

A NEW VORKOSIGAN SAGA NOVEL

LOIS
MCMMASTER
BUJOLD

GENTLEMAN JOLE
AND THE
RED QUEEN

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Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen – eARC

Lois McMaster Bujold

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A NEW NOVEL IN THE AWARD WINNING SERIES FROM MULTIPLE *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST SELLING AUTHOR LOIS MCMASTER BUJOLD! Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan returns to the planet that changed her destiny.

FUTURE TENSE

Three years after her famous husband's death, Cordelia Vorkosigan, widowed Vicereine of Sergyaran, stands ready to spin her life in a new direction. Oliver Jole, Admiral, Sergyaran Fleet, finds himself caught up in her web of plans in ways he'd never imagined, bringing him to an unexpected crossroad in his career.

Meanwhile, Miles Vorkosigan, one of Emperor Gregor's key investigators, this time dispatches *himself* on a mission of inquiry, into a mystery he never anticipated – his own mother.

Plans, wills, and expectations collide in this sparkling science-fiction social comedy, as the impact of galactic technology on the range of the possible changes all the old rules, and Miles learns that not only is the future not what he expects, neither is the past.

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Chapter One

It was a good day on the military transfer station orbiting the planet Sergyar. The Vicereine was coming home.

As he entered the station's Command-and-Control room, Admiral Jole's eye swept the main tactical display, humming and colorful above its holo-table. The map of his territory—albeit presently set to the distorted scale of human interests within Sergyar's system, and not the astrographic reality, which would leave everything invisible and put humans firmly in their place as a faint smear on the surface of a speck. A G-star burning tame and pleasant at this distance; its necklace of half-a-dozen planets and their circling moons; the colony world itself turning below the station. Of more critical strategic interest, the four wormhole jump points that were its gateways to the greater galactic nexus, and the attendant military and civilian stations—two highly active with a stream of commercial traffic and scheduled tightbeam relays, leading to the jump routes back to the rest of the Barrayaran Empire and on to its nearest neighbor on this side, currently peaceful Escobar; one accessing a long and uneconomical backdoor route to the Nexus; the last leading, as far as forty years of exploration had found, nowhere.

Jole wondered at what point in the past double-handful of years he'd started carrying the whole map and everything moving through it in his head at once. He'd used to consider his mentor's ability to do so as something bordering on the supernatural, although the late Aral Vorkosigan had done it routinely for an entire three-system empire, and not just its smallest third. Time, it seemed, had gifted Jole easily with what earnest study had found hard. Good. Because time bloody *owed* him, for all that he had taken away.

It was quiet this morning in the C-and-C room, most of the techs bored at their stations, the ventilation laden with the usual scents of electronics, recycled air, and overcooked coffee. He moved to the one station that was brightly lit, letting his hand press the shoulder of the traffic controller, *stay on task*. The man nodded and returned his attention to the pair of ships coming in.

The Vicereine's jump-pinnace was nearly identical to that of a fleet admiral, small and swift, bristling more with communications equipment than weapons. Its escort, a fast courier, could keep up but was scarcely better armed; they traveled together more for safety in case of technical emergencies than any other sort. None this trip, thankfully. Jole watched with what he knew was perfectly pointless anxiety as they maneuvered into their docking clamps. No pilot would want to make a clumsy docking under *those* calm gray eyes.

His newest aide popped up at his elbow. "The honor guard reports ready, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Vorinnis. We'll go over now."

He motioned her into his wake as he exited C-and-C and made for the Vicereine's docking bay. Kaya Vorinnis was far from the first of the techs, medtechs, and troops from the greatly expanded Imperial Service Women's Auxiliary to be assigned to Sergyar command, nor the first to be assigned directly to his office. But the Vicereine would approve, which was a charming thought, though Cordelia would doubtless also make some less-charming remark about how her natal Beta Colony and a like list of advanced planets had boasted fully-gender-integrated space services since forever. Personally, Jole was relieved that he only had to supervise the women during working hours, and that their off-duty arrangements here on-station and on the downside base were the direct responsibility

a rather maternal and very efficient ISWA colonel.

“I’ve never seen Vicereine Vorkosigan in person,” Vorinnis confided to him. “Only in vids.” Jole was reminded not to let his long stride quicken unduly, though the lieutenant’s breathlessness might be as much due to incipient heroine-worship, not misplaced in Jole’s view.

“Oh? I thought you were a relative of Count Vorinnis. Had you not spent much time in Vorbarra Sultana?”

“Not that closely related, sir. I’ve only met the count twice. And most of my time in the capital was spent running around Ops. I was put on Admin track pretty directly.” Her light sigh was easy to interpret, having the identical content to those of her male predecessors: *Not ship duty, dammit.*

“Well, take heart. I was put through a seven-year rotation in the capital as a military secretary and aide, but I still caught three tours on trade fleet escort duty afterward.” The most active and far-flung space-based duty an Imperial officer could aspire to during peacetime, culminating in his one and only ship captaincy, traded in due course for this Sergyar patch.

“Yes, but that was aide to *Regent Vorkosigan* himself!”

“He was down to Prime Minister Vorkosigan, by then.” Jole permitted himself a brief lip twitch. “I’m not *that* old.” And just kept his mouth from adding, “...young lady!” It wasn’t merely Vorinnis’s height, or lack of it, that made her look twelve in his eyes, or her gender; her recent male counterparts were no better. “Although, by whatever irony, my one stint in an active theater of war was as his secretary, when I followed him to the Hegen Hub. Not that we knew it was going to end up a shooting war when that trip started.”

“Were you ever under fire?”

“Well, yes. There is no rear echelon on a flagship. Since the Emperor was also aboard by that point, it was fortunate that our shields never failed.” Two decades ago, now. And what a top-secret cockup that entire episode had been, which, glued throughout to Ex-Regent Prime Minister Admiral Count Vorkosigan’s shoulder, Jole had witnessed at the closest possible range from first to last. His Hegen Hub war stories had always had to be among his most thoroughly edited.

“I guess you’ve known Vicereine Vorkosigan just as long, then?”

“Nearly exactly, yes. It’s been...” He had to calculate it in his head, and the sum took him aback. “Twenty-three years, almost.”

“I’m almost twenty-three,” Vorinnis offered, in a tone of earnest helpfulness.

“Ah,” Jole managed. He was rescued from any further fall into this surreal time warp by the arrival at Docking Bay Nine.

The dozen men of the honor guard braced, and Jole returned salutes punctiliously while running his eye over their turnout. Everything shipshape and shiny, good. He duly complimented the sergeant in charge and turned to take up a parade rest in strategic view of the personnel flex tube, just locking up under the competent and very attentive supervision of the bay tech. Exiting a null-gee flex tube in the grav field of a station or ship was seldom a graceful or dignified process, but the first three persons out were reasonably practiced: a ship’s officer, one of the Vicereine’s ImpSec guards, and Armsman Rykov, the only one of the new Count Vorkosigan’s personal retainers seconded to his mother, in her other hat as Dowager Countess. The first man attended to mechanics, the second made visual and electronic scan of the docking bay for unscheduled human hazards, and the third turned to assist his liege lady. Vorinnis tried to stand on tiptoe and to attention simultaneously, which didn’t quite work, but she dropped from Jole’s awareness as the last figure cleared the tube in a smooth swing and flowed to her feet with the aid of her armsman’s proffered hands.

Everyone snapped to attention as the color sergeant piped her aboard. Admiral Jole saluted, and said

formally, “Vicereine Vorkosigan. Welcome back. I trust your journey was uneventful.”

“Thank you, Admiral, and so it was,” she returned, equally formally. “It’s good to be back.”—

He made a quick initial assay of her. She looked a trifle jump-lagged, but nothing like the frightening dead-gray bleakness that had haunted her features when she’d returned alone almost three years ago from her husband’s state funeral. Not that Jole himself had been in much better form, at the time. The colonists of Sergyar had been entirely uncertain if they were going to get their Vicereine back at all, that trip, or if some stranger-lord would be appointed in her place. But she was wearing her colors again now, if subdued ones, Komarran-style trousers and jacket, and her unmistakable smile had warmed to something better than room temperature. She was still keeping her tousled red-gold hair cut short; the fine bones of her face held out, like a rampart that had never fallen.

Her left hand, down at her side, gripped what appeared to be a small cryofreezer case. Lieutenant Vorinnis, like any good admiral’s assistant, advanced upon it. “May I take your luggage, Your Excellency?”

Cordelia cried, sharply and unexpectedly, “No!” twitching the case away. At Jole’s eyebrow-lift, she seemed to catch herself up, and continued more smoothly, “No, thank you, Lieutenant. I’ll carry the one. And my armsman will see to the rest.” She cast a quick head-tilt toward the girl, and a plea of a look Jole’s way.

He took the hint. “Vicereine, may I introduce my new aide, Lieutenant Kaya Vorinnis. Just assigned—she arrived a few weeks after you left.” Cordelia had departed six weeks ago to present the Sergyaran Viceroy’s Annual Report to Emperor Gregor in person, and incidentally catch a little of the Winterfair Season with her family back on Barrayar. Jole hoped that had been refreshing rather than exhausting, although having met the Vorkosigan offspring, he suspected it had been both.

“How do you do, Lieutenant? I hope you will find Sergyar an interesting rotation. Ah—any relation to the young count?”

“Not close, ma’am,” Vorinnis replied, an answer Jole suspected she was tired of offering, but she did it without grimacing here.

The Vicereine turned and delivered a few well-practiced words of thanks to the honor guard. The sergeant returned the traditional, “Ma’am, yes, ma’am!” proudly on their behalf, and marched them out again. Cordelia watched them go, then turned with a sigh to take Jole’s arm proffered in escort.

She shook her head. “Really, Oliver, do you have to do this every time I transit? All I’m going to do is walk from the docking bay to the shuttle hatch. Those poor boys could have slept in.”

“We never did less for the Viceroy. It’s an honor for them as well as for you, you know.”

“Aral was your war hero. Several times over.”

The corners of Jole’s mouth twitched up. “And you’re not?” He added in curiosity, “What’s in the box? Not a severed head—again—I trust?” It seemed too small for that, fortunately.

Cordelia’s gray eyes glinted. “Now, now, Oliver. Bring home one dismembered body part, *once* in your mind you, *once*, and people get twitchy about checking your luggage ever after.” Her smile grew wider. “But that we can *joke* about that now...ah, well.”

Lieutenant Vorinnis, trailing, looked vaguely appalled, though whether at the famous historical incident that had ended the Pretender’s War, a disturbing number of years before her birth, or her superiors’ attitude to it, Jole was not sure.

Jole said, “Do you want to take a break, Cordelia, before catching your downside leg? I don’t know what meal schedule you’re on, but we can provide.” The entire Barrayaran Imperial fleet, and by extension this station, kept Vorbarr Sultana time, which unfortunately did not mesh with that of the colonial capital below, as the two planets had, among other things, different day lengths. Not that the

same time on two different sides of a wormhole jump, let alone a string of them, had any but an arbitrary congruence. “Your shuttle will await your convenience, I promise you.”

Cordelia shook her head in regret. “I switched to Kareenburg time when we made Sergyaran space day ago. I *think* my next meal is lunch, though I’ll find out when we land. But no, thank you, Oliver, not this round. I’m eager to get home.” Her grip on the freezer case tightened.

“I hope we’ll be able to catch up more thoroughly soon.”

“Oh, count on it. When do you next cycle down to base?”

“End of the week.”

Her eyes narrowed in some unconfided calculation. “Ye-es. That might just about do. My secretary will be in touch, then.”

“Right-oh.” Jole accepted this affably, hiding his disappointment. News from Barrayar arrived hourly by tightbeam. *Stories from home* arrived with returning visitors, more erratically. Could a man be homesick for a *voice*? A light, particular voice, still laced with a broad Betan accent forty-plus years after pledging and proving allegiance to an alien Imperium?

All too soon, they arrived at the shuttle hatch. Jole had inspected the vessel personally not an hour ago. The pilot reported at the ready. Jole stood aside with Cordelia, stealing a few more minutes together as her luggage was trundled aboard.

“You’re traveling lighter, these days.”

She smiled. “Aral was *used* to moving an army. I prefer simpler logistics.” She glanced toward the shuttle hatch, as if anxious to be boarding. “Any forest fires downside that I haven’t heard about by tightbeam?”

“None that have penetrated the stratosphere.” Their traditional dividing line for their respective responsibilities. Cordelia rode herd on some two million colonists on behalf of Emperor Gregor; Jole suspected that a good half of them would be at her for attention the moment her foot touched the soil. At least he could make sure that no new troubles dropped on her from above. “Take care of yourself down there. Or at least let your staff do so.” Jole exchanged a conspiratorial glance with Armsmaster Rykov, who acted more-or-less as the Vicereine’s household seneschal, and who nodded endorsement of this notion.

Cordelia just smiled. “See you soon, Oliver.”

And off she goes. And goes and goes, like any Vorkosigan. Jole shook his head.

He waited till he heard the docking clamps release, then turned away.

Vorinnis, pacing him, inquired, “Were you there, sir, when she brought back the Pretender’s head?”

“I was *eight*, Lieutenant.” He tried to rub the amusement off his mouth, and recover his expected admiral’s gravity. “I grew up in one of the westernmost districts—it had no military shuttleport, so we weren’t a high-value target for either side. I mainly remember the war as everyone trying to carry on normally, but all the adults being awash in fear and fantastic rumors. The Lord Regent had made away with the boy emperor, he was brainwashed by Betan spies, worse slanders...Everyone believed the Lady Vorkosigan had been sent on that commando raid by her husband, but the truth, I later learned, was a deal more complicated.” And not all his to tell, Jole was reminded. “We meet fairly frequently in the course of business here on Sergyar—you may get a chance to try to get her to decant some *her* war stories.” Although upon reflection, Jole wasn’t sure of the advisability of introducing a keen young officer to Vorkosigan notions of initiative. Metaphors about fighting fire with gasoline rose to his mind.

He grinned and returned to Command-and-Control, there to keep the Vicereine’s shuttle in view till its safe touchdown was confirmed.

The Sergyaran afternoon was luminous, on the restaurant terrace overlooking what Cordelia could no longer call the encampment, nor even the village, but surely the *city* even by galactic standards. The terrace's perch above a sharp drop-off on the hillside lent a pleasant illusion of looking out into a gulf of light. When the server, seating her at her reserved corner table, inquired if ma'am wanted the polarizing awning raised, Cordelia answered simply, "Not yet," and waved him off. She sat back and lifted her face to the warmth, closing her eyes and letting its caress soothe her. And tried not to think how long it had been since any more palpable caress had done so. *Three years next month*, the too busy part of her brain that she could not shut off supplied.

As an anodyne, she reopened her eyes to her surroundings. The two tables closest to hers were empty by arrangement, except for her plainclothes ImpSec bodyguard who already sat at the farthest one, not-sipping iced tea and looking around as well. *Situational awareness*, right. Her over forty years as a subject and servant of the Barrayaran Empire had included all too many *situations*; for today, she was willing to default to *I have people for that*. Except that the fellow looked so young; she felt as though she should be watching out for him, maternally. She must never offend his dignity by letting on, she supposed.

She sucked in a long breath of the soft air, as if she might so draw its lightness into the dark hollows of her heart. The server brought two water glasses. She was only a few sips into hers when the figure she had been awaiting appeared through the building's door, glanced around, spied her, lifted his hand in greeting, and strode her way. Her bodyguard, watching this progress and taking in her guest in civilian garb, visibly restrained himself from standing and saluting the man as he passed by, although they did exchange acknowledging nods.

When Cordelia had first met Lieutenant Oliver Perrin Jole, back when he was, what—twenty-seven—she had not hesitated to describe him as *gorgeous*. Tall, blond, lean, chiseled features—oh my, the *cheekbones*—blue eyes alive with earnest intelligence. More diffident, back then. After two decades and some change—and changes—Admiral Jole was still tall and straight, if more solid in both build and demeanor. The bright blondness of his hair was a trifle tarnished with gray, the clear eyes framed with what were really quite fetching crow's feet, and he had grown into a quiet, firm self-confidence. Still with those unfair cheekbones and eyelashes, though. She smiled a little, permitting herself this private moment of delicate enjoyment, before he arrived to bow over her hand and seat himself.

"Vicereine."

"Just Cordelia, today, Oliver. Unless you want me to start *admiraling* you."

He shook his head. "I get enough of that at work." But his curious smile grew more crooked. "And there was only ever the one true admiral, among us. My last promotion always felt a touch surreal when I was in his company."

"You're a true admiral. The Emperor said so. And the Viceroy advised."

"I shan't argue."

"Good, because it would be a few years—and a great deal of work—too late."

Jole chuckled, twitched his long fingers at her in surrender of the point, if no other sort, and took up the menu. He tilted his head. "You're looking less tired, at least. That's good."

Cordelia had no doubt that she'd looked downright hagged often enough in their late scramble for their new balance. She ran a hand through her close-cropped red-roan hair, curling in its usual feathered fashion around her head. "I'm feeling less tired." She grimaced. "I sometimes go for whole hours at a time without thinking of him, now. Last week, there was a whole day."

He nodded in, she was sure, complete understanding.

Cordelia wondered how to begin. *We haven't seen enough of each other these past three years* was not really true. The Admiral of the Sergyaran Fleet had moved smoothly into his tasks as the military right arm of the lone Vicereine of Sergyar—just as for the joint Viceroy and Vicereine formerly. He'd been accepted by the colony planet on his own considerable merits even when his mentor's immense shadow silently backing him was removed by that—could she call it untimely?—that immense death. Vicereine Vorkosigan and Admiral Jole had adjusted to the new patterns of their respective jobs, working around that aching absence, tightening the public stitches over that wound. Briefings, inspections, diplomatic duties, petitions, advice given and listened to, arguments with budget committees both in tandem and, a few times, in opposition—their workload After Aral was scarcely changed in substance or rhythm from their workload Before. And, slowly, the civic scar had healed, though it still twinged now and then.

The inmost wounds...they'd scarcely touched, or touched upon, in mutual mercy perhaps. She would never count Oliver as less bereaved than herself just because his grief was more circumspectly hidden—though she had more than once, as she forced herself through what had seemed the endless gauntlet of public ceremonies befalling the Viceregal Widow, envied him its privacy.

It was only their former intimacy that seemed taken away, buried with its nexus point. Like two planets left to wander when their mutual sun vanished. It was time, perhaps, for a renewed source of gravity and light.

The server returned, and she was spared from her further internal...dithering, yes, she was dithering by the minor distractions of placing their orders. When they were alone again, Oliver relieved her of her quandary by remarking, "If this is to be a working lunch, someone was behindhand in supplying me with the agenda."

"Not work, no, but I do have an agenda," she confessed. "Personal and private, which is why I invited you here on our so-called day off." She wondered what signals he'd read in her invitation that had brought him here in comfortable-if-flattering civvies, instead of his uniform. He'd always been able to nuance, an invaluable trait back when he'd first been assigned as Prime Minister Vorkosigan's military secretary in the hothouse political atmosphere of the Imperial capital back on Barrayar. *We are far from Vorbarr Sultana. And I'm glad of it.*

She took a sip of water, and the plunge. "Have you heard anything about the new replicator center we opened downtown?"

"I...not *per se*, no. I am aware that your public health efforts continue." He blinked at her in his most amiable I-am-not-following-you-but-I'm-still-listening look.

"My mother back on Beta Colony helped me headhunt an exceptional team of Betan reproductive experts to staff it, on five-year contracts. They're teaching Sergyaran medtechs in the clinic, as well as serving the public. By the end of their terms, we expect to be able to hive off several daughter clinics to the newer colonial towns. And, if we're lucky, maybe seduce a few of the Betans into staying on."

Jole, unmarried and unlikely to be so, smiled and shrugged. "I'm actually old enough to remember when that was new and controversial technology, back on Barrayar. The younger officers coming out here take it for granted, and not just the Komarran-born ones, or the ISWA girls."

The server arrived with their wine—a light, fruity, well-chilled white, produced right here on the planet, yes!—and she fortified herself with a sip before continuing forthrightly. "In this case, the public good is also a personal one. As, um, Aral may never have mentioned to you, and I don't recall ever did either, during one of the dodgier times of Aral's regency—before you came on board—we took the precaution of privately sequestering gametes from each of us. Frozen sperm from him, frozen eggs from me." Over thirty-five years ago, that had been.

Oliver's steely blond brows rose. "He told me once that he was infertile, after the soltoxin attack."

"For natural conceptions, probably. Low sperm count, lots of cellular damage accumulated over his lifetime. But—technology. You only need one good gamete, if you can sort it."

"Huh."

"For reasons more political than either biological or technological, we never went back to that ban. But Aral made sure in his will that the samples' ownership was mine absolutely, after his death. On this trip home for Winterfair and the annual Viceroy's Report, I pulled them all. And brought them back to Sergyar with me. Those were what was in that freezer case I was—well, sitting on more like a mother hen than you knew."

Oliver sat up, abruptly interested. "Posthumous children for Aral? *Can you?*"

"That's what I needed the top Betan experts to determine. As it turns out, the answer is yes."

"Huh! Now that Miles is Count Vorkosigan in his own right, with a son of his own, I suppose another son—brother?—would not present an inheritance issue...Uh—would they be legitimate, under Barrayaran law?"

Her elder son Miles, Cordelia reflected ruefully, was only eight years younger than Jole. "I actually plan to sidestep all those issues by conceiving only daughters. This takes advantage of one of the peculiarities of Barrayaran inheritance law in that they will all be, without question, mine alone. They will bear the very prole surname of Naismith. No claim on the Vorkosigan's District or Vorkosigan estates. Nor vice versa."

Oliver pursed his lips, frowning. "Aral...would have wanted to support them. To say the least."

"I have been, and will be, setting aside the rather comfortable widow's jointure due me as Dowager Countess Vorkosigan for that purpose. Since I have both my salary as Vicereine, at least for a while longer, and my own personal investments, mostly here on Sergyar, to support a private household quite adequately."

"A while?" said Jole at once, pouncing upon a key point and looking alarmed. As she might have known he would.

"I never planned to remain as Vicereine till I died in harness," she said gently. *As Aral did*, she did not say aloud. "I'm a Betan. I expect to live to a hundred and twenty or more. I have fed about as much of my life to Barrayar as I wish to. It's time..." She drained her wineglass; Jole politely poured her more. "They say that a person should not make major life decisions or changes for at least a year after bereavement, due to having their brains scrambled, to the truth of which I can testify, except I make it two years."

Jole nodded bleak agreement.

"I've been thinking about this from the night we buried him at Vorkosigan Surleau." The night she'd cut all her waist-length hair, which Aral had always loved, nearly to the roots to lay in the burning brazier. Because the usual sacrificial lock had seemed absurdly inadequate. Not one of her fellow mourners had said a word in protest, nor asked one in question. She'd never worn it longer than its current finger-length, thereafter. "It will be three years next month. I think...this is what I truly want, and if I'm going to, it's time. Betan or no, I am not getting any younger."

"A person would take you for fifty," offered Jole. His own age, very nearly. He actually meant it; he wasn't just flattering her. *Barrayarans*.

"Only a Barrayaran. A galactic would know better." She considered *seventy-six*. It...made no sense. Except that sometime in the past three years, she had switched from counting her years not up from birth, but back from death—a grab-bag of time not growing, but shrinking, *use it or lose it*.

The server arrived with their vat-chicken-and-strawberry salads and fancy breads, giving her

moment to muster her next push. Jole, to his credit, had not asked, *Why are you telling me all this?* but had taken it in as a simple—well, maybe not that simple—confidence from a friend. And by no means an unwelcome one. She took another sip of wine. Then a gulp of wine. She set down her glass.

“We didn’t have a large number of eggs to work with, once the substandard ones were filtered out. I took my share of damage over the years, too. But I think I can get as many as six girls, altogether.”

Jole huffed a laugh. “Well, Sergyar needs women.”

“And men. There were also a very few ova which might still be healthy as...I suppose you could say, enucleated eggshells. They will carry my mitochondrial DNA, anyway. And such enucleated ova are exactly what are used to host the same-sex IVF crosses.”

Jole stopped in mid-chew and stared at her, blue eyes going wide. His quickness of mind had always been one of his more endearing traits, she reflected.

“If you like—and you can take as long as you need to think about it—I would donate to you some of those enucleated eggs, and genetic material from Aral, and you could...you and Aral could have a son or sons of your own. I mention sons for legal, not biological reasons. With an X chromosome from Aral and a Y chromosome from yourself, the offspring would be unassailably legally yours. With no damned bloody lethal Vor hung on the front of their names, either.”

Jole swallowed his belated bite with the aid of a large gulp of his own wine. “This...sounds insane. At first blush.”

He *was* blushing a trifle, actually. Interesting. On him, of course, it looked good. But then, it always had. *All the way down*, as she recalled, and suppressed a smile. “On Beta Colony, it would be routine. Or Escobar, or Earth, or any of the advanced planets.” The normal planets, as Cordelia thought of them. “Or even Komarr, for heaven’s sake. This biotech trick was worked out *centuries* ago.”

“Yes, but not for us, not for...” He hesitated.

Not for Barrayar, did he mean to say? Or...*not for me?*

Instead he said, “So is this waste not, want not?”

“Just *want*.”

“How many...how many such eggs?”

“Four. Which does not guarantee four live births, I hope you realize. Or, in fact, any. But it’s four genetic lottery tickets, anyway.”

“How long have you been thinking about this, um...extraordinary offer?” He was still staring at her wide-eyed. “Did you already have it in mind when you docked, the other day?”

“No, only since my conference with Dr. Tan, three days ago. We were discussing what to do with the leftovers, which was the one question I’d never anticipated. He suggested I donate the eggshells to the clinic, which could use them, and if this doesn’t interest you, I probably will. But then I had a better idea.” She’d hardly slept that night, thinking about it. And then she’d given up on running circles inside her head trying to second-guess herself, and just invited Oliver to lunch.

“I’d never thought—I’d given up all thought—of ever having children, you know,” he said. “There was my career, there was Aral, there was...what we three had. Which was more than I’d ever dreamed of having.”

“Yes. I’d thought you insufficiently imaginative.” She took a fortifying crunch of chicken salad. “Not to mention insufficiently greedy in the extreme.”

“How could I ever take care of...” he began, then cut himself off.

“Plenty of time to think about the practical details,” Cordelia assured him. “I just wanted to put the idea into your head.”

Oliver made a hair-clutching gesture, not quite jesting. “And explode it? You always did have the

little sadistic streak, Cordelia.”

“Now, Oliver. *Assertive*, perhaps. As you may recall.”

From the way he choked on his next swallow of wine, he did. *Good*. But the next words out of his mouth were, unexpectedly, “Everard Piotr Jole?”

Good grief, he’s naming them already! Well...she’d had her hypothetical girls named for a year. *Wow, this pitch went fast.* Fortunately, there was a certain amount of time built-in for second thoughts and the cascade of worrying that she knew from experience would follow. “We’re on Sergyar, here. Not bound to tradition. You could choose any names you liked. I’m going to name my first girl Aurelia Kosigan Naismith. They’re all going to be named Kosigan Naismith, actually. Except that Kosigan will be an actual middle name, no hyphens or anything.” *Or prefixes.* “I’m not sure they’ll thank me, later.”

“What, um...what does your son Miles think of this? Or his clone-brother Mark, for that matter?”

“I haven’t discussed it with them yet. Nor do I intend to, till after the fact. I won’t say, *Not Miles’ business*, but I will say, *Not his decision.*”

“Did you—or Aral—ever tell him about us? Does he know? I was never quite sure. That is, if he knew and accepted me, or if he just didn’t know.”

And the grueling state funeral, which had been the last time Oliver and her sons had crossed paths with that person, had been no place to bring it up. “Ha. No. Speaking of exploding heads, Aral always spared Miles that. I never much agreed with that choice, but I have to admit it was simpler.”

He nodded relieved acceptance.

She regarded him a moment, and added, deliberately, “Aral was always so very proud of you. I hope you know that.”

His breath caught, and he looked away. Swallowed. Nodded shortly. It took him another few breaths, but he recovered his train of thought: “When you started to tell me about this, I thought perhaps you were going to ask me to stand as godfather or something—what’s that Betan term, co-parent?”

“A co-parent is legally, and usually genetically, the same as a parent—a godfather is more like the orphan’s legal guardian in the event of parental death. And yes, I’m going to have to give thought to my new will. Fortunately, I have access to the best lawyers on the planet. And so will you, in the event.”

“Aral Kosigan Jole...?” he muttered, as if he hadn’t heard this, though she knew he had.

“No one would blink,” she assured him. “Or Oliver Jole, Junior, or anything you like.”

“How could I...explain their mother? Or their lack of a mother?”

“Anonymously donated eggs purchased from the gamete bank, perfectly standard. Which isn’t even untrue. You hit fifty, and suddenly decided to have a child for your midlife crisis instead of a shiny red lightflyer, whatever.”

He swiped a hand through his tarnished gold hair, and laughed uncertainly. “I am beginning to think you are my midlife crisis, Cordelia.”

She shrugged, amused. “Shall I apologize?”

“Never.” The best smile tugged up his lips, despite his dismay.

No—they hadn’t seen enough of each other these past three years, had they. They’d merely swiped past each other often. She and Oliver had both been running like hell for their work and other duties frequently on different planets, or on opposite ends of a gravity well, and the last thing the widowed Vicereine, under intense scrutiny in her new solo position, possessed was any personal privacy. She envied Aral his cool former command of his privacy, in retrospect. And how his cloak of loyalties had stretched to cover them all.

She dug a card out of her pocket, scribbled a note on the back, and handed it across. “This is the doctor to see, if you decide to stop in at the rep center and leave a donation. My key Betan man, D. Tan. He’s been fully apprised. In your own time, Mister Jole.”

Jole took it gingerly, and read it closely. “I see.” His long fingers placed it in his shirt pocket with care, and touched it again as if to make sure. “This is an astounding gift. I would never have thought of it.”

“So I concluded.” She scrubbed her lips with her napkin. “Well, think about it now.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to think about anything else.” His smile tilted. “Thank you for not dropping the bomb on me in the middle of a working day, by the way.”

She cast him a ghost of a salute.

His eyes grew warmer, intent upon her. “Huh...This makes it the second time that my life has been turned upside-down and sent in directions I’d never even imagined by a Vorkosigan. I might have known.”

“The first being, ah, when Aral fell in love with you?”

“Say, fell in love on me. It was like being hit by a falling building. Not a building falling over—building falling from the sky.”

She grinned back. “I am familiar with the sensation.” She regarded him in reminded curiosity. “Aral talked to me about nearly everything—I was his only safe repository for that part of himself, till you came along—but he was always a bit cagey about how you two got started. The empire was at peace, Miles was safely locked up in the Academy, political tensions were at an all-time low—not that *that* lasted—I go off to visit my mother on Beta Colony leaving him in no worse straits than another of his unrequited silent crushes. I come back to find you two up and running and poor Illyan having a meltdown—it was like talking him in off a ledge.” Aral’s utterly loyal security chief had never come closer to, if not weeping with relief, at least cracking an expression, to find in her not an outraged spouse, but an unruffled ally. *I knew Aral was bisexual when I married him. And he knew I was Beta Melodrama was never an option, Illyan.* “The only surprise was how you two ever got past all your Barrayaran inhibitions in the first place.”

A flash of old amusement crossed Jole’s always-expressive face. “Well—I’m afraid you’d think I was all more Barrayaran than Betan. It doubtless involved a lot less *talking*, which I cannot regret. The standard for declassification is still fifty years, isn’t it? That sounds about right to me.”

Cordelia snickered. “Never mind, then.”

Jole cocked his head in turn. “Did he have that many, er, silent crushes? Before me?”

“I ought to make you trade”—Jole made his own *never mind, then*, gesture, and Cordelia smiled—“but I’ll have pity. No, for all that the capital was awash with handsome officers, he more appreciated them as a man would a good sunset or a fine horse, abstractly. Intelligent officers, I recruited whenever he could, and if they happened to intersect the first set, well and good. Officers of extraordinary character—were always thinner on the ground. All three in one package—”

Jole made another fending gesture, which Cordelia brushed aside. “Oh, behave. The first time I ever saw you it was to pin that medal on you, wasn’t it? He’d already studied the reports of the orbital accident, in detail—he always did, for those honors—and all your prior records. If nothing else, you just saved the Emperor the trouble of replacing about a hundred very expensively trained men.” No wonder that Aral had recruited Jole as nearly on the spot as the paperwork and his physician permitted. The *other* recruitment had come rather later.

Jole grimaced. “That always felt strange, to be cited for a set of actions I could barely remember. The hypoxia was cutting in badly by then. Not to mention the blood loss, I suppose. Or so my ImpM

physicians suggested, later. I could only think—but what if I had to do it again, and couldn't remember *how*?" His lips twisted up in belated amusement. "God, I was young, wasn't I?"

"You were as old as you'd ever been. As were we all, I suppose." After a moment, she added curiously, "Had you thought you were monosexual, before Aral?"

He shrugged. "If one doesn't count experiments at age fourteen. I'd dated women, as much as my career up till then permitted, which wasn't much. But things never quite clicked. After Aral, I thought I knew why." He glanced up through those lashes at her. "I was quite terrified of you, at first. Thought my head was going to end up in a sack."

"Yes, it took some time to talk you down, too."

"And I found out what the Countess's famous *Betan* conversations were all about. I'd never thought of myself as a naïve backcountry boy, till then."

Cordelia chuckled. "On Beta Colony, we'd have had *earrings* for it. We could have bought them in any jewelry shop."

"Ha. Remind me to tell you about the Betan herm merchanter I once met when I was out on my third escort tour. Without your tutoring, I'd have missed...well, an extraordinary week." He looked, for just a second, salaciously cheerful in his apparently fond memory. It wasn't a look she'd surprised on him for quite some time. It was no mystery why they'd both been getting through on zombie-pilot, the past three years; but she wondered when it had become a *habit*.

"I'm glad you were over your, er, shyness by the time you came to us again on Sergyar."

"The extra years and the captaincy under my belt probably helped."

"Something had, certainly." She bent her head, ambiguously but amiably. Silence fell between them, not unduly strained.

He twisted the stem of his wineglass; looked up at her directly. "This isn't going to be easy, is it. Or simple."

"It never has before; I have no idea why it should start now."

His laugh was low, but real.

They lingered only a little longer, reverting to talking shop—Chaos Colony made sure that the never ran out of shop—and then rose together. He did not offer his arm, although he might have done so here unexceptionably enough, and she did not walk too close. He helped her into her groundcar brought round to the front; as it pulled away she twisted and studied him through the canopy, striding off to his own vehicle. He did wheel and give her a bemused little wave as her car turned into the street. His hand, falling again, touched his breast pocket in passing.

Cordelia was conscious of a twinge of frustration on Oliver's behalf, mostly because he never seemed to muster it for himself. Dammit, if there was ever a man who *deserved* to be loved...But he'd made any connections since Aral's death, he hadn't confided them to her, not that he was under any obligation to do so. Her attempts at Barrayaran-style matchmaking had been extremely hit-or-miss over her lifetime, or she'd be tempted to try to help him somehow. But Oliver was so complicated. *Which was why I broached this to him in the first place*, she reminded herself.

His tall, solitary figure was lost to her sight as her car rounded the next corner.

Chapter Two

Jole arrived twenty minutes early for his appointment with Dr. Tan at the rep center, and then couldn't make himself step inside. He walked up and down the side street, instead.

Kareenburg actually *had* side streets now, some thirty-five or forty years, depending on how one counted it, after its founding. Barrayar's first imprint on its new colony world had been a military base and shuttleport half-sheltered by a volcanic mountain that had blown out its side in some ancient cataclysm, standing sentinel with a string of sisters upon a wide plain. The pictures Jole had seen of the earliest Kareenburg depicted a mud street lined with repurposed, and in some cases doubtless stolen, old military field shelters, as the base slowly upgraded from its first primitive incarnation. Like an up-sprung village serving a fortress on Old Earth or on Barrayar going back to the Time of Isolation, it had run heavily to such services as bars and brothels, but with the arrival of the first legitimate civilian colonists and a string of Imperial viceroys, government functions had slowly taken over the space, and the livelier aspects of the settlement had relocated. Historical redaction had cut in with amazing speed, and those grubby early days were well on their way to being rewritten mainly as a setting for romantic adventure stories.

The hottest local political argument at the moment, and for the last ten years, was the transfer of the capital to some more selectively chosen region of the continent or one of the five others, resisted fiercely by those with major speculative investments in the present site. The Vicereine had dozens of scientific surveys on her side in favor of relocation, but Jole suspected she might be fighting one of her few losing battles with inertia and human nature. In the meanwhile, the racket of new construction extended and entrenched the proto-city in all directions.

These ruminations brought Jole around again to the doors of what the sign proclaimed *Kareenburg Reproductive and Obstetrical Services*. *Kayross* for short, the intimidating polysyllable tamed and made friendly by the nickname. The building was not one of the old field shelters, but instead purpose-built, in a utilitarian mode that spoke of constrained budgets, as a clinic—if not *the* clinic, which had taken over the premises more recently.

I can do this. I can do anything. Hadn't Aral Vorkosigan taught him that? Jole took a breath and pushed inside.

...But, as he stepped into the queue at the reception counter, he was nonetheless glad he was wearing his anonymous casual civvies, and not his rank-heavy undress greens. Not that Imperial uniforms were an unusual sight on Kareenburg's streets. There were several people in line ahead of him—another man, a woman, and a couple, whose heads all swung around to observe him in turn—and he wasn't sure whether to be glad he had company, or to wish them all to oblivion. They were assigned to wait on uncomfortable-looking seats lining the side of the room, but when Jole stated his name to the receptionist, she jumped up, saying in a far-too-carrying voice, "Oh, yes, Admiral Jole! The Vicereine told us to expect you. Dr. Tan is right this way," and ushered him through a door into a short corridor which had the faint chemical-and-disinfectant smell of every med clinic he'd ever unhappily encountered. So maybe it was some visceral memory of old pain and injury that was making him edgy? No, probably not.

She led him first into a room containing several comconsole desks, half of them manned by intel staffers and displaying dauntingly dense data readouts, or gaudy tangles that he guessed were

molecular maps. The various colors and cuts of lab coats might proclaim different functions, rank and responsibilities, just as Imperial uniforms and insignia did, but this wasn't a code to which he had the key. And there were a lot more personal touches—plants, toys, holocubes, souvenirs. The clothing under the coats was anything but uniform, including a couple of young people wearing what were clearly Betan sarongs and sandals, though it was less clear if they were actually Betans. The coffee mugs, at least, were familiar.

The receptionist delivered him to the desk of a slight, dark-haired young man in a light blue coat that went to his knees, though he was wearing Sergyaran-style trousers and a shirt underneath.

“Dr. Tan, Admiral Jole is here.”

“Ah, excellent! Just a sec...” He flung up a finger and finished whatever he had been about at his comconsole, shut down the baffling display of vibrant light lines, then stood up to offer Jole a firm handshake and a smile. The receptionist flitted away.

Dr. Tan *was* tan, and very healthy-looking, though his features were hard to map to any particular Earth ancestry—unlike Barrayar's population, lost and isolated for six hundred years and only rediscovered a century ago, the Betans had been using gene cleaning and rearranging for generations, which meant anyone's ancestors could be anything. “How do you do, Admiral? Welcome to Kayros. I'm so glad you came in. Any friend of the Vicereine's is a friend of ours, I assure you!”

Jole was a bit disoriented by that familiar Betan accent coming out of such an unfamiliar mouth, but he managed the handshake and suitable greetings. He tried not to let the accent sway him—he was here to make his own judgments...Or had he already decided, and all this going-through-the-motion was for what audience, exactly?

“Vicereine Vorkosigan said you would have questions, and that I was to answer them all. Would you care to start with a short tour?”

“Uh...yes, actually. Please. The only rep center I've ever been in wasn't up and running yet.” They had been at a dedication ceremony in the Vorkosigan's District capital of Hassadar, back on Barrayar, which then-Prime Minister Vorkosigan, and therefore his aide, had attended in public support of his wife's manifold medical projects there.

Tan led him off to get suited up in some disposable paper garments, and then ushered him through the double doors at the end of the corridor. There, Jole found himself in a brightly lit clinic laboratory—busy lab benches cluttered with equipment under filtering vent hoods, a dozen absorbent techs bent over scanner stations. It reminded him a little of his tactics room, except that no one here seemed in the least bored. All the meticulously moving hands were smooth and gloved and steady.

The work stations on the first bench, featuring some especially rapt techs, were devoted to what Jole thought was the heart of the matter, fertilization. A couple of tightly temperature-controlled storage chambers held the culture dishes with early cell divisions. The lab stations on next bench over were devoted to what Dr. Tan dubbed *quality control*, gene scanning and repair. A second bank of warming cupboards continued the next stage of closely observed development, and then a last bench was devoted to implanting the ratified embryos and their placentas in the uterine replicators that would house them for the next nine months.

Through the next door, Tan relieved his guest of his crinkly paper overalls and hat, and guided him through a series of chambers devoted to the banks of replicators themselves, stacked five high. Panels of readouts monitored their progress. Pleasant music alternated with assorted natural sounds over speakers hidden somewhere. Individual jacks allowed soft, piped-in recordings of parental voices speaking or reading. Jole found it creepily cheerful. Or cheerfully creepy, he wasn't sure which. He reminded himself that all those arrayed containers held individual people's—or couples'—mo-

ardent hopes for the future. The next generation of Sergyarans. In fifteen years, all those disturbing biological blobs would be out on Kareenburg's streets, wearing strange fashions, listening to annoying music, and disagreeing politically with their beleaguered parents. In twenty-five years, they'd be taking on tasks that he couldn't presently imagine, though he guessed a few would be right back here working in this rep center, or its successor. Or offering up their own gametes for what the Vicereine dubbed *the genetic lottery*.

Could his own children be among them?

Why, yes, they could.

"Can conceptions—babies—ever get mixed up?" There were *stories* about such mishaps... Many of them passed along, Cordelia had pointed out, by people with irrational objections to the rep centers.

Dr. Tan smiled at him in a pained fashion. "Our techs are extremely conscientious, but to soothe the doubts of the, shall we say, biologically less educated, the genetics of any infant can be checked against that of its parents with a few cheek swabs and three minutes on the scanner at the time they take delivery. Or at any prior time, actually, amniocentesis being a trivial procedure with a replicator. The service is offered for free—or rather, included at no extra charge." He added after a moment, "We get that question a lot, from you Barrayarans. The Vicereine once told me to point out that our error rate is provably statistically lower than that of the natural method, but the late Viceroy advised me that it might not be taken in good part."

"I see," said Jole. He tried to come up with a few more suitably technical questions that would redeem his Barrayan IQ in this man's eyes. Jole enjoyed Sergyar's sprinkling of galactic immigrants, on the whole, but he had to admit that they could sometimes also be remarkably annoying. He managed not to blurt out his own history as a natural, un-gene-cleaned body birth, an attempted proof of what, he could not say.

The fact came up shortly, however, when Dr. Tan took him back out to another room off the reception area, and left him to get on with an unmanned station that took his medical history in exhaustive detail. Jole was able to speed up this tedious process by plugging in his military medical records, which, after checking over to remove anything still classified, he'd stored on his wristcom for the purpose last night. This program was used to dealing with the arcana of Barrayan military records, fortunately—quite a few veterans from the base chose to muster out here, or to come back later. Had Cordelia supplied Aral's? Yes, she must have, when she'd done her own. No one asked Jole for it, anyway, when Tan came back to rescue him.

"Any more questions? Are you ready for the next step?" Tan inquired jovially.

Jole searched his mouth with his tongue for an answer without finding one; in any case, Tan didn't wait, but motioned his VIP visitor along after him. He dodged aside to pick up some objects Jole could not quite make out, then brought him to another closed, blank door, labeled *Paternity Room*, with a sliding slot bearing the words *un/occupied*. A magnetized flip label read *Clean* on one side and *Do Not Disturb* on the other, to which Tan flipped it.

"Here is your sample jar," Tan announced, handing it across, "properly labeled as you see. The fluid inside will keep your semen alive and healthy until it can be processed. Check the label for accuracy, please."

Jole squinted and found his name and numbers duly recorded on the side. "Right...correct, that is."

"In the event of, so to speak, shyness, you will find a number of aids inside. I can also issue you a single-dose aphrodisiac nasal spray. We used to put them out in a basket, but they kept disappearing, so we had to go to rationing—my apologies." Tan held out a small ampoule.

Somewhat hypnotized by now, Jole warily accepted it. Tan opened the door and ushered him inside.

“Take all the time you need. Come find me personally when you’re done,” Tan told him, his tone brightly encouraging. The door shut, leaving Jole alone in the quiet, dimly lit little room. He heard the slight scrape of the slot-label sliding to *occupied*.

The chamber contained a comfortable-looking armchair, a straight chair, and a narrow cot with a fitted sheet. A shelf offered a line-up of sex toys, most of which Jole had encountered less depressingly in other contexts, all with little paper ribbons around them proclaiming their sterilized state. The room also contained a holo-vid player—a quick check of the contents found a number of titles Jole recognized from barracks and shipboard life, plus a few that seemed highly unlikely to ever have played to that audience. Which made him wonder, just for a moment, what equivalents were passed around in the ISWA barracks, and if there were any of the women he dared to ask. Not Vorinnis, anyway. Maybe the colonel, if they ever got drunk enough together. The vid also offered an array of slide shows of beautiful young women, a few of beautiful young men, one of beautiful young herms, one of rather eye-grabbing beautiful young obese ladies, and others that became increasingly more otherly—this *had* been programmed by the galactic crew. A few more collections of images were downright repulsive, and a couple were simply incomprehensible, though Jole considered himself a traveled man. What none of them seemed, just at the moment, was arousing in any way. He shut the machine off.

I’ve been doing this since I was thirteen. It shouldn’t be hard. Which, in fact, it wasn’t—he’d never been more limp in his life.

He sat down on the edge of the cot, examined the instructions on the collection jar, and considered the nasal spray. It seemed like cheating, letting down the side, unbecoming to a manly, virile Imperial officer. Did he get any slack for being almost fifty?

This had to be the most un-erotic, not to mention unromantic, place he’d ever been in. What kind of bizarre irony was it, that it should also be the one to fulfill the main biological purpose of his ever having had a sexuality in the first place?

I could have done this when I was twenty... But he’d added thirty years of exposure to hard radiation, biological hazards, and chemical toxins atop them, here and there in his varied military career. God knew what insults his gonads had accumulated, starting with the space accident that had put him in hospital at ImpMil in his twenties. Jole also recalled, in an ancient untethered scrap of memory from his training days, some fellows who’d been working with experimental microwave weaponry making jokes about fathering only girls... Even if he were in the most traditional relationship imaginable, he still wanted to be doing it this way. Surely *no preventable defects or diseases* was the foremost birthright gift any father could give to his firstborn son...er, hypothetical child.

Hell with this. His own brain, his mind and memories, were surely stocked with all the images he could ever need.

He considered Aral. Surely there was a treasure-house of the most erotic memory imaginable. The range of things the man had been willing to try... And it would be weirdly appropriate, somehow. The beloved face laughed at him from the past, hugely amused at his present contretemps, but was too quickly overlain with the cold, clay, empty version last viewed under glass in a chilled coffin, so wrong... and if he followed those worn thoughts down the spiral any farther, he’d end up weeping, not wanking. No.

Giving up, he broke the seal on the nasal spray and thrust it up each nostril in turn. The mist was cold and odorless, and appeared to do nothing. Now what?

Unbidden, a memory popped into his head of Cordelia, striding down an upstairs hallway of Vorkosigan House wearing only a towel, slung around her hips like a Betan sarong. Himself, tumbling

out of a doorway in a panic. What emergency had it been, a fire alarm? Bomb threat...? He couldn't recall. ~~He did remember the towel, oh yes. She'd worn her bare skin like space armor. Some armsman or servant had, sadly, soon handed her another towel. Suppose, instead of adding a towel, one were taken away...? That...was suddenly more interesting.~~

It seemed wrong to star her so in his mind-theater, but dammit, it was her fault that he was in that position in the first place. She could just put up with it.

She wore the long, swinging red hair of Aral's wife in the memory-scrap, though. Perhaps...he could picture her with it cut short. Short and curling. Yes, that felt better. And he could do without the Vorkosigan House fire drill of excited servants and armsmen, and, for that matter, without Vorkosigan House. This left his composite Cordelia standing in a blank whiteness. She raised her eyebrows at him. *Surely you can do better than this, kiddo...*

Yes, he could. He imagined his little sailboat, the first one he had owned on Sergyar, out on the local lake where he'd used to launch it. Out in the middle, far from any shore. Angled sunlight. Wind dead calm, because he had better things to wrestle with than the sails and tiller, just now. Cordelia sat on the forward bench and grinned at him, and unfolded the towel to sit upon. Oh, and no wristcoms on either of them. They'd left those ashore. Neither his office nor hers could reach them.

What else? She might like some chilled white wine; he handed her a glass, and she tilted it up. "Excellent," she pronounced, and she was certainly a shrewd judge. She looked up at him, intense and amused. She tossed her towel, and a few others, down in the center of the boat, neatly lined up along the keel, because she had a keen appreciation of the rules of physics as applied to small boats, and most everything else. She plunked herself atop them in that downright way she had of moving, the despair of her Barrayaran social arbiter friend, Lady Alys. Cordelia stretched herself to the light like a cat, and her face was free of strain or grief. "Oliver," she breathed, and the syllables of his name were warm in her mouth. She extended a sturdy arm above her bare torso, and her hand turned imperious over. "Come here," she commanded throatily...

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Jole emerged from the little room with his jar in his hand, lid screwed down tight. He blinked in the bright light, checked his fly, and trod off to find Dr. Tan. He didn't *feel* drunk. His walk—he tested it against the lines of the cheap floor tiles—was perfectly straight. But he felt simultaneously disembodied, and wholly in his body, a walking contradiction. *No wonder they have ration that stuff.*

Tan greeted him with a pleased "Ah!" when Jole located him again at his desk. He took the jar and set it down without ceremony.

"When, ah...can I find out if I made the grade?" Jole asked.

"I'll put it in right away, and call you personally with the report...perhaps not today, but no later than tomorrow morning?"

Jole made sure the physician had his personal comcode.

"I expect it will be fine," Tan assured whatever look was on his face—Jole tried for blander. "Three hundred million to four are pretty good odds, after all." Tan hesitated. "About the leftovers—the clinic has a small but steady demand for high-grade high-achieving male gametes. You certainly meet all the criteria for physical health and intelligence and so on, despite your age. Would you care to donate the excess to our catalog? Anonymously, of course." Tan blinked amiably. "I rather think your face would sell."

Jole flinched. Well, Cordelia had warned him about this part of the conversation, in a way, hadn't she? "My face is not that anonymous, on Sergyar. I...let's get through the evaluation first, eh?"

“Very well. But do think about it, Admiral.” Tan abandoned his office to walk Jole all the way to the front door, a sign of something.

Jole stood once more in the sunlit side street, feeling as though he’d just been put through a wormhole jump. Backwards. He contemplated the prospect of his lightflyer uneasily. He should have asked Tan how long it took that mist-drug to clear the system, but he wasn’t going back inside now. He felt clearheaded, but that could be an illusion. Perhaps a walk around would help metabolize it, like other inebriants. He turned and made for the main street, a block off.

It occurred to him, belatedly, that Cordelia had several times mentioned that she was a replicant at birth herself, back on high-tech Beta Colony. That meant that her father, then-Lieutenant Miles Mar Naismith of the Betan Astronomical Survey, had once been through an experience very like the one Jole had just endured. And her mother the female equivalent, Jole supposed, though the women’s version seemed more simply medical. More invasive, as he dimly understood it, but at least they didn’t have to dragoon their libidos into cooperation. Did that make it better, or worse? On the other hand, they’d got Cordelia out of the deal, in the end. That...had worked out well.

Anyway, Jole himself was still at the gathering-data stage, really. The final decision would not be made till tomorrow, or much farther in the future if he chose to have his sample frozen. He had not hit any point of no return yet.

He passed a young colonial family on the sidewalk; she pushed a stroller with a cranky toddler, he bore a chest pack holding a sleeping infant, its slack little hands limp on his shirt. Jole wondered briefly what was the point of avoiding carrying children around during the nine months of gestation and then turning around and lugging them like this when they’d escaped into the wild and were even *heavier*, but it seemed something that humans liked to do, because they kept doing it. He tried to imagine himself in the young father’s place. Could that be his child? *Grandchild*, a dry part of his brain noted. *Shut up.*

He stepped aside around an elderly gentleman idly waiting for his dog to finish what dogs did at lamppost. A dog. Maybe a dog would be simpler, saner...easier to explain. Many famous senior officers in history had sported famous pets/mounts/mistresses/plants...well, perhaps not plants. Although there was a certain cadre of fellows, after their twenty or twice-twenty years of service were up, who threw themselves into gardening. The more flamboyant live accessories seemed to be part of the mystique or public relations of command. Jole had always traveled lighter.

A few blocks of walking brought him out of Kareenburg’s central business area, and he found himself staring across the street to the so-called Viceroy’s Palace. The name was misleading—it was actually a low, rambling house. Surrounded, true, by a remarkable garden, gift of the Vicereine’s even more remarkable daughter-in-law, which was growing up lushly these days to lend color and privacy or the illusion of it. The old, hand-painted sign still hung by the gate.

The original Viceroy’s Palace had been a relocated field shelter, much to the dismay of the first Viceroy. His unhappy successors had made do with several field shelters, stuck together in assorted arrays. These had at length been followed by a semi-fortified prefabricated dwelling of remarkable ugliness. The present Vicereine, in the first year of her and her husband’s reign, had ordered the place knocked flat and the site cleared, and started over with a saner and far more elegant design. The barracks at the back of the premises, which had housed Count Vorkosigan’s personal armsmen during his tenure, were now converted to various Viceregal offices; the sole remaining armsman lived in the main house with a few other principal servants.

On impulse, Jole crossed the street and presented himself to the lone gate guard—another reduction from Aral’s day. The premises’ current security was thinner and much more discreet. Jole didn’t mind

the second, but wasn't so sure he approved of the first.

The gate guard, who knew him well, saluted. "Admiral Jole, sir."

"Afternoon, Fox. Is Her Excellency home to visitors?"

"I'm sure she's at home to you, sir. Go on in."

Jole strolled on up the curving drive. He almost turned around again when he spotted the array of parked vehicles, many of them with diplomatic stickers from the assorted planetary consulates based in Kareenburg, that marked some kind of diplomatic meeting—ah, yes, the welcoming reception for the new Escobaran consul was this afternoon, wasn't it. Jole had dumped the task of representing the Sergyaran military forces upon his downside base commander, to give the two men a chance to get acquainted in a less fraught setting before they had to sort out some inevitable contretemps involving to choose an unfortunately unhypothetical example, off-duty soldiers with too much to drink and galactic tourists insufficiently briefed on the fine points of Barrayaran culture. Far better that they should first meet in the Vicereine's garden than in a hospital or, worse, the Kareenburg municipal guard's morgue. These elegant soirees had more than one practical function.

Perversely, being blocked from a chance to talk with Cordelia heightened his anxiety to do so. He continued on the walkway around the house, noting one security man in uniform and another pretending to weed, who made note of him with nods of greeting in turn, till the familiar murmur of voices and clink of glassware guided him to the patio and terrace that flowed out into the garden. Perhaps a hundred well-dressed people were scattered about, clutching little plates and talking. He hesitated on the fringe. Happily, Cordelia was in sight, wearing something light and flowing for the balmy afternoon, and her glance found him after only a moment. She immediately detached herself from the half-dozen people clustered around her and made her way to his side.

"Oliver," she said warmly. "How did your visit to the rep center go?"

"Mission accomplished, ma'am," he told her with a mock, but not mocking, salute. Her brows flicked up in pleased surprise. "I...we need to talk, but obviously not now."

"This thing is winding down, actually. If you can hang on for about half an hour, I should be able to start getting rid of them. Or you could come back later."

He had work on his schedule for this evening, unfortunately. "I'm not in uniform," he said in doubt.

"Oh, let these paranoid galactics experience a nonthreatening Barrayaran officer for a change. It will widen their world-views."

"That seems counterproductive, somehow. The whole *point* of having us all Imperially out here is to make our wormhole jump-points uninviting to the uninvited."

She grinned. "You look fine. Go do the pretty. I know you know how." She strolled away, and several persons with agendas hidden or otherwise bee-lined for her.

Jole felt himself falling with the ease of long practice back into diplomatic-aide mode. He did check in first with his base commander, General Haines, who was properly attired in full dress green and looking suitably broad and wall-like. The tall boots would be hot and sweaty, Jole was sure.

"Ah, Oliver, you're here!" said the general. "Didn't think you could make it. Is there anything afoot?" And, hopefully, "Can I leave now?"

"No and no. I'm just dropping by." He glanced around the party, which had reached a relaxed and tipsy stage. "What did you think of the new Escobaran consul?"

"Seems sensible enough, if young. At least he only has one sex, thank God."

Jole followed Haines's eye to the familiar, androgynous figure of Betan consul, now chatting with the Vicereine. Consul Vermillion was a Betan hermaphrodite, one of that planet's bioengineered double-sexed...you couldn't call them a species, nor a race...Jole settled on *minority*. If the hermaphrodite

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