

New Thunder

By Mark Flavin

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CHAPTER 3: Lawgiver

Katreean's eyes blazed. He thundered, and snarled as he tossed the metal-framed briefing pad on his desktop.

"Those incompetent bush rats you sent to dispatch Captain Parder will suffer the harshest punishment imaginable!"

"Sir, we have a system wide alert for Captain Parder, there is no way he will escape," said Colonel Arcon as he winced.

"Right, like your *airtight* plan at the Ambassadors residence? We don't even know where he went, and it's been two days. He could be back on Alpha hiding among his friends." The General perched a black boot on the seat of chair as his finger stroked his chin.

"Send me Captain Lexin, I have a special mission for him."

Arcon moved quickly, happy to leave the eye of the storm.

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His eyes burned when he barely opened them. He lay perfectly still in the semi-darkened room. The smell and chill of an ancient musty cave was heavy in the air, like a thick blanket it enveloped him. The shadowy outline of technical equipment silhouetted the walls - the gentle whir of devices running somewhere close. The deep comforting bass of stellar drive engines on stand-by resonated through the structure.

Shipboard, but where, he said to himself. Parder was slowly churning his groggy mind into consciousness. He rose up on one elbow, and tried to focus in the dim light. As he looked about he caught the glint of the gold braid on his blood soaked tattered uniform which was neatly folded on a chair in the corner.

Infirmary, he thought as he surveyed the assemblage of instruments. He swung his legs over the bed and noticed he was clothed in a loose fitting soft tunic, with a pressure bandage on his arm. As his bare feet hit the cool smooth floor, the lights began to slowly intensify.

From a dim corner a baritone male voice startled him, "Greetings, Master, I hope you are well?" He snatched a smooth warm cylindrical object off the tray next to the bed and raised it over his head. He teetered and felt nauseous - squinting he tried to focus on the shape. His voice rasped, through a dry, sore throat, "Where am I?"

"Are you going to hit me with your breakfast," asked the stranger.

Avalon looked at the cylinder, then back at his captor. "*What is this ship, and what are the specific charges you are holding me on?* My rights under the Manarge Protocol of 5893 entitle me..."

The tall figure stepped into the light holding up his right hand, palm forward.

"You are no ones prisoner, you are the Master of this ship and your breakfast is in danger of being ruined if you do not put it down, Sir."

Parder looked at the man, and then at the cylinder in his hand. "I will put *breakfast* down as soon as I get some answers."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders, and nodded with his head toward a small, cantilevered translucent table with two chairs against the wall near the door.

"Shall we retreat to the negotiation table and settle our difference under your protocol? Or would you rather stand all morning? It makes no difference to me." The slight sarcasm in his voice sounded hauntingly familiar.

"I'll stand you sit," said Parder

The stranger pulled out a chair, "You combative types always must have the high ground. Very well Sir."

Parder studied his target with a full sensor sweep. His hair was medium length, short on the sides, hoary white. It was swept to one side, very regulation looking. The dark blue, textured suit he wore was devoid of insignia of any kind, yet appeared to be a uniform. His pale green eyes, deep black pupils, unstained whites made his glance formidable, like a wild dog. By the age lines that emanated from the corners of his eyes, and overall skin texture, Avalon estimated his age at around fifty standard years. The strange, archaic dialect he spoke - he was not from Alpha at least. He studied every movement as the stepped closer, trying to decide when to rush him. There were no guards in the room and he figured he could take him in a fair fight, even in his weakened condition.

Avalon gestured with the cylinder, "Your name?"

"What would you like it to be," said the stranger.

Parder ached in every joint and had no time for twenty questions, he snapped at the man, "How about *Dog Breath*?"

The stranger smiled broadly revealing two rows of perfect polished, alabaster teeth.

"Very well Sir, although some might not appreciate the humor."

Parder in disgust raised the cylinder, and stepped forward to swing at the seated man. He was smiling, a good time to attack. In a blur of motion the stranger stood. The cylinder was snatched from his hand; the man stepped back and glared at Avalon in disgust then pointed at the other chair. "Now Sir, *you* sit! This is *highly* unorthodox, but I can clearly see that ordinary courtesy is not working with you."

Parder seated himself, his jaw slack from the speed of the transaction. *Must be the injuries*. The man touched a spot on the wall and a panel opened revealing an opal colored gold ringed dining service. He rotated the cylinder that he had just snatched from Avalon's grip, which easily split spirally lengthwise revealing a steaming fluffy delicately colored mixture of what appeared to be an omelet. He emptied the steaming concoction on the plate - the dense aroma sent a dagger pang through his empty stomach.

"Shall I pour you a Banner, Sir?"

"Yah - yah, that would be fine thanks, Mister?"

The man expertly poured a frothy cup of Banner from a swirl polished, gold decanter.

"I am Elliott Mentor, you may if you like call me Dog Breath, Sir. Other masters have had other names for me over time."

Parder sipped the nectar from a fancy thermo mug.

"You are on board your ship, the Omega Equinox, in stationary orbit over Brauntame.

Avalon rolled his eyes, "My ship? I don't have a ship on this assignment, and if I did it wouldn't be a stinking cruiser." He flipped his chin up, "I'm a Star Fighter pilot, not a cruiser driver." He then cautiously took a fork full of the fragrant omelet, sniffing it first. The taste was exquisite, which he tried to conceal with a bland expression.

"The Omega Equinox is your ship, you are the Ships Master, I am your aide, Elliott Mentor. Do you have any orders Sir," the new master studied Mentors character lined expressionless face.

"Oh, I get it, my bud Katrean wants to put me up on larceny charges, since he didn't get me for murder. What a perfect plan - 'suspect Captain steals fleet ship, tries to make an escape' - not possible Mister Mentor or what ever your name and rank really is. He gestured at himself with a fork, "This guy is not a thief!"

There was a long silence.

"What happened to my Uncle, is he dead?"

"I'm afraid he is. He was a wonderful man. The assault was very efficient and deadly to every one in the compound."

"How did I escape? I was right next to him."

"Ambassador Parder activated a trans-dimensional molecular transceiver during the attack, I believe it is still on your finger."

Avalon examined the ring, the blue stone glistening in the cabin light.

"Right - and if I click my heels together will you disappear? This is so much crap! Just give me the charges that Katrean has me up on, 'cause I'm not *active* on this grid!"

Mentor puzzled over his new Master. Of all the men who he had served, this one was most peculiar - far more suspicious, far less trusting, and probably the youngest. He swept the young mind, and could detect no fear or misgivings, just focused anger.

"Well Sir, you are free to believe whatever you wish. But you might want to see something of interest."

Mentor walked toward the door, the actuator hissed, the door slid into its pocket. He moved through the doorway into the corridor. Parder picked up his mug and slowly followed at a casual pace, as he snatched the last bit of breakfast from his plate.

"Hey, buddy, this place smells like an old cave, can't you do something about it? Where's the enviro panel on this cruiser?" Instantly a fresh, almost floral smell filled his nostrils as he moved toward the small doorway, the dramatic change caused him to pause briefly in the opening. "Wow, not a bad system response."

The corridor was narrow with a low ceiling. It dead-ended to the left with several closed compartment doors along each side each with glowing code panels next to the doors. Just as his head cleared the doorway, his peripheral vision detected the silent closure of one of the doors. The upper walls had a neon blue cove light that shown as an eerie glow onto the low gloss finish of the walls.

They moved down the corridor to the right. The floor gradually felt warmer to his unshod feet. The grav system seemed a bit lighter than standard, causing a slight bounce to his step. The corridor turned and opened onto the main bridge, or at least that's what he assumed it to be. There was a diffused warm pink light emanating from a large oval appendage in the multi-curved ceiling.

The workstations that lined the elliptical room were unfamiliar to Parder. Instead of the usual fleet standard display and controls, a slightly canted work surface followed most of the perimeter of the room with a transparent covering. There were no knobs, controls, readouts or any other indication of control or display. On one end of the short side of the bridge was what appeared to be a view screen. The floor was a brilliant gleaming pastel blue. It was noticeably warmer, as though a large energy server was located below it. A gold symbol covering most of the center of the bridge was inlaid in the floor that looked like a lemniscate with an unknown character slashed through it and an inscription in some unknown language. Avalon recognized the symbol.

"Hey that symbol... that's what Uncle Avior wrote in blood just before he died, what does it stand for? Was this his ship?" Mentor took a breath as if to speak when a low oscillating aural alert sounded followed by a voice message.

"Warning, you have eight hostile targets bearing one seven six, grid one by twenty five, with a full weapons compliment charged" The voice conveying tactical information in Federal standard syntax was unmistakable – it was Parder's own voice!

"What's loose here?"

Instantly the console nearest him became active as a seat emerged from the seamless floor. The panel surface assumed the controls and tactical readouts of a Spear Class tactical fighter. He instantly recognized the familiar shape and readouts.

Parder jabbed the air pointing toward the console, "What's this all about?"

"I believe it is quite obvious, Sir. Your ship is under consideration of attack."

Parder folded his arms, "And I suppose you now will add firing on fleet personnel to the charges? You people must think I've been vacked. I have no intention of doing anything in this scenario."

Instantly the ship responded. "For this scenario on this time line you have five hundred forty-six combined offensive and defensive options."

Parder grimaced, his eyes flashed. "You better call off the dogs Mongoose, I will *not* fight fleet troops."

Mentor cocked his head, "Even if it means your life? This is not a practice drill, those ships have every intention of firing upon us."

The ship again responded. "You have two hundred twenty two options on this time line." Parder grabbed for Mentors collar but with lightning fast reflexes, he swung around and pivoted away. Avalon then tried a thrust kick, but again the middle-aged opponent nimbly avoided the jab. The two danced around the bridge, Parder thrusting, kicking, jabbing, using every well-practiced technique of an expert in body combat.

Finally, he positioned himself to shut off Mentors escape down the corridor by attempting an up-hand assault, his best move, and one that had caught countless opponents unprepared. It failed. Mentor avoided the charge effortlessly, his image blurred as he darted and dodged the attack. Parder sat in the chair by the workstation, his heart pounding, breathing heavily.

"You now have sixty one options on this time line." He never realized how obnoxious his own voice could sound.

"Turn the com voice off." Mentor was not even breathing hard. He stood relaxed and stared at his new master for a few seconds that seemed to pass like hours.

"Please," was his humiliated sheepish plea.

"You, know there still are non-combative options out of this dilemma, Sir."

Mentor now addressed the glowing sphere in the center of the rooms ceiling, "Omega Equinox, enable voice interface and display current tactical situation. Recommend a non-lethal exit."

Instantly a three dimensional solid map of the approaching assault force was displayed in the center of the room. It rotated slowly to give spatial awareness. The eight Sol class fighters were shown in red in a classic "X claw" formation converging on the green ship in the center with contrails that disappear behind their track. It gave the sense of direction and velocity of the ships in the engagement. The green craft in the center had a yellow dashed line indicating a projected path.

"There is the situation Master, but I can not command this ship to take offensive or defensive action without your approval. It is obliged to answer only to you in matters of this nature, unless you relinquish control to me." Avalon studied the display, amazed at the vivid clarity of the scene unfolding. His experienced mind raced to solve the problem.

Parder gestured at the yellow line "This path, this is our way out?" Mentor nodded.

"There is *no* ship in the fleet or anywhere else that can fly this path. Look at these turns - we would be liquefied against the bulkhead, if the bulkhead could stand the stress. This is not workable."

Mentors hands were open and outward toward the display, "Why don't you let Omega Equinox answer this," Parder, rose from his chair, wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Hostiles have reached their maximum firing range, you have nineteen options on this time line." said the comm voice.

The ships had converged on the stationary target in an optimal position to affect the most damage. Their linked fire control computers would shoot in unison to inflict the greatest damage. He had run this gambit many times in simulation and real combat, and this was no simulation. Beads of sweat formed on his upper lip, the knot grew tighter in his gut.