then we thought we would, but now . . ." She took a rather large gulp of
wine. "This is the most important thing we've ever done," she said quietly. "Probably the most
important thing we will ever do. I mean, if you had any idea how many brilliant minds have
puzzled over this problem for centuries . . . and we maybe have a chance of doing this thing that
will change millions of lives." She looked up, eyes shining.

"Ah," said Miles, a bit ruefully. "I've always hated that feeling. If you fail, then you've failed. But
if you get the job done, you've done your most important thing and then what is there?" He
brooded a moment, and Rowan waited, a little uncomprehending but politely silent. "I guess it's a
good thing that most of my 'most important things' weren't most important until towards the end, or
even after," he said at last, thinking of Dagoola again. "It's an entirely different matter when you
know before you even start that this thing could be - will be so enormous."

"We aren't talking about androgenesis anymore, are we?" Rowan asked.

"No. Not really, anyway." He shook himself. "Maybe a real lab will help," he suggested.

"I hope so," she said, but the doubt in her voice was discouraging, and she didn't seem to want to
discuss it any further.

_How interesting_, Miles thought later, after Rowan was gone. He lay back on his bunk, a half full
glass of wine in one hand, and stared out the tiny porthole at the inky blackness of space. So
theoretically, the Duronas' might not be the only copy. The person who had originated the data
probably had one, for starters. _Well_, he thought, _two or three or four heads are better than one._

Strange though, that the Cetagandans didn't seem to know about the other copies. Perhaps Lily
hadn't told Pel that the original data had come from someone else.

_Not my problem_, Miles thought, just before he dropped off into a wine-induced nap, _as long as it's
not on Barrayar._

They made contact with the Dendarii two days later. The voice on the comlink was achingly
familiar - Admiral Elli Quinn herself. She'd be furious, Miles reflected, if she found out he was on
board and hadn't even said hello, and if he was entirely honest with himself he didn't really want to
avoid her. In the end, he had the pilot tell her that Lord Vorkosigan would like a personal meeting,
if she had the time. She said that she would be delighted, once the Duronas were all on board, and
they agreed that she would transfer to the courier ship, since Lord Vorkosigan could not,
obviously, show himself to the Dendarii.

"Good luck with everything," Miles told Rowan as she was about to leave. "I'm sure you'll all do
brilliantly on Beta Colony."

She was cradling the box with all the technical information a bit like it was a child, and seemed
reluctant to let go of it to shake his hand, but she did smile at him. "Thank you for your help," she
said. "If you hadn't shown up when you did . . ." She shook her head, and didn't say what might
have happened if the Cetagandans had discovered them before Miles had.
Miles shrugged. "Being lucky is really more than half of seeming competent," he said, and she laughed.

Finally, after massive amounts of chaos and large numbers of loud children and several screaming toddlers, the Duronas were gone. The ship was startlingly silent without them. Miles found himself standing in his bathroom, staring at his face in the mirror and gingerly touching the healing cuts. The places where his face had been scraped raw were almost healed, thanks to liberal amounts of antibiotic cream. There would be two scars, he thought. One on his forehead, over his left eyebrow, and one along his jaw. The lines were red now, but he knew from experience that eventually they would fade and be barely noticeable.

Dinner with Elli was far more comfortable than Miles had thought it would be. He said nothing about Gregor, though he did tell her that he was seeing someone, so she wouldn't expect anything other than dinner and friendly conversation. She was the same Elli, he decided; a little older and wiser, it seemed, crisp and professional in her gray and whites with her admiral's pins, but still Elli. He wondered if she thought he was the same Miles, or if she realized that he'd changed in ways even he couldn't define. And if she did realize it, did she like the changes? Could Elli have loved Lord Auditor Vorkosigan, even if he hadn't wanted her to become a dirtsucking Barrayan Countess? He wondered if he'd ever be able to see her and not wonder about all the "what if's" that existed between them. What if one of us had been willing to give up everything and remake himself or herself for the other?

It was useless thinking about it, Miles told himself as he returned to his cabin after seeing her off in her shuttle. He sat on the edge of the narrow bunk and tugged meditatively at his boots. Elli had point blank refused to even consider Barrayar, and he honestly couldn't blame her. Leaving Barrayar behind forever had never been anything more than an academic question for him. The only thing you can't trade for your heart's desire is your heart, he thought, and wondered suddenly if that were entirely true. Wasn't that what falling in love was supposed to be? Am I giving, or am I giving up?

He sighed and crawled into his bunk. Tomorrow he would see his parents. He didn't think he was quite ready to tell them yet, especially his father, but part of him wanted to, just so they could clear the whole mess up for him. Fix it for me, please, because I've certainly proven incapable.
"Well, this is a pleasant surprise. I can't remember the last time twice in less than six months." The Vicereine held Miles at arms length for a moment, examining him. Noticing the new scars, he was sure. Not to mention the four ImpSec minions who had escorted him into the house and then attempted, and failed, to fade into the woodwork.

"Yeah," Miles said. "Well, I'm not off haring all over the Nexus anymore."

"Hmm," his father said, putting a hand on his shoulder as the three of them moved into the library. Pym was taking the bags upstairs, but the Vicereine had invited him to join them for lunch. "And how do you feel about staying closer to home?"

"I'm okay with it," Miles said honestly as he dropped into an armchair. "Sometime in the last ten years I somehow came to like Barrayar."

"Quite a feat, that," his mother murmured.

"Come now, dear Captain," his father said with a smile. "Some days even you like Barrayar."

"I do?" the Vicereine returned. They shared one of their looks, and Miles waited it out patiently. "But we hear," she said at last, turning back to him, "that Barrayar might not be liking you so well these days." He gave her an innocent look, and she narrowed her eyes, tapping her chin significantly.

"Oh. That."

"Yes," his father said dryly. "That. Did you think no one would mention someone taking a shot at our son?"

"I was hoping," Miles muttered. "Oh, look, lunch."

"Don't think you're getting out of it," his mother told him as they relocated to the dining room. "I suppose we could get it out of Pym, but having to do that would annoy me."

"All right, all right," Miles sighed.

They had passed around the salad before his father cleared his throat and looked at him pointedly. "Um," Miles said. "Yes. So. How much have you heard?"

"Not much," the Vicereine said. "Gregor was unusually cryptic in his message. Generally, he's more informative than you are. He said simply that there had been an attempt on your life and that for a variety of reasons you were on your way here for a few days." She frowned. "He looked a bit... unwell. Is he all right?"

"I don't know," Miles said, hiding his wince.

The Viceroy made a herding gesture with his salad fork. "What happened, precisely, please?"

"Um. Well, it seems I'm going to need a new groundcar."

By the time he'd got through the story, editing it for mixed company, of course, they'd all stopped eating. When he finally wound down, his mother looked at Pym and said, "We are in your debt, Pym."
"It was my duty, milady."

"That doesn't diminish our gratitude," his mother said.

Pym looked embarrassed and as though he might have liked to protest some more, but the Viceroy turned his gaze to Miles and said, "We don't have a specific suspect yet?"

"Nope," Miles said, a bit grimly. "Or at least I haven't heard differently since I left. We do know it probably wasn't the Cetagandans."

"Yes," the Viceroy said slowly. "I suppose they explain why Gregor was looking a bit peaked. I have to say, the idea of a pack of them staying in his guesthouse . . . concerns me."

"You're not alone there," Miles said. "But there's really nothing to be done about it. For now, anyway. And with androgenesis on its way to Beta Colony, the danger should diminish somewhat."

"That is a stroke of genius," his mother said thoughtfully. "Sending them to Beta Colony, I mean. Even Cetaganda would think twice before trying anything on Beta."

"One hopes," Miles sighed.

"But there's no proof that this latest assassination attempt had anything to do with all of this, is there?" his father asked. Miles shook his head. The Viceroy was silent for a moment. "You know, what really concerns me," he finally said, "is where it happened. So close to the Residence."

"That occurred to me, too," Miles admitted. "But I left too quickly after everything to really start to assemble any ideas or even suspicions."

"Why did you leave, anyway?" his mother asked. "I'm surprised. I would have thought you would have wanted to stick around and make a nuisance of yourself."

"Oh," Miles said. "Well. The Duronas were meeting the Dendarii in Sergyan airspace, and I thought it . . . prudent to accompany them, just in case." In case of what, he didn't say. "And then, well, I was here. I didn't get to stay very long last time." He thought that sounded pretty reasonable, but when he looked up he found his parents exchanging glances again. Why did he have to have perceptive parents? Why couldn't they just leave him alone or bother him about getting married or something?

"I should look into the agent who died, make sure his family is taken care of," the Vicereine said at last.

Miles froze, guilt-stricken. "I completely forgot - usually I would send a letter, I always tried to with the Dendarii, but I was in such a hurry -" He broke off and leaned his forehead in his hands. This could not go on, this personal upheaval. He was starting to lose sight of everything else. "I'll do it when I go back," he finally said on a sigh.

"Actually," his mother said, after another short exchange of significant eyebrow flickers with his father, "I think I'm going to come with you."

"Um," Miles said. "You don't have to, you know. All things considered, it might be much safer for you to stay here."

"It might be safer for you to stay here, too," she said sweetly.

"I can't," he said.
"Why ever not?"

"Because . . ." Miles floundered for an answer, and finally gave up. "All right," he said with a resigned sigh.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad that's settled. I'm ready to leave whenever you like, though you are, of course, welcome to stay as long as you wish." He could not, therefore, get out of it by saying that he had to get back to Barrayar quickly. *Oh well,* he thought, and realized that he was not quite as upset by this turn of events as he might be. His mother was awfully good at sorting out emotional difficulties, even if she did approach them with frighteningly Betan tendencies. If he actually got up the nerve to tell her - and there really wasn't any point in not doing so, he knew, because if Pym and Ivan could figure it out, Cordelia Vorkosigan certainly would - she might actually be helpful.

Miles ended up staying a full four days, mostly to spend time with his father. The Count would be seventy-five in about four months. His father did have a new heart, and that might go quite a ways towards extending his life, but the tired slump that sometimes took the Count's shoulders when he thought no one was watching was a quiet, terrifying reminder of the passage of time. Politically, Miles was probably more than capable of being Count Vorkosigan. But he was not ready yet. He didn't think he would ever be ready.

On the fifth day, he and his mother said good-bye to his father at the shuttleport. Miles watched his parents kiss each other good-bye with more interest than he had since his childhood discovery that not everyone's parents actually loved each other.

"That's what it looks like after three decades,* he thought, and tried to picture himself and Gregor, thirty years from now. The idea gave him vertigo.

"Well," his mother said once they were aboard. "Eight days, love. I don't think I've had that much time with you in years. Whatever shall we talk about?" She gave him a bright, Betan smile that made Miles squirm, and went off with her retainers to put her luggage up.

"Could I offer some advice, m'lord?" Pym asked as they unpacked Miles's bag.

"Sure," Miles sighed.

"Don't fight her on this," Pym said. "I know you're not familiar with the concept, but in this case it's better to just surrender because the fortress will be breached eventually anyway. M'lord."

"Right," Miles said resignedly.

He couldn't quite manage the courage to tell her that night at dinner, or the next night, or the one after that, but then they were suddenly in Komarran orbit and Miles realized that if he kept putting it off, eventually they'd be home and then she'd figure it out on her own and probably be quite annoyed that he hadn't told her up front. Besides, she kept giving him speculative looks and they were making him very nervous.

"I need to, um, tell you something," Miles said that evening as they drank coffee and picked at the remains of dessert. They'd made the first jump out of Komarran space a few hours earlier and would be home in just under five days.

The Countess set her fork down and regarded him seriously. "I thought you might."

"I - I might be seeing someone," Miles said.

Her smile looked more than a bit relieved. "Wonderful," she said, though with definite reservation in her voice
"It's Gregor."

It was almost worth everything just to see the look on his mother's face. The thing about her being, well, her was that she was surprised by almost nothing, but he could tell that he'd really gotten her this time. "Our Gregor?" she managed, after a fraught silence. "You're seeing - might be seeing - our Gregor?"

"Er, yes."

"Romantically?"

"Er . . .yes."

"That's . . . wonderful, Miles. I don't want you to think that I don't think it's wonderful. I'm just . . . surprised, that's all. I thought you were rather, ah . . . inclined elsewhere."

"That would make two of us," Miles said.

"I take it this is a fairly new development?"

"It started right before I visited last time. For me, anyway. Or right after I got back, depending on how you count it. Longer for Gregor, I think."

"I see. That explains a lot about your behavior. We were a little worried, you know. We actually spoke to Ivan about it, but he said he didn't have any idea what was going on."

"He didn't at the time. And why does everyone keep talking to Ivan about me? I mean, Ivan!"

"Hmm." She rested her chin in her cupped hands. "That's the thing about Ivan - you don't expect him to see much, so sometimes you show him a great deal." She paused. "Why the 'might be'?

"Um," Miles said. "We sorta had a fight. Well, not really a fight . . . I don't even know what to call it, except it was . . . bad." His mother raised an eyebrow at this eloquent description of events. "It was going very well, right after I got back from Escobar," Miles said, almost defensively. "He was . . . it was nice. Easy. We've always been able to talk and he really . . . y'know." He waved vaguely at himself.

"Loves you?" the Countess suggested, eyebrows still up.

"Yeah. That. But then there was that bloody assassination attempt and Gregor . . . didn't take it well. And I'd just had a seizure and neither of us was in the best frame of mind and it was a complete and total disaster."

"And that's when you decided to come to Sergyar?"

"Yeah. I needed to get away." Miles took a deep breath. "He wanted me to move into the Residence, you see. For my own safety. I said no, and he said he could make me. You can imagine the rest."

"Yes, I certainly can." She sipped her coffee. "You said this has been going on longer on Gregor's end of things. How much longer?"

"I don't know exactly. But I think . . . a while. Since after my cryo-revival, maybe. He's terrified of me up and dying again."

"He isn't the only one, you know," his mother said gently. "That was an awful time for all of us."
"I know," Miles said, irrationally guilty. "But you know how Gregor is about losing people."

"Yes," she said. "We tried our utmost, but there was only so much we could do for him. Those seeds were . . . planted very early."

"He . . ." Miles stopped, hesitating, wondering whether he should tell his mother everything. "He put his hands between mine," he whispered at last. "He told me he'd give me everything, Barrayar, himself, everything."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him that he can't say those things, not to anyone, not even to me. Perhaps especially not me."

"Why not?"

Miles floundered. "He wasn't thinking clearly."

"I see." She cocked her head to one side, and Miles squirmed. "You never did react well to others having power over you." She paused deliberately. "Especially when you find you cannot trust them."

"I trust him," Miles snapped, oddly stung.

"Ah," his mother said, with the decisive tones of someone springing a trap. "So why did you run?"

"I didn't run. I -"

"Don't give me some line about a strategic retreat."

Miles closed his mouth quickly, then reopened it. "I just felt like I had to go," he said. "I wasn't running away, I just . . . couldn't be there."

"Hmm," his mother said, maddeningly. Miles was glad when she decided not to poke at the loopholes in that. "And what have you decided, over the course of your time away?"

Miles slumped in his chair. "Not much. Except that I have to do something soon, because this is getting unbearable."

"Are you in love with him?" she asked bluntly.

He found himself gaping like a fish. She waited a moment, then sailed right on through his silence.

"Loving someone isn't always easy. Especially when that someone answers to something higher than yourself." She would know, having been married to the Count through his fifteen-year stint as Lord Regent of Barrayar. "I'd tell you not to consider Barrayar when making your decision, but I know better."

"Gregor didn't, at first," Miles said. "When he first told me, he said he wanted me to consider just the two of us, without the Imperium. But that isn't the problem for me. Barrayar has never wanted me, that isn't anything new. What's new is that I want Barrayar. And what's difficult is not Gregor, me, and the Imperium, but just Gregor and me."

"Are you certain of that?"

"I . . . was," Miles said, frowning at her. "What?"
She sat back. "Just a few observations for you, love, to do with what you will." She lifted a hand, counting them off on her fingers. "One, to my knowledge, you've never gotten involved with someone in a position of authority over you. True?"

He thought about it, nodded.

"Two, Gregor has grown into himself and his power in very impressive ways. Don't you agree?"

He nodded again, helplessly.

"He has the will to hold three planets together," she continued. "It takes either a rock solid stance inside yourself, or an extraordinary talent for acting to do the job he does. It's a little of both in Gregor's case, I think." The third finger rose. "There aren't many people you've encountered whom you can't make dance to your whims, if you need to" - another finger - "but I have no doubt that he can withstand you. Immovable object, indeed." The last finger went up, and she paused. "But I don't think you should really have too much trouble with that. After all, your father and I were careful not to give into your charms too often." She leaned across the table, dropping her hand. "What do you do when someone who has the tactical advantage on you surrenders all at once? What do you do when your opponent simply lays his cards on the table and says, 'take me for all I am?'"

"You . . . take advantage," Miles said reluctantly.

"That's one option. You can also turn tail and leave the whole mess," his mother returned crisply. "Because you find you don't want what has just been laid at your feet." She paused, devastatingly. "Or you find you want it very much."

". . . oh."

She let him stew over this for a minute, then added gently, "There's a third option, you know. You can do the same - lay down your own cards and say 'this is all I have. Take what you will from me, what's yours is mine and what's mine is yours.'" The eyebrow rose again. "You never did answer my question."

"I . . . could," he breathed. "He's gotten into my head, somehow. From the moment he told me it's like all the cardinal points have moved. Everything I do is in relation to him, now."

She grinned. "I think you'll find you're further gone than even you know," she said with sudden cheer. "It took me years to realize how fast I fell in love with your father. For so long I thought I was so rational about everything, and then one day I realized how much I'd been fooling myself."

"That's the other thing," Miles said in a small voice. "I have no idea what Da would think about any of this."

"Well," she said, and stopped, hesitating. Miles watched her curiously. "I don't think he'd have a problem with it," she finally said. "At least not for the reasons you're worried about."

"Can you be sure about that?" Miles asked. "It can't be what he pictured for me."

"Well," she said again, "I'm not exactly what Piotr pictured for him, either. But that's not quite what I meant." She caught his eye and said, "You're not entirely unprecedented in this, Miles."

"I'm not . . . I don't understand."

"Your father was - is - bisexual. I solved a bit of a problem for him actually, being a woman and a
soldier all at once." She paused, sipped her coffee, and let Miles's worldview tilt precariously and come into alignment on a new axis. He remembered suddenly the rumors he had heard once or twice - never spoken loudly and never in company he could take seriously. He had rolled his eyes, muttered, "Barrayarans!" under his breath, and ignored them as slander. Who had it been? Miles ran frantically through a list of his father's contemporaries - so many of them were such insufferable Vor bores now, he could not imagine . . . And what had his grandfather thought? Miles felt sudden relief - if he was nervous about telling his father, at least he would never have to face Piotr Vorkosigan.

His mother was watching him attempt to assimilate this new information with something like amusement glinting in her eyes. "Do not worry about what your father would think," she said at last. "Whatever will make you happy is what we want for you. What will make you happy?"

"I'm . . . lonely," Miles said. "I have been for a very long time. I hadn't realized until it stopped, just a little bit. Even when I had someone, I was still lonely."

"That's because even when you had someone, no one ever quite had you," his mother said gently. "You give of yourself sparingly, kiddo, and you can't do that when you're trying for real and always. Do you want real and always, this time?"

"I . . ."

"If you don't, then don't try and fake your way through. Because it won't work and you'll end up ripping each other's hearts out. But if you do . . . then go after it," she said. She leaned forward and looked him in the eye. "Go after it, Miles. Work hard at it and don't be scared of giving yourself - all of yourself. It's worth it. It's worth all of it."

Miles sat back and looked at her, seeing her not as his mother, but as the woman who had traveled across the entire nexus to be with the man she'd fallen in love with, during a war in which they'd fought on different sides. She had abandoned her way of life to come to a backwater planet and a society that wouldn't even recognize her considerable intelligence, her achievements. She had left her family, her career, everything she had worked for her entire life. She had not remade herself - she was still Cordelia Naismith to the core - but she had sacrificed much of what she had once wanted. And now she was telling him that it was worth all of it.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said. "I - thank you."

She reached out and took his hand. "I'm glad you told me. I've been rather concerned these last few days."

"I still don't know what to do," Miles said.

"And I can't tell you. But I would suggest that you sleep on it."

He did. He woke in the small hours of the next morning, not from a nightmare, though his dreams had been vivid and unsettling. He'd felt the walls closing in on Barrayar, felt himself pinned as if by the unmovable, shimmering dome of his nightmares. You got spooked. So what are you going to do about it? Simon said you were getting clever. You don't need to jump off this wall - you can go around.

Heaven was for everyone. Even them?

*Am I in love? With Gregor?* Gregor, whose honor was enough for three whole planets, and whose reserve ran so still and so deep, a man could drown in it. Gregor, who had to sneak junk food and
who loved battered, crazy Barrayar, and battered, crazy Miles Naismith Vorkosigan.

A slow, burning seed of certainty took root in his chest. *If something is worth doing . . . You want to give me everything, Gregor? Be careful. I just might take it, and you never know what you'll get in return.*

They came home to a chilly, early spring Barrayaran dawn. Miles leaned into the shuttle viewport as their vector took them across Vorbarr Sultana, watching the blur of rooftops and towers and then the misleadingly beautiful sweep of the river whipping past. Life, he had decided on the last four days of the trip, was a lot more fun when you got rid of all those nasty uncertainties and found yourself a goal. It would be nicer still when he wasn't cooped up on a previously overlarge courier ship with his Betan mother, who was prone to bestowing random advice, which was alternately enlightening and mortifying. What in God's name had she been reading, anyway?

"So," said mother piped up from the seat beside him. "Got any plans this morning?"

Miles glared. "Yes."

"Excellent," she said crisply. "We'll just drop you at the Residence then, shall we? I'm sure you can find your own way home eventually."

"I'll manage," Miles said, leaning forward as the shuttle touched down with a bump. Barrayar. Home. Why did it feel as if he had been away for three months instead of three weeks?

He'd decided not to call ahead, either from orbit or the ground. The car dropped him at one of the side entrances, and his mother sent him on his way with a final, encouraging pat. Miles kissed her cheek, waved, and went.

He wondered, with a sense of clinical curiosity, if it would really be possible to get to Gregor without warning him first. As it turned out, with a little ingenuity, it was. Miles met Armsman Flavion, pressed and perfect even at dawn, carrying a light breakfast up in the lift.

"Gregor's?" said Miles, glancing with some pity at the wholesome grain muffin and plump banana. Gregor really should get the full Ma Kosti breakfast treatment at some point.

"Yes, m'lord," said Flavion, expertly balancing the tray through a polite bow. "Did you wish to see His Imperial Majesty this morning?"

"Yes," said Miles, following him out onto the third floor.

"I'll have to check the schedule," Flavion said. "I think there may be fifteen minutes in about an hour."

"Actually," said Miles, ducking under his arm and lifting the tray right out of his hands. "Why don't I just take this in to him? Won't be but a minute."

He left Flavion, who looked like he was contemplating accusing Miles of trying to poison Gregor's muffin, at the outer door.

The apartment was insulated, sound proofed, and shielded, and the active noises of the rapidly waking palace were replaced by an impenetrable silence within the walls. He did knock on the bedroom door, situated up a short hallway from the sitting room. There was a pause, then Gregor's voice, regrettably wide-awake, called for him to enter.
"Room service," Miles said cheerfully, breezing in and looking around with some curiosity. The room was large but not austere, elegant but not ornate, decorated in cream and warm, burnished wood grains. The bed was still rumpled, Miles noted. Gregor stood at the door to the closet in trousers and shirt sleeves, and the valet was just emerging with the glittery black and silver tunic of his formal Vorbarra house uniform. Something official to do this morning, then.

There was a moment of satisfyingly startled silence, then Gregor signaled to the valet. "Rete," he murmured.

The man bowed, laid the tunic over the back of a chair, and exited past Miles without a word. Miles waited until the door clicked shut behind him, then strode across the room. He disposed of the tray on an end table and then turned to face Gregor.

"Sorry about before," he said sincerely, stood on tiptoe, and pulled Gregor's mouth down to his. This method, he had decided after some contemplation, was the most decisive and time efficient way of getting his point across. Gregor got with the program with flattering alacrity, his hands sliding around Miles's back and his mouth going from surprised to eager. They broke apart a minute later, breathing hard. "Uh," Miles said. "You have decided to be more reasonable, right?"

"Yes," Gregor said. "I'm sorry too." They kissed again, like the best kind of punctuation. "So," Gregor said at last, seeming poised on the brink of shy delight. "You've . . . decided to keep me?"

"Oh, you have no idea," Miles said. "My mother did that thing she does where she looks inside your head and tells you what you're thinking."

"You told your mother about us?" Gregor asked, eyes widening.

"Um, yes?"

Gregor's lips parted and he huffed out a sudden, triumphant breath. "You're sure. You're really sure."

There was more kissing then - quite a lot of it, to be perfectly accurate. Miles wasn't precisely sure who started the general bedward drift, but he suspected it was a mutually endorsed plan. They parted only long enough to scramble up on to the high mattress, then fell on each other again. The bed had an emboldening effect on Gregor, Miles thought dizzily. He hardly minded. Gregor's hair was shower-damp, his skin warm and scented with spicy soap. Miles burrowed in, surprised to find the lean lines of him so comfortable to sprawl on or wrap around or any number of other interesting things.

They ignored the first comconsole summons entirely. The second made them pause, and the third finally parted them.

"Should you get that?" Miles asked breathlessly.

Gregor blinked, then turned his head and pressed his face into the covers. He made a thwarted, utterly piteous sound, then swore quite colorfully in a muffled voice. "Fifteen minutes," he moaned. "That's all I ask. Fifteen minutes of peace, now that I've finally got you -"

"Just fifteen minutes?"

Gregor's head popped up. "Well," he said judiciously. "I'm trying not to be greedy. The hours upon hours can come later."

"Not much later," Miles said, catching and holding his gaze.
Gregor's eyes flared. "No," he said, pressed a hand to Miles's chest to hold him in place, and rolled off the bed. Miles waited, hands tucked behind his neck. He tried to plan the next logical step - telling the inner circle, probably - but he kept getting distracted by the scent of Gregor lingering about the blankets and, he liked to think, himself.

Gregor returned, pleasantly rumpled and a little flushed. "Allegre is here," he said, leaning on the edge of the bed. "Morning security briefing. They've been getting longer and longer ever since the Cetagandans got here. I don't suppose I could convince you not to move from that spot for the next four hours? I can take a long lunch."

"Hm," Miles said, tempted. Then, "Cetagandans? You mean they haven't left yet?"

"Oh no," Gregor said, rolling his eyes. "We've got a whole pack of them out in the guest house now. Haut Pel says they're negotiating. I'd like to suggest that perhaps they take their negotiations back where they came from, but my diplomatic team seems to think that's a bad idea."

"That's . . . odd," Miles said slowly. "I would have thought they'd all be desperate to get off this uncivilized backwater."

Gregor sighed. "You're not going to stay there until I get back, are you?" he asked, resigned.

"Um no," Miles said distractedly. "I need to corner Benin. I'll be back later, though," he added. "Promise."

"We're going to the symphony tonight," Gregor said.

"We as in you and the Cetagandans?" Miles asked, having somewhat surreal mental images.

"That's the one nice thing about being invaded," Gregor said. "We can go public now. They're a visiting diplomatic delegation - entirely true. Nothing about asylum or, you know, the possibility of imminent war. And their embassy actually knows this group is here, which of course means the social, dare I say, pleasantries."

"Huh," said Miles. "Invasion. Huh."

Gregor paused. "Are you thinking something?"

"No," Miles said slowly. "I mean, even the Cetagandans aren't weird enough to try and invade a sort of hostile world a dozen ghem at a time." They blinked at each other.

"Right," Gregor said. "No way." He shook his head a little. "Anyway, would you like to come tonight?"

"To the symphony?" Miles asked, still distracted. "Sure, why not? Good music, mortal enemies, and you and me. Oh and my mother - can I bring her along?"

Gregor, who had been rebuttoning and futilely trying to smooth his shirt, froze. "Your mother is here?"

"Didn't I say? She came back with me."

"No," Gregor said flatly. "You did not."

"What? You love my mother - my mother loves you."

"Oh yes," Gregor said, and reached for his tunic.
"What?" Miles repeated.

"Your mother," Gregor said patiently, "is famous for beheading someone who tried to hurt you."

"Well yeah," Miles said, shrugging. "Mothers do that." He paused. "He tried to hurt you, too, you know."

"I'll keep it in mind," Gregor said, and ducked into the dressing room for boots and final touches.

"We need to have a nice long talk, you and I," Miles called after him.

Gregor emerged, a hint of wariness in the set of his posture. "Do we?"

"Yes," Miles said. "We need to coordinate strategy, for one thing." He swung off the bed and had a weird, domestic thrill as he reached up to straighten Gregor's collar. "For another," he added, "we've both made our share of mistakes. Only makes sense to try and not make them again."

Gregor blinked, then threw an exasperated look into the air and mouthed something that looked strangely like 'turnip?' That couldn't be right.

"We . . . need strategy?" he said.

"Oh yes," Miles said. "That was your first mistake, you know. Mine too, for going along with it. There's no point going at a problem without a coherent strategy, and less if you don't even coordinate."

"I . . . see," Gregor said a little blankly. "I imagine you have some, uh, ideas for improvement?"

"Of course," Miles said. "But not now. You're going to be late for your security briefing."

"I am very sorry, you know," Gregor said. He did penitent remarkably well.

"It's all right," Miles said. "Might be a good thing in the long-run, anyway."

Gregor didn't look entirely convinced, but before either of them could say any more, Miles's wristcom chirped.

"My lord?" Pym's voice said.

Miles lifted his wrist to his mouth, eyebrows rising. "Yes?"

"M'lord, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I think you should come home as soon as possible."

Miles straightened, heart picking up speed. Someone lying in wait to catch him on his return, someone aiming for an anonymous groundcar, a groundcar carrying the Countess and not her son . . . no. The summons would be quite a bit more urgent than this. "What is it?" Miles asked, stepping firmly on his paranoia reflex.

"A visitor for you, m'lord," Pym said. "Lord Ivan. He says it's urgent."

Miles blinked. "I'll be there shortly. Vorkosigan out." He glanced up at Gregor. "Wonder what he wants? He's been doing his best impression of a Betan therapist lately. It's very . . . disconcerting."

"But effective," Gregor murmured. He finished with his boots and straightened. "You're right. We should talk. After the symphony?"
"I'll be there," Miles said. "Enjoy your Cetagandans."

"My Cetagandans?" Gregor repeated disbelievingly. "Miles, remind me please, who exactly was it that brought the first two home again?"

Miles grinned. "Considering what they're chasing after, can you really complain?"

"No," Gregor admitted. "Not in the slightest." He turned for the door, but Miles did not follow, struck still by a sudden, startling recollection.

"Gregor," he said. "How did you - before Escobar, you had no idea about androgenesis. How did you - why did you tell me?"

Gregor paused, back turned. There was a long moment of silence. "I wasn't thinking beyond the moment," he said at last. "Or maybe I didn't care anymore, I'm not sure. But I found that keeping what was supposed to be a heroic silence was in fact an insult to the man I knew you to be. And I didn't expect -" he broke off, shrugging. "I just wanted to say it," he finished at last. "I'll see you tonight."

He exited, and Miles sank into a nearby chair, shaken. You didn't expect me to say yes, did you? Neither did I. He stared blindly at the closed door. Gregor opened to him with such seeming ease, it left him dizzy sometimes. Every time he showed more and more of the secret things that lay beneath the unruffled waters of Emperor Gregor Vorbarra, the more certain Miles became that those depths went on forever. How can he do it? He's been alone so long, how does he know how? Miles breathed out a slow breath. Elena's voice came to him, across a decade and more.

You own honor by the ocean. You'd swallow me up the way an ocean swallows a bucket of water.

He remembered the confused agony of that conversation, his complete lack of understanding. He understood now, all too well. He had frightened Elena, and now he was frightened in turn. But unlike her, he was also fascinated, drawn, lone swimmer to the watery vastness. Even his anger draws me. Gregor, what else are you hiding in there? By God, I want to know.
Ivan's foot tapped rhythmically, uncontrollably on the tessellated black and white tiled floor of the entrance hall. He considered getting up to pace, then discarded the idea. Despite his morning coffee, he was still damnably tired. He hadn't expected the call alerting him to Miles's return to come well before the sun had even risen. And if the infuriating runt didn't show up in the next fifteen minutes, Ivan's heroic sacrifice of a few extra hours of sleep would be entirely a waste, unless he wanted to be late to work.

He had arrived at Vorkosigan House just a few minutes behind the Vicereine, who had greeted him cordially then retreated upstairs, leaving him with the completely unhelpful information that Miles was at the Residence. *Which way will you jump, then?*

Pym, stationed just inside the great double doors, straightened suddenly, glancing over at the security panel. Ivan stood from where he had been hunched at the bottom of the curving staircase as Pym moved to open the doors. He braced himself, waiting for the inevitable storm.

Miles strode in, waving off a pack of ImpSec men to disperse about the house. He greeted Pym absentely, his mind obviously elsewhere, and only then glanced up to see his cousin. Ivan blinked at him, taken aback. Miles was . . . calm. Almost, dare he say it, serene. Even his body language showed a change - the usual baseline Miles twitchiness was completely absent as he came across the foyer. He looked preoccupied, certainly, but it was not one of the vicious inward turns Ivan was familiar with, one of the black moods that could come on so fast and so fierce.

"Have a nice trip?" Ivan hazarded.

Miles paused, rocking back on his heels. "More or less," he said, then smiled, clearly amused at a private joke. "Coming home is always good, though."

"Uh," said Ivan, nonplused. "Can I have a word?"

Miles blinked, obviously caught by something in his voice. He shook himself, and seemed to focus for the first time. "You're up and about early, aren't you?"

"Yes." Ivan gestured pointedly towards the library. "Got something to tell you. It's strange and inexplicable. You'll like it."

Miles's eyebrows rose. Good. He was hooked. Ivan followed him to the library, deeply grateful when Miles paused long enough to ask Pym to bring in some more coffee and, after a plaintive and pointed look from Ivan, some of Ma Kosti's pastries.

"So?" Miles said, settling on one of the sofas. Ivan sat opposite, blinking as the early morning sun slanted into his face.

"Your mother said you were at the Residence?" he probed.

Miles shrugged. "Needed to stop by."

Ivan ground his teeth. "And?"

"And . . . I stopped by. Caught Gregor before his morning meetings. Then Pym called and said you were here. Why are you here?"
Ivan swallowed. He couldn't quite decide whether he should congratulate Miles, or offer a reality check. "Um," he said, then pulled himself back on topic. "Got a message for you. Or Admiral Naismith - I could never tell whether you'd decided to have multiple personalities or just multiple names."

Miles sat up straight. "A message? From whom?"

"I don't know," Ivan said, and detailed the strange encounter as best as he could recall. Miles sat still through the whole recital, hands dangling between his knees, eyes progressively narrowing as the story went on.

"Huh," he said, as Ivan sat back. Then, "Huh."

"What?" Ivan demanded. "What does it mean?"

Miles shrugged. "I have no idea. This is . . . very strange. Admiral Naismith. Why did they want Admiral Naismith? And how did they know . . . another copy. Yes, I'd figured that much out. But where? The Duronas should have reached Beta Colony by now - perhaps I should send a message."

He lapsed into muttering, then silence. Ivan waited through it for a minute, then coughed pointedly. "Did you tell anyone else about this?" Miles asked, gaze returning to him.

Ivan shifted uncomfortably. "Well no," he said.

Miles's mouth twitched. "How uncharacteristically insubordinate of you, Ivan."

"Um." Ivan leaned forward, shoulders hunching. "Miles, I don't know how busy you've been during your trip, but you left so soon after someone tried to blow you up, I wasn't sure if you'd had the chance to really think about the whole thing."

"No," Miles said. "I haven't. An oversight I intend to rectify, I assure you."

"Yes, well," Ivan said. "See, I had this thought. And once I had it I couldn't seem to forget it. I blame you completely, by the way. Entirely your influence."

Miles sat forward as well. "Yes?" he said encouragingly.

"Do you think your assassin could be ImpSec?" Ivan said, then reflexively glanced towards the closed door.

Miles sat back, letting out a long breath. "Oh my," he murmured. "Oh my, that is a nasty idea, isn't it?" He paused, going still all over. "Damn," he said finally. "Damn, damn, damn."

"Stays with you, doesn't it?" Ivan said. To his chagrin, passing the idea off on Miles hadn't relieved him of it. "It would explain a lot of how. And, I don't know, is there anyone in ImpSec who has a grudge against you?"

"Haroche," Miles said promptly. "But he's in prison, and I doubt he would have the influence." He paused again. "Revenge. That's possible, I suppose. But . . . " He bit at his lower lip, then shook his head. "Now there's another nasty idea."

"What?" Ivan asked, despite himself.

"Never mind," Miles said in a normal tone of voice. It wasn't until then that Ivan realized they'd
practically been whispering. He sat back. He should be much more relieved right now. Miles sat a moment longer, then slapped his thighs with a decisive gesture and rose. "One problem at a time."

"What are you going to do?" Ivan asked with some apprehension.

"Hopefully catch Allegre still at the Residence," Miles said. "I have no doubt he's thought of this but he, er, he may not have all the relevant information." A faint flush colored his neck, and he cleared his throat. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

Ivan glanced at his chrono and swore. "I'm late. Gotta go."

"Thank you for the information," Miles said, showing him to the door. "It may prove most useful."

They walked out together, Miles recollecting Pym and the now ubiquitous gaggle of shadows as he headed for the groundcar the Countess had rented at the shuttleport.

It took Ivan a full ten minutes to connect the dots. In his defense, morning traffic was particularly bad, and he was concentrating very hard as he wove in and out at top speed. But the pieces fell into place as he pulled into his captain's reserved slot at Ops HQ.

Someone wants to kill Miles. This someone might be in ImpSec. Miles needs to tell Allegre something he doesn't know, something worth blushing over.

A cold pit of terror opened wide in Ivan's gut. He'd never met the Princess Kareen, but he felt sometimes that he practically knew her through his mother, Drou Koudelka, and Aunt Cordelia. Blood had been shed over and over and over again around the Emperor of Barrayar, like a sickly red badge of honor. But surely not. Not so soon. Not when Miles himself had only just made up his mind about what he wanted.

Ivan got out of his groundcar and moved mechanically through the lot to the building. Miles knows. Miles is the most paranoid person - he learned it from Sergeant Bothari. Miles can take care of himself. And what do you think you could possibly do, anyway?

Nothing, that's what he could do. For one of the few times in his life, Ivan cursed the necessity of inaction.

* *

Miles sat hunched in the front seat of the groundcar, firmly resisting the urge to continually twist and look over his shoulder to watch the three ImpSec men crammed in the back. Pym was a reassuringly stolid presence beside him, incorruptible and utterly dependable.

Be logical, boy. This lot has been living in your pockets for a month. One of their squad died to protect you, and you are demonstrably still alive. He forced himself to sit up straight. There was no point in tying himself in knots, looking for death in every face above a pair of winking silver eyes. It was just a theory. A paranoid, unlikely, Ivan-concocted theory. But you believe it anyway. Because it makes an awful lot of sense. How else did he get away? How else was he so bold? A buggered stunner cartridge - buggered in the best ImpSec covert ops style that you know so well?

He glanced up distractedly, then twisted in his seat, eyebrows rising.

"Pym, pull over," he said, gesturing to their right.

Pym did, one hand on the controls, the other dropping to his stunner. "M'lord?"
"It's all right," Miles said, popping the canopy and swinging out of his seat. He still wasn't perfectly sure, and if he was wrong it could be awkward, but . . .

He jogged up the sidewalk, hearing the swish of the second canopy and the rushing of feet behind him. He opened his mouth to call out, modifying a reflexive, "General" to a more unobtrusive, "Dag."

Benin turned at the call, eyes widening a little as he saw Miles and company bearing down on him.

"I thought that was you," Miles said, arriving before him a bit breathlessly. "Hard to be sure without the carnival paint and usual attire, but I thought so." He surveyed Benin, who was indeed bare-faced and dressed in utterly nondescript casual wear. "Out for a bit of native watching, are you?"

"My Lord Auditor," Benin said, bowing gravely. "I am pleased to see you returned from Sergyar. How was your trip?"

"I'm surprised to see you still here," Miles said bluntly. He glanced around them, catching the eyes of a few irritated pedestrians forced to go around their stationary island. "Can I give you a ride somewhere?" he asked.

Benin hesitated, then nodded. "I would be most grateful."

It took some strategic glaring and one or two pointed shoves, but Miles managed to secure himself, Benin, and Pym in the front compartment with no other listeners. "Where to?" Miles asked, half-bowing as he slid into his seat.

"The Residence," Benin said. "I was just on my way back."

"Pym," Miles said. "Please take the scenic route, if you don't mind."

Benin's eyebrows rose, but he said nothing, waiting instead for Miles to begin the conversation.

"Did you lose your escorts?" Miles asked, suddenly curious. No point in pretending Benin wasn't being watched - the man would of course know.

"I'm almost certain," Benin said. "They aren't troublesome, but I do like a little breathing space once in a while."

"Understandable," Miles said. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you this, but take care. It's been a long time since the occupation - excuse me, skirmish - but you will find yourself still remarkably unpopular in certain circles."

"Thank you," Benin said gravely, in the manner of someone listening patiently and prepared to ignore everything.

Miles shrugged the topic away. The man was beyond competent, and on his own head be it. "I find myself in an uncomfortable position," he said after a moment. "Events succeeded themselves so quickly, I barely had time to keep up, let alone analyze. And now I find myself about three turns ahead of the facts, and I don't like it."

"That is difficult," Benin agreed neutrally.

"The real problem is," Miles went on, "that I don't even have enough information to know the right questions to ask. It's most frustrating, as I'm sure you can imagine." He paused, sitting back and
crossing his legs. "So here's what I propose. Why don't I just sit here, and you ask the questions that I should be asking, then give the answers."

"That sounds most efficient," Benin said, mouth twitching imperceptibly. "And what do I get in return?"

"The opportunity to tell me what questions I should be asking," Miles said promptly. "Invaluable information, as I think I proved to you seven years ago. Here, I'll give you the first one free - what are you all still doing here?"

"Negotiating."

"Yes. With each other. On Barrayar. You can hardly call this neutral ground."

Benin clasped his hands together and studied them for a long moment. "I honestly do not know," he said at last.

"Huh," said Miles. "But you have theories? Of course you have theories. Here, I'll trade you one for one. I just thought this one up on the spot, so it's a bit rough around the edges. Your people are still here because haut Pel does not yet feel comfortable or safe in returning to Eta Ceta. She wants to be perfectly sure that androgenesis has taken hold on Beta before she leaves Barrayar, where she is, almost unbelievably, safe. Right, now it's your turn."

This time, the twitch made it to a genuine upward curve before it was quashed. "There's a small hole in your theory," he said. "Haut Pel was initially reluctant to acquiesce to your plan, and yet now she is depending on it?"

"True," Miles said. "So? Let's hear one of yours."

Benin considered. "A completely separate motive," he said at last. "Unrelated to Beta Colony or the haut Pel's actions. Though not, perhaps, androgenesis."

"Hmm," said Miles. "How very vague of you. What motive, exactly?"

Benin spread his hands. "I serve the haut," he said. "I do not read their minds."

Miles subsided for a moment, at an impasse. Then he perked up, following the thread in a new direction. "But you know the haut, very well. You practically live in the Celestial Garden, and I imagine you have some haut in you, anyway."

"I do not, in fact," Benin said.

Miles paused, momentarily diverted. "Really?" he squinted at Benin, recalling dimly that he had once thought the man did not look much like any haut.

Benin shrugged. "We share a common ancestor, I'm sure, but no one in my familial constellation has crossed with a haut genetic strain for many generations."

"And yet here you are," Miles said. "At the top of the heap, as it were." He paused, mouth twisting. "Then again, maybe that's not so surprising. I have long thought that the gift of a haut wife to a prominent ghem could act much like that accursed medal Emperor Giaja hung around my neck. Decorative, but with a tendency to make you sink, rather than swim."

"That is . . . acute of you," Benin murmured.
"Anyway," Miles said, refinding his original topic. "You know the haut, even if you're more loosely related to them than some. Tell me, why are the planetary consorts so dead set on getting rid of androgenesis? The haut Pel has a logical argument - it seems a great opportunity for the furtherance of the haut, genetically speaking."

"Mmm," said Benin. "An interesting question. You know, according to current records, female haut outnumber male haut over four to one. The proportions in the ghem are, naturally, reversed."

"That much?" Miles said, impressed despite himself. "Wish we'd had that problem here when I was younger." He paused, brain clicking over implications. "The haut produce more women, because women can advance by becoming an Empress. Men cannot advance to become Emperor, and what constellation doesn't want one of its daughters to be an Empress? I don't see how androgenesis would threaten that - there would still be a disincentive to produce men."

"Perhaps not," Benin said. He was silent for a long moment, gazing moodily out the canopy. "There was a dissident ghem faction several years ago," he said slowly. "A small group of young people, inflated with idealism and besotted with the notion of revolution." His voice, though perfectly even, still managed to imply great disdain. "They questioned the very existence of haut. They called it meaningless, aimless. They said haut as individuals were not really individuals at all because they owned nothing, not even their genes."

Miles bit his tongue. He had once thought something very similar. "What happened to them?" he asked.

"They were . . . taught the error of their thinking," Benin said. "Because they were, of course, desperately wrong."

"Of course," Miles murmured. *What the hell are you getting at, you cagey bastard?* No wonder Gregor is looking worn around the edges, if he's been dealing with conversations like this. Miles's thoughts skittered to a halt. *They're haut. They're not human. But we still share some things. Maybe most haut don't own their genes. But of all of them, who do?* "Do you have children, General?"

Miles asked suddenly.

Benin stirred. "No," he said shortly.

"Me either," Miles said. "I want them, though. Very badly, sometimes. I think everyone does, at one point or another, the haut most of all. Life's work, and all that." And the only haut with the capacity to control their own genetic destinies in any way were the planetary consorts, the master genetic manipulators. They had a grand plan, certainly, but they also must have smaller, more personal desires. He didn't think even the haut could have, or would have, removed the longing for children in one's own image. *My God. They might not get married, but I'll be damned if they don't have dowries, just the same. Tiny microscopic dowries in every cell of their bodies.* He was struck suddenly with the precarious position of the haut ladies. They could rise to the very pinnacle, certainly, but they could also be plunged to the very depths, exiled out of the genome forever, a fate a haut lord did not have to fear. *Oh ladies, this frightens you, doesn't it? To be no longer essential.* A paranoid mind, Miles thought, a mind like his own, could map out the worst case scenario - haut women marginalized to the status of potential Empresses, and nothing more, with only the Emperor's choice and a few lucky others given the opportunity to pass on their genes. Or, Miles caught his breath with the simplicity of it, displaced altogether, their one opportunity for meteoric rise blocked by an Emperor's choice of a man. *Oh, God. There are going to be hoards of angry Vor maidens after my blood.*

A bit extreme, Miles thought, jerking his mental focus away from a vision of a mass of furious former Imperial marriage prospects chasing him with pitchforks. The scenario was unlikely in the
extreme - the haut would probably be unwilling to discard the genetic material in their women. But a haut woman, living the life she did, knowing she could be forever exiled, would fear nothing greater, and would morph every new specter into the monster of her greatest nightmares.

Miles pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on his thighs. "The haut Pel must possess a great deal of . . . vision," he offered into the prolonged silence.

"One assumes," Benin returned. "I do not know her well. It was a great surprise when she came to me, asking for aid in getting off planet. I was planning on traveling outside the Empire on some business anyway, but I had not planned on the company. The honored Consort Pel, though well traveled by haut lady standards, has relatively little experience in matters of . . . galactic investigation. When it became clear that her resources had expended themselves, I decided it might be efficacious to create a plausible reason for her movements. Your presence on Escobar was happily coincidental."

"I applaud the spirit, if not the method," Miles said, wincing at the recollection of a tree exploding in a shower of pulverized wood.

"I apologize," Benin said. He hesitated, looking almost nervous, then continued. "It did not occur to me that that particular method had . . . personal significance for you. I apologize for the oversight."

"No harm done," Miles said, with more good cheer than he actually felt. "Your fellow was quite convincing, but still managed to miss. Ah," he floundered, searching for a diplomatic way to ask the question. "How widely known is my, erm, aversion to needle grenades in the Cetagandan Empire?"

"Only at the highest levels," Benin said. He turned a genuinely admiring look on Miles. "The business with the clones was truly inspired, I must say."

"Temporary measure, I knew even then," Miles said, shrugging it off. "Nothing can last forever." He paused, cocking his head. "Tell me, how widely is it known in the Cetagandan Empire that there is a division in the Star Crèche? And the reasons for it?"

Benin frowned repressively. "At the highest levels," he said shortly.

"The highest levels of what?" Miles pressed. "I'm wondering, see, if some haut lords wouldn't rather sympathize with the haut Pel. Or," he paused, catching his breath at the simplicity of the realization, "the ghem." Four times as many men, he'd said. Miles had always found the arguments against including women in the service laughable—those who thought a female presence would introduce a distracting surge of sexuality had clearly never spent time in a male-dominated environment and didn't know that it was a little late to be worrying now. What was it like when three fourths of your male population had no ready-made partners?

"As you say," Benin murmured.

Miles squinted in annoyance. That was sufficiently vague to tell him nothing useful. It could simply be a deflection, a meaningless piece of conversational padding. But it could also be an acknowledgement of his point, it could mean that this was truly a Star Crèche internal matter, that only select other haut even knew of it. Would Emperor Giaja? Miles simply did not know enough about high haut internal politics to say either way.

"Have they caught the person or persons who attacked you before your departure to Sergyar?"

Benin asked.
"No," Miles said. "Giving ImpSec ulcers, let me tell you." He glanced reflexively over his shoulder to find two of the three men in the back seat watching him and Benin with unwavering attention. Miles turned quickly away, the back of his neck prickling.

He glanced at Benin, surprised by his own impulse to ask for . . . what? Advice? Guidance? Benin, after all, had some experience in coping with potential enemies in his own forces, and he'd come out the other side with neither honor nor person tarnished by the experience. *What the hell. Go with the gut.*

"Dag," Miles said.

Benin started a little, then dipped his chin. "Miles?"

"I have a terrible feeling," Miles said, dropping his voice without conscious thought, "that I've found myself in a situation very similar to your own seven years ago. Except this time the enemy is watching my back, not cutting my orders."

Benin's eyes widened, and Miles caught the swift, reflexive glance to the back seat. Beside him, Pym stiffened.

"You gave me quite sound advice upon that occasion," Benin said after a moment. "You told me to go to the top."

"I did," Miles agreed, nodding. *Oh, Gregor is going to love this.*

"The only problem," Benin said contemplatively, "is that the man at the top, as an ally, is rather more like a hammer than a scalpel. Effective, but certainly not subtle. Sometimes, what is needed is an ally who can . . . watch the watchers."

"But what if I choose wrong?" Miles asked, voicing the fear for the first time. He knew General Allegre almost entirely by reputation only, and Haroche had set a dangerous precedent in ImpSec chiefs. The last thing Miles needed was to confide in a man dedicated to the Emperor's service in the most single-minded, potentially devastating way. Or, disaster on an entirely different scale, a man who was not so loyal, who would see Miles as Gregor's greatest vulnerability and would, instead of guarding it, take advantage. *How many times has someone plotted to overthrow Gregor in your lifetime, boy? Too damn many.*

"Then don't choose wrong," Benin said.

Miles chuckled a little. "Of course."

Benin was silent again, and the groundcar began to slow. They were pulling up to the front gates of the Residence. "I wish you good fortune in your choice," Benin said as they drew to a stop. He popped the canopy, holding it politely for Miles. But Miles didn't move.

"No," he said, the decision forming as he spoke. "I think I'm headed back to Vorkosigan House, actually. It was most enlightening to speak with you."

Benin bowed formally. "Thank you for the ride," he said. His eyes flashed then, a moment of sudden comradeship that took them both by surprise. "Good hunting." He wheeled away and strode up the walk.

Miles closed the canopy and sat back.

"M'lord?" Pym said questioningly.
"Yes," Miles said. "I meant it about home. I think . . . I think my errand will have to wait."

He didn't mistrust Allegre in quite so many words, he decided as the car turned and headed back the way they had come. He just preferred a more certain option. If he had to pick one man he could trust to watch those watching him, why not let it be someone who had been handed multiple opportunities to cut Miles's life prematurely short, and who had passed them all up? Admittedly, Duv Galeni had wanted to strangle Miles on more than one occasion, but he'd somehow managed to restrain himself. And Duv, Miles was certain, would make the perfect scalpel to Gregor's hammer.

He went directly upstairs to call Galeni on the comconsole in his suite, brushing off his mother's confused inquiries with promises of explanations later. Maybe. He checked his chrono. It was just after 1000. Galeni would be at ImpSec HQ, but Miles did not want to have this conversation over comconsole, even a secure one. Perhaps he would have Duv over for dinner before the symphony then. Somehow he thought that Duv should be sitting down for this.

"My Lord Auditor," Galeni greeted him when the call went through. "I didn't know you were back from Sergyar yet."

"Just got in early this morning," Miles said.

"No one's tried to kill you since then, right?" Galeni said, his tone only half-joking.

"No," Miles said, grimacing. "But I'd like to talk to you about something along those lines."

Galeni raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yeah. What are you doing at 1930?"

"Having dinner with Delia Koudelka. Should I cancel?"

"Ah - no," Miles said, but the hesitation in his voice was sufficient to draw a skeptical look from Galeni. "How soon can you get away from HQ?"

Galeni glanced away from the vidplate, obviously taking inventory of his desk. "I was going to stay late to finish up a few things, but it's nothing that won't keep until tomorrow. I can be at Vorkosigan House at 1800. That would give us some time before I have to pick up Delia."

"Thanks," Miles said. "It's not urgent, exactly, but it is serious."

"I'll see you soon." Galeni cut the com. Miles, now at loose ends, went to go see Ma Kosti about lunch, and also to tell her that he would like a tray of coffee and pastries ready to be sent up to his suite in the evening. After being informed that lunch would be ready soon and would he please not hover, m'lord, he ended up standing in the front hallway for several minutes, staring at the black and white tiled floor and thinking grim thoughts.

He found Pym in the garage, polishing the rented groundcar, a sure sign that his armsman was worrying about something. Of course he would be; the idea that someone in ImpSec wanted Miles dead would be just as troubling to Pym. Miles wasn't the only one who had nearly died that night outside the Residence.

"Duv Galeni is coming to see me this afternoon," Miles said after Pym had looked up and acknowledged him. Miles made sure the door to the main house was firmly shut and then said, without preamble, "You know what I'm afraid of."
"Yes, m'lord," Pym said.

"And you know how serious it could be if I'm right."

"I do," Pym said, standing very straight, almost at attention.

"Do you think it's likely? Or do you think I'm being paranoid?"

Pym polished a small spot on the groundcar over and over with quick swipes of his rag. "I... don't think it's likely, m'lord. But it's not an impossibility, and there are certainly signs... in this case, it's much better to be paranoid."

"Right," Miles said, feeling a bit less like he might be cracking up. "Pym," he added, and then stopped.

"M'lord?" Pym prompted. He folded the rag and set it down.

"If something happens... you know what to do."

"Yes, m'lord."

"Get my mother out, make sure she's safe. She won't want -- but do what you must. And then go to Gregor. Because if something's happened to me, that means he can't trust anyone either."

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said gravely. There was a short silence. "Do you need anything else, m'lord?"

"No... yes. Once Duv gets here, please escort him up to my sitting room. If you can somehow put it about to the staff that he's here for purely social reasons, that would be helpful. Also, let me know if anyone takes any undue interest."

Galeni arrived promptly at 1800. Miles waited until Pym had poured them both coffee and withdrawn before stating bluntly, "I think my assassin is in ImpSec."

To his credit, Galeni did not spit out the mouthful of coffee he had just taken. His eyes widened, he swallowed painfully, and then said, "What?"

"Think about it, Duv. He was lying in wait a block from the Imperial Residence, an area in which people are not allowed to loiter. He used a buggered stunner cartridge, which is a classic ImpSec trick. And then he disappeared somehow. If he was ImpSec he could have just faded right into the crowd."

"Miles, that's... a huge accusation."

"I know. And believe me, I've spent all day thinking about the consequences. They are distinctly unpleasant."

"That's not just an assassination attempt. With your promotion that's damn near a..."

"A coup, yes, I know. That's exactly what I'm afraid of, actually."

Galeni frowned. "I don't understand. An ImpSec agent died that night protecting you. The Residence has been crawling with Cetagandans and you suspect ImpSec?"

"The Cetagandans didn't do it."

"I know, I know. I'm just saying..." Galeni subsided for a moment. Miles let him think. "If you're
right, and I'm not saying you are, this would be the second incident of this type in six months. From the branch of the service dedicated to guarding against such things."

Miles nodded grimly. "Well, think of the people who make good ImpSec operatives. Hell, look at me. A little bit rogue, a little bit reckless -"

"A lot reckless," Galeni muttered.

Miles pretended not to hear. "You get someone in there who's not entirely . . . moral, or who doesn't care about personal honor and all that" - he waved a hand vaguely - "stuff, and you've got a problem. A problem that carries a deadly weapon and watches the Emperor's back."

"Yes, well, there's quite a vetting process for that job. And frankly, Miles, we'd never have let you anywhere near it."

Miles managed a laugh. "Thank God for small favors. But do you see what I'm saying?"

Galeni sighed. "I do. I mean, there is a certain logic to it, but ImpSec hardly has a monopoly on the cartridge trick, for one thing."

Miles set down his cup and laid his hands flat on the table. "I think something bad is coming," he said steadily. "And this time I might not be the only one who's targeted."

"Who else?"

"Gregor."

"But - but why? Why would someone want to kill you and then stage a coup? Aside from the obvious reasons, that is."

Miles hesitated. He had not really intended to tell Galeni everything, especially not when Allegre still didn't know. He wanted Galeni to watch his back and to help him watch the people watching his back. He had hoped that the assassination attempt would be convincing enough, but he hadn't counted on how unsubstantiated the words would seem as soon as they left his mouth. Especially to someone who worked in ImpSec HQ and personally knew most of the people Miles was accusing, however indirectly.

"There is a reason," he said carefully. "Not many people know about it. My mother. My senior Armsman. Ivan. And Gregor, of course. What I'm worried about is that someone else might know and be . . . not so pleased."

Galeni's eyes narrowed. "Cut the buildup. What's going on?"

Miles took a deep breath. "Gregor and I are lovers." There. He had said it. He had to admit, he liked that better than any of the other ways he had tried phrasing it so far. And it didn't matter that he and Gregor hadn't actually done . . . that yet. It was really only a matter of finding a stretch of time when a million people weren't clamoring for Gregor's attention. An astonishing bit of congruity, he thought, distracted. He had never desired a man before in his life, and even now the idea was more than a little disconcerting. Yet attraction wouldn't be bounded, even the purely cerebral hook that Gregor had first set in him. It had spread, was continuing to spread, diffusing like alcohol into the bloodstream, warming and intoxicating with a body want that echoed and reinforced the mental. He recalled, for a sudden, vivid moment, the press of Gregor's mouth, the solid line of his body beneath him on that intriguingly huge bed, the way it was the same and so fascinatingly different.
Galeni gaped at him. "Are you having me on?"

"I'm not."

"You must be."

"My word as Vorkosigan," Miles offered, and that seemed to rock Galeni even more. He stared at Miles and then stood up to pace around the room. "It shocked me as well," Miles said. "The idea takes some getting used to. But it's grown on me. Do you see now why I'm so worried?"

"Yes," Galeni said shortly. He stared out the window for a moment, and Miles let him think. Finally he returned to his chair and took a long sip of coffee. From the expression on his face, Miles thought he might be wishing for something a bit stronger. "So that's why . . ."

"What?"

"Allegre's been as twitchy as a rat," Galeni said. "When I asked him about it he said the Emperor had been, erm, rather perturbed by the attempt on your life." He paused. "Come to think of it, Allegre might have already come to the same conclusion you have, and simply not informed me." A frown touched his forehead, then vanished. Miles winced internally. He rather thought Galeni was forever on the lookout for signs of mistrust from his superiors. "So that night . . . you think that whoever it was, wasn't trying to get rid of an Imperial Auditor, but an Imperial Lover?"

"Perhaps," Miles said. "It's hard to tell. And it's so new - I've barely been on planet since it started. I can't think who would know."

Galeni shook his head. "I . . . I think I should offer my congratulations."

"Thank you," Miles said.

Galeni sighed, obviously still thinking everything through. "What exactly are you asking me to do?" he asked at last, straightening.

"Help me watch the watchers," Miles said quietly. "I trust you. I don't trust many people right now. Make sure the people here, and the people stationed around Gregor, are trustworthy."

Galeni blew out a long breath. "That's . . . difficult. ImpSec always does its best in that area, but people slip through. Haroche, for instance. He was in Gregor's presence every day for weeks. Normally I'd tell you that you need to trust ImpSec to do its job, but . . ."

"I don't trust ImpSec. I trust you."

"Well, frankly, I don't have that kind of power. Allegre handpicks the Emperor's men. Speaking of which, does he know about this?"

"He will soon enough. He's right after my father, Simon Illyan, and Alys Vorpatril on our need to know list."

Galeni raised an eyebrow. "It sounds more like you're planning a covert operation than having a love affair."

"In this case it's both, I think," Miles said, cracking a smile.

"Right," Galeni said. He scowled at Miles. "This is an . . . uncomfortable spot you've gone and put me in, Vorkosigan."
"I know. I had hoped not to have to tell you." Miles hesitated. "You've laid your hands between
Gregor's, and given him your oath as an officer and a section chief. I'd like to think that means
something to you."

Galeni made a sour face. "It does. He is . . . not at all what I had expected."

"Your loyalty is unquestionable in my mind," Miles said. "You have your own reasons, certainly,
but that makes you even more sure, by my way of thinking."

"Does . . . he know you're telling me this?"

"Not at the moment. But he will soon enough, and he won't object. He trusts my judgment." More
than he should, maybe.

"Is this how you get drawn into the service of the Vorkosigans?" Galeni asked, at his driest. "Be
suspected of high treason multiple times?"

"That'll do," Miles said easily. "And I'm not asking you to serve me alone."

"No. You're not." Galeni gnawed at his lip. "I'll do what I can, of course," he said at last. "Should I
report to you with anything I turn up?"

"For the time being. Gregor may wish to speak to you, at some point."

"Lucky me," Galeni muttered.

He left fifteen minutes later to pick up Delia Koudelka, after promising Miles copies of all the
ImpSec files on the agents currently stationed either in the Residence or in Vorkosigan House.
Miles wasn't sure that hundreds of pages of biography and holos could tell him what he needed to
know, but it was a place to start. He felt slightly better just knowing that he was doing something,
instead of sitting around, twiddling his thumbs and waiting for the assassin to take another shot.

Unfortunately, this just cleared the way for Miles to worry about the other pieces of the puzzle,
namely those involving - completely inexplicably - Admiral Naismith.

Who the hell wants Admiral Naismith involved in whatever it is they want him involved in? Who's
that ill-informed? Or well-informed?

The symphony was lovely, but Miles spent most of it chewing on that particular problem, and
hoping in vain that the solution would simply fall into his head, helped along by the music. It at
least distracted him from the fact that the atmosphere in the Imperial box possessed a decidedly
frosty edge. The Cetagandan delegation consisted of six ghem officers, one colonel, one captain,
and four lieutenants. They didn't say much, but they were very good at looming. Star Crèche
flunkies, or another faction? Was Pel negotiating only with the seven other consorts, or was the
general staff involved? Miles sat still and kept his mouth shut, and he was twitchy and restless
afterwards as he finally took the lid off and let things simmer as they would.

On their way out of the symphony, Gregor snagged Miles and muttered, "Don't leave me alone
with them." Miles managed not to smile too broadly and went gladly along, hoping that they'd be
able to ditch the cheery Ceti bastards as soon as they got to the Residence. Happily, they were able
to do just that, and Miles got his strategy meeting late that night, though not quite in the venue he
was used to.

"I do my best thinking here," Gregor said, hopping up onto the central kitchen island and sprawling
back, hands locked behind his head.
Miles surveyed him for a moment in the dim light filtering through from the hall. Gregor's chef would probably be horrified to discover that the Imperial Ass was regularly planted in the middle of her workstation.

"You can't pace and gesticulate while lying down," he said, but clambered up anyway.

"Go ahead and pace if you want," Gregor said, passing him the beer they were once again splitting. "I'll just lie here and watch."

"I just might," Miles said, and gulped beer.

"So," Gregor said after a moment. "You have, uh, strategy to impart?"

"I do," Miles said, turning on his side to face him. "It's all about goal-directed action, you see. Full forward momentum is the ticket when you really want something done, and want it done well. And though no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, it is generally helpful to have a plan in the first place, even if it's only so you can look brilliant and innovative later for scrapping it."

"Uh, what's our goal, exactly?" Gregor asked tentatively.

"Well, you and me," Miles said, frowning at him. "You and me and the optimal outcome, I mean."

"Which is?"

"Well, going public without causing a civil war, for one thing," Miles said. "That's the big one. The creation of a political and social climate in which my position as your, er, Consort will actually be swallowed by Barrayar. A little gagging is to be expected, but we're trying not to be violently regurgitated, here."

"Oh," said Gregor.

Miles paused. "Um," he said diffidently. "That is what you want, isn't it? I mean, I sort of assumed -" he cut himself off and drew back from Gregor, sitting up straight. "If you're thinking," he began, then changed tacks. "There are a lot of things I would do to get what I want," he said at last, voice low and steady. "But I should tell you right now that it only goes so far. I refuse to be your - your -" he struggled for a moment with a succession of more or less vulgar expressions, before settling on, "your dirty secret. I don't think I could take that, for long."

"No," Gregor said, sitting up at once. "I would not ask such a thing of you. I just . . . I had not thought much beyond yes or no, before. It always seemed unnecessary effort, and perhaps counterproductive. And now that I have the time and opportunity . . . " He shrugged, a vague ripple of motion in the dimness. "Now that you're here with me, I had begun to think a little, and to plan. But I didn't expect you to be ahead of me there." He turned his head, and his face was clear for a moment in the dim light. He was smiling the sort of tremulous smile that would shatter if pushed to a full grin. It was the fragile agony of hope, Miles realized, the deeply affecting experience of having a dream, longed for but not particularly expected, finally fulfilled. How long, Gregor? How long have you been waiting? Gregor reached to touch Miles's face, running a finger from cheekbone to lips. Miles bit it lightly, and all the breath seemed to rush out of Gregor in an explosive sigh. His smile strengthened, widened.

"We don't have the luxury of uncertainty," Miles said quietly. "We have to know where we're going, ten or eleven turns ahead, just to keep even."

"I know," Gregor said. "I'm sorry."
Miles shrugged. "I'm not," he said frankly. "It's almost freeing, in a weird way." He squared his shoulders, chin jerking up. "We've got to put our cards on the table," he said, smiling a little. "All of them. Nothing held back. We have to know what we're doing, what we want, and we can't afford to hedge on anything."

"I think you know what I want," Gregor said.

Miles nodded. Gregor had laid that out for him from the very beginning, and Miles had only himself to blame for the length of time it had taken the full picture to come into focus. He consciously relaxed his muscles, uncurled his legs and settled back onto his elbows. "It's my turn, then," he said.

"So it is," Gregor said, a bit huskily. "Enlighten me about this great strategy, mastermind."

"Propaganda," Miles said, clearing his own throat. "The quiet war, the one in people's heads. It'll be over before they know it's been declared."

"And how do we declare it?"

"You'll like this part," Miles said. "I'll need to stay on Barrayar pretty exclusively. I'll have to be all over the place, but I imagine I can spend a lot of time in Vorbarr Sultana. I need to build a reputation, you see. I don't have one, you know, except as my father's son. A few people know I was ImpSec, but anything in there that would be useful is classified. So I need to be in the public eye, and more importantly in the public favor. I think a strategic array of Auditorial assignments could help out there, but I wouldn't want to go too far with that. It would feel vaguely unethical, and some sharp-eyed observer might catch on after the fact."

"You're going to have to be exceedingly charming to everybody," Gregor said.

Miles sighed mournfully. "I know." He hesitated. "And it'll take a while. You realize that, right?"

"Yes," Gregor said. "I realize. And I wouldn't worry about the charm. You tend to become more charming the more difficult you're being. I have often wondered just how you do that - it's a skill I'd like to master."

"Well, I can certainly try," Miles said, shrugging.

"Hmm," Gregor said. "You expending a concerted effort over a prolonged period of time in an attempt to get an entire planet eating out of your hand. This . . . this will be a show."

"I'll need Aunt Alys for some of it," Miles said. "Which is another thing - we're going to have to tell the people who need to know pretty soon. No more of this figuring it out business. It's getting rather old. She and Simon, obviously, and General Allegre and Prime Minister Racosy, though he can wait for a while. But yes, I'll need Aunt Alys to be a sort of social director. I'm really not that well-known even in Vorbarr Sultana, you know. That will have to change."

"I'm sure it will," Gregor murmured. "What else?"

"Well, that depends on Beta Colony now," Miles said. "Look, we can't make any sort of formal announcement until androgenesis is at least known within Vorbarr Sultana. I imagine that process can be hurried along, though - perhaps some silent backing of a few new clinics opening here in the capitol, and in some key districts. We'll have to wait for the first successful births, for the idea to, well, not be accepted, but at least known. Also, and this is more in the reputation category again, but my genetic fitness will have to be made an issue in the public consciousness. People can't see gene-cleaning technology, but they can see me. The real story will somehow have to be
revived - ImpSec will love that." He paused for more beer, then continued. "That's the social side, in rough outline. The political will in some ways lead from the social, but not entirely." He sighed. "My father will have to drop out of sight. He can't appear to have any sort of hand in any of this. Not here, and not on Komarr."

"That had occurred to me," Gregor said. "I'm sorry. I know that will be difficult."

Miles swallowed, thinking of the lines of tiredness and age etched around his father's mouth. "We'll survive," he said firmly. "And, er. I - we - still need to tell him. Mother won't do it for me," he added sulkily.

"Ah," said Gregor, and took a long draught from the bottle. "Um. Yes. Let's, ah, let's worry about that later, all right?"

"Sure," Miles agreed readily. "Um, where was I?"

"Political."

"Right. See, this is where it gets a bit murky. That's the thing about bucking precedent - there comes a point where you're just making up your own rules."

"I would have thought you'd like that," Gregor said mildly.

"I do," Miles said. "It's the making up rules to satisfy the existing rules that's the problem. See, well. You've got to ask yourself if the traditional unanimous Council of Counts vote legally confirming your choice for Empress would apply to me. Or be necessary. I rather think it will be necessary, simply for the security of our heirs. What do you think?"

"Our heirs," Gregor repeated blankly.

"Oh yes, about that," Miles said. "We'll need two. One for the Imperium and one for the Vorkosigan Countship. The best way to evade the legal challenge of just what is supposed to happen when two heirs, er, unite. You know, that will be an interesting question when women someday have the right to inherit. Anyway. That's beside the point. The way I see it, the Counts who would object to me won't dare vote directly to oppose. But they could simply get a quorum to abstain and we'd have a serious problem."

"Uh," said Gregor. He blinked, and seemed to shake himself. "Yes. Quite. You'll have to ingratiate yourself to a substantial portion of the Counts."

"Yes," said Miles. "Just what I always wanted." He coughed uneasily. "There's also the issue of my Auditorship. I mean, the job description doesn't really include impartiality, but I don't know if it would be appropriate for me to keep my position after, you know."

Gregor frowned. "I don't see why not," he said. "Well, I do see the point, but I think it's negotiable. I am not in the habit of removing an Auditor for anything short of high treason, and you . . . could prove uniquely effective in certain circumstances."

"I hope so," Miles said, with more feeling than he was quite expecting. "Anyway. The two heirs issue will settle the legal, but not so much the political. We'll have to make it known right away that that's what we plan to do. This would all be a lot easier if Mark showed any inclination to reproduce, but I get the impression he has no plans in that direction. And . . ." he hesitated.

"And you want your son to succeed you," said Gregor.
"I do. It's silly and sentimental, but . . ." he shrugged. "There will still be talk of a Vorkosigan power grab, but, well. That can't be helped."

They fell silent, contemplating.

"So what do you think?" Miles asked at last.

"Think?" Gregor repeated.

"Of my strategy."

"It's . . . comprehensive," Gregor murmured.

"Well that's the idea with good strategy," Miles said. "But am I forgetting anything? It's very rough, obviously, but we can hash out the details as they're needed."

"We can," Gregor said. He lifted Miles's hand from the counter, turned it over, and pressed his mouth to the palm. Miles's toes curled. "It's an amazing strategy," Gregor murmured. "Brilliant. Innovative." He began working his way up Miles's wrist, kisses tracing the nearly invisible lines of one of the bone-replacement surgery scars. Miles lay back, reached for him with his other arm. Gregor slid up his body, weight settling carefully, and their mouths met for the first time since that morning.

"I have something for you," Gregor said, withdrawing after an increasingly ardent interval. He shifted a bit awkwardly to dig into his pocket, still keeping hold of Miles's hand. "I had Allegre set these up for me personally." He withdrew two tiny, unobtrusive private comlinks on fine leather bands, and slid one over his own wrist. "They're the standard twinned set," he explained, flipping the other between his fingers. "Coded with a channel that only the two carriers can access. I thought maybe it would be nice to have them." He reached to clasp it around Miles's wrist, then hesitated. "May I?" he asked, almost shyly.

Miles, throat inexplicably and quite ridiculously tight, nodded. Gregor slid the band around his wrist, snugging it just behind the bulkier model that was his link to his duty Armsman.

"They have a range up to the nearest jump point," Gregor explained.

"Thank you," said Miles, fingering it.

"You're welcome."

There was an awkward moment then, why Miles wasn't entirely sure. Gregor hovered over him, propped on his hands, head bent and face obscured. He didn't lift it when he spoke again.

"I thought . . . I was pretty sure you would come back from Sergyar and tell me you were done trying," he said.

Miles bit his lip. "I thought about it. Not much, but I did think about it."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because . . ." Miles blew out a breath. "Because I decided that it's okay to buy into propaganda if you know the propagandist is on your side. I could never be sure of that before, you know - that what I thought was good for me actually would be. I was wrong on purpose sometimes. But this . . . I just became sure. That's the funny thing about playing wall; you get so crazy sometimes that you forget how easy it is to just bypass the whole game if you really want to."
"Playing wall?" Gregor asked.

"Personal metaphor. It's . . . life as a series of insurmountable obstacles to get around. Thrilling, but ultimately not as productive as you'd think. Because when you finally run into a wall you can't get over or under or around or through, you only have two options. You can smash yourself to bits on it, or you can decide not to play anymore."

Gregor nodded slowly. "That is a very apt metaphor," he said. "I appreciate that you - I am grateful -"

"I know," Miles said. "Me too." He pushed at Gregor's locked elbows pointedly, wrapping both arms around him as Gregor gave into the hint and folded up to settle over him again. One arm slid beneath Miles's neck, a comfortable pillow, and the other wrapped securely about his ribs. Miles sighed, knots of tension unraveling as they lay cheek to cheek. Gregor held him very tightly, but Miles didn't mind - quite the contrary. Something stirred in his backbrain, an instinctive upswell of contentment as he fed the need for simple human contact, something that had been on starvation rations of late. He had long since resigned himself to the fact that any partner would be larger than he was, though he'd never envisioned dealing with someone quite Gregor's shape. Tall and lean, and completely lacking the usual in and out bits he'd previously - still - found so fascinating. And yet Gregor had his own fascination, a compulsive draw that had Miles's hands running up and down his back, fingers counting vertebrae, testing the shape of his bones beneath cloth and skin and muscle.

Gregor sighed and kissed the juncture of neck and shoulder. Miles went shivery all over. Gregor lifted his head, and their eyes met. Miles waited, heart thumping embarrassingly. Gregor licked his lips, drew a breath to speak.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Miles hissed and swore, breaking free of Gregor and dropping off the edge of the counter to his feet. Gregor rolled the other way, face averted, and they leaned on opposite sides of the island. Miles was gratified to find that he wasn't the only one fighting breathlessness. Dammit. Was he going to ask me to stay?

Gregor's senior Armsman, Flavion, appeared in the doorway, as impeccable as always. "Sire," he said, half-bowing, eye sliding blandly over Miles. "You wished me to remind you that you have a dawn session with the Economic Advisory Commission."

Gregor had the look of a man suddenly dashed in the face with a bucket of ice water. "Thank you," he said, straightening up from a faux-casual lean. "I'd forgotten. Almost."

Miles glanced down at his chrono and winced. Their eyes met for the first time since the interruption, and Gregor's mouth twisted in unhappy apology. Flavion hovered, bland but still unforgettable there, and Miles was almost relieved. If he'd attempted anything resembling a proper goodnight, he had a feeling neither of them would want to stop.
Chapter 12

Miles decided that night on the ride back to Vorkosigan House that there was no time like the present to start implementing his strategy. The next step was deceptively simple: tell those who needed to know immediately. Aunt Alys, Simon, and his father, Miles had decided. General Allegre and Prime Minister Racosi could wait, and his father should be told in person, as soon as possible, even though the idea made Miles slightly nauseous. But Aunt Alys and Simon were personal friends as well as potential allies in his propaganda campaign, and should be informed in a personal manner.

This conclusion led to Miles pacing back and forth in his sitting room four days later, while his mother sat in a chair in front of the fireplace, watching him with maternal indulgence.

"Everyone is getting here at 1900. At 1930, we'll move in for dinner. I figure that by 2100 at the latest, we'll be eating dessert, and everyone will have had at least three or four glasses of wine."

"That is traditional," the Countess agreed.

Miles didn't break stride. "At that point, I'll stand up and ask for everyone's attention. I'll say that I have an announcement -"

"That you and Gregor have an announcement," the Countess corrected. "I think he'd appreciate being included."

"Yes, yes, of course. Gregor and I have an announcement. Gregor will stand up, I will take his hand, and then I will say . . . er, this is where I run into some problems." Miles paused in his pacing and looked at his mother hopefully.

The Countess raised an eyebrow and appeared to consider and reject several possible responses. "First of all, Miles, I think you're over thinking this. Alys and Simon are very fond of both you and Gregor. I'm quite certain they'll be happy for you."

"Simon, yes. I hope. But Aunt Alys has been trying to get Gregor married off for years, and now we're about to tell her that it's all been for naught and that there'll never be a nice Vor Empress to take over her job. Added to which, she is very important to my strategy."

The Countess pursed her lips together as though trying not to laugh, and then said, "Your strategy?"

"Yes. We can't hide it forever, you know. Eventually Gregor and I will have to go public. But first . . . propaganda. Years of it, probably." Miles folded himself into a chair and looked his mother straight in the eye. "We're going to change Barrayar," he said. "And no one is even going to realize that we're doing it."

"How subversively ambitious."

"But I need Aunt Alys for it," he said. "She . . . thinks like a Vor in a way that I don't. She's progressive enough not to decapitate me over this - I hope - but traditional enough to know how those stodgy, stubborn old Counts think."

"I see. Well," his mother said, "your plan for this evening sounds very solid."

"Except for the part where I actually tell them." Miles frowned. "I'm not used to being at a loss for words."
"I can believe that. Hmm. Did you mention anything when you extended the invitation?"

"No, not really. Ivan knows what's going on, though I think he might be planning to play dumb tonight. In any case, he's very relieved that we're finally telling Aunt Alys. But she and Simon both think that we're having a dinner party because you're visiting - which we are," he added hastily.

"Of course," the Countess said dryly. "Well, love, I would tell them that you have some very good news to share, just so they don't start to think it's something horrible, and then just . . . tell them. Don't dither and make an idiot out of yourself."

"Thanks."

"Any time." She went back to the handviewer she'd been reading before Miles had come in to pester her. Miles stared out the window for about thirty seconds, and then decided that he should go bother Ma Kosti about the menu for tonight. Again.

By six o'clock, Miles had been effectively banned from the entire first floor of Vorkosigan House. He retreated, grumbling, to his rooms, where he showered and dressed. He lingered for an indecisive moment before discarding the idea of house uniform and going for a dark civilian suit. After all, Gregor was attending this relatively relaxed family gathering in the most unofficial capacity possible. Miles spent rather longer than usual examining himself in the mirror. He found two gray hairs and pulled them, with perhaps a bit too much savage enjoyment.

Pym knocked and then stuck his head around the door. "M'lord?"

"Am I allowed downstairs now, Pym?" Miles asked with a persecuted air.

"Yes, m'lord, provided you don't go into the kitchen." Miles gave him a baleful look and his Armsman sighed. "It was for your own good, m'lord. And frankly, while we all like you very much and are proud to be in your service, living here would not be quite so pleasant without Ma Kosti."

"Hmph," Miles said. There wasn't really a way to argue with that, so instead he changed the subject. "No one has arrived yet, right?"

"No, m'lord. But when they do, I'll show them to the library," he added, forestalling Miles's question.

"Excellent." Just then the doorbell rang. "Ah, Pym . . . ?"

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said, and headed downstairs.

Not the liveliest gathering he'd ever hosted, Miles reflected a few minutes later as Aunt Alys kissed his cheek and Simon shook his hand. The moment of truth was rapidly approaching, and Miles was surprised to find a low-level buzz of panic building in his gut. And so what? It was only sensible - everyone was afraid of Aunt Alys.

"Have a drink," he said, gesturing imperatively.

The library doors swung open and Miles turned eagerly. He slumped in disappointment, though, when it was only Ivan, his usual dapper self in a dark green suit.

"Well, it's nice to see you, too," Ivan said as Miles approached. "Could you try to look just a little less enthused?"

"Have a drink," said Miles.
"That's the spirit," Ivan said, cheering. "I thought you'd never get the hang of formal dinner parties."

His mother arrived in a swirl of skirts, and Miles was reminded that his excuse for this gathering was really quite a good one. She and Aunt Alys fell into a pleased exchange of intelligence and Illyan, after listening for a few moments, drifted over to Ivan and Miles.

"That's somewhat disturbing," he observed, cutting his eyes to the two ladies. "There are several dozen analysts working on capital specific intelligence at any given moment, but I swear we could fire them all and just put Alys in."

"Memory like a steel trap," Ivan said morosely. "You ruin one lace shawl using it as a personal force shield . . . I was eight," he added, frowning at their looks.

"Have a drink," said Miles. "It'll all be better after a drink."

There was a brief commotion in the hall and Gregor appeared. Miles's panic eased instantly at the sight of him. There were two targets now, instead of just one.

"Sire," Illyan said, eyebrows rising. It was of course not unheard of for Gregor to attend gatherings outside the Residence, but no one would know better than Simon what a nail-biting exercise it could be from a security standpoint.

"Simon," Gregor returned, nodding a sober greeting all around. Miles returned it, wondering just when he'd gotten so good at reading him. Gregor, he was sure, was in fact not much calmer than himself.

Gregor moved on to the ladies, and Simon turned back to Miles, eyebrows still up. "Haven't seen you in some time, Miles," was all he said, however.

"Been on Sergyar," Miles said, shrugging.

"So Alys told me," Illyan said. He cast a fond look over to the ladies, including the Countess in it. "It is lovely to see your lady mother again. I know it was very difficult for Gregor to send them so far away."

"Yes," said Miles, who had not actually thought of it quite like that. But now that Simon had pointed it out, his parents were the oldest and, in many respects, the most dependable support system Gregor had to call on. Settling them so far away must have been quite an adjustment. Though not, Miles thought, contemplating Gregor's straight, dark-clad back, an impossible one. Gregor was not in the habit of doing something before he was certain of his own readiness.

"Is there any chance your father will be coming home for a time?" Simon asked.

"Er . . . not that I know of," Miles said, controlling the urge to hunch protectively.

Before Simon could continue, he was summoned away by Aunt Alys. He went with a will, flicking an absent-minded gesture of apology at Miles.

"He's looking good," Miles said, watching him go.

"Mother says he's taken up gardening," Ivan said. "Gardening and classical music. Can you imagine?"

"Among other things," Miles murmured.
"What's that supposed to mean?" Ivan demanded suspiciously.

"Nothing." Miles looked up, watching Aunt Alys slide her hand comfortably through Simon's arm as they stood chatting with the Countess. They didn't even look at each other, but Miles could read a subtle awareness in the cant of their bodies, in the way Simon's hand rose to casually cover hers.

His eye sought and found Gregor, who had drifted up one of the shelves alone, fingers playing absently along the spines of the books. Gregor turned, as if feeling his gaze, and their eyes met. Gregor watched him soberly for a long moment, then laid a hand over his own heart, an abbreviated bow made suddenly and startlingly intimate. Miles's breath caught at the bare, revealing simplicity of the gesture. *That's all of it, right there, just like that.*

Miles was suddenly aware, watching Gregor still and self-contained but open to him, whenever he liked, when he but asked, that it had been nearly two days since they'd had any time alone. And that had been a hastily stolen few moments in Gregor's office in the middle of the afternoon, an unexpected flare of tension that had left them wrapped around each other on the sofa under the window, hands everywhere, Gregor murmuring alternated tendernesses and wickednesses that Miles could now feel in the sudden flush of his skin. Gregor's eyes on him went from contemplative to intent, and Miles could see him catch a quick breath.

"Cover for me," Miles said, glancing at the oblivious Ivan. He looked back at Gregor and jerked his chin towards the door to the tiny, rarely used private study off the library.

"What?" said Ivan.

Miles ducked away, leaving the door ajar and not looking back. The lights came automatically up to a dim glow, and he left them that way.

There was a single quiet footstep, then the soft click of the door closing. Before Miles could turn, Gregor's hands were sliding warmly around his waist.

"You really shouldn't look at me like that in front of other people," Gregor murmured, bending and resting his cheek on the top of Miles's head.

Miles tilted his head back for a kiss and received one, with enough intent to leave him breathless. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because we're trying to be mature, rational adults in the face of what will probably be concerted disapproval," Gregor said, steering him towards the sofa. "Not . . ."

"Lust-fogged teenagers?"

"Exactly," Gregor said, and did something that made Miles go quite foggy all at once. There followed an interlude that would have done the seventeen-year-old Miles proud. They really needed to arrange a decent block of time (or was that indecent?) Miles thought dizzily. This was just getting ridiculous. But if this was all they had for the time being . . .

He heard dim stirrings from the other room, but the significance didn't register until Ivan's voice carried, unnaturally loud through the door.

"Mother! You can't just - it's the Emperor! You don't know what they might be do - discussing!"

"Whatever it is can wait until after dinner," he heard his aunt say, sounding very annoyed. She rapped smartly on the door. "Miles!"
Miles jerked into a half-sitting position and frantically attempted to straighten his jacket. Beneath him, Gregor went utterly still, like a rabbit sensing danger, his eyes very wide. "Your--" Miles hissed, gesturing toward the triangle of bare skin showing at Gregor's gaping collar.

Outside, he could hear Ivan yelping, "No, Mother, don't!" and his own mother saying, "Alys, I'm not sure that's a very good - "

The study door swung open. "Miles," his aunt began, "it is very rude to -" She stopped short, physically and verbally, with an abrupt jerk. Miles, who had made a reflexive roll for freedom and ended up in a heap on the floor, glanced frantically from her to his mother and Simon in the doorway, to himself and Gregor. No getting out of this one - they'd either been necking, or well, necking was pretty much all it looked like.

"Miles," his mother said after a moment, her voice laced with - damn her - amusement. "Perhaps there's something you'd like to tell our guests."

"Um," Miles said, too busy trying not to look either his aunt or Simon in the eye to even form a coherent sentence.

Luckily Gregor seemed to find his voice. "Alys, Simon," he said calmly. "We have some . . . incredible news." He sat up and resettled his jacket with an unobtrusive jerk before standing. He paused then, lips parted as if to speak. Not easy, is it, Miles thought, glad to see he wasn't the only one lacking in eloquence on this particular topic. But then Gregor turned, offering an arm up from the floor, and bent in a gesture both formal and warm to touch his lips to the hand Miles set in his. Oh. Hmm. That works.

"Dinner, anyone?" the Countess said brightly after several long moments of silence. "I'm sure it's more than ready by this time," she added, giving Miles a 'this is what you get' look. She steered the guests out, giving everyone a moment to collect themselves.

"That was . . . that was . . ." Miles shook his head. "Not how I wanted them to find out."


"No," Miles said, but followed anyway. They paused at the study door, and Miles reached up to straighten Gregor's jacket. "Sorry," he said, a little miserably.

Gregor's mouth quirked. "Not at all. I never experienced the obligatory 'getting walked in on by your elders' when I was a teenager. It was . . . enlightening."

"Try your Betan grandmother," Miles said, flinching at the very recollection. "I was fifteen. It was the most horrible experience of my life to date, and that's really saying something."

"Well then," Gregor said practically, "this can only be better by comparison."

Miles gave him a disbelieving look, but accepted Gregor's hand when it was offered and tucked it comfortably through his arm. "And off the brave company marched to their doom . . ."

They were not quite to the smallest dining room when they heard Lady Alys say, rather more loudly than she would have normally considered polite, "Ivan you idiot, you knew about this? And you didn't tell me?"

"He swore to me he wouldn't," Gregor said, entering the room. He released Miles and took his seat at the antique table laid for six. "We weren't ready at the time to tell anyone. I hope you will forgive me, Alys. But this is the one thing I want for myself."
Aunt Alys appeared stymied by this. She glanced at Simon, who reached out and covered her hand with his own. She let out a long sigh and said, "I understand, Gregor. And I hope you know that I am very fond of you, and that I want you to be happy. But -"

"No," Gregor said firmly. "I want this - we want this, and we will have it, whether Barrayar wants us to or not. I've had years to think about the consequences, and frankly I don't care all that much." His teeth flashed in a sudden smile. "And then again, consequences can be so very useful . . ." He glanced at Miles. "We feel we can serve Barrayar, even in this," he said, and there was such a tone of implacable, bloody Imperial certainty in his voice that Miles believed it fully, for perhaps the first time. Gregor would know if anyone would.

"Years?" Simon broke in. "How many years?"

Yeah, Miles thought, looking up at Gregor and realizing that he didn't know the answer to that one either. How many years?

"Close to ten now," Gregor said, and Miles felt a bit dizzy. Ten years Gregor had waited, and said nothing? Miles tried to think of something he would wait ten years for and couldn't come up with anything. Patience was not one of his virtues. He probably would have hauled off and told whoever it was years ago. But you weren't ready years ago, and Gregor knew it.

"Ten years," Illyan repeated, sounding absolutely floored. "Three decades of running ImpSec and I never figured this out. Er - I didn't forget knowing this, did I?"

"No, Simon," Gregor said with a smile. "No one knew this. Miles didn't even know this until about three months ago."

"But you're not -" Alys stopped briefly as Armsman Pym leaned over her shoulder to fill her wine glass. "You're not going public, are you?" Just wait until I retire. To the South Continent, preferably, Miles could practically hear her thinking. Now was probably not the time to approach her with his grand strategy for preparing Barrayar to accept its Emperor and his male Consort. Later, after she'd had time to get used to the idea herself.

"No," Gregor said. "Not for a long time."

Pym and Roic, acting as waiters for the evening, brought in the first course. Miles breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that maybe everyone would be too hungry from the delayed dinner to talk for a few minutes. Ma Kosti's meals always made conversation seem rather unimportant. For a few minutes everyone concentrated on his or her soup. Miles drank his first glass of wine far too quickly, and made himself promise to slow down when Pym refilled it.

"I'm sorry for the way you found out," Miles said at last, deciding it was time to open his mouth and stop making Gregor handle things. "That wasn't exactly what we wanted."

"It was, er, eye opening," Simon said.

"That's one way of putting it," Ivan muttered. Miles speared him with a glare. He didn't know why he ever expected subtlety from his cousin, though he would have thought that even Ivan could do better than, No, Mother, don't!

"In any case," Simon added, "I am happy for you."

"Thank you," Miles said quietly. Though he didn't work for Illyan anymore, his opinion mattered a great deal to Miles. And some part of him had been afraid, however illogically, that Simon would be disappointed. It felt an awful lot like the part of him that had been afraid - was still afraid - that
his father would be disappointed.

"I . . ." Alys said and then, uncharacteristically, hesitated. "I can't say I'm all that surprised," she said at last.

Miles almost choked on a piece of vat beef. "What?" he managed.

"Well, I am surprised by the . . . specifics. But I had often wondered . . ." she cast Gregor a strangely sad, thoughtful look. "After every tall, thin Vor beauty that I've paraded past you over the years, without so much as a blink from you . . ."

"Just how long ago did you come to this conclusion?" Gregor asked. He sounded slightly strangled, Miles thought, giving him a sideways glance. It must be disconcerting to find out you were not as deeply closeted as you'd assumed.

"Hmm, it must have been about three years ago. Don't give me that look--I kept hoping you'd find a nice girl you liked well enough. I didn't want you to be unhappy, but there are . . . practicalities to think of."

"I know," Gregor said. "Well . . . I am happy. And we'll figure out the rest."

The Armsmen brought in the second course then. Once everyone had been served and their wine glasses replenished, the conversation moved onto other, easier topics. They returned to the library for dessert wine, dessert, and then coffee. Miles found himself tucked comfortably next to Gregor on the sofa, their hands clasped on his knee. He was peripherally aware that everyone was watching them with disconcerting intensity, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. It felt good to be out in the open, at least a little bit, though Miles wouldn't have minded being alone in a room with the door firmly shut (and locked this time) either. Miles felt a little bit like he was fifteen again, except that when he was fifteen he'd been a complete basket case, so this was really much better.

* * *

It was close to eleven o'clock by the time Alys and Simon left. Ivan followed soon after, and Gregor knew he should go as well. He had a security briefing at seven o'clock the following morning, and then more Cetagandans. He wished very, very badly that they would all go back to Eta Ceta instead of negotiating in his guesthouse, and, not for the first time, wondered why they weren't doing just that.

But Cordelia had spent most of dinner looking amused and not trying to behead him, and Miles was pressed up against his side, and he very much did not want to go back to the Residence, where he would be alone. He wondered how soon he and Miles could start spending the night together, and how they would handle it. Miles's groundcar could not stay parked at the Residence all night if they didn't want people to start noticing. But, he consoled himself, he was by no means the first Emperor of Barrayar to conduct a clandestine affair. Dorca's philandering ways were legendary, and he was, of course, the negative example - the mere fact that there weren't more outrageous tales floating down the centuries was testament to the success with which these things could be concealed, if one made an effort.

He glanced down at Miles's dark head and felt a sudden swell of longing. He was relatively inexperienced, he knew, and markedly so in comparison to Miles, he was certain. Virginity lost at nineteen to the daughter of an off world diplomat, more out of pity on her part than anything else, he rather thought. A few necessarily brief affairs since then, including those horrible days with Cavilo. He had hated her and wanted her, desired that quicksilver mind, the psyche edged in barbed
wire, the small, overburdened body. He had never been able to discern, in the years after, what had come first - Cavilo or Miles. But it was ultimately unimportant, for realization had taken several months to set in, and knowing was what mattered.

And now Miles was so deep in him, his hand unknowingly so integral in the shaping of the past decade that Gregor could look few places inside himself that did not hold a reflection of Miles, somewhere. Gregor shivered, just a little, at the thought of having that want finally satisfied.

"Miles," Cordelia said suddenly. Miles stirred against his side, and Gregor became aware that he had been on the verge of falling asleep. He remembered what Miles had said about proper dinners being devastating for those with low tolerances. Tonight's dinner had been very proper indeed, and he wondered if Miles was somewhat drunker than he had let on. Gregor smiled, rather charmed by the idea of Miles falling asleep against him.

"Mmm?" Miles mumbled and sat up.

"Why don't you go up to bed? You're tired"

"I should-" Gregor began, starting to rise.

"Sit down," said Cordelia, sweetly implacable. Gregor obeyed with a thump.

"Uh," Miles said, blinking in sudden alarm. Gregor was a bit alarmed himself, though nothing Cordelia had said so far gave him cause to think she was angry with him. Maternally concerned, perhaps. Betanly amused, definitely. But not angry.

"I promise not to eat him alive," Cordelia said. "And I don't see what point there would be in pulling out the holovids from when you were a baby, since he was there for most of them anyway."

"Right," Miles said. "Er."

He glanced at Gregor, who smiled with more confidence than he actually felt. "It's fine, Miles. Go to bed."

"Okay," Miles said, obviously with some misgivings. He stood up, hesitated for a moment, and then kissed Gregor, briefly. The casualness of it took Gregor's breath away, reminding him that this was happening and, not only that, but they were settling into it, getting comfortable, emerging from the glorious but tempestuous first days into something that could last. Something very real and solid.

"Good night," Miles said, and kissed his mother on the cheek as well as he passed her. "Be nice," Gregor heard him mutter. "And not too terribly Betan, all right?" With one last look over his shoulder, Miles left the library. Gregor heard him calling for Pym as he went up the stairs, and then he was alone with Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan. Who, God help him, was smiling at him.

"You are utterly besotted, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," Gregor said. "Though that's not new for me."

"So you said. Ten years?" Gregor nodded. "Right after he joined the Dendarii, then."

"About then, yes," Gregor said. "I couldn't tell him, of course. I kept hoping it would pass. I didn't think it would ever work, even if he wanted it, which I didn't think he did. He kept bringing home those galactic girlfriends -"
"Only the one, actually," Cordelia corrected. "Though I do believe there were a few we never got to meet."

"Right. Well, none of those signs exactly pointed to him ever wanting me. But then when he was killed . . ." Gregor stopped and took a deep breath. "I felt . . ." He shook his head.

"Like someone had ripped your heart out," Cordelia said quietly.

Gregor nodded, once, pressing his lips together. "And then handed it back to me, somewhat battered, but still working. After that, it was only a matter of time, I think."

"I'm glad you told him," Cordelia said. "For both your sakes."

"Do you mean that?" Gregor asked, looking at her hopefully. "Is he happy?"

"Yes," Cordelia replied, after a moment of thought. "I think he is. It's hard for me to tell, you know. I'm not sure Miles has ever really been happy before in his life. At least not in a contented way. He was always chasing after something, even as a child. He was never willing to just stay in one place for very long, and he had so much to prove, to himself, to Barrayar, and even to us, I think. That sort of life doesn't allow a great many things."

"I wonder if my sort of life is any better," Gregor said. He frowned. "You can't honestly tell me that you're completely happy about this. He's been nearly killed twice since I told him. The first one might not have been a real attempt, but the second one definitely was. And we still have no idea why it happened."

"I'd be lying if I said that I didn't have my concerns. But considering the danger I put myself in to be with Aral, I can hardly say much. I know that you won't take his safety lightly, and won't let him take it lightly either." She leaned forward. "On that note, I am somewhat concerned about what happened before he came to Sergyar."

Gregor felt heat rise in his face, and he dropped his gaze to the carpet. "I overreacted. Badly."

"You almost ordered him to move into the Residence."

"Almost. I didn't, in the end."

"You could have. And he would have had to obey you or commit treason." Gregor stayed silent and after a moment she said, "You could have lost him twice that night. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Gregor said quietly. "At the time, I was more afraid of him dying."

"I sometimes thought I would have to sit on my hands for the rest of my life," Cordelia said musingly. "It was worse for Aral, especially when Miles was a teenager. Not allowed to reach out, even to try. Letting him make his own choices, wondering if one of them would take him from us. And then one did, and we were left asking if we had been wrong from the very beginning." She spoke evenly, but the echo of devastation lurked in her eyes. Gregor shivered a little, remembering the moment when then-Prime Minister Vorkosigan had come into his office, calm and businesslike and utterly shattered, with a message disk in his hand from Simon Illyan.

"Were you wrong?" he asked.

"No," she said instantly. "No. We were right. We could never make Miles anything more or less than what he would make himself. Whatever the consequences." She laughed a little. "It's not
power Miles is after, though it seems to collect about him despite himself. I truly believe that all he really wants is to be free of the power of others. Quite impossible, of course, but I think he may at last be learning to compromise on that."

"I do not ever intend to abuse my power over him," Gregor said. "And he . . . he does not know that he holds me in the palm of his hand. Sometimes I feel . . ." He hesitated, then plunged on, reckless in his need to make her understand, to convince her of his trustworthiness. "Sometimes I feel I live and die with his every breath. I want to be swallowed up by him, and take him in whole at the same time."

"Good," Cordelia said. "Good. That is a great comfort to me. And I think perhaps he realizes more than you give him credit for. What do you think sent him to Sergyar, anyway?"

"Oh," said Gregor, startled. "I had thought - I promised myself from the very beginning that I would not coerce him in any way. If something were to happen, it would have to be his will. And then . . . ."

"Your fears are coloring your thinking," she said gently. "He's not afraid of you. Well, not much, and not in the way you're thinking. You are more overwhelming than you realize, and Miles is not used to being so . . . matched."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Gregor said, humbled.

"Very little can hold him," she said, and there was an edge of warning in her voice. "It took two personalities just to handle the spill-over. He is a great flood sometimes, and he pours himself out with such reckless abandon. My greatest fear has always been that he would spend it all in some endeavor, or into one person, and in his eagerness wash away the thing he wants the most and be left empty, with nothing at all." She surveyed him with a look that almost flayed. "But you . . . perhaps you are the one to take in all he has, at last. Miles is . . . the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that you've outfoxed us all and made the best choice you possibly could have. The two of you . . . oh yes, I do believe . . ." She trailed off, and Gregor found himself holding his breath, for what exact reason he couldn't say. "You go into relationships making all sorts of promises," she said at last, gaze returning to him from something far away that Gregor wished very much he could have seen, too. "You promise not to do this or that, and sometimes you keep your promises and sometimes you don't. But eventually you find that all the promises and the cautions and the fears and the inequalities have disappeared in the sharing. That is . . . astonishing, and it takes time. And sometimes, along the way, you get people . . . ."

"Fleeing into the night," Gregor finished with a half-smile, thinking of Ivan.

"Exactly." She looked at him very seriously for a moment, and then reached over and took his hand. "This is going to sound patronizing, but I am proud of you. I know it took a great deal of courage to declare yourself to him."

"Thank you," Gregor said, a bit shakily. "But it wasn't bravery, or anything like that. There just . . . it was the only thing left to do. The only thing I could do."

The doorbell sounded. Gregor and Cordelia both jumped, startled, and then looked at each other in confusion. There followed promptly the sound of twelve sets of ImpSec issue boots rushing into the front hallway.

"Who in the world . . ." Cordelia began, rising.

There was a polite wrap on the library doors, and Flavion stepped through. "Sire, Countess. Simon
Illyan is here."

"Show him in, please," Cordelia said, eyebrows rising. Illyan appeared a moment later, striding with the sort of purposefulness that had been mostly absent since his chip was removed. He drew the library doors shut behind him before turning to face them.

"Simon," Cordelia said. "Did you forget something?"

"No, actually," Illyan said, with an ironic quirk of the lips. He nodded his thanks and took the armchair Cordelia gestured him to. "I was going to wait on this until tomorrow, but I was so bothered by it that after I dropped Alys off, I decided to come back and see if I could catch Gregor."

"Do you want me to leave?" Cordelia asked.

"No . . . in fact, all things considered, it would probably be best for you to stay." Cordelia raised an eyebrow at this, but settled herself back on the sofa, looking on with interest. Illyan glanced around the room in some confusion and asked, "Where's Miles?"

"He went up to bed," Cordelia said. "I can have Pym wake him if it's urgent."

"No, that's fine. Illlyan took a deep breath and turned to Gregor, leaning forward in the armchair, lacing his fingers together. "I know you said tonight that you don't want to think about this from a political perspective, but I wanted to know, mainly for my peace of mind, if you'd considered the security implications yet."

"Of course," Gregor said. "We've been rather forced to do so. The number of ImpSec guards here at Vorkosigan House and around Miles himself has been increased. I'm not sure what else we can do without attracting too much attention."

"That's good," Illyan said cautiously. "But . . ." He stopped. Gregor and Cordelia waited patiently. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't even really put my finger on what's bothering me. But after three decades of running ImpSec, if I've learned one thing, it's that I should go with my instincts. Especially now that my head's not what it once was. I realize it's not my job anymore, but old habits die hard, so I went to take a look at the site of the assassination attempt tonight, after I dropped off Alys. I'd thought about going earlier, but - well, it's not my job anymore, and I try not to do anything that might infringe on Allegre."

"And?" Gregor prompted.

"And . . . and it never should have happened. Someone should not have been able to take a shot at Miles a block from the Residence and then slip straight through ImpSec's fingers. It shouldn't happen. It wouldn't happen."

"But it did," Gregor said slowly.

"It did. And I don't know why. Perhaps ImpSec is slipping up. Perhaps the agents stationed around the perimeter were lax that day. Or perhaps it's something else altogether." Illyan looked at Cordelia. "I couldn't help but think of another attack on a groundcar."

To Gregor's surprise, Cordelia almost flinched. "I thought of the same thing," she admitted.

"I expected you probably had. Of course, that led me to think about the events that came after. My brain might be buggered all to hell, but I still remember the War of the Pretendership and what it was like to not be able to trust anyone, including those who had sworn to protect the Imperium."
Gregor sat very still. "Do you think something similar is coming?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know, Sire. But sometimes attacks come from places you'd never expect, and those are the ones that hit you the hardest because you're not prepared for them."

"What can I do?" Gregor asked. "If ImpSec is corrupted, what can I do?"

"First of all," Illyan said, "I might be completely wrong. Though if I am, there are other troubling issues that you should discuss with Allegre. As for what you should do . . . well, there are a number of things we did when we realized that Vordarian was up to something, but ultimately . . ." Illyan frowned. "Be watchful. Trust no one completely. And know that if something happens, whoever it is may be acting not out of hunger for power or anger, but true loyalty to the Imperium, and to you."

"Thank you," Gregor said quietly. "This is . . . distressing. I hadn't thought of it before. I wonder if Miles . . . he hasn't confided anything to me."

"Oh, I have little doubt the thought has occurred to him," Illyan said dryly.

"Hmm," said Gregor, casting his mind back. Some of Miles's reactions were beginning to make a bit more sense. Not to mention the tense, worried look Allegre got whenever Gregor inquired about the progress of the investigation. *All our cards on the table, eh Miles?*

Illyan sighed. "I wish I could not think these things. Going on forty years of ImpSec though . . . it does things to your brain. Mine more than most, I suppose. But some of them aren't very nice." He grimaced. "I wish I could have seen you through this, Gregor. On the other hand," he added with a small smile, "I don't envy Allegre's position once you tell him."

A few minutes later Illyan walked Gregor out to his waiting groundcar, the two of them surrounded by a moving bubble of ImpSec as they went. He bowed Gregor into the car, asking, "Think about it, all right, Sire?" as he did so.

"I doubt I'll be able to think of much else," Gregor replied. Illyan gave him a grim smile and closed the door. Gregor was accompanied on the ride back by three agents in the back seat and two up front; he tried not to flinch every time one of them shifted, but it was hard now, with ten or twelve different conspiracy scenarios flitting through his head. *Thanks, Illyan,* he thought wryly, though he knew it was necessary. He would be up late tonight, he knew also, going over and over everything he knew about the men outside his door, not to mention those outside Miles's.

*Be watchful. Don't trust anyone.* Gregor sighed heavily. It wasn't difficult to arrive at the final piece of advice which had gone unspoken. *Be ready.*
Chapter 13

Miles whistled tunelessly as he exited the groundcar that had picked him up from Vorkosigan House - he really did need to get around to buying a new one - and entered the Residence by the same side door he'd come in just a few days earlier upon his return from Sergyar. He checked his chrono as he made his way up to Gregor's office; it wouldn't do to keep Lady Alys Vorpatril waiting. Or Gregor, for that matter, but Miles had a feeling he would be far more forgiving than Aunt Alys.

The door into the inner office was open, and Miles could hear the low murmur of their voices from the antechamber. One of Gregor's private secretaries glanced up as Miles approached, but it was Flavion, stationed at the inner door, who waved him in. Did the man ever sleep? Miles wondered. He had that same ubiquitous, unflappable quality about him that made Pym so good at his job.

"Ah," Gregor said with obvious pleasure as Miles shut the door behind him. He stood and came around the desk for a warm, nearly courtly greeting. Miles could feel Aunt Alys watching them, measuring. It was unnerving, but he was glad that her presence didn't cheat him out of a proper hello, even if it was appropriately chaste.

"Hello, Miles," she said when Gregor had let him go.

"Aunt Alys." He crossed the room and hitched himself up to sit on the corner of Gregor's desk. Alys's brow lowered in imperceptible disapproval, but she didn't comment as Gregor retook his seat.

"Gregor said you requested this meeting," she said instead. "I admit, I'm rather surprised."

Miles cleared his throat. "Well," he began, deciding that now was as good a time as any to unveil their plan. "We, er, need your help." He outlined everything as succinctly as possible. Alys listened, nodding every once in awhile. Miles was gratified to see the light of calculation entering her eyes as he talked. Good. I've got you. And if I have you . . .

"I see," she said judiciously when he wound down. "Well, I certainly don't think it will be a problem, making you better known. To begin with, I don't think you're as obscure as you seem to believe."

"No, but I'm not well known the way I want to be," Miles said, "or need to be. I'm still my father's son. Perhaps people know me as the new Imperial Auditor. But I need to establish a . . . personality, so to speak."

"I doubt that will prove problematic," Gregor murmured.

"And you do realize," Alys said, "that you will have to avoid being . . . difficult."

Miles frowned. "I can be very charming. When I have to be."

"Hmm," Alys said. Miles glared. "Well," she continued crisply after a moment, "I think it is an excellent plan. You'll forgive me, though, if I ask what exactly the goal is?"

"To be . . . together. On Barrayar. Socially approved and all that," Miles said. Gregor nodded his confirmation.

"You realize what that will involve, of course," Alys said.
"Um . . . My strategy isn't enough?" He'd thought he'd been very thorough, dammit.

"Well it's a start, certainly. But eventually there's going to have to be an Imperial Wedding, no matter the gender of the . . . bride."

Miles gaped. "What?"

"She's right," Gregor sighed. "I'd thought of that."

"Why?" Miles yelped, horrified. He'd read the accounts of previous Imperial Weddings, as relatively few as they were. They were insane. Bloody circuses. Half the planet had to be invited and the entire thing was weighed down by archaic ritual and dear God wasn't there any way he could get out of this?

"Because it's tradition," Alys said implacably. "And since the two of you are breaking tradition quite enough already, I think it would be a very bad idea for you to break this one as well. You need to be seen to be committed, Miles, before you can be accepted as permanent. Marriage ceremonies are quite common between persons of the same gender in other places, as I'm sure you know."

Miles could see her point. Unfortunately. "Er . . ."

"Most of the ceremonial details would have to be rewritten, of course," Alys said. "But that will be easy enough."

"It's all a moot point right now anyway," Gregor said soothingly. "Nothing like that can happen for a long time."

"Thank God," Miles muttered.

"I'll need to sit down with you soon," Aunt Alys told him. "We need to plan your Midsummer social calendar. Oh, don't look at me like that! You asked for my help. I do the same thing with Gregor every season."

"Just do as she says," Gregor advised. "I find the phrase 'Yes, Lady Alys' comes in very handy."

She hit them both with a reproving frown. "Don't be cheeky."

The meeting broke up soon thereafter. Alys left looking abstracted, her expression similar to the one scientists and military strategists got when thinking about their respective disciplines. Of course, navigating the Vor social circus was a science, and involved a great deal of strategy. Miles was glad that Alys was willing to do his thinking for him on that front.

"Is the idea of marrying me so terrible?" Gregor asked when she was gone.

"What? Oh, no, of course not - it's not the marriage, you know, it's the damn wedding."

"Can't have one without the other," Gregor said, smiling apologetically.

Miles gave a long-suffering sigh. "I 'spose not. But . . . you've seen the holos. It's . . ." He paused, searching futilely for words to describe the organized chaos that was an Imperial Wedding. "Practically a bloody horse show. And we're the horses. Or, well, me, specifically."

"You'll be brilliant," Gregor said confidently. He reached across the desk, lifted Miles's hand, and kissed the pulse point at the inside of his wrist.
"You could have warned me," Miles said, glaring half-heartedly. "You knew this was coming."

"I could have," Gregor agreed tranquilly. "But then again I could also leave it for Alys to do." He retained Miles's hand, and considered him through thoughtful eyes. "I would have expected you'd appreciate the chance to allow your more . . . dramatic tendencies to run free."

"I guess," Miles said noncommittally.

Gregor bit his lip and sat forward. "There will be a great many unpleasant things said about you when the time comes," he said slowly. "About both of us, but you in particular." He hesitated. "I know playing my . . . bride is never something you pictured for yourself."

*Bull's eye. Does he know me that well, or is it that transparent? Both, probably.*

"No," Miles said honestly. "I'd always expected to meet some tall, exotic beauty, fall instantly in love, sweep her off her feet and carry her away with all pomp and circumstance."

"Well," said Gregor, "you've got the tall part, at least."

"How did you do it?" Miles asked impulsively. "When you realized you . . ." He waved vaguely between them. "How did you handle the . . . men part?"

A frown creased Gregor's forehead. "I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. I guess . . . I guess I just didn't for a long time. Would you be offended if I told you that I wanted your presence and your company a long time before I came to want . . . the rest of you?"

"No. I can hardly blame you." Miles fought the urge to hunch, which would just make him look shorter anyway.

"And yet," Gregor said, frown deepening, "now when I hear you say something like that about yourself, it hurts me."

Miles blinked, dipped his chin. "It's just reflex."

"Is it?"

"It's how I . . . if I say what people are thinking first, then they can't . . . well. You get the idea." Gregor said nothing, so Miles added, awkwardly, "I started doing it when I was in school and just never really stopped."

"Well, it's not what I'm thinking," Gregor said mildly. "And I think you're well beyond worrying about schoolyard bullies."

"You'd be surprised." Gregor waited for him to elaborate, but Miles didn't. He was right in a way - he was beyond worrying about schoolyard bullies, but that did nothing to silence the voices in Miles's own head. They hadn't shut up when Quinn, beautiful, tall, brilliant Quinn had wanted him, and he had the feeling they weren't going away just because tall, handsome, brilliant Gregor wanted him either.

"I'm just not used to this," Miles said, indicating the original topic with an illustrative gesture encompassing the both of them. It was true; he found himself wanting Gregor more and more every day, but at the same time he was accustomed to being the pursuer, not the pursued, to being the catcher, not the caught. He was beginning to wonder, as events spun on, which were more difficult to outmaneuver - the inbred biases of Barrayar, or his own. One and the same in some things, apparently. It was ironic, he reflected, that Gregor, Vor of Vors, The Barrayaran, was in
many respects more his own creature, and perhaps Cordelia Vorkosigan's, than Miles himself.

"I'm sorry," Gregor said simply. "You are making yourself vulnerable in this. And some of the
attacks will be entirely unanswerable. The suggestion that you are my 'dirty secret' will probably be
the least of it."

"I'll deal with it," Miles said steadily. "That's one respect in which we're lucky, we have time for
these things." He was suddenly certain that by the time the far-off day of revelation came, they
would be so deep in each other as to be unshakeable. The knowledge of that, of so much more to
come between them was comforting and terrifying, all at once. We fall in love in bits and pieces,
like a puzzle we put together without even knowing it. I have only a small part, yet. Gregor was
well ahead of him there, Miles knew. The incongruity troubled him, made him uneasy with the
entirely ridiculous urge to even the score, somehow. It would come in time, he was more and more
certain.

"I never pictured myself wearing an Auditor's chain, either," he said. "For that matter, I never
thought myself capable of lying to Simon, and to you." He shrugged. "Any good strategist knows
when to update his plans. I . . . can learn to bend." You will not be the thing that breaks me. I know
that, at least.

"Well." Gregor bent his head, then looked up with a shy smile. "You swept me off my feet years
ago, in all things," he said, "and you can carry me off wherever you will, if it please you."

Miles felt the color rise in his face. Gregor could do his own bit of sweeping, he thought, and Miles
knew for a fact that he could be carrying you off before you knew he was even there. They can call
me what they will. He is mine, and I am coming to be his, and not to worry that I never intended to
be any man's.

*

The next few days passed in a blur as Miles began preparations to go at his grand scheme with all
the forward momentum he could muster. He knew from past experience that unfocused forward
momentum could be disastrous, so he forced himself to sit down and take stock before harrying
off to actually do anything.

Aunt Alys could handle the social, but the political was Miles's domain. By the end of his first
brainstorming session, he had a long list of Counts, government officials, and their hangers-on
whom he would need to start courting as soon as possible - even if they had no idea that they were
being courted. A few of the older, stodgier Counts could probably be skipped on the basis that they
were likely to be dead by the time anything happened. But their heirs needed to be wined and
dined. Luckily Miles had a secret weapon held in reserve for just such occasions. Ma Kosti, you are
going to help us change Barrayar, and you don't even know it.

His mother's temporary homecoming, complete with several dozen house retainers, had taken care
of the trouble of formally reopening the house for him. But still, Miles made a note to start
assembling his own staff for the large-scale maintenance of the place after she was gone. Rather
oddly though, she seemed reluctant to bestir herself. Miles couldn't understand it - she and his
father were normally inseparable, and not even interplanetary wars had been able to keep them
apart in the past. And it wasn't as though he could complain. Well, not much. His mother had taken
it upon herself to play Baba with a sort of complacent zeal that was really quite worrying. She liked
being a polite chaperone, and she was prone to giving Miles advice, ranging from the theological to
the romantic to the downright filthy. And God only knew what she'd been saying to Gregor.

The other thing occupying his attention during this time was the huge number of data files that
Galeni had sent him. ImpSec was thorough when it came to its guards, Miles discovered without surprise. He read through everything; most of it was quite dull, as the agents were all painfully earnest men. None of them had a single blemish on his record, of course. Miles was uncomfortably reminded of the contrast to his own files, which he rather suspected read like one long attempt at career sabotage. Galeni spotted nothing, Miles spotted nothing, and Gregor lifted an eloquent eyebrow at the gnawed state of Miles's nails.

He departed Vorbarr Sultana shortly thereafter, bound for a whirlwind inspection and general shake-up in Hassadar. His mother had pointed out with some glee that, since he was to be permanently in Vorbarr Sultana now, he had no excuse not to play a larger role in the District. Miles could hardly argue with that, particularly since he had, in recent years, felt the strange pull of the place, not so much obligation as compulsion. Just as long as Tsipis didn't corner him on anything too agonizingly financial . . .

He spent a day in and around Hassadar, with Tsipis and Armsmen and a gaggle of twitchy ImpSec men in plainclothes trailing behind as he spoke to key people in the local management structure. Visiting Hassadar always left him feeling diffusely energized, infected with the frenetic industry of the place. It was hard to believe, walking down a crowded Hassadar street, looking up at the high rise modern buildings and listening to the passersby talking about off planet trips and the latest galactic news, that just tens of kilometers away, thousands of people lived without even the luxury of a comconsole. Two generations after inheriting the district seat, Hassadar still had the wild enthusiasm of something to prove.

He collapsed into bed in his seldom-used suite in the residence off the central square that night, comfortably weary. It seemed, he thought bemusedly, that running a mercenary fleet was in fact excellent schooling for heading a district. Perhaps he should mention it to Gregor, send a few of the greener heirs out for a quick and dirty education . . .

He dreamt of Admiral Naismith and the Dendarii. No great battle or dramatic rescue, but a strangely distorted replay of one of the interminable budget and planning conferences he'd been forced to chair. Oddly, Gregor was at his side, though no one seemed to have noticed his full Vorbarra House livery.

"Watch out for the Cetagandans," Gregor said, leaning seriously across the table.

"Beta Colony," Miles said firmly. "It's about Beta Colony . . ."

He swam to consciousness, unsure for a bleary moment what had woken him. Ah, there it was. He rolled over and groped about on his bedside table in the dark, fingers automatically finding then discarding his comlink before he pinpointed the source of the intrusive beeping.

"Gregor?" he croaked, bringing the other comlink to his lips.

There came the perfectly transmitted rustling of blankets. "Did I wake you?" Gregor said contritely.

"It's all right," Miles yawned, glancing at the glowing display of his chrono. It wasn't too late, barely half past midnight. "Is there something wrong?" he asked belatedly.

"No," Gregor said, aborting an adrenaline-fueled jolt to full consciousness. Miles lay back, resting the comlink on his pillow in range of both voice and ears.

"Can't sleep?" he hazarded, when Gregor offered nothing further.
"Something like that," Gregor said.

Miles paused, ear catching the edge of something unpleasant. The nights could be very bad, Gregor had told him once, many years ago. "What are your nightmares about?" he asked.

There was a very brief silence. "History," Gregor said. "Sometimes just history, sometimes history repeating itself. Things I wasn't even there to see, but seem to remember anyway. Things that haven't happened yet. Getting eaten alive by Barrayar. And sometimes, being the one doing the eating."

"History is what we make of it," Miles quoted, then dropped his professorial tone. "We don't have to make a monster of it. And the future, it's not worth panicking over until it's on top of you. For the rest, you honestly can't still be worried about some mythical trace of Emperor Yuri's madness lurking in your blood, can you?"

"No," Gregor said instantly. "I know I am not - I am more . . . stable than he ever was, now."

"Yes," said Miles. "There's no comparison between you."

Gregor made a sound, a mix of protest and relief that let Miles know he was aiming in the right direction at least. "If you only knew," Gregor said. "If you only knew how much I'm faking sometimes. Your mother is right, you know - everything is an illusion."

"She doesn't believe that much anymore," Miles said, coming further awake as it occurred to him that this conversation was getting exponentially more complicated. "She thinks in constructs, now. There's more reality to constructs." He hesitated, then continued on, safe in the implicit freedom to speak his true thoughts. "Perhaps many people believe you were born Emperor, and I suppose you were. But whatever it is they've constructed as their Emperor, you've taken it and breathed life into it and made it your own. And it's - you're - incredible. I can read all the theory about millions of voices becoming sixty becoming one will, but you make it happen. Is it really faking if everyone around you believes it wholeheartedly?"

"I lived for a decade on your faith," Gregor said, voice low. "You said I was not a monster. You said I could be - that I was - good at this madness, that I could be the confluence. Do you remember, after we were back from the Hegen Hub?"

"Yes," Miles said, shaken. He had not known his words had meant so much then, could barely recall speaking them.

"I lived on that," Gregor continued. "I thought if you believed I could, then I would. I made your faith into my own, and sometimes I felt . . . I felt I had grown to fill the illusion or the construct or whatever it is, and maybe had grown larger than it."

He laughed softly, and Miles could imagine him with sudden, telepathic clarity, half-sitting alone in that big bed, comlink on his wrist, illuminated in the light of a single lamp. "And then some days it eludes me," he finished. "And I am . . . drowning."

"I'm really not the person to come to on those days," Miles said honestly. "I used to have them myself, sometimes."

"You made Naismith real," Gregor said. "And I don't know why we talk about him like he's another person, anyway."

"Isn't he?" Miles said, then corrected himself. "Wasn't he?"

"No," Gregor said. "He came from you. You grew him yourself, because you needed him."
"Because I wanted to be him," Miles corrected. "Because I was scared and outnumbered and outgunned, and let's not forget strongly chemically altered at the time."

"Still," Gregor said. "You can't . . . you can never be anyone but yourself. Can you honestly say Admiral Naismith was more?"

"No," Miles admitted, almost unwillingly. "No. I can't. But he was more than a uniform and an accent."

"It doesn't matter," Gregor said. "You made yourself."

"I built my own little secondary personality," Miles retorted. "Because it was better than the one I had."

"That's a matter for debate," Gregor murmured. There was a short silence and then he said, almost lightly, "What are your nightmares about, Miles?"

"How long do you have?" Miles returned dryly.

"How long do you need?"

Miles let out his breath. Gregor was being quite literal, he had no doubt. "Being trapped," he said, flipping through the mental menu of horror destinations. "Reaching to catch someone, and letting them fall. Being . . . forgotten. Disappearing, I guess. Losing control, of what I'm not entirely sure. Failing."

"Shall I debunk them for you?" Gregor asked.

"No. I know what they are, where they're from. And yet . . ."

"And yet," Gregor agreed. They were silent for several moments. The comlinks were good enough for Miles to be able to hear every breath Gregor took, slow and measured, almost as if his head lay on the pillow next to Miles's own. He can hear me, just the same. A sudden, unexpected longing took him then, to be there with Gregor in the depths of the Barrayaran night. That's why he called you, of course.

"I imagine you have thought of this already," Gregor said at last, his voice falling heavily in the silence. "But Simon spoke to your mother and I. He raised some concerns which are . . . difficult to forget."

"Ah," Miles said. "I see."

"I could," Gregor began, then changed his mind. "You could be killed because of me," he said starkly.

"It would make a change from being killed because of myself."

"Miles." He could hear Gregor shifting, could trace his movements as he sat up straight, unstrapped the comlink and held it in both hands. "I was very frightened when your groundcar was destroyed," Gregor said. "And I overreacted. I know better now. But please do not mistake my restraint for lack of feeling."

"I don't," Miles said, a little shamed. "But I don't always think of it like that. You're forgetting, if you could get me killed, I could do the same to you, or something potentially worse for Barrayar. I could be your greatest weakness." If you mess this up, boy . . . "I have this grand plan," he went on,
words tumbling one over the other in a rush of suddenly unleashed truth, "but I have no idea if it's going to work. I have no idea what I'm doing, really, if I'm at all cut out for any of this. I'm the damaged, obscure son of a great man with experience of little but running a small time fleet of rejects and misfits, with a tendency for manic depression and a chip in my head. I am -"

"My choice," Gregor cut in firmly.

"You could be wrong." His voice was smaller than he had intended.

"I'm not," Gregor said. "You will be - you are - what Barrayar needs. What I need. I cannot tell you how much joy it brings me to know that the two coincide in you so perfectly."

"We'll certainly be making history, won't we?" Miles said ironically.

"I felt for you before I even knew the beginnings of my way through this job," Gregor returned pointedly. "I believe you will not fail."

But I didn't feel for you then, not like that. You fell in love with someone who was already fracturing in half, and now you believe I can fill the illusion of wholeness for you. Not just for you, for Barrayar. Which is frightening me more, I wonder?

"I've spoken to a friend at ImpSec," Miles said, clearing his throat a little. "There's not much he can do, but I wanted to try. You haven't told General Allegre about us?"

"No," Gregor said, not objecting to the reversal of topics. "I wanted to speak to you first, but it's a moot point now. He's off to the out-system shipyards for at least a week."

"Anything important?"

"Not yet," Gregor said. "We're hoping to keep it that way."

Miles hesitated. "Do you have - you must have - plans?"

"I do," Gregor said, not pretending to misunderstand. "I have a small selection of my Armsmen and the regular palace guard to choose from, and there is more than one way out of this building not on the blueprints."

"You're the only one who has all the details?" Miles asked.

"Not quite. Simon knew. I don't think Allegre does, not yet." He paused. "Perhaps I should tell you -"

"No," said Miles hastily. "Don't." He bit his lip hard, then huffed out a breath. There was no need to sugarcoat for Gregor's sake. "It's possible that there will come a time when I really shouldn't know where you are," he said.

He counted a full breath. "How worried are you?" Gregor asked.

"I . . . don't know yet. It may be nothing. But it may not. I just wanted to be sure that you were aware. And prepared."

"And you?"

"I can trust my Armsmen," Miles said obliquely.

The conversation stalled there. Miles lay still, imagining a giant elephant perched ludicrously on
the invisible link between them.

"I should get some sleep," Gregor said at last. "There's a pack of officers scheduled for medal presentations tomorrow morning. They'll be expecting their commander-in-chief, in full sternness."

"You can never be anyone but yourself," Miles said dryly.

Gregor snorted. "Just so. It seems we are both better at dispensing wisdom than learning from it." He paused. "You'll be home tomorrow?"

"I think so," Miles said. "And I can get started on Lady Alys's social calendar." He nibbled distractedly on a nail. "There's not much else we can do right now, unless you can think of anything?"

"No," Gregor said. "Just wait. For . . . something." There was a click, as of a light being turned off, then the soft rustle of blankets and a sigh. "Goodnight, love."

"Goodnight," Miles said, and cut the com. He lay for a long time in the dark. The endearment ricocheted around his skull, seeming to magnify at every iteration. What in God's name did he fall in love with, a decade ago? And how can he still love me now? I am not the boy I was then, and neither is he. What sort of consort have you built for yourself, Gregor? God help me if I'm too small to fit . . .

And yet Gregor had chosen him, seemed sure of that choice. As sure as you are that he is the greatest Emperor this benighted planet has ever known?

He slept at last, deep and surprisingly peaceful. The nightmares, strangely, did not come.

* 

It was too damn quiet, Ivan decided as he stepped through the doors of Ops HQ and made for his groundcar. The sun was just slanting down behind the tallest of the tall buildings in this sector of the city, touching the ugly brown stone with illusory shades of yellow and gold. His work routine had been uninterrupted by a crisis of any magnitude, he was getting out a few minutes early, and chances were the lovely and charming Emmeline Vorsoisson would be calling tonight. Life was good, simple, strangely Milesless, and too damned quiet.

He paused a moment before popping the canopy, scowling at the recollection of his last contact with his cousin, several days before. Miles had been supremely unimpressed with him for over a week now. It wasn't like he'd done the grudge-carrying little bastard a bad turn, Ivan thought resentfully. Really, he'd done Miles a favor, saving the trouble of actually having to explain to Illyan and Ivan's mother about . . . that thing with Gregor. It wasn't like they wouldn't have found out that night, anyway, and really Miles had only himself to blame, losing track of time like that. Ivan suppressed a spasmodic twitch at the recollection of the scene, and climbed into his groundcar. Miles, unfortunately, had been singularly unimpressed with his highly logical and pointed arguments, and though he'd been back from Hassadar for three days now, Ivan hadn't seen him (had been assiduously avoiding him).

Not that he didn't get the daily Miles and Gregor update from his mother, in any case. Ivan grimaced as he pulled out into traffic. He'd long dreaded the day either Gregor or Miles decided to get permanently attached to someone, knowing the flutter it would put his mother in. The fact that they were attaching to each other was making the whole thing exponentially worse. He had no idea why his mother thought he was interested in the minutiae of their every move. So Miles had gone
to a party at the Vorbrettens and managed not to spill his drink on anybody. So he and Gregor had shared an evening tagging a few errant ministers over dinner, then spent the rest of the night doing - Ivan didn't even want to contemplate. Was it Ivan's fault he wasn't marrying an Emperor? Or anyone at all?

He leaned into the accelerator, weaving around five or six slower groundcars and slipping neatly through the entrance into the underground lot below his building. He should probably go out and pick up some dinner supplies. Perhaps Emmeline would like to come over this evening for a private meal. Ivan brightened, resolving to put Miles, Gregor, grand plans, Imperial Weddings, and his mother out of his mind.

He left the groundcar and headed for the closest market on foot. There were a few high quality brands of pre-prepared meals that could easily pass for home cooking, and he spent a few minutes looking them over, making his selections with Emmeline in mind. He was whistling by the time he left the shop, bags swinging from both hands, having dropped more than was probably wise on an excellent bottle of wine. Fortune favored the prepared, after all.

The man stepped out of the underground driveway Ivan had driven down not half an hour before. He was dressed darkly, and it was only the bright splash of his blond hair that caught Ivan's eye. He turned, a warning tingle of recognition coming well before he saw the man's face.

"You," he said, dropping his bags, though still managing to be careful of the wine. He groped for his regulation stunner, rarely used but always charged. Well, mostly always.

"Captain Vorpatril." A hand reached around him and plucked the stunner from his grip. Ivan whirled, coming face to face with a stranger, a dark haired fellow who held the stunner as if it might explode in his hand. Where had he come from? Ivan took a step back, trying to keep them both in his line of sight.

"You'll get your stunner back in just a few moments," the blond said. "We don't intend to hurt you."

"Great," said Ivan. "Who are you?"

"Does Admiral Naismith know where the second copy of the androgenesis research is?" the dark-haired man asked.

Ivan ground his teeth. "Look," he said, trying to sound as reasonable as possible. "We both can't be asking questions at once here - second copy?"

"He doesn't know," the blond said, face tight with disappointment.

"Admiral Naismith just might not have told him," the dark haired man said, prodding Ivan further back into the shadows of the ramp.

"Possibly," the blond said doubtfully.

"How do you know about Admiral Naismith?" Ivan asked.

"Elli Quinn told us," the blond said distractedly.

"Quinn? What's she up to?"

"Halfway to Earth by now, for all we know," the dark haired man said irritably. He was holding the stunner all wrong, Ivan noted, very much like someone unaccustomed to weapons. If Ivan were
"I wouldn't," the blond said, eyes going cool. Ivan took one look at him and uncoiled from his unconscious preparatory stance. "We can't get to Naismith," the blond continued, taking two steps closer. He was small, but he managed to project a great deal of menace, without really seeming to try. Ivan had the unmistakable impression of a great deal of cunning strength behind those blue eyes. "There are too many guards around him," the blond continued. "But you can get to him. Did you relay our previous messages?"

"Yes," Ivan said guardedly.

"And?" the man persisted.

Ivan shrugged. "And nothing. He's as baffled as I am. I repeat, who are you people?"

"So he probably really doesn't know where the copy is," the blond said. He scrubbed a hand across his face, a quick nervous gesture. "All this time spent here a waste."

"We could double back to Beta," the dark haired man suggested, though he didn't sound too enthusiastic.

"No good by now," the blond said. "The Cetagandans will have gotten to it. Dammit. I was sure the second copy was on Barrayar."

Ivan stayed still, listening intently, and silently mourning the demise of his evening's plans.

"We can't find it," the blond said, refocusing on Ivan. "Tell Admiral Naismith that. Tell him he needs to start looking, but we're almost certain the second copy isn't on Barrayar. It's imperative that it be found before the Cetagandans get to it."

"Fine," said Ivan. "I'll tell him. How about you tell me something - how do you know about this stuff?"

"We'll try to track down another lead," the blond continued, ignoring him completely. "It was probably a mistake to bank everything on following the one copy, but Teppin was so sure . . ."

"Who?"

"We couldn't have split up," the dark haired man put in.

"No," the blond agreed. "We need to stick together." They shared a look, and Ivan began inching backwards. Just his luck - trapped by a pair of nutty homosexuals and held by his own stunner.

"We'll try to contact you again," the blond added, tearing his eyes back to Ivan. "Before we leave the planet, so Naismith will know where to find us if he gets there first."

"Whatever," Ivan said resignedly.

The blond nodded, and his companion tossed Ivan's stunner over his shoulder. The two of them linked arms as Ivan sprinted after it, and vanished out onto the sidewalk as if they didn't have a care in the world.

Ivan retrieved his stunner, and stomped back for his groceries. He checked around the ramp as a matter of course, but there was no sign of either of the bastards.
"Dammit, Miles," he muttered. "You'd better make sense of this."

Emmeline would just have to talk to his comconsole tonight, he feared.
Chapter 14

"His Imperial Majesty conveys his sincere apologies," said the Armsman who met Miles as he entered the Residence, rather as if he had been waiting. "He is unavoidably detained, and asks that you avail yourself of anything you like, while you wait."


"Thank you," said Miles, supervising the transfer of an enormous basket, redolent of wonderful, Ma Kosti things, from Pym's care to Gregor's staff. He followed Armsman and basket to a lift, up to the third floor, and directly to Gregor's own apartments. He was deposited in the sitting room, politely offered an array of refreshments and entertainments, and finally left to his own devices. He sat idly in an armchair for a moment, eyeing the picnic basket with anticipatory speculation before it occurred to him just what sort of opportunity he had here. He'd spent a small amount of time in these rooms, particularly since Winterfair, but he really had only the most passing familiarity with the space. Gregor wouldn't mind if he looked around a bit - he'd like it, actually, Miles suspected.

The apartment was large, but it fell short of palatial. Gregor had picked it out himself upon his majority and the conclusion of his single year of military service. He'd avoided the reconstructed north wing, where several generations of Vorbarras had laid their heads. Miles wasn't sure, but he thought no one had lived in the east wing since Emperor Vlad le Savante.

There was the sitting room, of course, cozy but elegant, where they had fought like wary, frazzled cats. Miles liked the scatter of art, eclectic but with a discernible lean towards the modern. Then there was the glassed-in balcony, the site of that first momentous dinner. Quite possibly the most exclusive dining room on three planets, an intimate refuge from the huge, echoing banquet halls downstairs. There was a small kitchen alcove tucked off in a little bend of corridor beyond the sitting room, yielding an array of fruit and other unpromisingly healthy things. And no alcohol, Miles noted, not even a bottle of wine.

Beyond that there was the hallway he had breezed down a mere ten days before, distracted by thoughts of reconciliation. Miles took his time now, investigating what lay behind the intriguing array of doors.

There was a study, large and a little charmingly messy around the edges, so essentially Gregor that Miles found himself smiling involuntarily as he touched the smooth wood of the desktop, cast his eye over the fireplace, the half dozen readers scattered about, the impressive collection of music disks, the jacket abandoned over the back of a chair and the book left on the armrest of the couch. Poetry, Miles saw, taking a peek, of the earthy, visceral Escobaran variety.

A library adjoined, a tiny outpost of the vast collection housed in the south wing, and all the more telling for the selectivity. Miles took down a few familiar volumes out of curiosity. Gregor was not one for scribbling in the margins. In fact he seemed the sort who took great care with his books. More poetry here, and not as much history as Miles had expected, though he did pause over the short, bleak little march of volumes on a bottom shelf, ancestors lined up by chronology rather than virtue.

The bedroom then, familiar enough not to be intimidating, strange enough to give him pause. He circled the space slowly, hands clasped behind his back like a museum patron. Gregor slept on the left side of the bed. The nightstand bore the scatter of a tired evening's detritus; a glass of water, another book, a pair of heavy, monogrammed cufflinks, a bottle of sleep timers, a good half dozen styles of security screamer buttons on wristbands and lapel pins and watch chains. Miles stood a
moment, rocking on his heels as he chased down a niggling feeling. The thought wouldn't come, though, and he turned away.

Gregor had a lot of clothes. Uniforms marched up the left side of the closet, a solid month's worth of glittering house livery, a whole swath of parade dress, the black mourning tucked in back. On the other side ranged suits, achromatically somber or done in dark, cool shades of blue or green or brown. On a hunch Miles peered around the back of the door to find an array of accoutrements from belts to dress collars to a small but impressive collection of weapons holsters. He whistled a little enviously at the sight of a stunner small enough to fit comfortably in his own hand. Chances were anyone who got through ImpSec and close enough to Gregor to be a threat wouldn't be deterred by a single stunner, but Miles knew for a fact Simon had insisted that Gregor go armed all the same.

There was only the one visible entrance for the entire place. He amused himself for a moment, trying to pick out where the inevitable escape routes lay. Perhaps in the study? Behind the full-length mirror in the bathroom was a bit too obvious . . .

. . . That was a very large tub in there . . .

The subliminal awareness of no longer being alone drew him back to the bedroom. Gregor was just in the act of shedding his suit jacket, a thick portfolio of flimsies abandoned on the bed. He looked up at once, appearing unperturbed to find Miles lurking in his closet.

"Long day at the office, dear?" Miles asked lightly.

"No more than usual. Sorry to keep you waiting." He crossed to Miles and went to one knee to steal a kiss with surprising savoir-faire for a man not accustomed to kneeling for anybody. Miles leaned into him, letting his fingers work into the tense column of his neck and then up into the short dark hair.

It was the bed that was bothering him, he realized mid-kiss. Though the layout of the room - only one nightstand, the other side of the bed against the wall - was probably ideal for security, it was also designed with the implicit assumption of a single occupant. He winced a little internally, picturing his own subconsciously hopeful furniture arrangements back home.

"Don't worry about it," he said as they parted. "Anything important?"

"Lady Alys and my social calendar running up to Midsummer," said Gregor, allowing Miles to add his own gloss of importance to that.

"We should compare notes at some point, see which ones she has us both working." Miles bit his lip thoughtfully. "I wonder how much we should really be seen together?"

"A fair amount, I think," Gregor said. "You need to become an inextricable part of my circle in the public eye."

"Yeah," Miles said, "but that's a fine line. We don't want to give it away somehow."

"I'll avoid ravishing you in the Council of Counts then," Gregor said dryly, and leaned in for another kiss.

"Um," Miles said after a moment, "just out of curiosity, who are you going to be escorting to these balls?"

"Ah," Gregor said. "Alys and I had a . . . discussion about that."
Miles could only imagine. "And?" he prompted.

"I won't be escorting anyone, officially."

On second thought, he really didn't want to imagine. The two of them arguing would be polite and low-key and utterly terrifying. "That's going to look odd," he said.

"I'm aware," said Gregor.

Miles chewed his lip. "Erm... if it's on my account, I'm really not the sort to get all bent out of shape if you have to spend an evening."

"Perhaps not," said Gregor, "but I find I am the sort."

"Oh," said Miles, a little faintly. He felt a maddening prickle of color on his cheeks, and he had to control the urge to hide his face.

Gregor watched him squirm, then said lightly, "So what's in that fascinating basket I saw on my way in?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. Ma Kosti wouldn't let me see." Miles grinned. "I think she likes the idea of cooking for you, though. She makes a big fuss about it and glares at me for springing things on her at the last minute, but she's brilliant and she knows it."

"That she is. Now, the question is, where should we eat it?"

" Hmm," Miles said. "It probably wouldn't be very prudent to take it out into the garden."

"No," Gregor said with some regret. "Probably not. I don't think I've ever had a picnic out there, either."

"Another time."

In the end they settled in the sitting room, by virtue of the fact that the basket was already there. Gregor opened the balcony doors, allowing in the diffuse glow of the eastern sky at sunset.

"Your mother seems to want to stay on planet for a while," he said, beginning to investigate the array of containers in the basket. "It's a pleasant surprise."

"Speak for yourself," Miles muttered, hunching protectively.

Gregor looked up from a bowl of spicy smelling, chilled pasta salad garnished with bright red peppers. "I wasn't aware you were... not getting along," he said delicately, with the uncertain interest of someone who didn't have parents.

"Oh," said Miles, wishing he hadn't spoken. "We're fine. Don't worry about it."

"It's not me, is it?" Gregor asked, visibly unsettled.

"Good God no," Miles said hastily. "She thinks you're brilliant, actually. Rather smug about the whole thing, if you want to know, when she isn't laughing at me or offering up horribly Betan courtship advice." He scowled. "Can do my own courting, I keep telling her."

"And very well at that," said Gregor, plucking up a hors d'oeuvres pastry stuffed with spinach and cheeses.
"Thank you. Tell her that - on second thought, don't. Steer clear. God knows what she'll say to you. Betans!" he added, in tones of deep disgust. "Nobody's mother should know about . . . those sorts of things. Or if they do, they shouldn't . . . share."

"About - oh." Gregor's eyes widened minutely. "Oh?" he added, after a moment.

"Hmph," said Miles, repressively. "Still," he added, "I suppose it is nice to have her here."

"Odd though. Usually I never think to even try and pry her from your father."

"I think she's making a special dispensation for the sake of personal amusement," said Miles. "That or she's sticking close for when I screw up."

Gregor let his head fall to one side. "Are you planning on screwing up any time soon?"

"Well no, but I rarely schedule it ahead of time." He gnawed on his lip. "And I really don't have the best track record, y'know. Quinn and I used to have these fights - the screaming and throwing things kind - and I've never been a model of perfect fidelity, though Rowan was not my fault." He stopped, controlling the urge to pout. Gregor was laughing at him, behind a perfectly straight face.

"You have a very broad attention span," he said seriously.

Miles was in the act of dishing up the warm vat steak, but he abandoned the task half finished. Gregor made a sound of startled indignity as Miles came straight across the blanket, pinned him flat, and kissed him breathless.

"Well then," he said, grinning a little smugly down at Gregor's look of half-lidded pleasure, "What are you going to do about it?" He shifted his weight, moved just so. Gregor went with it, yielding with a soft, yearning sound Miles decided he could stand to hear a lot more of. To hell with dinner, anyway.

He thought he heard something strange in the heady rush of the next few minutes, but it was easy to ignore. It was only when Gregor frowned against his mouth and pushed halfheartedly at him that events began to slow down again. Miles propped himself up on his elbows, wondering with some dismay if he'd somehow mistaken this evening's agenda - dammit, he'd thought the subtext had been clear from Gregor's polite, lashes down invitation two days ago right up to this very moment.

"Um," said Gregor, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I hate to interrupt, but, um . . ."

"What?"

"Well, the picnic basket is meowing."

"The -" Miles rolled away, sat up.

"I could have sworn -" said Gregor, pulling himself up and eyeing the basket with some wariness.

"Um," said Miles, befuddled. "Perhaps we should . . ." He flicked a finger at the security link pinned to Gregor's collar.

"We should not," Gregor said firmly. "I'll just -" He scooted closer and peered into the depths.

Miles went to stop him, but then he considered Gregor's rumpled shirt, the disheveled state of the blanket, his own rapid pulse. Not to mention how fast a few dozen armed ImpSec agents could ruin a man's evening.
"Okay. We have bread," said Gregor, investigating. "And dessert - Miles, I love your cook - and goodness, that's a lot of wine."

"Um," Miles shrugged, "I wasn't sure what you'd want. And if we're here awhile . . ."

"Ah," Gregor said. "Excellent foresight." He peered into the basket again, a decidedly peculiar expression on his face. He reached one hand in, then the other, and appeared to struggle for a moment before emerging with a small, black, furry something in both hands. "I'm assuming this isn't for dinner," he said.

"Oh, one of those," Miles said, rolling his eyes at the kitten. "Wonder how it got in there? They're all over the house - always underfoot. Say, do you think you'd want to keep . . ." he leaned over and twitched at the kitten's tail for a look, ". . . him? You're more than welcome."

Gregor considered the kitten with palpable dubiousness. "I don't . . . what does one do with a cat?"

"One doesn't," Miles said dourly. "The cat does with you, and only if it wants to." As if to prove his point, the kitten gave a ferocious wiggle in Gregor's grip and let out a sound like a kettle about to boil over. Gregor set it down with commendable haste, watching in bemused fascination as it proceeded to stalk about the blanket and, when it got its courage up, the nearby couch and chairs.

"I'm really starting to hate cats," said Miles with a long sigh. The two of them eyed each other, caught out in a moment of nerves all of a sudden. "Speaking of wine," said Miles at last.

"Good idea," said Gregor.

They demolished the picnic basket methodically and completely, and drank one and a half bottles of wine, though they virtuously saved dessert for later. The kitten returned and crawled all over, mewing piteously and making a great nuisance of itself until it was rewarded for its bad behavior with slivers of vat steak.

After, Gregor sprawled full length, chin cupped in his hands. When Miles looked over after wrestling successfully with the urge to eat another cream cake, the kitten had wandered over and the two of them were facing off, nose to nose, with identical expressions of uncertain fascination on their faces.

"Did you name him?" Gregor asked.

"I didn't. Lord knows what the staff have come up with." Miles leaned over and stroked the thing from ears to tail. It permitted the caress once, then hauled off and whapped him solidly across the knuckles before turning back to Gregor. "How about Yuri?" Miles suggested, rescuing his smarting hand. "It has a mad gleam in its eye."

"I am not naming my cat after my great uncle," Gregor said.

"How about Vlad, then? I've always thought that'd make a great horse's name. Close enough. And hey - your cat?"

"Well," said Gregor seriously. "He seems to be . . . doing with me, as it were."

"Vorfelus," Miles offered after a moment.

"That's . . . vaguely obscene."

"Is it?" Miles asked brightly.
Gregor ignored him. He reached out one careful hand, and within a few minutes had the little beast arching and rolling and purring beneath his fingers. Miles watched with not a little envy. Why would the cursed animals never do that for him? . . . And would he purr if Gregor stroked his belly?

"Negri," Gregor said.

"Negri?" Miles repeated, with some skepticism.

"Yes," Gregor said firmly. "They called him my grandfather's familiar, you know. I think it's appropriate."

"Do you think Negri would think it was appropriate?" Miles asked, raising an eyebrow.

Gregor ignored him once again. "I hence forth Imperially declare you Negri," he informed the cat, who responded by arching his back into Gregor's stroking hand.

Miles flopped down next to him, receiving a pre-emptive feline glower as he shifted close to Gregor's side. Gregor spared one hand from cat coddling and slid it warmly around Miles's back. Miles looked up at him, at the neat, patrician profile, the softly amused quirk of the mouth, the sleepy relaxation in his eyes. He had the feeling, as he often did when they were alone, that he had unknowingly passed through the locked and barred gates of a fortress and was seeing things few others ever had. Are my footsteps the only ones here? A surge of satisfaction greeted the thought, and Miles went still all over.

. . . oh. He blinked once, then again. When did that happen?

"By the way," he said quietly, "you should know. I've gone and fallen in love with you."

He was close enough to feel, as well as hear, Gregor's breath catch. He was suddenly the sole focus of those eyes, and they were no longer sleepy at all, but endless and devouring. And, he thought, feeling his mouth split in a grin, more than a little wondering.

"I . . . am still falling. You are - it goes on and on, and I - I -" Gregor struggled, swallowed, and Miles held his breath to see that diplomatically polished, brilliant people-handler so . . . undone.

When was it, then? When he knew your strength before you did? When he poured himself out at your feet and then let it all lie there, waiting for you to be done running?

Gregor sounded so lost, and so amazed.

Ten years, Miles thought. They kissed slowly, exquisitely careful like the very first time. Only Miles had no intention of stopping, now.

"How much time do you have?" he asked softly.

"I cleared everything," Gregor replied, just as quietly. "All night. I didn't want to be presumptuous, but I was feeling . . . optimistic." He raised an eyebrow. "And how are you feeling?"

"I am feeling . . ." Miles paused, but no great words of either wisdom or romance rose to his lips. "Nervous," he finally confessed.

"Me too," Gregor said quietly. "I mean, I know how things are supposed to go, but I've never . . ." Gregor paused. "You haven't either, right? Not," he added hastily, "that I would be upset if you had . . ."

"I haven't," Miles said. "Well, I mean, there was this herm, but it was pretty complicated and we -
"Okay," Gregor said. He sounded relieved. "Then we'll just . . . figure things out together."

They packed the picnic things back up. Miles shoved his feelings of general nervousness as far down as they would go, hoping they would sort themselves out once he was . . . occupied. Even with Elli, he had held back. Had been forced to, really; she hadn't wanted Lord Vorkosigan. No one ever had before, not even Miles. Except, apparently, Gregor.

Gregor sent him on ahead with a tilt of the chin. Miles paused momentarily in the hallway, listening to the subdued sounds of Gregor settling the cat, then to the even timbre of his voice as he spoke briefly by com to one of his Armsmen. The subtext of the casual phrasing was clear even from here - he didn't want to be disturbed short of a coup, and that only if it looked like the coup was going to succeed.

Miles left the bedroom door wide open. He paused a moment, considering, then shed only his boots and socks before climbing up onto the bed. Gregor appeared in the doorway, eyes dark and hungry.

"Thought I'd leave this part for you," said Miles, waving a hand at his clothes. Gregor blinked once, fast, then came across the room in a few quick strides, the door swinging shut behind him.

"I never thought -" he said a few minutes later, muffled against Miles's cheek. Gregor's hands were shaking on his skin as they slid beneath Miles's clothes.

"I think," Miles said slowly, "that you should stop thinking about all those years now."

"Sorry," Gregor said. "I just don't quite believe it still. I mean, I do, but -"

"I understand." Miles slid both arms up Gregor's back and clasped him warmly. "But now that you've got me here - for hours and hours, even - I think you should start thinking about what you're going to do with me." He grinned. "And what I'm going to do with you."

"Still nervous?" Gregor murmured.

"No," Miles whispered back honestly. "Not a bit."

Miles was sprawled across him, dozing, but not, Gregor thought from his breathing, quite yet asleep. He was smaller at rest, the illusion of size he projected around himself fallen away in a still tangle of small hands and bony shoulders and short legs. Gregor lay still and tried not to breathe too much. He was sleepy, too, but this . . . this he would stay awake for.

*I'm going to be so good to you,* he thought, and couldn't help reaching to touch, because his hands were allowed, his fingers had license to slide into the short dark hair and his palm over that deceptively innocent face. Predictably, Miles was a light sleeper. He stirred at the first touch, then yawned and stretched, making charming sleepy noises. He propped himself up on Gregor's chest and surveyed him with the bright eyes of someone who was used to waking at a moment's notice.

"That went well," he said judiciously, in the tones of a vindicated tactician.

"Mmm," said Gregor, smiling.

Miles seemed in no hurry to move. In fact he resettled himself with the air of someone making himself comfortable for the duration. One hand curled proprietarily about Gregor's bicep and a sigh
gusted across his bare shoulder. Gregor basked in him for a long moment, lazy and instinctively greedy like a lizard beneath the sun. He moved after a time, though, bending his head to try and get a look at Miles's face.

"You . . . enjoyed yourself?" he asked, wincing at the tremor of shyness in his voice.

Miles tilted his head minutely. "Um, yeah. Sorry, was I not clear enough about that?"

"No," said Gregor hastily. "I was just . . . making sure." He fished under the covers, located Miles's free hand, and brought it to his lips.

"We should get up," said Miles conversationally. "Should shower . . ."

"We still have dessert," said Gregor agreeably.

Neither one of them moved.

"You probably shouldn't stay the night," said Gregor, regretfully into the silence.

"I know." Miles didn't lift his head. "Maybe . . . we can figure something out for next time, have the car leave without me and I'll get home via ImpSec . . . something."

"Mmm," said Gregor. "I'll take care of it." He wondered what General Allegre would say when he realized he'd been brought in on the information loop so he could coordinate Gregor's sex life.

He kissed Miles's hand again, turning it to lay his mouth along the knuckles, then once more in the hollow at the base of his palm. Something had come unlocked inside him, a hidden treasure trove of secret wants and outrageous fantasies tucked away out of sight for ten years. He imagined walking the ballroom with Miles on his arm, the glitter of the Consort's seal at his throat, wondered if anyone had ever given him roses or indulged him with all the extravagance Gregor could command. All perfectly wonderful and perfectly foolish, of course. Courting Miles was like fishing for trout and hooking a deep-sea mystery; he was as likely to be the romancer as the romanced, and Gregor couldn't help wondering just who would be on whose arm.

And through all of it he chanted promises in his head, swearing oaths on all the things he would do and be, if just to please the man drifting comfortably off to sleep on his shoulder.

He took a breath, gripped with sudden urgency. "Miles?"

Miles stirred, as if from a light sleep. "Hmm?"

"I," said Gregor, "I need you to know how serious I am."

"You're always serious," said Miles, sleepily indulgent.

"No. I mean about you. About us."

Miles did move then, peering up over his arm with a curious furrow between his eyes. "I know that," he said gently. "You never would have said a word if you weren't."

Gregor nodded. "Yes. But I . . . you should know what you could do to me. I'm not trying to trap you, but I need to say . . . you are the center of all things for me now, and it's not wise and it's not fair to you but I -"

Miles hushed him with a finger across the mouth. "I know," he said softly. "Gregor, I know. And I'm . . . I'm terrified, all right?" He blinked once, dark lashes sweeping down over wide gray eyes.
He did know, Gregor realized, a little dizzy with relief. He knew the awesome responsibility that had been laid at his feet when Gregor laid himself there. "You chose me," Miles said on a single breath. "You chose me for this, and I'm coming to think I can be anything if you ask it."

"My consort?" Gregor asked, his heart in his voice, he knew. "It's ridiculous - I almost wouldn't wish it on my enemy, let alone someone I love."

Miles laughed quietly against the bare skin of his shoulder. "I'm no shrinking maiden," he said, and squeezed Gregor's arm. "You don't need to read me the warning label; I am Aral Vorkosigan's son, and I've known you since I was born."

"It will be an extraordinary change of life," Gregor reminded. "Much of your freedom will be gone. Your children's freedom will be gone. You may one day die because -"

"I know," said Miles calmly. "Gregor, I do know."

"And you still . . ?"

"Yes. I still." His smile was kind, but there was such a look in his eye, a flat, unmoving implacability that made Gregor think he could shake Barrayar in its orbit, if he but tried. And he would, that was for certain.

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Ivan sat up from where he'd been slumped on one of the benches in the entrance of Vorkosigan House, as the headlights from the groundcar swept across the windows. Finally, he thought grouchily. He'd been here going on two hours now. Two hours that could have been spent with Emeline. Miles had bloody well better appreciate this. Listening, Ivan realized that they'd pulled the groundcar into the garage. He went and stationed himself just inside the door, so that when Pym opened it and Miles appeared, he could pounce immediately.

"Good God, what took you so bloody long?" he demanded when Miles emerged at last.

Infuriatingly, Miles did not look the least surprised to see him, and even ignored Ivan for the moment. "Thank you, Pym," he said pointedly. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said, and vanished upstairs.

Miles glanced around at the ImpSec agents and said, "Let's go into my sitting room. Roic," he added to his Armsman on duty, "please send up some coffee, and perhaps see if there are any of Ma Kosti's pastries left over."

To Ivan's dismay, he found that he couldn't quite keep up the same level of indignation once he'd been plied with coffee and sweets. Miles sat across from him, sipping a cup of coffee, looking awfully smug about something, and ignoring the pastries all together. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Hours," Ivan said, attempting to scowl, but unable to do so with much effectiveness around his mouth of cream cake. "Your mother was here until about an hour ago. She said she'd be gone for the night, and that you were at the Residence," he added, almost accusingly. "And that I should under no circumstances go over there. I thought you'd be home ages ago, dammit. What took you so long?"
Miles sipped his coffee and looked alarmingly innocent. Ivan stared at him, trying in vain to ignore the suspicion that had been growing in his mind ever since Aunt Cordelia had laid a hand on his arm and gently advised him to wait at Vorkosigan House. He saw Miles watching him in what he assumed was supposed to be a covert fashion, the same damn smirk lurking about his lips. A mental image flashed, completely unbidden, and Ivan felt the blood drain out of his face. He put the pastry aside as his stomach turned.

"You didn't," he managed weakly.

"I had a very nice dinner with Gregor," Miles said with maddening calm. "And then we had . . . dessert." Ivan glowered. "You know," he added, smirking overtly now, "that shade of green your face just turned clashes terribly with your uniform."

"Urgh," Ivan replied succinctly. "Miles, that's . . ." He decided just in time that 'disgusting' might not be the most diplomatic word, and switched to a strangled and questioning, "Wonderful?"

"Thank you," Miles said, evidently enjoying Ivan's vast discomfort. "It was, actually."

"No need for details," Ivan said hastily.

"I wasn't going to offer them," Miles said reassuringly. He sat back. "Now, you mind telling me why you're here? I have a thrilling evening of seizure inducement ahead of me." He glared at the seizure stimulator, which Roic had brought in with the coffee and pastries, and left sitting pointedly on the small end table.

"Oh," Ivan said, suddenly reminded of his reason for being there in the first place. "I was accosted in my parking lot," he said, managing to refind his indignation.

Miles raised his eyebrows. "Accosted?"

"Yes." Ivan outlined the encounter as quickly but thoroughly as possible, hoping he could avoid an Admiral Naismith-style interrogation if he got enough details in the first time around. Miles listened, looking, unfortunately, more puzzled by the moment. "They were hell-bent on Admiral Naismith," Ivan concluded. "I'm not even sure they know who you really are, except . . . well, why would they be looking for you here if they didn't?"

"Hmm," Miles said. "This is interesting. I've heard nothing about a second copy from anyone except these two . . . you notice anything unusual about the new guy?"

Ivan shrugged. "Not really. Normal build. Didn't have a clue how to handle a stunner, so my guess is that he's not usually the military type. The other one seemed more at home with the situation."

"Did either of them seem to be in charge?"

"Not really." Ivan hesitated. "But I think - I'm pretty sure they were a couple."

"Ah!" Miles said. "Well, at least we have motive now." He fell silent for a moment. "Hmm," he said at last. "The why seems obvious, but the who and the how and the where . . . are less so. How do they know about androgenesis to begin with? Not to mention Admiral Naismith." He was silent again. Ivan let him think, and watched as the wheels almost visibly turned. "Thank you, Ivan," he said at last. "I think I'm going to have to process this overnight. As much as I can process anything after one of these damn seizures. If you swing by tomorrow after work I might have something."

"Dinner?" Ivan said hopefully and Miles grinned.
"Yeah, why not? My mother might be back by then - did she say where she was going? Or when exactly she'd be back?" Ivan shook his head. "That's odd," Miles said. He shrugged this off and rose. "Could you send Roic in on your way out?"

Ivan's glance followed his to the seizure stimulator. "I'll do it, if you want," he said.

Miles bit his lip, obviously battling with his pride "Fine," he said, with some reluctance. "Come on, then," he added. "I usually lie on the floor." He folded to sit cross-legged on the rug beside the sofa.

"What am I supposed to be doing?" Ivan asked, dropping down to sit by his cousin.

Miles reached for the device, slipping the band over his head and adjusting the contact point at his temple. "Not much," he said, in a flattened, businesslike tone that practically screamed 'embarrassed, miserable, angry.' It's not like you could help dying and being brought back not quite right, you stupid bugger. "Just watch me. Make sure I don't flail around too much and hurt myself."

"Right," Ivan said, and moved a bit closer. The last time he'd seen one of these, he'd nearly swallowed his own tongue. Miles had looked bad enough, spattered with blood, his face a mess, and Ivan knew he hadn't been the only one to jump to the most awful conclusion when Miles just folded up in the middle of the Residence foyer like a puppet with its strings cut. Luckily for them all, Pym had kept his wits about him, stopped Miles from banging his head on the way down, and snatched a light pen from General Allegre's pocket to stick in his lord's mouth. After that it had just been a matter of tense waiting, with Gregor about to implode and Allegre interrogating people right and left. But still, Ivan liked to think he at least knew what to expect now.

Miles adjusted the headset one last time, popped in the mouth guard, and reached for the control pack. He hefted it, putting a finger on the switch, then paused, a strange expression crossing his face.

"What?" Ivan asked, when Miles didn't move for several moments.

Miles set the control pack down with the utmost care, then ripped the headset off with sudden, violent haste. He sat up, breathing very fast.

"What?" Ivan repeated, alarmed.

"There's a toolkit in the table behind you," Miles said through tight lips. "Get it for me."

Ivan hesitated, then did as ordered, producing a surprisingly well-stocked kit of hand tools. He passed it to Miles, who hadn't moved, but stared at his stimulator through gradually narrowing eyes.

"What?" Ivan said for the third time, becoming exasperated.

"I don't know," Miles said. "But . . ." He trailed off, popping open the toolkit, then reaching out to gingerly rotate the control pack until he found an access panel. He selected a magnetic decoupler from the kit, turned the control pack away from both of them, and began gently working at the access panel, arms stretched to their full length.

"The hell," Ivan began. He was starting to get a very bad feeling.

"It's too heavy," Miles said lowly. "Not much. I barely noticed. But I'm sure. It's too heavy. There's something else in there."
"Well, don't open it," Ivan yelped, scooting backwards rapidly. "Shouldn't you call ImpSec?"

"Probably," Miles said, hissing in satisfaction as the access panel popped off. He crawled around, electing not to move the control pack again, and peered at it, face close to the floor.

There was a long, fraught silence.

"Well?" Ivan said after a moment. "Are you completely paranoid, or are you right?"

Miles sat up very slowly. "Both, as it happens," he said, lips pulling back and teeth flashing. "Have a look."

Ivan did. It took him several moments to make sense of the neat bundles of silver wiring, the ingenious little circuit board, the interweaving of the more finely conductive organic circuitry. It all looked perfectly normal, except for a tiny bundle of extra wires, neatly but hastily twisted together, leading from the central circuit board to a small, wicked looking, frighteningly familiar black crystal.

"Good God," Ivan breathed, reaching out a finger, then drawing it back. "Is that the energy matrix for a nerve disrupter?"

"Oh yes," Miles said, grimly pleased. "If I had tried to induce a seizure, it would have shunted the charge straight through the contact point into my brain. Quite ingenious, really." He paused, staring. "I wonder . . ." He reached in and began tugging gently at the wires, revealing more wrapped out of site beyond the panel opening.

"Um," Ivan said, rocking nervously up into a crouch. "Shouldn't we be calling someone about this?"

"Yes," Miles said, head bent as he worked. "The question is, who?"

"ImpSec?" Ivan suggested hopefully.

Miles didn't answer right away. Instead, he hunched closer, pulling with delicate flicks of the wrist as wire pooled in deceptively harmless loops around his hands. After a moment he made a small, satisfied noise, and sat back. "No ImpSec," he said with finality.

Ivan leaned over, and nearly passed out. "Miles," he hissed, voice falling to a whisper for no real reason.

"Elegant," Miles said, staring at the small but thankfully, blessedly heavy wad of explosive. "I've set a bomb just like this one before," he added, voice going thoughtful. "It's a neat trick - it's triggered by the backwash from a primary process. A plasma arc discharge will do, or a nerve disrupter. You set it somewhere, then figure a way to startle your enemy into firing a shot close by. And they blow themselves up for you. Very nice. In fact, I learned that in one of the special covert ops training courses."

Their eyes met, and Ivan saw with mounting terror the lurking panic in Miles's gaze. "What do we do?" Ivan asked. "And, uh, shouldn't you disarm that thing?"

Miles yanked out several wires with an absent twist. Ivan flinched, but nothing happened. "It seems rather redundant," Miles said, voice still flat and distant, almost academic. "I would have died instantly with just the disrupter charge. Why blow me up? And half of Vorkosigan House, while you're at it?"
"Um, redundancy?" Ivan suggested. "There are some rumors that you have multiple lives. Well founded, as it happens."

Miles drummed his fingers restlessly on his knees. Though he didn't move, Ivan had the impression of someone poised, ready to leap, still at the cusp of decision. Miles took a deep breath, let it out, then stood in one swift motion. Ivan scrambled to join him.

"Stick your head out the door and ask Roic to step in here," Miles said. "I hope he's alone. If he's in House uniform, tell him to run and change into streetwear first, but also tell him to be sure not to be seen by anybody. Thank God my mother's not here - tell Roic to tell Pym, in person if he can, but by wristcom if he must, to wait for my mother to return, and when she does to get her out of the house. Vorkosigan Surleau should be safe enough. Tell Pym to remember what I said, and to choose which of the retainers he brings very carefully. You got all that?"

"What will you be doing?" Ivan demanded.

Miles hesitated, halfway to his bedroom door. "Packing a few things," he said, emotionlessness overtaken for a moment with a bleak little smile. "Tell Roic to report back here as soon as he's changed."

"Packing?" Ivan repeated.

"No choice," Miles said, shrugging. "I can't stay here and wait for the next try, and maybe miss it. And next time, maybe my mother will be home. Something has to be done."

He disappeared into the bedroom, and Ivan stood a moment, mouth open. Then he closed it with a snap and crossed the room, making a wide, uneasy circle around the seizure stimulator cum weapon, gutted on the antique rug before the sofa. Miles seemed to know what he was doing, and for now, that would just have to be enough.

Roic was thankfully alone outside the door. Ivan gestured him in, and conveyed Miles's instructions in a low voice. Roic, eyes very wide as he took in the evidence, nodded and ducked out. He left Ivan alone with a disarmed bomb, not daring even to pace.
Chapter 15

His secure data case, complete with Auditor's seal. An extra stunner power pack. The nerve disrupter from the bottom drawer of his bedside table. A small stack of unmarked credit chits, hoarded away, a precaution Gran'da had quietly, fiercely insisted on. Gran'da's dagger. Miles hesitated a moment over that last, surprised at the re-emergence of a childish habit. *It's not like you won't be back for it later. You have to be.* He grimaced, and slipped it into the top of his boot.

He paused before the mirror, checking his attire for any trace of identifiability. He had dressed casually that day, and nothing sprang out at him apart from his own height, which he could do nothing about. He turned a quick, tight circle in the middle of his bedroom. Everything he needed could easily be secreted around his person. Here he was, about to flee into the night for the second time in as many months, and he wasn't even carrying an overnight bag this time. *And where are you going, boy? What are you going to do?* Miles's fingers stole treacherously to the tiny comlink, the weight become a comfortable habit in such a short time. Should he? Dare he? If the booby trap were an isolated incident, aimed at him alone, dragging Gregor into the middle of it could be disastrous in so many ways. But if Miles wasn't the only target, or even the primary one . . . Where lay duty, and where his own desires? He had begun to count on their congruence in recent weeks, soothed by an easy harmony of purpose that now shattered into discord.

Miles strode back into the sitting room, pulling a dark jacket over his shoulders as he did. Ivan waited, tense and straight-backed, in unconscious guardsman stance by the closed door. "What now?" he asked.

"We need to get out of the house," Miles said. "Out from under ImpSec's thumb."

"And then?" Ivan persisted.

Miles bent, shoving the gutted control pack, explosive and all, under the sofa. Any delay the confusion of his disappearance could cause in the men who were supposed to be his protectors was precious. "And then I figure out how large this plot is," he said, straightening up. "And then I dismantle it."

"Um," said Ivan. He blinked for a moment, then seemed to pull himself to focus on one thing. "How will we get out of the house without being seen? There are at least eight ImpSec men scattered around here, not to mention some of your mother's people." *Good lad,* Miles thought in dour amusement. *Focus on one thing at a time. The rest will work itself out when it must.*

There came a quiet rap at the door, and Ivan jumped. He turned, hand slipping under his tunic to his stunner as he cracked the door. Then he relaxed, stepping back to allow Roic and Pym to pass.

"Did anyone see you?" Miles asked Roic, who was now dressed in nondescript streetwear.

"No, m'lord. I think I know the pattern most of the agents are walking," Roic said. "Er, I thought you might need these," he added, pushing a bundle at Ivan. Another set of clothes, Miles saw, castigating himself for not realizing that Ivan, straight off work and still in undress greens, would be rather noticeable. Ivan, firmly in emergency 'can go from competent to idiot in two seconds or less' mode, took the bundle dubiously.

"Um," Miles said uncomfortably. "Ivan . . . you don't have to come with me."

Ivan shot him a scathing look. "Are you joking? My mother would kill me if I let you go running
off by yourself. Your mother would kill me. I have very specific instructions for these sorts of situations. And let's not get started on Gregor." He stopped, indignation sliding away to alarm, and then to practiced blankness. "Miles," he said slowly, "do you suppose -"

"I don't know," Miles cut him off. He turned in a tight circle on the rug. "The bomb was redundant. But was it a precaution, or did they need something big and flashy as the signal for . . . something else? They couldn't be precisely sure when I'd next induce a seizure . . ." Possibilities began spiraling through his brain, most petering out into nothingness for sheer lack of data. The decision was deceptively simple. If Gregor is in danger, it's my duty to get him out. If he's not, I could put him there. He felt a sudden, very un-Barrayaran urge to take a vote. Let the four of them decide collectively, ease the sudden burden of responsibility off him just a little.

The comconsole chimed, loud in the silence, and they all jumped.

"It's just a message," Miles said, leaning over to look. He straightened, glancing at Ivan. "Are you sure?"

Ivan nodded, and ducked into the bedroom to change without a backward glance. Your loyalty humbles me. I doubt I'll be able to repay you in glory. Not this time.

Miles dropped into the comconsole chair, keying for the message with little more intention than to distract himself. He sat up straight, though, as the tight beam message downloaded and decoded, and Lily Durona's face formed above the plate.

"Lord Auditor Vorkosigan," she said formally. She looked very tired, Miles saw, tired and angry. "I regret to inform you that our research has come to what appears to be an impasse. All our experiments have ended in failure, and it has become clear with time that our data is corrupted."

She paused, mouth twisting in anger. "Sabotaged, I should say. We were foolish to keep only one copy of the initial data, as well as our work, but I thought it to be safer. It appears I was wrong. Sometime after we left Escobar and before we arrived on Beta Colony, our initial data was compromised. Very skillfully manipulated, even. It took us several weeks to realize what had happened, and to conclude that we do not have the knowledge to fix it. I regret to inform you. She sounds like she's telling me my father died. No, he realized, as Lily continued on, her voice falling to a low drone in his hearing. Not his father, his children. Miles sat still in the comconsole chair, shaken down to the very core of himself at the depths of that wrench. A troop of little dark haired terrors flashed before him, with the Countess's eyes and the capacity for Gregor's ineffable stillnesses. He already loved them, and he had never met them, hadn't even known they were lurking there in his head. With their uprooting came all the rest of it, dreams newly planted but sturdy none the less, the blooming certainty, nurtured with Gregor's greatest skill and tenderness, that he could help push Barrayar to the next peak, that he wanted to, with Gregor at his side. All destroyed now, in one awful night? It's not fair. I didn't even know I wanted this so much.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he whirled in the chair to find Ivan, dressed innocuously in Roic's slightly too large clothing, face tight with sympathy. Behind Miles, the vid plate was dark and silent, Lily having finished delivering her awful tidings without his notice.

"I'm sorry," Ivan said gently.

Miles nodded, not prepared to speak just yet. He was paralyzed with impotent anguish, stripped of a newly minted future by an enemy whose face he had yet to even glimpse. The anguish gathered about that thought, shifted and boiled uneasily, like deep flowing water meeting a rock. I have no idea who you are, but oh how I hate you . . .

Miles straightened. Ivan's hand fell away, and he stepped back, eyebrows rising in inquiry.
No. This . . . this will not be taken. I refuse. It's mine - it's ours - and you cannot have it.

Anger gathered, mounting higher and higher. Miles let it, reveling in the full-body flush of rage. Then he stood, and with the movement he pressed the anger back down, forcing it into something harder, something cooler.

He lifted his wrist to his mouth, keying the little comlink. "Gregor?"

Ivan started and made a move as if to stop him, then subsided. There were several beats of silence, and Miles was just beginning to feel real fear, to wonder if the signal had been passed somehow despite him. Then the comlink engaged, and Gregor's voice, blessedly muzzy with safe, undisturbed sleep, responded.

"Miles? Is it my turn to talk you to sleep?"

"No," Miles said. "Not tonight, I'm afraid."

"What is it?" Gregor asked, sounding suddenly much more alert.

"I'm leaving Vorkosigan House in the next few minutes," Miles said steadily. "Ivan is with me, and I'll bring one of my Armsmen. There was a nasty little surprise waiting for me here tonight, with ImpSec fingerprints all over it. I'm fine," he added, as Gregor took an audible breath.

There was the rustling of bedcovers, and then the thump of bare feet hitting the floor. "Where should I meet you?"

"I'm not sure if you need -"

"Where, Miles?"

"The old Vorloupulous Bridge, on this side of the river," Miles said. "Can you get a groundcar?"

"Yes. Will you be on foot?"

"We can make it. Um," he wet his lips and cleared his throat. "You should know. I also just received a message from Lily Durona. Her research has been sabotaged. Irretrievably, she thinks."

There was a barely perceptible pause. "I see," Gregor said neutrally. "I can be at the bridge in about forty minutes."

Miles let out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding. "There might still be another copy," he said. "I never told you, but there's still a chance. I just don't know -"

"All right," said Gregor. "We'll manage. Right now, concentrate on getting out of there safely."

"Okay," Miles said. "You too. Vorkosigan out." He lowered his wrist slowly, eyes on the floor as actions clicked into place, one after another in his head. One thing at a time. "Right," he said, lifting his eyes. "Here's what we're going to do. Roic, you and Ivan will come with me upstairs. Try not to look as if anything's wrong. We're just off to retrieve something from my old room. We might not see anybody, but if we do, be normal. Pym, where's Jankowski?"

"Below stairs, m'lord," Pym said. "I woke him just now and told him to wait."

"Good man," Miles said, nodding. "The two of you are going to have to stay here and wait for my mother. She brought six of the other Armsmen with her, but I'd like you to be there, too. And besides, one of you will need to figure a way to get the force screen down for a few minutes so we
can get out. After that, though, you and Jankowski both need to get rid of your wristcoms. I could be traced by them."

Pym frowned. "But if you need us, m'lord -"

"I'll have Roic," Miles said. Roic straightened bravely, but the effect was ruined by an audible gulp. "And Ivan," Miles added. "And whoever Gregor brings along."

"Yes, m'lord," Pym said disapprovingly.

"Preferably I'd like there to be as little alarm as possible, or even none, when the force screen goes down. Use your initiative on how to do it. I'll signal you in about fifteen minutes when we're ready to go - will that be enough time?"

Pym squinted, then nodded. "Yes, m'lord," he said, saluted in what must have been a combat reflex, and exited.

"Okay," Miles said, glancing from Ivan to Roic. "Are we ready? Normal, remember."

"Where are we going?" Ivan demanded.

"Upstairs, to retrieve something from my old room," Miles said.

Ivan frowned. "But you moved everything out of there over the winter."

"I did," Miles agreed. "But I put all of Admiral Naismith's things up there after Winterfair. Haven't bothered going through them since. There are a few items we'll need."

Ten minutes later, Miles and Ivan paused side by side at the top of the final flight of stairs, in front of the roof door. Miles felt much more dressed now, with his pockets weighed down by an assortment of Admiral Naismith's old gear. Beside him, Ivan was playing stupid cousin to the hilt. No one looking at him, Miles knew, would be able to guess that he was currently concealing at least nine deadly weapons, half of which were illegal on most civilized planets, and a few even on Barrayar. Behind them, a step below, Roic waited, hand hovering twitchily over his stunner.

"I still object to this," Ivan said. "Just so you know."

"Noted," said Miles. "You ready?"

"No," said Ivan. "Let's go." He managed to get out the door first, alert watchfulness camouflaged by a casual swagger. Miles followed him, resisting the urge to whistle an innocent tune. The roof door was set in a protruding central cylinder, housing the stairs and some of the bulkier environmental control and ventilation systems. The ImpSec man on this side of the roof whipped around at the sound of the door opening, then relaxed into a formal salute.

"Good evening, Lieutenant," Miles said cordially. "All quiet up here?"

"Yes, my lord. Everything is fine."

"Excellent," said Miles. "And, er, sorry."

"My lord?" the man asked in puzzlement. Miles drew his stunner and shot him. Beside him, Ivan stifled a low moan.

"Roic," Miles snapped.
"He's coming, m'lord," Roic said, and Miles lifted his stunner once again as the second guard, alerted by the characteristic sound of the discharge, rounded the stubby tower at a dead run. Roic's shot brought him down in his tracks.

"Couldn't we, I don't know, have done this any other way?" Ivan asked, plaintively surveying the two uniformed, crumpled bodies.

"No," Miles sighed. "I thought about trying to set them up to take each other out, but it was too complicated. Would you rather I'd shot the first man, then told the second he'd tried to kill me? Would have worked, probably."

Ivan winced. "No. But those of us with acting commissions tend to have problems when we go around stunning fellow officers. Even subordinates."

"Well, you're fine then," Miles said. "Roic and I did it. Come on, help me dose them and get them stowed."

Ivan glowered and winced, but his hands were steady and efficient as he and Miles administered a small dose of a powerful sedative to each guard, then relieved them of comlinks and weapons. Miles distributed the weapons between the three of them, rather redundantly except for the wicked and very much unofficial knife one man had been carrying. Assassin's tool, or simply a personal innovation? No way to tell, and it hardly mattered now. The comlinks he dropped over the side of the building. Let the trackers waste a few minutes mucking through the muddy side yard. The two unconscious men they stuck out of sight, bundled together in the narrow crawlspace for repairs on the heating or cooling units. It was rather obvious, but it would buy a little time, and Miles felt every minute to be precious. With all luck, though, they wouldn't be discovered for at least two hours, when they failed to make a scheduled check-in.

"Right," Miles said, straightening up after wedging the rusted repairs hatch shut and brushing his hands off. "Now comes the fun part." Ivan turned slightly green, and Roic, who had been pacing an uneasy security perimeter around them, winced.

Miles considered a moment, then crossed the roof to lean over the chest-high stone wall on the east side. The few lights burning in the windows beneath him cast scattered patches of illumination over the bare expanse of ground between the wall of the house and the high, iron-spiked wall marking the physical bounds of the property as well as the force screen. Miles glanced reflexively up, imagining for a moment he could see the screen arching overhead as he knew it did, forming a protective dome over the house that could only be breached at the front gate. It wouldn't stop a ship on collision course, but it was certainly enough to keep inquisitive birds out. Impressive as the technology might be, it was designed to cope only with the small scale, to prevent any sort of physical invasion such as the one that had damaged Miles in his mother's womb. Good for keeping the crazies out, and apparently, the crazies in, too.

He lifted his com to his mouth. "Pym?"

"We're ready, m'lord," Pym returned instantly.

"Right," said Miles. He reached into his belt and withdrew the deceptively tiny cylinder that concealed the spool of drop wire, ribbon harness, and gravitic grappler of his rappelling gear. The apparatus unfolded easily in his hands, and he affixed the grappler solidly to the underside of the lip of the wall on the inside edge of the roof. He tested it with a powerful jerk, then unspooled the fine, enormously strong drop line, and shook out the harness. "I'll go first," he said over his shoulder. Roic looked as if he would have liked to object, but couldn't quite manage it. Miles turned back to the wall and secured himself in the harness. He tugged one last time on the straps,
then boosted himself up to sit on the wall with a mighty heave. "All right, Pym," he said into his wristcom. "Bring it down."

Pym acknowledged, and there were a few moments of silence. Then, rising out of the darkness from the other side of the house like the howlings of a furious spirit, came a great, blood-chilling shriek. Miles jumped, and nearly fell right off the wall. "Pym?" he demanded into his com. "What the hell is going on?"

"The cat is annoyed," Pym said succinctly.

"Right," Miles breathed, grinning. "Good job. How much time will we have, do you think?"

"Depends on if Jankowski can get them all out of the control room in the guard house," Pym said. "But at least four of them ought to head for that. Might even turn it off themselves if they think we've got something stuck in the tangle fields. Save Jankowski from maybe having to clobber one of them."

"That would be best," Miles murmured. "I've only got the one harness and there's only so much -"

"It's down," Jankowski said, his voice cutting crisply across theirs. "Captain Bremer turned it off himself. He's still in the control room, but I should be able to hang about and make helpful suggestions and warn you when it's coming back up."

"Try to make that an advance warning," Miles said. He glanced once behind him to Roic and Ivan, watching nervously, and nodded encouragement. Then he rose to a crouch, turned around, and stepped backward into empty space.

Five minutes later he landed on his rear in the dirt, effectively blind in the total darkness outside the perimeter wall. It wasn't so much the descent itself that had been so bad as the part where he'd had to swing far out over space and control his drop down the outer wall as to miss the bristling spikes. Miles let out an explosive breath of relief, and climbed shakily to his feet.

"I'm down," he said, keying his wristcom. "Roic, tell Ivan to head downstairs and make like I've gone to bed and he's leaving." He worked himself out of the ribbon harness with trembling, aching hands. He could feel the imprint of the control handles in both his palms. "All right," he added, bundling the harness together so no loose strap would catch on anything.

Roic acknowledged and the harness rose out of Miles's hands, slithering up the wall and out of sight. "Um," Miles said after a moment. "Have you ever rappelled before, Roic?"

"Yes, m'lord," Roic said, "in the training courses in Hassadar. But . . . not quite like this."

Miles chewed his lip. "It's really quite simple," he said at last. "You'll have an easier time than I did - you can jump harder. Just watch the distances and remember to keep your feet ready to catch you. You'll be fine."

"Yes, m'lord," Roic said, very dubiously Miles thought. "Lord Ivan just left," he added. "I'll be down shortly."

Miles waited, craning his head back fruitlessly in an attempt to chart Roic's progress. Vorkosigan House was a mysteriously vague mass, the upper floors in almost total darkness, only memory and long familiarity allowing him to fill in the line of the roof and the jut of the outermost east wing rooms.

What's next, boy? How are you going to do this?
I don't know yet. But I will. I have to.

Roic arrived above him on the wall with a rush of air, a thump, and some muffled swearing. Miles stepped hastily back, listening as Roic began making his way down towards him. He pulled a handlight from his belt, and risked playing it at the base of the wall. Roic's face, when he arrived within the circle of light, was a sickly gray. He dropped the last few feet to the ground in one jerk and huddled there, looking like he might kiss the dirt.

Miles touched his shoulder. "Okay?"

"Yes, m'lord," Roic said, and staggered to his feet to get the harness off.

Both their wristcoms chirped simultaneously. "It's coming back up," Jankowski said tensely. "Maybe fifteen seconds for Bremer to walk back into the control room. He's rather scratched," he added thoughtfully.

"Come on," Miles said, helping Roic detangle the harness. "Hit the release - there it is." They stood together, watching the drop line retracting back into the spool as the grappler released, was dragged over the roof wall, and fell towards them. Miles could tell when it hit the ground by the change of tension in the line as it began pulling the weight up and over the perimeter wall. He checked his chrono and winced. It wouldn't be quite as bad for the grappler to be found in the side yard as it would have been for it to be left on the roof, but still . . .

There was a small shower of bluish sparks at the top of the wall, and the faint odor of singed plastic. Miles swore, prodding the drop spool as if that could make it go faster. But then the grappler arrived, thumping into his hands hard enough to hurt. It was just a little singed, he saw, playing the handlight over it.

"We made it," Roic said, sounding more than a little surprised.

"We did," Miles agreed, stuffing the repacked harness and grappler into his belt. He glanced up one more time at the wall, and the house beyond. "I have to admit," he said thoughtfully, "I never pictured myself having to break out of my own house. Come on," he added more briskly. "We need to get moving."

Ivan met them on a corner, two blocks east of Vorkosigan House, just as they had arranged.

"Any trouble?" Miles asked, drawing Ivan with him back into the shadows of a looming office building.

"No," Ivan said, tapping his stunner holster rhythmically. "They were all still distracted by the cat. Captain Bremer wanted to make a report to you personally, to say what the disturbance was, but Pym said you were going to bed and he'd tell you, and that was it."

"All right," Miles breathed. "All right. We have some time then."

"We do," Ivan agreed. "The question is, for what?"

"To get to Vorloupulous Bridge," Miles returned. "Come on." He peered up the street. "We're going to have to be quick. There's no real way to be stealthy about it." This quarter was pretty deserted after nightfall, but they would have to cross some of the more active boulevards to get to the river. There was nothing for it, they were just going to have to count on anonymity. He moved off up the sidewalk, Ivan at his right and Roic behind.

*What happens when you get to the river and suddenly you're out of things to do?*
Then I'll find more things.

He glanced at his chrono, suppressing the urge to call Gregor again and see how he was doing. It would probably be best not to distract him right now. Miles broke into a jog, calculating the kilometers they needed to cover with some dismay. A groundcar, if Gregor could secure one, would be more than welcome, for whatever they ended up doing.

They were coming up on the next corner, and Miles slowed to turn. It was only that which stopped him from slamming full tilt into the man who came around it in the opposite direction, also at a rapid, triple-time jog. They both swerved, luckily in opposite directions, and Miles heard Ivan and Roic swear as they scrambled for weapons. Miles waved them frantically down. The last thing they needed was to start taking out hapless civilians. He was just constructing a quick apology, intending to duck right around the man and continue on his way, when the fellow spoke.

"Lord Vorkosigan," he said, sounding both startled and relieved. "What are you doing out here - never mind. I need your help."

Miles rocked back on his heels in dismay. Hapless, nothing. They just might have to start stunning civilians if he would be recognized so easily. He squinted at the man, a tall, blond, muscular type, but could not immediately place him.

"And you are?" he asked, deciding to play for time.

"My apologies," the man said, seeming to pull himself together. He bowed, a strangely familiar gesture with one hand splayed over his chest. "I am ghem-Captain Teppin. I'm very glad to have run into you. I was just about to try and figure a way to get into Vorkosigan House to speak with you."

"Ghem?" Miles repeated, startled. He took another look at the man, but his first impression was correct. This captain had not come with the Cetagandan delegation. Something tugged at the back of his brain, begging for attention, but Miles had none to spare as the man bowed once again.

"Yes, my Lord Auditor. I was told I should call on you, should I find it necessary, and I think I do. I've found the source of the androgenesis project."

Miles blinked rapidly. He had been accused more than once in his life of possessing luck above and beyond the call of reason. Yet this, falling right out of the sky into his path, seemed almost too much to believe. But if it could be believed . . . his heart leapt at the thought. He'd been desperate for this, intended to seek it out himself if it meant turning over every stone in the whole godforsaken Nexus. He glanced at his chrono again, then back over his shoulder up the deserted street.

"Come with us," he said. "We're in a bit of a hurry. You can talk along the way."

Teppin's eyebrows rose, but he fell in step with no further comment as they set off again. Ivan, on the other hand, said plenty with just one disbelieving look. Miles ignored him.

"So?" he prompted.

"My colleague and I have been on the trail of the Durona clones for months," Teppin began. "Or, I should say, what we thought they had. We were correct, as it turns out."

"They didn't originate it," Miles said, hopes crumbling.

"Oh goodness, no," Teppin said, waving that away. "They only had a copy. And it took us nearly a
month to confirm even that. We were sent after the copy, you see, with scant evidence as to where to find it."

"With what purpose?" Miles demanded. He had a sudden, horrible image of himself aiding a Star Crèche flunkie unknowingly. It would be just like a Cetagandan . . .

"To bring it back to the Empire, of course," Teppin said. One of Pel's people, then. Or probably. *If he knows where it is, does it matter? Deal with it later, when you have what you want.*

"How did your superiors get word of androgenesis in the first place?" Miles asked keenly.

Teppin hesitated. "There was an . . . unpleasant incident," he said at last. "A particular ghem officer was found to be, ah, dabbling in things an officer should not. The problem was . . . removed. But before he was brought to ground, the man managed to send an enormous chunk of information off Eta Ceta by tight beam."

"Huh," said Miles, decoding this and coming up with a very unpleasant picture. He wondered just what the Star Crèche did to ghem officers who annoyed them. *Or frightened them. Don't forget that.* "Continue," he said.

"We followed some technical leads as far as Beta colony, and from there ran into a bit of a roadblock. We had to split up. I followed the Durona clones to Escobar, and attempted to ascertain if they had what I wanted, and my partner chased another lead. To Barrayar, as it turned out. I lost contact with my partner - I found out later he was unavoidably detained." He grimaced in remembered annoyance. "But in his last message, he intimated that he had found the original source of androgenesis. He said to wait for him, but he never arrived. I didn't know what was happening, so I decided to stick to the doctor clones. Then you showed up and dragged them back to Barrayar. I was sure they had it, so I followed. Except once I was here I figured out what had happened to my partner, and I began following his tracks, trying to find what he'd been after."

"Interesting," said Miles. "Why would you drop the trail of a sure thing for an unsure one?"

"Well, it wasn't sure anymore," Teppin said, as if this were obvious. "I knew as soon as the clones left Barrayar that it was only a matter of time before someone got to them."

"Someone meaning whom exactly?" Miles asked delicately.

"A . . . misguided Cetagandan faction," Teppin said shortly. "I thought the original source would give me more security, anyway."

"And you found it," Miles said, cutting to the most important thing.

"Oh yes," Teppin said. They turned a corner and slowed to a more decorous walk as they entered a populated sector of the city. Bars and coffee houses lined the street, and Miles gritted his teeth as they wove in and out of the crowds of stylishly dressed young people milling about the sidewalk.

"Where is it?" Miles asked intently.

"Right on Barrayar," Teppin said. "In your Imperial Science Institute. That's why I need your help - I can't break in there by myself. That's been amply proven. But you're an Imperial Auditor. You can get me in."

"Um," said Miles. He decided not to mention that he was more or less on the run from Barrayaran security forces in general just at the moment. "Not to put too fine a point on it," he said, turning up a quieter side street, "but what's in it for me?"
"I beg your pardon?"

"You want me to help you waltz into a secure Barrayaran facility and get copies of top secret research - that's treasonous, you know - and you want me to let you take those copies back to the Cetagandan Empire." And that was another thing - the Imperial Science Institute? What the hell were their own people doing messing around with this thing, and more importantly, why hadn't anyone known about it? "What's in it for me?" he repeated.

"What do you want?" Teppin asked, with an open-palmed gesture that suggested Miles could name his price. Curiouser and curiouser . . .

"Hmm," said Miles, pretending to contemplate. "A copy, to start with, and a guarantee that it won't be . . . disturbed."

"Done," Teppin said instantly. Miles decided not to point out that he'd just given his word to the actions of a different Cetagandan faction. He chewed his lip, breaking into a jog again as they reached the river and turned north up the bank. Almost there.

"Where are we going?" Teppin asked, keeping up with an easy, loping stride.

"Classified," Miles said succinctly. The man was an intelligence agent - that ought to shut him up. And Miles very much wanted silence. If he could only get a few minutes to think about this . . .

A haut faction knew about androgenesis and wanted to see it destroyed. Another faction - at the moment consisting solely of Pel - didn't. So who was so bloody set against her? Was it the rest of the Star Crèche itself, or some of the male haut?

The shape of the bridge loomed out of the murky darkness along the river. They really needed to put lights along the bank, Miles thought, slowing and looking around. This was one of the older bridges, dating back to Emperor Dorca. For all of that, it was surprisingly pedestrian, just a stone arch rising over the dark, sluggish depths. It gave, on this side of the river, onto a small, forgotten stone plaza, surrounded by low-end novelty shops, now shuttered for the night. The place looked deserted, lit only by a few sputtering lamps in the middle of the square. Miles paused, looking again. Not quite deserted. A bulky shape sat, half concealed by the darkness, on the stone paved bank of the river beneath the first upsweep of the bridge's arch.

Miles dropped to a walk, and pointed. "Does that look like friend or foe?"

"Why don't you ask?" Ivan suggested, not unreasonably.

Miles nodded, keying his com. "Gregor? Is that you under the bridge?"

"Thank God," Gregor returned. "It's us. Come on and get out of the open."

A tight coil of worry in Miles's gut eased. He got out. He's fine. Then a new, titanic weight of worry settled in and began putting down roots. You do realize you've just effectively kidnapped the Emperor, don't you? I didn't mean to . . . much.

They crossed the remaining distance at a light trot, and Miles heard a collective sigh of relief go up
as they moved into the cover of the bridge. The front canopy of the waiting groundcar, turned a flat, opaque gray in the darkness, rose. Flavion emerged, hand at his belt. Miles eye twitched at the sight of a nerve disrupter. The Armsman studied them carefully for a moment, face blank but eyes sharp. Miles could relate - he'd had the responsibility of Gregor's safety laid on his shoulders alone once, too. And that had turned out all right . . . mostly.

At last Flavion relaxed, a fractional easing of his shoulders and neck, and Gregor emerged, anonymous yet urbane in plain, unmilitary black. He went at once to Miles, gripping his shoulders, then his hands. Gregor's face was a pale, indistinct blur in the dimness, but Miles didn't need to see - the convulsive grip, too tight then gentling to overwhelming tenderness, told him everything. It occurred to him suddenly that he had been in this man's bed not three hours ago. A prickle of heat rushed up his face, and he gritted his teeth. *We talked about our future . . .*

"Any trouble?" Miles asked, a bit hoarsely.

"No," Gregor said. "And there's a chance I won't be missed until morning."

"Excellent," said Miles. "I might not be so lucky, but we can worry about that later. Come on. We should get going."

"Uh, where, exactly?" Gregor asked, drawing Miles's hand through his arm and moving back to the car.

"The Imperial Science Institute," Miles said. "It seems we can find the originator of the androgenesis research there. One of the greatest intelligence networks in the Nexus, and we missed it in our own backyard."

"Hmm," said Gregor. "That's . . . disturbing. Though, I must say not the most disturbing thing I've heard about my intelligence people lately. But come to think of it . . ."

"A bit far fetched," Miles said, following his train of thought. "Possible, but . . ."

Gregor leaned into the front compartment of the groundcar and popped the rear canopy. The dash panel lights cast a small, greenish circle of illumination on their faces as they all gathered around. Teppin, Miles saw, was squinting confusedly at Gregor, a quizzical expression on his face. They'd need a good story there . . .


"My duty, Sire," Roic said. He glanced down at Miles's hand, still tucked possessively through Gregor's arm, and blinked slowly once, then again. Miles waited, but there was no further reaction.

"And, ah?" Gregor glanced inquiringly at Teppin, who had finally twigged and was frowning intently.

"A lucky break for us," Miles said, sweeping a shallow bow. "Captain, Emperor Gregor Vorbarra of Barrayar. Gregor, ghem-Captain - hey!" He pulled up short, staring hard at Teppin, his vague sense of recognition finally coalescing. Escobar . . . "You tried to shoot me!" he said indignantly. A startled fraction of a second passed, then with gratifying speed a small but potent arsenal was aimed in the Cetagandan's direction. Ivan, who was closest, clamped a firm hand on his shoulder, stunner steady in the other.
"I missed!" Teppin protested. He at least had the sense not to jump back.

"Not by much," Miles said. He could still hear that strange, nearly insectile buzzing sound, if he closed his eyes.

"What -" Gregor began.

"Escobar," Miles said. "That was him. I'm sure of it. I saw his holo in ImpSec's files."

"I see," Gregor said, with glacial mildness. Teppin quailed.

_I wonder if he could teach me to do that..._

"I missed," Teppin repeated, more weakly this time.

"Hold on," Miles said slowly. "You were on Escobar, poking around the Duronas. And you what, just got an order to try and assassinate me, but not really?"

"Well... yes," Teppin said. "I was the closest operative, I assumed. It didn't take long - just an afternoon of surveillance. I was supposed to be pretty obvious about it."

"Well," Miles said slowly. "At least now we know for sure that he's on our side... sort of." There was a short pause.

"Er," said Ivan. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Oh, let him go," Miles said with a sigh.

"Should we remove his weapons?" Roic asked uneasily.

Miles bit his lip. "No," he said. He stole a quick look at Gregor, half expecting to be overridden, but Gregor was still, watching the proceedings through an impenetrable expression. "We might need all the hands we can get," Miles finished. "Come on. Let's get going."

There was a bit of a scramble over seating. Teppin was none too gently shepherded into the front seat, sandwiched no doubt uncomfortably between Flavion at the wheel and Ivan. Roic looked from Miles to Gregor, conflict obvious. He was oath sworn personally to the Vorkosigans, and to Miles in particular, but he also had a duty to Gregor. Miles solved his problem by sliding into the rear compartment first, leaving the middle to Gregor. Not that it would matter all that much, he thought, taking a closer look at the groundcar. It was blandly anonymous, but Miles's practiced eye could see the signs of top of the line shielding. It probably didn't have any of those pesky built-in speed controls, either.

"So," Gregor said as the car pulled from beneath the bridge and turned away from the river. "What happened?"

Miles described the discovery of the booby trap as succinctly as possible, leaving nothing out, even his dilemma over whether to call or not. "Then I got Lily's message," he finished. "And it just seemed too much of a coincidence... or just too much." He paused, then added in a rush, "Just so you know, I haven't the faintest idea what we should do after the Imperial Science Institute."

"We can get off planet," Gregor said thoughtfully. "A battle cruiser in orbit, perhaps. Or any one of the Vorbarra properties... we do have options." He touched his chest, and Miles's eye caught the subtle flash of a chain around his neck, disappearing into the collar of his tunic.
"Your seal?" he asked, frowning a little.

Gregor nodded and withdrew it. It lay heavily in his cupped palm, an almost overly ornamental cylinder. But its incalculable value lay not in the precious metals of its construction, but in the fine circuitry, the signature both electronic and physical woven into the Vorbarra crest at the tip that would grant them access and aid anywhere in the Empire. "There's an ImpSec tracer, of course," Gregor said. "But I thought it was worth the risk, particularly if my absence is undetected until morning. We can always abandon it, if we must."

"I have mine, too," Miles said, nodding. He paused, biting his lip. "Worst case scenario," he said at last. "How does it look to you?"

"A coup," Gregor said immediately. "Start by killing you, and then me - your father too, at some point, I should imagine, as he is my most clearly acknowledged heir. If that had been the plan, you've thrown a wrench in it, though not an insurmountable one . . . then again, the goal might simply have been to break my spirit with your death." His mouth twisted. "A miscalculation. I've survived you once. It's not an experience I care to repeat, but I could, if I must." He trailed off, lips pursed, gazing abstractedly into space. "At least thirty-five Counts," he said at last. "In the worst case, if this is the beginning of a coup, I would expect that many to support me. As many as eight, perhaps ten, would jump at the chance to oppose, and the rest would wait to see how it looked to be falling out. The service . . . as long as I live, I believe enough of the service would remain loyal to the Imperium, if not myself personally. I have made efforts in that direction all my reign. It seemed . . . prudent." he cast a sudden, disconcertingly speculative look at Miles. "If I don't survive . . ."

"Which you will," Miles said hastily. He didn't want to hear the odds calculated with Gregor dead, the Count or, worse yet, Miles himself slated to take his place.

"Even so," Gregor said. "If I should not . . ." He lifted his seal, glittering lowly in the light.

"You're going to have to declare an official heir, I think," Miles said abruptly. "After we've gotten all this straightened out. Not me, I mean. Do it now, and it'll be harder for people to say that I'm making a power grab later."

"I hadn't thought of that." Gregor sat back, tucking the seal away. "Who, then?"

Miles's eye passed over the back of Ivan's dark head, tilted watchfully towards Teppin as the lights of the city blurred past him out the front screen. *Oh, that isn't very nice at all.*

"I'm sure someone appropriate can be found," he murmured silkily.

Gregor followed his glance and stifled a snort. They looked at each other, sharing a grin and, Miles was sure, the same vision of Ivan's face when they told him.

"When this is over," Gregor repeated, grin falling away.

They fell silent. Miles was surprised - he'd expected there to be so much more to say at a time like this, a moment of potential, catastrophic cusp. But no words came, and more surprising, no things frustrated for the lack of them. Miles leaned back in the seat, hand still tucked through Gregor's arm, feeling his heartbeat thumping solidly against his ribs. *I've turned into such a romantic sop. Just having him here makes this livable.*
Chapter 16

The car slowed as it approached a deserted intersection, then stopped. Miles looked for street signs and was startled to discover that they'd already crossed the city and entered the suburban corona that flared out around the southwest quadrant, a thick swarm of residential blocks mixed with a smattering of official buildings, small businesses, and schools. They were nearly there. Ivan turned and lowered the screen between the two compartments.

"How are we going to play this?" he asked tensely.

"Do you know where we're going once we get in?" Miles asked Teppin.

"Yes," Teppin said, turning in his seat. There was a universal intake of breath, as if he could cut Miles's life precipitously short with just a glance. "If I can see a building directory, we should be fine."

"All right," Miles said, reaching into his tunic and drawing out his chain and seal. "Surprise inspection, I think. Ivan, you and Roic and our friend the ghem-Captain here can be my special assistants. Er, Gregor . . ."

"I'll stay in the car," Gregor said, grimacing. "Best not to be seen. Though the same could be said of you," he added to Miles.

"Can't be helped," Miles said. "One of us will have to go in, and better me than you." This was patently unarguable, and Gregor contented himself with one unhappy grimace.

They turned right, drove several more blocks, and pulled up at a set of unassuming, but no less well-fortified, gates. Some of the most important scientific work in the Empire took place within the walls of this complex. Teppin was wise not to have tried to get in on his own.

"Let's get out," Miles said to Ivan, reaching for the canopy release and checking to be sure he didn't look too incredibly disheveled after the unexpected exertions of the evening. The chain and seal more than made up for any other defects, he decided, and tried not to feel like a convenient coat hook. Then again, the less anyone noticed him personally, the better off he'd be.

Two men emerged from the guard kiosk beside the gate as he and Ivan alighted onto the pavement. Miles straightened his shoulders, strode up to them, and took the initiative.

"'Evening, lads," he said briskly. "You'll be wanting to open the gate for us, please. Oh, and clear us through to the main complex while you're at it."

The lead guard opened his mouth, caught site of the seal, and shut it hastily. "Uh," he said, "yes, my Lord Auditor . . . um . . ."

"Thanks," said Miles, neglecting to give his name. He was of course eminently recognizable if you knew what you were looking at, but there was no need in throwing his name about. If they want to follow me, let them goddamn work for it. "Oh," he added over his shoulder as he turned away. "Let's not be telling anyone I'm coming, shall we?" He winked in what was supposed to be a conspiratorial manner but which, to judge by the expressions on the guards' faces, came across as terrifying. "It's more fun this way," he finished, and headed back for the waiting car.

"You like that part of your job way too much," Ivan muttered, trailing obediently.
"I take my fun where I can get it," Miles returned, ducking under the canopy and sliding back into his seat. "Here we go." Before them the gates slid aside, and Flavion piloted them through and up a short, lawn-bordered drive into a central courtyard. Buildings rose on three sides, at least thirty stories tall, interconnected with a series of elevated walkways outlined like a well-organized spider's web by the security lighting below.

"No one's probably there right now," Gregor murmured, glancing up the length of the central building, now mostly dark.

Miles shrugged. "So he'll have an unpleasant surprise in the morning," he said. "The least of them, I think. ImpSec will be wanting to talk to him." He was finding it rather difficult to feel any sympathy for the sorry son-of-a-bitch. He found it incredibly unlikely that it was a simple error or breakdown of communications that had kept word of this astounding breakthrough from reaching the appropriate ears before now. "Drop us off at the front there," he said, pointing. "Then find somewhere out of the way to wait. There should be an underground lot around here somewhere."

"Call if you need us," Gregor said, touching his wrist meaningfully as they drew up before the shallow stone steps that led to the central building.

"I will," said Miles, returning the gesture reflexively, and popping the canopy once more. "This shouldn't take long."

"Good luck."

The front doors were transparent glass, and locked. A man sat at a comconsole desk opposite them, and he frowned confusedly at Miles and his party for several moments before hitting the lock release and allowing them into the lobby.

Not built by the mad architect, Miles discerned at once, feet sinking into rich, ankle-deep pile carpeting and eye sliding over an opulently arched ceiling, the neatly spaced columns, and a proliferation of pretty green growing things. For a place nearly as shrouded in secrecy as ImpSec HQ, they certainly had nice décor.

"Good evening," Miles said, reaching the reception desk. "Would you be so kind as to let me use your comconsole there - thank you." He gestured Teppin forward to take the hastily vacated chair, and circled the desk himself to press seal and then thumb to the comconsole pad. The machine chirped happily, and Teppin began flicking rapidly through screens, looking for directions. "So," Miles said, leaning casually on the edge of the desk, "worked here long?"

"A few years," the guard, an ImpSec lieutenant, replied.

"Like it here?"

"Uh." The man floundered. Miles was tempted to point out that it wasn't a trick question. "It's nice," the man said at last.

Teppin brought up a full color, three-dimensional schematic of the complex, and began scrolling through a list of names with the rapidity of a serious speed-reader. Yes, far too logical to be the work of the mad architect, Miles saw in a quick glance. The buildings were orderly honeycombs of laboratories and offices, cut through by the occasional larger swath of a conference suite, the basement-to-roof lifts, and the tight, scrunched spirals of emergency staircases.

"Looks simple enough to secure," Miles murmured.

"Oh, yes, my Lord Auditor," the guard said eagerly. "There are emergency panels in each corridor
with alarm access, fully stocked with medical materials and gas masks in case of accidents. We haven't had a serious hazard situation in over a year, even from the weapons development boys."

"Mmm," said Miles, deciding not to mention that he had been thinking more along the lines of threats from without than from within. It was a good point, though - who knew what could be going on in a place like this? Not us, apparently.

"Got him," Teppin said, straightening and clearing the vidplate with a flourish. "He's in another building, but we can just take the catwalks."

"Right," said Miles, starting off for the lift and waving absently at the guard. "We were never here," he called back over his shoulder.

"So are we just going to . . . steal it?" Ivan asked as they piled into the lift tube and shot up.

Miles shrugged. "Why not? You'd think a scientist would leave that sort of thing in his lab, and frankly I'm not too concerned with the niceties on this one."

"I suppose not," Ivan said, shrugging. They emerged onto the twenty-fifth floor, and followed Teppin through a rapid succession of corridors to an outer door. This, too, was locked, but Miles's seal took care of that.

The spring night was warm, and this high up a gentle breeze wafted through, lifting Miles's hair off his forehead. The three buildings of the complex cut off their view behind and to both sides, but ahead they had a panorama of a haphazard sprinkling of buildings, outlined by the disorderly sprawl of lighted Vorbarr Sultana streets.

"This way," said Teppin, turning to the right. Miles and his party followed, their boots clanging on the metal planks of the surprisingly flimsy walks.

They arrived at a door that was twin to the one they had just exited, and Miles coded their entry into a dimly lit, beige-carpeted corridor. The everyday parts of the complex, those not likely to be frequented by anyone who didn't work there, weren't nearly so well appointed.

Their final destination turned out to be two levels up, just down the corridor from the lift. Miles coded the door open, heart thumping inexplicably in his chest.

He stepped into a dimly lit room, the epitome of every scientific stereotype he'd ever heard - cluttered, messy, full of complicated, incomprehensible things. A combination lab bench and comconsole desk took up the center of the room, scattered with strange, expensive-looking pieces of equipment and flimsies scribbled with unreadable handwriting. Squat, utilitarian file cabinets lined the far wall, and two refrigeration stations flanked a sink and standard laboratory emergency shower. The place smelled of unidentifiable chemicals, antiseptic, and order-in dinners.

"Right," said Miles, looking around for the light panel. "I'll take the comconsole. The rest of you split up everything else. Look for -" he hesitated, suddenly realizing that they could be looking for any number of things, "- anything interesting," he finished.

"Not in the refrigerators, you think?" Ivan asked.

"I think we're looking for data," Miles said. "Not samples. At least I hope -". There came a sudden, unexpected rustling sound from the corner of the room. Roic started towards Miles, drawing his stunner.

"What in the nine bloody hells do you think you're doing?" an outraged voice demanded. A man
struggled to his feet, slapping on the lights with a careless hand. There was a cot stuck far back in
the corner, Miles saw as he squinted against the sudden brightness. So, someone was home after
all. "What are you doing in my laboratory?" the man demanded. "And how did you get in here?
And what -" His eye fell suddenly on Miles, and recognition struck them both simultaneously. "Oh
God," Dr. Weddell moaned. "You again. What do you want now?"

Miles felt suddenly dizzy. How many coincidences can you stomach, boy? Not this many, I'm
afraid . . . He had the sudden, hateful feeling of walking through a colored world while seeing only
in black and white.

What the hell is going on here?

"Now isn't this fascinating?" Miles said, glance moving from Weddell to Teppin and back again.

"You know each other?" Teppin asked.

"Oh yes," said Miles. "Do you?"

"No," Weddell said, glancing dismissively at Teppin. "Never seen him before." Miles was inclined
to believe this - Weddell looked too strung out to lie convincingly. Come to that, he looked too
strung out to stand upright for long. "What do you want, Vorkosigan?" Weddell asked, a note of
weary resignation in his voice.

"Your research," Miles said, pulling himself together. Oh do I have some questions for you, good
Doctor. But they could wait. "Your research into androgenesis, that is," he clarified.

"My what?" Weddell said, blinking innocently.

"Don't bother," said Miles, the last threads of his patience giving way with a series of alarming
pinging noises in his brain. Three hours ago he'd been pleasantly sleepy, downright satiated in fact,
and now he was hunted, on the run, exhausted, frightened, verging on the desperate, and he still
only had half the story from anybody. "My Cetagandan friend here told me everything," he added
with sudden inspiration.

Weddell started visibly. "The Cetagandans are after me," he said, backing towards his corner. "I
can't leave the building - haven't left for months in case they find me."

Miles took a closer look at him, re-examining the sickly pallor to the man's skin and the dark
smears beneath his eyes. "Well, this one isn't after you," he said. "Just your research. So let's be
handing it over now."

Weddell hesitated, the manic gleam fading a bit and calculation taking its place. "If I do," he said
slowly, "you'll have to protect me from them. The Cetagandans."

"Fine, fine," Miles said impatiently. "They won't touch a hair on your overpriced head."

"And there won't be any recriminations," Weddell continued. "It's not my fault, you know-I had no
idea what those Cetagandans are really like. I regretted it almost immediately, of course, but by
then it was too late. I'm grateful you're here, really - was going to call someone in fact, tell the
authorities, make it all better."

Miles's eyebrows felt like they would be permanently elevated. Now what have you been doing
that's so terrible? The man looked more and more unbalanced, the closer Miles watched. He had
the unmistakable stretched look of someone worn down by the slow, inexorable grind of great
stress, not by any outright trauma.

Miles was just opening his mouth to deliver a suitably vague promise (or threat, he really hadn't
decided yet) when he was interrupted by a high-pitched, shrieking wail, ear-piercingly loud. "What the hell is that?" he demanded, raising his voice to a shout.

"Intruder alarm," Weddell shouted back, eyes going wide. "Someone's broken into the building."

"It's the new galactic sport," Miles muttered. Then a slow grin stretched his mouth, and he raised his voice again to be heard. "It's the Cetagandans, Doctor. They've gotten in and they're coming for you. You'd better come with us to be safe. Bring your research."

Weddell stood poised for a moment, proverbial deer in groundcar headlights. Then he sprang across the room and wrenched at the drawers in the central table, hands visibly shaking. He came up with a double handful of data disks, then a plastic container to store them in. He threw a despairing look at the comconsole, but seemed to conclude that there wasn't enough time.

"That alarm can't be us, can it?" Ivan asked, sidling up to Miles and leaning close.

Miles shook his head. "Not from my seal, it can't."

"Well then," Ivan said, lifting his eyebrows. "Who is it?"

This actually hadn't occurred to Miles, and he paused briefly to contemplate. "Pray it's an adventurous bird," he said, knowing even as he said it that life was rarely that kind. He thought of Gregor waiting for them, and felt for his stunner. He waved towards the door. "Come on. Let's go. Is that everything, Doctor?"

"Yes," said Weddell, clutching the box to his chest. The alarm went blessedly silent, leaving Miles's ears still ringing.

"What's procedure for an intruder alert?" Miles asked suddenly, pausing at the door.

Weddell shrugged. "Just to stay put. Wait until the security boys do their sweeps. Not that they're very good at it," he added bitterly.

"Fine," said Miles, who had not been thrilled with the idea of sharing the corridors and catwalks with a skeleton crew of sleepy, annoyed scientists and techs. "Let's go. Doctor, stick close." He hit the door release and gestured Teppin into point position.

Halfway up the corridor, Miles's wristcom chirped.

"Everything all right in there?" Gregor asked tensely. "We heard an alarm."

"Fine so far," Miles said, glancing ahead to the lift. "We're just on our way out."

"Do you have it?"

"Yes," Miles said, checking reflexively on Weddell, who was staying at his heels like a faithful dog. *Scratch the faithful, I think.*

"Good," Gregor breathed. "See you in a few minutes."

Miles slowed as they reached the lift. Teppin, still on point, moved to hit the call button. But before he reached it the doors slid aside all on their own, and the tube beyond was not empty. Teppin, Roic, Ivan and the three men in the tube all fired at once. Everyone, armed and shooting or not, hit the deck or scrambled for the nearest door or corner. When Miles dared to raise his head a moment later, stunner in hand this time, the air was still crackling with the energy of that many
weapons bursts in such close proximity. Everyone looked all right, he saw in a quick survey, with the possible exception of the unlucky Teppin, who had the squinty, reeling look of someone who had just been grazed and would rather have been unconscious. Only one of the three men in the tube seemed to have been hit, but his awkward, anti-grav sprawl was at least obscuring the aim of his two comrades. Miles scrambled to his knees, and switched his stunner into his left hand. He fired a covering burst into the lift and rolled sideways to fetch up against the opposite wall. "Give me that," he snapped, tugging sharply at Ivan's jacket. Then he impatiently batted Ivan's hand aside and plucked Admiral Naismith's plasma arc from his cousin's belt. Miles straightened, switched hands, and shot the lift control plate dead center. The lift made a horrible high-pitched grinding noise, and the doors slammed shut under a wash of stunner fire from both directions. Miles blinked, then shrugged. He'd been hoping to short out the grav generators, if only on this and the surrounding levels and if only until the safeties cut in. But really, this was better.

"Let's go," he said, scrambling the rest of the way to his feet. "We'll need to take the stairs." His troops staggered up, in various states of panic (Weddell), adrenaline soaked obedience (Ivan and Roic), and wooziness (Teppin). "Can you walk?" Miles asked him worriedly. "Better yet, run?"

"Yes," said Teppin, and lurched off up the cross-corridor, still determined to stay on point. Probably a good thing, too, as Miles was hoping he had a clearer idea about where the stairs were than Miles's fuzzy, half-glimpse of the map had given him.

"Not a bird," Ivan said, sprinting to catch up to Miles.

"No," said Miles grimly. "Some familiar faces. I know everyone tonight, it seems. Starting to make my teeth itch, that."

"Familiar?" Ivan repeated, frowning. "Who were they?"

"The Cetagandans," said Miles. "They're coming for us," he added, lips twisting.

"Cetagandans as in -"

"As in Gregor's guest house Cetagandans," Miles said. "I recognized the colonel himself." They swung around a corner at a full run, and Miles was relieved to see that the corridor ahead remained blessedly empty.

"Um," said Ivan, only slightly out of breath. "Maybe someone should tell him he's had a Cetagandan death squad in his guest house for the past few weeks."

"Oh, I plan to," said Miles, working hard to keep his own breath as steady.

"No face paint though," said Ivan, slowing as Teppin did. Miles hoped this meant they were getting somewhere, rather than that the man was about to pass out.

"No," said Miles, glancing over his shoulder to check on Weddell and Roic. The exhausted scientist, it seemed, could run as well as anybody when confronted with the prospect of a Cetagandan death squad after him. "Damn serious though, for all that," Miles said, turning back and sighing in relief as the third door Teppin tried yielded a dimly lit staircase. "They're risking a hell of a lot, pulling an operation like this in the middle of Vorbarr Sultana."

"You'd think they'd be more subtle about it," Ivan said, preceding him down the stairs. "You'd think they wouldn't want to be breaking in places like this and shooting at anything that moves."

Miles pursed his lips, but before he could reply a sudden, sharp concussion shook the building on its foundations. Miles grabbed for the railing, cursing as Weddell stumbled and nearly knocked
him down. The lights in the stairwell went out, and there was a moment of chaotic darkness before the bloody wash of the red emergency lights lit up along each stair tread.

"It seems not," said Miles, righting himself. "That was probably the main power generators for the complex." He shrugged at Ivan's astonished look. "They're going for broke, I think. They don't have much time, and fewer chances, and they want to get it done, no matter how messy it is. It's a suicide mission, actually," he added with a grimace. "They do their jobs, get themselves killed in the process, and the folks back home on Eta Ceta can claim they were acting independently."

"I had no idea they were so desperate," Ivan said, turning to head down the next flight.

"I think," said Miles, boots pounding on the uncarpeted stairs, "that the Cetagandans are a great deal more panicked than I quite realized." He was trying very hard not to imagine just what a team of Cetagandan covert ops agents would do to achieve a goal set at unlimited cost. The thought made his stomach lurch. If they blow the power generators, what else will they blow?

They emerged into a corridor two levels down. It looked different in the emergency lighting, almost like the corridor of an embattled, and losing, ship.

"Wait," said Miles, eye catching on a flashing light ahead. He detoured, glance running quickly over the emergency panel. Just as the guard downstairs had promised - first aid supplies, gas masks, and an intriguing panel of red buttons plastered with dire warnings about what happened to someone who pushed them just for the fun of it. Miles broke the glass shield with his elbow, studied the buttons for one more moment, then selected one and pushed. An immediate wailing began, even louder than the intruder alarm.

"Evacuation alert," he explained, rejoining the others. "Not many people here tonight, hopefully, but who knows what they'll do. Gregor," he added, raising his comlink to his lips and shouting over the racket. "There'll be some people running out of here. Try to keep out of sight."

"Where are you?" Gregor asked, barely audible.

"Just about to get back onto the catwalks," Miles said. "We'll be down in a few minutes. Er," he added, glancing ahead to where Teppin was still in the lead. "If we know where we're going, anyway."

They did, it turned out, know where they were going. Teppin didn't even have to wait for Miles and his seal to open the catwalk door-it had been quite efficiently jimmed, the lock plate a neat, still-smoking hole.

"Watch it," Miles cautioned, neck itching as they moved out into the open air. "There were three Cetagandans in that lift. There are at least six on planet that we know about." Behind him, Weddell moaned very quietly.

The night, Miles discovered, was a lot less lovely when the back of his neck was prickling madly with the unpleasant suspicion of being centered in the targeting sights of a long-range sniper projectile rifle, or something else just as nasty. He gestured his companions to spread out. The alarm was still shrieking, and far below in the courtyard he could hear shouts and running footsteps. He just hoped none of the night staff happened across a pack of determined Cetagandans on their way out.

Ahead of him, Teppin reached the small, rectangular platform suspended at the center of the courtyard, with three walkways, one to each building, leading off from it. Almost there.
Ivan shouted a warning, and Miles reflexively ducked. Behind him he heard the crackle of an uncomfortably close miss, and Weddell let out a yelp. Miles spun at a crouch, reflexively returning fire the way they had come. Two shapes ducked back out of sight through the door they had just exited, and Miles gritted his teeth. They probably know Weddell on sight, if they got into the comconsoles. They had no choice but to run for it, with no cover and less time.

The catwalk beneath Miles's boots vibrated oddly, and it was only then that his brain caught up with itself and recognized the distraction for what it was. He whirled back around, stunner tracking desperately for a target. But it was too late. The door to the central building, illuminated by the backwash of city lights, was wide open. The painfully bright white flare of a plasma arc was just fading away as the catwalks shuddered, swaying sickeningly, and Miles could smell superheated metal. He got off two quick shots, and had the belated satisfaction of seeing the figure wielding the plasma arc stumble and fall on its way back through the door. But it was a lukewarm satisfaction - he didn't need Teppin's frustrated curses to tell him that the walkway to the central building had just been sliced clean in half.

Two behind, at least one in the middle . . .

"Run!" Miles shouted, gesturing frantically at the last building, straight across the court. "Run for it before -" He cut off in the effort of obeying his own words. Behind him he heard reassuring thuds as everyone sprinted after him. He could, Miles realized with a nauseating lurch, feel every step jarring in his own feet as the catwalks thumped and shook alarmingly. How much stress could they take with one of the three central supports gone?

Behind him there came a familiar hissing, whining sound, and Miles risked one frantic look over his shoulder to see two men crouched at the far end of the walkway at the door they had just come from, grim faces illuminated in the wash of the plasma arc's light. They're just going to drop us twenty-five stories into the courtyard.

He turned back to watch where he was running, and he didn't have to be looking to know when the second catwalk was severed. The metal beneath his boots moaned, jerked, and developed a noticeable downward slant.

Miles's heart plummeted in despair as the last door, still half a building length ahead of him, began to open. This is just ridiculous. Falling is such an ignominious way to go. He raised his stunner, and a shot from someone close behind him sizzled past his ear to glance harmlessly off the lip of the still opening door. Two men, Miles saw, deciding to keep at his dead run just for the sake of momentum. He was Barrayaran, after all - charging a primed plasma arc was only to be expected.

Miles's ear caught a muffled roaring sound, and when he identified it as an engine he nearly swallowed his own tongue. Reinforcements. But whose?

An aircar rocketed out of the dark court below, and the walkway trembled again at a glancing blow as the vehicle turned and braked in midair. Both canopies popped at once, and from the back issued a steady stream of covering stunner fire. The two Cetagandans in the doorway ahead ducked back, unprepared.

Gregor came up onto his knees in the backseat, stunner in a steady, regulation two-handed grip. "Move closer," he shouted over his shoulder to Flavion, who hunched at the controls, trying to get the car closer to the swaying catwalk without crashing right into it and possibly knocking them all to their deaths. Miles scrambled at the railing, looking back to make sure he still had everybody. There went Ivan in a single athletic leap, and behind him Teppin. Beside Miles, Dr. Weddell fumbled, trying to climb over the railing and keep hold of his box at once. If you drop that, I swear . . .
Miles snatched it away from him. "Gregor," he called, and lobbed it. Gregor caught it neatly one-handed, and Miles gave Weddell a none too gentle shove after. The scientist half-jumped and half-fell into the backseat next to Gregor.

"M'lord," Roic panted, arriving at Miles's shoulder as he tried to get his other leg over the rail.

"I'm going, I'm going," said Miles, and jumped. He landed mostly on top of Ivan in the front seat, but he didn't have much time to feel bad about it before Roic landed squarely on them both. "Go!" Miles shouted as the breath was knocked out of him.

Flavion did, and there was a startling rush of air for several seconds as they soared up over the complex, before the Armsman had a chance to close the canopies.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by everyone trying to catch his breath and the sound of Gregor reholstering his weapon. Miles, after regaining his equilibrium, wriggled and poked at Roic.

"I'm beginning to think this is a pattern, Roic," he said in a muffled voice. "Are you out to squish me?"

"Sorry, m'lord," Roic mumbled, and tried to shift off him. On his other side, Ivan grunted, and it occurred to Miles that perhaps part of the problem was that they were trying to fit five men into a seat built comfortably for three. Flavion was driving scrunched far over on the opposite side of the seat, his head practically plastered to the side window.

"Right," said Miles, preparing to scramble over the seat into the back. "That was fun and exc-

A needle of light shot up into the night, followed almost instantaneously by the low, throbbing concussion wave of precision, but no less devastating, explosives. Miles twisted, leaning over Roic to stare down through the window, mind reeling. _I didn't actually think they would - son-of-a-bitch._ Illuminated by the light of its own demolition, the side building of the institute complex where Weddell had his laboratory folded in on itself in a neat, perfectly professional display of demolition expertise. _I wonder if everyone got out in time._

The light of the explosion - carefully, if rapidly, laid precision charges all up the building's length, Miles would bet his ImpSec special courses - faded with surprising quickness, leaving only the faint glow of emergency lights in the courtyard. From high up, Miles could see only shadows and movement, no details of the crowds of people and vehicles that must be swarming down there by now. "Well," he breathed quietly. "There's no turning back now. Not for them." He turned, and nodded to Flavion. "Get us out of here. Half the law enforcement population of the planet will be arriving in the next few minutes. Let's be gone by then."

"Where, m'lord?" Flavion asked, turning them south, further into the city outskirts.

"Nowhere yet," Miles said, lips compressing. "Just drive around for a while."

There came a rustling from the backseat. Out of the corner of his eye Miles saw Gregor leaning back from the window, face carved from stone. "Would somebody care to explain to me," he said mildly, "why one third of my science institute is currently rubble?"

"Yes," said Miles. He sat still a moment, debating between two equally appealing targets. Then he shrugged, elbowed Ivan out of the way, and scrambled bodily over the back of the front seat. Gregor and Weddell moved politely to give him room, but Miles kept right on coming. He had the satisfaction of hearing Weddell's terrified squeak as Miles planted one knee on the seat and took a
firm grip on the man's collar. "Well," he said pleasantly. "You've been interrogated before, so I'll skip the introduction."

"Get off," Weddell snapped.

Miles leaned closer, and Weddell's face slowly began to redden as his air supply was squeezed to a trickle. "No," Miles said. "In case it escaped your notice, I just saved your life. Again. It turned out to be worth it the first time around, if only for Simon's sake. Now you have to convince me I didn't just waste a lot of effort." He eased off fractionally, and Weddell wheezed.

"A deal," he choked out. "I want to make a deal. Trade - fair trade."

"Sure," said Miles equably. "You explain to me just what you know about androgenesis and the Cetagandans who want it, and I'll do my best not to let them get to you."

"I'll tell you everything," Weddell promised, seeming to find his footing. "But you have to promise that nothing I say will be held against me. A grant of amnesty - you can do that. You're an Imperial Auditor now."

Miles sat back a little, grip relaxing. "I am," he said slowly. "And technically, you're right, I can grant amnesty, in certain circumstances. At the moment, however, I'm outranked." He jerked his head to Gregor, then offered an introduction when Weddell only blinked in distracted incomprehension. "Gregor, this is Dr. Weddell, formerly of Jackson's Whole, designer of super soldiers, disasters, and apparently genetic revolutions. Dr. Weddell, meet Emperor Gregor Vorbarra. He'd be the one who granted you asylum here, by the way."

Gregor's mouth, which had been set in a firm line, twitched ever so slightly. Miles didn't know when exactly he'd become so attuned to Gregor's wavelength, but he could read a wry observation about his flair for dramatic introductions in the brief flash of amusement. Then the grim expression resettled, and Miles was suddenly and painfully reminded that Gregor had a strong personal distaste for violence, and that as satisfying as cowing Weddell by force was, there were better, perhaps even faster ways.

"So," he said, easing off his grip and standing up straight in the small floorspace between the two seats. It paid to be short, sometimes. "What exactly is it you may or may not be getting amnesty for?"

"Amnesty first," Weddell said, crossing his arms.

Miles sighed, considered pointing out that the man really wasn't in a position to bargain about anything, but dismissed it. Too much effort, and the outcome would probably be the same, anyway. He looked to Gregor, one eyebrow raised in inquiry.

Gregor looked between him and Weddell for a moment, then down at the box cradled in his lap. "All right," he said. "I hereby grant you, Dr. Weddell, a writ of Imperial amnesty for any and all crimes against the Barrayaran Imperium or any of its subjects you have committed." He lifted a finger as Weddell slumped in relief. "Contingent upon the validity and usefulness of the information you provide to us," he added. He sat back, passing the ball back to Miles with an opened hand. Miles took a deep breath, nodded, and leaned into the front seat, crossing his arms.

"Start with androgenesis," he said. "Why did you start researching it? And why didn't you tell anyone? It seems vastly out of character, considering you had perhaps the most astounding breakthrough in reproductive medicine since the uterine replicator."
A flush stole up Weddell's neck and onto his face. He couldn't quite meet Miles's gaze. "I didn't," he muttered.

"I'm sorry?"

"I didn't start researching it," Weddell said, louder this time. "At least not right away. I didn't even realize what it was for."

"Oh," said Miles, heart sinking. He turned, and had to exercise an effort not to jump when he found Teppin's face staring back from only a few inches away. "Seems like your information was faulty," Miles said. Teppin, equally as grim, didn't reply. Miles swiveled back to Weddell, chill with sudden urgency. "Has anyone tampered with your data?" he demanded. "When's the last time you looked, and did you notice anything wrong with it?"

"This afternoon," Weddell said instantly. "I've been looking into constructing an artificial protein globulin that would act as a selective decoupler for DNA related to - "

"No one touched it?" Miles repeated.

"No," Weddell said irritably. "I told you. I haven't left my lab for weeks. I kept all the information on disks and only ran simulations off my comconsole. No one could have gotten to it."

Miles breathed a sigh of relief. It was echoed quietly by Gregor and, Miles noted, Teppin. _He wants it almost as bad as we do. Why?_

"You received a copy anonymously," Miles recited, pressing fruitlessly at the bridge of his nose to ward off an incipient headache. "Is that right?"

"Well, yes," Weddell said, blinking. "On Beta Colony. The last day of the Galactic Biomedical Innovations Conference."

Miles spent a moment wondering just how many attendants of that conference had also received copies. He entertained a brief, mildly amusing vision of hundreds of scientists departing the planet, all secretly gleeful at the treasure they thought they had. Possible, certainly, and something to keep in mind if Weddell turned out to be a dead end like the Duronas. "And then what?" he prompted. "Where did you think it came from? What did you do with it? Why didn't you tell anybody?"

"I didn't really think about it," Weddell said, shrugging. "I remember assuming it was from a grad student somewhere, looking for a second opinion on research. Tiresome, but it happens."

"Anonymously?"

"That was the only strange part," Weddell said. "I did mention it, I remembered later. At the farewell dinner. I didn't say what it was, obviously - I didn't know - but I remember joking about it with some colleagues."

"So, when did you realize?" Miles prompted. He longed briefly for fast penta, but it was pointless. Weddell doubtless had an induced allergy, and Teppin would as well for that matter.

"On the trip home," Weddell explained. "I was bored, and I glanced at it. It took me a little while to realize what I was looking at. When I did, and all the implications came to me, it was very exciting, of course." His expression fired for a brief moment with the glow of discovery. "I knew it would take a great deal of work, though," he added, "and I wasn't sure I was even right. So I decided to keep quiet for the meantime."
"Huh," said Miles, parsing this as a tactful way of saying the man had wanted sole and complete credit for any discoveries.

"Anyway," Weddell said hastily. "Some weeks after I got back to Barrayar, my lab was broken into. It was just chance I was even there - this was just before you yanked me for that business with Imperial Security." He made an annoyed face in recollection.

Miles blinked once. "Someone broke into the Imperial Science Institute?" he repeated.

Weddell nodded. "Didn't seem that difficult," he said irritably.

Miles swiveled and caught Ivan's eye. His cousin's eyebrows were as high as Miles's felt. "How many times do you suppose one building could have been broken into around Winterfair?" Miles asked.

It had been a rhetorical question, but he wasn't surprised when Gregor stirred and offered a knowledgeable, "Just the once."

"That's what I thought," said Miles. He shifted his gaze to Teppin, took a breath through his nose, then sighed it out and turned back to Weddell. One thing at a time. "Reynold Daley," he said.

Weddell shrugged. "I suppose. That's not the name he gave me, but there was only the one break-in."

"And what name did he give you?"

"Er . . . ghem-Captain Camier."

"Right," Miles breathed. "You didn't mention this to Imperial Security. They don't even know he's Cetagandan. At least I don't think so - no one's mentioned the matter to me for a while."

"Me either," Gregor said.

"So?" Miles prompted, staring hard at Weddell. "What did he offer you?"

"A . . . promotion," Weddell said.

"Prized scientist of the Cetagandan Empire, or some such?" He's done it once before, why not again?

"More or less," Weddell said uncomfortably. "He said he knew what I was working on. He said his people would be willing to do anything to have me working on it for them." He hesitated minutely. "I may have, er, let him assume that I'd originated the whole concept."

"Of course you did," said Miles. "Then what?"

"Well, the alarms went off, and he had to go. He told me to say he'd held me at disrupter point - entirely true - and that he'd be back in a few weeks with his partner, and the two of them would get me off Barrayar." He paused, wincing. "He also said I should lie low, that there were people out there who wanted to see my research destroyed, and that they would stop at nothing. So I did. And I waited."

"Except nothing happened," Miles said.

Weddell shook his head, slumping. "Nothing. I started to think . . . a lot of things. Wondering . . . Cetagandans, you know, you never can tell. What if he'd been lying about something? And he'd
said there were people after me . . . I really was on the point of telling someone," he added, looking hopefully up at Miles. "Very soon, I swear to you."

*Right. It would only take a threat to your own skin.*

"I'm sure," said Miles, witheringly. He studied Weddell for one more moment, then dismissed him with a jerk of the chin. He turned slowly, consciously not leaning back, to find Teppin no longer hunched eagerly over the back of the seat. They stared at each other for one prolonged, silent breath.

"My my," Miles said at last. "Are you ever in trouble."
Chapter 17

Ivan actually felt a little bit sorry for the Cetagandan bastard. That particular hungry, toothy grin of Miles's was nothing short of terrifying. Then again, what with the getting shot at, and nearly blown up, and repeatedly chased, and confused beyond all reason, perhaps not so sorry after all.

Ivan shifted uncomfortably, mashed between the lanky Roic and Teppin, who was twisted around to talk to Miles. He hesitated, then turned himself and began clambering awkwardly over the seat back. Miles, focused like a targeting computer, didn't even notice as Ivan slipped behind him and dropped into the space between Weddell and Gregor.

"It seems to me," Miles was saying softly, "that we have similar goals. We both want to stop androgenesis from being destroyed, don't we?"

Teppin nodded briefly, warily.

"It also seems to me," Miles continued implacably, "that you're not having a very good time of it. Your own government is probably trying to kill you." He paused, eyes snapping to narrowed slits. "Come to think of it, that death squad got to the science institute at a rather peculiar moment. It sort of leaves one wondering if they didn't know that's where they should be going until we got there."

Teppin sat frozen, blank-faced for a long moment, then blinked once. "I've been made," he said quietly. "All agents at my level have an implanted tracer. They know I - I'm compromised. They were probably waiting for me to move, and just followed me."

Miles nodded grimly. "You can never go home again," he said. Ivan winced. The little bugger was doing his impression of the deep dark voices at the back of Teppin's brain. It was more than a little disturbing. "Your partner is in Barrayaran hands. Your mission is a disaster, and now you know that whoever ordered you on that mission isn't going to be able to protect you anymore." He paused thoughtfully. "What will you do now?"

Teppin let out a long breath. "I . . . had hoped to negotiate with you. For copies of the androgenesis research, and maybe even the release of my partner. We might still have a chance . . . not to go home, but just to finish this right. We've probably both already been discharged, put on the termination lists."

Ivan bit his lip. Cetagandan internal politics gave him a worse headache than Barrayaran internal politics. The whole concept rankled deeply with some of Ivan's fundamental principles of life. You were just supposed to get your orders and carry them out, and that was all. You weren't supposed to get caught between two opposing superiors like grain between the grindstones.

"Well," said Miles, leaning back and folding his arms in a suddenly relaxed posture, "I'm open to negotiation."

Teppin blinked, opening both hands. "What do I have that you want?" he said, in a tone that suggested he'd offer up life's blood. Not the standard operating procedure for Cetagandan agents, Ivan thought. But then again, Cetagandan agents weren't usually this exhausted, desperate, and optionless.

Miles lifted a finger. "One thing," he said. "That tracker somewhere in you. They're probably following us as we speak."

Teppin slumped. "Right," he said. "You'll just drop me somewhere high up over the river then?"
"No," said Miles, grinning. "We need you right here with us." He turned then and looked at Gregor. "This needs to end," he said quietly. He tapped the box still held in Gregor's lap. "We've got what we wanted, now we have to secure it. And we can't leave a Cetagandan death squad running around the city."

"Agreed," said Gregor. "Do we really want them following us, though?"

"Yeah," said Miles. "That way we can catch them."

Gregor lifted an eyebrow. "I highly doubt the Cetagandan authorities will care enough to bargain for their lives," he said dryly.

"No," said Miles. "But it just so happens that they tried to kill one of your Imperial Auditors tonight. Rumor has it you get all kinds of riled up over that."

"That's because I do," Gregor said, with a shadow of grimness. He paused, forehead creasing in a deep frown. "No," he said suddenly. "The last thing I want is to escalate this matter to the point of war, and that's what will happen if I make that sort of accusation."

Miles nodded quickly. "I understand that," he said. "But it doesn't have to come to that. I think . . ."

He shot a sharp, speculative look over his shoulder at the watchful Teppin. "I think there are some interesting things going on in the Cetagandan Empire right now. And they want a war as little as we do." He leaned forward earnestly. "But this has to stop, and it has to stop now."

"We should make copies of this," Gregor said, tapping the box distractedly. "Maybe leave one in a secure location." He dipped his chin significantly. "Cetagandans aren't the only problem we have at the moment."

Miles nodded, then stopped. A slow grin began to spread across his face, and he swiveled back to Teppin. "If you help us catch them," he said, "then you can take a copy of what we have." He hesitated, and glanced back at Gregor again, biting his lip. "And, pending a positive outcome, we can discuss the release of your partner. You can't be in any more trouble than you already are," he added, seeing the minute hesitation on Teppin's face. "Assaulting fellow officers, colluding with foreign powers," he waved a dismissive hand, "treason is treason at this point."

Teppin looked as if he would have liked to argue this particular point, but he restrained himself. "Agreed." He hesitated minutely. "And I think you're right. You can hold their actions immediately to consequence with the haut Pel on planet."

"Maybe," said Miles absently. "Though I doubt she's really speaking for the Cetagandan Empire at the moment."

Teppin frowned at him. "Of course she is," he said. "Who do you think ordered the squad out tonight in the first place?"

Miles looked momentarily gobsmacked. Ivan found himself committing the expression to memory - the look of a Miles who had just been entirely blindsided was not something he saw often. "She -oh," he breathed. "Oh, that clever bitch. She's been playing us, hasn't she? She's the one who tampered with Lily's research--she had the chance on the way from Escobar, all those days on the same ship . . . and you knew that."

Teppin nodded. "I don't know all of it," he said. "But I imagine she thought the idea of a rebellious haut would appeal to you." His mouth twisted in a private irony he apparently didn't feel the need to share.
"It did," Miles said grimly. "Damn. That . . . no wonder she never left. She was just waiting for the other copy to surface . . ." He reached back blindly and touched the box Gregor still held. "It did appeal to me," he added broodingly, scowling. He really didn't like being played, Ivan thought absentely, though in this case he could hardly offer up any blame. All that frantic effort on Escobar, the scheming and strategy, and she'd been stabbing them in the backs all along.

"Hold on," Miles said, chin coming up. "She wants to see it destroyed. If the squad is hers - and that makes sense - then she's done this whole thing to try and track down the copies for the Star Crèche." His eyes landed unerringly on Teppin. "So who's cutting your orders?"

Teppin matched him, stare for stare. "That's not really any of your concern," he said evenly.

"Oh, please," said Miles. "They're going to hunt you down like a dog, and you're going to let them do it without a word?"

"I've known the dangers inherent in my position from the start," said Teppin, with a 'well, what can you do?' sort of shrug. Ivan was caught aback to find this so entirely comprehensible to him - when you said things like that to Betans they started squawking about constitutions and all that bollocks. For all that they were Cetagandans, the ghem had a deep vein of something oddly Vorish in them.

Apparently Miles thought something similar, for his mouth pursed in what could have been respect, were he less pissed off. "Sure," he said. "Better to keep your secrets from the outlander barbarians than spill and maybe improve your chances of surviving. No, don't bother," he added, lifting a hand. "I can come to my own conclusions about your, hem, position." Ivan was glad someone could - he hadn't the faintest notion of what sort of picture was forming behind those speculative gray eyes. Miles turned to Gregor, dismissing Teppin for the moment. "Are we agreed, then? We can catch us some Cetagandans, and get ourselves free from the whole lot."

"We'll have to, ah, be found in order to negotiate with her," Gregor pointed out.

Miles nodded, and began gnawing in distracted contemplation on his knuckles. Gregor watched his sharp little teeth working for a moment, then reached forward and pulled his hand away from his mouth, folding it between his own and capturing the other before Miles could start in on that one. They looked at each other, and Ivan was peripherally aware of a great many things passing between them, like the shouting of many voices too far away to make out each word. Miles was scared, Ivan saw, stomach sinking. He'd been scared from the very beginning, even before that damned, unaccounted bomb. He was pissed, too, and frantically calculating, but this was perhaps the worst mess he'd ever leapt into, and Ivan didn't even want to think about everything that could go wrong tonight. They still didn't know if Gregor was being threatened, and Miles couldn't resurface until he knew he would be safe and -

Ivan looked away and pressed an involuntary hand to his forehead. This isn't fair.

"I could try and get back into the Residence tonight," Gregor said slowly. "There might be no danger for me, after all. I can take care of the Cetagandans, and you can lie low. I have places - you should be safe with the right people."

Miles made a face. "And then what?"

Gregor shook his head. "I'm not sure. We can try and track down who's behind this."

"I'm pretty terrible at waiting," Miles said. He withdrew one hand and swiped at his face, rubbing at his eyes with his knuckles. "Maybe this wasn't the best move, taking off like this," he said quietly. "And bringing you with me . . . though if there is a plot afoot - damn." He snapped his
teeth shut, frustrated. Ivan did not like this at all. Better Miles be all full forward momentum, no matter how insane the direction he'd chosen, than this indecisive self-questioning. So there are actually situations so close that they psych even him out.

"You wanted to get your own footing," Gregor said. "You wanted to come at this from a position you'd chosen, and I don't think you need to question that instinct." He bent briefly over the hand he still held, proud head dropping momentarily. "And don't expect me not to follow you, wherever you may go," he added, so low Ivan almost couldn't hear.

Miles let out a huff of breath, the grim line of his mouth softening. "A position I've chosen, eh?" he asked, then went still all at once like a dog at point. "All right," he breathed. "This is what we need to do."

Duv Galeni met them personally as they set down in the small, sheltered landing pad on the roof of the HQ building. Miles was the first out of the car, and Ivan, who still thought this was a truly terrible idea, followed slowly after.

He'd argued, and then Miles had argued. Gregor had looked on and taken no sides.

"Here's a thought," Ivan had said desperately. "Why don't you and Gregor head for somewhere that's not crawling with potential enemies. Galeni and I can handle a simple trap without messing it up too badly."

"It's the safest place for us to be," Miles had said. "The building will be almost empty what with the hour and the disaster over at the Institute. And they'd never expect us to go there, of all places."

He'd already been trying to raise Galeni on the dashboard comlink at that point and Ivan, giving up on Gregor stepping in, had subsided into irritably worried silence. Miles might be set on catching himself some Cetagandans, but that wasn't their only, or even their main problem tonight. The little bugger better have something else up his sleeve . . .

He'd missed the first quick exchanges, Ivan saw as he stepped away from the aircar. Galeni and Miles were already deep in discussion, probably plotting the logistics of this whole thing. Galeni's head snapped around, however, as Gregor moved forward ahead of Ivan.

"Sire!" he said, startled. "You're - are you all right?"

Gregor paused. "Yes," he said. "I'm fine."

Galeni let out an explosive breath of relief, then mouthed something towards the sky that looked suspiciously like thanks. "I have to go call off the full-scale panic," he said, reaching for his comlink.

"Panic?" Miles asked sharply. "Over what?"

"Over him going missing," Galeni said, as if this were obvious.

Miles started. "Since when?" he demanded.

"Since about two minutes after you called me," Galeni said, pausing with comlink halfway to his mouth. "I decided to have him woken up over the explosion and, well, he wasn't there." His face spasmed in what must have been an echo of the utter panic of that moment.

"Yeah," said Miles. "Sorry about that. I sort of commandeered him for the duration."
"I'm still missing," Gregor cut in, gesturing Galeni's comlink back down.

Galeni blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Don't report it," Miles said. "Let the search go on. Who's in charge with Allegre away?"

"Me," Galeni snapped. "Allegre won't get any message for a few hours, and it'll take him just as long to come back planetside. Ulshanski has a raging fever, and I have seniority over the new Sergyaran Affairs fellow, if only by a week." He shrugged helplessly. "So I'm the lucky bastard who gets exploded government laboratories and the Emperor gone missing."

"Excellent," said Miles, brightening. "It's always easiest to just work from the top. Oh and sorry about the science institute," he added. "Bit more of a mess than I was anticipating."

Galeni opened his mouth, then shut it. "Why am I not surprised?" he muttered dourly.

"Can we get under cover?" Ivan cut in, glancing around the roof uneasily.

"Come on, then." Galeni hurried them all into a lift, hesitated, then punched in a level. "Some people will have to know you're here," he said, shooting wary looks at Teppin and Weddell. "I can handpick a few squads to help with this capture operation of yours." He frowned between Miles and Gregor. "Are you certain you want to stay missing?" he asked dubiously. "The whole huge circus is in full swing - spaceports closing, traffic blockades and vehicle searches -"

"My seal," Gregor said suddenly. "It hasn't been traced yet, has it?"

"If not, I'm sure it's being done as we speak," Galeni said, frowning.

"Can you delay that a bit?" Miles asked. "Or figure out a way to get rid of it?"

Galeni, who seemed to be catching the universal headache, nodded resignedly. "I'll see what I can do."

"I'm missing too, by the way," Miles said as they stepped out of the lift.

"I know," Galeni growled. "You were reported forty-five minutes ago. I was just getting ready to head over to Vorkosigan House and speak to Pym in person when you called. I wasn't overly alarmed - he seemed remarkably unperturbed over the com, and I had a feeling those men on your roof had been shot on the way out, not the way in."

"Er, yeah," said Miles. "I seem to be making your night pretty difficult, don't I?"

"Yes," said Galeni flatly. He halted them all in the corridor with a gesture, and moved on ahead to speak to the duty guard stationed at the upcoming intersection, before waving them all on again. "There's a control room off the Chief's office. We can move the search operations downstairs and set up there."

Ivan had never been in the Imperial Security Chief's office before the mess with Haroche, and he had never wanted to be again after. Galeni left them all there for a few minutes as he went next door. Ivan watched Miles circle the space like a caged rat. He gave it half an hour before the little bugger was gnawing on the furniture.

Galeni returned at last and ushered them all through to an impressive operations control room sufficient, to Ivan's Ops-trained eye, to handle a full-scale ground and air assault upon the planet. A half a dozen ImpSec men stood about the perimeter, and Ivan marginally relaxed for the first time.
Gregor, Galeni, and Miles withdrew to one side and held a rapid-fire conference in low voices. Ivan hung back, not particularly interested in participating. At the moment he very much wanted someone to tell him what to do. At one point Galeni detached himself, setting a subordinate to copying the box of comconsole disks.

They broke up after a few moments and Galeni hurried off to start giving orders.

"Well?" Ivan asked as Miles approached.

His cousin hooked a thumb at Weddell. "We're putting him and the good ghem-Captain in temporary holding cells and setting up a trap for invading Cetagandans."

"You really think they'll invade?" Ivan asked dubiously. "I mean, here?"

"Oh yes," said Miles, rocking a little on his heels. "For this mission, I think they'll do anything." He made a face. "Do you know how complicated it is to make it easy for someone to break into this building?"

"Yes," said Gregor dryly, coming up behind him and laying a casual hand on his shoulder. "Very inconsiderate of everyone to have put the holding cells underground and sealed off each level with a checkpoint."

"It's the outer shielding and entrances I'm worried about," Miles said unhappily. "We don't know how much weaponry they've got, and we stunned at least two of them. I'm just not sure they'll get through . . ."

Galeni returned, and the next ten minutes were spent in hurried preparations. Teppin and Weddell were whisked away, both looking somewhat dubious about their chances of being let out of the holding cell when this was all over. A bank of monitors along one wall was switched on, and Ivan found himself surveying a sequence of internal and external views of the building. Several squads had been prepped to meet the coming threat, and let it pass with sufficiently convincing resistance.

And then all there was to do was wait. Miles and Galeni spent several hair-raising minutes debating all the various approaches the Cetagandans could use. After listening for a few moments Ivan sidled up to Gregor.

"Do you get the idea," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "that Miles has put a certain amount of thought into the best ways to break into this building?"

Gregor shrugged. "Miles has spent a lot of time traveling from place to place," he murmured in reply. "I imagine he's gotten bored more than once . . ."

It began before Miles and Galeni even started to lose steam. One of the men seated at the control stations waved them over, then adjusted the view on the wall displays for the benefit of everyone else. Ivan watched, fascinated in a macabre sort of way as the Cetagandan Empire breached ImpSec HQ for the first time since the end of the last war.

They came in on the ground and opted for one of Miles's favorite scenarios involving a side entrance, an oddity in the angle of a staircase, and an unusually vulnerable exterior ventilation port. The exterior cameras didn't reveal much in the dark, but after only about thirty seconds and the controlled flare of pinpoint explosives, the outer door was open and the two guards inside fell to stunner fire. Ivan breathed a covert sigh of relief - despite Miles's assurances that the Cetagandans seemed disinclined to use anything besides stunners, he'd worried that those two unassuming
guards, left in place so that things didn't seem too easy, would be caught in nerve disruptor or plasma fire.

"Only two Cetagandans?" said Miles, leaning forward and staring at the screen. "I know we didn't stun four of them."

"Hey!" Ivan yelped, pointing in outraged disbelief.

"What?" Miles looked over, annoyed.

"It's them!" said Ivan.

Miles frowned. "Them as in -"

"Them as in them. As in following me around and obsessing over Admiral Naismith them."

Miles swiveled back to the monitor and stared through narrowed eyes.

"Do you know these people?" Gregor asked.

"No," said Miles, drawing the word out in a way that made Ivan think he was still deciding on that. "But I don't think they're Cetagandans."

"Well, then who are they?" Galeni asked, then frowned. "And what are they doing?"

On the monitors the two men from the parking garage had failed to move on up the corridor from the entrance. Instead they were holding a short conversation as they searched the bodies of the unconscious guards.

"Can we get sound on this thing?" Miles asked.

There was a pause, then the voices came through loud and clear.

"...before the Cetagandans get here," the dark-haired one was saying tensely. "Do you want to go try and read Teppin, or can you hear Naismith?"

"Comlink," the blond said, producing one from a guard. "They know we're here, let's make this easy." He raised the unit to his lips. "Excuse me. My name is Terrence Cee. I've just broken in here, and I'd really like to talk to whoever's in charge."

"Oh," said Miles, eyes very wide.

"What?" said Ivan.

"Uh-oh," said Miles.

"What?" demanded Gregor.

Instead of answering, Miles turned on Galeni. "How far are we from them?" he asked rapidly.

Galeni blinked. "Well, we're eighteen levels up and on the other side of the building."

"What's that in a straight line? More than a thousand feet at least?"

"Yes," said Galeni immediately.

"Good," said Miles, and jabbed a finger at the blond man, waiting patiently on the monitor. "I've...
not actually met him, but I know of him. He's a telepath."

"As in -" Gregor began.

"As in reading your mind, if he's close enough to you," said Miles grimly.

"Well, what the hell do they want?" Galeni demanded, alarmed and exasperated.

Miles moved as if he were about to go and find out himself, then he stopped and made an exasperated growling sound. He swung around and his gaze landed on Ivan.

"Ah," he said. "Perfect. Ivan, they seem to like you. Go down there and find out what they want." He paused, frowning. "And try not to think."

* *

Gregor staked out the command chair at the center of the room, with a clear view of all the monitors. He wished very much he could lasso the pacing Miles, still those restless feet, relax the clenched hands, soften the grim line of his mouth. But this was neither the time nor the place, and he suspected, judging by how wound up Miles really was, he might get himself bitten for his trouble.

"Athos?" he said, frowning. "Where is that?"

Miles shrugged. "The ass end of nowhere. It's an interesting place, by all accounts. All male population that sustains itself through a bank of harvested ova." He paused. "I imagine their interest in androgenesis is . . . substantial."

"Yes," said Gregor, who had no trouble imagining their fervor. "And they have telepaths?"

"Well, no," said Miles. "Terrence Cee is of Cetagandan make. He's no fan of theirs," he added hastily. "Damn," he muttered to himself. "Wish Quinn were here."

Gregor winced internally. He imagined he himself was of no help, and probably more of a hindrance, in situations like this.

Then the central monitor screen flickered, and showed them a small conference room on the lower levels where the Athosians - ex-Cetagandans - whatever had been escorted. Ivan entered, looking deeply irritated.

"Oh," said Miles suddenly.

"What?" asked Gregor.

"Do you suppose Ivan's ever interrogated anybody before?" said Miles worriedly.

"Er," said Gregor.

"I should go down there," said Miles.

"You should not," said Galeni sharply. "Let's keep the contents of your head in your head, shall we?"

"Yeah, yeah," Miles muttered, subsiding unhappily.

"He's seen you do it often enough, I'm sure," said Gregor soothingly.
On the monitor, Ivan had declined to take a seat. "Hi," he said. "What do you want?"

Miles dropped his face into his hands and groaned.

"I'm Dr. Ethan Urquhart," said the dark-haired one. "Reproductive specialist from Athos."

Galeni swiveled to give Miles a disbelieving look. "We got broken into by a reproductive specialist?"

"Yeah?" said Ivan, who was working his way towards surly. "What's it to me?"

"We heard about androgenesis," Urquhart continued. "At the Galactic Biomedical Innovations Conference."

"By 'heard' you mean . . ." said Ivan.

The blond tapped his temple significantly.

"Oh," said Ivan, and took a half step back.

"Anyway," Urquhart said, "we were intrigued, naturally. To have a child with the partner of your heart . . ." His eyes flickered, seeing something very far away for a moment before his focus returned to Ivan. "So we skipped our trip home and followed the, er, scent to Escobar. And then here."

"Er," said Ivan. "By 'followed' you mean . . ."

Terrence Cee tapped his temple again.

"Right," said Ivan. "So you, what? Want a copy to take back home?"

"Yes," said Urquhart.

Ivan blinked. "That's it? There's nobody trying to kill you? No plots to overthrow somebody's government?"

"That's it," said Terrence Cee, speaking for the first time. Ivan looked flummoxed by this simplicity. Gregor, leaning forward in the command chair, could have told him it was even simpler than that. They wanted a child.

"Um," said Ivan.

"There are the Cetagandans," said Terrence Cee suddenly. "I . . . heard a great number of fascinating things from a ghem-Captain Teppin on Escobar. They want it for their little revolution, and I imagine there are any number of other Cetagandans out to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Ha," muttered Miles. He'd come to rest next to Gregor, one hand planted on the armrest of his chair and eyes narrowed on the monitor.

"Elli Quinn told us once that if we ever needed help, we should go to Admiral Naismith," said Urquhart. "Apparently now he's calling himself Vorsomethingsomething, at least from what Terrence could pick up."

"Fascinating mind," murmured Cee. "He was easy to follow tonight."

"Oh, fantastic," muttered Galeni, and Gregor could tell he was trying to figure out just how to
classify a telepathic security breach to Miles's person and privacy.

"Uh," said Ivan, and glanced reflexively up to the camera position. "Hold on a second." He ducked out the conference room door and appeared on the next monitor over in the corridor. "Well?" he asked the air.

"Can we -" said Miles.

"He can hear you," said the officer at the main control station.

"I am inclined to give it to them," said Gregor slowly. "It's that much more secure with a copy in their hands, and it gets them out of our hair for the moment."

"Yes," said Miles thoughtfully. "We should have real Cetagandans descending at any moment." He glanced over as Galeni ducked away to respond to a summons from one of the comconsoles.

"Besides," said Gregor, "it is the . . . nice thing to do." His lip twisted. "I don't get to say that very often."

"Ah," said Galeni, crossing back to them. "I can't step on the search for you much longer. Vortala is downstairs and he's about ten seconds from arresting me on suspicion because I'm dragging my feet on tracing the seal."

"Damn," muttered Miles. "We'll have to -" He stopped suddenly, and grinned. "Ivan, run in and ask them how they got here."

On the monitor, Terrence Cee looked up from the table and spoke to the camera. "We have a light flyer a few blocks down," he said. Ivan, still out in the corridor, twitched visibly. It was more than a little creepy, Gregor had to admit.

"Fine," said Miles rapidly. "Please, erm, convey that what we have is not a finished product. It will require some work. Oh, and the spaceport is closed at the moment, but they can take it back to wherever they're staying until they can get passage off planet."

"Anything else while I'm standing here thinking?" said Ivan.

"No, that's it," said Miles, and made a cutting gesture to the tech. As soon as the audio was off he reached up and removed his chain, the seal swinging heavily from the center. "Give me yours," he said.

Gregor did, eyebrows up. "What are you thinking?"

Miles didn't answer directly. Instead he retrieved the box of copied comconsole disks and tucked the two seals at the bottom, underneath everything, out of sight.

"Oh," said Gregor. "That isn't nice."

Miles shrugged. "Can't be helped. They're the perfect decoy. Cee will pick up on anyone following them and lead ImpSec a merry chase. They're the perfect distraction."

"You know, Vorkosigan," said Galeni, "I hate to think what you do to people you don't like."

"Er," said Miles, staring at one of the monitors over Galeni's shoulder. "I think you just may find out. The Cetagandans are finally here."

Galeni sent the box of disks and seals down to Ivan with a lieutenant who hadn't seen Miles's
sleight of hand. Gregor paid little attention as the Athosians were escorted off the premises and hurried on their way. Instead, he watched a three-man squad of Cetagandan assassins break into ImpSec. Beside him Miles quivered, tension rolling off him in waves as he and Galeni moved people around the building like pieces on a Tacti-Go board. They jockeyed guard patrols, luring the Cetagandans (who had blasted their way in from the roof) deeper into the building.

"They're definitely aiming for Teppin," said Miles. "Bet they'll take care of him first then search out Weddell." He paused. "And then they'll blow themselves up."

Gregor coughed inquisitively. "We're not actually going to let it get that far, are we?"

"No," said Miles, with what might have been a twinge of regret. "Next level down, Galeni?"

They boxed the Cetagandans in with two fully armed squads. The cross-corridor they'd chosen for the ambush erupted in stunner fire, and bodies dropped on both sides. It was over in less than thirty seconds, and the only fatality was on the Cetagandan side, the last man standing felled by his own nerve disrupter between one blink and the next. Gregor looked away despite himself. There was no visible difference between the pile of unconscious bodies and the one dead one, but he imagined he could see the true uninhabited space behind the closed eyes. So futile - he knew his two comrades would be taken alive - and yet he'd done it anyway.

Miles, who had been craning forward, leaned back with a sigh. "No Benin," he said quietly, as if to himself.

Gregor blinked. That possibility hadn't occurred to him. Such were the hazards of making friends with potential enemies. He had to admit to a twinge of relief himself--he'd grown to rather like Benin, on Miles's recommendation.

"Erm," said Galeni. "Allegre's here."

Miles blinked. "Already?"

"Well, not exactly," said Galeni, shutting down his comlink. "He's in orbit." He made a face. "And having quiet hysterics. Vortala's off haring after your seals," he added. "They're halfway across the city by now."

"We can't tell him just yet," said Gregor with a sigh. "Not in orbit. And it'll take him a good hour to get down here."

"Plenty of time to have this whole thing straightened out," said Miles, rubbing his hands together. "Gregor, how are your diplomatically threatening skills?"

They relocated next door to the Chief's office for a bit more privacy. Galeni hunched at the comconsole, talking his way through a few layers of Residence staff. Ivan returned from downstairs, Miles paced, and Gregor considered strategies for threatening somebody whose damage calculations were figured on a generational scale.

"Bloody geneticists, trying to run covert operations," Miles muttered, sounding almost offended. "Only a complete fool would just order her forces to penetrate ImpSec HQ like that."

"We can't all be paramilitary tacticians," said Ivan.

"No," said Miles. "But this is what you get when you put a bloody haut lady in charge of a covert destroy and distract."
"Don't forget Benin," said Gregor, absently.

A decidedly peculiar expression crossed Miles's face. "Benin," he said slowly, as if tasting the name. "Yes, I wonder -"

"Ah," said Galeni. He yielded the desk chair to Gregor with a flourish. Better you than me, his look said.

Gregor settled himself, crossing one knee over the other and leaning back before keying for visual. The hold pattern vanished and he was faced with the entirely unrevealing curve of Pel's force bubble, set to a dark purple for the hour, he imagined.

"Emperor Gregor," she said at once. "It is the middle of the night."

"Milady," he said politely. "I beg your pardon for disturbing you at this hour, but it's a matter of some importance. We have ghem-Captain Abrier and ghem-Lieutenant Mayne in custody. They were apprehended inside Imperial Security Headquarters."

There was a satisfyingly dismayed pause. "What were they attempting to do?" she asked.

"They're still unconscious," said Gregor, opening both hands in a disingenuously helpless gesture. "But we can only assume they were attempting to secure the destruction of the androgenesis research, copies of which were in the building." He paused deliberatively. "Ah, and I regret to inform you that ghem-Colonel Ellit took his own life in battle. The whereabouts of your other three officers are as yet unestablished, but there is certain evidence that they were involved in the explosion of a secure government laboratory earlier this evening."

"Not my officers," she said, and was that a hint of panic in the filtered voice?

"My mistake," said Gregor. Miles had perched on the corner of the desk next to the comconsole and out of vid range. He rolled his eyes expressively and mouthed something very rude. "In any case," Gregor continued smoothly, "in light of these events, I find myself re-evaluating our prior understanding."

"Oh?"

Benin was nowhere in sight on her end, Gregor noted, taking a moment in the appearance of thought, chin cupped in his palms. It was much more difficult to know if you were making somebody twitch when you couldn't actually see them, he reflected, but he liked to think these things had a certain feel to them. "As it happens," he said, "the Doctors Durona are not having as much luck on Beta Colony as we had hoped. They feel their data was . . . tampered with."

"Astonishing," said Pel.

"Quite," said Gregor. "In any case, I have decided to issue an invitation to the good doctors. Barrayar's warmest hospitality for as long as they wish, or as long as it takes for them to spearhead the development of the androgenesis project with the uncorrupted data we have recently obtained." He paused minutely to let this sink in. "We have also distributed copies to a few other interested parties, who will pursue their own work."

"That is . . . most excellent." Was it possible for a filtered voice to sound strangled?

"I thought so," said Gregor, and allowed himself to crack a smile. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Miles's frankly appreciative look, in which he basked for just a moment. It was quite a brilliant idea, if he did say so himself. A technology like androgenesis coming off Barrayar would
put them on the map in a field where their previous distinction had been 'galactic laughing stock.' That, and home development meant that much faster home adoption. Which was to say nothing of the potential economic benefits. "In any case," he continued, "it appears your efforts at diplomatic negotiation with Eta Ceta have fallen flat."

"So it does," said Pel. There was a pause, fairly buzzing with calculation. She was beaten. Gregor knew it, and he had only to wait for her to realize it. There was no way she could get to all the copies now, no way to contain the widening pool of information. And he was inclined to agree with Miles - sending your troops on a reckless chase like tonight's was simply amateur. Which meant it really was the planetary consorts running this silent, frantic retrieval operation, and not any military or even political Cetagandan faction. She'd been playing a game for which she was utterly unprepared, and she'd lost. Not by much, he reminded himself, but she had lost.

"Perhaps," she said at last, "I have erred. It might be more beneficial for me to return to Eta Ceta now and smooth over any difficulties from within the Empire, away from the interference of outsiders."

"Oh," said Gregor. "We will be so sorry to see you go."

"In fact," said Pel, "I should set off as soon as possible. This . . . incident has amply proven that my presence on Barrayar is effecting no improvement of the situation."

"Mmm," said Gregor. "You will of course wait for morning?"

"Of course. One does not simply flee into the night."

Miles did laugh this time, swallowing the sound under a slight cough. The wicked humor in his eyes was infectious, and Gregor controlled his expression with an iron will. "I shall bid you farewell with much regret," he said. "The time you have spent with us has been most instructive. I feel we've made tremendous strides in bridging the distances between our two peoples." That was the great thing about the haut, he thought - you could say something impeachably polite which was nevertheless a brazen insult in the haut mind.

"Quite," said Pel, coolly. "Now, if you will excuse me, I am very tired."

"Of course," said Gregor, and half bowed, sitting. "Sleep well, milady."

She cut the com without another word, and Ivan whistled lowly into the silence.

"Ouch," Miles said. "I wonder if she's ever had to go home, tail between her legs before." He poked a finger at Gregor. "You were far too nice, you know. I would have told the bitch to pack up and get off planet within the hour."

Gregor shrugged. "She is a planetary consort, if you will recall, and she has the ear of the Empress Rian and the Emperor himself. It pays not to irritate either of them overly much."

"Hmm," said Miles. "Except I don't think either of them knows about this. At least not Emperor Giaja, anyway."

"You think?" said Gregor.

"Yeah. It looks like this was a Star Crèche driven operation. It has that off-the-map nutty feel to it." He paused, chewing at his lip. "And I imagine Benin . . . found a way into things." He smiled, as if at a private joke.
"Hold on," said Ivan slowly. "So who did it?"

"Did what?" said Miles.

"Androgenesis," said Ivan. "It. The Duronas didn't. Weddell didn't. So who did?"

"Well, the Star Crèche, of course," said Miles, as if this were obvious. "Who else to originate something like this than the premiere geneticists in the nexus? I imagine they came up with it, then got cold feet. But it was too late - someone in this fascinating little ghem revolution got hold of it, and we were off and running. The consorts picked Pel to go chasing after it, and we led each other in circles until she landed here, where she was just waiting until her reinforcements arrived and Teppin showed his hand, or until they got a break and found the copy on their own."

"Speaking of ghem," said Galeni, "the entire counterintelligence division is having quiet dizzy fits over our Cetagandan guests. They probably have fast penta allergies, but we don't often get the chance to have a go at some of their operatives like this."

"And Pel can hardly demand them back," said Miles, grinning. "Not when she needs us to think they aren't hers."

Galeni's com chirped, and he excused himself off to the side to answer it.

"It's just all so weird," said Ivan. "All this, for something they did themselves."

Miles shrugged. "They . . . have reason to worry. They are always so aware of their precarious position." He paused. "And there's this revolution we keep hearing about . . ."

"It happens periodically," said Gregor. "Our agents out there pick up a ghem disturbance every few years. Things have been particularly tense in the past decade, what with no expansionary wars thinning out this generation."

"Hmm," said Miles, deliberatively. "That . . . hmm. I wonder . . ."

"What?" said Gregor.

"What if," said Miles slowly, as if feeling his way through a thought. "What if it's not a revolution, exactly? What if they don't want to overthrow the haut, but they want a change nonetheless?"

"How do you mean?" said Ivan.

"I don't know," said Miles. "But it seems to me . . . one of the main reasons we Vor have survived as long as we have is that our ranks have proven to be permeable, to a certain degree. Gregor hands out lordships with key appointments, young Vor daughters marry off into the rising commercial aristocracy . . . and the new untitled elite can sneer all they want, but most of them would give a limb for an extra syllable in front of their names."

"So?" said Ivan.

"So," said Miles, "why overthrow the haut when they're such an -" his mouth twisted " - inspiring example? Wouldn't you rather be them, and chafe at the things that kept you from it?"

"Oh," said Gregor, and blinked. "That is an intriguing thought." He paused. "Though not one we'll ever have any concrete information on, I suspect."

"Mmm," said Miles. "Maybe."
"All right," said Galeni, stepping back into the conversation. "Allegre's taken over control of operations from orbit. Vortal is still in pursuit, we've confirmed the deaths of all three missing Cetagandans, and you," he jabbed a finger at Miles, "have a house freshly swept of anything remotely threatening."

"Oh," said Miles, and blinked. He'd nearly forgotten about that part, Gregor realized. Nothing like finishing up one crisis only to fall right back into another.

He didn't really like the speculative look on Miles's face. "You can't possibly be thinking of going back there," Gregor said.

"Mmm," Miles said.

"Mmm?" Gregor repeated. "Let me rephrase that. You will not go back there."

Miles frowned. Galeni did as well, and broke in before Miles could respond, "Vorkosigan House is perfectly safe at this point, Sire, and teeming with agents. I don't see any reason why -"

"Someone tried to blow me up tonight," Miles said, "via my seizure stimulator. Neat little trick, involving the energy matrix of a nerve disruptor. And then, rather redundantly, a bomb that would have been triggered by the energy from the disruptor charge. Sound familiar?"

Galeni's eyebrows shot up. "Yes."

"So, fine, no going home just yet." Miles paced briefly around the desk. "Whoever did it knows I'm not dead, because Vorkosigan House is still standing. They're wondering what happened . . . maybe they know Gregor's disappeared . . ."

"Miles," Gregor said, "don't tell me you're thinking of setting some sort of trap for them with you as - as bait."

"Well, I am what they want," Miles said, in a very reasonable tone of voice.

Gregor's mouth thinned. "Excuse us, please," he said to Ivan and Galeni. Galeni looked rather worried as he left, but Ivan seemed quite pleased to be excused.

"Miles, right now you need to be somewhere safe," Gregor said. "We can do that. If you go to one of the Vorbarra properties, no one will know. They can be completely locked down."

Miles shook his head. "I'm not going to be locked up while whoever tried to kill me is running loose. It could be anyone, Gregor," he said, lowering his voice. "It could be the guard who stands right outside your bedroom door every night while you sleep. What if they target you next?"

"We don't have any proof that they will," Gregor said.

"Or that they won't. We don't know what they want."

"Yes, we do. You just said it. We know they want you dead."

Miles didn't answer for a moment. "I don't like it," he finally said. "The idea of being locked down in a house while someone wants to kill me . . . it makes my skin crawl."

Gregor leaned up against the desk in front of Miles and took both his hands. "Please, Miles."

Miles looked up at him. "What if they get in? You have to send guards, don't you? I'd be completely cornered, Gregor." His breath was coming a little too fast, his pulse, which Gregor
could feel beneath his fingertips, was rapid.

"Take Roic," Gregor said. "Galeni can hand pick a small squad for you. And," he paused. "I would like to send Flavion, for my own peace of mind if nothing else."

Miles shifted from foot to foot, jaw visibly clenched. Gregor watched him, holding his peace with an effort. Please. You know you must. Meet me halfway, this time. "All right," Miles said on a sigh. "You're probably safer with me out of the picture, anyway."

"Hey," Gregor said. He touched the slim comlink on his wrist. "Don't forget these."

"Right," Miles said. He looked around a bit helplessly and then said, "Erm, where exactly . . ."

Gregor paused, considering this. "There's a place not too far from here, just over the border in the Vormuir district. Only a handful of people even know it exists."

"Okay." Miles sighed and straightened. "Just don't leave me there very long."

"No longer than necessary," Gregor said. Miles grimaced. The two of them stayed like that for a moment, stalling. Finally Miles reached up and kissed him, gently, his hand tightening on the back of Gregor's neck. "Take care," he said, pulling away slowly.

"You too. This won't last long, I promise you."

"Right," said Miles, with an unreadable little twist of the mouth as he turned away.
Gregor's eyes burned on his back as he walked away. Miles was preternaturally aware, without looking, of Gregor's nearly silent footsteps behind him, of the low murmur of his voice as he summoned Flavion to his side and imparted his orders. Ivan, leaning casually against a comconsole in the control room, straightened at Miles's appearance. He pulled his hands from his pockets and waited, apparently ready to follow wherever Miles led.

"This is the part where you get off the train," Miles said, stopping in front of him.

Ivan blinked. "I what?"

"I'm . . . going to be incommunicado for a while. Gregor will know where I am. There's no need to disrupt your life, too."

"Oh," said Ivan, blinking, and if Miles didn't know better he would swear his cousin was almost hurt by the dismissal.

"Uh," said Miles. "Thanks. For, y'know."

"Will you quit it?" said Ivan irritably. "You're being all polite and farewell-like. It's not right."

Miles twitched his shoulders. "I'll see you," he said, and turned away.

Flavion materialized at his side. "My lord," he said softly, dipping his chin. A new line of tension strained at his shoulders, and Miles didn't envy the charge Gregor had laid on him. "Your Armsman has gone for the car," he said.

"Thank you," said Miles. "We should go." He glanced back once, to find Gregor speaking in low tones with Galeni, his face tight. Ivan had uncharacteristically insinuated himself into the conversation. Gregor, as if feeling Miles's gaze, glanced up for just a moment. He watched Miles through quietly agonized eyes, then dipped his head in a humbly eloquent gesture. Miles huffed out a breath and turned away.

It wasn't goddamn fair. Miles resisted the urge to stomp as he made his way up the corridor and waited for the lift. All of this, their chance snatched from the jaws of defeat, only to have to run and cower? What was he going to do with himself for the next . . . days? Weeks? Months? He didn't even know where he was going. If this was one of Gregor's boltholes it could be anything from a snug mountain cabin complete with hot tub to an underground bunker.

He wafted up in the lift, Flavion just beneath him. Miles kicked his feet in mid-air in a fit of frustrated pique. Being mad was a lot better than being scared, because what if they were wrong? What if someone was aiming for Gregor after all? Miles ground his teeth. That was his post, to be watching over Gregor, now more than ever. His place to guard that proud, unbending back. He was not supposed to hunker down out of sight while Gregor paraded around with a big target painted on his forehead.

"Where are we going?" Miles asked abruptly as they emerged into the next corridor and headed for the second lift that would take them back down to ground level.

"Perhaps it would be best for you to wait and see, my Lord," said Flavion laconically.

Miles hissed out a breath between his teeth. "Fine," he muttered. Then, "Hold on." He swerved
around a corner and straight armed the door to the men's room (not that ImpSec HQ actually had any women's bathrooms outside the more public areas). The room was empty, Miles saw with relief.

He took care of himself, then crossed to the sinks. The mad architect hadn't exactly been building to Miles's scale, and only his head was visible in the mirror as he washed his hands, then splashed some water on his face. He felt out of control, as if events were dictating to him rather than the other way around. He loathed the feeling.

He leaned both hands on the edge of the sink and stared at himself through narrowed eyes. Flavion stood sentry by the door, hands loose and ready at his sides.

"What did he say to you?" Miles asked abruptly.

"My lord?"

"Gregor. What did he say to you?"

Flavion shifted minutely. "His Imperial Majesty said I was to guard you as if you were the Emperor himself," he said, oddly toneless. "He said I was to protect you from all threats, no matter the source, no matter the name or the uniform."

"Right," breathed Miles. "This . . . this is ridiculous." There had to be a better way.

"My lord?" said Flavion.

Miles reached for his wristband. He had a feeling he'd have better luck talking Gregor out of this when they weren't face to face. Talking him out of it and talking him into what? "This is a stupid plan," he said to Flavion in the mirror. "Well, not stupid, but unacceptable all the same." He lifted the com to his mouth.

Flavion crossed the room in three long-legged strides. Miles looked up, saw him in the mirror, and had only time enough to blink as Flavion's fist came up and around, almost too fast to see. Miles jerked, instinctive flinch more than a concerted attempt at evasion, and the blow glanced past his ear leaving ringing in its wake and crashed into his temple. Miles had no hope of keeping his feet, and he rolled as he went down, managing not to brain himself further on anything as stars exploded in his vision.

He kept rolling, up into a little ball, arms around his knees, trying to protect gut and groin and throat all at once. Flavion was coming for him again, fast and efficient and utterly terrifying. An Armsman, the most trusted of servants, was a man who could secure his lord's cufflinks and execute his enemies with the same competence. And Gregor's people were the very best.

He was going to die here, on the floor of an ImpSec men's room for the janitorial staff to find at dawn.

_God, Gregor . . ._

Flavion bent over him. Miles looked up into calm, resigned eyes. Flavion would die for this, Miles had no doubt Gregor's revenge would be absolute. And he knew it and didn't care.

Flavion held him dangling with one hand, and the other dipped down, going for the nerve disrupter at his belt. Miles twisted, kicked out. Too late to scream, his air supply was nearly gone and he doubted anyone would hear, anyway. He curled up tighter, grabbing at his own ankles in preparation for one last push, one last kick.
It happened below the level of consciousness, so quick that it was like watching a holovid on fast forward. Miles's fingers fumbled, reached, found and clenched, and as Flavion's hand rose, the muzzle of the nerve disrupter growing larger and larger as it approached Miles's eyes, his own small hand darted out, skimmed beneath the weapon, and sank the blade of Gran-da's dagger to the hilt in Flavion's gut.

The sound was like nothing he'd ever heard. Flavion dropped him, doubling over, the nerve disrupter ringing on the tiles where it fell, and Miles thought, for the first time in his life, that there really was something very civilized about dying by disrupter blast.

He'd landed hard, awkward on his back, and Flavion fell across him. Miles blinked down at a spreading pool of blood, the Vorkosigan crest gleaming malevolently from the center. There was silence, cut only by Miles's gasps. Flavion was still breathing too, but it was a watery, labored sound.

Miles shifted, heaved at the weight pinning his legs and torso to no avail. He was shaking all over, vision and hearing cutting in and out as his head pounded. Now might be a good time to scream.

Instead, he reached for his wrist com.

"Gregor?" he said, but his voice was a thin rasp, and he had to clear his throat and try again.

"Miles?" came the response almost immediately. "You sound -"

"Yeah," said Miles, and coughed. Somehow, he'd forgotten how sweet blood smelled, almost like the sap leached from the bark of Gran-da's maple trees. "I," he said, and stopped. -just stabbed your closest and most trusted servant.

"Miles?" He sounded alarmed now, and Miles shook himself until his head screamed and swam.

"I'm in the restroom," he said. "The one on the . . . uh . . . aren't there cameras in here?"

"Are you all right?" Gregor demanded, then said something in a muffled aside.

"Yeah," said Miles distantly. "I'm just fine. Don't come yourself, okay?"

He'd managed to wriggle out from under Flavion and get to his feet by the time backup arrived. The squad of agents missed seeing him getting sick into the sink by mere seconds.

It occurred to him only as he was given a lightning once over from a medic and hurried towards the door that maybe telling Gregor not to come hadn't been the best idea. He looked back and saw Flavion, body bent in a U around the dagger, a truly astonishing amount of blood pooling beneath him and spattered across the white floor.

Gregor was, in fact, out in the corridor, flanked by Ivan and Galeni. Miles only blinked at them as he was hustled by, momentarily glad that he wasn't expected to actually say anything right then. He saw Gregor hesitate minutely, looking from the door to Miles to the empty spot where Flavion should be hovering. Then he turned a corner, his escort muttering something soothing about the clinic, and Gregor was out of sight.

Until he rounded the corner after them at a near jog and followed close behind, tense and watchful and wincing every time Miles did.

The clinic could have been soothing and quiet, but the crowd who boiled in on Gregor's heels nixed that possibility. Miles was steered into an exam room and propped up on a bed while a
frowning doctor poked repeatedly and to Miles's mind entirely needlessly at the lump rapidly expanding on his skull. Miles dutifully counted fingers, stared into a penlight, and offered up his mother's maiden name.

"Not a concussion," the doctor said, and slapped Miles heartily on the shoulder. "You'll have a headache for a few days, though. Don't operate any heavy machinery or make any life-altering decisions." He retrieved a spray from the tray behind him and Miles bestirred himself to speak.

"That's not going to knock me out, is it?" Not that he would object to the idea, particularly.

"No, it's just for the pain. But tell me if you start seeing things that aren't there."

"He has an implant . . ." Gregor began. He'd been hovering, visibly distracting the doctor and plucking uncomfortably at the periphery of Miles's vision.

"Other side of the head," said the doctor. "He'll be fine." He gave Miles the injection and excused himself.

"He seemed . . . unconcerned," Miles said after a beat of silence.

"Good for him," Gregor said, his voice a bit rough. He opened his mouth, apparently tried and failed to form a question. Miles sat up straighter and reached his hand out. Gregor came and sat on the edge of his hospital bed, covered Miles's hand with his own.

"How much did you see?" Miles asked quietly.

"I saw . . . Flavion . . . Miles, what happened?" Gregor sounded utterly at sea. For a brief, heart-wrenching moment, Miles contemplated how he would feel, if he had discovered that Pym had been plotting to kill Gregor. He stopped quickly.

"I don't really know," Miles said. "We were in the bathroom, and I had just decided that the plan was, um, I called it unacceptable. I think. And I was about to call you on the wristcom, and then all of a sudden . . . he was coming at me. He lifted me clear off the ground and he had a nerve disruptor. I . . . - stabbed him in the gut with Gran'da's dagger - "I'm so sorry, Gregor."

"I don't . . . I don't understand."

"Me neither," Miles lied.

"Twenty years. That's how long he's been with me. Since I was fifteen."

"Sire." Gregor and Miles glanced up together. It was Galeni, standing in the doorway with Ivan at his shoulder.

"Is he dead?" Gregor asked flatly.

"No, Sire." Galeni shifted uncomfortably. "He's awake, actually." Gregor's hand tightened on Miles's. "Do you want to see him?"

"No," Gregor said. "But I will." He levered himself up, and Miles slid off the bed to stand next to him. "You shouldn't -." Gregor started.

"I'm fine," Miles said gently. "The doctor said so."

"My Lord Auditor," Galeni said, a steely glint in his eye, "I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't go into the same room as the man who just tried to kill you with his bare hands."
Gregor flinched minutely, but nodded his agreement. He let Miles walk with him down the hall, but stopped him at the door to Flavion's hospital room, where a small platoon of ImpSec guards was stationed. Miles didn't argue, just let him go. Both Ivan and Galeni paused, but Miles made shooing motions at them and they followed Gregor in. The door closed behind them all, and Miles resigned himself to a bout of dizzied pacing.

He'd always felt more secure in the eye of his Armsmen than that of a squad of ImpSec men, no matter how skilled. It was just different, Gregor had realized many years ago, when the men who watched your back also knew what brand of tea you liked best and when you were likely to be struck by a bout of insomnia and how you wanted your bookshelves organized. He reached for anger and found himself instead grasping shocky denial. *This can't really be happening.*

Flavion lay on the hospital bed, eyes closed, very white. At the sound of Gregor's footsteps, he said, without even opening his eyes, "Sire."

"Flavion." He did open his eyes then. They were bloodshot. Gregor was dimly aware of Galeni and Ivan hovering near the door. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Gregor said, shaking his head, "Why?"

Flavion looked away. "You won't want to hear it. You won't believe me."

"No, I don't expect I will. But I still want to know."

Flavion looked over at the agents hovering at the door. "Make them leave, please, Sire."

"I would advise against that," Galeni said.

"Commodore Galeni, Ivan, please stay. Everyone else, you may wait outside," Gregor said, ignoring Galeni's half-swallowed protest. He waited until they had left, and then returned his attention to his - former - Armsman.

"I knew, about you and Lord Vorkosigan," Flavion began.

"I know. Was it that night in the kitchen?"

"No, Sire, it was . . . it was many months ago. When he was killed."

That . . . that he had not expected. "I never spoke of it to you. To anyone. And you didn't, either."

"No, Sire. I didn't think it was appropriate. I don't think anyone else noticed, but I saw what his death did to you." His teeth set, jaw flexing. "And I hoped then that he would stay dead, because if he didn't it would be worse. But he came back. I started watching then; I knew when you declared yourself, I knew when he gave in, I knew . . . every step of the way, I knew. And I also knew something you didn't, something you wouldn't let yourself see."

"Flavion . . ."

"He will destroy you." Flavion reached out and seized Gregor's wrist; out of the corner of his eye, he saw Galeni tense to spring forward. "You don't believe me, I know you don't. I knew you wouldn't, no matter what I said. You would choose him and dismiss me. I couldn't let that happen. The only way to save you was to take care of Vorkosigan myself."

"To kill him."
Flavion released his wrist and sank back on the bed. He looked suddenly exhausted and old and beaten, and Gregor was reminded that he was over sixty. "Yes, Sire. You have to believe me. I did it because . . . he will be your downfall. You don't see that because you love him, but I know it. You have to believe me," he repeated, hands twisting the sheet into knots.

"You couldn't have expected to get away with it," Gregor said shakily.

"No, Sire. I didn't think I would."

"The buggered stunner cartridge, the nerve disruptor matrix in the seizure stimulator . . . those were both yours?"

"Yes, Sire." He looked away. "I knew I would die, one way or the other. My entire life has been in your service, I have no family. I had hoped to make my death a service too. I wish . . . I wish I had died. It would have been easier for both of us, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would have been." Flavion shut his eyes. There was a terrible silence, and then Gregor said, "You're wrong. Miles will not destroy me. He . . . has already saved me, more than once, in ways not even you know. And together, we will make Barrayar so much better than it is."

"I know you must think so," Flavion said, opening his eyes to stare up at him almost pityingly.

"Yes," Gregor said, very quietly. "I must." He started to turn away, but then he stopped, turned back, and said evenly, "You're not going to be executed." Flavion's eyes widened. "You're going to live, and you're going to watch us make it work. And then you will know that you were horribly, dreadfully mistaken."

Gregor walked away. Ivan wordlessly held the door open for him.

Allegre's shuttle arrived downside an hour later. They waited for him in Gregor's private office, having sent Ivan home to get some sleep. Galeni was currently buried up to his elbows in paperwork, but Gregor was sure he would be getting a visit from his boss later.

He'd left the door to the antechamber open, as his secretary wasn't in yet, and Allegre didn't stop to announce his presence before barging in. He went pale with relief at the sight of Gregor sitting behind his desk, all in one piece. "Sire," Allegre said, bowing. "My Lord Auditor," he added, somewhat more darkly. No doubt as to who he thought was behind the entire adventure.

"Good morning, Guy," Gregor said, gesturing him to a chair. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Good -" Allegre sputtered, his relief apparently giving way to general annoyance. "Sire, do you have any idea what kind of state I've been in the last six hours?"

"I have some idea, yes."

"What were you thinking? And you," he said, turning to Miles, "my Lord Auditor, I think I need to remind you that you are no longer a covert ops agent and this is not Jackson's Whole! If you would be so kind as to not kidnap the Emperor out from under my nose, I would be most appreciative!"

Gregor did his best to look penitent. "I'm very sorry, Guy. Will you please sit? We'll explain everything, but first I think you need some coffee." He signaled to Roic, who was the only Armsman at the door, for the moment.

"Or a stiff drink," Miles muttered.
"I'll take the explanation first, if you don't mind, Sire."

"Hmm. Yes. Well, the good news is that our Cetagandan guests will be departing very shortly. The bad news is that they appear to have in fact been a, er . . ."

"Death squad?" Miles supplied, most unhelpfully. He'd been getting punchier over the last hour, Gregor had noticed.

"They - what?"

"We found that out the hard way," Miles said, "but don't worry, they're all either dead or in custody now."

"Also," Gregor said, and here he took a deep breath. "We found out who was behind the attempts on Miles's life. One of my Armsmen, Flavion, former ImpSec - which explains the methods - made a last ditch effort tonight."

Allegre blinked. "I don't understand. Why would one of your Armsmen try and kill one of your Imperial Auditors?"

"Well," Miles said, "that's sorta where it starts to get . . . complicated."

"That's where it starts to get complicated?" Allegre repeated.

"Guy," Gregor said firmly, "probably we should have told you this earlier, especially in hindsight. But we didn't know . . . well, there was a lot we didn't know, and it seemed prudent to wait until you came back from out-system." He waited while Roic entered and handed out blessed, wonderful coffee. Gregor took his first sip and waited for Allegre to do the same. When the man had swallowed and set his cup down, Gregor said, "Lord Vorkosigan and I are lovers."

There was the usual moment of complete incomprehension. And then . . . there was a great deal of shouting.

Allegre finally let them go after dawn when he had worn himself out. Gregor had thought about asking him to consider ways to coordinate Miles staying overnight at the Residence, but in the end, the vein popping out on the older man's forehead dissuaded him. There wouldn't be a lack of opportunities to bring up the subject later, when Allegre had adjusted to the basic idea.

There was silence for a long time after Allegre took himself off, mumbling under his breath. Miles slumped, exhausted and pale, in his chair across Gregor's desk. Gregor's thoughts drifted inexorably toward Flavion. He would have to find a new Armsman, he realized. How strange it would be to have someone else bring his breakfast each morning. Someone he didn't know, someone who didn't know him.

"That went well," said Miles.

"Oh, I don't know," said Gregor, stirring in his chair. "Simon used to be able to cut me down to size in fifteen words or less. Allegre's just been so bloody nice, I didn't know what to do with myself."

"I think he's over that now," said Miles dryly.

"Ah well," said Gregor, eyeing him. "Deferential people get rather dull."

"Gregor," Miles said into a pause, a bit hesitantly.
Mmm?

"Do you . . ." Miles stopped. "He could be right," he finally managed, looking down at his hands. "Not in his methods, of course, but . . . don't you think sometimes that maybe it's all just hubris, to think we can change anything?"

"Of course it's hubris," Gregor said quietly. "But no, I don't think he is right." Maybe it was just that being with Miles had always given him a sense of vast possibility that perhaps exceeded all sense of caution, but Gregor had felt when speaking to Flavion for that last, horrible time, that it didn't matter. And I will not give you up.

Miles nodded grimly. Sensing that there was nothing more he could say for the moment, Gregor checked his chrono. It was 0600; he had left a note for his private secretary to cancel everything until noon, when he would take a security update from Allegre. "Come on," he said gently to Miles, who was frowning into his cooling coffee. "Let's get some sleep. Er," he added hastily, caught up short by his own presumption. "If you'd like to stay, that is."

Miles looked up, and the tension eased in Gregor's chest at the sight of his smile. "Try and stop me," he said.

* *

Gregor offered him a courteous arm up, which Miles accepted with some gratitude. Apparently, he was getting too old to be pulling all-nighters, or so his body was informing him. Gregor rested a warm hand on his back, but said nothing when Miles gently disentangled himself at the door.

The Residence was just transitioning from nighttime watchfulness to daytime activity, and the corridors were still quiet. That was, until they came around a corner and met ghem-General Benin and haut Pel in her bubble, just disembarking from the lift.

"Getting an early start?" Miles asked.

Gregor flashed him a quick, reproving glance, and Miles squashed the reflex to sarcasm. Besides, it wasn't very nice to mock your enemies when they were down, even if it was fun.

"I find it efficacious to act quickly, once a course is chosen," said Pel.

"Admirable," murmured Gregor.

Miles took a step back, leaving them to continue the interchange of affirming politenesses. Nothing to worry about overly much, he thought, listening with half an ear. He doubted this contretemps would have any lasting effect, at least militarily. Unless, that was, this interesting little ghem rebellion . . .

Miles eye flicked to Benin, standing at flawless attention beside the larger bubble. He looked back at Miles, face unreadable. A pair of ghem revolutionaries, taking orders from the haut but also from . . . someone else. A highly placed officer in Celestial security killed for treason. And thou . . .

He couldn't engage Benin in conversation with Pel and Gregor right there, and he probably wouldn't have dared, regardless. These were the thoughts for which men died. Or rather, ghem. The thoughts and, apparently, the chance at genetic self-determination sitting safely, even now, in the Residence vault, just waiting for someone brilliant to come along and unlock it.

Good luck, you cagey bastard. Keep your head down and your thinking big, and one day . . .
They passed on at last, Benin pacing in quick, measured strides. Miles stood politely aside, then turned his back and stepped into the waiting lift.

"What is it?" said Gregor, frowning at him.

"Hmm?"

"You have a . . . look on your face."

"Oh," said Miles. "It's . . . nothing important."

Gregor accepted this with a sardonic lift of the eyebrows, but he said nothing more as they approached the door to his apartments.

Miles briefly contemplated a shower, but then decided it could wait until after he'd slept. His plans to stumble straight to bed were foiled, however, when the door slid back to reveal - good God - his parents, waiting in Gregor's sitting room. The Countess was smiling at them with a bright, Betan smile, Negri curled in her lap, and his father - when the hell had he gotten here? - looked . . . well, pissed.

Gregor stopped. Miles stopped. The Countess's smile widened. The Count crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

"So I break orbit last night," Miles's father began, standing, "and I already don't know what's going on, because your mother," he looked at Miles accusingly, "won't tell me, except that you've got something you need to say to me. And then I get here and Pym says someone tried to blow you up, and all of Vorkosigan House along with you, both of you are missing, Allegre is popping antacid and looking like he's considering apologizing in the most profound way, the Imperial Science Institute is in flames, and your seals are hopping all over the city, but when ImpSec catches up with them, they've got nothing but Athosians, whatever they are, and -"

"Aral, love," the Countess interrupted gently, "you need to breathe in order for that nice new heart of yours to work."

The Count took a single deep breath and said, "What in God's name did the two of you get up to last night and why the hell am I here in the first place?"

"Nice to see you too, Da," Miles said, and threw himself into a chair. So much for sleep. But on the bright side, he was so exhausted at this point that he hardly had the energy to be nervous.

"It's a long story, Aral," Gregor said wearily, seating himself with a bit more dignity.

"I have time."

"Well," Miles said, and decided to deal with the easy part first. "Pym was right. Someone did try to blow me up. Again. We chased them. They blew up the Imperial Science Institute. We chased them again. Or they chased us, I'm not rightly sure which anymore."

"And who were they?" the Count asked.

"The Cetagandan death squad that had been living in Gregor's guest house for a month," Miles said rapidly, and took the opportunity to stare at his fingernails. Flavion was a complication that he could fill them in on later. He didn't feel like going into that story again just at the moment.

"I see," was all his father said. "And the other?"
"Ah," Miles said, looking at Gregor. "That."

"Yes," his father said, "that."

Miles glared at his mother. "You might have given me some warning."

"You might have run off," she said serenely. "I thought you'd somehow been warned when we arrived at Vorkosigan House and you weren't there, but then Pym told us about the bomb in the seizure stimulator."

"Wouldn't have run off," Miles said, slumping. He looked at Gregor, who turned his hand palm out as if to say, "He's your father." Miles sighed heavily and sat up. "Right," he said to himself.

"Your mother told me it was good news," the Count said uncertainly.

"It is," Miles assured him. "It's just . . . complicated good news." He grimaced.

"Just say it, love," his mother suggested gently.

Right. Just say it. "Gregor and I are . . . in love," Miles managed, and then looked away.

"What?" the Count said after a beat. "I - I think I must have heard you wrong."

"No, you didn't," the Countess said, with far, far too much amusement in her voice.

Miles dared to glance up. His father looked . . . stunned, mostly, but that was being rapidly displaced by horror. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you before," Miles said, "but we weren't ready."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A few weeks. For me, anyway."

He relaxed fractionally. "So this is new, then."

"Ten years, Aral," Gregor put in quietly, the first he'd contributed to the conversation. "I have loved Miles for ten years. This isn't going away."

The Count turned his gaze from Miles to Gregor, and it wasn't a nice look, Miles saw. Damn, but he'd hoped this would go better. "If you love him," his father said quietly, "then you will not do this to him."

"Da!" Miles said, shocked. His mother frowned deeply, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry, Miles, but I hope you didn't expect me to be happy about this!"

"I'd hoped you would be, yes! I mean, Mother said that you -" Miles cut himself off abruptly.

The Count glanced reprovingly at the Countess, who gave him an apologetic half-smile. "It's not that, Miles," he said. "I don't care if you end up with a man or woman or a Betan hermaphrodite, I really don't. I care about your safety, and the last thing I want is for you to be anywhere near the Imperium. It's not safe!"

"I know it isn't," Miles said. "We know. We've talked about it."

"And?"
"And . . . I won't say that I don't care or that it doesn't matter, but . . . but there are things that matter more."

"Tests are gifts," his mother said, suddenly and quietly. "Great tests are great gifts."

"But, Cordelia . . ." the Count said despairingly. "I never wanted . . ."

"What we want does not matter in this case," she replied. "What Miles wants matters. And what Gregor wants. And if they want each other, than we can do nothing less than support them to our fullest ability."

"Please, Aral, do not think for one minute that I haven't considered the potential consequences," Gregor said, in his quiet, firm way. "I waited ten years to tell Miles how I felt . . . for a lot of reasons: personal cowardice, the certainty that he was not ready, my own hope that my feelings might eventually change. But concern for his safety was a factor as well. Tonight . . ." He shook his head. "What Miles didn't mention is that one of my own Armsmen made an attempt on his life, because he felt that Miles would be my downfall."

"Then you see!" the Count said desperately. "People who mean well, people who don't mean well, you'll be targets for all of them. For God's sake, you could argue that Vidal Vordarian meant well. The Imperium poisons people, literally and figuratively."

Gregor's chin came up. "I know that better than anyone," he said, "except perhaps yourself. Though I do rather think Miles has a few opinions on the topic, don't you?" The two of them stared at each other, the Count's desperation meeting Gregor's determination. "You married Cordelia," Gregor finally said. "And you have often told me that that marriage was what kept you sane and allowed you to serve as well as you did, for as long as you did. Your son . . . does the same for me. Please, allow me that."

"I wasn't Regent when we married. If I had been, I would never have . . ."

"You would not have allowed me that choice, Aral?" the Countess asked mildly. "You act as though I had no will in the matter, as though Miles has no will in the matter. I think you're forgetting how strong his will is. And I assure you, neither of them is undertaking this lightly."

The Count shook his head and did not speak for a long moment. Gregor's hand found Miles's and gripped it; the Count glanced up in time to see this, and let out a breath through his set teeth. "I'm sorry," he said. "I . . . I am happy that you each have found someone. I simply wish that circumstances were different."

"So do we," Gregor said. "I have wished that many times, for many reasons. But they are as they are, and we are as we are, and we think we can make this work. And we think that Barrayar will be better for it. It was better for your marriage."

The Count was silent and unresponsive, and Miles had to look closely to see the incremental sag in his shoulders. He looked away, hurt and a little desolate.

The Countess surveyed them all for a moment, and then shooed the cat off her lap and rose. "Well, then," she said calmly. "I'm assuming that it's safe for us to return to Vorkosigan House now?"

"Should be," Miles said, rubbing his temples in an attempt to ward off an incipient tension headache.

"Excellent. Are you coming with us?"
"No," Miles said brusquely. He did not look at his father. "Oh," he added suddenly, "the seizure stimulator. Has ImpSec carted it off?"

"Allegre himself," his mother assured him. "We wouldn't let anyone else have it."

"Good," Miles said, frowning. "I'm just wondering . . . damn, I'll have to call up ImpMil for another one."

"Actually," the Countess said, "we took care of that last night as well." She reached behind her armchair and produced a bag. "Apparently your neurologist made up a spare, for research purposes. Pym said that if you were lucky enough not to have had a seizure in all the excitement tonight, you were to induce one immediately."

"Okay," Miles sighed, accepting the bag. He was lucky he realized, and in a sickening, retroactive panic, went over all the points during the night when a seizure would have been fatal - and not just to him. By the slight paling of Gregor's face, Miles guessed that he was doing the same. "I'll do that . . . now, I guess."

"Yes, you will," she said firmly, and then looked to Gregor. "See that he does, please." She herded her silent husband out the door over her son's indignant protests.

"Hmph," Miles said, glaring after them. "Like I need a baby-sitter to make sure I take my medicine on time."

Gregor bent to scoop up the cat, and raised a sardonic eyebrow over the pointed ears. "How many times would you have forgotten to check your neurotransmitter levels if one of your Armsmen hadn't reminded you?" He pulled his head back to avoid the kitten's paws, which were batting with claws out at about eye-level.

"That's not -" Miles began, and stopped at the look on Gregor's face. "Entirely untrue," he finished reluctantly. "I guess I hadn't thought of my Armsmen like that before," he said thoughtfully as he followed Gregor into the bedroom. "Baby-sitters. Armed baby-sitters."

"Zookeepers, more like," Gregor said. He dumped the cat on the bed and went into the closet to change.

"That's probably closer," Miles agreed. He kicked off his boots and stripped down to his underwear, leaving his clothes in a heap on the carpet. He pulled the seizure stimulator out and glared at it, hefting it in his hand. It would be a long time - maybe forever - before he could put it on without worrying that it had been tampered with. Perhaps it would be worth locking it up in the family safe in between uses.

"Does it seem all right?" Gregor asked, emerging from the bathroom in pajamas and bare feet.

"Yeah," Miles said. "No reason it shouldn't be. My parents brought it straight from ImpMil, after all."

"True," Gregor said.

They eyed it for a long moment. "Fine then," Miles said at last. "Let's get it over with."

"What should I do?" Gregor asked nervously as Miles settled himself flat on his back on the floor.

"Make sure I don't hit my head or something. Don't let me flail around too much. It shouldn't be as bad as the uncontrolled one you saw. And, um, I usually need help getting into bed afterward."
Miles tried to be as reassuring as possible, while keeping his own nerves bottled up. The thought of letting anyone see this made his skin crawl.

"Ready?" Gregor asked, when Miles had the headset in place.

"Yeah," Miles said. He took a deep breath and touched the control to set it off. There was a sharpening of his surroundings, a rain of confetti and green fire, and then blackness.

He came to groggy and bleary as usual, and was aware of someone helping him into bed. He closed his eyes, disoriented and trying to remember where he was and who he was with, because these were not his sheets and the light was not the same as it was in his room at Vorkosigan House. Then Gregor slid into bed beside him and pulled him close and he remembered. He turned his head, briefly burying his face in the soft material of Gregor's shirt and whispered, "You okay?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Ready to run a hundred kilometers." Gregor puffed out a laugh. "I'll be fine once I sleep." He was aware, suddenly, of a rumbling, persistent, and sneaky ball of black fluff wedging itself in between them. "You," Miles said to the cat. "I can see that you might be competition. I'll lock you in the closet if I need to, don't think I won't."

"Go to sleep, Miles," Gregor said, laughter in his voice. He reached over and turned the light off.

Miles settled down and relaxed everywhere all at once. He was dimly aware of Gregor beside him, still wakeful in the dark. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, like "it's all right," and "we're alive," and "he'll come around eventually." But all he managed before sleep overtook him was an inarticulate murmur, part reassurance, part promise. There would be time for the rest later.

Fin.
Chapter 19

EPILOGUE

The Emperor's Birthday was always a glittering affair, with pretty people dressed up in pretty clothes and the public areas of the Imperial Residence decked out to the nines. Miles handed his coat off to an ImpSec agent masquerading as a footman for the occasion, and stepped into the ballroom, scanning for people he knew. Gregor would be in the other room with the moneybag ceremony for at least another hour. Miles would have to go in shortly, but first he wanted to find . . . ah, there he was.

Ivan stood in a corner, looking trapped and pained as Count Falco Vorpatril lectured him urgently on something. It wasn't the first time, Miles knew, that Vorpatril had cornered Ivan since he had officially been named Gregor's heir three months earlier. The content of the speeches was familiar - one of the greatest opportunities handed to a Vorpatril since the Time of Isolation, do not besmirch the family name in this, boy, do not humiliate your mother or me, etc. In short, "Don't screw up." Miles watched for a moment and then decided to take mercy on poor, besieged Ivan.

"Count Vorpatril," Miles said cheerfully. "Good to see you. Are you enjoying the party?"

"Your generation is going to be the ruin of Barrayar, Vorkosigan," Vorpatril growled in reply. "Mark my words."

"Oh, I don't know," Miles said, smiling pleasantly. "I think we're doing all right so far. But if you'd like to continue a discussion of our faults, I saw Count Vormoncrief and Count Vortala over by the food. I'm sure they'd be happy to agree with you. I, on the other hand, think it's a load of bollocks."

Ivan went pale. Vorpatril looked gobsmacked at having been spoken to in such a way. Miles took the opportunity to grab Ivan's arm and haul him away, with a polite, "Enjoy your evening" over his shoulder.

"Did you just talk back to Count Vorpatril?" Ivan asked in an alarmed undertone.

"I might have. What's he going to do, send me to bed without any supper?" Miles shrugged it off. "I'm just tired of him and his cronies. They might not like the way we're taking Barrayar, but frankly they're stuck with us." He took a deep breath and added lightly, "And I find that I'm less inclined to put up with them in my old age. Have you seen Gregor yet?"

"No, I barely got in the door before six different people tried to get my attention. I don't know why I ever agreed to be part of your - your ruse."

"It's not a ruse," Miles said, lowering his voice. "At least, this part of it isn't. You're very much the Imperial Heir."

"I know," Ivan said mournfully. "Anyway, what did you want?"

"Company while I stand in line, actually." They snagged glasses off a passing tray and made their way next door. Gregor was seated on the camp stool, receiving each Count with formal solemnity. And, Miles observed with a snort of laughter, perched on the table behind him and looking entirely as regal as the Emperor was Negri, now about twice the size he'd been when he'd popped out of their picnic basket. He sat with his paws together, watching over the proceedings with haughty disdain.

"He threatened to do this, but I didn't think he actually would," Miles said, grinning.
"M'mother mentioned it to me," Ivan said. "She tried to talk him out of it, but he said that it would keep his blood pressure down during the parade of geezers. Also, it's his birthday and he can do as he pleases."

"Very true."

Miles, standing in for his father, was one of the last people to kneel and place his hands between Gregor's, before handing off the bag of gold and giving a glowering Negri (who had come to regard Miles with jealous suspicion) a quick scratch behind the ears. The rest of the evening was a comfortable blur of dancing and dinner and then toasts and yet more dancing. Gregor's arm was noticeably bare of young heiresses, and Miles smiled behind his hand at some of the talk, grimly pleased. That place was his now, whether everyone knew it or not, and he found himself more gratified than he expected at Gregor's insistence upon holding it for him.

A little before midnight - and fifteen minutes after Gregor had retired - Miles trotted rather tipsily off to his groundcar. Pym drove down the street and turned as though heading for Vorkosigan House, before doubling back and dropping him off at the obscure side entrance that he often used. It was on the opposite side of the building from the public areas, so there were no drunken partygoers or curious passers-by hanging around.

"Thank you, Pym. Have a good night." Miles sidled up the stairs in the shadows. A Vorbarra Armsman let him in without comment, and he made his way up to Gregor's private apartments unimpeded. All the palace guards and Armsmen knew him now; most of them had probably guessed the truth. Miles was not particularly comfortable with that, but there was nothing they could have done to prevent it.

He found Gregor in the study, sprawled full-length on the couch with one booted foot hooked casually over the armrest. He had a book open across his chest, a glass of wine within reach, and if he were any more relaxed he'd slide right onto the floor. Miles surveyed him from the doorway, amused.

"Problem?" he asked.

Gregor looked up, smiling openly in welcome. "Not a one, thank you," he said. "Except maybe that you're all the way over there."

"And I bet you can't walk in a straight line right now," said Miles, laughing. He crossed the room, considered his options, then shrugged and stretched out, feet tucked up by Gregor's and chin propped on his chest. He lifted the book to set it aside, glancing down at it as he did.

"Makes me think of you," said Gregor, watching him.

Miles lifted an eyebrow, tilting the book and reading a few lines. The other eyebrow shot up, and he felt his mouth form a silent "o" as a prickle of heat rushed up his neck.

"I think I would have liked to be a poet," said Gregor. "If I'd chosen something, I mean. I think that would have been it."

"Really?" said Miles, who had a very difficult time imagining Gregor as anything other than what he was.

"Yes. If only it would mean you would blush at my filthy limericks, and not anyone else's."

Miles shot a dubious look down at the book. Those were neither limericks nor... well, "filthy" just wasn't quite the right word. "Are you jealous of -" he checked the flyleaf " - an Escobaran
who's been dead for seventy years?"

"Anyone who can put that look on your face . . ." murmured Gregor, watching him through half-lidded eyes.

"Hmm," said Miles, setting the book aside and resolving to investigate further at a later date. He leaned over the edge of the couch, eying the bottle next to Gregor's glass. "We were supposed to share that," he said.

"Really?" said Gregor, blinking guilelessly up at him. "I thought the idea was I would drink it and then you would have your wicked way with me."

"Well," said Miles, who had contrived to have the bottle of century-old Vorkosigan red waiting for Gregor when he came upstairs. "That was plan B." He paused, cocking his head. "But I don't really think I have to get you drunk for that, do I?" he said.

"No," said Gregor, smile sliding into something soft and crooked and all Miles's.

Miles hugged him, sudden and hard. Gregor made a small ooof, then hugged back. "Happy birthday," Miles said into his shoulder

"It was," Gregor said on a sigh. "Thank you."

They lay still together in the quiet. Not a sound reached them from the party still staggering on downstairs, or the rising fall winds outside. It was a bloody powder keg they were sitting on here, Miles thought lazily, with Barrayar and Cetaganda locked in an icily polite dance step and Komarr circling restively, to say nothing of their very own people. Mine, Miles thought, in a moment of suspended peace. The whole crazed lot of them, because they are his and what's his will be ours.