

Lancer

A novel by Elliot S! Maggin

Chapter 3 Flourishes

The young man did not like problems. He found that they went away more readily when he called them “situations.” It was like setting right the course of a sailboat. There were only three issues: the sail, the rudder and the craft itself. You determined your course through the interaction of these three variables, each in conflict with the other two. When the boat was about to go over and you approached the issue as a problem, then the boat simply went over and you got all wet. If your situation was that the three factors in conflict were making the boat unstable, then the obvious thing to do is let go of either the sail or the rudder and the boat becomes stable quite suddenly. You may be facing in a direction you do not much like, but you can correct that situation too. Conflict was good.

It was a surprise to no one that the young man told his father that he was not interested in a career in public service. He was home from the war, tempered by the loss of many friends including a brother with whom he had always been close. With degrees in economics and international affairs, he was as well educated as any of his family or friends. He had written a decently regarded book on contemporary history and he wanted to write more. He had spoken to a former professor about joining the faculty of the

university from which he graduated. On the other hand, his father was wealthy, ambitious and enormously accomplished, and did not think much of his son's aspirations.

“Writing? Teaching?” the old man said. “Sipping tea at faculty meetings, burying yourself in libraries, composing long tedious monographs on the doings of your intellectual inferiors? I thought you were a meat-eater, boy.”

That was how most conversations with his father ended for almost two years after the son returned from the war. Then late one evening, over after-dinner drinks and in front of his mother, his grandfather, his brothers and sisters and a handful of dinner guests, it occurred to the young man that he was tired of his father's serial ridicule.

“It's me, Dad,” he said. “Look at me. I'm not my big brother, right?”

He did not think either the rebuke to his father, or the reference to his lost brother amounted to much. He missed his brother as much as anyone else did. He supposed he had the right to refer to the missing son, but he had no warning of his father's reaction.

The old man looked at his wife, who was actually holding her breath. Maybe it was the alcohol and maybe it was the hour and maybe it was just something else that happened during the day. But the old bull-moose of a father choked audibly, got up from his chair and stomped out of the room. No one saw him again until the following afternoon.

A week later the contemplative young war veteran chose a friendly Congressional district not far from home and filed for the seat. He turned out to be much better at winning elections than he or anyone else expected. That was the end of his career in academia, but he set the sailboat right.

Now he was grown to mid-life with a wealth of experiences that had proved valuable through the years, none of which seemed to apply to his current situation. He was kidnapped by captors who, if they are to be believed, had meant to nab someone else. Nonetheless, he was stuck here for about a year according to these blunderers. Apparently it was important to his captors to return him but it did not seem to matter how long that took. And here he was in a room that had no evident exit, with a child, also kidnapped in error, who was – who knew? – as likely as not to panic and become hysterical at any moment. As a problem it was insurmountable but as a situation, he could always improve matters.

The key was that it was important to their three odd kidnappers to keep them safe. He hoped it was more important to them that the pair were safe, than it was to keep them away from the rest of the world.



“Get that pile of clothes, would you, Shipmate?” the President asked Davy.

Davy got up and scrambled toward the pile of simple tan outfits that the committee had given them to replace their wet clothes.

“Not those,” the President said. “These.” He went to the other mess of his suit and Davy’s jacket and school clothes. “Yeah, these are almost dry. Bring those over here too, would you Dave?”

The President fished around the pocket of the jacket he had arrived in and pulled out a small flip-top cigar lighter. He opened it, blew on the flint wheel that was there to make a spark, tapped it a little to see if it was damp and spun the wheel to try and get it to flame. It gave off a quick glint of light but nothing came of it.

“Still wet. Damn.” He put it up to his mouth and blew over it as he breathed.

“Want me to do that?” Davy asked. “What are we doing?”

The President handed the lighter to the boy, who blew lightly over it to dry the flint. “Starting a fire.”

“Really?”

“Maybe. Why? You worried?”

“I don’t know.” Davy thought a moment and said, “No. We’ve got to get out, right?”

“Yes we do.”

“Are we going to burn a hole in the wall?”

“I hope not.”

“Why do we need a fire?”

“Figure it out,” the President said.

“Okay,” and now Davy had something to think about while he blew the cigar lighter dry.

The President spread the boy’s clothing and his own over the floor, periodically feeling corners of garments to test their dryness.

“Sir?” Davy asked.

“Yes sir,” the President answered.

“Are you scared at all?”

“I suppose so. You?”

“Not very much,” Davy said. “It’s weird. I’m just kind of confused, I think.”

“Uh-huh. So who are you?”

“Who?”

“You. Who are you? You kind of know who I am. Who are you?”

“I’m a kid.”

“Right. Do you get good grades?”

“Yeah, sorta.”

“What’s a sorta good grade?”

“I mean I never get the best grades in the class. Somebody always shows up who’s a little ahead of me.”

“So you’re a competitor.”

“I guess.”

“And you’re what? About thirteen?”

“Next week. Or rather a thousand years ago give or take.”

“Depends on your perspective.”

“Yeah.”

“Well my grades weren’t that good. Not when I was your age, at least. But I read a lot. Do you read a lot?”

“About a book a month. Is that a lot?”

“Sounds like a lot. What kind of books?”

“I just read a biography of Louis Agassiz.”

“Who?”

“Louis Agassiz. He was a biologist. He discovered the Ice Age.”

“Right. The fish doctor.”

“Yeah.”

“He was a serious racist.”

“Really?”

“Well he was a product of his time, I expect. Sort of like us. He advocated separation of the races. He believed that different races were different species and inherently unequal.”

“That wasn’t in the book.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would be.”

“Now I don’t like him any more.”

“Good. Neither do I. Ever hear of Mary Bethune?”

“Who?”

“They want to put up a statue to her in a park near where I live. I keep meaning to find out who she was.”

There was no sense of time in here. It could have been day or night, an hour or a week, before Davy put his eye up next to the lighter and stared carefully at the flint for maybe the hundredth time. “You want to try it now, sir?”

“Dry?”

“I think so.”

The President took the lighter and spun the flint, and a thin spout of flame came up from it. He held it under a corner of one of the plain tan shirts like those Davy and the President were wearing. Nothing happened. The flimsy material of the garment showed no hint of charring.

“That’s not good,” Davy said.

“It’s fine,” and the man picked up his own trousers and held them in the flame. “It means they’re concerned enough to give us flame-proof clothing.”

A small hole burned through the fabric of the President’s pants and smoke came up from it. “Which is more than I can say for the Secret Service.” The President leaned his face toward the flame and he blew air over the top of it. After a minute or so a spark grew on an edge of the growing hole and developed into a flame. The President bunched up the pants around the burning part and the flame grew. Soon the President was holding a torch and had some trouble keeping his hand out of the fire.

“Come on over here,” the man told the boy. “Bring that shirt. That looks flammable.”

It was. Soon both the man and the boy were both holding flaming articles of clothing against the base of different parts of the wooden wall. The wall was starting to turn dark.

“I get it,” Davy said.

“You do?”

“Yeah. You think there’s some kind of fire alarm in here.”

“I’m hoping so. Pretty good, kid.”

Gradually the room grew smoky, but not enough to make them cough. They both replenished their fuel two or three times. “It isn’t working,” the boy said.

“Not yet.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“What if we have to stay cooped up in here for a year? Is that any worse?”

“No,” Davy said after thinking about it, “no worse.”

It took until the pair both crouched under a thickening cloud of smoke and the temperature of the enclosed space rose to cause droplets of saline to tumble from both their chins and their noses ...

“You sure you’re all right, Davy?”

“I’m fine, sir, unless you can think of a better plan.”

“Not likely. I’m a bit focused at the moment.”

...for the smoke to begin to sweep away from them and dissipate, and a large gap appeared in the far wall.

“Run for it!” the man barked, dropping his swatch of flaming cloth and diving through the cloud and across the room.

The boy was close behind. Both found their way through the opening and they were still in a smoky watery-eyed haze, tumbling blindly over the soft ground, when they were able to turn around and see where they had emerged.



It was time for Geneva to join the celebration.

She saw the raised trunk down the path that she walked through the city. She heard the rumble of music and splashing. It was not far away.

She could see no one in the city. Everyone was inside, safe, if there was anyone. It was a shame, Geneva thought, that in such a beautiful city so few people could gather the nerve to venture into the sunlight.

There was the party, along the periphery of the pool that collected in the caldera of the enormous trunk. It was a short climb to the lip of the caldera. Here, all around the pool, were gathered women, thousands of them of all ages, shapes and sizes. They

danced. They ate and drank and inhaled fumes. They sang. They swam. They flirted. They simulated sexual activity. They wandered off in pairs and trios and who-knew-what numbers to engage in sexual activity.

It was heartwarming.



Davy and the President got up and brushed themselves off and could see no sign of any doorway they might have come through.

“Good riddance,” the man said.

“Really? Are we safe?” from the boy.

“Who knows?” and the President paused a minute, looking around. From what he could see, they were in a vast well tended forest – clean and with lots of worn footpaths going in any number of directions. “Probably not.”

The trees here were shaped oddly, twisted in irregular directions, some intersecting each other from different roots and rising in a single ponderous trunk. Others grew to a height and stopped, but with trunks just as wide, and leaves covering their roofs like green toupées. The other vegetation was unfamiliar too. Plants grew along the paths and among the tree-things in eccentric patterns and with alien flowers of all sorts of colors. The boy would have thought they were on another planet if it weren’t so unlikely. Then he wondered which was less likely: to be a space traveler or a time traveler.

“Where did those goonies say we were, sir? Susquehanna?”

“Goonies?” the man asked.

“Don’t know what else to call them.”

“That’s not bad. Susquehanna is a county in Pennsylvania. Mountainous. Pretty. I’ve been there.”

“Really? I wonder if it’s the same Susquehanna.”

“Couldn’t tell you. There were more bugs, though.”

“Bugs?”

“There aren’t any bugs here. Susquehanna had mosquitoes big enough to carry off a sheep. There aren’t any here.”

“No bugs?”

“Not that I can tell. You see any?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Not that I’m a big mosquito fan, but it doesn’t seem right.”

There was a damp ditch with a trickle of water running down it. The place was alive, despite the absence of wildlife. Davy kicked away damp leaves as he walked, turned over rocks, swatted at the trunks of trees with sticks. There were no insects anywhere. He was not a big mosquito fan either. It certainly smelled like a forest, all green and musky. But still, it was unnatural.

“The place is Susquehanna,” the President observed, rhetorically. The kidnappers are goonies. Now what are you going to call me?”

“Sir?”

“That’s what I mean. I usually don’t have such respectful hallucinations.”

“Do you have a lot of hallucinations?”

“Only lately.”

“Really?”

“No. Joking.”

“Good.”

“They called me Lancer. These goonies did.”

“That’s what the Secret Service called you.”

“Yeah. I kind of like it. They got that right in their history at least.”

“Lancer. Is it really all right to call you that?”

“Who’s going to object? Besides, it’s better than ‘sir’.”

“Sir Lancer.”

“No, just – ” Lancer looked away for a moment. “You hear that?”

There was a sound on the air. Like music.

“That way,” the President pointed to the right.

They walked toward the right as the music got louder. It did not have much rhythm, but there was a heavy melody line. It didn’t repeat very much, but it was pretty in a way that seemed almost primitive. Soon they could hear voices as well. The sounds were nothing distinct, just crowd noises.

“Are we just going to walk in on the party?” Davy asked.

“I’m not sure. What do you think?”

“Me?”

“Is there someone else here?”

“I think we should probably see what’s going on and then figure it out from there.”

They walked a little further. “That’s what I think too.”

The two came upon a broad opening in the wood the size of a stadium. In the center of it was what looked like a stump of a mountainous tree, truncated about forty feet above the ground. That was where the sound came from.

As the two approached they saw people coming and going from the far side of the giant trunk. They were the first people – in fact, the first living beings of any sort – whom they saw since breaking out of their prison.

The pair circled around the base of the trunk and there were more and more people coming and going and lingering. They were all women. Dozen, mostly in pairs, came out of a wide gap in the wall of the trunk on the far side. Some held hands.

“Lancer, they’re holding hands,” Davy said. “They’re all girls.”

“Those two?”

“Yeah, and them too. Over there.”

“You’ve got to have a more flexible view of the variations in culture, kid. In the orient you’ll find men holding hands with men and women with women as an expression of friendship. They think it looks silly when people of the opposite sex hold hands in public. Just something to get used to.”

“And them over there.”

“Who? Over where.”

“By that tree. There. They’re making out.”

“So they are,” the man said, watching the couple for a few moments. He took Davy around the shoulders and into the entryway at the base of the enormous tree stump.

“Think good thoughts, pal,” he said.



“We celebrate today,” Geneva said, “not the resistance of a small group of people, but a collective act of a vast community.”

She stood on a platform with the musicians behind her, and roughly thirteen hundred women before her. The musicians were silent and some of the women were actually listening. There were nearly as many people here as this caldera could hold. Many still swam in the big pool and sunned themselves along the edges.

It was the week of the Glory Stendeck Vaulting Tournament and there were more women here today than there had been at any of the annual events since the Polarian occupation began a generation ago. Glory Stendeck was a performer – a singer and actor of the last century – who was fond of the sport of vaulting. She vaulted recreationally, as many people did, simply as an excuse to be outdoors, to spend time with her friends and her family, but as she grew older and wealthier she began to sponsor this annual women’s vaulting tournament here in Susquehanna to popularize the sport and give other women the opportunity to spend time with their friends and, as a bonus, to see some of the best woman vaulters in the world play.

Many of the world’s best woman vaulters in the world, as it happened, were lesbian. After awhile, as Glory’s tournament increased the popularity of women vaulting as a spectator sport, many of the women’s vaulting fans were lesbian as well. So it came to pass in the years following Glory’s death that the Glory Stendeck Vaulting Tournament began to attract a large audience of homosexual women. Every year for many years the number of women who came to attend the annual tournament grew until from out of the sky the forces of an alien race came to use the planet as a weapons disposal site.

The occupation was now forty years old. Nearly a billion have died. Entire peoples and histories have been obliterated. The face of the planet has changed. And for three entire years no one showed up at the Glory Stendeck Vaulting Tournament. Then they began to trickle back.

“This year,” Geneva said to the crowd who may or may not have been listening, “we have sold twenty-nine thousand six hundred fifty-one tickets. That is the most attendees we have had in thirty-eight years.”

There was some applause, some splashing in the water, and one of the band members tinkled on a high-pitched instrument.

“While the people of the city around us huddle in their burrows and pursue the loneliness of the secure, here we are in the open air.”

There was some more applause from the far side of the big pool. Two young women in water suits and boots who stood on a platform to one side of the pool began to dance together without the music. The tournament organizers hired them to dance on the platform and that was what they had been doing for most of the morning.



Lancer and Davy walked out of the winding path along the inside of the tree-like walls of the structure just in time to hear Geneva say, “So welcome, goodladies. Welcome to the Glory.”

There was almost no response among the crowd to this greeting, and no one seemed to have any reaction to the fact that Lancer and Davy were the only males here.

“People haven’t changed,” the man said.

“Haven’t changed?” Davy took in the scene with wide eyes. “They all dress the same, except for those girls dancing up there. Is that dancing? They live in trees. They kidnap people in time.”

“They don’t notice anything they don’t expect to see.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard this old story about the Indians on the island where Columbus first landed.”

“On San Salvador, right?”

“We’re not sure.”

“Really?”

“He called it San Salvador, but who knows? So they sat at anchor for a few days in an inlet and once in awhile a few Indians would come out and stare and stare, as if they were looking off in the distance beyond the ships. Then once in awhile one would suddenly see something and he’d jump up and down, or he’d hide, or he’d get an astonished expression across his face.”

“What changed?”

“Nothing. It’s just that for the first time that guy would see the three ships.”

“Wait. Weren’t they there all along?”

“Sure they were, but they were like nothing these people had ever seen before, so they couldn’t integrate the sight of them into their experience. They just wouldn’t see them.”

“Like when I was breathing water in the tank.”

“Like that? What did you see then?”

“I think I kept seeing the cars on the street in town for a long time, and then I just didn’t see anything. It was like I was asleep when I was awake.”

“It was probably like that.”

A woman walked up to them wearing the same tan outfit that nearly everyone else wore, with a rip down the front that made more of her chest visible. She held a hand up in the air and an empty tray floated above it.

“Can I get you ladies anything?” she asked.