

Lancer

A CHILDHOOD FANTASY

By Elliot S! Maggin

Chapter 5 Chief

This was a very dark place. Davy didn't like it here. He was uncomfortable, disoriented and angry but he was not scared. The message from the bad guy who shot some kind of fear rays down at them before bombing out the place was way out of line. It made Davy move when he meant to stay still. It made him panic when he wanted to figure things out – until Lancer calmed him down. Just remembering the feeling he had then was enough to make him swear off the dread stuff for the long-count. Scared was all used up with Davy.

The last thing he remembered was running behind Lancer in the winding hallway almost as far as the exit. He could see the light that the caldera walls generated begin to fade as the natural light from outside took its place. Then Davy heard something deep and rumbling and probably the world went black because something knocked him out. When he woke up – if he really woke up – there did not seem to be any difference in the way the world looked, so maybe he was never unconscious. Or maybe he was not awake now.

It was absolutely lightless here. He tried to roll to his hands and knees and feel around for the edges of the space he was in, but moving through the darkness – even moving only an arm or a leg – made him dizzy. Slowly he felt his way to his hands and knees and crawled in whatever direction he happened to be facing. After a short distance he tapped his forehead on a wall. He started to rise to his feet but found there was not enough head room to do that here properly. He tried to lower himself back to his knees but he fell over backward. He was not quite clear as to which direction was down.

Eventually Davy got his bearings back without hurting himself too badly. He crawled a little greater distance this time before he found a wall. He was in a very small room with rough walls and a low ceiling and no apparent way out. It probably formed around him as the debris of the caldera's shell collapsed. He was lucky, he supposed, to be in a bubble of safety when he could as easily have been under who-knew-how-many tons of garbage. For that matter, it could collapse further at any time. He may as well make himself comfortable.

He crawled around the edges of the wall, feeling for an opening and looking for a light. There was neither. This room was shaped irregularly, though. The wall made ins and outs in random places. The ground was hard and uneven, and sometimes Davy could not determine whether he was on the ground or on a jutting chunk of wall. He suspected that he circumnavigated the room several times before it occurred to him to leave a shoe somewhere along the edge of the floor. He crawled around the room with one shoe on, counting his steps. He supposed that when he found the shoe he left behind he would know about how big the room was. He got to a hundred steps and decided he wasn't going to find the shoe. So he found a fairly straight part of the wall and he sat there.

For maybe a thousand years.



“Then you actually grow your homes,” Lancer said to Geneva as he examined the exterior of the collapsed caldera.

“Yes,” she said.

“Like a tree,” he said. “Or a marigold. Or an asparagus.”

“Yes.”

“And how long does it take for these things to grow?”

“It depends on a number of factors. Primarily —”

“Lots of water. Lots of sunlight. Lots of fertilizer. Small house. How long?”

“A day. Possibly two.”

“A day or two? Turnkey?”

“Turn key?”

“Ready to go. You could move in and live there a day maybe two after planting the seed.”

“A bulb.”

“What?”

“Planting a bulb,” Geneva said. “The genetic information cannot be reduced to the protocols of a seed.”

“Genetic information,” Lancer said. “What genetic information?”

“All of it,” Geneva said. “Whatever the occupants specify.”

“Wait a minute,” Lancer said looking around at a forest that suddenly looked to him more like a vast manicured garden. “You live in homes that look like trees, all designed to your specifications?”

“Yes,” Geneva said, thought about it for a moment and asked him, “where do you live?”

“Size? Shape? Number of rooms? Where the light switches go?”

“Light switches?”

“So some civic-minded biologist designed this big arena that just collapsed around all of us?”

“Yes. But I believe your answer to my question was non-responsive.”

“So what you normally do when one of these – what would you call them? – buildings? When one collapses. What if, say, there’s a disaster when someone’s home falls in and there are people inside?”

“A disaster?”

“Like this. The arena’s just fallen on maybe dozens of people including the young man who was with me and for whom I am at least nominally responsible. What do you do when something like that happens?”

“I ...” Geneva looked perplexed, “...I do not think that happens.”

“Well clearly it does now, doesn’t it? How do we get these people out of there?”

“I do not know, Goodsir.”

“Then who do you ask?”

“Goodsir, if I may. Where do you live?”

“All right, find me an architect. There are hundreds of fuzzy-headed women wandering around here like lost souls. And what’s wrong with all you people anyway, walking around in circles with nowhere to go? One of these people has got to be an architect – or whatever you call it.”

“An arka?”

“A biological designer. A builder. A domestic horticulturalist. Someone who – what was the phrase you used? – a genetic information person. Who plants the house bulbs?”

“Oh,” Geneva said. Then in a voice that was not at all penetrating, she asked, in the direction of no one in particular, “Is there a flower pot here?”

“A flower pot?” Lancer asked Geneva, who did not understand the question.

He repeated, “A flower pot.”

Lancer strode up to the nearest clutch of women and asked them, “Are any of you ladies a flower pot?”

There were eight or ten of them. Two looked at Lancer with glassy eyes, doll’s eyes. The others walked on. As they walked away, Lancer saw that they went in different directions. What had appeared to be a group of people turned out just to be eight or nine women walking in roughly the same direction for a minute or two.

“Are you a flower pot?” he asked another woman. “Do you know anyone who is?”

Another blank stare.

“You, ma’am. Goodlady,” he said to another. “Is there a flower pot in your group? Do you know of any?”

The woman walked on and he followed.

“Talk to me, please,” he said to her in more of an order than a plea.

She stopped and turned, perplexed. “Goodsir?” she asked.

“A flower pot,” he said. He was a little desperate but it did not show. “A designer of genetic codes. Someone who can design a growing structure.”

“A pot,” she answered.

“Yes.”

“That one, I think. Gianna.”

“There? The one with the green bag walking under that hanging arbor?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

Lancer was recently displaced in time, but these people all seemed far more disoriented than Lancer felt he was himself. He caught up with the woman walking under the branches that extended like eaves from the trunk of a home.

“Good lady,” he said, “I understand you are a flower pot. Is that correct?”

She seemed not to notice.

“Pardon me? Are you Gianna?” he said, putting a hand lightly against her forearm.

She looked at him and held her arm as if he had struck her.

“Please. Tell me.”

“Goodsir?”

“I’m sorry. I need your help. Can you design a jack?” he asked her.

“A jack?”

“A lift. An organism that you can place under a large mass which lifts the heavier object as it grows.”

She looked at his eyes and her own eyes got clearer. After a moment she said, “Yes. Of course. An elevator.”

“I think ... yes. An elevator.”

“How big?”



The ground shifted. Davy was still too annoyed to be scared.

After a while that might have been another hundred years a spear of dull light came into the chamber through a tiny hole that appeared under a wall across from where he sat.

Davy got up, tumbled over his sleeping feet and crawled to the narrow shaft. He extended a hand to the light. There was not enough light to make his hand look like a hand, but he could see the light pool up and stop on a dot of skin.

The ground and the walls continued to shift periodically a little bit at a time, and after awhile the shaft of light lengthened, faded and went away.

Davy was just relieved to find that he had not gone blind.



“You, Goodsir,” Lancer pointed at a man coming out of a broad-trunked home. “I wonder if I might borrow your communicator.”

“Mine?”

“Yes,” Lancer said. “I understand you people have portable communication devices. May I use yours?”

“You people?” the man said.

It took a moment, Lancer determined early in this project, to factor in the time and patience to find a way through a profusion of social barriers with which he was unfamiliar.

“I’m not sure how they work,” Lancer explained, “but I’ve heard you each have means of communicating with the world at large. Like a telephone?”

“Telephone?”

“Artificial voice communication. How do you do that?”

The man stared for a moment as he deciphered what Lancer meant. “My earplant,” he said.

“Right,” Lancer smiled. “May I borrow it?”

“Not without surgery,” came the voice from behind him. It was Gianna the flower pot. “It’s tattooed on his skull.”

“Really?”

“It is,” Gianna said. “Really.”

“Are you unable to place a comm?” the man asked amiably.

“Maybe another time,” Lancer said and the man walked on. “You know,” he said to Gianna, “if the only way to make a phone call where I come from was to have surgery first, there’d be some serious objecting going on.”

“Then it appears the place you come from is not Polaris,” Gianna said. “You never did tell me where you are from.”

“Probably I will, eventually. Would you call someone, Gianna?”

“You mean ‘comm’ someone?”

“I guess. Short for communication?”

“I think the derivation is ‘community’.”

“Community. But you don’t seem to know each other. Look at those people over there. They pass each other in a path but they don’t do so much as nod.”

“You find that improper, Goodsir?”

“Would you make a call? A comm?”

“Yes.”

“Can you order a few pizzas or something?”

“Pizzas?”

“Lunch. Snack food. We should feed all these people.”

Behind Lancer and Gianna were forty-two people Lancer had stopped along the way to help raise the walls of the collapsed arena. He had approached each one individually at random in the city and persuaded him or her to help. They were his crew. He arranged them in teams of two and posted each team roughly equidistant along the perimeter of the ruined arena. Then he looked at Gianna and said, “Time to go to work.”

What Gianna did – with the materials at hand, as it happens – was genetically engineer a biological elevator which would reproduce however many times she needed. The collection of them were to lift the entire ruined arena off the ground. Each pair of crew members would plant one of them in the ground next to the fallen structure, to snake its way under the wall of the ruin as the new plant grew and push on the shattered wall from underneath.

“We don’t have to order snack food,” Gianna said.

“They don’t have to eat?”

“They don’t have to order it remotely.”

“Can we still feed them?”

“We can. Would you find out what everyone wants while I synthesize the bulbs?”

“Don’t you need a lab or something?”

“A lab?”

“A laboratory. A place to ... I don’t know. Do what you do to make a bulb for these jacks.”

“I’ve got everything I need.”

“All right. I’ll be the waiter.”

Gianna reached into her green shoulder bag and pulled out a plum.



The tiny shaft of light appeared again – somewhere else this time. Davy crawled near it and waved his hand under the light to see what he could see.

He could see that he still had a hand with fingers on it.

He was still angry but this was some relief.



Gianna’s plum was a tool of her trade. It was an actual plum, quite edible and most capable of leaving indelible purple stains on any vulnerable surface onto which it

dripped. Gianna's plum was her template. It had more than ninety percent of its genetic information in common with every other living thing on earth from a mitochondrion to a blue whale. Whenever Gianna had a project, she would typically start with the plum's genetic map as a template and artfully fill in all the non-plumlike characteristics she needed. Most of the architecture she designed and built was far closer to the genetic makeup to a plum than it was to either that of a blue whale or of a mitochondrion, so her work was generally much less difficult than it looked. She had a reputation for building things that were purple.

When Lancer came back from a circuit of the ruin's exterior, Gianna was squatting under a tree and studying a transparent working surface, a non-corporeal screen that hung on the air like a spider web. It displayed numbers and icons that grew wider, higher and denser as she manipulated the figures with her hands and, one could only presume, her mind.

"How does that work?" he wanted to know.

"Come see," she said. "Have a seat."

Lancer squatted by sliding down against the trunk of the tree against which Gianna sat. It occurred to him that he did not feel he needed the lower back support. He could just sit down on the ground and sit cross-legged the way he did when he was a skinny college kid studying on the yard. He saw that the display of numbers and diagrams hanging on the air in front of him was not just a spray of meaningless stream-of-consciousness equations like those you might find on the blackboard of a professor in an opaque graduate mathematics seminar. They fit into patterns and templates somehow.

This was not to say he could understand any of it, but he could see how someone might. He reached toward the display.

“It’s like art,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. It’s saved.”

Lancer passed his hand through the spectral display on the air and the figures dissipated for a moment like a pattern of cream in a cup of black coffee. Then as he held his arm still, his hand on the other side of the display, the patterns reestablished themselves around his wrist, resuming their previous positions. He realized after a moment that he felt something on his wrist, as though something solid was touching it. It was not as much pressure as a rubber band hanging limply around his wrist might exert, but it was there nonetheless. He pulled his hand slowly out from the display and felt the pressure, much lighter than a tickle, move up over his hand and to the tips of his fingers as the figures and tables in the display resumed their previous positions.

“What is it?” he asked. “Some kind of electrical field?”

“My screen?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a pattern of ambient matter,” Gianna said. “Compressed air and vapor. Maybe a little bit of dust from the attack on the caldera. Why don’t you move something around?”

“On the ... the screen? How?”

“Just push things.” She put her fingertips to a table of numbers and symbols and moved it laterally across the surface of the display.”

“How do you do that?”

“Lightly. Try it.”

He put his hand on the surface of the screen as lightly as he could, but he could not make anything move. He just poked holes in the display and made ripples.”

“You grow a feel for it,” Gianna said.

“We’ve got to get into this building. Aren’t we wasting time here?”

“Not yet. We can start to waste some if you like.”

“Don’t you have a formula to figure out? Or a pattern to establish? Or something?”

“It’s done.”

“What’s done?”

“My matrix for the elevators.”

“So,” he looked around, wondering what a matrix might look like, “when do we start excavating the wreckage?”

“When the bulbs complete their reproductive cycle. Do you want to site thirty-two perimeter stations or sixty-four?”

“Perimeter stations?”

“You have twenty-one pairs of people stationed at the base of the wreckage. The number of bulbs we synthesize will be a power of two. Would you like to place thirty-two elevators around the exterior of the caldera or sixty-four?”

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of either choice?”

“Thirty-two lifts will be sufficient to raise the structure and keep a reasonable margin of safety against collapse. Sixty-four will allow us a redundant safety margin.”

“Why wouldn’t we use sixty-four then?”

“Because we would have to replant the thirty-two we have now and allow them time to reproduce.”

“Thirty-two we have now?”

“Yes. They’ve almost all sprouted.” She turned to the far side of the tree trunk against which she had been sitting and pointed at a patch of purple leaves poking up out of the ground. They looked like poison oak.

“Were those there before?”

“Of course not. Shall we plant these thirty-two?”

Gianna reached into the ground underneath one of the germinated leaves and pulled it up with the plant bulb from which it sprung.



The boy’s senses of smell and taste were intact, he realized, so the other three senses had to be around somewhere. He could feel the walls and the floor. The constant tang of sweet dust filled his nose. He sat perfectly still and listened for sounds. He listened for a sound that was just beyond hearing. At first there was nothing there. Then after a minute or so he started to hear a humming – almost a hissing – from deep inside his head. It was a lot like the sound of the ocean you hear in a big seashell, but it had a lot more texture somehow. It was as though the sound was a very quiet voice speaking in a language he ought to understand.

He listened to it for a while. It was not just a constant sound. There were pauses and peaks. There were degrees of intensity. He tried to figure out whether there was something it was saying. All he could gather from it was the urge to relax. He relaxed.

This was starting to get less annoying and more interesting.

The crack under the wall was gone again, so whether his eyes were open or closed he saw the same thing: dark in every direction. He watched the insides of his eyelids for a while.

In fifth grade biology he had learned a little bit about how eyes interpret light. He realized that what he actually saw was the reflection of light off the inside of the back of his eyeball. He realized that all sorts of stuff, imperceptible through sight, could be out there in the world, and probably was. He tried to explain this idea to some of the other kids in his class and to his fifth grade teacher, Mrs. McFarland. The teacher didn't get it and neither did most of the kids in the class. Nancy Wolf, however, thought it was an amazing realization. Davy had not said much of anything to Nancy Wolf before, but from fifth grade and for most of the days since, he said hello to her in the morning. What she said to him was that she was looking for him in the backs of her eyeballs. He was never sure what this meant in the great scheme of things, but now in the cavern under the wreckage of the arena he was looking for Nancy Wolf in the backs of his eyeballs. There was not much sign of her, but he would keep looking.



With the dawn, Lancer realized he was sleeping in a shelter of leaves that reached out from the tree near the ruined caldera, on a thick bed of soft mushrooms that had grown from beneath him as he slept. How long had he slept? Forever? He was rested – really rested. He sat up and reached into the leafy tent around him. It was thick, but it felt more like a curtain than overgrowth. He pushed it aside and looked around.

“You slept well?” Gianna’s voice came from behind him.

“Is this your doing?”

“Your shelter for the night? It is. You fell asleep against the tree. Did you like the mattress?”

“Mattress. It was fine. And it smelled pretty good too.”

“Fungus has always made a fine sleeping surface, I have found.”

“Lovely. Honest truth, my back hasn’t felt this good in I don’t know how long. How’s our project going?”

“Your project, Lancer. And look.”

There were people all around, a hundred or more of them. They were not only the few dozen he impressed into service yesterday, but others as well. They carried baskets of food. They dug small trenches around the edge of the ruin. They brought water in leathery buckets from who-knew-where and emptied them into the trenches around the periphery. And there was something going on with the irregular walls of the fallen structure.

Every hundred feet or so, a network of purple tendrils reached up from the ground through the outer wall of the ruin. He wanted to go and examine one of these purple capillary networks but on the way – and he had slept only a few yards from the edge of the ruin – all of these people gathered around him and kept him from moving. They were not blocking him intentionally. They were more like the crowd around a bridal couple or a pop star.

“Thank you,” a man said.

“Growing hopes, Goodsir,” another said.

A woman wished him “best of luck.”

“We are with you,” a little girl offered.

“Lead us.”

“Save us.”

“Dream for us.”

They watched him and touched him as he passed and a few shook his hand.

Lancer was not sure, but he thought he was enjoying this.

“I need to see what’s going on with the wall,” he said to no one in particular, and the crowd of people opened a path between him and the ruin.

He walked through the crowd as the path closed behind him. He knelt beside a purple growth along the bottom of the wall. It was a plant growing into the wooden structure of the fallen building. It was not so much taking over the fallen arena as getting a grip on it from underneath.

“Gianna?” he asked the people gathered around him. “Is Gianna here somewhere?”

There was a movement among the crowd. People shifted their positions. A row of bodies separated in front of him and the crowd spit out Gianna.

“Is this what you designed yesterday?”

“Approximately,” she said.

“Is it working?”

“I believe it is.”

He looked the growth up and down, saw that the outermost purple tendrils were slowly getting visibly longer as he watched. “It’s growing. Fast.”

“Yes,” she said.

“It’s becoming part of the ruined structure?”

“Yes.”

“And eventually it will start to lift?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

He looked at the wall, and at the purple capillaries working up the side of the wall. He imagined a three-dimensional network of such branches reaching through the fallen caldera, filling in gaps, widening and thickening like roots of grass working their way through concrete.

“When will it be ready?” he wanted to know. “Ready to start lifting, I mean.”

“Soon” Gianna said. “Sometime before mid-day.”

“Before noon.” He pressed his lips together, nodded, looked at the line of several purple capillary systems working their way around the exterior of the circular building.

“That’s good,” he said.

And the crowd erupted in cheers and applause like a ballpark full of fans watching a home run ball soar over the far wall.



Davy was listening for the sound of nothing when he heard a sound that was decidedly something. It was a quiet squeegee slurping sound that for all he knew might have been as loud as a thunderclap. He opened his eyes, crawled in the direction of the sounds, and after awhile he realized that the room he was in no longer looked just like the insides of his eyelids. There was light here, a little bit, from somewhere.

The wall had a little bit of a glow from its bottom. It was not the tiny shaft of light that he saw earlier that seemed to come from somewhere outside as the structure shifted. This was more like the light that came from the walls of the room where he and Lancer first woke up breathing water. It was like the light that came from those walls when the caldera stood. This light was much duller, but it was light nonetheless.

The boy realized that he first found himself here maybe two days ago. It could not possibly have been longer than that. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to have been here longer than a day. He was kidnapped, biologically altered and altered back, imprisoned in a room without doors, thrust into an alien society, attacked by bullets of anti-matter, paired up with the hero of his childhood who, as it turned out, had been the most powerful man on earth, and he had an enormous building fall on him. His absence of fear, it seemed to him, was due not so much to bravery on his part, but was the product of an overdose of abject terror. Whatever glands generated the fright response in him had probably burned right out.

Davy Sugarman wondered about all these things, alone here in the dark, and then he wondered how and when he managed to get so contemplative. Then, with a slurp and a squeegee, the walls around him began to lift off the ground.



“Here,” Lancer said to a boy of about ten standing nearby. “The outer wall here is high enough off the ground to see what’s inside. See if you can find out if anyone’s inside.”

Obediently, the boy got to his knees and started to squeeze under the narrow slit between that part of the ruin and the ground.

“No no!” from Lancer. “Don’t crawl under there.”

The boy got up, waiting for an instruction.

“Are you with anyone?”

“My father,” the boy said, taking the hand of a tall man standing nearby who had looked on impassively as the child had shoved his head under the massive, slowly rising wall.

“For chrissakes that isn’t even a little safe,” Lancer told the father. “Would you and your son find a stick or a long branch and feel under there? Maybe you could find out how thick the wall is. See whether it opens into anything.”

“Yes we will,” the father said, taking his son around the shoulder to go off in search of a suitable tool.

Lancer walked around the perimeter of the ruin, looking for progress. Gianna the flower pot was busily monitoring growth on some sort of graphic readout on the air. Dozens of people followed Lancer at every step, each eagerly waiting for an assignment. He would give out jobs as he found them necessary. This was tedious and involving, but it was much easier than being President.

Somewhere about a quarter of the way around the building he heard a voice.

“Shh.”

It startled him how quickly and completely everyone within earshot became quiet. He could not make out what the sound was saying or whether it was saying anything, but what was coming from this part of the wall was definitely a high-pitched voice.

“Here,” he said, kneeling by the smallest crack under the slowly rising wall.

“There’s someone in here. You two. Run around opposite sides of the ruin. Whichever of you sees Gianna first, bring her here. You – see if you can get everyone with a container of water to bring it over here.”

Before he could think, there were a dozen or more people with as many of those leathery buckets emptying water on the roots of the two purple tendril plants to either side of the spot where Lancer heard the voice.

The wall continued to rise, first slowly and then perceptibly more quickly as the ground and the roots sucked up the water. The wall was a little less than a foot off the ground at this point, and the voice was a little louder.

“Hello?” he said, crouching to call under the wall.

The sound that came back was still garbled, but he might have heard the word “where” in there.

“You are in the ruins of the arena in –” he looked up at someone behind him.

“Where are we?”

“Susquehanna City,” someone said. Then more people quickly repeated the answer to his question as though they thought he had to make sure.

“Thank you,” he said. “Please quiet,” and immediately they were quiet again. He turned back to the crack under the wall. “Are you hurt? Can you see daylight?”

There was more garbled sound approximating a voice.

“I’m coming in,” he said. “Under the wall.” He shoved his arms up to his elbows into the rising crack.

“Sir?” came the voice behind him. It was Gianna. “Sir, you asked for me?”

“Yes. How do we make this section of wall rise a little faster?”

“Flood the roots with water.”

“That’s what we’ve done.”

“That is the way to do it. What are you doing, sir?”

“I’m going under. There’s someone in there.”

“Can’t someone else do it?”

“Why?”

“You are valuable, sir.”

“I am? What makes me so valuable?”

“You can give orders and organize the day.”

“That makes me valuable?”

“No one else here can do that.”

“No one? Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t have time for this.” And he called underneath the slowly rising wall,
“Reach far along the opening if you can.”

Lancer managed to get his head and shoulders under the wall and extend his arms forward. When the outer edge of the wall was up to his waist he felt something warm against his right palm. It was a fingertip.

“Hello?” he said.

“Hello,” came the high voice. It was the first clearly discernible word he heard from inside.

He wriggled forward a little bit further and grasped an entire hand. Then he found another one and tightened his own hands around both.

“Behind me. You outside. Can you hear me?”

A chatter of yeses came back to him.

“Are my feet and ankles still visible?”

More yeses.

“Pull me back toward you. I’ve got someone.”

He felt himself being dragged backward, perhaps a foot or two, holding tightly to the pair of hands. He heard a squeal and the hands pulled free of his.

“Wait! Stop! Stop pulling me.” He felt his backward movement stop. “Are you all right in there?”

“I hit something,” the voice said. “I’m all right.”

He wriggled forward just an inch or two more before the hands again found his.

“All right,” he called behind him. “Pull me back.”

In a few moments he saw daylight again and he kept dragging along the ground until the two arms he dragged with him extended out from under the wall. He got to his knees and with the help of two other men he pulled the survivor the rest of the way out.

He was disappointed to see it was not Davy, but he worked at not showing it. He had saved a young woman, bruised on her arms and with a large bump on her forehead. He helped her to her feet.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her.

“Yes. Thank you,” she said.

“Find this girl something to eat,” he said to no one in particular and half a dozen people did.

The ruined building continued through the day to rise until it looked like a LeCorbusier treehouse. A score of people, supported by dozens more hanging onto their ankles, repeated Lancer’s rescue. Davy was the eleventh person who got pulled out of the ruin. Lancer was rescuing his own third survivor when he realized that one of the people hanging onto one of his ankles and pulling this time was the boy.

“Are you all right?” Lancer said when Davy helped him to his feet.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I wasn’t scared, sir.”

“Well, why would you be?” the man wanted to know, and clapped the boy on both shoulders and hugged him hard. “It appears we’re old friends, kid.”

“That’s good.”

The people Lancer gathered around the disaster rescued forty-two people from the fallen building, few seriously injured. Each had been trapped in a bubble of building material as Davy had been. By nightfall the crew began to find the bodies. Three hundred eight people, all women, were retrieved dead. Certainly there were many more, too deep under the wreckage to find.

Before the fourth day of excavation through the debris it was apparent that there would be no more survivors. Well before that time it was clear to both Davy and Lancer that many hundreds of people were following wherever Lancer was leading.