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Winterfair Gifts

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From Armsman Roic's wrist com the gate guard's voice reported laconically, "They're in. Gate's locked."

"Right," Roic returned. "Dropping the house shields." He turned to the discreet security control panel beside the carved double doors of Vorkosigan House's main entry hall, pressed his palm to the read-pad, and entered a short code. The faint hum of the force shield protecting the great house faded.

Roic stared anxiously out one of the tall, narrow windows flanking the portal, ready to throw the doors wide when m'lord's groundcar pulled into the porte cochere. He glanced no less anxiously down the considerable length of his athletic body, checking his House uniform: half-boots polished to mirrors, trousers knife-creased, silver embroidery gleaming, dark brown fabric spotless.

His face heated in mortified memory of a less expected arrival in this very hall—also of Lord Vorkosigan with honored company in tow—and the unholy tableau m'lord had surprised with the Escobaran bounty hunters and the gooey debacle of the bug butter. Roic had looked an utter fool in that

moment, nearly naked except for a liberal coating of sticky slime. He could still hear Lord Vorkosigan's austere, amused voice, as cutting as a razor-slash across his ears: *Armsman Roic, you're out of uniform.*

He thinks I'm an idiot. Worse, the Escobarans' invasion had been a security breach, and while he'd not, technically, been on duty—he'd been *asleep*, dammit—he'd been present in the house and therefore on call for emergencies. The mess had been in his lap, literally. M'lord had dismissed him from the scene with no more than an exasperated *Roic . . . get a bath*, somehow more keenly excoriating than any bellowed dressing-down.

Roic checked his uniform again.

The long silvery groundcar pulled up and sighed to the pavement. The front canopy rose on the driver, the senior and dauntingly competent Armsman Pym. He released the rear canopy and hurried around the car to assist m'lord and his party. The senior armsman spared a glance through the narrow window as he strode by, his eye passing coolly over Roic and scanning the hall beyond to make sure it contained no unforeseen drama this time. These were Very Important Off-World Wedding Guests, Pym had impressed upon Roic. Which Roic might have been left to deduce by m'lord going personally to the shuttleport to greet their descent from orbit—but then, Pym had walked in on the bug butter disaster, too. Since that day, his directives to Roic had tended to be couched in words of one syllable, with no contingency left to chance.

A short figure in a well-tailored gray tunic and trousers hopped out of the car first: Lord Vorkosigan, gesturing expansively at the great stone mansion, talking nonstop over his shoulder, smiling in proud welcome. As the carved doors swung wide, admitting a blast of Vorbarr Sultana winter night air and a few glittering snow crystals, Roic stood to attention and mentally matched the other people exiting the groundcar with the security list he'd been given. A tall woman held a baby bundled in blankets; a lean, smiling fellow hovered by her side. They had to be the Bothari-Jeseks. Madame Elena Bothari-Jesek was the daughter of the late, legendary Armsman Bothari; her right of entree into Vorkosigan House, where she had grown up with m'lord, was absolute, Pym had made sure Roic understood. It scarcely needed the silver circles of a jump pilot's neural leads on midforehead and temples to identify the shorter middle-aged fellow as the Betan jump pilot, Arde Mayhew—should a jump pilot look so jump-lagged? Well, m'lord's mother, Countess Vorkosigan, was Betan, too; and the pilot's blinking, shivering stance was among the most physically unthreatening Roic had ever seen. Not so the final guest. Roic's eyes widened.

The hulking figure unfolded from the groundcar and stood up, and up. Pym, who was almost as tall as Roic, did not come quite up to its shoulder. It shook out the swirling folds of a gray-and-white greatcoat of military cut and threw back its head. The light from overhead caught the face and gleamed off . . . were those *fangs* hooked over the outslung lower jaw?

Sergeant Taura was the name that went with it, by process of elimination. One of m'lord's old military buddies, Pym had given Roic to understand, and—don't be fooled by the rank—of some *particular*

importance (if rather mysterious, as was everything connected with Lord Miles Vorkosigan's late career in Imperial Security). Pym was former ImpSec himself. Roic was not, as he was reminded, oh, three times a day on average.

At Lord Vorkosigan's urging, the whole party poured into the entry hall, shaking off snow-spotted garments, talking, laughing. The greatcoat was swung from those high shoulders like a billowing sail, its owner turning neatly on one foot, folding the garment ready to hand over. Roic jerked back to avoid being clipped by a heavy, mahogany-colored braid of hair as it swept past, and rocked forward to find himself face to . . . nose to . . . staring directly into an entirely unexpected cleavage. It was framed by pink silk in a plunging vee. He glanced up. The outslung jaw was smooth and beardless. The curious pale amber eyes, irises circled with sleek black lines, looked back down at him with, he instantly feared, some amusement. *Her* fang-framed smile was deeply alarming.

Pym was efficiently organizing servants and luggage. Lord Vorkosigan's voice yanked Roic back to focus. "Roic, did the count and countess get back in from their dinner engagement yet?"

"About twenty minutes ago, m'lord. They went upstairs to their suite to change."

Lord Vorkosigan addressed the woman with the baby, who was attracting cooing maids. "My parents would skin me if I didn't take *you* up to them instantly. Come on. Mother's pretty eager to meet her namesake. I predict Baby Cordelia will have Countess Cordelia wrapped around her pudgy little fingers in about, oh, three and a half seconds. At the outside."

He turned and started up the curve of the great staircase, shepherding the Bothari-Jeseks and calling over his shoulder, "Roic, show Arde and Taura to their assigned rooms, make sure they have everything they want. We'll meet back in the library when you all are freshened up or whatever. Drinks and snacks will be laid on there."

So, it was a *lady* sergeant. Galactics had those; m'lord's mother had been a famous Betan officer in her day. *But this one's a bloody giant mutant lady sergeant* was a thought Roic suppressed more firmly. Such backcountry prejudices had no place in *this* household. Though, she was clearly bioengineered, had to be. He recovered himself enough to say, "May I take your bag, um . . . Sergeant?"

"Oh, all right." With a dubious look down at him, she handed him the satchel she'd had slung over one arm. The pink enamel on her fingernails did not quite camouflage their shape as claws, heavy and efficient as a leopard's. The bag's descending weight nearly jerked Roic's arm out of its socket. He managed a desperate smile and began lugging it . two-handed up the staircase in m'lord's wake.

He deposited the tired-looking pilot first. Sergeant Taura's second-floor guest room was one of the renovated ones, with its own bath, around the corridor's corner from m'lord's own suite. She reached up and trailed a claw along the ceiling and smiled in evident approval of Vorkosigan House's three-meter headspace.

“So,” she said, turning to Roic, “is a Winterfair wedding considered especially auspicious, in Barrayaran custom?”

“They’re not so common as in summer. Mostly I think it’s now because m’lord’s fiancée is between semesters at university.”

Her thick brows rose in surprise. “She’s a student?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He had a notion one addressed female sergeants as *ma’am*. Pym would have known.

“I didn’t realize she was such a *young* lady.”

“No, ma’am. Madame Vorsoisson’s a widow—she has a little boy, Nikki—nine years old. Mad about jumpships. Do you happen t’ know—does that pilot fellow like children?” Mayhew was bound to be a magnet for Nikki.

“Why . . . I don’t know. I don’t think Arde knows either. He hardly ever meets any in a free mercenary fleet.”

He would have to watch, then, to be sure little Nikki didn’t set himself up for a painful rebuff. M’lord and m’lady-to-be might not be paying their usual attention to him, under the circumstances.

Sergeant Taura circled the room, gazing with what Roic hoped was approval at its comfortable appointments, and glanced out the window at the back garden, shrouded in winter white, the snow luminous in the security lighting. “I suppose it makes sense that he’d have to wed one of his own Vor kind, in the end.” Her nose wrinkled. “So, are the Vor a social class, a warrior caste, or what? I never could quite figure it out from Miles. The way he talks about them you’d half think they were a religion. Or at any rate, *his* religion.”

Roic blinked in bafflement. “Well, no. And yes. All of that. The Vor are . . . well, Vor.”

“Now that Barrayar has modernized, isn’t a hereditary aristocracy resented by the rest of your classes?”

“But they’re *our* Vor.”

“Says the Barrayaran. Hmm. So, *you* can criticize them, but heaven help any outsider who dares to?”

“Yes,” he said, relieved that she seemed to have grasped it despite his stumbling tongue.

“A family matter. *I* see.” Her grin faded into a frown that was actually less alarming—not so much fang. Her fingers clenching the curtain inadvertently poked claws through the expensive fabric; wincing, she

shook her hand free and tucked it behind her back. Her voice lowered. “So she’s Vor, well and good. But does she *love* him?”

Roic heard the odd emphasis in her voice but was unclear how to interpret it. “I’m very sure of it, ma’am,” he avowed loyally. M’lady-to-be’s frowns, her darkening mood, were surely just prewedding nerves piled atop examination stress on the substrate of her not-so-distant bereavement.

“Of course.” Her smile flicked back in a perfunctory sort of way. “Have you served Lord Vorkosigan long, Armsman Roic?”

“Since last winter, ma’am, when a space fell vacant in the Vorkosigans’ armsmen’s score. I was sent up on recommendation from the Hassadar Municipal Guard,” he added a bit truculently, challenging her to sneer at his humble, nonmilitary origins. “A count’s twenty armsmen are always from his own district, y’see.”

She did not react; the Hassadar Municipal Guard evidently meant nothing to her.

He asked in return, “Did you . . . serve him very long? Out there?” In the galactic backbeyond where m’lord had acquired such exotic friends.

Her face softened, the fanged smile reappearing. “In a sense, all my life. Since my real life began, ten years ago, anyway. He is a great man.” This last was delivered with unself-conscious conviction.

Well, he was a great man’s *son*, certainly. Count Aral Vorkosigan was a colossus bestriding the last half century of Barrayaran history. Lord Miles had led a less public career. Which no one would tell Roic anything about, the most junior armsman not being ex-ImpSec like m’lord and most of the rest of the armsmen, eh.

Still, Roic *liked* the little lord. What with the birth injuries and all—Roic shied away from the pejorative *mutations*—he’d had a rough ride all his life despite his high blood. Hard enough for him to just achieve normal things, like . . . like getting married. Although, m’lord had brains enough, belike, in compensation for his stunted body. Roic just wished he didn’t think his newest armsman a dolt.

“The library is to the right of the stairs as you go down, through the first room.” He touched his hand to his forehead in a farewell salute, by way of paving his escape from this unnerving giant female. “The dining’s to be casual tonight; you don’t need t’ dress.” He added, as she glanced down in bewilderment at her travel-rumpled loose pink jacket and trousers, “Dress up, that is. Fancy. What you’re wearing is fine.”

“Oh,” she replied with evident relief. “That makes more sense. Thank you.”

Having made his routine security circuit of the house, Roic arrived back at the antechamber just outside the library to find the huge woman and the pilot fellow examining the array of wedding presents temporarily staged there. The growing assortment of objects had been arriving for weeks. Each had been handed in to Pym to be unwrapped and to undergo a security check, rewrapped, and as the affianced couple's time permitted, unwrapped again and displayed with its card.

“Look, here's yours, Arde,” said Sergeant Taura. “And here's Elli's.”

“Oh, what did she finally decide on?” asked the pilot. “At one point she told me she was thinking of sending the bride a barbed-wire choke chain for Miles, but was afraid it might be misinterpreted.”

“No . . .” Taura held up a thick fall of shimmering black stuff as long as she was tall. “It seems to be some sort of fur coat. No, wait—it's a blanket. Beautiful! You should feel this, Arde. It's incredibly soft. And warm.” She held a supple fold up to the side of her head, and a delighted laugh broke from her long lips. “It's purring!”

Mayhew's eyebrows climbed halfway to his receding hairline. “Good God! *Did* she . . . ? Now, *that's* a bit edgy.”

Taura stared down at him in puzzled inquiry. “Edgy? Why?”

Mayhew made an uncertain gesture. “It's a live fur—a genetic construct. It looks just like one Miles once gave to *Elli*. If she's recycling his gifts, that's a pretty pointed message.” He hesitated. “Though I suppose if she bought a fresh new one for the happy couple, that's a different message.”

“Ouch.” Taura tilted her head to one side and frowned at the fur. “My life's too short for arcane mind games, Arde. Which is it?”

“Search me. In the dark, all cat blankets are . . . well, black, in this case. I wonder if it's intended as an editorial?”

“Well, if it is, don't you *dare* let on to the poor bride, or I swear I'll turn both your ears into doilies.” She held up her clawed fingers and wriggled them. “By hand.”

Judging by the pilot's brief grin, the threat was a jest, but by his little bow of compliance, not an entirely empty one. Taura observed Roic, just then, refolded the live fur into its box, and tucked her hands discreetly behind her back.

The door to the library swung open, and Lord Vorkosigan stuck his head out. “Ah, there you two are.” He strolled into the antechamber. “Elena and Baz will be down in a little—she's feeding Baby Cordelia.

You must be starving by now, Taura. Come on in and try the hors d'oeuvres. My cook has outdone herself.”

He smiled up affectionately at the enormous sergeant. While the top of Roic's head barely came up to her shoulder, m'lord just about faced her belt buckle. It occurred to Roic that Taura towered over himself in almost exactly the same proportions that ladies of average height towered over Lord Vorkosigan. This must be what women looked like to m'lord *all the time*.

Oh.

M'lord waved his guests through to the library but, instead of following them, shut the door and motioned Roic to his side. He looked thoughtfully up at his tallest armsman and lowered his voice.

“Tomorrow morning, I want you to drive Sergeant Taura to the Old Town. I've prevailed upon Aunt Alys to present Taura to her modiste and fix her up with a Barrayaran lady's wardrobe suitable for the upcoming bash. Figure to hold yourself at their disposal for the day.”

Roic gulped. M'lord's aunt, Lady Alys Vorpatril, was in her own way more terrifying than any woman Roic had ever encountered, regardless of height. She was the acknowledged social arbiter of the high Vor in the capital, the last word in fashion, taste, and etiquette, the official hostess for Emperor Gregor *himself*. And her tongue could slice a fellow to ribbons and tie up the remains in a bowknot before they hit the ground.

“How t' *devil* did you—” Roic began, then cut himself off.

M'lord smirked. “I was very persuasive. Besides, Lady Alys relishes a challenge. With luck, she may even be able to part Taura from that shocking pink she favors. Some damned fool once told her it was a nonthreatening color, and now she uses it in the most unsuitable garments—and quantities. It's *so* wrong on her. Well, Aunt Alys will be able to handle it. If anyone asks for your opinion—not that they're likely to—vote for whatever Alys picks.”

I shouldn't dare do otherwise, Roic managed not to blurt aloud. He stood to attention and tried to look as though he were listening intelligently.

Lord Vorkosigan tapped his fingers on his trouser seam, his smile fading. “I'm also relying on you to see that Taura is not, um, offered insult, or made uncomfortable, or . . . well, you know. Not that you can keep people from staring, I don't suppose. But be her outrider in any public venue, and be alert to steer her away from any problems. I wish I had time to squire her myself, but this wedding prep has gone into high gear. Not much longer now, thank God.”

“How is Madame Vorsoisson holding up?” Roic inquired diffidently. He had been wondering for two days if he ought to report the crying jag to someone, but m'lady-to-be had surely not realized her

muffled breakdown in one of Vorkosigan House's back corridors had included a hastily retreating witness.

Judging by m'lord's suddenly guarded expression, perhaps he knew. "She has . . . extra stresses just now. I've tried to take as much of the organizing off her shoulders as possible." His shrug was not as reassuring as it might be, Roic felt.

M'lord brightened. "Anyway, I want Sergeant Taura to have a great time on her visit to Barrayar, a fabulous Winterfair season. It's probably the only chance she'll ever have to see the place. I want her to look back on this week like, like . . . dammit, I want her to feel like Cinderella magicked off to the ball. She's earned it, God knows. Midnight tolls too damned soon."

Roic tried to wrap his mind around the concept of Lord Vorkosigan as the enormous woman's fairy godfather. "So . . . who's t' handsome prince?"

M'lord's smile went crooked; something almost like pain sounded in his indrawn breath. "Ah. Yes. That would be the central problem, now. Wouldn't it."

He dismissed Roic with his usual casual half-salute, a vague wave of his hand in the vicinity of his forehead, and joined his guests in the library.

Roic had never in his whole career as a Hassadar municipal guardsman been in a clothing store resembling that of Lady Vorpatril's modiste. Nothing betrayed its location in the Vorbarr Sultana thoroughfare but a discreet brass plaque, labeled simply ESTELLE. Cautiously, he mounted to the second floor, Sergeant Taura's massive footsteps creaking on the carpeted stairs behind him, and poked his head into a hushed chamber that might have been a Vor lady's drawing room. There was not a garment rack nor even a mannequin in sight, just a thick carpet, soft lighting, and tables and chairs that looked suitable for offering high tea at the Imperial Residence. To his relief Lady Vorpatril had arrived before them and was standing chatting with another woman in a dark dress.

The two women turned as Taura ducked her head under the lintel behind Roic and straightened up again. Roic nodded a polite greeting. He couldn't imagine what m'lord had said to his aunt, but her eyes widened only slightly, looking up at Taura. The second woman didn't quail at the fangs, claws, or height either, but when her glance swept down the pink trouser outfit, she winced.

There was a brief pause; Lady Alys shot Roic an inquiring look, and he realized it must be his job to do the announcing, as when he brought a visitor into Vorkosigan House. "Sergeant Taura, my lady," he said loudly, then stopped, hoping for more cues.

After another moment, Lady Alys abandoned further hope of him and came forward, smiling, her hands

held out. “Sergeant Taura. I am Miles Vorkosigan’s aunt, Alys Vorpatril. Permit me to welcome you to Barrayar. My nephew has told me something about you.”

Uncertainly, Taura stuck out one huge hand, engulfing Lady Alys’s slender fingers, and shook with care. “I’m afraid he hasn’t told me too much about you,” she said. Shyness made her voice a gruff rumble. “I don’t know many aunts. I somehow thought you would be older. And . . . and not so beautiful.”

Lady Vorpatril smiled, not without approval. Only a few streaks of silver in her dark coiffure and a slight softening of her skin betrayed her age to Roic’s eyes; she was trim and elegant and utterly self-possessed, as always. She introduced the other woman, Madame Somebody—not Estelle, though Roic promptly dubbed her that in his mind—apparently the senior modiste.

“I’m very happy to have a chance to visit Miles’s—Lord Vorkosigan’s homeworld,” Taura told them. “Although, when he invited me to come for the Winterfair season, I wasn’t sure if it was hunting or social, and whether I should pack weapons or dresses.”

Lady Vorpatril’s smile sharpened. “Dresses *are* weapons, my dear, in sufficiently skilled hands. Permit us to introduce you to the rest of our ordnance team.” She gestured toward a door at the far end of the room, through which presumably lay more utilitarian workrooms, full of laser scanners and design consoles and bolts of exotic fabrics and expert seamstresses. Or magic wands, for all Roic knew.

The other woman nodded. “Do please come this way, Sergeant Taura. We have a great deal to accomplish today, Lady Alys tells me . . .”

“My lady?” Roic called in faint panic to their disappearing forms. “What should I do?”

“Wait here a few moments, Armsman,” Lady Alys murmured over her shoulder to him. “I’ll be back.”

Taura, too, glanced back at him, just before the door eased silently closed behind her, the expression flitting over her odd features seeming for a moment almost beseeching—*Don’t abandon me*.

Did he dare sit on one of the chairs? He decided not. He stood for a few moments, walked around the chamber, and finally took up a guardsman’s stance, which by dint of much recent practice he could hold for an hour at a stretch, his back to one delicately decorated wall.

In a while Lady Vorpatril returned, a pile of bright pink cloth folded over her arm. She shoved it at Roic.

“Take these back to my nephew and tell him to hide them. Or better, burn them. Or anything, but do not under any circumstances allow them to fall into that young woman’s hands again. Come back in about, oh, four hours. You are by far the most ornamental of Miles’s armsmen, but there’s no need to have you lurking about cluttering up Estelle’s reception room till then. Run along.”

He looked down on the top of her perfectly groomed head and wondered how she could *always* make him feel four years old, or as though he wanted to hide in a large bag. For his consolation, Roic reflected as he made his way out, she seemed to have the same effect on her nephew, who was thirty-one and ought to be immune by now.

He reported again for duty at the appointed time, only to cool his heels for another twenty minutes or so. A sub-modiste of some sort offered him a choice of tea or wines while he waited, which he politely declined. At last, the door opened; voices drifted through.

Taura's vibrant baritone was unmistakable. "I'm not so sure, Lady Alys. I've never worn a skirt like this in my life."

"We'll have you practice for a few minutes, sitting and standing and walking. Oh, here's Roic back, good."

Lady Alys stepped through first, folded her arms, and looked, oddly enough, at Roic.

A stunning vision in hunter green stepped through behind her.

Oh, it was still Taura, certainly, but . . . the skin that had been sallow and dull against the pink was now revealed as a glowing ivory. The green jacket fit very trimly about the waist. Above, her pale shoulders and long neck seemed to bloom from a white linen collar; below, the jacket skirt skimmed out briefly around the upper hips. A narrow skirt continued the long green fall to her firm calves. Wide linen cuffs decorated with subtle white braid made her hands look, if not small, well-proportioned. The pink nail polish was gone, replaced by a dark mahogany shade. The heavy braid hanging down her back had been transformed into a mysteriously knotted arrangement, clinging close to her head and set off with a green . . . hat? feather? anyway, a neat little accent tilted to the other side. The odd shape of her face seemed suddenly artistic and sophisticated rather than distorted.

"Ye-es," said Lady Vorpatril. "That will do."

Roic closed his mouth.

With a lopsided smile, Taura stepped carefully forward. "I am a bodyguard by trade," she said, evidently continuing a conversation with Lady Vorpatril. "How can I kick someone's teeth in wearing this?"

"A woman wearing *that* suit, my dear, will have volunteers to kick in annoying persons' teeth for her," said Lady Alys. "Is that not so, Roic?"

"If they don't trample each other in the rush," gulped Roic and turned red.

One corner of that wide mouth lifted; the golden eyes seemed to sparkle like champagne. She caught sight of a long mirror on a carved stand in one corner and walked over to it to stare somewhat uncertainly at the portion of her it reflected. “It’s effective, then?”

“Downright terrifying,” Roic averred.

Roic intercepted a furious glower from Lady Alys behind Taura’s back. Her lips formed the words *No, you idiot!* He shrank into cowed silence.

“Oh.” Taura’s fanged smile fled. “But I already terrify people. Human beings are so fragile. If you get a good grip, you can pull their heads right off. I want to *attract* . . . somebody. For a change. Maybe I should have that pink dress with the bows after all.”

Lady Alys said smoothly, “We agreed that the ingenue look is for much younger girls.”

“Smaller ones, you mean.”

“There is more than one kind of beauty. Yours needs dignity. *I* would never deck myself in pink bows,” she threw in, a little desperately it seemed to Roic.

Taura eyed her, seeming struck by this. “No . . . I suppose not.”

“You will simply attract braver men.”

“Oh, I know *that*.” Taura shrugged. “I was just . . . hoping for a larger selection, for once.” She added under her breath, “Anyway, he’s taken now.”

What he? Roic couldn’t help wondering. She sounded rather sad about it. Some very tall admirer, now out of the picture? Larger than Roic? There weren’t too many men of that description around.

Lady Alys rounded out the afternoon by guiding her new protegee to an exclusive tearoom, much frequented by high Vor matrons. This proved to be partly for the purposes of tutorial, partly to refuel Taura’s ferocious metabolism. While the server brought dish after dish, Lady Alys offered a brisk stream of advice on everything from gracefully exiting a groundcar in restrictive clothing to posture to table manners to the intricacies of Vor social rank. Despite her outsized scale, Taura was naturally athletic and coordinated, seeming to improve almost as Roic watched.

Drafted as practice gentleman, Roic found himself coming in for a few sharp corrections himself. He felt very conspicuous and clumsy at first, until he realized that, next to Taura, he might as well be invisible. If they drew sidelong looks from other diners, at least the comments were low-voiced or far enough away that he was not compelled to take notice; besides, Taura’s attention was entirely upon her mentor. Unlike Roic, she never needed the same instruction twice.

When Lady Vorpatril removed herself to consult with the head server about some fine point, Taura leaned over to whisper, “She’s *very* good at this, isn’t she?”

“Yes. The best.”

She sat back with a smile of satisfaction. “Miles’s people generally are.” She regarded Roic appraisingly.

A server guided a well-dressed Vor matron shepherding a girl-child about Nikki’s age past their table toward their own seating. The girl stopped short and stared at Taura. Her hand lifted, pointing in astonishment. “Mama, look at that gigantic—”

The mother captured the hand, shot an alarmed glance at them, and began some hushed admonishment about it not being polite to point. Taura essayed a big friendly smile at the girl. A mistake . . .

The girl screamed and buried her face in her mother’s skirts, hands frantically clutching. The woman shot Taura a furious, frightened glower and hustled the little girl away, not toward their table but to the exit. Across the tearoom, Lady Alys’s head swiveled around.

Roic looked back at Taura, then wished he hadn’t. Her face froze, appalled, then crumpled in distress; she seemed about to burst into tears but caught herself with a long indrawn breath, held for a moment.

Tensed to spring—where?—Roic instead eased back helplessly in his chair. Hadn’t m’lord *specifically* detailed him to prevent this sort of thing?

With a gulp, Taura brought her breathing back under control. She looked as wan as though she’d been wounded by a knife thrust. Yet what could he have done? He couldn’t very well draw his stunner and pot some Vor lady’s terrified kid . . .

Lady Alys, taking in the incident, returned quickly. With a special frown at Roic, she slid back into her seat. She smoothed over the moment with some light comment, but the outing did not recover its cheerful tone; Taura kept trying to shrink down and sit smaller, a futile exercise, and whenever she began to smile, stopped and tried to hold her hand over her mouth.

Roic wished he were back patrolling Hassadar alleys.

Roic arrived with his charges back at Vorkosigan House feeling as though he’d been run through a wringer. Backward. Several times. He peered around the tower of garment boxes he carried—the rest, Madame Estelle had assured Taura, would be delivered—and managed not to drop them getting through

the carved doors. Under Lady Vorpatril's direction, he handed off the boxes to a pair of maidservants, who whisked them away.

M'lord's voice wafted from the antechamber to the library. "Is that you, Aunt Alys? We're in here."

Roic trod belatedly after the two disparate women just in time to see m'lord introduce Sergeant Taura to his fiancée, Madame Ekaterin Vorsoisson. Like, it seemed, everyone but Roic, she had apparently been warned in advance; she didn't even blink, holding out one hand to the huge galactic woman and offering her an impeccably polite welcome. M'lady-to-be looked fatigued this evening, although that might be partially the effect of the drab gray half-mourning she still wore, her dark hair drawn back in a severe knot. The garb went with the gray civilian suits m'lord favored, though, giving the effect of two players on the same team.

M'lord regarded the new green outfit with unfeigned enthusiasm. "Splendid work, Aunt Alys! I knew I could rely on you. That's a stunning look with the hair, Taura." He peered upward. "Are the fleet medicos making some new headway with the extension treatments? I don't see any gray at all. Great!"

She hesitated, then replied, "No, I just got some customized dye to match it."

"Ah." He made an apologetic motion, as if brushing away his last words. "Well, it looks lovely."

New voices sounded from the entry hall, Armsman Pym admitting a visitor.

"No need to announce me, Pym."

"He's right in there, then, sir. Lady Alys just arrived."

"Better still."

Simon Illyan (ImpSec, retired) entered upon these words, bent to kiss Lady Alys's hand, then tucked it through one arm as he straightened. She smiled fondly at him, and he snugged her in close to his side. He, too, absorbed his introduction to the towering Sergeant Taura with unruffled calm, bowing over her hand and saying, "I am so pleased to have a chance to meet you at last, Sergeant. I hope your visit to Barrayar has been pleasant so far?"

"Yes, sir," she rumbled back, apparently controlling an impulse to salute the man only because he still held her hand. Roic didn't blame her; he was taller than Illyan, too, but the formidable former Chief of Imperial Security made *him* want to salute, and he'd never even been *in* the military. "Lady Alys has been wonderful." No one, it seemed, was going to mention the unfortunate incident in the tearoom.

"I'm not surprised. Oh, Miles," Illyan continued, "I've just come from the Imperial Residence. Some good news came in when I was saying good-bye to Gregor. Lord Vorbataille was arrested this afternoon

at the Vorbarr Sultana shuttleport, trying to leave the planet in disguise.”

M’lord blew out his breath. “That’s going to put *that* ugly little case to bed, then. Good. I was afraid it was going to drag on over Winterfair.”

Illyan smiled. “I wondered if that might have had something to do with the energy with which you tackled it.”

“Heh. I shall give dear Gregor the benefit of the doubt and assume he did not have my personal deadline in mind when he assigned me to it. The mess did proliferate unexpectedly.”

“Case?” Sergeant Taura inquired.

“My new job as one of the nine Imperial Auditors for Emperor Gregor took an odd and unexpected turn into criminal investigation a month or so back,” m’lord explained. “We found that Lord Vorbataille, who is a count’s heir—like me—from one of our southern districts, had involved himself with a Jacksonian smuggling ring. Or, possibly, been suborned by it. Anyway, by the time his sins caught up with him he was up to his eyebrows in illicit traffic, hijacking, and murder. Very bad company, now wholly out of business, I’m pleased to report. Gregor is considering sending the Jacksonians home in a box, suitably frozen; let their backers decide if they are worth the expense of reviving. If everything is finally proved on Vorbataille that I think will be . . . for his father’s sake, he may be allowed to suicide in his cell.” M’lord grimaced. “If not, the Council of Counts will have to be persuaded to endorse a more direct redemption of the honor of the Vor. Corruption on this level can’t be allowed to slop over and give us all a bad name.”

“Gregor is very pleased with your work on this one,” Illyan remarked.

“I’ll bet. He was livid about the *Princess Olivia* hijacking, in his own understated way. An unarmed ship, all those poor dead passengers—God, what a nightmare.”

Roic listened a bit wistfully to all this. He thought he might have done more this past month when m’lord was buzzing in and out on the high-profile case, but Pym hadn’t assigned him to the duty. Granted, someone had to stand night guard for Vorkosigan House. Week after week . . .

“But enough of this nasty business”—m’lord caught Madame Vorsoisson’s grateful glance—“let’s turn to more cheerful affairs. Why don’t you finish opening that next package, love?”

Madame Vorsoisson turned back to the crowded table and the task everyone’s arrival had interrupted. “Here’s the card. Oh. Admiral Quinn, again?”

M’lord took it, brows rising. “What, no limerick this time? How disappointing.”

“Perhaps this one is to make up for—Oh, my. I imagine so. And all the way from Earth!” From a small box, she drew a short, triple strand of matched pearls and held them up to her throat. “Choker-style . . . oh, how pretty.” Momentarily, she let the iridescent spheres line up upon her neck, touching the two ends of the clasp in back.

“Would you like me to fasten it?” her bridegroom offered.

“Just for a moment . . .” She bent her head, and m’lord reached up and fiddled with the catch at her nape. She walked to the mirror over the room’s unlit fireplace, turning to watch the exquisite ornament catch the light, and gave m’lord a quizzical smile. “I believe they would go perfectly with what I’m wearing the day after tomorrow. Don’t you think, Lady Alys?”

Lady Alys tilted her head in sartorial judgment. “Why, yes, indeed.”

M’lord bowed at this endorsement by the highest authority. The look he exchanged with his bride was less decipherable to Roic, but he seemed very pleased, even relieved. Sergeant Taura, watching the byplay, frowned in unease.

Madame Vorsoisson removed the strands and laid them back in their velvet-lined box, where they glowed softly. “I believe we should let your guests freshen up before dinner, Miles.”

“Oh, yes. Except I need to borrow Simon for a moment. Will you excuse us? There will be drinks in the library again when you are all ready. Someone let Arde know. Where is Arde?”

“Nikki captured him and carried him off,” said Madame Vorsoisson. “I should probably go rescue the poor man.”

M’lord and Illyan withdrew to the library. Lady Alys escorted Taura away, presumably for one last tutorial on Barrayaran etiquette before the impending formal dinner with Count and Countess Vorkosigan. Taura glanced back at the bride, still frowning. Roic watched the giant woman out with some regret, distracted by the sudden speculation of what it would be like to patrol a Hassadar alley *with* her.

“M’lady—Madame Vorsoisson, that is,” Roic began as she started to turn away.

“Not for much longer.” She smiled, turning back.

“What’s with . . . that is, how old is Sergeant Taura? Do you know?”

“Around twenty-six standard, I believe.”

A little younger than Roic, actually. It felt unfair that the galactic woman should seem so much more . . . complicated. “Then why is her hair turning gray? If she’s bioengineered, I wouldn’t have thought they’d muff up such details.”

Madame Vorsoisson made a little gesture of apology. “I believe that is a private matter for her, which is not mine to discuss.”

“Oh.” Roic’s brow wrinkled in bafflement. “Where’d she come from? Where did m’lord meet her?”

“On one of his old covert ops missions, he tells me. He rescued her from a particularly vile bioengineering facility on the planet of Jackson’s Whole. They were trying to develop a super-soldier. Having escaped enslavement, she became an especially valued colleague on his ops team.” She added after a contemplative moment, “And sometime-lover. Also especially valued, I understand.”

Roic felt suddenly very . . . rural. Backcountry. Not up to speed on the sophisticated, galactic-tinged Vor life of the capital. “Er . . . he *told* you? And—and you’re all right with that?” He wondered if meeting Sergeant Taura had rattled her more than she’d let on.

“It was before my time, Roic.” Her smile crimped a little. “I actually wasn’t sure if he was confessing or bragging, but now that I’ve seen her, I rather think he was bragging.”

“But—but how would . . . I mean, she’s so tall, and he’s, um . . .”

Now her eyes narrowed with laughter at him, although her lips remained demure. “He didn’t supply me with *that* much detail, Roic. It wouldn’t have been gentlemanly.”

“To you? No, I guess not.”

“To her.”

“Oh. Oh. Um, yeah.”

“For what it’s worth, I have heard him remark that a height differential matters much less when two people are lying down. I find I must agree.” With a smile he *really* didn’t dare try to interpret, she moved off in search of Nikki.

A scant hour later, Roic was surprised when Pym gave him a heads-up on his wrist com to bring m’lord’s groundcar around. He parked it under the porte cochere and entered the black-and-white paved hall to find m’lord assisting Madame Vorsoisson on with her wraps.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?” m’lord asked her anxiously. “I’d like to go with you, see you get home and in all right.”

Madame Vorsoisson pressed a hand to her forehead. Her face was pale and damp, almost greenish. “No. No. Roic will get me there. Go back to your guests. They’ve come so far, and you’ll only be getting to see them for such a short time. I’m sorry to be such a drip. Give my abject apologies to the count and countess.”

“If you don’t feel well, you don’t feel well. Don’t apologize. Do you think you’re coming down with something? I could send our personal physician round.”

“I don’t know. I hope not, not now! It mostly seems to be a headache.” She bit her lip. “I don’t think I have a fever.”

He reached up to touch her brow; she winced. “No, you’re not hot. But you’re all clammy.” He hesitated, then asked more quietly, “Nerves, d’you think?”

She hesitated, too. “I don’t know.”

“I have all the wedding logistics under control, you know. All you have to do is show up.”

Her smile was pained. “And not fall over.”

He was silent a little longer this time. “You know, if you decide that you really can’t go through with it, you can call a halt. Any time. Right up to the last. Hope you won’t, of course. But I need you to know you could.”

“What, with everyone from the emperor and the empress on down coming? I think not.”

“I’d cover it, if I had to.” He swallowed. “I know you said you wanted a small wedding, but I didn’t realize you meant *tiny*. I’m sorry.”

She blew out her breath in something like exasperation. “Miles, I love you dearly, but if I’m going to start throwing up, I’d really prefer to be home first.”

“Oh. Yes. Roic, if you please?” He motioned to his armsman.

Roic took Madame Vorsoisson’s arm, which was trembling.

“I’ll send Nikki home safely with one of the armsmen after dessert, or after he wears Arde out. I’ll call your house and let them know you’re coming,” m’lord called after her.

She waved in acknowledgment; Roic helped her into the rear compartment and closed the canopy. Her shadowed form sat bent, head clutched in her hands.

M'lord chewed on his knuckle and stared in distress as the house doors swung shut upon him.

Roic's night shift was cut short at dawn the next morning when the count's guard commander called him on his wrist com and told him to report to the front hall in running gear; one of m'lord's guests wanted to go out to take some exercise.

He arrived, shrugging on his jacket, to find Taura bending and stretching in a vigorous series of warm-ups under Pym's bemused eye. Lady Alys's modiste hadn't gotten around to providing active wear, it appeared, because the huge woman wore a plain set of well-worn ship knits, although in neutral gray rather than blinding pink. The fabric hugged the smooth curves of a lean musculature that, without being bulky, gave an unmistakable impression of coiled power. The braid down her back looked cheery and sporting in this comfortable context.

"Oh, Armsman Roic, good morning," she said, started to smile, then lifted her hand to her mouth.

"You don't—" Roic motioned inarticulately. "You don't have to do that for me. I like your smile." It wasn't, he realized, altogether a polite lie. *Now that I'm getting used to it.*

Her fangs glinted. "I hope they didn't drag you out of bed. Miles said his people just used the sidewalk around this block for their running track, since it was about a kilometer. I don't think I can go astray."

Roic intercepted a Look from Pym. Roic hadn't been called out to keep m'lord's galactic guest from getting lost; he was there to deal with any altercations that might result from startled Vorbarr Sultana drivers crashing their vehicles onto the sidewalk or each other at the sight of her.

"No problem," said Roic promptly. "We usually use the ballroom for a sort of gymnasium in weather like this, but it's being all decorated for the reception. So I'm behind on my fitness training for the month. It'll be a nice change to do my laps with someone who's not so much older, um, that is, so much shorter than me." He sneaked a glance at Pym.

Pym's wintry smile promised retribution for that dig as he coded open the doors for them. "Enjoy yourselves, children."

The biting air blew away Roic's night's fatigue. He guided Taura out past the guard at the main gate and turned right along the high gray wall. After a few steps, she extended herself and began an easy lope. Within a very few minutes, Roic was regretting his cheap shot at the middle-aged Pym; Taura's long

legs ate the distance. Roic kept half an eye on the early morning traffic, fortunately still light, and concentrated the rest of his attention on not disgracing House Vorkosigan by collapsing in a gasping heap. Taura's eyes grew brilliant with exhilaration as she ran, as if her spirit expanded into her body as her body stretched out to make room.

Half a dozen laps barely winded her, but she slowed at last to a walk, perhaps out of pity for her guide. "Let's circle through the garden to cool down," Roic wheezed. Madame Vorsoisson's garden, which occupied a third of the block and was her bride-gift to m'lord, was among other things sheltered from view of the cross streets by walls and banks. They dodged around the barricades temporarily barring public access till after the wedding.

"Oh, my," said Taura as they turned down the winding walk descending between curving snow hillocks. The chilly brook, its water running black and silky between feathery fingers of ice, snaked gracefully from one corner to the other. The peach-colored dawn light glimmered off the ice on the young trees and shrubs in the blue shadows. "Why, it's beautiful. I didn't expect a garden to be so pretty in winter. What are those men doing?"

A crew was unloading some float pallets piled high with boxes of all sizes, marked FRAGILE. Another pair was going around with water hoses, misting selected branches marked with yellow tags to create yet more delicate, shimmering icicles. The shapes of the native Barrayaran vegetation grew luminous and exotic with this silver-gilding.

"They're putting out all the ice sculptures. M'lord ordered ice flowers and sculptured creatures and things to fill up the garden, since all the real plants are under the snow, pretty much. And fresh snow to be added, too, if there isn't enough. They can't put out t' real live flowers for the ceremony till the very last gasp, late tomorrow morning."

"Good grief, he's having an outdoor garden wedding in *this* weather? Is that—a Barrayaran thing, is it?"

"Um, no. Not exactly. I believe m'lord originally was shooting for fall, but Madame Vorsoisson wasn't ready yet. But he'd got his heart set on getting married in the garden, because it was hers, y'see. So he is, by damn, going to have the wedding in the garden. The idea is people will assemble in Vorkosigan House, then troop out here for the vows, then scurry back into the ballroom for the reception and the food and dancing and all." *And the frostbite and hypothermia treatments.* "It'll be all right if the weather stays clear, I guess." The backstairs commentary on the potential disasters inherent in this scenario, Roic decided to keep to himself. Vorkosigan House's staff seemed united in their determination to make the eccentric scheme work for m'lord, anyway.

Taura's eyes glinted in the level dawn light now filtering between the buildings of the surrounding cityscape. "I can hardly wait to try out the dress Lady Alys got up for me to wear to the ceremony. Barrayaran ladies' clothes are so interesting. But complicated. In a way, I suppose they're another kind of uniform, but I don't know whether I feel like a recruit or an enemy spy in them. Well, I don't suppose

the real ladies will shoot me in any case. So much to learn about how to go on—though I suppose it all seems ridiculously easy to you. You grew up with it.”

“I didn’t grow up with *this*.” Roic waved a hand toward the imposing stone pile of Vorkosigan House rising above the high, bare trees on its grounds. “My father is just a construction hand in Hassadar—that’s the Vorkosigan’s District capital city, just this side of the Dendarii Mountains, a few hundred kilometers south of here. Lots of building going on there. He offered to apprentice me to the trade, but I got the chance to become a street guard, and I took it—sort of an impulse, truth to tell. I was eighteen, didn’t know up from down. Sure learned a lot after that.”

“What does a street guard guard? Streets?”

“Among other things. The whole city, really. You do what needs done. Sort out traffic, before or after it’s a big bent pile. Deal with upset people’s problems, try to keep ’em from murdering their relatives, or clean up the mess after if you can’t. Trace stolen property, if you get lucky. I did a lot of night foot patrol. You learn a lot about a place on foot, up close. I learned how to handle stunners and shock-sticks and big, hostile drunks. I was getting pretty good at it, I thought, after a few years.”

“How did you end up here?”

“Oh . . . there was a little incident . . .” He gave an embarrassed shrug. “Some crazed loon tried to shoot up Hassadar Square at rush hour with an auto-needler. I, um, took it away from him.”

Her brows went up. “With a stunner?”

“No, unfortunately, I was off duty at the time. Had to do it by hand.”

“A little hard to get up close and personal with someone firing a needler.”

“That was a problem, yeah.”

Her lips curved up, or at least the ivory hooks lengthened.

“It seemed to make perfect sense at the moment, though later I wondered what t’ hell I’d been thinking. I don’t think I was thinking. At any rate, he only killed five and not fifty-five. People seemed to think it was a big deal, but I’m sure it’s nothing compared to what you’ve seen out there.” His glance upward was meant to indicate the distant stars, though the sky was now a paling blue.

“Hey, I may be big, but I’m not needler-proof. I hate the shrieky sound when the razor-strands unwind and whiz around, even though I know in my head that those are the ones that *missed*.”

“Yeah,” Roic said in heartfelt agreement. “Anyways, after that there was a stupid fuss, and someone recommended me to m’lord’s own armsman commander, Pym, and here I am.” He glanced around the sparkling fairy garden. “I think I was a better fit in the Hassadar alleys.”

“Naw, Miles always did like having big backup. Saves a lot of small-scale grief. Though the large-scale grief we still had to take as it came.”

He asked after a moment, “How did you bodyguard, um, m’lord?”

“Such a funny way of thinking of him. To me, he’ll always be the little admiral. Mostly, I just loomed at people. If I had to, I smiled.”

“But your smile’s really kind of nice,” he protested, and managed not to add the *once you get used to it* out loud. He’d get the hang of this *savoir faire* thing yet.

“Oh, no. The *other* smile.” She demonstrated, her lips wrinkling back, her jaw thrusting out. Roic had to admit, it was a much *wider* smile. And, um, *sharper*. They were just treading past a workman on the rising path; he gasped and fell backward into a snowbank. With lightning reflexes, Taura reached past Roic and caught the heavy, life-size ice sculpture of a crouching fox before it hit the pavement and shattered into shards. Roic lifted the gibbering man to his feet and dusted snow off his parka, and Taura handed back the elegant ornament with a compliment upon its artistry.

Roic managed not to choke with muffled laughter till they both had their backs to the fellow, heading away. “See what you mean. Did it ever not work?”

“Occasionally. Next step was to pick up the recalcitrant one by the neck. Since my arms were invariably longer than theirs, they’d swing like mad but couldn’t connect. Very frustrating for them.”

“And after that?”

She grinned. “Stunner, by preference.”

“Heh.Yep.”

They’d fallen unconsciously into an easy side-by-side pace, tracing loops around the garden paths. Talking shop, Roic thought. “What mass d’you lift?”

“With or without adrenaline?”

“Oh, without, say.”

“Two hundred fifty kilos, with a good grip and a good angle.”

He emitted a respectful whistle. “If you ever want to give up mercenary-ing, I can think of a fire fighting cadre might could welcome you. M’brother’s in one, down Hassadar way. Though come to think of it, m’lord’d be a more powerful reference.”

“Now, there’s an idea I’d never thought of.” She pursed her long lips, and her brows bent in a quizzical curve. “But, no. I expect I’ll be, as you say, mercenary-ing till . . . for the rest of my life. I like seeing new planets. I like seeing this one. I could never have imagined it.”

“How many have you seen?”

“I think I’ve lost count. I used to know. Dozens. How many have you seen?”

“Just t’ one,” he admitted. “Though hanging around m’lord, this one keeps getting wider till I’m almost dizzy. More complicated. Does that make sense?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “That’s our Miles. Admiral Quinn always said she’d follow him halfway to hell just to find out what happened next.”

“Wait—this Quinn you all keep talking about is a *lady* admiral?”

“She was a lady commander when I first met her. Second-sharpest tactical brain it’s ever been my privilege to know. Things may get tight, following Elli Quinn, but you know they won’t get *stupid*. She didn’t sleep her way to the top by a long shot, and they’re half-wits who say so.” She grinned briefly. “*That* was just a *perk*. Some might say his, but *I’d* say hers.”

Roic’s eyes crossed, trying to unravel this. “Y’mean m’lord was lovers with *her*, t—” He cut off the *too* not quite in time, and flushed. It seemed m’lord’s covert ops career was even more . . . *complicated* than he’d ever imagined.

Taura cocked her head and regarded him with crinkling eyes. “That’s my favorite shade of pink, Roic. You *are* a country boy, aren’t you? Life’s uncertain out there. Things can go down bad, fast, anytime. People learn to grab what they can, when they can. For a time. We all just get a time, in our different ways.” She sighed. “Their ways diverged when he took those horrible injuries that bounced him out of ImpSec. He couldn’t go back up, and she wouldn’t come down here. Elli Quinn’s got no one but herself to blame for any chances she threw away. Though some people are born with more chances to waste than others, I’ll admit. I say, grab the ones you’re issued, run with them, and don’t look back.”

“Something might be gaining on you?”

“I know perfectly well what’s gaining on me.” Her grin flashed, oddly tilted this time. “Anyway, Quinn

might be more beautiful, but *I* was always taller.” She gave a satisfied nod. Glancing at him, she added, “I guarantee Miles likes *your* height. It’s sort of an issue with him. I know recruiting officers in three genders who would swoon for your shoulders, as well.”

He hadn’t the least idea how to respond to *that*. He hoped she was enjoying the pink. “M’lord thinks I’m a fool,” he said glumly.

Her brows shot up. “Surely not.”

“Oh, yeah. You have no idea how I screwed up.”

“I’ve seen him forgive screwups that put *his* guts on the bloody ceiling. Literally. You’d have to go some to top that. How many people died?”

If you put it in *that* perspective . . . “No one,” he admitted. “I just wished *I* could have.”

She grinned in sympathy. “Ah, one of *those* kinds of screwups. Oh, c’mon, tell.”

He hesitated. “Y’know those nightmares where you find yourself walking around naked in the town square, or in front of your schoolteachers, or something?”

“My nightmares tend to be a bit more exotic, but yeah?”

“So, no lie, there I was . . . Last summer, m’lord’s brother Mark brought home this damned Escobaran biologist, Dr. Borgos, that he’d picked up somewheres, and put him up in the basement of Vorkosigan House. An investment scheme. The biologist made bugs. And the bugs made bug butter. Tons of it. Slimy white stuff, edible, sort of. We found out the biologist had jumped bail back on Escobar—for fraud, no surprise—when t’ skip-tracers they’d sent to arrest him showed up and talked their way into Vorkosigan House. Naturally, they picked a time when almost everyone had gone out. Lord Mark and the Koudelka sisters, who were in on the bug butter scheme, got in a fight with them when they tried to carry off Borgos, and the house staff waked me up to go sort it out. All in a tearing panic—wouldn’t even let me grab my uniform trousers. I’d *just* got to sleep . . . Martya Koudelka claims it was friendly fire, but I dunno. I’d just about pushed the whole mess of ’em out the front door when in walks m’lord with Madame Vorsoisson and all her relatives. He’d just got engaged and wanted to make a good impression on ’em all . . . It was an unforgettable one, I guarantee. I was wearing briefs, boots, and about five kilos of bug butter, trying to deal wit’ all these screaming, sticky maniacs . . .”

A muffled sound escaped from Taura. She had her hand over her mouth, but it wasn’t helping; little squeaks still leaked out. Her eyes were alight.

“I swear it wouldn’t a’ been half so bad if I’d had my briefs on backwards and my stunner holster on frontways. I can still hear Pym’s voice . . .” He mimicked the senior armsman’s driest tones: “Your

weapon is worn on the right, Armsman.””

She laughed out loud then, and looked him up and down in somewhat unsettling appreciation. “That’s a pretty amazing word picture, Roic.”

Despite himself, he smiled a little. “I guess so. I dunno if m’lord’s forgiven me, but I’m right sure Pym hasn’t.” He sighed. “If you see one of those damned vomit bugs still around, squash it on sight. Hideous bioengineered mutant things, kill ’em all before they multiply.”

Her laughter stopped cold.

Roic reran his last sentence in his head and made the unpleasant discovery that one could do far worse things to oneself with words than with dubious food products, or possibly even with needlers. He hardly dared look up to see her face. He forced his eyes right.

Her face was perfectly still, perfectly pale, perfectly blank. Perfectly appalling.

I meant those devil-bugs, not you! He managed to stop that idiocy on his lips before it escaped to do even more damage, but only just. He couldn’t think of any way to apologize that wouldn’t make it worse.

“Ah, yes,” she said at last. “Miles did warn me that Barrayarans had some pretty ugly issues about gene manipulation. I just forgot.”

And I reminded you. “We’re getting better,” he tried.

“Good for you.” She inhaled, a long breath. “Let’s go in. I’m getting cold.”

Roic was frozen straight through. “Um. Yeah.”

They walked back to the gate in silence

Roic slept the day around, trying to force his body back onto the boring night shift cycle that by the duty roster was to be his junior armsman’s fate this Winterfair. He was quite sorry to thus miss seeing m’lord take his galactic guests and a selection of his in-laws-to-be on a tour of Vorbarr Sultana. He’d have been fascinated by what the two disparate parties made of each other. Madame Vorsoisson’s family, the Vorvaynes, were solid provincial Vor types of the sort Roic had always regarded as normal to the class, before he’d taken up his duties in Vorkosigan House’s high Vor milieu. M’lord, well . . . m’lord wasn’t standard by anybody’s standard. The four Vorvayne brothers, though dutifully pleased with their widowed sister’s upward social leap, plainly found m’lord an unnerving catch. Roic wished he could see

what they would make of Taura. He melted into sleep with a vague scenario drifting through his reeling brain of somehow imposing his body between her and some undefined social insult. Maybe then she would see that he hadn't meant anything by his awful gaffe . . .

He woke at sunset and made a foray down to Vorkosigan House's huge kitchen, below stairs. Usually m'lord's genius cook, Ma Kosti, left delectable surprises in the staff refrigerator and was always looking for a good gossip, but tonight the pickings were slim and the personal attention nonexistent. The place was plunged into final preparations for tomorrow's great event, and Ma Kosti, driving her harried scullions before her, made it plain that anyone below the rank of count, or perhaps emperor, was very much in the way just now. Roic fueled up and retreated.

At least the kitchen did not have to deal with a formal dinner atop all the rest. M'lord, the count and countess, and all the guests were off to the Imperial Residence for the Winterfair Ball and midnight bonfire, the heart of the festivities marking solstice night and the turning of the season. When they all decamped from Vorkosigan House, Roic had the vast place to himself, but for the rumble from the kitchen and the servants rushing about completing the last-minute decorations and arrangements in the public rooms, the great dining room, and the seldom-used ballroom.

He was therefore surprised, about an hour before midnight, when the gate guard called him to code open the front door. He was even more surprised when a small car with government markings pulled up under the porte cochere and m'lord and Sergeant Taura climbed out. The car buzzed off, and its passengers entered the hall, shaking the cold air out of their outer garments and handing them off to Roic.

M'lord was dressed in the most elaborate version of the brown and silver Vorkosigan House uniform, befitting a count's heir attending upon the emperor, complete with custom-fitted polished riding boots to his knees. Taura wore a close-fitting, embroidered russet jacket, made high to the neck where a bit of lace showed, and a matching skirt sweeping to ankles clad in soft, russet-colored leather boots. A graceful spray of cream-and-rust colored orchids was wound into her braided-up hair. Roic wished he could have seen her entrance into the Imperial Winterfair Ball, and heard what the emperor and empress had said upon meeting her . . .

"No, I'm all right," Taura was saying to m'lord. "I saw the palace and the ball—they were beautiful—but I've had enough. It's just that I was up at dawn, and to tell the truth, I think I'm still a little jump-lagged. Go see to your bride. Is she still sick?"

"I wish I knew." M'lord paused on the steps, three up, and leaned on the banister to speak face-to-face with Taura, who was watching him in concern. "She wasn't sure even last week about attending the emperor's bonfire tonight, though I thought it would be a valuable distraction. She insisted she was all right when I talked to her earlier. But her aunt Helen says she's all to pieces, hiding in her room and crying. This is just not like her. I thought she was tough as anything. Oh, God, Taura. I think I've screwed up this whole wedding thing so badly . . . I rushed her into it, and now it's all coming apart. I can't imagine how bad the stress must be to make *her* physically ill."

“Slow down, dammit, Miles. Look. You said her first marriage was dire, yes?”

“Not bruises and black eyes bad, no. Draining the blood of your spirit out drop by drop for years bad, maybe. I only saw the very end of it. It was pretty gruesome by then.”

“Words can cut worse than knives. The wounds take longer to heal, too.”

She didn't look at Roic. Roic didn't look back.

“Isn't that the truth,” said m'lord, who wasn't looking at either of them. “Damn! Should I go over there or not? They say it's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding. Or was that the wedding dress? I can't remember.”

Taura made a face. “And you accuse *her* of having wedding heebie-jeebies! Miles, listen. You know how the recruits got precombat nerves before they went out on a mission the first time?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Now. Do you remember how they got precombat nerves before they had to go out on a big drop for the *second* time?”

After a long pause, m'lord said, “Oh.” Another silence. “I hadn't thought of it like that. I thought it was *me*.”

“That's because you're an egotist. I only met the woman for one hour, but even I could see that you're the delight of her eyes. At least consider, for five consecutive seconds, the possibility that it might be *him*. The late Vorsoisson, whoever he was.”

“Oh, he was something else, all right. I've cursed him before for the scars he left on her soul.”

“I don't think you have to say anything much. Just *be* there. And be not him.”

M'lord drummed his fingers on the banister. “Yes. Maybe. God. Pray God. Dammit . . .” He glanced across at Roic, ignored as if he were Vorkosigan House furniture, a rack to hold coats. A dummy. “Roic, scrape up a vehicle; meet me back here in a few minutes. I want you to drive me over to Ekaterin's aunt and uncle's house. I'm going to run up and change out of this armor-plating first, though.” He ran his fingers across the elaborate silver embroidery upon his sleeve. He turned away, and his bootsteps scuffed up the stairs.

This was way too alarming. “What in t' world's going on?” Roic dared to ask Taura.

“Ekaterin’s aunt called him. I gather Ekaterin lives at her house—”

“With Lord Auditor and Professora Vorthys, yes. She’s been going to University from there.”

“Anyway, the bride-to-be seems to be having some sort of awful nervous breakdown or something.” She frowned. “Or something . . . Miles isn’t sure if he should go over and sit with her or not. I think he should.”

That didn’t sound good. In fact, it sounded about as not-good as it could be.

“Roic . . .” Taura’s brows knotted. “Do you happen to know if I could find any commercial pharmaceutical laboratories open at this time of night in Vorbarr Sultana?”

“Pharmaceutical labs?” Roic repeated blankly. “Why, do you feel sick, too? I can call out the Vorkosigans’ personal physician for you, or one of the medtechs who ride herd on the count and countess . . .” Would she need some kind of off-world specialist? No matter, the Vorkosigan name could access one, he was sure. Even on Bonfire Night.

“No, no, I feel fine. I was just wondering.”

“Nothing much is open tonight. It’s a holiday. Everyone’s out to the parties and bonfires and the fireworks. Tomorrow, too. It’ll be the first day of the new year here, by the Barrayaran calendar.”

She smiled briefly. “It would be. A new start all round; I’ll bet he liked the symbolism of that.”

“I suppose hospital labs are open all night. Their emergency treatment intakes will be. Busy as hell, too. We used to bring the ones in Hassadar all kinds of customers on Bonfire Night.”

“Hospitals, yes, of course! I should have thought of them at once.”

“Why do you want one?” he asked again.

She hesitated. “I’m not sure that I do. It was just a train of thought I had earlier this evening, when that aunt-lady called Miles. Not sure I like its destination, though . . .” She turned away and swung up the stairs, taking them two at a time without effort. Roic frowned, then went off to scare up a vehicle from whatever remained in the sub-basement garage. With so many signed out to transport the household and its guests already, this might take some rapid extemporizing.

But Taura had spoken to him, almost normally. Maybe . . . maybe there were such things as second chances. If a fellow was brave enough to take them.

Lord Auditor and Professora Vorthys's home was a tall, old, colorfully tiled structure close to the District University. The street was quiet when Roic pulled the car—borrowed without notification, ultimately, from one of the armymen off with the count at the Residence—up to the front. From a distance, mainly in the direction of the university, drifted the sharp crackle of fireworks, harmonious singing, and blurred drunken singing. A rich, heady scent of wood smoke and black powder permeated the frosty night air.

The porch light was on. The Professora, an aging, smiling, neat Vor lady who intimidated Roic only slightly less than did Lady Alys, let them in herself. Her soft round face was tense with worry.

“Did you tell her I was coming?” m'lord asked in a low tone as he shed his coat. He stared anxiously up the stairs leading from the narrow, wood-paneled hallway.

“I didn't dare.”

“Helen . . . what should I do?” M'lord looked suddenly smaller, and scared, and younger and older all at the same time.

“Just go up, I think. This isn't something that's about talking, or words, or reason. I've run through all those.”

He buttoned then unbuttoned the gray tunic he'd thrown on over an old white shirt, pulled down his sleeves, took a deep breath, mounted the stairs, and turned out of sight. After a minute or two, the Professora stopped picking nervously at her hands, gestured Roic to a straight chair beside a small table piled with books and flimsies, and tiptoed up after him.

Roic sat in the hall and listened to the old house creak. From the sitting room, visible through one archway, a glow from a fireplace gilded the air. Through the opposite archway, the Professora's study lay, lined with books; the light from the hall picked out an occasional bit of gold lettering on an ancient spine in the gloom. Roic wasn't bookish himself, but he liked the comfortable academic smell of this place. It occurred to him that back when he was a Hassadar guard, he'd never once gone into a house to clean up a bad scene, blood on the walls and evil smells in the air, where there were books like this.

After a long time, the Professora came back down to the hall.

Roic ducked his head respectfully. “Is she sick, ma'am?”

The tired-looking woman pursed her lips and let her breath run out. “She certainly was last night. Terrible headache, so bad she was crying and almost vomiting. But she thought she was much better this morning. Or she said she was. She wanted to be better. Maybe she was trying too hard.”

Roic peered anxiously up the staircase. “Would she see him?”

The tension in her face eased a little. “Yes.”

“Is it going to be all right?”

“I think so, now.” Her lips sought a smile. “Anyway, Miles says you are to go on home. That he expects to be a while, and that he’ll call if he needs anything.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He rose, gave her a kind of vague salute copied from m’lord’s own style, and let himself out.

The night duty guard at the gate kiosk reported no entries since Roic had left. The festivities at the Imperial Residence would go on till dawn, although Roic didn’t expect Vorkosigan House’s attendees to stay that late, not with the grand party planned here for tomorrow afternoon and evening. He put the borrowed car away in the sub-basement garage, relieved that it hadn’t acquired any hard-to-explain dings in its passage back through some of the rowdier crowds between here and the university.

He made his way softly up through the mostly darkened great house. All was quiet now. The kitchen crew had at last retreated till tomorrow’s onslaught. The maids and menservants had gone to roost. For all that he complained about missing the daytime excitements, Roic usually enjoyed these quiet night hours when the whole world seemed his personal property. Granted, by three hours before dawn, coffee would be a necessity little less urgent than oxygen. But by two hours before dawn, life would start trickling back, as those with early duties roused themselves and padded down to start work. He checked the security monitors in the basement HQ and started his physical rounds. Floor by floor, window and door, never in quite the same order or at quite the same hour.

As he crossed the great entry hall, a creak and a clink sounded from the half-lit antechamber to the library. He paused for a moment, frowned, and rose on his toes, moving his feet as gently as possible across the marble pavement, breathing through his open mouth for silence. His shadow wavered, passed along from dim wall sconce to dim wall sconce. He made sure it was not thrown before him as he moved to the archway. Easing up beside the door frame, he stared into the half-gloom.

Taura stood with her back to him, sorting through the gifts displayed upon the long table by the far wall. Her head bent over something in her hands. She shook out a cloth and upended a small box. The elegant triple strand of pearls slithered from their velvet backing into the cloth, which she wrapped around them. She clicked the box closed, set it back on the table, and slipped the folded cloth into a side pocket of her russet jacket.

Shock held Roic paralyzed for a moment longer. M'lord's honored guest, rifling the gifts?

But I liked her. I really liked her. Only now, in this moment of hideous revelation, did he realize just how much he'd come to . . . to *admire* her in their brief time together. Brief, but so damned awkward. She was really beautiful in her own unique way, if only you looked at her right. For a moment it had seemed as though far suns and strange adventures had beckoned to him from her gold eyes; just possibly, more intimate and exotic adventures than a shy backcountry boy from Hassadar had ever dared to imagine. If only he were a braver man. A handsome prince. Not a fool. But Cinderella was a thief, and the fairy tale was gone suddenly sour.

Sick dismay flooded him as he imagined the altercation, the shame, the wounded friendship and shattered trust that must follow this discovery—he almost turned away. He didn't know the value of the pearls, but even if it were a city's ransom he was certain m'lord would trade them in a heartbeat for the ease of spirit he'd had with his old followers.

It was no good. They'd be missed first thing tomorrow in any case. He drew a breath and touched the light pad.

Taura spun like a huge cat at the flare of the overhead lights. After a moment, she let out her breath in a huff, visibly powering down. "Oh. It's you. You startled me."

Roic moistened his lips. Could he patch up this shattered fantasy? "Put them back, Taura. Please."

She stood still, looking back at him, tawny eyes wide; a grimace crossed her odd features. She seemed to coil, tension flowing back into her long body.

"Put them back now," Roic tried again, "and I won't tell." He bore a stunner. Could he draw it in time? He'd seen how fast she moved . . .

"I can't."

He stared at her without comprehension.

"I don't *dare*." Her voice grew edgy. "Please, Roic. Let me go now, and I promise I'll bring them back again tomorrow."

Huh? What? "I . . . can't. All the gifts have to go through a security check."

"Did this?" Her hand twitched by her pocket full of spoils.

"Yes, certainly."

“What kind? What did you check it for?”

“Everything is scanned for devices and explosives. All food and drink and their containers are tested for chemicals and biologicals.”

“Only the food and drink?” She straightened, eyes glinting in rapid thought. “Anyway, I wasn’t stealing it.”

Maybe it was the covert ops training that enabled her to stand there and utter bald-faced . . . what? Counter-factual statements? *Complicated things*? “Well . . . then what *were* you doing?”

Again, a kind of frozen misery stiffened her features. She looked down, away, into the distance. “Borrowing it,” she said in a gruff voice. She glanced across at him, as if to check his reaction to this feeble statement.

But Taura wasn’t feeble, not by any definition. He felt out of his depth, flailing for firm footing and not finding it. He dared to move closer, to hold out his hand. “Give them to me.”

“You mustn’t touch them!” Her voice went frantic. “No one must touch them.”

Lies and treachery? Trust and truth? What was he seeing here? Suddenly, he wasn’t sure. *Back up, guardsman*. “Why not?”

She glowered at him narrow-eyed, as if trying to see through to the back of his head. “Do you care about Miles? Or is he just your employer?”

Roic blinked in increasing confusion. He considered his armsman’s oath, its high honor and weight. “A Vorkosigan armsman isn’t just what I am; it’s *who* I am. He’s not my *employer* at all. He’s my liege lord.”

She made a frustrated gesture. “If you knew a secret that would hurt him to the heart—would you, could you, keep it from him even if *he* asked?”

What secret? This? That his ex-lover was a thief? It didn’t seem as though that could be what she was talking about—around. *Think, man*.

“I . . . can’t pass a judgment without knowledge.” Knowledge. What did she know that he didn’t? A million things, he was sure. He’d glimpsed some of them, dizzying vistas. But she didn’t know *him*, now, did she? Not the way she evidently knew, say, m’lord. To her, he was a blank in a brown-and-silver uniform. With his mirror-polished boot stuck in his mouth, eh. He hesitated, then countered, “M’lord can requisition my life with a word. I gave him that right on my name and breath. Can you trust

me to hold his best interests to heart?”

Stare met stare, and no one blinked.

“Trust for trust,” Roic breathed at last. “Trade, Taura.”

Slowly, not dropping her intent, searching gaze from his face, she drew the cloth from her pocket. She shook it gently, spilling the pearls back into their velvet box. She held the box out. “What do you see?”

Roic frowned. “Pearls. Pretty. White and shiny.”

She shook her head. “I have a host of genetic modifications. Hideous bioengineered mutant or no—”

He flinched, his mouth opening and shutting.

“—among other things I can see slightly farther into the ultraviolet, and quite a bit farther into the infrared, than a normal person. *I* see dirty pearls. Strangely dirty pearls. And that’s not what I usually see when I look at pearls. And then Miles’s bride touched them, and an hour later was so sick she could hardly stand up.”

An unpleasant tremor coursed down Roic’s body. And why the devil hadn’t *he* noticed that progression of events? “Yes. That’s so. They’ll have to be checked.”

“Maybe I’m wrong. I could be wrong. Maybe I’m just being horrible and paranoid and—and jealous. If they were proved clean, that would be the end of it. But, Roic—*Quinn. You* don’t have any idea how much he loved Quinn. And vice versa. I’ve been going half-mad all evening, ever since it all clicked in, wondering if Quinn really sent these. It would about slay him, if it were so.”

“Wasn’t him these are meant to slay.” It seemed his liege lord’s love life was as deceptively complicated as his intelligence, both camouflaged by his crippled body. Or by the assumptions people made about his crippled body. Roic considered the ambiguous message Arde Mayhew had evidently seen in the live fur blanket. *Had* this Quinn woman, the other ex-lover—and how many more of them were going to turn up at this wedding, anyway? And in what frame of mind? How many *were* there, altogether? And what t’ *hell* did the little guy do to have acquired what was beginning to seem far more than his fair share, when Roic didn’t even have—He cut off the gyrating digression. “Or—is this necklace lethal, or not? Could it be some nasty practical joke, to just make the bride sick on her wedding night?”

“Ekaterin barely touched them. I don’t know what this horrible goo may be, but I wouldn’t lay those pearls against my skin for Betan dollars.” Her face twisted up. “I want it to not be true. Or I want it to not be Quinn!”

Her dismay, Roic was increasingly convinced, was unfeigned, a cry from her heart. “Taura, think. You

know this Quinn woman. I don't. But you said she was smart. D'you think she'd be plain stupid enough to sign her own name to murder?"

Taura looked taken aback, but then shook her head in renewed doubt. "Maybe. If it were done for rage or revenge, maybe."

"What if her name was stolen by another? If she didn't send these, she deserves to be cleared. And if she did . . . she doesn't deserve anything."

What was Taura going to do? He hadn't the least doubt she could kill him with one clawed hand before he could fumble his stunner out. The box was still tightly clutched in her great hand. Her body radiated tension the way a bonfire radiated heat.

"It seems almost unimaginable," she said. "Almost. But people mad in love do the wildest things. Sometimes things they regret forever afterward. But then it's too late. That's why I wanted to sneak the pearls away and check them in secret. I was praying I'd be proved wrong." Tears stood in her eyes now.

Roic swallowed and stood straighter. "Look, I can call ImpSec. They can have those—whatever they are—on the best forensics lab bench on the planet inside half an hour. They can check the wrappings, check the origin—everything. If *another* person stole your friend Quinn's name to cloak their crime . . ." He shuddered as his imagination sketched that crime in elaborating and grotesque detail: m'lady dying at m'lord's feet in the snow while her vows were still frost in the air; m'lord's shock, disbelief, howling anguish—"Then they should be hunted down without mercy. ImpSec can do that, too."

She still stood poised in doubt, on the balls of her feet. "They would hunt *her* down with the same . . . unmercy. What if they got it wrong, made a mistake?"

"ImpSec is competent."

"Roic, *I'm* an ImpSec employee. I can absolutely *guarantee* you, they are *not* infallible."

He ran his gaze down the crowded table. "Look. There's that other wedding gift." He pointed to the folds of shimmering black blanket, still piled in the box. The room was so quiet he could hear the live fur's gentle rumble from here. "Why would she send two? The blanket even came with a dirty limerick, handwritten on a card." Not presently on display, true. "Madame Vorsoisson laughed out loud when m'lord read it to her."

A reluctant smile twitched Taura's mouth for a moment. "Oh, *that's* Quinn, all right."

"If *that's* truly Quinn, then this"—he pointed at the pearls—"can't be. Eh? Trust me. Trust your own judgment."

Slowly, with the deepest distress in her strange gold eyes, Taura wrapped the box in the cloth and handed it to him.

Then Roic found himself facing the task, all by himself, of stirring up ImpSec Supreme headquarters in the middle of the night. He almost wanted to wait for Pym's return. But he *was* a Vorkosigan armsman: senior man present, even if merely because sole man present. It was his duty, it was his right, and time was of the essence, if only to relieve Taura's troubled mind at the earliest possible instant. She hovered, bleak and worried, as he gulped for nerve and fired up the secured comconsole in the nearby library.

A serious-looking ImpSec captain reported to the front hall in less than thirty minutes. He recorded everything, including Roic's verbal report, Taura's description of what the pearls had looked like to her, both their accounts of Madame Vorsoisson's witnessed symptoms, and a copy of Pym's original security check records. Roic tried to be straightforward, as he'd often wished witnesses would have been to him back in Hassadar, although in this version the fraught confrontation in the antechamber became merely *Sergeant Taura voiced a suspicion to me*. Well, it was *true*.

For Taura's sake, Roic made sure to mention the possibility that the pearls had not been sent by Quinn at all and pointed out the other gift certainly known to be from her. The captain frowned and bundled up the live fur as well, and looked as though he wanted to bundle up Taura along with it. He carried off the pearls, the still-purring blanket, and all related packaging in a series of sealed and labeled plastic bags. All this chill efficiency took a bare half hour more.

"Do you want to go to bed?" Roic asked Taura when the doors closed behind the ImpSec captain. *She looks so tired*. "I have to stay up anyway. I can give you a call to your room when there's any news. If there's any news."

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep. Maybe they'll have something soon."

"There's no telling, but I hope so."

They settled down to wait together on a sturdy-looking sofa in the antechamber opposite the one displaying the gifts. The noises of the night—odd squeaks of the house settling against the winter cold, the faint whir or hum of distant automated machinery—were very noticeable in the stillness. Taura stretched what Roic suspected were knotted shoulders, and he was briefly inspired to offer a back rub, but he wasn't sure how she'd take it. The impulse dissolved in cowardice.

"Quiet around here at night," she said after a moment.

She was speaking to him again. *Please, don't stop*. "Yeah. I sort of like it, though."

“Oh, you, too? The night watch is a philosophical kind of time. Its own world. Nothing moving out there but maybe people being born or people dying, necessity, and us.”

“Eh, and the bad night people we’re put on watch against.”

She glanced through the archway into the great hall and beyond. “Apparently so. What an evil trick . . .” She trailed off in a grimace.

“This Quinn, you’ve known her a long time?”

“She was in the Dendarii mercenaries at the time I joined the fleet—’original equipment,’ as she says. A good leader, a friend by many shared disasters. And victories, sometimes. Ten years adds up to some weight, even if you’re not watching. Especially if you’re not watching, I suppose.”

He followed the thought spoken by her glance, as well as her words. “Eh, yeah. God spare me from ever facing such a puzzle. It would be as bad as having your count revolt against the emperor, I suppose. Or like finding m’lord in on some insane plot to murder Empress Laisa. Shouldn’t wonder that you’ve been running around in circles in your head all night.”

“Tighter and tighter, yes. I couldn’t enjoy the emperor’s party from the moment I thought of it, and I know Miles so wanted me to. And I couldn’t tell him why—I’m afraid he thought I was feeling out of place. Well, I was, but it wasn’t a problem, exactly. I’m usually out of place.” She blinked tawny eyes gone dark and wide in the half-light. “What would you do? If you discovered or suspected such a horror?”

His lips twisted. “That’s a tough one. A higher honor must underlie ours, the count says. We can’t ever obey unthinkingly.”

“Huh. That’s what Miles says, too. Is that where he got it, from his father?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. M’lord’s brother Mark says integrity is a disease, and you can only catch it from someone who has it.”

A little laugh sounded in her throat. “That sounds like Mark, all right.”

He considered her question with the seriousness it merited. “I’d have to turn him in, I guess. I hope I’d have the courage, anyways. Nobody would win, in the end. Least of all me.”

“Oh, yeah. I can see that.”

Her hand lay on the sofa fabric between them, clawed fingers tapping. He wanted to take it and squeeze

it for comfort—hers, or his? But he didn't dare. *Dammit, try, can't you?*

His argument with himself was interrupted when his wrist com sounded. The gate guard reported the return of the Vorkosigan House party from the Imperial Residence. Roic coded down the house shields and stood aside as the crowd disembarked from a small fleet of groundcars. Pym was in close attendance upon the countess, smiling at something she was saying over her shoulder to him. The guests, variously cheerful, drowsy, or drunk, streamed past chatting and laughing.

“Anything to report?” Pym inquired perfunctorily. He glanced in curiosity past Roic at Taura, looming over his shoulder.

“Yes, sir. See me in private as soon as you can, please.”

The benign sleepy look evaporated from Pym's features. “Oh?” He glanced back at the mob now divesting wraps and streaming up the stairs. “Right.”

Low-voiced as Roic had been, the countess had caught the exchange. A wave of her finger dismissed Pym from her side. “Although, if this is of moment, Pym, I'll take a report before bed,” she murmured.

“Yes, my lady.”

Roic jerked his head toward the antechamber of the library, and Pym followed him and Taura through the archway. The moment the guests had cleared the next room, Roic decanted a short precis of the night's adventure, self-plagiarized from the one he'd given to the ImpSec forensics captain. Omitting, again, the part about Taura's attempted theft. He hoped like hell that it wasn't going to turn out to be horribly pertinent later. He would submit the full account to m'lord's judgment, he decided. When the devil was m'lord going to return?

Pym grew rigid as he took in the report. “I checked that necklace myself, Roic. Scanned it clear of devices—the chemical sniffer didn't pick up anything either.”

“Did you touch it?” asked Taura.

Pym's eyes narrowed in memory. “I mainly handled it by the clasp. Well . . . well, ImpSec will run it through the wringer. M'lord always claims they can use the exercise. It can't hurt. You acted correctly, Armsman Roic. You can continue about your duties now. I'll follow it up with ImpSec.”

With this tepid praise, he moved off, frowning.

“Is that all we get?” Taura whispered as Pym's ascending footsteps faded on the winding staircase.

Roic glanced at his chrono. “Till ImpSec reports back, I guess. It depends on how hard that dirty stuff you saw”—he didn’t insult her by phrasing it as *you claimed you saw*—“is to identify.”

She scrubbed tired-looking eyes with the back of her hand. “Can I, uh, can I stay with you till they call?”

“Sure.”

In a moment of true inspiration, he led her down to the kitchen and introduced her to the staff refrigerator. He’d been correct; her extraordinary metabolism was in need of fuel again. Ruthlessly, he cleared out everything on the shelves and laid it in front of her. The early morning crew could fend for themselves. There was no shame here in offering up servants’ food to a guest; *everyone* ate well from Ma Kosti’s kitchen. He dialed up coffee for himself and tea for her, and they perched together on two stools at the counter.

Pym found them there as they were finishing eating. The senior armsman’s face was so drained of blood as to be nearly green.

“Well done, Roic, Sergeant Taura,” he began in a stiff voice. “Very well done. I just now spoke with ImpSec headquarters. The pearls *were* doctored—with a designer neurotoxin. ImpSec thinks it’s of Jacksonian origin, but they’re still cross-checking. The dose was sealed under a chemically neutral transparent lacquer that dissolves with body heat. Casual handling wouldn’t release it, but if someone put the necklace on and wore it for a time . . . half an hour or so . . .”

“Enough to kill someone?” Taura’s tone was tense.

“Enough to kill a bloody elephant, the lab boys say.” Pym moistened dry lips. “And I checked it myself. I bloody *passed* it.” His teeth clenched. “She was going to wear them to—M’lord would have—” He choked himself off and ran a hand over his face, hard.

“Does ImpSec know who really sent them?” asked Taura.

“Not yet. But they’re all over it, you can believe.”

A vision of the deadly pale spheres lying on m’lady-to-be’s warm throat flashed through Roic’s memory. “Madame Vorsoisson touched the pearls last night—night before last, that is now,” said Roic urgently. “She had them on for at least five minutes. Is she going to be all right?”

“ImpSec is dispatching a physician to Lord Auditor Vorthys’s to check her—one of their toxins experts. If she’d taken in enough to kill her, she’d have died right then, so *that’s* not going to happen, but I don’t know what other . . . I have to go now and call m’lord there and warn him to expect a visitor. And—and tell him why. Well done, Roic. Did I say well done? Well done.” Pym drew a shaken, unhappy breath and strode back out.

Taura, her chin in her hand as she drooped over her plate, scowled after him. “Jacksonian neurotoxin, eh? That doesn’t prove much. The Jacksonians will sell anything to anyone. Miles made enough enemies there in some of our old sorties—if they knew it was intended for him, they’d probably offer a deep discount.”

“Yeah, I imagine tracing the source is going to take a little longer. Even for ImpSec.” He hesitated. “Although, wouldn’t they know him on Jackson’s Whole only under his old covert ops identity? Your little admiral?”

“That cover’s been well-blown for a couple of years, he tells me. Partly as a result of the mess his last mission there produced, partly from some other things. Over my head.” She yawned, hugely. It was . . . impressive. She’d been up since dawn, Roic was reminded, and hadn’t slept through the afternoon as he had. Stranded in what must seem to her an alien place and wrestling terrible fears. All by herself. For the first time, he wondered if she was lonely. One of a kind, the last of her kind if he understood correctly, without home or kin except for that chancy wandering mercenary fleet. And then he wondered why he hadn’t noticed her essential aloneness sooner. Armsmen were supposed to be observant. *Yeah?*

“If I promise to come by and tell you if I get any news, d’you suppose you could try to sleep?”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “Would you? Then I think I could. Try, that is.”

He escorted her to her door, past m’lord’s dark and empty suite. When he clasped her hand briefly, she clasped back. He swallowed, for courage.

“Dirty pearls, eh?” he said, still holding her hand. “Y’know . . . I can’t speak for any other Barrayarans . . . but *I* think your genetic modifications are beautiful.”

Her lips curved up, he hoped not altogether bleakly. “You *are* getting better.”

When she let go and turned in, a claw trailing lightly over the skin of his palm made his body shudder in involuntary, sensual surprise. He stared at the closing door and swallowed a perfectly foolish urge to call her back. Or follow her inside . . . He was still on duty, he reminded himself. The next monitors check was overdue. He forced himself to turn away.

The sky outside was shifting from the amber night of the city to a chill blue dawn when the gate guard called Roic to code down the house shields for m’lord’s return. As the armsman who’d been called out to chauffeur drove the big car off to put away, Roic opened one door to admit the hunched, frowning figure. M’lord looked up to recognize Roic, and a rather ghastly smile lightened his furrowed features.

Roic had seen m'lord looking strung-out before, but never so alarmingly as this, not even after one of his bad seizures or when he'd had that spectacular hangover after the disastrous butter bug banquet. His eyes stared out from gray circles like feral animals from their dens. His skin was pale, and lines of tension mapped the anxiety across his face. His movements were simultaneously tired and stiff, and jerky and nervous, a spinning exhaustion that could find no place of rest.

"Roic. Thank you. Bless you," m'lord began in a voice that sounded as though it were coming from the bottom of a well.

"Is m'lady-to-be all right?" Roic asked in some apprehension.

M'lord nodded. "Yes, now. She fell asleep in my arms, finally, after the ImpSec doctor left. God, Roic! I can't believe I missed the signs. Poisoning! And I fastened that death around her neck with my own hands! It's a damned metaphor for this whole thing, that's what it is. She thought it was just her. *I* thought it was just her. How little faith in herself, or me in her, to misidentify dying of poison for dying of self-doubt?"

"She's *not* dying, is she?" Roic asked again, to be sure. In this spate of dramatic angst, it was a little hard to tell. "T' bit of exposure she got isn't going to have any permanent effects, is it?"

M'lord began to pace in circles around the entry hall, while Roic followed vainly trying to take his coat. "The doctor said not, not once the headaches pass off, which they seem to have done now. She was so relieved to find out what it really was she burst into tears. Go figure *that* one out, eh?"

"Yeah, except that—" Roic began, then bit his tongue. Except that the crying jag he'd inadvertently witnessed had occurred well before the poisoning.

"What?"

"Nothing, m'lord."

Lord Vorkosigan paused at the archway to the antechamber. "ImpSec. We must call ImpSec to take away all those gifts and recheck them for—"

"They already came and collected them, m'lord," Roic soothed him, or tried to. "An hour ago. They say they'll try t' get as many as possible cleared and back before the wedding guests start arriving come midafternoon."

"Oh. Good." M'lord stood still a moment, staring into nothing, and Roic finally managed to get his coat away from him.

“M’lord . . . *you* don’t think your Admiral Quinn sent that necklace, do you?”

“Oh, good heavens, no. Of course not.” M’lord dismissed this fear with a startlingly casual wave of his hand. “Not her style at all. If she were ever that mad at me, she’d kick me downstairs personally. Great woman, Quinn.”

“Sergeant Taura was worried. I think she thought this Quinn might a’ been, um, jealous.”

M’lord blinked. “Why? I mean, yes, it’s almost exactly a year since Elli and I parted company, but Ekaterin had nothing to do with *that*. Didn’t even meet her till a couple of months later. The timing’s pure coincidence, you can assure her. Yeah, so Elli turned down the wedding invitation—she has responsibilities. She got the fleet, after all.” A small sigh escaped him. His lips screwed up in further thought. “I’d sure like to know who knew enough to steal Quinn’s name to smuggle that hellish package in here, though. *That’s* the real puzzle. Quinn’s connected to Admiral Naismith, not to Lord Vorkosigan. Which was the sticking point in the first place, but never mind now. I want ImpSec to put every available resource on to tearing *that* one apart.”

“I believe they already are, m’lord.”

“Oh. Good.” He looked up, and his face grew, if possible, more serious. “You saved my House last night, you know. Eleven generations of Vorkosigans have narrowed down to the choke point of me, this generation, this marriage. I’d have been the last, but for that chance—no, not chance—that moment of shrewd observation.”

Roic waved an embarrassed hand. “Wasn’t me who spotted it, m’lord. It was Sergeant Taura. She’d have reported it herself earlier, if she hadn’t been half-taken in by t’ bad guy’s nasty camouflage with your, um, friend Admiral Quinn’s name.”

M’lord took up his taut orbit of the hall again. “Bless Taura, then. A woman beyond price. Which I already knew, but anyway. I could kiss her feet, by God. I could kiss her all over!”

Roic was beginning to think that line about the barbed-wire choke chain wasn’t such a joke after all. All this frenetic tension was, if not precisely infectious, starting to get on what was left of his nerves. He remarked dryly, in Pym-like periods, “I was given to understand you already had, m’lord.”

M’lord jerked to a halt again. “Who told you that?”

Under the circumstances, Roic decided not to mention Madame Vorsoisson. “Taura.”

“Eh, maybe it’s the women’s secret code. I don’t have the key, though. You’re on your own there, boy.” He snorted a trifle hysterically. “But if you ever *do* win an invitation from her, beware—it’s like being mugged in a dark alley by a goddess. You’re not the same man after. Not to mention critical feminine

body parts on a scale you can actually *find*, and as for the fangs, there's no thrill quite like—”

“Miles,” a bemused voice interrupted from overhead. Roic glanced up to see the countess, wrapped in a robe, leaning over the balcony railing and observing her son. How long had she been standing there? She was Betan; maybe m'lord's last remarks wouldn't discombobulate her as much as they did Roic. In fact, he reflected, he was certain they couldn't.

“Good morning, Mother,” m'lord managed. “Some bastard tried to poison Ekaterin, did you hear? When I catch up with him, I swear I'm going to make the Dismemberment of Mad Emperor Yuri look like a house party—”

“Yes, ImpSec has kept your father and me fully apprised during the night, and I just spoke with Helen. Everything seems under control for the moment, except for persuading Pym not to throw himself off the Star Bridge in expiation. He's pretty distraught over this slipup. For pity's sake, come up and take a sleeptimer and lie down for a while.”

“I don't want a pill. I have to check the garden. I have to check everything—”

“The garden is fine. Everything is fine. As you have just discovered in Armsman Roic here, your staff is more than competent.” She started down the stairs, a distinctly steely look in her eye. “It's either a sleeptimer or a sledgehammer for you, son. I am *not* handing you off to your blameless bride in the state you're in, or the worse one it'll be if you don't get some real sleep before this afternoon. It's not fair to her.”

“Nothing about this marriage is fair to her,” m'lord muttered, bleak. “She was afraid it would be the nightmare of her old marriage all over again. No! It's going to be a completely *different* nightmare—much *worse*. How can I ask her to step into my line of fire if—”

“As I recall, she asked *you*. I was there, remember? Stop gibbering.” The countess took his arm, and began more or less frog-marching him upstairs. Roic made a mental note of her technique for future reference. She glanced over her shoulder and gave Roic a reassuring, if rather unexpected, wink.

The brief remainder of the most memorable night shift of his career passed, to Roic's relief, without further incident of note. He dodged excited maidservants hurrying to the big day's tasks and mounted the stairs to his tiny fourth-floor bedroom thinking that m'lord wasn't the only one who should get some sleep before the afternoon's more public duties. M'lord's last, decidedly free-floating comments kept him awake for some time, though, beguiling him with visions of somewhat shocking charm. Such as he'd never dreamed of back in Hassadar. He fell asleep with his lips curling up.

A few minutes before his alarm was set to go off, Roic was awakened by Armsman Jankowski tapping

at his bedroom door.

“Pym says you’re to report to m’lord’s suite right away. Some kind of briefing—you don’t have to be in your uniform yet.”

“Right.”

Dress uniform, Jankowski meant, although Jankowski was already sharp in his own. Roic slipped on last night’s wear and ran a comb through his hair, frowned in frustration at his beard shadow—*right away* presumably meant just that—and hurried downstairs.

Roic found m’lord in his suite’s sitting room, halfway dressed in a silk shirt, the brown trousers with silver side-piping and the silver-embroidered suspenders that went with and slippers. He was attended by his cousin Ivan Vorpatril, resplendent in his own House’s blue-and-gold uniform. As m’lord’s Second and chief witness in the imminent ceremony, Lord Ivan was also playing groom’s batman as well as general supporter.

One of Roic’s fonder secret memories from the past weeks was of witnessing, in his role as disregarded coatrack, the great Viceroy Count Vorkosigan himself taking his handsome nephew aside and promising, in a voice so low as to be almost a whisper, to have Ivan’s hide for a drumskin if he allowed his misplaced sense of fun to do *anything at all* to screw up the impending ceremony for m’lord. Ivan had been humorless as a judge all week; side bets were being taken belowstairs for how long it would last. Remembering that deeply ominous voice, Roic had selected the longest shot in the pool—and thought himself likely to win.

Taura, also in last night’s gear of skirt and lacy blouse, lounged on one of the small sofas in the bay window, apparently offering bracing advice. M’lord had evidently taken the sleptimer, for he looked vastly better: clean, shaved, clear-eyed, and very nearly calm.

“Ekaterin’s here,” he told Roic, in the awed tone of a besieged garrison commander describing the unexpected relieving force. “The bride’s party is using my mother’s suite for their staging area. Mother’s going to bring her down in a moment. She needs to be in on this.”

In on what? was answered before Roic could voice the question by the entry of ImpSec chief General Allegre himself, in dress greens, escorted by the count, also already in his best House uniform. Allegre was a wedding guest in his own right, but it clearly wasn’t for social reasons that he’d arrived an hour early.

The countess and Ekaterin followed on their heels, the countess graceful in something sparkling and green, m’lady-to-be still in her drab dress but with her hair already braided up and thickly entwined with tiny roses and other exquisite little scented flowers that Roic could not name. Both women looked grave, but a smile like a fugitive gleam from paradise lit Ekaterin’s eyes as they met m’lord’s. Roic found he

had to look away from that brief intensity, feeling a clumsy intruder. He thus surprised Taura's expression: shrewdly approving, but more than a little wistful.

Ivan drew up extra chairs, and all disposed themselves around the small table near the window. Madame Vorsoisson took a seat beside m'lord, decorously but with no wasted centimeters between. He gripped her hand. Roic managed to slip in next to Taura; she smiled down at him. These chambers had once belonged to the late great General Piotr Vorkosigan, before they'd been claimed by his grandson, the rising young Lord Auditor. This spot, not the grand public rooms downstairs, was the site of more military, political, and secret conferences of historic import to Barrayar than Roic could readily imagine.

"I dropped by early to give you ImpSec's latest report in person, Miles, Madame Vorsoisson, Count, Countess." Allegre, half-leaning on a sofa arm, nodded around. He reached into his tunic and withdrew a plastic bag in which something white glimmered and gleamed. "And to return these. I had my forensics people clean them after collecting and recording the evidence. They're safe now."

Gingerly, m'lord took the pearls from his hand and set them down on the table. "And do you know yet who gets the thank-you note for this gift? I'm rather hoping to deliver it in person." Ill-concealed menace vibrated beneath his light tone.

"That has actually broken open much faster than I was expecting," said Allegre. "It was a *very* nice forgery job on the date stamps from Escobar on the outer packaging, but the inner decorative wrapping checked out under analysis as of Barrayaran origin. Once we knew which planet to look on, the item was sufficiently unique—the necklace *is* of Earth origin, by the way—we were able to trace it by jeweler's import records almost at once. It was purchased two weeks ago in Vorbarr Sultana for a large sum of cash, and the store security vids for the month hadn't been erased yet. My agent positively identified Lord Vorbataille."

M'lord hissed through his teeth. "He was on my short list, yes. No wonder he was trying so hard to get off planet."

"He was up to his eyebrows in the plan, but he wasn't its originator. Do you remember how you said to me three weeks ago that while there had to be brains behind this operation, you'd swear they weren't in Vorbataille's head?"

"Yes," said m'lord. "I had him pegged for a front man, suborned for his connections. And his yacht, of course."

"You were right. We picked up his Jacksonian crime consultant about three hours ago."

"You have him!"

"We have him. He'll keep, now." Allegre gave m'lord a grim nod. "Although he had the wit to *not* bring

attention to himself by trying to get off planet, one of my analysts, who came in last night to look over the new evidence that came in with the necklace, was able to run a back-trace and cross-connect, and so identify him. Well, actually he fingered three suspects, but fast-penta cleared two of them. The source for the toxin was a fellow by the name of Luca Tarpan.”

M’lord mouthed the syllables; his face screwed up. “Damn. Are you sure? I’ve never heard of him.”

“Quite sure. He appears to have ties with the Bharaputra syndicate on Jackson’s Whole.”

“Well, that would give him access to quite a lot of somewhat scrambled two-year-old information about me and Quinn, yes. Both *mes*, in fact. And it accounts for the superior forgery. But why such a heinous attack? It’s almost *more* disturbing to think that some total stranger would—Have we crossed paths before?”

Allegre shrugged. “It seems not. The preliminary interrogation suggests it was a purely professional ploy—although he clearly had no love left for you by the time you were about half done ripping open this case. Your talent for making interesting new enemies has evidently not deserted you. The plan was to create distracting chaos in your investigation just after the group made its getaway—Vorbataille was preselected to be thrown to us for a goat, it turns out—but we shut them down about eight days early. The necklace had only just been slipped into the delivery service’s records and dispatched at that point.”

M’lord’s teeth set. “You’ve had Vorbataille in your hands for two days. And fast-penta didn’t turn this up?”

Allegre grimaced. “I just reviewed the transcripts before I drove over here. It came very close to surfacing. But to get an answer, even—especially—under fast-penta, as useful a truth drug as it is, you must first know enough to ask the question. My interrogators were concentrating on the *Princess Olivia*. It *was* Vorbataille’s yacht that was used to insert the hijacking team, by the way.”

“Knew it had to be,” grunted m’lord.

“We’d have caught up with this necklace scheme in a few more days on our own, I think,” said Allegre.

M’lord glanced at his chrono and said rather thickly, “You’d have caught up with it in about one more hour, actually. On your own.”

Allegre tilted his head in frank acknowledgment. “Yes, unfortunately. Madame Vorsoisson”—he touched his brow in a considerably more formal gesture than the usual ImpSec salute—“on behalf of myself and my organization, I wish to offer you my most abject apologies. My Lord Auditor. Count. Countess.” He looked up at Roic and Taura, sitting side by side on the sofa opposite. “Fortunately, ImpSec was not your last line of defense.”

“Indeed,” rumbled the count, who had seated himself on a straight chair turned backward, arms comfortably crossed over its back, listening intently but without comment till now. Countess Vorkosigan stood by his side; her hand touched his shoulder, and he caught it under his own thicker one.

Allegre said, “Illyan once told me that half the secret of House Vorkosigan’s preeminence in Barraryaran history was the quality of the people it drew to its service. I’m glad to see this continues to hold true. Armsman Roic, Sergeant Taura—ImpSec salutes you with more gratitude than I can rightly express.” He did so, in a sober gesture altogether free of his sporadic irony.

Roic blinked, ducking his head in lieu of the return salute he wasn’t sure if he was supposed to make. He wondered if he was expected to say something. He hoped to hell no one would want him to make a speech, like after that incident in Hassadar. That had been more horrifying than the needler fire. He glanced up to find Taura glancing down at him, eyes bright. He wanted to ask her—he wanted to ask her a thousand things, but not here. Would they ever get a private moment again? Not for the next several hours, that was certain.

“Well, love,”—m’lord blew out his breath, staring down at the plastic bag—“I think that’s your final warning. Travel with me and you travel into hazard. I don’t want it to be so. But it’s going to go on being so, as long as I serve . . . what I serve.”

M’lady-to-be glanced at the countess, whose return smile was decidedly twisted. “I never imagined it would be otherwise for a Lady Vorkosigan.”

“I’ll have these destroyed,” m’lord said, reaching for the pearls.

“No,” said m’lady-to-be, her eyes narrowing. “Wait.”

He paused, raising his eyebrows at her.

“They were sent to me. They’re *my* souvenir. I shall keep them. I’d have worn them as a courtesy to your friend.” She reached past him and scooped up the bag, tossed it up and caught it again out of the air, her long fingers closing tightly around it. Her edged smile took Roic aback. “I’ll wear them now as a defiance to our enemies.”

M’lord’s eyes blazed back at her.

The countess seized the moment—possibly, Roic thought, to cut off her son from further blithering—and tapped her chrono. “Speaking of wearing things, it’s time to get dressed.”

M’lord went a shade paler. “Yes, of course.” He kissed m’lady-to-be’s hand as she rose, looking as if he never wanted to let it go again. Countess Vorkosigan herded everyone except m’lord and his cousin into the hallway, shutting the door to the suite firmly behind her.

“He looks much better now,” said Roic to her, glancing back. “I think your sleptimer was just t’ thing.”

“Yes, plus the tranquilizers I had Aral give him when he went in to wake him up a while ago. The double dose seems to have been just about right.” She hooked her arm through her husband’s.

“Still think it should have been a triple,” he murmured.

“Now, now. Calm, not comatose, is the goal for our groom.” She escorted Madame Vorsoisson toward the stairs; the count went off with Allegre, taking advantage of the chance to discuss details, or perhaps drinks, in private.

Taura stared after them, her smile askew. “You know, I wasn’t sure about that woman for Miles at first, but I think she’ll do him very well. That Vor thing of his always baffled Elli. Ekaterin has it in her bones same as he does. God help them both.”

Roic had been about to say that he thought m’lady-to-be *better* than m’lord deserved, but Taura’s last remark brought him up short. “Huh. Yeah. She’s true Vor, all right. It’s no easy thing.”

Taura started down the corridor but stopped at the corner and half-turned back to ask, “So, what are you doing after the party?”

“Night guard duty.” *All bloody week*, Roic realized in dismay. And Taura only had ten days left on-planet.

“Ah.”

She whisked away; Roic glanced at his chrono and gulped. The generous time he’d allotted to dress and report for wedding duty was almost gone. He ran for the stairs.

The guests were already starting to arrive, spilling from the entry hall through the succession of flower-graced public rooms, when Roic scuffed quickly down the staircase to take up his allotted place as backup to Armsman Pym, in turn backing up Count and Countess Vorkosigan. Some on-site guests were already in place: Lady Alys Vorpatril, acting as assistant hostess and general expediter, and her benevolently absentminded escort, Simon Illyan; the Bothari-Jeseks; Mayhew, in apparent permanent tow of Nikki; an assortment of Vorvaynes who had overflowed from Lord Auditor Vorthys’s packed house to Vorkosigan House guest rooms. M’lord’s friend Commodore Galeni, Chief of ImpSec Komarran Affairs, and his wife were early arrivals, along with m’lord’s special Progressive Party colleagues, the Vorbrettens and the Vorrutyers.

Commodore Koudelka and his spouse, known universally as Kou and Drou, arrived with their daughter Martya. Martya was standing in as Madame Vorsoisson's Second in place of m'lady-to-be's closest friend—yet another Koudelka daughter, Kareen, still at school on Beta Colony. Kareen and m'lord's brother, Lord Mark, were much missed (albeit, in remembrance of the bug butter incident, not by Roic) but the interstellar travel time had proved too tight for their schedules. Lord Mark's wedding present was a gift certificate for the bridal couple for a week at an exclusive and very expensive Betan resort, however, so perhaps m'lord and his lady would soon be visiting his brother and their friend, not to mention m'lord's Betan relatives. As gifts went, it at least had the advantage of shifting all the security challenges inherent in the trip to some *later time*.

Martya was sped upstairs by a maid detailed to that purpose. Martya's escort and Lord Mark's business partner, Dr. Borgos, was quietly taken aside by Pym for an unscheduled frisking for any surprise gift insects he might have been harboring, but this time the scientist proved clean. Martya returned unexpectedly soon, her brow wrinkled thoughtfully, and repossessed him to stroll off in search of drinks and company.

Lord Auditor and Professora Vorthys arrived with the rest of the Vorvaynes, altogether a goodly company: four brothers, three wives, ten children, and m'lady-to-be's father and stepmother, in addition to her beloved aunt and uncle. Roic glimpsed Nikki showing off Arde to his mob of awed young Vorvayne cousins, pressing the jump pilot to decant galactic war stories to this enthralled audience. Nikki didn't, Roic noted, seem to have to press very hard. The Betan pilot grew downright expansive in the warm glow of these attentions.

The Vorvayne side stood up bravely to the glittering company that was Vorkosigan House's norm—well, Lord Auditor Vorthys was notoriously oblivious to any status not backed by proven engineering expertise. But even the bride's most buoyant older brother grew subdued and thoughtful when Count Gregor and Countess Laisa Vorbarra were announced. The emperor and empress had chosen to attend the supposedly informal afternoon affair as social equals to the Vorkosigans, which saved a world of protocol hassles for everyone, not least themselves. Not in any other uniform but that of his Count's House could the emperor have publicly embraced his little foster brother Miles, who ran downstairs to greet him, nor been so sincerely embraced in return.

In all, m'lord's "little" wedding numbered one hundred twenty guests. Vorkosigan House absorbed them all.

At last, the moment arrived; the hall and antechambers became brief, crowded chaos as wraps were redonned and the guests all streamed out the gate and around the corner to the garden. The air was cold but not bitter, and thankfully windless, the sky a deepening clear blue, the slanting afternoon sun liquid gold. It turned the snowy garden into as gilded, glittering, spectacular and utterly unique a showplace as m'lord's heart could ever have desired. The flowers and ribbons were concentrated around the central place where the vows were to be, complementing the wild brilliance of the ice and snow and light.

Although Roic was fairly sure that the two realistically detailed ice rabbits humping under a discreet bush were *not* part of the decorations m'lord had ordered. They did not pass unnoticed, as the first person to observe them immediately pointed them out to everyone within earshot. Ivan Vorpatril averted his gaze from the cheerfully obscene artwork—the rabbits were grinning—a look of innocence on his face. The count's menacing glower at him was alas undercut by an escaping snicker, which became a guffaw when the countess whispered something in his ear.

The groom's party took up their positions. In the center of the garden, the walkways, swept clear of snow, met at a wide circle of paving brick, with the Vorkosigan crest of mountains and maple leaves picked out in contrasting brick. In this obvious spot, the small circle of colored groats was laid out on the ground for the oath-making couple, surrounded by a multipointed star for the principal witnesses. Another circle of groats crowned a temporary pathway of tanbark flung wide around the first two rings, providing dry footing for the rest of the guests.

Roic, wearing a sword for the first time since he'd taken his liegeman's oath, took his place in the formal lineup of armsmen making an aisle on either side of the main pathway. He looked around in worry, for Taura did not loom up among the groom's guests sorting themselves out along the outer circle. M'lord, his hand clutching his cousin Ivan's blue sleeve, gazed up at the entrance in almost painful anticipation. M'lord had, with difficulty, been talked out of hauling his horse in to town to fetch the bride from the house in the old Vor style, though Roic personally had no doubt that the placid, elderly steed would have proved much less nervous and difficult to handle than its master. So the Vorwayne party made their entrance on foot.

Lady Alys, as Coach, led the way like some silken banner carrier. The bride followed on her blinking father's arm, shimmering in a jacket and skirt of beige velvet embroidered with shining silver, her booted feet striding out fearlessly, her eyes seeking only one other face in the mob. The triple stand of pearls gracing her throat glimmered their secret message of bravado to only a few persons here. A few extraordinary persons. By his narrowed eyes and wryly pursed lips, it was clear that Emperor Gregor was one of them.

Roic's might have been the sole gaze not to linger on the bride, for following beside her stepmother, in the place of—no, *as*—the bride's Second, walked Sergeant Taura. Roic's eyes shifted, though he kept his rigid posture—yes, there was Martya Koudelka with Dr. Borgos on the outer circle, apparently demoted to the status of mere guest but not looking in the least put-out. In fact, she seemed to be watching Taura with smug approval. Taura's dress was everything that Lady Alys had promised. Champagne-colored velvet exactly matched her eyes, which seemed to spring to a brilliant prominence in her face. The jacket sleeves and long swinging skirt were decorated on their margins with black cord shaped into winding patterns. Champagne-colored orchids coiled in her bound-back hair. Roic thought he'd never seen anything so stunningly sophisticated in his life.

Everyone took their places. M'lord and m'lady-to-be stepped into the inner circle, hands gripping hands like two lovers drowning. The bride looked not so much radiant as incandescent; the groom looked

gobsmacked. Lord Ivan and Taura were handed the two little bags of groats with which to close the circle, then stood back to their star points between Count and Countess Vorkosigan and Vorvayne and his wife. Lady Alys read out the vows, and m'lord and m'lady-to—*m'lady* repeated their responses, her voice clear, his only cracking once. The kiss was managed with remarkable grace, m'lady somehow bending her knee in a curtsylike motion so m'lord didn't have to stretch unduly. It suggested thought and practice. Lots of practice.

With immense panache, Lord Ivan then swept the goat circle wide with one booted foot, triumphantly collecting his kiss from the bride as she exited. Lord and Lady Vorkosigan passed out of the dazzling ice garden between the lines of Vorkosigan armsmen; swords, drawn and lowered at their feet, rose in salute as they passed. When Pym led the Armsmen's Shout, the sound of twenty enthusiastic male voices bounced and echoed off the garden walls and thundered to the sky. M'lord grinned over his shoulder and blushed with pleasure at this deafening endorsement.

As Seconds, Taura followed next on Lord Ivan's arm, bending her head to hear something he said, laughing. The row of armsmen remained to rigid attention while all the principals streamed past them, then formed up and marched smartly in their wake, followed by the guests, back around and into Vorkosigan House. It had all gone off *perfectly*. Pym looked as though he wanted to pass out there and then from sheer relief.

Vorkosigan House's main state dining room boasted seating for ninety-six when both tables were brought out in parallel; the overflow fit in the chamber immediately beyond, through a wide archway, so that the whole company could sit down at once essentially together. Serving was not Roic's responsibility tonight, but in his role as arbiter of emergencies and general assistant for any guest needing anything, he kept to his feet and moving. Taura was seated at the head table with the principals and the most honored guests—the *other* most honored guests. Between tall, dark, handsome Lord Ivan and tall, dark, lean Emperor Gregor, she looked *really* happy. Roic could not wish her anywhere else, but he found himself mentally erasing Ivan and replacing him with himself . . . yet Ivan and the emperor were the very pattern of debonair wit. They made Taura laugh, fangs flashing without constraint. Roic would probably just sit there in inarticulate silence and gawp at her . . .

Martya Koudelka passed him in the entryway, where he'd temporarily taken up guard stance, and smiled cheerily at him. "Hi, Roic."

He nodded. "Miss Martya."

She followed his glance to the head table. "Taura looks wonderful, doesn't she?"

"Sure does." He hesitated. "How come you're not up there?"

Her voice lowered. “I heard the story about last night from Ekaterin. She asked me if I’d mind trading. I said, *God, no*. Gets me out of having to sit there and make small talk with Ivan, for one thing.” She wrinkled her nose.

“It was well thought of, of m’lady.”

She hitched up one shoulder. “It was the one honor here that was wholly hers to bestow. The Vorkosigans are amazing, but you have to admit, they do eat you up. They give you a wild ride in return, though.” She stood on tiptoe and planted an unexpected kiss on Roic’s cheek.

He touched the spot in surprise. “What’s that for?”

“For your half of last night. For saving us all from having to live with a *really* insane Miles Vorkosigan. As long as he lasted.” A brief quaver shook her flippant voice. She tossed her blond hair and bounced off.

The toasts were made with the count’s very best wines, including a few historical bottles, reserved for the head table, that had been laid down before the end of the Time of Isolation. Afterward the party moved to the brilliant ballroom, seeming another garden, heady with the scent of a sudden spring. Lord and Lady Vorkosigan opened the dancing. Those who could still move after the dinner followed them onto the polished marquetry floor.

Roic found himself, all too briefly, passing by Taura as she watched the dancers sway and twirl.

“Do you dance, Roic?” she asked him.

“Can’t. I’m on duty. You?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know any of these dances. Although, I’m sure Miles would have foisted an instructor on me if he’d thought of it.”

“Actually,” he admitted in a lower voice, “I don’t know how either.”

Her lips curled up. “Well, don’t let Miles know if you want it to stay that way. He’d have you out there thumping around before you knew what hit you.”

He tried not to snicker. He hardly knew what to say to this, but his parting half-salute did not betoken disagreement.

On the sixth number, m’lady danced past Roic with her eldest brother, Hugo.

“Splendid necklace, Kat. From your spouse, is it?”

“No, actually. From one of his . . . business associates.”

“Expensive!”

“Yes.” M’lady’s faint smile made the hairs stir on Roic’s arms. “I expect it to cost him everything he has.”

They spun away.

Taura nailed it. She’ll do for m’lord, all right. And God help their enemies.

Promptly on schedule, the aircar was brought round for the bridal couple’s getaway. The night was still fairly young, but it was more than an hour’s flight to Vorkosigan Surleau and the lakeside estate that was to be the honeymoon refuge. The place would be quiet this time of year, blanketed with snow and peace. Roic could not imagine two people more in need of a little peace.

The guests in residence were to be left behind under the care of the count and countess for a few days, although the galactic guests would travel down to the lake later. Among other things, Roic was given to understand, Madame Bothari-Jesek wished to visit her father’s grave there with her husband and new daughter and burn a death offering.

Roic had thought Pym would be doing the flying, but to his surprise, Armsman Jankowski took the controls as the newlyweds ran the gauntlet of raucous family and friends and made it to the rear compartment.

“I’ve shuffled some assignments,” Pym murmured to Roic as they both stood smiling in the porte cochere to watch and salute. M’lord and m’lady seemed to melt into each other’s arms in an equal mix of love and exhaustion as the silvered canopy finally closed over them. “I’m taking night watch in Vorkosigan House for the next week. *You* have the week off with double holiday pay. With m’lady’s own thanks.”

“Oh,” said Roic. He blinked. Pym had been quite frustrated by the fact that no one, from the count down, had seen fit to censure him for the slipup with the necklace. He could only conclude that Pym had given up and decided to supply his own penance. Well, if the senior armsman looked to be carrying it too far, the countess could be relied upon to step in. “Thanks!”

“You can consider yourself free from whenever Count and Countess Vorbarra leave.” Pym nodded and stepped back as the aircar eased out from under the overhang and began to rise into the cold night air as if buoyed up by the yells and cheers of the well-wishers.

A splendid and prolonged burst of fireworks made the send-off a thing of beauty and a joy to Barrayaran hearts. Taura applauded and hooted, too, and, along with Arde Mayhew, joined Nikki's cohort for some added, unscheduled crackers and sparklers in the back garden. Powder smoke perfumed the air in clouds as the children ran around Taura, urging her to throw the lights *higher*. Security and an assortment of mothers might have quashed the game, except for the fact that the large bag of most remarkable incendiary goodies had been slipped to Nikki by Count Vorkosigan.

The party wound down. Sleepy, protesting children were carried past Roic to their cars or to their beds. The emperor and empress were seen out fondly by the count and countess; soon after their departure, a score of unobtrusive, efficient servants, on loan from ImpSec, vanished quietly and without fanfare. The remaining energetic young people hijacked the ballroom to dance to music more to their taste. Their tired elders sought quieter corners in the succession of public rooms in which to converse and sample more of the count's very best wines.

Roic found Taura sitting alone in one of the small side rooms on a sturdy-looking sofa of the style she favored, reflectively working her way through a platter of Ma Kosti's dainties on a low table before her. She looked drowsy and contented, yet a little apart from it all. As if she were a guest in her own life . . .

Roic gave her a smile, a nod, a semi-salute. He wished he'd thought to provide himself with roses or something. What could a fellow give to a woman like this? The finest chocolate, maybe, yeah, although that was redundant at the moment. Tomorrow for sure. "Um . . . have you had a good time?"

"Oh, yes. Wonderful."

She sat back and smiled almost up at him—an unusual angle of view. She looked good from this direction, too. M'lord's comment about horizontal height differentials drifted through his memory. She patted the sofa beside her; Roic glanced around, overcame his guard-stance habits, and sat down. His feet hurt, he realized.

The silence that fell was companionable, not strained, but after a time he broke it. "You like Barrayar, then?"

"It's been a great visit. Better than my best dreams."

Ten more days. Ten days was an eyeblink. Ten days was just not enough for all he had to say, to give, to do. Ten years might be a start. "You, uh, have you ever thought of staying? Here? It could be done, y'know. Find a place you could fit. Or make one." M'lord would figure out how, if anyone could. With great daring, he let his hand curl over hers on the seat between them.

Her brows rose. "I already have a place I fit."

“Yeah, but . . . forever? Your mercs seem like a chancy sort of thing to me. No solid ground under them. And nothing lasts forever, not even organizations.”

“*Nobody* lives long enough to have *all* their choices.” She was silent for a moment, then added, “The people who bioengineered me to be a super-soldier didn’t consider a long life span to be a necessity. Miles has a few biting remarks about that, but oh well. The fleet medics give me about a year yet.”

“Oh.” It took him a minute to work through this; his stomach felt suddenly tight and cold. A dozen obscure remarks from the past few days fell into place. He wished they hadn’t. *No, oh, no . . . I*

“Hey, don’t look so bludgeoned.” Her hand curled around to clasp his in return. “The bastards have been giving me a year yet for the past four years running. I’ve seen other soldiers have their whole careers and die in the time the medics have been screwing around with me. I’ve stopped worrying about it.”

He had no idea what to say to this. Screaming was right out. He shifted a bit closer to her instead.

She eyed him thoughtfully. “Some fellows, when I tell them this, get spooked and veer off. It’s not contagious.”

Roic swallowed hard. “I’m not running away.”

“I see that.” She rubbed her neck with her free hand; an orchid petal parted from her hair and caught upon her velvet-clad shoulder. “Part of me wishes the medics would get it settled. Part of me says, the hell with it. Every day is a gift. Me, I rip open the package and wolf it down on the spot.”

He looked up at her in wonder. His grip tightened, as though she might be pulled from him as they sat, right now, if he didn’t hold hard enough. He leaned over, reached across and picked off the fragile petal, touched it to his lips. He took a deep, scared breath. “Can you teach me how to do that?”

Her fantastic gold eyes widened. “Why, Roic! I think that’s the most delicately worded proposition I’ve ever received. S’ beautiful.” An uncertain pause. “Um, that *was* a proposition, wasn’t it? I’m not always sure I parlay Barrayaran.”

Desperately terrified now, he blurted in what he imagined to be merc-speak, “Ma’am, yes, ma’am!”

This won an immense fanged smile—*not* in a version he’d ever seen before. It made him, too, want to fall over backward, though preferably not into a snowbank. He glanced around. The softly lit room was littered with abandoned plates and wineglasses, detritus of pleasure and good company. Low voices chatted idly in the next chamber. Somewhere in another room, softened by the distance, a clock was chiming the hour. Roic declined to count the beats.

They floated in a bubble of fleeting time, live heat in the heart of a bitter winter. He leaned forward, raised his face, slid his hand around her warm neck, drew her face down to his. It wasn't hard. Their lips brushed, locked.

Several minutes later, in a shaken, hushed voice, he breathed, "Wow."

Several minutes after *that*, they went upstairs, hand in hand.

About the Authors

Lois McMaster Bujold

Lois McMaster Bujold was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1949; she now lives in Minneapolis. She began reading science fiction at age nine. Romances came later, when in her early twenties she discovered Georgette Heyer. She started writing for professional publication in 1982, a goal achieved in 1986 with the release of her first three science fiction novels. Bujold went on to write the Nebula-winning *Falling Free* (1988) and many other books featuring her popular character Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, his family, friends, and enemies. The series includes three Hugo Award-winning novels; readers interested in learning more about the far-flung Vorkosigan clan are encouraged to start with the omnibus *Cordelia's Honor*. Bujold's books have been translated into seventeen languages. In 2001 came a new fantasy, *The Curse of Chalion*—which won the Mythopoeic Award for Adult Literature. A sequel in the same world, *Paladin of Souls*, followed in 2003. A fan-run Web site devoted to her work, The Bujold Nexus, may be found at www.dendarii.com.

[Version History]

1.0 – scanned, formatted, and spell-checked from trade paperback. This is only one of the novellas from the multi-author anthology *Irresistible Forces*, ed by Catherine Asaro (which also has a novella written by Asaro in her Skolian world as well). At some point, I will get around to editing the rest of the anthology.

2.0 – September 9, 2004 – The_Ghiti – proofed in detail against deadtree format. As usual, if there was an oddity in dialogue, or an obscure alternate form, I left “as is.” Armstrong uses a lot of mammoth paragraphs—this isn’t a proofreading or scanning error. It’s also apparent that major publishers are cutting back on their proofreading budgets—although the book had been spellchecked, it obviously hadn’t been manually proofread (“want” instead of “went”; “at” instead of “it”; “then” and “than” interchanged frequently; many more).