



ISLE OF THE BLESSED

Book Two

Chapter 2: Fathers and Sons

Steven Mohan, Jr.

HVAC Equipment Room, The Falls, Cormarc Falls New Avalon, Crucis March, Federated Suns 2 February 3073

Geoffrey Zucker had thought he was beyond the ability to feel pain. He had faced his own father in combat—and lost. Thinking to spare the life of the enemy tech Bob Orson, he had instead delivered him to his death. Worst of all, in trying to keep to the blessed Blake’s path, he had strayed.

No blade cut more deeply than the ragged blade of irony.

Agony flared in him, crackled along his nerve endings, pulsed through his veins, until it burned itself out. He no longer felt pain.

Or anything else.

And now there was nothing left for him to look forward to but a single, bright moment of summary justice delivered at Avitue’s whim. Really, he could see no other end to his story.

He had lost the ability to want any other end.

Until the guards brought in two unconscious men and shackled them to cots.

It was hard to see what was happening. As part of his torment, Avitue had ordered the room be left in darkness. Dusk’s feeble light filtered through the room’s small window, gray and weak. Like some creature trapped in a cave, Zucker had learned to see in the darkness.

So he was blinded when the soldiers flung open the door, flooding the room with dazzling incandescence. Zucker shielded his eyes, but he still couldn’t see. He strained to hear, but he couldn’t make out their words over the bass thrum of the chill-water pumps and the high-pitched whine of the chiller’s compressor.

And then the soldiers were gone.

Who had they brought? Zucker wondered. More dissidents to join him up against a wall at a time of Avitue’s choosing?

He drifted over to the chiller and tapped the little touch screen that served as the machine’s control panel. Automatically, the screen illuminated, bathing the room in a dim, blue glow. Avitue



might have condemned him to darkness, but a clever man could always find a little light.

The closer man laid with his back to him. All Zucker could tell was that he was a MechWarrior and that he was hurt, perhaps badly. The other man, the man in coveralls, was facing him. The blue half-light twisted his features, hiding the hollows of his eyes in shadow. Zucker studied the man's face expecting to see one of his lance mates.

And then his breath caught. This man... This... *This was the tech.* Bob Orson, or whatever the hell his real name was.

And suddenly Zucker recognized the man in the other cot, the curve of his back, the shape of his head.

Father.

Zucker's vision blurred and he quickly knelt by the old man's side, feeling for a pulse. No, Blake no! And then... *There.* The soft, steady beat of life. He swallowed. Gulped down a mouthful of air.

His father was alive.

How could this be? Avitue had told him she would slaughter every last man and woman who served at Corean and he'd believed her more completely than he'd ever believed anything in his life. So how come his father lived?

Unless the Feds had won.

Zucker shook his head.

It was like, like he'd woken up in a different world, full of strange, impossible things. Could Avitue be torturing him right now? Could his mind have snapped under the weight of terror and grief?

"If it has," he whispered, "I don't want to wake up."

But if the Feds had won, how had Avitue managed to capture Orson and his father? He shook his head.

His father's body was covered with black bruises and his left arm looked like it was badly broken. He had ejected, Zucker realized. He'd ejected and retreating Blakist forces had taken him prisoner.

But that still didn't explain the tech.

Unless Orson knew that father had fallen and—



Zucker swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. *Orson had come for his father.* Showing the kind of devotion that—

Zucker closed his eyes.

That a son shows his father.

Zucker had been replaced. *Replaced in his father's heart.*

And that's when Zucker realized that he'd been wrong. He hadn't lost the ability to hurt. No, not at all. The proof was in what he felt now. Oh, hell yeah. He could still hurt. Pain was a bottomless pit, a black hole bored into the cold heart of infinity and Zucker was falling.

Yeah.

He was falling.



The Falls, Cormarc Falls

Avitue stood rooted to the hardwood floor of the hotel dining room she had converted to her command and control center, chin cupped in her left fist, staring at an area map on the large wall screen.

Like most military commanders, Avitue understood that winning battles was largely about reading maps, and she liked what she saw on this one. Davion's forces would be funneled into specific kill zones. Good.

The thing she did *not* like was not on the map. And no amount of staring at the wall screen would help. She turned and scanned the room for the answer to the one problem she didn't know how to solve.

The room was filled with people: Zetas installing screens and holotables, Epsilon staffers loading reports and intel, Iota troopers standing guard, all of them working hard to look busy so they wouldn't have to meet their commander's eyes.

Avitue drew a deep breath and smelled the fear on them, sharp and acrid. Steadying. *Real*.

She rode a terrible, monstrous wave that peaked at euphoria and then crashed into an unbearable black desolation. She closed her eyes and shook her head. She would face the abyss. She had to.

Because that's what the Blessed Blake demanded of her.

She opened her eyes, yanked her attention back to the room, which was filled with people. What it was *not* full of was furniture, because an hour before she'd had an infantry squad pile the dining room's beautiful tables with their white linen tablecloths and matching hand-carved chairs and the polished silver and fine crystal on the back lawn and set it all afire.

And when the squad leader had hesitated as she knew he would, confusion clouding his features, she'd pulled the slug thrower from her hip and shot him right between the eyes.

There'd been no fucking hesitation after that.

It was wasteful, she knew, and psychotic, but that's why she'd done it. She wanted her troops to think she was crazy.

Fear was the one instrument of command left to her.



Because delegation sure as hell was gone.

She had the perfect plan, the perfect opportunity, the perfect *moment* to crush Jackson Davion. What she did *not* have was an officer to execute that plan.

Zucker was under arrest. Armaros was dead. Geist was dead. McQuinn was a subliterate moron. Horell froze under pressure. Bronson was competent—the merc could handle a stand-up battle—but he didn't have the same flare for battlefield innovation of say...

Zucker.

Zucker. Now why did she keep coming back to that name?

How bad were things if Word of Blake's greatest hope was a traitor?

Of its own accord, her right hand found the butt of her slug thrower and her long, slim fingers wrapped themselves around the weapon.

And for some unknown reason all her people struggled to work harder.



**HVAC Equipment Room, The Falls, Cormarc Falls
New Avalon, Crucis March, Federated Suns
3 February 3073**

The familiar man stepped toward Doucette and offered his hand, obviously meaning to help him stand. The dusty light from the window illuminated a kind face with wide brown eyes. Doucette blinked rapidly trying to— It was Jerry... Evans. *No*. That was a lie. That wasn't this man's name. This man was . .

Geoffrey Zucker.

Nausea roiled Doucette's stomach and his head felt like it was filled with broken glass. The smart thing would've been to lie back. Or at least accept Zucker's help.

Doucette glanced at the outstretched hand.

And lunged at Zucker.

He got in one good roundhouse to the Wobbie's jaw, but it wasn't enough. White light exploded in his head, popping, like a light bulb letting go. And then Zucker got in a blow to his ribs and Doucette dropped, his breathing ragged and hard, his face pressed against the cold concrete floor.

"Sum... Bitch," Doucette gasped

"I saved your life," said Zucker indignantly. "*Twice.*"

"Lied to me," croaked Doucette.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. *Orson.*"

"I—" Doucette took a deep breath, trying to clear his head.

"What the hell is your real name anyway?" asked Zucker.

"Serg— I mean, Lieutenant Robert Doucette."

Zucker snorted and shook his head. "You still can't tell the truth, can you?"

Doucette jabbed a hand at the old man's cot. "*This*— This is your *father*. Should be in hospital, instead of holding us. Down here."

Zucker shook his head. "You really have no idea, do you?"



"No idea. About what?"

"I'm a prisoner here, too," Zucker snapped.

"I—" Doucette squinted at the other man. "What?"

"Perhaps you wouldn't be so fast to denigrate my small acts of mercy if you knew their true cost," said Zucker coldly.

Doucette closed his eyes and tried to breathe. His head hurt. Probably light concussion. Hard to think.

Could this be a trick?

"What happened?" he managed.

Zucker sighed. "It turns out that my commander was suspicious of me from the beginning. Because of who my father was. Because I spared *your* life. She used me to drive Davion from the Den."

Doucette shook his head. "I don't—"

"Look, it doesn't matter," Zucker snapped. "All that matters to me is that we keep father alive."

Doucette glanced down at the old man's prone form and then back up to Zucker. He slowly nodded.

That was at least one thing they could agree on.



Zucker gently touched his father's forehead. Burning up.

"How is he?" asked Doucette softly.

"Fever," said Zucker dully. "Infection from the compound fracture, I think. If he doesn't get medical treatment soon..." Zucker's voice trailed off.

"I gave him some antibiotics," said Doucette. "Before we were captured."

"Thank you," said Zucker stiffly. "I don't suppose you have any more?"

Doucette shook his head. "Your friends took my pack."



Zucker nodded absently. Of course. His father's was going to die in this wretched equipment room and he wasn't even going to get to say— What?

What would he say to his father if he could?



Zucker's face looked pale and haggard. Somehow the man had aged twenty years since Doucette saw him in the Acheron Forest, ten in the last hour alone. If he was acting, it was the best damn job Doucette had ever seen.

The Wobbie stared down at his father's face with a swirling mixture of emotions. Sometimes Doucette thought he saw shame or regret or anger. Now what he saw was much more primal.

Despair.

He licked his lips. "Zucker," he said softly.

Nothing. The Wobbie was still in a trance.

"Zucker," said Doucette a little more loudly.

Zucker looked up this time. "What?"

"You said before. You drove Davion from the Den."

Zucker scowled, drew a deep breath. "Avitue told us she was going to nuke the Mountain."

Doucette snorted. "And that just broke you up."

"Not at all," said Zucker icily. "The Den is a legitimate military target. And the Davions are the pimps of the Inner Sphere. If there was a way to kill them all, I'd press the button myself."

Doucette suddenly wanted to hit Zucker again. If he thought he could have done it without passing out he would have killed him. He drew a deep breath, trying to keep his anger in check. "So?"

Zucker looked down. "I couldn't live with the civilian casualties." He exhaled slowly. "So I went to the people in the mountains and told them a plague was coming, a newly discovered hemorrhagic fever. I tried to move them out before the Den got hit. You know. Without revealing Avitue's plans."



Doucette blinked. "That was... smart."

Zucker laughed bitterly. "No. It wasn't." He shook his head. "MIIO saw through my little ruse. As Avitue knew they would. The whole nuke gambit was a bluff from the beginning. Avitue just wanted to sell it to your side so Davion would run. Set up her play for Corean. And I was just the tool to make that happen."

"You got played," breathed Doucette, "by both sides."

Zucker winced. "Yes," he said stiffly, "Real smart."

"Doan have to be smart," croaked Pops. "Have to be *good*."



Zucker's head jerked down. His father was looking up at him with those dark eyes.

For a second Zucker couldn't breathe. He felt a heaviness in his chest and his throat closed up. Suddenly he couldn't talk.

"Pops," said Doucette, "how do you feel?"

Zucker glanced up, startled. For a second he'd forgotten Doucette was there. And then he was suddenly furious. Who was Doucette to intrude on this moment? *You son of a bitch*.

And then somehow his father actually *chuckled*. "Well, Bob, since you asked, it turns out I actually feel like shit. Thanks for asking."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" asked Doucette. Zucker found he still couldn't talk.

"How 'bout getting the toaster-lovers off my God damn planet," said father.

Doucette laughed. "What do you think old Doc Ogutu would say to that?"

And suddenly Zucker couldn't take it any more. "*Father*."

Both man abruptly stopped laughing and turned to look at him.

Zucker swallowed painfully in his tight throat. "Father, I—" And all of a sudden he didn't know what to say, didn't know how to name the welter of emotions that filled him.



Father stared up at him, his jaw trembling, not saying anything either, just looking up with those dark eyes.

Zucker cast about for something to say.

Was he sorry for the things he had done? Yes. And then an icy voice inside him said, *No*.

Did he respect his father? Yes, because his father was a good man and a great MechWarrior. And no, because his father had contributed to the darkness that had swept across the Inner Sphere.

Zucker would do anything humanly possible to save his father's life. And he would work tirelessly to destroy everything his father held dear.

Zucker looked within himself and found there was only one word that encompassed these raging emotions.

"I love you, father," he whispered.

Father blinked several times and swallowed hard. "Do I have a son again, Geoff?" his father said in a broken voice. "Is that what you're telling me?"

Zucker straightened. "You always had a son," he said coldly.

"Pops," said Doucette softly.

"Shut up, Bob," father snapped. "This is none of your damn business."

"Go to hell, Pops," Doucette snarled. "He saved my life."

"And that makes everything OK. All the things he did before," father shot back.

"I don't know," Doucette shouted. The tech shook his head, his mouth working, but no words coming out. "I don't know where the line is any more, Pops. Do you?"

Father licked his lips and looked from Zucker to Doucette.

"He destroyed himself to protect New Avalon's civilians." Doucette shook his head. "What more would you ask of a soldier?"

"Sure," said father, "if it's not a trick."

Father's words were like a blow to the solar plexus and they almost broke Zucker. His legs trembled and he almost went down.



Somehow, *somehow*, he did not lose his composure, but it was a close thing.

"No, it's not a trick," said Zucker. "In fact, as soon as Avitue recovers from the defeat you handed her at Corean, I expect to be executed. Perhaps," he said coldly, "she will let you watch."

Father gasped and the blood drained out of his face. Zucker took grim pleasure in it. The old man had never had the strength to face the truth.

"Don't you see, Pops," said Doucette. "You're almost out of time."

Zucker saw the old man's eyes fill with tears. "You betrayed the Federated Suns."

"I betrayed the Davions," said Zucker. "I never betrayed the people of the Suns."

"They are the same," father said shakily.

"*They are not*," Zucker roared. "Old fool," he said sadly. "How many worlds did Hanse Davion 'liberate' from the Capellans? Who rules St. Ives and Tikonov now? What did all those soldiers die for?" He shook his head. "How many times do the border worlds change hands. And how many of the boys and girls of the inner worlds died to make it all happen? And for *what*? For the glory of the Davions? By the way, *which* Davion? Jackson? Yvonne? Victor?" He paused. "Katherine?"

Father slowly shook his head. "How can you possibly hate everything I love?" he whispered.

"And how can you serve those who would destroy everything we both love?" Zucker shot back.

"Gentlemen—" began Doucette, but before the tech could get his thought out, the door to the equipment room swung open.



Doucette turned and saw a young woman in a ComStar white form-fitting uniform step into the equipment room, flanked by a pair of Wobbie guards. She was beautiful, the kind of beautiful your best friend's kid sister might grow into one day. She wore her



dark hair long, touching her shoulders. Her eyes were translucent brown. And she had lovely skin the color of cream.

He guessed she was a doctor, because of the white uniform. He pointed at Pops. "This man needs immediate medical attention."

She smiled. "Well, we will certainly take that under advisement—" she glanced at the bar on his coveralls, "—Leftenant, but for the moment we have more pressing matters to attend to."

"More pressing matters?" asked Doucette. "This man's going to *die*, if he doesn't get immediate help."

"Yes, well, we are engaged in a war," said the woman. "Sometimes that happens."

"Do you know this is—" Doucette began.

Zucker caught his eyes and slightly shook his head, once. The gesture sent a chill down Doucette's spine.

The woman folded her arms across her chest. "No," she said in a bored voice.

Doucette looked over at the old man, who, thank God, wasn't wearing any insignia on his togs.

"This is Sergeant Major Carsten Thompkins of the Assault Guards. The best MechWarrior this side of Victor Steiner-Davion. So if you won't help us, doctor—"

"She's not a doctor," said Zucker. "Gentlemen, may I introduce to you Precentor Avitue, Commander of all Word of Blake Forces in the New Avalon system."

Doucette looked back at the young woman.

"That's right," she said. "And I'm afraid I'm not here to attend to your needs, Leftenant, or those of the Sergeant Major." She looked at Pops's son. "I'm here for Zucker."



Doucette thought if he lived to be a thousand he would never forget the look he saw on Zucker's face at that precise moment. The man drew himself up, ramrod straight, and a look of unbreakable resolve settled into the lines of his face. Like he was ready to do anything it required to support the things he believed in.



Even die.

Doucette had never seen a clearer example of total bravery in his whole life.

And that was the problem. A weaker man would have given in to his father or to his commander. A weaker man would have pulled back from the brink months before.

A weaker man wouldn't have made Avitue kill him just to prove her point.

Without a word of complaint or a single backward glance, Zucker walked out of the room.

Fanaticism. With Wobbies it was an occupational hazard.

The door slammed shut with a terrible, final sound, shutting out all light.

And somewhere in the darkness Pops began to sob, a small, almost gentle sound of unspeakable grief that for all his strength he couldn't hold back. So the father was weaker than the son.

Somehow that gave Doucette a tiny measure of comfort, a tiny sense of relief that even after all he'd been through Pops was still human.

He reached down and placed his hand on the old man's shoulder.

And listened to him cry in the darkness.



Zucker walked alongside Avitue, not speaking, gazing straight ahead, seemingly unconcerned about the two needler rifles leveled at his back. The man had achieved some strange Zen state of being despite his impending execution.

Astounding.

Somehow Zucker never ceased to surprise her.

"Aren't you going to beg for your life?" she asked.

He snorted. "Would it make any difference?"

She looked at him. "It might."



He rolled his eyes.

"Are you so eager to die that you will not say anything in your own defense?"

He stopped and turned toward her. The guards automatically tensed, but Avitue warned them off with a look.

"I will tell you what I told the two prisoners back there," he said. "I serve the people of New Avalon, the people of the Inner Sphere.

"If I wear a Word of Blake uniform it's because I feel Blake's vision offers the best chance for these people. That decision has already cost me my home, and the love of my father. After that—" he looked away from her. "The loss of my life doesn't seem such a high price to pay."

"By the mercy of the Blessed Blake," said Avitue, "you are the most dangerous of men—an idealist."

"Well," said Zucker dryly, "then it is probably better for all of us that you shoot me now and get it over with."

Avitue felt a smile curl across her face. "Oh, how I've missed your sense of humor, Geoffrey. It's almost a pity you have to be executed."

She turned away from him and began walking. He followed her.

The old Zucker would have taken up the gauntlet she'd just thrown down, but not this man. He said nothing. Apparently he'd learned something in confinement.

"I am thinking," said Avitue, "that it would be unfortunate for the Word of Blake to waste the ammunition needed to kill you. I'd much rather have the Feds do it for me."

"Turn me over to the Feds and I'm certain Jackson Davion will oblige you."

She heard the bitterness in his voice and peered at him. "You really hate the Davions don't you?"

He shrugged. "They are the poster children for everything that is wrong with the Inner Sphere." His voice dropped. "They have brought nothing but terror and destruction to New Avalon. And yet the people still love them."

This last sentence was spoken with surprise and awe.



And a touch of hurt.

Right then it occurred to Avitue that if she returned Zucker to his *Legacy* he would fight for Word of Blake. Oh, he didn't like her and he sure as hell didn't trust her, but that was nothing compared to the hatred he felt for the Davions.

Avitue might be a monster, true, but in Zucker's eyes her crimes paled next to those of the Davions. She was a monster.

But they had failed him.

And right then Geoffrey Zucker's fate rested on a knife edge, delicately balanced between battlefield glory and death before a firing squad. She had come to his little prison with the intention of executing him, but she was no longer sure.

She turned to look at him, trying to decide. "Zucker," she said softly.

He looked at her expectantly.

"Who are those prisoners? The men in the equipment room?"

Zucker shrugged. "A couple idiots from the Assault Guards."

She placed her hand on his arm, stopping him again. Met his gaze. "No. Don't settle into the old games. I need you to tell me the truth."

She looked at him and he looked at her, and suddenly Avitue realized that Zucker understood. He understood his answer to this question would determine if he lived or died and he hesitated not because he was trying to decide how to sway her, but because he was trying to decide which he wanted.

Then he drew in a deep breath and answered her question.

And she decided.



Twenty minutes later the door to the equipment room opened again and the beautiful woman returned, arms folded casually across her chest, a faint smile stretched across her face. Doucette just couldn't quite bring himself to believe this beautiful young thing was the author of all New Avalon's torments.



In addition to the pair of guards, another officer accompanied her, a tall scarecrow of a man with a shock of iron gray hair. He went immediately to Pops and knelt down by the test pilot, and began to administer drugs.

"A doctor," Doucette whispered.

"Yes," she said. "As it turned out, after dealing with my problem, I found I had time to deal with yours."

"Thank you," Doucette said stiffly.

"Oh, don't thank me yet," said Avitue happily. "At least not until I've had the chance to tell you what is going to happen next."

Doucette carefully said nothing.

"Hmmm, nothing to say? Well, perhaps you are smarter than you look. Would you like the good news or the bad news first?"

Doucette remained silent.

"Well, let's do the good news first, shall we? I've always been a good news girl. The good news is I will not have to execute Demi-Precentor Zucker, after all."

Across the room, Pops gasped.

"I don't care," snapped Doucette. "Why should I care? One less toaster-lover in the world is fine with me."

"Toaster-lover?" She made a *tsk* sound. "Such language. Oh, you do have a mouth on you, don't you, Lieutenant Orson?"

Doucette froze.

"And that's the bad news, I'm afraid," said Avitue. "In order to save himself, Zucker gave you up." She glanced at Pops. "Both of you."

She sketched a little bow in the direction of the old man. "I cannot tell you how honored I am to meet Captain Aremas Heuaventas the lead test pilot of the Legion Project and one of its chief technicians."

Pops closed his eyes and his face contorted with pain. And Doucette knew if Pops hadn't been broken before, he was now.

She touched Doucette on the shoulder and leaned in, whispered: "We are going to have such fun, we three."

