

# Lancer

A CHILDHOOD FANTASY

by Elliot S! Maggin

## Chapter 4 Hail

“Confirming on the locus,” the helm reported.

“Apply an accuracy margin of one percent of velocity,” Vemiluas the pilot replied to his animate machinery.

“Informing the pilot that –”

Vemiluas recited along with the mechanized warning, “– the margin of accuracy exceeds the margin of safety by ...”

“... what?” the pilot said.

“... eighteen craft-lengths,” the helm said at the same time.

“I can live with that,” Vemiluas said and ordered the wings of his craft to fold upward for its initial approach to the unauthorized assemblage.



Davy watched the young women on the platforms dance. One hung upside down from a beam holding the platform up as the other held the thighs of the hanging woman and bounced up and down, roughly to the rhythm of the music.

A screaming came across the sky. A moment later a dusting cylinder with raised wings swooped downward at the caldera and then back up in a perfect parabola and in the cylinder's wake an echoing voice tumbled over the thousands attending the Glory like a blanket settling over a patch of beach.

“This facility will be perforated in one thousand heartbeats. Anyone who remains in this unauthorized assemblage at that time will be shattered.”

The voice was not so much a voice as an idea. It was as though the warning constructed itself whole in Davy's mind, and along with it came an overwhelming feeling of dread. The boy just wanted to run for the entryway if he could, but he could not. The wide opening in the bark-covered wall was clogged with women rushing out, some climbing over one another, lifting each other up and out of the way with the force of their bodies, crawling through the spaces along the ground that their legs were leaving as they attempted to move.

Davy felt a hand on his arm. He stopped short before he realized he was running.

“Where are you going, shipmate?”

“I'm not sure. Was I going somewhere?”

Their corner of the caldera had already emptied out and Lancer and Davy stood alone by the pool, near the stage.

“This is a full-blown panic. It was planned to be.”

“What do you mean planned?”

“Don't you feel it? The artificial fear?”

“How do you know it's artificial?”

“Because all I want to do,” Lancer said, “is run for the exit and climb over people to get out.”

“Sounds good to me too.”

“No analysis. No consideration. Something is trying to suppress everything rational. That’s not normal.”

“What, some super-scientific fear radiation?”

“Super-scientific nothing,” the man snapped at him. “We can do that with chemicals.” Lancer fought to contain the fear but it leaked out in the guise of rage. “Over here,” the man pulled Davy by the arm toward the emptied stage, a little bit too hard.

The irregularly shaped instruments of the musical group lay at the back of the stage where the musicians had left them. Lancer scrambled up the rough steps alongside the stage. Davy hopped up on the platform, looking for whatever that woman who welcomed them all earlier had used as a microphone.

“Just speak,” a woman’s voice behind Davy said.

“Whuh?”

“At the proscenium,” she said. “Stand there and speak up.”

Davy looked behind himself to see the woman who earlier had spoken to the crowd. He thought she would have been buried in the anthill of women crammed around the exit by now.

Lancer stepped forward to the edge of the stage and said, “Here?”

His voice reverberated through the basin as though there were speakers every few feet around. She nodded.

“It is true that we may be under attack,” Lancer said and everyone in the caldera heard him. Few listened at first, but continued to press toward the walls around the exit stopped-up with people. “But the greater danger is our fear. Our enemies use our fear as a weapon against us. And it is deadlier than any physical harm from outside ourselves. Think. We need to think.”

The crowd at the exit did not stop pressing or trampling, but they seemed to grow a little bit quieter.

“Davy,” he said in a stage whisper, “go over there and see if you can get some of them to back away. Like a fire drill.” Lancer realized that he was not talking only to Davy, then for the crowd’s benefit he added, still in a stage whisper, “Just for a moment. Go on.”

The boy was still scared of something. He did not know what. He shook it off and hopped off the stage in a run toward the mass of people at the exit.

“By backing away from the exit,” Lancer said, “we will allow exactly as many people as can fit to leave the structure as quickly as possible. We have five or six minutes left. Plenty of time to save lives.”

By now Davy was moving quickly among the rearmost people in the crowd. There was a woman with her hand clamped stiffly on the shoulder of the person in front of her. The face of the woman was blank, empty. Gently he pried the hand away, two fingers at a time. He found little resistance.

“That’s the way,” Davy said. “Now take just three steps back. One. Two. Three,” and others who heard and saw this stepped back as well.

“All right,” Lancer said from the proscenium, “that’s good. Now when you’re through the exit and you reach the ramp, move down it briskly. Don’t touch the person in front of you any harder than you would touch someone to ask her a question. If anyone is unable to move, take that person by the hand and lead her along gently.”

The mass of people at the exit began visibly to thin. After a minute or two Davy was asking people to step not back but forward. No one was being shoved; almost no one was getting hurt. It felt like progress. He was almost too busy to be afraid.

“When you get outside,” Lancer said, “move away from the building. “Go in the direction where you see the fewest people.” That seemed to be a good way to avoid further panic, but the man realized that if the warning from above was to be believed, time was getting short. He hopped off the stage, forgetting about his bad back. In fact, he managed to get to Davy before he felt any twinge in his back at all.



At the top of the climb Vemiluas ordered the cylinder’s helm to break out of the parabola and begin a second descent. The craft rotated, dropped out of its pattern and spun until it pointed sharply downward again.

“Prepare for expulsion,” the pilot said.

“Reporting expulsion set,” the helm answered.



The last of the crowd were nearly out the exit. Lancer lost track of that woman – what had she said her name was? Geneva? He looked at the sky and saw the growing speck from the direction where the aircraft disappeared ten minutes ago.

“We’re out of here,” he ordered Davy.

“Yes we are,” Davy said, looking up at the descending craft too. Davy did not feel that artificial fear any more. It must have worn off. Now it was the real thing; the boy could feel the difference, now he held it under control.



Vemiluas felt the growing force of the descent pressing against him. The gravitation of this world was greater to start with than he was accustomed to. The homeworld was somewhat larger than this Earth, but it was made of more porous stuff. A Polarian, even in the best of condition as Vemiluas was, was scarcely able to run over this surface. Now he could feel the pressure letting go as he neared the arc at the bottom of his parabolic dive.

The ground approached at a dizzying speed. The cylinder leveled. Vemiluas could see not just the approaching ground but the sky as well and he was lightheaded. At the moment of zero-gravitation he said, “Expel the injectables.”

Millions of tiny pellets, each smaller than a grain of sand, flew out the bay gates below and behind the pilot. He would be a light-instant away before the first of them collided with the empty bowl-shaped depression he saw for a moment in the forest below before he lost consciousness.

When he woke in a few moments, he would be on the edge of space.



The man and the boy followed the last of the women out and along the broad winding corridor. Soon they could see the light of day beyond the entrance. Then the light vanished.



Here is how things were held together:

The observable Universe is made up of matter and energy, which are essentially the same thing but which move at different rates relative to one another. There was matter in energy and energy in matter. The matter in energy was called photons. The energy in matter was called quantum levels. Photons were packets of energy so small that the mass of each was negligible even on the atomic level. The energy that each particle of mass – each atom – generated was determined by the quantum levels at which the electrons in that atom orbited its nucleus.

Matter came in two flavors: positive-matter and anti-matter. With variations in the composition of each particle, virtually every atom in the Milky Way galaxy was made up of positively charged protons, negatively charged electrons and neutrally charged neutrons. Anti-matter, by contrast, contained positively charged positrons in place of electrons and negatively charged negatrons in place of protons. Composed of these fundamental particles, galaxies floated through the Universe like uncountable motes of dust, each formed of a vaguely coherent collection of stars and other particulate matter. There was virtually never any material contact between one galaxy and another.

Some galaxies, like the Milky Way, were positive-matter galaxies and others were anti-matter galaxies. When a chunk of positive-matter collided with a chunk of anti-matter, each destroyed an exactly equal mass of the other and both masses blinked into an energy state. That was why so much of the Universe contained no matter, but lots of crossing beams of energy.

Let there be light.

Most of the stuff of the Universe was energy. Matter was rare. There was roughly one atom of matter for every eighty-eight gallons of space. So if you had a space that was empty of any matter and was the size of a large backyard in-ground swimming pool, you could brush the back of a fingernail lightly against the back of another fingernail and enough matter would fly imperceptibly from a fingernail to fill the empty pool with an amount of matter that was proportionately a little bit greater than the amount of matter in the entire Universe. All the rest would be empty.

When the cloud of far-flung matter and energy that composes our Universe was created, its birth came about in a collision between an enormous mass of positive-matter and an enormous mass of anti-matter. All that remained of that collision were relatively tiny clouds of one flavor of matter or the other. Each tiny cloud became a galaxy floating through its own pocket of space and almost never shared material from another galaxy. Even rarer was the intersection of material of a positive-matter galaxy with that of an anti-matter galaxy. However, with the advent of intelligence – an inevitable and disruptive element of any aging clump of matter – an advanced technology could produce and, to some extent, keep under control some matter of the flavor opposite its own. Generally, when an intelligent community in possession of positive- and anti-matter

technology becomes entangled with a community that does not have such technology, the product of that entanglement is a destructive and unbalanced rivalry.

Each of the millions of infinitesimal pellets that screamed down at that caldera in the wooded and green city of Susquehanna was a bubble in which an even tinier strand of anti-matter floated. The anti-matter was suspended until the bubble around it hit something solid, lost its structural integrity and burst open. The minuscule particles of anti-matter, no longer suspended, flew out with the inertia of their drop and penetrated whatever they touched in a tiny violent explosion. Individually, each explosion was perhaps the size of a cerebral hemorrhage. Together, they ruptured the structural integrity of the big caldera which collapsed into itself down a million little wormholes that suddenly appeared in place of the matter that no longer existed.



Geneva took an initiative. It felt good.

“You there, Goodlady,” she said, “would you please see to that young woman on the ground?”

“Me?”

“Yes. Now please. And you Goodlady, that woman sitting against that wall. She needs to move further from the caldera for her safety. Help her please.”

“Yes thank you.”

Geneva moved in a wide circle around the former stadium. Among the crowd of largely aimless people she pointed out tasks for whoever was at hand, generally getting women away from the site of the destruction. This attack would, at the very least, sour

the growing enthusiasm for the annual Glory Stendeck Tournament and the germs of hope it engendered. Geneva considered hope to be in her interest.

The stadium looked like a collapsed cake, all lopsided and lying over itself. Certainly people were killed inside. There were those under debris. Most of them, directly struck by tiny anti-matter pellets, were suddenly missing a tiny random part of their bodies and were in excruciating pain. Some had been pierced in their abdomens or heads. Those women were gone immediately. Many died, but not as many as there might have been were it not for the man and the boy who managed the crowd. And where were they?

“Goodsir?” Geneva asked the figure beginning to stir under what looked like a tent of splintered branches and twigs beside the collapsed exit from the caldera. “Goodsir, can you hear me?”



Lancer was a name from his imagination – or rather from the imagination of the person he had been before he reallocated all the time and energy he had for imagining things. There was that summer – he must have been thirteen or fourteen – when he read all those books about evil lords and chivalrous knights and ladies imprisoned in towers. *Ivanhoe*. *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. *Beowulf*. The good guys rode horses and wore capes. The bad guys hid out in their castles and send off hordes of agents to solve their problems. The women were beautiful and pure and didn't have any idea how to stand up for themselves, so that became Lancer's job.

It was the time when Dad was mostly away on the road making money, and Mother was constantly busy with priests and babies, and big brother had just discovered girls, and sisters were still no damn good for anything. He was laid up most of the time with asthma and some kind of recurring fever for which nobody seemed to have a name.

“Children’s Hospital would be the best idea,” Dr. Swanson said. “They can deal with this kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing would that be?” Dad snapped at the doctor. He had once seen Dad start an actual fight. He threw his chin out and got nose-to-nose with a bank executive and managed to intimidate the guy a little before he actually threw a punch. The punch did not seem very effective, but the guy was plenty unsettled. This time, talking with the doctor, Dad’s chin was tucked in where it belonged but that tone of voice was the same.

“Childhood illnesses,” the doctor said. “That kind of thing.” Probably they both thought the sick boy was asleep but he was listening.

“He’s not going to any children’s hospital where he’s more likely to pick up some nasty malady from one of the other inmates.”

“Now the hospital is quite sterile and up to date. It’s got a –”

“I don’t care what the hospital’s got. The kid’s got the tuberculosis,” Dad told the doctor. “I put a deposit on a little place on the beach where the air is clean and you get a sea breeze all year round. He’ll get better there.”

“Sir,” the doctor said, “he has none of the major indicators of tuberculosis.”

“He’s coughing like a banshee and can’t get his head off the pillow for days at a time. I’ve seen tuberculosis before.”

“With all due respect, I think I’m in a better position to be diagnosing the child.”

“Well I don’t see a lot of diagnosing going on here. Do you? We’re going to the beach.”

And so they did. Over the years Dad bought several of the surrounding properties and built some more houses to contain his growing family and, eventually, his children’s growing families. The boy spent that first summer at the beach compound living in his head most of the time. He knew no one in the neighborhood and, owing to the burgeoning crowd of brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews who eventually came to inhabit the place, he never did feel the need to know many of the neighbors. On days that summer when he had the energy to sit up and read, that was what he did. He spent the other days growing himself a secret identity.

Lancer could fight with a sword, shoot an arrow that never missed its mark, joust at a full gallop and always got the girl at the end of the story. In years to come Lancer would be able to sail a boat, swim a mile, and he even had the power to persuade anyone he encountered to believe whatever he told them. Lancer always told the truth, after all.

Decades later when, in the world outside his head, the sick boy grew up to be President, the part of the job he least looked forward to was having a band of thugs surrounding him all the time, protecting him, telling him what was safe and what wasn’t. The problem was not that it did not seem manly – though indeed it did not. It was more that the Secret Service seemed to be the sort of people with whom the bad guys would surround themselves.

He was sleeping at the beach the night it was decided across the land that he would be President. Before dawn agents had walked up the streets and over the dunes

and established a secure perimeter around him and the family. No one woke him up; no one knew what to call them if they did, so they let him sleep. When morning came and one of the kids brought him steak and eggs in bed, a tall dark-suited man wearing sunglasses in the house came in along with breakfast.

For most of an hour, sitting up in his pajamas, he talked with the man in the suit about what the rules would be. It seemed his protectors were more inclined to take orders than he anticipated. That did not improve matters, it seemed to him. It just made him the gang's boss. Then the agent asked about the "call sign."

"It's a code name, a kind of shorthand," the agent said. "It's how we'll refer to you in radio communications when we need to keep a minimum of confidentiality about our operations. We designate a one- or two-syllable word to refer to all of those we protect. Your family will each have a call sign that begins with the same letter. You should be comfortable with your own sign, though. If you have no preference we can—"

"No, actually," the new President-Elect said. "I've got a call sign for you."

The name made it more comfortable for the President to give in to some of his protectors' more unreasonable security concerns. The Secret Servicemen were the only people in the real world outside his mind who actually called him by his secret identity. Until now.



"Lancer, can you hear me?" the voice wanted to know.

It was a nice voice. Feminine. Musical. He wanted to listen to it for awhile.

"Lancer? Won't you please open your eyes, Goodsir?"

Eventually he did. It was the woman from the stage beside the pool.

“I am relieved to see you are alive, Goodsir.”

“So I am,” he said, lifting himself slowly to a sitting position. “What happened?”

“There was an aerial capsule attack on the caldera stadium, Lancer. It was the Polarians.”

“Polarians,” he said. “Alien invaders, right?”

“Yes.”

“From the star Polaris?”

“Yes, Lancer, we believe they are.”

“And how is it you call me that?”

“Lancer? I heard the boy call you that. Is that not your name?”

“Actually that is my name. Where is the boy? Where’s Davy?”

“We have not seen him.”

“Well we need to fix that. Where did you last see him?”

“Where did I see him? In the stadium before it fell.”

Lancer looked up for the first time to see the destroyed caldera structure a short distance to the side. “That? It doesn’t even look the same.”

“The capsules destabilized its internal organization and it reformatted itself.”

“Reformatted itself. That’s a hell of a euphemism.”

“A euphemism for what?”

Clots of people, of women from the pool party, wandered through the paths among the trees and plants. They rambled slowly around the destroyed caldera like

Bedouins, as though they had no particular place to go but moved nonetheless. Their eyes seemed empty, puzzled. Few of them spoke to one another.

“The kid,” he said, getting to his feet. “I saw him when we were running out of the ... the building. Where was the exit?”

“Here,” Geneva said. “Right here. Where the shards of the wall make an indentation.”

“There? Oh for heaven’s sakes it looks like a redwood could have fallen on him. We have to get into there. Do you have any drilling tools?”

“Drilling?”

“Drilling. Hammering. Sawing. Whatever. This is all wood, right?”

“Yes. It is all wood.”

“So how do you get through it? When it falls in the way, how do you cut it apart so you can get in?”

The language was virtually the same as the English of Lancer’s experience, but his language and that of these people did not share common meanings.

“It grows,” she said. “Is that not obvious?”

“Grows.”

“Yes.”

“All right, maybe you could explain this to me as though I were a small child.”

“Or a Polarian?”

“Or a Polarian. An alien. Yes. Assume I know nothing. Explain it to me from the beginning. How do you build a city out of a forest?”

Geneva hesitated a moment, looked at Lancer, at the way his clothes hung off him, at the way he stood and spoke. Then she asked him, “Are you a Polarian?”