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BUJOLD

THE VOR GAME

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THE VOR GAME

by **Lois McMaster Bujold**

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"Ship duty!" chortled the ensign four ahead of Miles in line. Glee lit his face as his eyes sped down his orders, the plastic flimsy rattling slightly in his hands. "I'm to be junior weaponry officer on the Imperial Cruiser *Commodore Vorhalas*. Reporting at once to Tanery Base Shuttleport for orbital transfer." At a pointed prod he removed himself with an unmilitary skip from the way of the next man in line, still hissing delight under his breath.

"Ensign Plause." The aging sergeant manning the desk managed to look bored and superior at the same time, holding the next packet up with deliberation between thumb and forefinger. How long had he been holding down this post at the Imperial Military Academy? Miles wondered. How many hundreds—thousands—of young officers had passed under his bland eye at this first supreme moment of their careers? Did they all start to look alike after a few years? The same fresh green uniforms. The same shiny blue plastic rectangles of shiny new-won rank armoring the high collars. The same hungry eyes, the go-to-hell graduates of the Imperial Services' most elite school with visions of military destiny dancing in their heads. *We don't just march on the future, we charge it.*

Plause stepped aside, touched his thumbprint to the lock-pad, and unzipped his envelope in turn.

"Well?" said Ivan Vorpatril, just ahead of Miles inline. "Don't keep us in suspense."

"Language school," said Plause, still reading.

Plause spoke all four of Barrayar's native languages perfectly already. "As student or instructor?" Miles inquired.

"Student."

"Ah, ha. It'll be galactic languages, then. Intelligence will be wanting you, after. You're bound off-planet for sure," said Miles.

"Not necessarily," said Plause. "They could just sit me in a concrete box somewhere, programming translating computers till I go blind." But hope gleamed in his eyes.

Miles charitably did not point out the major drawback of Intelligence, the fact that you ended up working for Chief of Imperial Security Simon Illyan, the man who remembered *everything*. But perhaps on Plause's level he would not encounter the acerb Illyan.

"Ensign Lobachik."

Lobachik was the second most painfully earnest man Miles had ever met; Miles was therefore unsurprised when Lobachik zipped open his envelope and choked, "ImpSec. The advanced course in Security and Counter-assassination."

"Ah, palace guard school," said Ivan with interest, kibbitzing over Lobachik's shoulder.

"That's quite an honor," Miles observed. "Illyan usually pulls his students from the twenty-year men with rows of medals."

"Maybe Emperor Gregor asked Illyan for someone nearer his own age," suggested Ivan, "to brighten the landscape. Those prune-faced fossils Illyan usually surrounds him with would give *me* depressive fits. Don't let on you have a sense of humor, Lubachik, I think it's an automatic disqualification."

Lubachik was in no danger of losing the posting if that were so, Miles reflected.

"Will I really meet the emperor?" Lubachik asked. He turned

nervous eyes on Miles and Ivan.

"You'll probably get to watch him eat breakfast every day," said Ivan. "Poor sod." Did he mean Lubachik, or Gregor? Gregor, definitely.

"You Vorish types know him—what's he like?"

Miles cut in before the glint in Ivan's eye could materialize into some practical joke. "He's very straightforward. You'll get along fine."

Lubachik moved off, looking faintly reassured, rereading his flimsy.

"Ensign Vorpatril," intoned the sergeant. "Ensign Vorkosigan." Tall Ivan collected his packet and Miles his, and they moved out of the way with their two comrades.

Ivan unzipped his envelope. "Ha. Imperial HQ in Vorbarr Sultana for me. I am to be, I'll have you know, aide-de-camp to Commodore Jollif, Operations." He bowed and turned the flimsy over. "Starting tomorrow, in fact."

"Ooh," said the ensign who'd drawn ship duty, still bouncing slightly. "Ivan gets to be a *secretary*. Just watch out if General Lamitz asks you to sit on his lap, I hear he—"

Ivan flipped him an amiable rude gesture. "Envy, sheer envy. I'll get to live like a civilian. Work seven to five, have my own apartment in town—no girls on that ship of yours up there, I might point out." Ivan's voice was even and cheerful, only his eyes failing to totally conceal his disappointment. Ivan had wanted ship duty too. They all did.

Miles did. *Ship duty. Eventually, command, like my father, his father, his, his ...* A wish, a prayer, a dream . . . He hesitated for self-discipline, for fear, for a last lingering moment of high hope. He

thumbed the lock pad and unzipped the envelope with deliberate precision. A single plastic flimsy, a handful of travel passes. . . . His deliberation lasted only for the brief moment it took him to absorb the short paragraph before his eyes. He stood frozen in disbelief, began reading again from the top.

"So what's up, coz?" Ivan glanced down over Miles's shoulder.

"Ivan," said Miles in a choked voice, "have I got a touch of amnesia, or did we indeed never have a meteorology course on our sciences track?"

"Five-space math, yes. Xenobotany, yes." Ivan absently scratched a remembered itch. "Geology and terrain evaluation, yes. Well, there was aviation weather, back in our first year."

"Yes, but . . ."

"So what have they done to you this time?" asked Plause, clearly prepared to offer congratulations or sympathy as indicated.

"I'm assigned as Chief Meteorology Officer, Lazkowski Base. Where the hell is Lazkowski Base? I've never even heard of it!"

The sergeant at the desk looked up with a sudden evil grin. "I have, sir," he offered. "It's on a place called Kyril Island, up near the arctic circle. Winter training base for infantry. The grubs call it Camp Permafrost."

"*Infantry?*" said Miles.

Ivan's brows rose, and he frowned down at Miles. "Infantry? You? That doesn't seem right."

"No, it doesn't," said Miles faintly. Cold consciousness of his physical handicaps washed over him.

Years of arcane medical tortures had almost managed to correct the severe deformities from which Miles had nearly died at birth.

Almost. Curled like a frog in infancy, he now stood almost straight. Chalk-stick bones, friable as talc, now were almost strong. Wized as an infant homunculus, he now stood almost four-foot-nine. It had been a trade-off toward the end, between the length of his bones and their strength, and his doctor still opined that the last six inches of height had been a mistake. Miles had finally broken his legs enough times to agree with him, but by then it was too late. But not a mutant, not ... it scarcely mattered any more. If only they would let him place his strengths in the Emperor's service, he would make them forget his weaknesses. The deal was understood.

There had to be a thousand jobs in the Service to which his strange appearance and hidden fragility would make not one whit of difference. Like aide-de-camp, or Intelligence translator. Or even a ship's weaponry officer, monitoring his computers. It had been understood, surely it had been understood. But infantry? Someone was not playing fair. Or a mistake had been made. That wouldn't be a first. He hesitated a long moment, his fist tightening on the flimsy, then headed toward the door. "Where are you going?" asked Ivan. "To see Major Cecil."

Ivan exhaled through pursed lips. "Oh? Good luck." Did the desk sergeant hide a small smile, bending his head to sort through the next stack of packets? "Ensign Draut," he called. The line moved up one more.

Major Cecil was leaning with one hip on his clerk's desk, consulting about something on the vid, as Miles entered his office and saluted.

Major Cecil glanced up at Miles and then at his chrono. "Ah, less than ten minutes. I win the bet." The major returned Miles's salute as the clerk, smiling sourly, pulled a small wad of currency from his pocket, peeled off a one-mark note, and handed it across wordlessly to his superior. The major's face was only amused on the surface; he nodded toward the door, and the clerk tore off the plastic flimsy his machine had just produced and exited the room.

Major Cecil was a man of about fifty, lean, even-tempered, watchful. Very watchful. Though he was not the titular head of Personnel, that administrative job belonging to a higher-ranking officer, Miles had spotted Cecil long ago as the final-decision man. Through Cecil's hands passed at the last every assignment for every Academy graduate. Miles had always found him an accessible man, the teacher and scholar in him ascendant over the officer. His wit was dry and rare, his dedication to his duty intense. Miles had always trusted him. Till now.

"Sir," he began. He held out his orders in a frustrated gesture. "What *is* this?"

Cecil's eyes were still bright with his private amusement as he pocketed the mark-note. "Are you asking me to read them to you, Vorkosigan?"

"Sir, I question—" Miles stopped, bit his tongue, began again. "I have a few questions about my assignment."

"Meteorology Officer, Lazkowski Base," Major Cecil recited.

"It's . . . not a mistake, then? I got the right packet?"

"If that's what that says, you did."

"Are . . . you aware the only meteorology course I had was aviation weather?"

"I am." The major wasn't giving away a thing.

Miles paused. Cecil's sending his clerk out was a clear signal that this discussion was to be frank. "Is this some kind of punishment?" *What have I ever done to you?*

"Why, Ensign," Cecil's voice was smooth, "it's a perfectly normal assignment. Were you expecting an extraordinary one? My job is to match personnel requests with available candidates. Every request

must be filled by someone."

"Any tech school grad could have filled this one." With an effort, Miles kept the snarl out of his voice, uncurled his fingers. "Better. It doesn't require an Academy cadet."

"That's right," agreed the major.

"Why, then?" Miles burst out. His voice came out louder than he'd meant it to.

Cecil sighed, straightened. "Because I have noticed, Vorkosigan, watching you—and you know very well you were the most closely-watched cadet ever to pass through these halls barring Emperor Gregor himself—"

Miles nodded shortly.

"That despite your demonstrated brilliance in some areas, you have also demonstrated some chronic weaknesses. And I'm not referring to your physical problems, which everybody but me thought were going to take you out before your first year was up—you've been surprisingly sensible about those—"

Miles shrugged. "Pain hurts, sir. I don't court it."

"Very good. But your most insidious chronic problem is in the area of ... how shall I put this precisely . . . subordination. You argue too much."

"No, I don't," Miles began indignantly, then shut his mouth.

Cecil flashed a grin. "Quite. Plus your rather irritating habit of treating your superior officers as your, ah . . ." Cecil paused, apparently groping again for just the right word.

"Equals?" Miles hazarded.

"Cattle," Cecil corrected judiciously. "To be driven to your will."

You're a manipulator *par excellence*, Vorkosigan. I've been studying you for three years now, and your group dynamics are fascinating. Whether you were in charge or not, somehow it was always your idea that ended up getting carried out."

"Have I been . . . that disrespectful, sir?" Miles's stomach felt cold.

"On the contrary. Given your background, the marvel is that you conceal that, ah, little arrogant streak so well. But Vorkosigan," Cecil dropped at last into perfect seriousness, "the Imperial Academy is not the whole of the Imperial Service. You've made your comrades here appreciate you because here, brains are held at a premium. You were picked first for any strategic team for the same reason you were picked last for any purely physical contest—these young hotshots wanted to win. All the time. Whatever it took."

"I can't be ordinary and survive, sir!"

Cecil tilted his head. "I agree. And yet, sometime, you must also learn how to command ordinary men. And be commanded by them!"

"This isn't a punishment, Vorkosigan, and it isn't my idea of a joke. Upon my choices may depend not only our fledgling officers' lives, but also those of the innocents I inflict 'em on. If I seriously miscalculate, overmatch or mismatch a man with a job, I not only risk him, but also those around him. Now, in six months (plus unscheduled overruns), the Imperial Orbital Shipyard is going to finish commissioning the *Prince Serg*."

Miles's breath caught.

"You've got it," Cecil nodded. "The newest, fastest, deadliest thing His Imperial Majesty has ever put into space. And with the longest range. It will go out, and stay out, for longer periods than anything we've ever had before. It follows that everyone on board will be in each other's hair for longer unbroken periods than ever before. High Command is actually paying some attention to the