

Lancer

A CHILDHOOD FANTASY

By Elliot S! Maggin

Chapter 6 Star

Back home, people thought Lancer had been born to be on television. Davy knew better. It was television that was born to bring us Lancer, the first television President of the United States.

Davy could not remember a time when television was not the center of communication in his life, and he had trouble imagining his earliest years when his mother mentioned once that the family had not owned a television set until he was almost two. It was one of the wonders of his life to consider that his parents had no television at all when they were young. He wondered, what did they do when they came home from school?

People were all aware of inventors in those days. School kids learned the names of inventors and their inventions the way they learned the names of explorers and the places they discovered. Edison invented the light bulb. Marconi invented the radio. Bell invented the telephone. The Wright brothers invented the airplane. Franklin invented bifocals and the lightning rod. Two thousand years ago a dead Greek named Hero invented a steam engine but no one had any use for it because there were plenty of slaves

around to move things from one place to another. It was clear that the ancient Greeks were not sophisticated enough to appreciate television. Davy wondered why he didn't know the name of the person who invented television. Mrs. McFarland told him that television was too complex to have been invented by one person. It was developed, she said, by committees of scientists working for General Electric and CBS and some other big companies. She did not know what she was talking about, of course, but she asserted it with a great deal of authority.

Philo Farnsworth was a fourteen-year-old farm boy from Rigby, Idaho in 1920 when he explained his idea for an electron tube to run an "Image Dissector" camera to Mr. Tolman, his chemistry teacher at Rigby High School. A few years earlier, the boy's father had bought a farmhouse that, by chance, was wired for electricity and where the boy found a pile of old electronics manuals in the attic. Young Philo sucked up the information in those journals like a blue whale inhaling kelp. The Image Dissector, he explained to the chemistry teacher some years later, would take a moving image and transmit it to a screen and display the image like a film. Philo, wearing a Boy Scout uniform with the hat hanging out of a back pocket, drew diagrams of his camera and tubes on Mr. Tolman's blackboard. He impressed Mr. Tolman enough that the chemistry teacher copied down the sketches onto paper and tucked them away in a drawer.

By the time Philo was twenty-one he had dropped out of college to take care of his sick mother, gotten married and moved to San Francisco. There, he built his first Image Dissector and demonstrated it to some potential investors. In one room he held a piece of glass with a vertical line drawn on it in front of a camera and he rotated it. In the next room his investors watched the line move from vertical to horizontal as it happened.

“There you are,” the farm boy said without guile or poetry to the astounded investors, “electronic television.”

William Sarnoff, the chairman of Radio Corporation of America, eventually offered to buy Philo’s patents and hire the inventor, but Philo preferred to keep the rights to his invention and collect royalties while Sarnoff’s company developed a commercial version of the television. “RCA doesn’t pay royalties,” Sarnoff thundered and hurled lightning bolts from his office in midtown Manhattan, “we collect them.”

Sarnoff found another inventor, a Russian immigrant like himself named Vladimir Zworykin, who had applied years earlier for a patent for a television device that involved spinning discs and moving prisms suspended behind a glass screen. Zworykin never actually built a working model based on his idea. In order for a screen to project an image that actually appeared to the human eye to move, Zworykin’s theoretical discs would have had to rotate at something approaching the speed of sound. This would have brought about too much noise interference to deal with, and would have remained impossible at any rate for another hundred years. By taking on Zworykin, Sarnoff and RCA were able for awhile to scarf up a bunch of Philo’s ideas, ascribe them to Zworykin’s patent and begin to build a marketable television apparatus.

Philo challenged Sarnoff and Zworykin’s claims with the United States Patent Office. Mr. Tolman the high school chemistry teacher even showed up at the courthouse in Washington with his old sketches of the teenaged Philo’s Image Dissector to back up the young inventor’s claim. The patent office threw out Sarnoff’s contentions and forced him, if he wanted to continue to develop this television idea after 1939, to pay royalties to Philo.

Not long afterward, the Second World War broke out and the United States government peremptorily ruled that RCA could no longer do basic research like developing the television. They drafted William Sarnoff into the army, made him a general and put him in charge of wartime communications operations. Sarnoff performed admirably in this position and was known as General Sarnoff for the rest of his life. The United States and its allies won the war, RCA went back to developing commercial television and started the National Broadcasting Company just in time for Philo's patents – and consequent royalty payments – to expire. Without Philo Farnsworth's contributions, Sarnoff's company would have been trying to make practical a television based on spinning discs and prisms until well into the twenty-first century – and Lancer, the first television President, would not have been elected when he was. In fact, that was part of the original plan.

Philo Farnsworth spent the remainder of his life fighting in vain for recognition and working on more inventions. He came up with an incubator for premature babies, a device for doctors to observe internal organs by inserting a tube with a camera into a patient's intestines, and infra-red vision goggles. He never became either wealthy or prominent as he would have liked, but he left behind a trail of innovation that not only saved lives, but propelled the technology of his extended community generations beyond what would have been possible without him.

Philo also designed and patented a small fusion generator that never worked to any practical purpose during his lifetime. He called it a "fusor," and it made possible something that happened when Philo Farnsworth was still very young.



Sometime early in the summer of 1915 an elderly man wearing a loose-fitting tan shirt and a pair of trousers that looked like a doctor's scrubs materialized out of thin air in a soybean field in Rigby, Idaho. His name was Manasa Simstain, a professor in the History of Sciences department at the South Reston Institute, an establishment of research and higher learning that would not be founded for another three hundred fifty-three years. Manasa carried with him a stethoscope and a large heavy bag of pamphlets and journals.

The literature in Manasa's bag consisted of reproduced paper copies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century publications that he gleaned from the extensive databases of the South Reston Institute. One of them, for example, was a 1905 copy of *Annalen der Physik*, a physics journal containing a breakthrough article on the photoelectric effect. This was an English translation of the German publication that was never actually translated until years later, but Manasa hoped no one would notice. Manasa hung the stethoscope around his neck as part of a disguise. If he accidentally saw anyone native to this place and time, Manasa reasoned, his dress and stethoscope would prompt people to suppose he was a simple country doctor. What no one ever told Manasa was that doctors would not generally wear scrubs in their work until sometime late in the century, and they would rarely wander through soybean fields with stethoscopes around their necks without prompting inconvenient inquiries. Fortunately, Manasa did not run into anyone and the issue did not arise.

This day in 1915 was the day that in an office of a bank in town Lewis Farnsworth, young Philo's father, was closing on the farmhouse in Rigby. No one would be in what would soon be the Farnsworth home. Manasa lugged his bag of counterfeit but accurate technical journals through the soybean field to the only house in sight that had a strand of electrical wire running from a pole to its roof. In front of the porch he picked up a rock to poke a hole in the window of the front door, but before he was forced to commit vandalism he realized that the door was hanging ajar.

In the house, Manasa looked around at the dangerous-looking wood-fired cookstove and the three more dangerous-looking electrical outlets and switches he noticed along the walls. He enjoyed the faint smell of charcoal and chopped onions. He walked upstairs to find an attic door and a pull-down ladder, which he climbed with his bag of magazines.

Once he scattered the load of publications around the hardwood floor of the unlit attic Manasa went back down to the first floor. He sat in the only piece of furniture left in the house, a padded rocking chair beside a hearth. Manasa rocked for a few minutes and nearly dozed off before he vanished like a thief in the night.

"Poor little Philo," was the last twentieth-century thought Manasa Simstain had.



"Geneva?" Lancer wanted to know.

"Yes?"

"It's me. The guy from the stage. Back in the caldera just before it collapsed."

“Yes, Lancer. I know. It’s nice to see you again. I helped you remove people from the wreckage.”

“You did? Great. Well it’s nice to see you again too. I think.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. I was being ironic. Sorry. You people don’t get excited much, do you?”

Gianna had invited Lancer and Davy to her home and, for lack of any other alternative they could think of, they were on their way there – wherever it was – when Lancer saw Geneva among the dispersing crowd.

“You met Davy. Do you know Gianna?”

“The pot,” Geneva said. “No, we have not met. Hello.”

“Hello,” Gianna said. After a minute or two she added, “You should visit at my home too, Geneva.”

“That would be enjoyable,” Geneva answered and no one talked for quite awhile after that.

The four walked along a vague path among the tree homes of the Susquehanna neighborhood. Lancer was very interested in seeing the inside of one of these homes. Davy was more interested, for the moment, in figuring out how this apparent forest doubled as a city. The homes anchored themselves to the ground with spreading root systems, and grew in roughly a round or rectangular footprint. Most had fairly large flat surfaces above what appeared to be their second or third floor, with strands of branches and leafy outcroppings wandering out their roofs in whatever direction the sun drew them. Here and there kids played on rooftop decks. Some of the homes were rigged out

with what looked like swings or slides or connecting ramps from one structure to another. There did not seem to be any formal property line between homes, and it looked as though these homes continued to grow a bit over the years and to butt up against one another here and there. Davy wondered if anyone minded. Lancer wondered why no one among their little group was talking to anyone else.

“So what part of town is this and what part are we going to?” Lancer asked the silent air. They had been walking for perhaps half an hour.

“We are in the Windsor-Exxon Gardens district,” Gianna answered, looking ahead as she walked. “My community is called Tangelo Grove, on the northern border of Susquehanna County.”

“I guess that’s an answer.”

“Is it somehow inadequate?”

“No,” Lancer said. “I’m the one who’s inadequate. I have no frame of reference. Other than knowing what north means, that is. Unless the poles shifted while Davy and I weren’t looking.”

“I do not believe the poles of the Earth have moved significantly in recorded history,” Geneva offered, also looking forward as she walked. Geneva walked to Davy’s left and Gianna to Lancer’s right, so they constantly stayed four abreast. It occurred to Lancer that if they had been wearing red they would look like King George’s soldiers marching through the woods.

“Is this a good neighborhood?” Lancer asked. He was not sure whether he was actually looking for information or just filling the gap in the air with banter.

“How do you mean ‘good?’” from Gianna.

“Is it costly to live here? What do the people here do? Do they work in factories or do they own businesses? Do they struggle economically?”

“People here generally work from their homes, but few own their means of production. We all struggle economically,” Gianna said, “but that is mostly a product of the occupation.”

“The Polarians?” Davy asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you ever actually see Polarians?” Davy wanted to know. “Do you know any? Or do they just hang out together?”

“They have bases scattered around the countryside,” Geneva offered. “They have displaced many people’s living and working spaces with their metal and ceramic structures.”

“We will see them, no doubt,” Gianna said. “At the checkpoint.”

“Checkpoint?”

“Before we board the ride.”

“A ride like a roller coaster?” Davy asked. He knew he was being facetious but he was not sure any of the adults realized it.

“Or a ride like a commuter train? Is that it?” Lancer asked.

“It is the transport to Tangelo Grove,” Gianna said.

“See Davy?” Lancer said. “It isn’t Paragon Park. Sorry.” As it happened, the transport resembled a roller coaster far more than it did a commuter train. When he saw it, Lancer worried for his back.



Most of the commuters this evening were the females, Aeolus noted as he looked from his spreadsheet to the crowd filing past the checkpoint. He made a note of the man and the boy who were flanked by the two tall women approaching the turnstile. This pair seemed odd. Was it something about the way they walked or stood, he wondered, or was it just that they were the first males he had seen all day?

There had been some celebration a few days earlier, Aeolus had read in a low-level intelligence report, which involved primarily indigenous females. Northern Command targeted it for a submission exercise which was, judging by the account in the last progress memorandum, quite successful.

“Passes,” Aeolus demanded of the adult Earth male.



“What did he say?” Lancer asked Gianna.

“I will administer this,” Gianna said and stepped up.

The lumpy fellow with the body armor had grunted something at him, but he did not understand what he had said.

“These two are in my employ,” Gianna told the lump, “and the goodlady is here on her own recognizance. This is my documentation.”

Gianna handed the armored man what looked to be a leather-bound card from her shoulder bag and he grunted something as he took it from her.

“Yes, that is correct,” she said in response to the grunt.

He snarled and sniffled and shuffled his feet like a bull about to charge.

“Hedge trimmers and shrubbers. The smaller one is an apprentice.”

The lump leaned forward, looked Davy up and down, then did the same to Lancer, a bit slower and more closely. He emitted a series of grunts and growls at some length then, not far from Lancer’s face. Lancer tried with limited success to avoid inhaling. He waved them through – Gianna, Lancer and Davy – then addressed Geneva. Lancer hung back as the three went through the open gate as if to make sure Geneva got through, but Gianna yanked his arm and told him to keep moving.

“What language was that?” Lancer wanted to know.

“What language was what?”

“The language the guy in the armor was speaking.”

“You mean the Polarian?”

“That was a Polarian?”

“Yes. He was speaking Standard, the same as I was.”

“Really? And he was a Polarian you say?”

“Yes.”

Geneva came bounding through the checkpoint behind them and caught up. They were walking toward the edge of a large lake whose far end was not visible. Some people walked further ahead of them, turning to walk along a wide gravelly path along the river’s shore to the right, toward a stand of very tall narrow trees. They looked to be evergreens of some sort, and very tall. Maybe they were some sort of cross between a pine and a cypress. The topmost parts of them seemed to be swaying, as if there were a heavy breeze up there but there was no wind at all on the ground.

“He looked like a human,” Davy said.

“Who did?” Lancer asked him.

“The big Polarian. He could have been human.”

“Think so? He looked pretty alien to me.”

“I think that’s just because he was wearing a funny outfit.”

Lancer laughed a little.

“The young man is correct,” Gianna said.

“How’s that?” Lancer asked her.

“The Polarians’ physiology and musculature suggest that they may be linked to us genetically.”

“They’re from this other planet, though, didn’t you say?”

“I’m sure they are,” Gianna said. “As far as they know.”

“See?” Davy said. “That guy had two hands with five fingers each and had a head hanging off the top of his shoulders same as we do. How likely is that?”

“Not very likely,” Gianna said.

“See?”

“Nobody I know of has been able to secure a reliably documented sample of Polarian genetic material. But interestingly, no one has come across any demonstrably alien nucleic acids.”

“Why would anyone,” Lancer asked, “if they keep themselves all armored up like that?”

“That would account for the absence of documentable Polarian chemistry,” Geneva said the first thing she said since rejoining the group. “But it would not explain

there being no trace of likely alien life chemicals anywhere in the environment.

Correct?”

“Correct,” Gianna said.

“So they’re not really aliens?” Davy asked Gianna.

“That would be a leap of about six steps of logic.”

“All right,” Lancer said, “let me give you a few alternatives.” He was talking to the three others as though he were speaking into a microphone to a much larger audience. “The Polarians are descents of Earth people who left or were relocated from this planet sometime ago. Or people of Earth are displaced descendents of ancient Polarians. Or sometime a million years ago some enterprising space god seeded a thousand planets around the Universe to see where human life would catch on. Or they’re really from here in the first place.” He paused.

“Or there is something about the templates of life,” Gianna the geneticist who ought to have thought more about this sort of thing said, “that defies logic or the laws of probability or anything we will really understand for a long time.”

“Or ...” Davy said, then stopped when the others looked from Lancer to him.

“Go on,” Lancer said.

“Or they’re actually time travelers.”

“There you go,” Lancer said.

“They’re time travelers from the future,” Davy said, “who are trying to migrate back to a time when the world wasn’t as overpopulated, or as polluted, or wasn’t orbiting a sun about to go nova.”

“Good one.”

“Or they’re an underground civilization of mole men come back to take over the surface world. Or there are only a dozen actors or so playing the role of Polarians and they were all hired by this conspiracy of college professors who’re determined to scare the world out of its apathy.”

“Apathy?” Geneva asked.

“Its slothful ways,” Lancer says.

“Slothful?” Geneva asked.

“This child has politics,” Gianna said.

“Its penchant for inaction,” said Lancer. “And we all have politics.”

“You think so too, Goodsir?” from Gianna. “Inaction?”

“You don’t? Look around. We had a disaster right in front of our faces. It came crashing down over our heads. And all anyone could do was take orders.”

“What do you mean?” Geneva wanted to know.

“Nobody would move,” Davy said. “No one would even start to get out of the caldera until Lancer told them to. They were like sheep, waiting for a sheepdog.”

“Sheep?” Geneva asked. “Sheepdog?”

“Metaphors,” Lancer said.

“I do not think the metaphors confound good Geneva,” Gianna said, “as much as the references themselves.”

“References?” Lancer asked.

“Sheep. Sheepdog. Sloth. References to classical life forms. I know them because of my work,” Gianna explained. “Are your backgrounds in genetics?”

“No,” Lancer said.

“Eighth grade biology,” Davy said.

“Pardon?”

“Another obscure reference,” Lancer said, supposing the explanation would be more trouble than it was worth.

Then he noticed that they were walking toward a line of several dozen people standing by one of those tall conifers. And he noticed that whoever was at the front of the line suddenly flew up into the air alongside the tree and vanished into the upper branches. This was alarming.

“What are they doing?” Lancer wanted to know.

“Them?” Geneva pointed at the line of people in their path.

“Those people over by the tree, yes.”

“Riding.”

“They’re shooting up in the air,” Lancer said.

“Shooting what?” Davy said.

“Shooting people,” Lancer said. “Shooting themselves.”

Gianna looked at Lancer whose face had gotten neat again as they walked, and Davy who squinted in the direction of the line of riders, turning his head a little sideways. These people did not seem to be afraid of anything, she decided, but they were definitely not from anywhere near here.

“Don’t you see it?” Lancer asked Davy.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought I saw,” Davy said.

“I expect our friends require a fundamental explanation,” Gianna said to Geneva.

“Of where we are going?” Geneva answered.

“Of how we are getting there.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Lancer said. “That would be good.”

“We are taking the ride,” Geneva said. “Out across the river to Tangelo Grove.”

“The ride,” Lancer said. “Would this ride involve shooting up into the sky and possibly leaving large shares of our stomachs behind?”

Gianna appeared amused.

“Stomachs behind?” Geneva said. “I don’t think anatomical reorganization is a part of the process.”

“The idea,” Gianna said, “is that you step into a transport field. It’s an inertia-free zone where you have no sensation of movement. You travel a prescribed course of several kilometers to the far side of this river and you arrive in my home neighborhood before the next person steps into the field.”

“Teleportation?” Davy asked.

“No, teleportation is much too disorienting for everyday use.”

“That’s comforting,” Lancer said.

“You feel no movement,” Gianna said. “None at all.”

“None? What do you feel. Nauseous? Carsick?”

“You might want to close your eyes the first few times,” Gianna offered, trying to be helpful.

“Are you all right with this, Davy?”

“Me? I don’t know. Sure. Want me to get in line ahead of you?”

“Maybe next time.”



It had to be him, Krendell thought. He walked the same way. It was unmistakable.

“Goodsir?” Krendell said quietly, walking closer behind the group of four people in line for the ride ahead of him.

“Hi,” Lancer said, turning to smile at the gaunt young man behind him.

“Are you Lancer?” Krendell asked him. “The man from the television?”

“I’m Lancer. I’m not sure what television you’re referring to.”

“What television?” Gianna carried what passed for incredulity in her voice. “You two are definitely not from anywhere near here.”