

A VORKOSIGAN ADVENTURE

MIRROR DANCE



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LOIS McMASTER BUJOLD

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**For Patricia Collins Wrede,
for literary midwifery above and beyond
the long-distance call of duty**

CHAPTER ONE

The row of comconsole booths lining the passenger concourse of Escobar's largest commercial orbital transfer station had mirrored doors, divided into diagonal sections by rainbow-colored lines of lights. Doubtless someone's idea of decor. The mirror-sections were deliberately set slightly out of alignment, fragmenting their reflections. The short man in the grey and white military uniform scowled at his divided self framed therein.

His image scowled back. The insignia-less mercenary officer's undress kit—pocketed jacket, loose trousers tucked into ankle-topping boots—was correct in every detail. He studied the body under the uniform. A stretched-out dwarf with a twisted spine, short-necked, big-headed. Subtly deformed, and robbed by his short stature of any chance of the disturbing near-rightness passing unnoticed. His dark hair was neatly trimmed. Beneath black brows, the grey eyes' glower deepened. The body, too, was correct in every detail. He hated it.

The mirrored door slid up at last, and a woman exited the booth. She wore a soft wrap tunic and flowing trousers. A fashionable bandolier of expensive electronic equipment hanging decoratively on a jeweled chain across her torso advertised her status. Her beginning stride was arrested at the sight of him, and she recoiled, buffeted by his black and hollow stare, then went carefully around him with a mumbled, "Excuse me . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

He belatedly twisted up his mouth on an imitation smile, and muttered something half-inaudible conveying enough allegiance to the social proprieties for him to pass by. He hit the keypad to lower the door again, sealing himself from sight. Alone at last, for one last moment, if only in the narrow confines of a commercial comm booth. The woman's perfume lingered cloyingly in the air, along with a *frisson* of station odors; recycled air, food, bodies, stress, plastics and metals and cleaning compounds. He exhaled, and sat, and laid his hands out flat on the small countertop to still their trembling.

Not quite alone. There was another damned mirror in here, for the convenience of patrons wishing to check their appearance before transmitting it by holo-vid. His dark-ringed eyes flashed back at him malevolently, then he ignored the image. He emptied his pockets out onto the countertop. All his worldly resources fit neatly into a space little larger than his two spread palms. One last inventory. As if counting it again might change the sum . . .

A credit chit with about three hundred Betan dollars remaining upon it: one might live well for a week upon this orbital space station for that much, or for a couple of lean months on the planet turning below, if it were carefully managed. Three false identification chits, none for the man he was now. None for the man he was. Whoever he was. An ordinary plastic pocket comb. A data cube. That was all. He returned all but the credit chit to various pockets upon and in the jacket, gravely sorting them individually. He ran out of objects before he ran out of pockets, and snorted. *You might at least have brought your own toothbrush . . .* too late now.

And getting later. Horrors happened, proceeding unchecked, while he sat struggling for nerve. *Come on. You've done this before. You can do it now.* He jammed the credit card into the slot, and keyed in the carefully memorized code number. Compulsively, he glanced one last time into the mirror, and tried to smooth his features into something approaching a neutral expression. For all his practice, he did not think he could manage the grin just now. He despised that grin anyway.

The vid plate hissed to life, and a woman's visage formed above it. She wore grey-and-whites like his own, but with proper rank insignia and name patch. She recited crisply, "Comm Officer Hereld, *Triumph*, Dendarii Free . . . Corporation." In Escobaran space, a mercenary fleet sealed its weapons at the Outside jump-point station under the watchful eyes of the Escobaran military inspectors, and submitted proof of its purely commercial intentions, before it was even allowed to pass. The polite fiction was maintained, apparently, in Escobar orbit.

He moistened his lips, and said evenly, "Connect me with the officer of the watch, please."

"Admiral Naismith, sir! You're back!" Even over the holo-vid a blast of

pleasure and excitement washed out from her straightened posture and beaming face. It struck him like a blow. "What's up? Are we going to be moving out soon?"

"In good time, Lieutenant . . . Hereld." An apt name for a communications officer. He managed to twitch a smile. Admiral Naismith would smile, yes. "You'll learn in good time. In the meanwhile, I want a pick-up at the orbital transfer station."

"Yes, sir. I can get that for you. Is Captain Quinn with you?"

"Uh . . . no."

"When will she be following?"

". . . Later."

"Right, sir. Let me just get clearance for—are we loading any equipment?"

"No. Just myself."

"Clearance from the Escobarans for a personnel pod, then . . ." she turned aside for a few moments. "I can have someone at docking bay E17 in about twenty minutes."

"Very well." It would take him almost that long to get from this concourse to that arm of the station. Ought he to add some personal word for Lieutenant Hereld? She knew him; how well did she know him? Every sentence that fell from his lips from this point on packed risk, risk of the unknown, risk of a mistake. Mistakes were punished. Was his Betan accent really right? He hated this, with a stomach-churning terror. "I want to be transferred directly to the *Ariel*."

"Right, sir. Do you wish me to notify Captain Thorne?"

Was Admiral Naismith often in the habit of springing surprise inspections? Well, not this time. "Yes, do. Tell them to make ready to break orbit."

"Only the *Ariel*?" Her brows rose.

"Yes, Lieutenant." This, in quite a perfect bored Betan drawl. He congratulated himself as she grew palpably prim. The undertone had suggested just the right hint of criticism of a breach of security, or manners, or both, to suppress further dangerous questions.

"Will do, Admiral."

"Naismith out." He cut the comm. She vanished in a haze of sparkles, and he let out a long breath. Admiral Naismith. Miles Naismith. He had to get used to responding to that name again, even in his sleep. Leave the Lord Vorkosigan part completely out of it, for now; it was difficult enough just being the Naismith half of the man. Drill. What is your name? Miles. Miles. Miles.

Lord Vorkosigan pretended to be Admiral Naismith. And so did he. What, after all, was the difference?

But what is your name really?

His vision darkened in a rush of despair, and rage. He blinked it back, controlling his breathing. *My name is what I will. And right now I will it to be Miles Naismith.*

He exited the booth and strode down the concourse, short legs pumping, both riveting and repelling the sideways stares of startled strangers. *See Miles. See Miles run. See Miles get what he deserves.* He marched head-down, and no one got in his way.

He ducked into the personnel pod, a tiny four-man shuttle, as soon as the hatch seal sensors blinked green and the door dilated. He hit the keypad for it to close again behind him immediately. The pod was too little to maintain a grav field. He floated over the seats and pulled himself carefully down into the one beside the lone pilot, a man in Dendarii grey tech coveralls.

"All right. Let's go."

The pilot grinned and sketched him a salute as he strapped in. Otherwise appearing to be a sensible adult male, he had the same look on his face as the

comm officer, Hereld; excited, breathless, watching eagerly, as if his passenger were about to pull treats from his pockets.

He glanced over his shoulder as the pod obediently broke free of the docking clamps and turned. They swooped away from the skin of the station into clear space. The traffic control patterns made a maze of colored lights on the navigation console, through which the pilot swiftly threaded them.

"Good to see you back, Admiral," said the pilot as soon as the tangle grew less thick. "What's happening?"

The edge of formality in the pilot's tone was reassuring. Just a comrade in arms, not one of the Dear Old Friends, or worse, Dear Old Lovers. He essayed an evasion. "When you need to know, you'll be told." He made his tone affable, but avoided names or ranks.

The pilot vented an intrigued "*Hm*," and smirked, apparently contented.

He settled back with a tight smile. The huge transfer station fell away silently behind them, shrinking into a mad child's toy, then into a few glints of light. "Excuse me. I'm a little tired." He settled down further into his seat and closed his eyes. "Wake me up when we dock, if I fall asleep."

"Yes, sir," said the pilot respectfully. "You look like you could use it."

He acknowledged this with a tired wave of his hand, and pretended to doze.

He could always tell, instantly, when someone he met thought they were facing "Naismith." They all had that same stupid hyper-alert *glow* in their faces. They weren't all worshipful; he'd met some of Naismith's enemies once, but worshipful or homicidal, they reacted. As if they suddenly switched on, and became ten times more alive than ever before. How the hell did he do it? Make people light up like that? Granted, Naismith was a goddamn hyperactive, but how did he make it so freaking contagious?

Strangers who met him as himself did not greet *him* like that. They were blank and courteous, or blank and rude, or just blank, closed and indifferent. Covertly uncomfortable with his slight deformities, and his obviously