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Father of AI

Articles

In the Betan Embassy on Barrayar

A short story.

This has some spoilers for Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor* and *Barrayar*, subsequently combined in *Cordelia's Honor*. However, I hope that anyone reading this squib who is not familiar with Bujold's work will be motivated to read Bujold's far-better-written stories.

To Barrayar, a planet beginning to recover from a series of bloody feudal wars and a foreign invasion and still backward in technology, society and prosperity, fled the recent military heroine of Beta, a planet far more far more advanced in technology and society. As recounted by Lois McMaster Bujold in her book "*Cordelia's Honor*", Captain Cordelia Naismith's flight to avoid revealing a secret that would cost hundreds of thousand lives, was motivated by both love and honor.

Concurrently with some events of Bujold's story, certain events took place at the Betan Embassy on Barrayar.

Richard Mabeth, the Chief Political Officer of the Betan Embassy on Barrayar, also the Chief of Betan Intelligence on Barrayar was briefing his successor Portia Nelson before returning to Beta.

"I think our missing Captain Naismith has turned up here. One of our informants reports seeing her arrive from Escobar. She's being followed by the imperial security organization Impsec."

"There are the two theories. One is that she fell in love with Captain Vorkosigan; that's what she told her mother that when she said, 'When he's cut, I bleed'. The other is the psychiatrists' theory that she was subjected to drug assisted manipulation that put her under Barrayaran control."

"If she's not under control, it was sure dumb of her to come to Barrayar. What our guys might have done to question her is nothing to what Negri's Impsec will do. I fear there will be nothing left.

She rented a light flyer and seems to have headed for Vorkosigan's country place, Vorkosigan Surleau. Rumor has it he's lying around drunk most of the time after he resigned his commission. Do you know much about her? Do you think we might persuade her to come into the Embassy if Negri doesn't grab her first.

"A lot. We were close friends in high school and at the university, where she majored in astrography and I in political science. We had our sex initiations together. She was shy but pretty stubborn, especially in matters of ethics. After we graduated, she went into the astrographic survey and I went into intelligence. She was much taken by the concept of honor and read a lot about it. Unless something bad happens to her, she won't come in. She'd have to see the situation as very dire to change her mind. [I sure hope she survives here. I wonder how I could meet her.] What are the odds she's under Barrayaran psychological control?"

Mabeth asked, "Do we know how to do that to a person not inclined that way, or do we have any evidence that the Barrayarans know how, or even that someone knows on Jackson's Whole, the home of every kind of cruel, murderous, and just plain nasty technology.?"

"Mot that anyone has told me. I regard it as of low probability, but the war had gotten everyone very excited. Maybe we'll know fairly soon.

"No. If they didn't grab her right away, I suppose they want to see what she'll do. Maybe it's a question of how well the conditioning worked. Going to Vorkosigan Surleau is compatible both with the theory she's under control and with her essentially telling her mother that she's in love with Vorkosigan. 'When he's cut, I bleed.' is a pretty strong statement, as well as being elegantly expressed.

Two hours later, Mabeth said, "The flyer she rented, presumably to visit Captain Vorkosigan is on its way back to Vorbarr Sultana. That's what the magic ear tells us."

"How do you know?"

"About seven years ago, a Cetagandan agent made it into the Embassy through a window trying to steal our database computer. We had to shoot him, and one of our people was wounded. Captain Negri of Impsec was very apologetic. We installed microphones in all the windows and fiber optic cables to our security computer. If anyone gets too close to a window from the outside our computer tells us."

"That seems like overkill. Have there been more recent intrusion attempts?"

"No. What we hope the Barrayarans don't know is that about five years ago we upgraded the security computer and installed a new program. It takes the analog signals from all the window microphones for half a second and a few more and combines them as a giant acoustic phased array receiver. It can listen very sensitively in several directions at once and can even listen around corners to some extent. Just for

practice we have it listen to all the traffic. Each vehicle, ground or air, produces sound, and the program can identify particular vehicles by slight peculiarities in their individual patterns of sound. We made a special effort to identify the rental vehicles, because that's what spies are likely to use. We also have most of the other embassies tagged, many Impsec cars and those from the Imperial Residence."

"Has this been of any use?"

"Oh yes. It kept us up-to-date on some things when the Barrayarans were getting ready to attack Escobar. That provided evidence enough to stir our politicians into preparing to give Escobar the laser mirror defense. It was almost too late, and Captain Naismith's expedition to deliver the LMD was a last ditch affair. Democracies have always been slow to respond to threats. At least we didn't have to wait till the Barrayaran militarists attacked us. The Escobar disaster has crippled the militarist party on Barrayar for at least a while."

"If she's back from Vorkosigan Surleau, if that's where she went, it looks like she and Vorkosigan didn't hit it off. Now she's really in hot water, poor girl.

20 minutes later.

"What's this beep from the ear?"

"Interesting. Her light flyer was headed toward the Shuttle Port where it was rented, presumably to return it. It suddenly changed course and headed this way. Do you think Naismith woke up and will soon be on our doorstep? Tom, get a car out in front prepared to cause an accident and draw off the Impsec people.

"Hmm. It didn't come here but stopped down the block. Is she coming on foot?

"That's the Registry Office where it stopped. It's where foreigners must register and anyone must apply to live in Vorbarr Sultana.

A half hour later Mabeth said, "Two people came out again, and it sounds like a man and a woman. Oops, there's Impsec. Listen."

"Sorry, Lord Vorkosigan, but we have an order to take this Betan lady for questioning."

"Is the order signed by the Emperor? Without that you can't touch Lady Vorkosigan. She's a count's heir's spouse."

"Oho. No. So that's what you were doing in the registry office. She wasn't just registering for residence."

Cordelia: "Well, on this planet I see that at least some people have some civil rights."

Portia: "Touche. Well, that was fast. It pretty well collapses the theory that she's controlled by Impsec with Vorkosigan as controller. I wouldn't suppose it's customary for a psychological controller to marry his victim. Conceivably the marriage is fake to fool her, but it would take a very complicated theory to support that. I wonder what her mother will think of her being Lady Vorkosigan."

Impsec officer: We'll have to see what Captain Negri wants to do."

Vorkosigan: "Have him call me.

"That was close. You're not absolutely out of danger; it depends on what Emperor Ezar decides, but I think you are quite safe. Ezar won't want random security people knowing what you might say.

"Now we can take the light flyer back, and Sergeant Bothari will pick us up and take us home to Vorkosigan Surleau."

Next day.

"The Morning Eagle vital statistics column announced the marriage of Captain Lord Aral Vorkosigan (retired) and Captain Cordelia Naismith (retired) of the Betan Space force. Do you suppose she's pregnant?"

"You men!"

"If the marriage were fake, a lot more people than Naismith would be faked. The marriage of a Count's heir is a big deal here. Vorkosigan is 44, and if he died without issue, the line might die out. Almost all of his collateral relatives were killed by the demented Emperor Yuri about 30 years ago. In fact his mother and brother were killed at the same time. Yuri considered all relatives as dangers."

Mabeth continued,

"I don't understand either Vorkosigan or Naismith. They both behaved much more desperately than I would have expected from the little we know about them. Why would a Space Force Captain resign into drunkenness just because of a defeat for which he was not responsible? He suffered defeats before."

Partia wondered, "Why was she so desperate about being questioned by our intelligence? Surely she knew we don't do much or take long. Perhaps there was something that she very much didn't want us to know?"

"Surely, she didn't know about the laser mirror defense."

"In fact, apparently she did know what she was convoying to Escobar. That was really stupid - sending someone with that information into a situation where she might be captured and interrogated."

"It was a slip. Apparently the mirror defense was so secret that the people who developed it didn't let the fact that she worked on testing it get into her service record."

"Surely they could have put a hold on her getting any assignment putting her in danger of capture. They wouldn't have had to give a reason."

"That was the slip. Did she have protection against fast-penta questioning?"

"Apparently not. That's what our intelligence wanted to use and what she fled from."

"So they could have found out about the mirror defense from her by fast-penta, but evidently they did not. The Barrayaran ships led by their nasty Prince Serg behaved quite ignorantly of it and were slaughtered."

"Maybe Vorkosigan learned about the mirror defense from her and intentionally kept it from Prince Serg."

"He'd have had to have decided on the spur of the moment. Our profile of him doesn't have him reacting that fast. Anyway he wouldn't have had personal access to fast-penta."

"What about her killing Admiral Vorrutyer while a prisoner? She kept herself in great shape, but she never trained for unarmed combat."

"I'll bet Vorkosigan did that.

"Given what Vorrutyer was, and how he treated captive women, killing him was surely something to make a damsel's heart grow fonder."

"You know", said Portia, "Negri might have found out about the mirror defense some other way and set up Serg. An awful lot of people on Beta and on Escobar had to know about it. In that case, the whole thing could have been a set-up by Negri and Vorkosigan. Barrayaran politics is very complicated and rife with plots."

"Not without the Emperor. Both are the Emperor's men."

"Would the Emperor kill his own son?"

"Maybe. According to what we hear, his own son tried twice to kill him."

"How could she have learned about that?"

"I have no idea. If he fast-pentaed her, he might have had to prevent her from talking to any other Barrayaran."

Mabeth added, "If this gets out, there will be a civil war on Barrayar. Barrayar will be weakened too much to be a threat for a long time. What can we do to make it happen?"

"I don't think that's a good idea at all. In the first place, an awful lot of people will be killed, even if they are Barrayarans. I don't think we want it on our consciences. [I sure don't want any part of it on my conscience.] In the second place, a Barrayaran civil war is not in Beta's interests if there's any chance that a warlike party will win it. Anyway it's just a speculation.

Let's see if a23 can find anything about in the Impsec or military files he can access. This program we gave him is supposed to be very good at that."

"Mr. Ambassador, we need to tell the new Lady Vorkosigan that Beta isn't mad at her any more."

"I already thought of that, and I sent a message asking for approval as soon as I read of her marriage in the Morning Eagle. Steady Freddy is quite steady enough for that, even if she did happen to kick him in the balls."

"Steady Freddy" was the President of Beta, and the surprise welcome-the-heroine-home ceremony when Cordelia returned from Barrayaran captivity went very badly indeed.

"We can at least send any of her personal possessions she left behind. She skipped with only a bag. I don't entirely blame her given the provocation. Perhaps Captain Mehta has been told not to use drugs to make people "recall" being mistreated.

"Briefly she was Major Mehta, because of her vigor. However, Freddy had second thoughts, and she's lieutenant Mehta now. I doubt Cordelia will be sorry."

Some weeks later.

"The other shoe dropped. Emperor Ezar died and seems to have chosen Vorkosigan to be the Regent for his four year old grandson and pushed it through the Council of Counts just in time. It suggests that the Emperor wasn't too unhappy with Vorkosigan's role in the losing invasion of Escobar, not even with the death of his son Prince Serg."

"That brings our awol captain to the very top of Barrayaran society, and for the next 16 years, until the boy Emperor is 20 she's acting Empress. I can't imagine she anticipated that, coming here to marry a retired captain."

"No. And I don't think Vorkosigan anticipated it either. Lying around drunk is not behavior calculated to win high office."

"I'm afraid I'll be able to see her only on official occasions or by vid. Moreover, her position won't permit any but official trips to Beta."

A week later.

"a23 hit the jackpot. One General Vormoncrief apparently had a bug in the Vorhartung Imperial Residence, and it caught Emperor Ezar telling Negri and Vorkosigan to keep the knowledge of the laser mirror defense secret.

"There's a complication. a23 wants ten million Betan dollars. Otherwise, he'll sell the information elsewhere."

"Who is this a23 anyway?"

"He's Lieutenant Vorsonto of Impsec. He's a spy for money to support an expensive habit. Of all things, it's an addiction to fast-penta. The stuff is expensive, and he takes it every day with his friends."

"Isn't our connection with him then babbled away?"

"Not necessarily. If you take fast-penta often enough you can be selective in your babbling.

If we do nothing, the civil war will happen. On the other hand, it's not clear what we could do to stop a23. Once he's threatened us, he must be taking precautions to prevent our just grabbing him.

"I think we should stop him. The more I think of it, the worse I think it would be. This Count Vordarian may start a civil war anyway."

"I think we can live with the Barrayarans chewing each other up. But anyway we need to tell Ambassador Capulet."

Ambassador Prospero Capulet brought in the first and second secretaries and a specialist on Barrayaran history and sociology, Professor Falstaff Schmidt from earth who was spending a year as a visiting professor at the Barrayaran Imperial University - the first foreign visiting professor they'd had at their 20 year old university. Schmidt also acted for Earth Intelligence from time to time.

Portia and Schmidt took a strong line.

"If we can prevent it, we can't let several hundred thousand people killed because of a hypothetical threat. Vorkosigan opposed the invasion of Escobabar and told the Counts that he hoped to turn Barrayar over to Emperor Gregor in a more prosperous state but with no fundamental political changes. He said that when the regency ends, Emperor Gregor can make and propose new goals for Barrayar."

"In Earth history teenage rulers have been dangerous to their neighbors. Think Alexander the Great."

"Often but not always. Gregor will probably give signs of his intentions well before he takes power. It's just wrong to cause a civil war based on such distant possibilities.

"Besides 16 years of probable peace is about as much as Barrayar's neighbors can reasonably hope for. It makes Barrayar far less of a threat to galactic peace than Cetaganda and much less of a nuisance than Jackson's Whole."

The Ambassador said, "What's the chance of capturing Vorsonto, although I don't know what we'll do with him if we succeed."

Richard said, "Yes, let's have a shot at it. Portia will have to do it, because she's the only one of us we can be pretty sure Vorsonto doesn't know about."

Portia's briefing was immediate after the Ambassador left.

"Here's what you have to do. This dart gun has our new Come-Along compound, a derivative of fast-penta. To use it you must squirt it at your target person, and let it play a recorded phrase the person has said. The effect is not to knock out the target but to make him docile. He'll then obey you, and you take him back to our ground car. Once you arm it to go after Vorsonto, you must hold it in your hand until you have him under control. It has a dead-man switch so that if you ever let go of it, it will self-destruct. It's our latest gadget, and we can't let the Barrayarans know about it. You'll have to do it, because you are the only person here, we're sure Vorsonto hasn't seen."

After hours of tramping the streets Portia saw Vorsonto. He was coming in the opposite direction. He suddenly pulled a nerve disruptor, but Portia ducked into a doorway. The nerve disrupter went splat. The door was locked, and Vorsonto approached. Portia chimneyed up the doorway in the desperate hope of dropping down on him, but she couldn't get far. He saw her and pointed the nerve disrupter. Desperately, she dropped down and fell flat on her face.

He pointed the weapon again, and Portia was sure it was the end.

Portia heard, "Daddy that man is pointing a nerve disrupter at that lady."

Suddenly a stunner went off and Vorsonto dropped.

"Let's get the hell out of here kid"

"Shouldn't we call the police."

"I'll get arrested. A non-Vor is not allowed to own a weapon, not even a stunner. Damn those Vors. I'll take the nerve disrupter. May as well be hanged for a goat as a sheep."

Vorsonto seemed to be recovering from the stun, the Come-Along had dropped and presumably self-destructed, and Portia didn't think she had a chance to take him by herself. She made her way back to the Embassy, considerably banged up from her drop, as well as mentally shaken. She never knew who her savior was.

"I wasn't close enough to speak or use the dart gun.", she apologized to Mabeth.

"Fortunately, the dead-man switch on the dart gun worked as designed. I have to say that while our Chief of Intelligence likes you very much, he'd have been far more unhappy to lose the secret of the

Come-Along than to lose you."

At first they thought the clothes weren't right, but they couldn't find anything so sharply different from what commoner Barrayaran women wore.

Schmidt took one look at the vid of Portia starting out.

"You looked like a Vor, actually even more so, like a Betan.

A Barrayaran commoner walks with his or her head tilted slightly forward. A Vor walks with his head straight up, and a Betan is likely to have his or her head tilted ever so slightly back.

When the Vors were tougher about their privileges than they are today a commoner had to keep his head down on the street. Somehow the habit persists after more than a generation. I don't know why you Betans tilt your heads back."

Portia remembered that Cordelia had told her mother that Sergeant Bothari had said, "You're like a Vor, ma'am." This was after he'd said he disliked Vors and she said she wasn't a Vor.

After this flop, there was another meeting. This time, because of the importance of the decision, the whole Embassy professional staff took part in the normal Betan democratic decision. However, except for the Ambassador and the two intelligence agents, the other staff members agreed not to remember after the discussion and decision. This was implemented by the Forgetful-Meeting injection, another Betan invention. The injection blocks the formation of long term memories and stores the memories of information revealed in the meeting outside the person's body. When the external memory is disconnected the person remembers nothing of the meeting.

Capulet said, "We can't go after Vorsonto again. Neither Barrayar nor Beta would tolerate a private war with him. I think we have to consider a desperate measure - turning Vorsonto over to the Barrayarans before he sells his secret to someone else.

Mabeth replied, "Yes, the only thing we can do is tell Vorkosigan and Negri about Vorsonto. Betraying a spy, even a mercenary spy, may make recruiting spies harder in the future. On the other hand, it tells them we won't tolerate their becoming independent operators - as well as shooting at our people.."

Portia and I are intelligence officers, and our work sometimes requires dirty tricks, but not killing hundreds of thousands. Ambassaor, do you think Freddy would agree. As a precedent, Freddy's predecessor decided against supplying any fancy new technology to Komarran rebels."

The vote was 35=3 against promoting a civil war on Barrayar.

"It doesn't look as though there is time to get orders from Beta. a23 is on the loose. We'll have to decide what to do ourselves."

Portia asked, "What can we do now?"

Ambassador Capulet said, "Since we don't have time to get instructions from home, if we tell the Barrayarans about a3, we'll do it on my authority, such as it is. I will have tell Freddy what we have done. I know him very well, having been one of his major supporters. I did vote for him. I think I'll go to Beta and tell him personally and get his instructions. Any other way of doing it involves too many people knowing. Do not transmit any information via intelligence channels.

The vote was 30-7 in favor of turning Vorsonto over to the Barrayarans, but Portia held out for insisting that the Barrayarans agree not to kill him.

Cordelia came down the stairs at a run. Portia had never seen her in a long dress. She looks great. I guess she is flourishing here.

Cordelia stopped short. "Portia Nelson, what the hell are you doing here? How long have you been on Barrayar?"

"At this very moment, I'm carrying a message from our Ambassador to the Lord Regent. This year, I'm the new Chief Political Officer at the Embassy. I've been here since about a week before you left Beta. It didn't seem appropriate to pursue our friendship, but I suppose it's ok for me to congratulate you on your marriage. Lord Vorkosigan becoming Regent was a surprise to us, but I don't suppose you were expecting it either."

"I should hope it was a surprise to you. Chief Political Officer often means chief spy, though."

"Must go. I'm late for Aral's Cousin Alys Vorpatril who is giving me more lessons on being a proper Barrayaran Vor lady."

Vorkosigan, who had just read the message she brought, turned to Portia.

"The message mentions the Ambassador, yourself and the previous Chief Political Officer, and on our side mentions just myself and Captain Negri of Impsec. Normally, our Foreign Minister is present at such meetings and Impsec is not."

"When you hear what our Ambassador has to say, you may want to involve the Foreign Minister".

"You say it's urgent. How urgent?"

"It's more urgent for you than for Beta. This afternoon would be best if you and Captain Negri can make it."

"All right. Make it 1:30 here."

Portia was introduced to the Barrayarans. Vorkosigan struck her as having everything under control. Portia remembered his reputation as the butcher of Komarr. Cordelia had defended him against that common Betan opinion extremely vigorously when she was on Beta. He didn't look cruel, and Cordelia didn't seem to take him that way. He was a chunky man about as tall as Cordelia. He seemed decisive.

Negri was a middle sized man. He deferred to Vorkosigan. He missed nothing that went on. I hope my job doesn't put me in conflict with him. Portia shivered.

After the introductions, the Ambassador Capulet got right down to business.

"Lord Regent, we had a spy in Impsec whom we are just about to betray to you. I say 'had', because he's gone independent. He has some information and evidence for that information for which he wants more money than Beta can afford. Also we're sure that we would be outbid for the evidence. As you may know, Beta doesn't have capital punishment, so it is a condition of his identification that you agree not to kill him. He's just a spy and hasn't himself killed anyone, although he tried.

Specifically, he has uncovered evidence that Captain Negri, the late Emperor Ezar, and yourself knew about the Betan Laser Reflector Defense before Prince Serg launched his attack on Escobar. We also conjectured that Captain Naismith somehow became aware of the fact while she was a prisoner.

Our motivation for telling you is that we project a civil war on Barrayar and have concluded that such a civil war would be to Beta's disadvantage. Such a civil war might bring very aggressively minded people to power, and this is more probable if the afore-mentioned evidence became available. It is also important to us that a large number of people would lose their lives.

Do you want the details now, or would you prefer to confer among yourselves first?"

Vorkosigan looked at Negri and then at the Ambassador, "We would like an adjournment for up to one hour. Can you wait in the anteroom through this door? It is not as secure as this room."

After the Betans left, Vorkosigan said, "Let's get Cordelia and Simon Illyan. I don't think we need the Foreign Minister, but when it becomes known that the Betan Ambassador was here, we'll need an excuse. Please ask Simon to think of one. We'll agree to not kill the spy."

"Cordelia, what do you know of this Portia Nelson?"

"A lot. We were in high school together, our parents knew each other, we had our contraceptive implants and sex training together. At the University she majored in political science and then went into Intelligence. I know she had several off-world assignments including Earth and Jackson's Whole. We got together from time to time when we were both on Beta. I didn't know she'd come to Barrayar till today. She's a good person, but who knows what actions her job may require.

The Betans came back in. Cordelia sat on Vorkosigan's left and sometimes put her hand on his arm.. They often looked at each other before speaking. Definitely in love, Portia thought.

Negri and Illyan were both impenetrable, although Illyan sometimes smiled.

Mabeth took the floor.

"Our spy is Lieutenant Vorsonto, and he gained access to the files of the late General Vormoncrief using some technology which we provided to him. We think he thinks one Count Vordarian would pay a much higher price than Beta could afford. We think he has plans to sell the same information to Cetaganda and Escobar."

Negri stared at Ambassador Capulet, "How do you know he has such plans?"

The Ambassador met his eyes. "I don't see that how we know is something that you have a need to know. When you arrest him, you may be able to find out his plans. We never supposed his motivations in spying for us were anything but mercenary, supplemented by the fact that we could provide him with some unique tools. He has an expensive habit, and we never paid him enough to be independent of our next installment. Now he thinks he can do a lot better. By the way, the expensive habit is the recreational use of fast-penta."

"What's his evidence?"

"Dated files which will have been backed up redundantly in permanent storage media. We think Vormoncrief had a way of spying on the Vorhartung Imperial Residence, but you'll be able to find out about that.

We now regret having told Vorsonto to look for the information, which was motivated by mere curiosity based on speculation. Neither Captain Naismith's panic over being questioned by Betan intelligence nor

Captain Vorkosigan's depression over a defeat for which he was not held responsible fit our psychological profiles of the two of them. We put the two facts together but only came up with a speculative theory which we undertook to try to check out using Vorsonto."

After the Betans left, it took Simon Illyan only two minutes to verify that the information was in General Vormoncrief's files, and an another 30 seconds to figure out why he hadn't used it. The information from his bugs in the Vorhartung Residence had come into his files after he had left Barrayar to join the fleet. Vormoncrief died in the attack on Escobar.

Catching Vorsonto did not go well. He went into the Cetagandan Embassy disguised as one of their suppliers of groceries in a way that wasn't detected until too late to stop him. He didn't come out.

Aral, Negri, Cordelia, and Illyan did not know what the Cetagandans would do with Vorsonto's information, but it wouldn't be good. Negri spoke first.

"Lady Vorkosigan, you must go promptly and secretly to the Betan Embassy and ask for their temporary protection for you and your unborn son. Lord Vorkosigan may have to move around a lot."

Vorkosigan agreed. "Yes, you must. When the information comes out, I'll go before the Council of Counts, and defend what we did as what Emperor Ezar decided would be best for Barrayar. I don't know whether I'll be able to return here or will be arrested."

If we can tag the Cetagandans with the releasing the information, maybe the counts will fear a civil war that would allow a new Cetagandan attack. That's probably a long shot. Maybe we can get the Betans to admit that Vorsonto was their spy and then went to the Cetagandans."

Portia met Cordelia in the courtyard of the Betan Embassy.

The little bit of Beta in the middle of Vorbarra Sultana gave Cordelia homesickness, which she quickly shook off.

"We're crowded, because we put off building the extension during the Escobar War. You can share my room."

"What's it like being Lady Regent."

"Regent-Consort it's called. Mainly lonesome so far. Aral has meetings continually. If I thought he always talked about Barrayaran politics, even when proposing marriage, it's doubled and redoubled. He hopes it will ease off when he gets some things reorganized. We were just about to go to the shore, when Ezar called Aral. Now that Ezar has died, Negri wants us to move to the Residence for security reasons, but Aral wants to stay home to emphasize that Regent is not Emperor."

I think a lot about the baby. I suppose it will be different when he is actually born. I decided not to ask for a replicator for our embryo son to grow in but to have my son the old-fashioned way."

"Are there any replicators here?"

"Yes, the Escobarans sent the unborn babies of the rape victims in replicators."

"I suppose they figured the Barrayarans would dump them."

"Aral had to threaten the Chief Surgeon to get him to make a normally seven day trip to Barrayar in five days to get the unborn babies in the replicators to the Vorbarra Sultana military hospital before their supplies ran out. The babies all survived. I could have had a replicator from which the baby had already been born. It may have been a mistake, but I've chosen a Barrayaran life. Probably my next child will use a replicator."

Only one of the fathers could take the baby. The rest are in the Imperial Orphanage."

"Where they'll survive how long?"

"You should suspend your prejudices about Barrayar. It's changing, and Aral is pushing the changes. Actually, because of all its wars, Barrayar is pretty good at orphanages. The children survive and get an education, at least average for the Barrayar cities, and better than in rural areas. I checked on it."

Actually I not only checked on it, I meddled with it. Tradition says that as acting Empress, the Regent-Consort gets to meddle. I declared that to be the tradition, and since there hasn't been a Regent for 120 years, no-one could say I was wrong."

The Imperial Orphanage is too militaristic, even for Barrayar. I am putting on pressure to give the children more freedom."

What do Betans think of my skipping out on Beta?"

"Variously. There are already two mini-dramas on holovid about you. One is romantic, all for love. You can imagine the hunk who plays Lord Vorkosigan. He is the butcher of Komarr. In the other you have been brainwashed, but break out of it. In both versions you die in the end. Would you like copies?"

"No thanks. I'm a Barrayaran now. I put my hands between the hands of the four year old Emperor Gregor and pledged fealty to him. It was quite an un-Betan experience. Ezar had never asked me to pledge fealty to himself."

"Did you kill Vorrutyer?"

"No, I was strapped to a table. It wasn't Aral either, but I can't tell you or anyone else who did it, so I often have to take the credit."

"Why did you escape to Barrayar?"

"First, I love Aral, but that wasn't enough, because I just didn't think I could stand Barrayar. Then I was shocked by Steady Freddy's Presidential reception and the demand that I become a spokesman for propaganda, especially the slander against Aral. However, I could have got out of that and expected to."

That my own mother believed the propaganda rather than me was a bad blow, but I could have got her around sooner or later. She didn't even try to protect me from the mad psychiatrist. In fact she gave them her permission to 'treat' me. It was also clear that I wouldn't be allowed to go back into the Survey."

Portia interrupted, "Captain Mehta is now Lieutenant Mehta."

Cordelia continued, "I suppose that's nice. Finally, as you guessed, I really did come to know about what Ezar and Negri and Aral were doing; I was hidden in a bathroom when it became obvious from a discussion between Aral and a certain henchman of Negri. I was sure the politicians would use any information they got from me and wouldn't care about a civil war on Barrayar that would kill hundreds of thousands of people. I couldn't be the cause of that."

Now I know I can live on Barrayar - albeit as an aristocrat."

Was my fear warranted?"

"I don't know. I'm just a spy. Politicians and politics are a mystery to me. By the way, Beta is officially not angry at you any more.

"When do you think Barrayar will become democratic?"

"Not till after the Regency if Aral has his way. He considers it his job to turn over to Gregor the full imperial power that Ezar passed on. I argue with him about that, and I suppose there will be some small steps.

Helen Vorthys, a professor of history here, has written a history of the Arabs on Earth. She thinks Barrayar is modernizing its attitudes faster than the Arabs did and will reach democracy sooner. You should read it."

"Do you know her?"

"Not yet, but I hope to. Her career shows Barrayar tolerates some women professionals. Maybe she was the first woman professor, but then universities on Barrayar aren't that old. Her husband is an engineering professor. Both are young for their positions.

Portia, what is your life like. What's the man situation?"

"You mean the husband situation. It's pretty tough being in a service where one can be frank only with a limited set of people, and I don't think I'll find my heart's desire in that set. I already know them

all."

"Why don't you get out of Intelligence? If you were Cultural Attache, we could see each other, and you would be doing things you wouldn't have to keep secret. I hated it when I had to keep what I was doing secret, and that was only for a short time."

"Maybe I'll see if the Ambassador, Intelligence, and the Foreign Ministry will let me switch. We need a Cultural Attache, and Richard would actually like to stay on as Chief Political Officer."

To Negri's and Vorkosigan's surprise, after a day, Vorsonto came out of the Cetagandan Embassy, and Impsec grabbed him. It seems there was no-one there authorized to pay the 10 million Betan dollars Vorsonto demanded. An ok from Cetaganda was needed. Dead drops had been arranged for future communication between Vorsonto and the Cetagandans. Negri was tempted to supply some misleading information suggesting a quite different kind of Barrayaran secret.

Cordelia came home - a trifle relaxed by her Betan weekend.

"They were very nice to me, especially Portia, but I missed you terribly and worried about you all the time."

Fast-penta worked unreliably on Vorsonto, because of his addiction. However, they got some information, and there was plenty of computer evidence that he'd got into Vormoncrief's files. Questioning Vorsonto confirmed his spying.

His court-martial was prompt, and he was sentenced to be shot and to have Vor removed from his name. The judges were surprised that while evidence that he had spied was presented, nothing was said about what information he might have sold to the Betans. The execution was postponed indefinitely at the request of Impsec. He stayed in solitary no-contacts confinement.

When Ambassador Capulet returned from Beta, he told the people involved in the decision that it had been touch and go, but Freddy had agreed to keep the information to himself, sharing it only with the head of Betan Intelligence. "I'll have to tell my successor, of course."

Portia eventually left Government service and settled on Barrayar and ran a business importing medical equipment along with her husband.

Thirty-five years later, after Count Aral Vorkosigan had totally retired and his son Miles had become Count in name as well as in function, Emperor Gregor, with the assent of Aral and Cordelia, ordered Sonto

released. Sonto agreed not to mention the Betan role in the affair until the Betans had a chance to react.

"We'll let the historians interview him, and we expect him to sell his story to the newspapers. There will be a flap, but public peace can stand it. It will be a lesson on how nasty our politics was 35 years ago." Cordelia was relieved not to be holding a vital secret any more, and also looked forward to personal visits to Beta. Her mother was still alive.

The revelation was a sensation in the newspapers and on the Barrayaran Web blogs, but no-one was killed. That showed how much Barrayar had matured. It also had little effect on politics; it had no relevance to currently controversial matters, although some speeches were made in the House of Commons as well as in the Council of Counts. A motion to censure Aral Vorkosigan was debated but not put to a vote when the

Emperor lobbied against it. Some of the papers and speeches even praised Cordelia for her sacrifice to save Barrayar from civil war.

It turned out that no-one currently in the Betan Embassy knew what their predecessors had done 35 years previously. They did succeed in decrypting the file describing it. It turned out there was even less information available on Beta, since the late Freddy had not recorded anything of the information he got from Ambassador Capulet. Also Freddy's successor's successor forgot to inform his successor.

[Top | John McCarthy's Original Website \[http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/\]](http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/) We invite you to send [comments and feedback](mailto:ProjectJMC@TheMagicLab.org) [\[mailto:ProjectJMC@TheMagicLab.org\]](mailto:ProjectJMC@TheMagicLab.org)