

A CIVIL CAMPAIGN

A VORKOSIGAN

ADVENTURE



Lois McMaster Bujold

"Boy, can she write!" – Anne McCaffrey

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by Lois McMaster Bujold

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DEDICATION

**For Jane, Charlotte, Georgette, and Dorothy—
long may they rule.**

ONE CUNNING PLAN TOO MANY?

(continued from back cover)

Lord Ivan Vorpatril has a problem: unrequited love in general. True, with the men on Barrayar outnumbering the women five to four, his odds aren't good. But Ivan had never thought the odds applied to him. He too has a cunning plan . . .

If no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, just imagine what all Miles's closest friends and relatives can do to his romantic strategy!

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CHAPTER ONE

The big groundcar jerked to a stop centimeters from the vehicle ahead of it, and Armsman Pym, driving, swore under his breath. Miles settled back again in his seat beside him, wincing at a vision of the acrimonious street scene from which Pym's reflexes had delivered them. Miles wondered if he could have persuaded the feckless prole in front of them that being rear-ended by an Imperial Auditor was a privilege to be treasured. Likely not. The Vorbarr Sultana University student darting across the boulevard on foot, who had been the cause of the quick stop, scampered off through the jam without a backward glance. The line of groundcars started up once more.

"Have you heard if the municipal traffic control system will be coming on line soon?" Pym asked, apropos of what Miles counted as their third near-miss this week.

"Nope. Delayed in development again, Lord Vorbohn the Younger reports. Due to the increase in fatal lightflyer incidents, they're concentrating on getting the automated air system up first."

Pym nodded, and returned his attention to the crowded road. The Armsman was a habitually fit man, his graying temples seeming merely an accent to his brown-and-silver uniform. He'd served the Vorkosigans as a liege-sworn guard since Miles had been an Academy cadet, and would doubtless go on doing so till either he died of old age, or they were all killed in traffic.

So much for short cuts. Next time they'd go around the campus. Miles watched through the canopy as the taller new buildings of the University fell behind, and they passed through its spiked iron gates into the pleasant old residential streets favored by the families of senior professors and staff. The distinctive architecture dated from the last un-electrified decade before the end of the Time of Isolation. This area had been reclaimed from decay in the past generation, and now featured shady green Earth trees, and bright flower boxes under the tall narrow windows of the tall narrow houses. Miles rebalanced the flower arrangement between his feet. Would it be seen as redundant by its intended recipient?

Pym glanced aside at his slight movement, following his eye to the foliage on the floor. "The lady you met on Komarr seems to have made a strong impression on you, m'lord . . ." He trailed off invitingly.

"Yes," said Miles, uninvitingly.

"Your lady mother had high hopes of that very attractive Miss Captain Quinn you brought home those times." Was that a wistful note in Pym's voice?

"Miss Admiral Quinn, now," Miles corrected with a sigh. "So had I. But she made the right choice for her." He grimaced out the canopy. "I've sworn off falling in love with galactic women and then trying to persuade them to immigrate to Barrayar. I've concluded my only hope is to find a woman who can already stand Barrayar, and persuade her to like me."

"And does Madame Vorsoisson like Barrayar?"

"About as well as I do." He smiled grimly.

"And, ah . . . the second part?"

"We'll see, Pym." *Or not, as the case may be.* At least the spectacle of a man of thirty-plus, going courting seriously for the first time in his life—the first time in the Barrayaran style, anyway—promised to provide hours of entertainment for his interested staff.

Miles let his breath and his nervous irritation trickle out through his nostrils as Pym found a place to park near Lord Auditor Vorthys's doorstep, and expertly wedged the polished old armored groundcar into the inadequate space. Pym popped the canopy; Miles climbed out, and stared up at the three-story patterned tile front of his colleague's home.

Georg Vorthys had been a professor of engineering failure analysis at the Imperial University for thirty years. He and his wife had lived in this house for most of their married life, raising three children and two academic careers, before Emperor Gregor had appointed Vorthys as one of his hand-picked Imperial Auditors. Neither of the Professors Vorthys had seen any reason to change their comfortable lifestyle merely because the awesome

powers of an Emperor's Voice had been conferred upon the retired engineer; Madame Dr. Vorthys still walked every day to her classes. *Dear no, Miles!* the Professora had said to him, when he'd once wondered aloud at their passing up this opportunity for social display. *Can you imagine moving all those books?* Not to mention the laboratory and workshop jamming the entire basement.

Their cheery inertia proved a happy chance, when they invited their recently-widowed niece and her young son to live with them while she completed her own education. Plenty of room, the Professor had boomed jovially, the top floor is so empty since the children left. So close to classes, the Professora had pointed out practically. *Less than six kilometers from Vorkosigan House!* Miles had exulted in his mind, adding a polite murmur of encouragement aloud. And so Ekaterin Nile Vorwayne Vorsoisson had arrived. *She's here, she's here!* Might she be looking down at him from the shadows of some upstairs window even now?

Miles glanced anxiously down the all-too-short length of his body. If his dwarfish stature bothered her, she'd shown no signs of it so far. Well and good. Going on to the aspects of his appearance he could control: no food stains spattered his plain gray tunic, no unfortunate street detritus clung to the soles of his polished half-boots. He checked his distorted reflection in the groundcar's rear canopy. Its convex mirroring widened his lean, if slightly hunched, body to something resembling his obese clone-brother Mark, a comparison he primly ignored. Mark was, thank God, not here. He essayed a smile, for practice; in the canopy, it came out twisted and repellent. No dark hair sticking out in odd directions, anyway.

"You look just fine, my lord," Pym said in a bracing tone from the front compartment. Miles's face heated, and he flinched away from his reflection. He recovered himself enough to take the flower arrangement and rolled-up flimsy Pym handed out to him with, he hoped, a tolerably bland expression. He balanced the load in his arms, turned to face the front steps, and took a deep breath.

After about a minute, Pym inquired helpfully from behind him, "Would you like me to carry anything?"

"No. Thank you." Miles trod up the steps and wiggled a finger free to press the chime-pad. Pym pulled out a reader, and settled comfortably in the groundcar to await his lord's pleasure.

Footsteps sounded from within, and the door swung open on the smiling pink face of the Professora. Her gray hair was wound up on her head in her usual style. She wore a dark rose dress with a light rose bolero, embroidered with green vines in the manner of her home District. This somewhat formal Vor mode, which suggested she was just on her way either in or out, was belied by the soft buskins on her feet. "Hello, Miles. Goodness, you're prompt."

"Professora." Miles ducked a nod to her, and smiled in turn. "Is she here? Is she in? Is she well? You said this would be a good time. I'm not too early, am I? I thought I'd be late. The traffic was miserable. You're going to be around, aren't you? I brought these. Do you think she'll like them?" The sticking-up red flowers tickled his nose as he displayed his gift while still clutching the rolled-up flimsy, which had a tendency to try to unroll and escape whenever his grip loosened.

"Come in, yes, all's well. She's here, she's fine, and the flowers are very nice —" The Professora rescued the bouquet and ushered him into her tiled hallway, closing the door firmly behind them with her foot. The house was dim and cool after the spring sunshine outside, and had a fine aroma of wood wax, old books, and a touch of academic dust.

"She looked pretty pale and fatigued at Tien's funeral. Surrounded by all those relatives. We really didn't get a chance to say more than two words each." *I'm sorry* and *Thank you*, to be precise. Not that he'd wanted to talk much to the late Tien Vorsoisson's family.

"It was an immense strain for her, I think," said the Professora judiciously. "She'd been through so much horror, and except for Georg and myself—and you—there wasn't a soul there to whom she could talk truth about it. Of course, her first concern was getting Nikki through it all. But she held together without a crack from first to last. I was very proud of her."

"Indeed. And she is . . . ?" Miles craned his neck, glancing into the rooms off the entry hall: a cluttered study lined with bookshelves, and a cluttered parlor

lined with bookshelves. No young widows.

"Right this way." The Professora conducted him down the hall and out through her kitchen to the little urban back garden. A couple of tall trees and a brick wall made a private nook of it. Beyond a tiny circle of green grass, at a table in the shade, a woman sat with flimsies and a reader spread before her. She was chewing gently on the end of a stylus, and her dark brows were drawn down in her absorption. She wore a calf-length dress in much the same style as the Professora's, but solid black, with the high collar buttoned up to her neck. Her bolero was gray, trimmed with simple black braid running around its edge. Her dark hair was drawn back to a thick braided knot at the nape of her neck. She looked up at the sound of the door opening; her brows flew up and her lips parted in a flashing smile that made Miles blink.

Ekaterin.

"Mil—my Lord Auditor!" She rose in a flare of skirt; he bowed over her hand.

"Madame Vorsoisson. You look well." She looked wonderful, if still much too pale. Part of that might be the effect of all that severe black, which also made her eyes show a brilliant blue-gray. "Welcome to Vorbarr Sultana. I brought these . . ." He gestured, and the Professora set the flower arrangement down on the table. "Though they hardly seem needed, out here."

"They're lovely," Ekaterin assured him, sniffing them in approval. "I'll take them up to my room later, where they will be very welcome. Since the weather has brightened up, I find I spend as much time as possible out here, under the real sky."

She'd spent nearly a year sealed in a Komarran dome. "I can understand that," Miles said. The conversation hiccuped to a brief stop, while they smiled at each other.

Ekaterin recovered first. "Thank you for coming to Tien's funeral. It meant so much to me."

"It was the least I could do, under the circumstances. I'm only sorry I couldn't do more."