

"Oh frabjous joy!" —*Romantic Times*

A VORKOSIGAN ADVENTURE

CETAGANDA

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87744-5 • U.S. \$7.99

LOIS McMASTER BUJOLD

CETAGANDA

by Lois McMaster Bujold

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CHAPTER ONE

“Now is it, ‘Diplomacy is the art of war pursued by other men,’” asked Ivan, “or was it the other way around? ‘War is diplo—’”

“All diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means,” Miles intoned. “Chou En Lai, twentieth century, Earth.”

“What are you, a walking reference library?”

“No, but Commodore Tung is. He collects Wise Old Chinese Sayings, and makes me memorize ‘em.”

“So was old Chou a diplomat, or a warrior?”

Lieutenant Miles Vorkosigan thought it over. “I think he must have been a diplomat.”

Miles’s seat straps pressed against him as the attitude jets fired, banking the personnel pod in which he and Ivan sat across from each other in lonely splendor. Their two benches lined a short fuselage. Miles craned his neck for a glimpse past the pod pilots shoulder at the planet turning below them.

Eta Ceta IV, the heart and homeworld of the sprawling Cetagandan empire. Miles supposed eight developed planets and an equal fringe of allied and puppet dependencies qualified as a sprawl in any sane person’s lexicon. Not that the Cetagandan ghem-lords wouldn’t like to sprawl a little farther, at their neighbors’ expense, if they could.

Well, it didn’t matter how huge they were, they could only put military force through a wormhole jump one ship at a time, just like everybody else.

It was just that some people had some damned big ships.

The colored fringe of night slid around the rim of the planet as the personnel pod continued to match orbits from the Barrayaran Imperial courier vessel

they had just left, to the Cetagandan transfer station they were approaching. The night side glittered appallingly. The continents were awash in a fairy dust of lights. Miles swore he might read by the glow of the civilization, as if from a full moon. His homeworld of Barrayar seemed suddenly a dull vast swatch of rural darkness, with only a few sparks of cities here and there. Eta Ceta's high-tech embroidery was downright... gaudy. Yes, overdressed, like a woman weighted down with too much jewelry. Tasteless, he tried to convince himself. I am not some backcountry hick. I can handle this. I am Lord Vorkosigan, an officer and a nobleman.

Of course, so was Lieutenant Lord Ivan Vorpatril, but the fact did not fill Miles with confidence. Miles regarded his big cousin, who was also craning his neck, eyes avid and lips parted, drinking in their destination below. At least Ivan looked the part of a diplomatic officer, tall, dark-haired, neat, an easy smile permanently plastered on his handsome face. His fit form filled his officer's undress greens to perfection. Miles's mind slid, with the greased ease of old bad habit, to invidious comparison.

Miles's own uniforms had to be hand-tailored to fit, and insofar as possible disguise, the massive congenital defects that years of medical treatments had done so much to correct. He was supposed to be grateful, that the medicos had done so much with so little. After a lifetime of it he stood four-foot-nine, hunchbacked and brittle-boned, but it beat being carried around in a bucket. Sure.

But he could stand, and walk, and run if need be, leg braces and all. And Barrayaran Imperial Security didn't pay him to be pretty, thank God, they paid him to be smart. Still, the morbid thought did creep in that he had been sent along on this upcoming circus to stand next to Ivan and make him look good. ImpSec certainly hadn't given him any more interesting missions, unless you could call Security Chief Illyan's last curt "... and stay out of trouble!" a secret assignment.

On the other hand, maybe Ivan had been sent along to stand next to Miles and make him sound good. Miles brightened slightly at the thought.

And there was the orbital transfer station, coming up right on schedule. Not even diplomatic personnel dropped directly into Eta Ceta's atmosphere. It

was considered bad etiquette, likely to draw an admonition administered by plasma fire. Most civilized worlds had similar regulations, Miles conceded, if only for purposes of preventing biological contaminations.

“I wonder if the Dowager Empress’s death was really natural?” Miles asked idly. Ivan, after all, could hardly be expected to supply the answer. “It was sudden enough.”

Ivan shrugged. “She was a generation older than Great Uncle Piotr, and he was old since forever. He used to unnerve the hell out of me when I was a kid. It’s a nice paranoid theory, but I don’t think so.”

“Illyan agrees with you, I’m afraid. Or he wouldn’t have let us come. This could have been a lot less dull if it had been the Cetagandan emperor who’d dropped, instead of some tottering little old haut-lady.”

“But then we would not be here,” Ivan pointed out logically. “We’d both be on duty hunkering down in some defensive outpost right now, while the prince-candidates’ factions fought it out. This is better. Travel, wine, women, song—“

“It’s a State funeral, Ivan.”

“I can hope, can’t I?”

“Anyway, we’re just supposed to observe. And report. What or why, I don’t know. Illyan emphasized he expects the reports in writing.”

Ivan groaned. “How I spent my holiday, by little Ivan Vorpatril, age twenty-two. It’s like being back in school.”

Miles’s own twenty-third birthday would be following Ivan’s soon. If this tedious duty ran to schedule, he should actually be back home in time for a celebration, for a change. A pleasant thought. Miles’s eyes glinted. “Still, it could be fun, embroidering events for Illyan’s entertainment. Why should official reports always have to be in that dead dry style?”

“Because they’re generated by dead dry brains. My cousin, the frustrated

dramatist. Don't get too carried away. Illyan has no sense of humor, it would disqualify him for his job."

"I'm not so sure...." Miles watched as the pod wove through its assigned flight path. The transfer station flowed past, vast as a mountain, complex as a circuit diagram. "It would have been interesting to meet the old lady when she was still alive. She witnessed a lot of history, in a century and a half. If from an odd angle, inside the haut-lords' seraglio."

"Low-life outer barbarians like us would never have been let near her."

"Mm, I suppose not." The pod paused, and a major Cetagandan ship with the markings of one of the out-planet governments ghosted past, on and on, maneuvering its monstrous bulk to dock with exquisite care. "All the haut-lord satrap governors—and their retinues—are supposed to be converging for this. I'll bet Cetagandan imperial security is having fun right now."

"If any two governors come, I suppose the rest have to show up, just to keep an eye on each other." Ivan's brows rose. "Should be quite a show. Ceremony as Art. Hell, the Cetagandans make blowing your nose an art. Just so they can sneer at you if you get the moves wrong. One-upmanship to the nth power."

"It's the one thing that convinces me that the Cetagandan haut-lords are still human, after all that genetic tinkering."

Ivan grimaced. "Mutants on purpose are mutants still." He glanced down at his cousins suddenly stiff form, cleared his throat, and tried to find something interesting to look at out the canopy.

"You're so diplomatic, Ivan," said Miles through a tight smile. "Try not to start a war single... mouthed, eh?" Civil or otherwise.

Ivan shrugged off his brief embarrassment. The pod pilot, a Barrayaran tech-sergeant in black fatigues, slid his little ship neatly into its assigned docking pocket. The view outside shrank to blank dimness. Control lights blinked cheery greetings, and servos whined as the flex-tube portals matched and locked. Miles snapped off his seat straps just a shade more slowly than Ivan,

pretending disinterest, or savoir faire, or something. No Cetagandan was going to catch him with his nose pressed to the glass like some eager puppy. He was a Vorkosigan. His heart beat faster anyway.

The Barrayaran ambassador would be waiting, to take his two high-ranking guests in hand, and show them, Miles hoped, how to go on. Miles mentally reviewed the correct greetings and salutations, and the carefully memorized personal message from his father. The pod lock cycled, and the hatch on the side of the fuselage to the right of Ivan's seat dilated.

A man hurtled through, swung himself to a sudden halt on the hatch's handlebar, and stared at them with wide eyes, breathing heavily. His lips moved, but whether in curses, prayers, or rehearsals Miles wasn't sure.

He was elderly but not frail, broad-shouldered and at least as tall as Ivan. He wore what Miles guessed was the uniform of a station employee, cool gray and mauve. Fine white hair wisped over his scalp, but he had no facial hair at all on his shiny skin, neither beard nor eyebrows nor even down. His hand flew to his left vest, over his heart.

"Weapon!" Miles yelled in warning. The startled pod pilot was still snaking his way clear of his seat straps, and Miles was physically ill-equipped to jump anyone, but Ivan's reflexes had been honed by plenty of training, if not actual combat. He was already moving, rotating around his own hand-hold point-of-contact and into the intruders path.

Hand-to-hand combat in free fall was always incredibly awkward, due in part to the necessity of having to hang on tightly to anybody one wanted to seriously hit. The two men quickly ended up wrestling. The intruder clutched wildly, not at his vest but at his right trouser pocket, but Ivan managed to knock the glittering nerve disrupter from his hand.

The nerve disruptor tumbled away and whanged off the other side of the cabin, now a random threat to everyone aboard.

Miles had always been terrified of nerve disrupters, but never before as a projectile weapon. It took two more cross-cabin ricochets for him to snatch it out of the air without accidentally shooting himself or Ivan. The weapon was

undersized but charged and deadly.

Ivan had meanwhile worked around behind the old man, attempting to pinion his arms. Miles seized the moment to try to nail down the second weapon, dragging open the mauve vest and going for that lump in the inner pocket. His hand came away clutching a short rod that he first took for a shock-stick.

The man screamed and wrenched violently. Greatly startled and not at all sure what he'd just done, Miles launched himself away from the struggling pair and ducked prudently behind the pod pilot. Judging from that mortal yell Miles was afraid he'd just ripped out the power pack to the man's artificial heart or something, but he continued to fight on, so it couldn't have been as fatal as it sounded.

The intruder shook off Ivan's grip and recoiled to the hatchway. There came one of those odd pauses that sometimes occur in close combat, everyone gulping for breath in the rush of adrenaline. The old man stared at Miles with the rod in his fist; his expression altered from fright to—was that grimace a flash of triumph? Surely not. Demented inspiration?

Outnumbered now as the pilot joined the fray, the intruder retreated, tumbling back out the flex tube and thumping to whatever docking bay deck lay beyond. Miles scrambled after Ivan's hot pursuit just in time to see the intruder, now firmly on his feet in the station's artificial gravity field, land Ivan a blow to his chest with a booted foot that knocked the younger man backward into the portal again. By the time Miles and Ivan had disentangled themselves, and Ivan's gasping became less alarmingly disrupted, the old man had vanished at a run. His footsteps echoed confusingly in the bay. Which exit--? The pod pilot, after a quick look to ensure that his passengers were temporarily safe, hurried back inside to answer his comm alarm.

Ivan regained his feet, dusted himself off, and stared around. Miles did too. They were in a small, dingy, dimly lit freight bay.

"Y'know," said Ivan, "if that was the customs inspector, we're in trouble."

"I thought he was about to draw on us," said Miles. "It looked like it."

“You didn’t see a weapon before you yelled.”

“It wasn’t the weapon. It was his eyes. He looked like someone about to try something that scared him to death. And he did draw.”

“After we jumped him. Who knows what he was about to do?”

Miles turned slowly on his heel, taking in their surroundings in more detail. There wasn’t a human being in sight, Cetagandan, Barrayaran, or other.

“There’s something very wrong here. Either he wasn’t in the right place, or we weren’t. This musty dump can’t be our docking port, can it? I mean, where’s the Barrayaran ambassador? The honor guard?”

“The red carpet, the dancing girls?” Ivan sighed. “You know, if he’d been trying to assassinate you, or hijack the pod, he should have come charging in with that nerve disrupter already in his hand.”

“That was no customs inspector. Look at the monitors.” Miles pointed. Two vid-pickups mounted strategically on nearby walls were ripped from their moorings, dangling sadly down. “He disabled them before he tried to board. I don’t understand. Station security should be swarming in here right now.... D’you think he wanted the pod, and not us?”

“You, boy. No one would be after me.”

“He seemed more scared of us than we were of him.” Miles concealed a deep breath, hoping his heart rate would slow.

“Speak for yourself,” said Ivan. “He sure scared me.”

“Are you all right?” asked Miles belatedly. “I mean, no broken ribs or anything?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll survive ... you?”

“I’m all right.”

Ivan glanced down at the nerve disrupter in Miles’s right hand, and the rod in his left, and wrinkled his nose. “How’d you end up with all the weapons?”