

# **Lancer**

**A novel by Elliot S! Maggin**

## **Chapter 2**

### **Ruffles**

It was on Gamma's initiative that the Ad Hoc Committee to Save the World assembled to carry out her plan. It was a good idea and a good plan, she thought, though very complex. It involved an exhaustive familiarity with remote history, which she herself provided. It also required a clear understanding of esoteric technologies as well as meticulous mathematical precision. The technologist was Manasa Simstatin, Gamma's colleague on the faculty of the South Reston Institute. The mathematician was Emfour Consulate, whom Gamma knew from the work Emfour did in the field of cultural probability before the invasion.

Manasa was an archaeologist by trade who led the team that uncovered and restored the fabled Columbia Tachyon Drive from a whirlpool crater underneath the Harlem Bay. The probability patterns that Emfour contrived a generation ago predicted the coming of the Polarians and the extended occupation of large tracts of the world. It was at Emfour's urging that scholars hid and protected enormous libraries of data at various locations below the skin of the Earth. And Gamma was the image engineer, the theorist who spent most of her professional career picking among factual anomalies to reconstruct the origins of civilization from the bits and pieces that survived the billows of

history. Gamma created what has come to be the world's narrative that scholars generally accept.

One of the things that Gamma discovered was that deep in the past, in a time whose dates and places she was able to determine with painstaking exactitude, there lived a powerful leader of great masses of people. He was a man who through the force of his will and the engine of his words could move men, women and children to rise as one and act in their collective interest and that of their nation. He was a hero, a warrior. Legend remembers him as the Last of the Barbarian Presidents. Gamma determined that he was called Lancer.

“Have we isolated the moment?” Manasa asked.

“We have,” Gamma said. “I fed the coordinates to the tachyon Drive.”

“Within what degrees of tolerance?”

“Six milliseconds of latitude, thirteen milliseconds of time, two milliseconds of altitude and,” she paused and continued, “six hundred twenty-two milliseconds of longitude.”

“Why such a variance in longitude?” Emfour wanted to know.

“It is the best I can do. It should be fine,” Gamma said. “Please take action, Manasa, before I lose the window I have.”

Manasa spun a dial and wiped the shadow of his hand over a bulb on the face of the tachyon drive control console and said, “Done.”

And it was done.



His wife called it his posing-for-a-stamp look. It showed up when, even for a moment, something came across his perception that he did not quite understand. He tucked the inside of his lower lip between his rows of teeth and raised his chin to the slightest degree and he froze his eyelids so he didn't blink until he knew what he was going to do next. Generally it went like this:

“Mr. President,” the elderly woman reporter at the press conference stood up so that her flowered hat was slightly higher than the back of the chair she had been sitting in, “have you made a decision as to the location of the statue of Mary McLeod Bethune, now that the private funds have been gathered to erect it?”

He had no idea who Mary McLeod Bethune was. Is. Might have been. The name is not even vaguely familiar.

Does he pretend he's on top of the issue? Does he say the appropriate authorities will evaluate the funding and make a decision in the coming days? Weeks? Months? No. There was too much danger of being exposed to be faking it.

Does he evade the question? Say that he has to familiarize himself with the issues involved? No, that won't work if the issues involved turn out not in fact to be significant.

Does he ask the woman for some elaboration to familiarize him with the players? No, that would give her a rostrum to declaim on the merits and virtues of whoever it was. This was his pulpit and he needed to keep it.

What he did once he posed for the stamp was knit his brow and silently mouth the word “Bethune” as the woman finished her question. That pulled a laugh from the other reporters – always a good sign. “We'll see what the status of the funding is,” he said, “and we'll look into it.” For some reason that got another laugh.

The problem now was that the only thing clear about this current situation was that he was not going to finesse his way out of it by being engaging. The President was floating – fully dressed in his dark suit and tie – in a closed tank filled to capacity with water. He was curiously comfortable. He was breathing something odd. Maybe it was water. That seemed to be the only thing going in and out of his lungs. He had no sense of the passage of any time at all since he leaned over the door of the convertible to reach for the boy’s hand. His eyes were open and the walls of the tank seemed clear, but he could not see past his reflection in them without floating to the wall and shielding the glare with his hands.

He looked ridiculous with the flaps of his coat floating up and his slacks blowing out like bubbles and his cheeks puffed out like Dizzy Gillespie. He floated as far as the tank would let him and cupped his hands to shield his eyes against the clear wall. There was another wall beyond it, an uneven irregular gray wall. He went around to another side of the tank and looked out there and he blinked several times at what he saw. There was the room the tank sat in, about twenty or thirty feet long with rough-surfaced curved walls all around, and beside the tank he was in, was another tank. In that other tank was the boy from the side of the road.

The boy sat cross-legged on the floor of his own tank, unmoving except for his deep slow breathing. He breathed water, or whatever this clear watery liquid was. Aside the tank containing the boy were three figures, two men and a woman, watching both tanks with clinical detachment.

“Where are we?” the President attempted to demand, but the liquid filling his mouth and lungs let out nothing but a gurgling sound.

The three looked from the boy's tank to the President's as if in response to his burbles. Then they looked back at one another, conferring as if he and the child were inanimate objects, as if they were paintings hanging on the wall. The woman was the tallest of the three and she appeared to be nearly as tall as the President himself, but this was difficult to determine from the President's vantage point. All three wore a simple shirt and trousers, all of an identical shade of tan.

"Where are we?" the President attempted to ask again, more forcefully now but no more understandably.

All three looked up at him now, the woman walking toward him, studying him. She knew he was attempting to communicate but she made no effort to reciprocate.

"The boy in the other tank," he said, approximately. "He can't handle this. He'll go into shock if you don't let him out."

It was all watery gibberish as far as what he could hear himself saying, but the woman looked over at the boy when he said it. Somehow, he was communicating with them. The woman looked at the President again, impassively, then turned to face her two companions.



"He expresses concern," Gamma told Emfour and Manasa.

"He is justified," Emfour agreed. "Do you have a recommendation?"

"The younger one appears traumatized and unlikely to bring about a management issue." Gamma said. "It may well be prudent to reoxidize his system and release him into the room."

“With us?” Manasa was dubious. “We have no experience with the barbarian character.”

“He is a boy,” Emfour said. “I concur with Gamma.” He ran the shadow of his hand up a corner of Davy’s tank and the passing of the shadow left behind a string of eight small bulbs that had been invisible before. “Do we have a consensus?”

“I am tentative,” from Manasa.

Emfour held his hand in the air away from the line of bulbs.

“But the immediate consequences appear negligible,” Manasa continued. “I endorse the action.”

Gamma nodded at Emfour, who flicked a fingertip over a sequence of the bulbs.

As Emfour and the two others stepped back the liquid began to drain quickly from Davy’s tank through a shallow trench around the perimeter of its base. Davy looked up from his sitting position and seemed to notice that the top surface of the water was lowering toward him. He squinted, blinked a few times, looked around. From where he sat he probably could not see past the reflections in the tank walls. He was unlikely to have any idea the tank was in a room with the President and three other people.



Davy got up to a squatting position, looking at the surface of the water as it dropped toward him. After a moment he realized he was breathing water somehow. He wondered whether he could still breathe air. He began to rise to his feet, to poke his head out the top of the receding water, but before he could rise he felt a tightening in his chest. Suddenly, before he could reach a standing position, a bright green glow shone under his shirt from the middle of his chest. Suddenly Davy had an urge to cough hard.

He coughed, and a torrent of liquid flew out of his chest and throat. It spewed like a stream from a fire hose and gushed out above the lowering water level. All it took was that one cough. His chest was still tight now, but in a different way. He had to hold his breath underwater. He needed air.

The act of coughing up all that liquid dropped Davy back off his feet. He found himself floating just below the surface. He needed to regain his footing and his shoe kept slipping against the floor as the water rushed downward. He must have slipped and fallen three times before the water surface lowered to a level below his head. Davy managed to crane his neck upward and take a deep breath of air.

It smelled sweet. Like roses. The walls of his enclosure melted down around him so that he was sitting on a short platform by the side of a rough-walled room where three strange people stood around him. And in a water tank across the room a man all puffed up in a suit swelling with water stood with his hands and face pressed against the walls of the tank. It must have been more than a minute before Davy realized whom the man in the other tank looked like.

“Are you damaged?” the tall woman asked Davy.

“What?”

“Are you damaged at all? Do you feel ill effects?”

“I’m cold,” Davy said. “Wet.”

“You may wish to change clothes,” she said, indicating a pile of tan shirts, pants and thin towels folded on the floor near a wall. Davy had not seen the clothes before. One of the men handed Davy one of each item and Davy wondered if they expected him to change clothes while the three stood around him.

“Who’s that?” Davy indicated the tank holding the man who looked like the President. “Where are we? How did we get here? Are we,” he hesitated, “what are we, dead or something?”

“He appears to have suffered few ill effects,” the other man said. “He even shows indications of coherency, if not perceptiveness.”

“You have accents,” Davy said. “Are you spies? Is that why you kidnapped the President?”

“He appears to recognize the other one,” the man said.

“That does not solve our problem,” the woman said. “These two both remain deficient for our objectives.”

“Hey,” the boy said, louder this time. “Stop talking like I’m not here.”

The three strangers appeared startled.

“Let him out,” Davy insisted. “Now.”

“Assertive inclinations,” one of the men said to the other two.

“That would appear consistent with the historical record,” the woman said.

“I said stop talking about me like that.”

The woman looked at Davy, locking eyes before she said, “We regret any offense we may have caused you, young goodsir.”

The President still in the tank seemed to be trying to say something. Davy could make out only huffing sounds from under the water.

“And I said let the President out.”

“You appear to know this man’s identity,” the woman said. “Would you tell us yours?”

“I said let him out.”

The three looked at one another. The woman nodded very slightly.

The man who had made Davy’s tank go away went to the President’s tank and waved his hand over a corner where a string of bulbs came visible the same way it had happened on Davy’s own tank. The man tapped the bulbs in a pattern and stepped back and the water level in the President’s tank quickly dropped.

Davy ran to the tank, realized the President could see him.

“Let out a deep breath, sir,” Davy said loudly. “Cough very hard.”

The green glow appeared on the President’s chest, shining from behind his shirt and tie and the President nodded. The President blew out as much of the contents of his chest and throat as he could in a violent flow, and reached his head upward out of the receding water. He gulped a deep breath of air. Then another one.



The President tried to demand that his captors tell him where they were, but only “where” came out, in a wet raspy croak.

It was the woman who stepped forward, extending the generic clothing and a thin towel to the President.

“I am Gamma Glandula,” the woman said, “and I take responsibility for the inconvenience we have caused you, goodsir.”

“Inconvenience,” the President managed to say without inflection as he took the dry clothes. “Who exactly the hell are you people and why am I being held here?”

“You are not being held here so much as detained by circumstance. Again, it is my responsibility and I apologize.”

“Responsibility and circumstance. Nice. A contradiction in terms. How is this boy involved?”

“If you would allow us a moment to explain, we certainly will.”

“Excellent,” the President said, stripping off his wet jacket and shirt and patting his torso down with the towel. “Don’t leave anything out.”

“It occurs to me that considering the young goodsir’s apparent trauma of a few moments ago it might be advisable to feed you the volume of information that we all agree you are due, in a gradual manner.”

The President wriggled into the tan shirt and peeled off his slacks and shoes, dried himself and slipped into the loose tan pants. “I did ask you not to leave anything out,” he said as peevishly as he knew how. “Maybe we could start with the list of laws you’ve broken.”

“Yes, laws,” Gamma said. “Goodsir, we realize you are not the person for whom we were looking and again we apologize.”

“And who was it you were looking for?”

Gamma looked at her two colleagues as if to solicit help. It was not forthcoming.

“We were looking,” Gamma said, “for Lancer. For the Last of the Barbarian Presidents.”

Here was the posing-for-a-stamp look again. He creased his brow and mouthed the word “barbarian.”



Davy supposed it was all right to dry himself and change his clothes while this was going on, so he did. This seemed to be an environment that was no more threatening

than the gym locker room at school, which was a little bit threatening, but if the President did it then it's probably all right.

"We are experiencing a planetary crisis, goodsir," Gamma continued to explain. "Some years ago we were invaded by the forces of an alien society who have occupied large tracts of territory and caused significant dislocation of our culture."

"Invaded," the President said. "You were invaded by a foreign nation?"

"A foreign star system," Gamma corrected.

"Oh for heaven's sakes," the President threw his hands in the air, "it's okay now."

"Okay?" Davy asked as he finished getting dressed.

"Sure, son. I thought we had a situation on our hands. But I'm just hallucinating. No problem."

"Am I hallucinating too?" Davy wanted to know.

The President thought about it a moment. "It's too early to tell," he said. The President walked a few steps to put a hand on Davy's shoulder. It made Davy nervous for a moment but it became reassuring very quickly. "What's your name, son?"

"David Sugarman."

"Good to meet you, Dave. I'm —"

"Lancer," Davy said.

"Right. I expect that'll do for the purposes of this hallucination. Please," he said to Gamma, "carry on."

"Thank you," Gamma carried on. "I hypothesized that in order to deal effectively with the Polarians we needed to establish a resistance that needed to be led by a warrior prince of the type who exists only in legend."

“A barbarian president,” Davy said.

“Yes,” Gamma agreed, “and as our culture has continued to evolve, such rare persons have been gradually selected out of the population. So we went seeking a figure who was a transformative leader of vast masses of people, someone who could inspire an ongoing movement among our people to make the invaders’ position untenable.”

“And that person was me?” the President said.

“Clearly, he was not,” one of the two men offered. “If I may demonstrate?”

“By all means,” the President said.

Emfour waved a hand in the air and a display came up, suspended at his eye level. It was a series of graphs and numeric displays that hung on the air like a ghostly television image.

“Here is your heart rate,” Emfour said to the President, “the stability levels of your musculature and the density of the bones in your upper and lower body. We had expected to find a heavily muscled, combative conqueror, perhaps howling loudly and waving a sword. That was the reason we first altered your respiration and contained you in a receptacle. It is clear that you are a product of a relatively civil community and in no condition to go about the activities that were required of the person we seek.”

“You were looking for a man on horseback,” the President said. “A mighty-thewed knight ready to plunge into desperate battle on a moment’s notice. And instead you got ... what?”

“A middle-aged man with spinal deterioration,” Gamma said.

“Not only am I kidnapped through some eccentric unknown process, but I get insulted too. Are you having a day too, Dave?”

The President actually grinned at Davy. Apparently there was something to grin about, although Davy had no idea what that could possibly be. It seemed all right to ask a silly question.

“Excuse me,” Davy interrupted, “but what planet is this?”

“Earth,” Gamma said quickly. “Still Earth.”

“And what year is it?” Davy wanted to know.

Gamma and the two men looked at him for a moment.

“Good question, kid,” the President said.

The three continued to stand silently.

“I believe there is an inquiry on the floor,” the President said.

Nobody said anything.

“Here’s why that was such a good question,” the President told Davy. “Every precaution was taken to see to it that this sort of thing could not possibly happen. I’m surrounded at all times by a secure perimeter of the best marksmen in the world. You wouldn’t know any of this, Davy, but as long as we’re shipmates now you ought to be told. The vehicles I use – planes, helicopters, cars – have advanced defensive capabilities. My eyes are surreptitiously scanned electronically everywhere I go to double-check my identity. And as a failsafe measure in case all of that breaks down I’ve got an electronic implant in my shoulder muscle to allow the Secret Service to track me immediately if my whereabouts are compromised.”

“Yes,” Emfour said, pointing to a rotating diagram on the air of the President’s anatomy, “we located the transistor here.”

“Unless you fellows are prepared to contribute actual information to this conversation,” the President snapped at Emfour, “you might want to butt out.”

“We apologize for the impolity, goodsir,” Gamma said.

“She apologizes again,” the President grinned again at Davy, and Davy grinned too for the first time since they were decanted from their tanks. “They snatched us out of our lives, displaced us to who-knows-where-in-a-hat and evaded the secure perimeter and the best marksmen in the world and she apologizes. Everything must be all right now.”

“Yeah,” Davy contributed.

“Clearly we’ve gone some distance,” the President directed what he said at Gamma. “Where exactly are we?”

“We are in the city of Susquehanna in a region that was once called Pennsylvania,” Gamma said, “and it is your distant future.”

“You’re time travelers,” Davy said.

“No,” Gamma corrected him. “You are time travelers. We are just a committee of academics who displaced the wrong person.”

“And the wrong innocent bystander,” the President still had a hand on Davy’s shoulder. “Now how do you propose to correct this?”

The three looked at one another for a moment.

Then, “It is important that we return you to your previous positions in the timestream. The opportunity for your return will recur in slightly more than a year,” Gamma said. “Please make yourselves comfortable.”



Roughly eight thousand years before the boy or the President or the Ad Hoc Committee to Save the World were born, somewhere on the northern shore of the Black Sea lived a man with blue eyes. His eye color was a mutation. He had lower levels of the chemical pigment melanin in his irises than most people do, and he was the first blue-eyed person anyone in his time had ever heard of. It was an interesting period in Eastern Europe. The northern glacier was receding and hordes of people were moving north from the Indian subcontinent in the direction of a suddenly habitable northern Europe and Scandinavia. Eventually many of these migrants reclaimed and settled on farmland rich with mineral nutrients that had not seen the light of the Sun for thousands of years.

To many of these adventurous people moving across his region, the man with the blue eyes was outlandishly attractive. In the course of his life he reproduced like a rumor. His blue-eyed descendants also tended to be adept at attracting sexual partners of any eye color. Within a few hundred years the mutation took firm hold and eventually forty percent of the people in Europe and close to fifty percent of those in North America had blue eyes.



Another mutation eventually figured in the practice of time travel.

The fundamental imperative of time travel was that it depended on a capacity for four-dimensional perception that humans were powerless to experience and of which they were specifically designed to be incapable. Human beings were born, grew up and experienced their world through their senses, defined and identified by a trio of spatial dimensions: length, width and depth. They also experienced a fourth dimension, the dimension of time. Unlike the three spatial dimensions, time bound humans to a precise

track that extended from the moment of their birth to the moment of their death at a rate that was determined outside of human control. Only when a brain mutation appeared in the late nineteenth century was a human able to perceive dimensions beyond those that were visible, and to explain them to others.

A young boy playing with a toy compass in southern Germany in the 1880's began imagining the difference between perception and reality. It occurred to him, quite correctly, that the two were synonymous. Nine years later he supposed it was possible that no one else had thought of many of these things. Another nine years after that, he wrote a series of papers for a scientific journal, finally expressing them. There was some uncertainty, in his day, whether anyone really understood what he was saying, but people seemed to be very impressed that he said it.

Part of the problem that caused humans to draw a false distinction between perception and reality was the mistaken belief that time was somehow of a different essential nature from space. We were not to blame for this error. It is part of our own essential nature, necessary to allow us to negotiate our way through the part of the Universe we see.

Say there is a person, though, who is able to move freely over only two spatial dimensions – forward and back, and from side to side – and who can also navigate freely along the line of time as it suits him. But say this person is bound to a single line of altitude, clearly limited at its bottom and top. He can go to wherever he wants and whenever he wants on this single strand of space, but he can interact only with people, creatures and objects that at some point intersect that line of height. To such a person, time would be just another dimension along which he is able to make his way. But as for

the nature and limitations of height, that would be a mysterious and elusive concept – just as time is intangible to all of us who are bound to our own peculiar filaments on the structure of time.

The boy with the brain mutation did not reproduce extensively and he did not pass along his mutation to subsequent generations. His special talent was the result of a larger than normal inferior parietal lobe, a small region on either side of the brain just above and in front of his ears. Additionally, a gap that courses through the folds of normal human brains above that lobe was partially filled with matter in his case, which contained an abundance of electrical connectors. He was thus better able than most humans to conceptualize that which he could not see, like time. But language, like the human brain, is an organic thing. When the young man wrote his ideas about time, space and perception in the series of journal articles, it had the effect on the human community that passing along his genetic information might have had. In the course of many generations across centuries, he transferred his ability to perceive multiple dimensions through logic rather than through sensation, to a growing subset of humans, much as genetic information travels along strands of nucleic acids.



The President could not be sure, but he believed he had never seen eyes as bright and pale blue as Gamma's. He wondered whether eyes like that were common out among the people of this age.

“They haven't given us much information,” the President said.

“Probably more than we can handle,” Davy said.

The trio who had kidnapped them in time had simply left, through a doorway that had opened in a wall and simply vanished when they were through it. There seemed to be daylight beyond it, but when the President rushed after them there was no trace of them and no way out of the room.

It was well lit in here. A light glow came from the walls and floors themselves. The walls themselves looked like the interior of a tree. The President in his baggy tan outfit sat down on the floor against a concave part of the wall that roughly provided a support for his back when he crossed his legs, closed his eyes and leaned back against it.

“What’re you doing, sir?” Davy asked after awhile.

“Surviving,” the President said without opening his eyes.

“Is it still a hallucination?”

“Looking less like one.”

Davy looked at him for a few moments, then found a suitably concave patch of rough wall and sat against it the same way.

After what seemed to Davy to be a very long time the President said, “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yeah,” Davy said.

The President said, “I’ve got an idea.”