

Lancelot Nova and the Hidden Peril

By
Tim McDaniel

"And now, Lancelot Nova, you will meet your doom!" crowed Drig the Dread. His tiny, piggy eyes – all three of them – glowed red, and his tusks clacked. "And when you are dashed against the rocks at the base of this cliff, your red blood sinking into the blue desert of this alien world, you will be unable to warn Earth of my cunning plan. The Terra Defense Rangers will be caught unaware when my marauder fleet pounces!"

The hot suns of Trilgar beat upon Lancelot and sweat creased his brow. He faced Drig's battalion, their yellow faces glistening not from heat, but from battle lust, their tails punctuating this murderous craving by beating the dusty ground. Behind Lancelot a few short steps was the cliff's edge and a very long fall. He threw his drained blaster at Drig's scaly feet. "You'll never win, Drig! We of Earth have never tolerated tyranny. We'll fight!"

"Ah, you will try, of that I am sure," said Drig nodding, drool sliding from his protruding lower lip. "In the past you bested Morkar the Alarming, fought Ixor the Insensitive to a standstill, and defeated the Spidermen of Ullock-tos. Most impressive." His tusks clapped thrice in acknowledgement. "But now, Ranger, you have met your match," he jabbed his own chest, "in me. I will crush you and your miserable little planet!" He turned to his minions. "Attack, minions!"

The battalion surged forward, forgoing their decomposer guns and reaching instead with their taloned digits to grasp and rip Lancelot's throat and limbs. Their howls and bellows vibrated across the valley below.

Lancelot stepped back, and the ground crumbled under his heel. Jaw set, he met the onslaught with the only weapons he had left, his powerful fists and even quicker wits. Each blow laid warriors low or catapulted them over the cliff, but they pressed in, unceasing, ugly yellow faces, piercing claws, slitted red eyes, nasty body odors, all forcing him back toward that long fall and the boulders below....

"Uh huh," said Joe Spinuzza, Lancelot's next-door neighbor, leaning against the white picket fence that separated their yards. He glanced at his atomimower clipping his grass, looked back. "Then what'd you do, Lance?"

"Well, Joe, my friend," said Lancelot, absently polishing the hood of his sleek, silver hovercar with his uniform sleeve, "I suddenly thought of a ruse. I stepped backward, feigning a fall off the cliff. In reality, I landed catlike on a small ledge, which I had noted earlier.

"Thinking me dead, the prideful Drig and his battalion never looked for my body on the rocks far below." Lancelot smirked and his tone deepened. "It was their undoing."

"Uh huh. Wouldn't that guy's name be 'Drig the Dreaded'? That makes better sense grammatically."

"Ah, no." Lancelot shook his head. "A common misconception among civilians. It is 'Drig the Dread'."

"Mmm."

"Anyway," Lancelot's voice resumed an excited cadence, "I climbed sideways and up, reaching for far flung, precarious handholds and slicing my fingers on protruding rocks. Gravel nicked my face and foul dust blew into my eyes, but I regained the cliff edge. After pausing for breath, I espied Drig and his brutes, then saw – horror of horrors! – the Silverfish Marauders, row upon row of Drig's deadly starships. Their pulsing green engines indicated their readiness for launch. Earth and its innocent citizens would be destroyed!

"I catapulted myself towards the fleet. Drig and his battalion came within inches of trapping me yet again in their vicious claws, but I dove into the cockpit of the nearest ship just by the skin of my teeth. I throttled the engines, incinerating those goons underneath, and took her up, blasting the exhaust against the fuel tanks of the other ships—"

"Yeah." Joe interrupted. "You know, my lawn's looking a little brown. Think I need some fertilizer?"

"Of course, all the other ships exploded in a devastating chain reaction. Soon, the entire fleet was ruined. I saw but a few wretched survivors wandering deaf and blind among the twisted wreckage." Lancelot's smile sparkled as he lodged his hands on his hips and straightened his shoulders so his chest stretched the white fabric of his Ranger uniform.

"Uh huh, and this Dreaded Drig – you get him, too?"

Lancelot shook his head. "Of him, I saw no sign. But if he survived the day, I hope he learned his lesson."

"Yeah, that's good." Joe was bending over, fiddling with the atomimower that had returned and switched to a low idle.

Lancelot gracefully propped an elbow on the fence. "But enough of me, Joe. How're things at the reclamation plant?"

"Oh, can't complain. One of the units backed up. We spent half the morning redistributing loads. Not fun, I can tell you, but at least I'm not one of the guys laid off last week, so there's that." Joe finished tinkering, straightened, and popped some gum into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully. "Oh, then some fool flushed one of those scorpion-pigs into the sewer. Cute when they're young, but they thrive down there, growing huge and very mean. Took most of an afternoon to get it caught."

Lancelot's attention had wandered to the cloudless sky.

"But the space hero thing is working out for you, that's good. Keeping you busy, then, are they?"

"Rather!" Lancelot's gaze popped back to Joe. "Everyday is a race against time to see who the ultimate conquerors of the galaxy will be – stalwart humans or ilk such as Drig's mindless drones, or the wormwraiths of Stilgar VI, or...say, did I tell you about the time I—"

"Oh, that's good." Joe headed toward his garage, the atomimower following at his heels.

"Yes, definitely. Well, my wife and son – and a steak! – are awaiting my return." Lancelot turned to mount the three steps to his front door.

Joe paused and eyed Lancelot. "It must be hard on your missus, being a Ranger too but doing the housework, laundry, yard work, taking care of your boy, all that. How's she been these days?"

"Just fine, Joe. Thank you for asking."

"Mmm." Joe looked doubtful. "Well, see you, Lance. Don't forget the block party next Saturday."

"Right." Lancelot leaped the steps and opened the front door in one fluid motion. "Honey, I'm—"

"Home? Good." Stella Nova said from the sofa, her six-foot frame curled on the sofa. She flicked back a lock of long, blonde hair and put down some papers. "The atomizer is still on the blink, Lance. I thought you were going to get it taken care of."

Lancelot kissed his wife on the cheek, then headed for the kitchen. "I'll fix it in just a little while." Returning, he opened a bottle of Venusian ale and dropped down on the sofa next to her.

She edged away. "That's what you've been saying all week."

"I'm sorry, Stella, dear. Today I was involved in a titanic struggle against the forces of Drig the Dread." He drank deeply. "It was a close thing. I think, not since my last battle with Ixor the Insensitive have I been so perilously close to death."

Stella blinked. "Well, I got a call from the school today, too. Melvin is struggling with Early Galactic History."

"I'll have a talk with the boy."

"I told you, Lance. We need to get him a tutor."

"Nonsense, dear. I'll work with him, get him up to speed. Soon as I can find the time." He sighed, relaxing further into the sofa tufts.

The vidphone rang.

"I'll get it." Stella darted for the unit and turned the screen away. Covering the mouthpiece with one hand, she pointed to the kitchen with the other. "Lance, why don't you go to the kitchen? Your steak should be coming out of the dispenser any time now."

"Great!"

As Stella smiled at the vidphone and spoke softly into its receiver, Lancelot entered the kitchen. Fragrant steam gushed from the dispenser's vent. He opened the hatch and retrieved his prized cut of beef. "Ah, most excellent!" He grabbed his steak knife and fork, set his plate on the table, and...ketchup. His meal wouldn't be complete without ketchup, he thought.

He poked his head in the living room.

"...maybe not the right time..." Stella murmured.

"Sweetheart, where's my Eridanian ketchup?"

She covered the mouthpiece. "Where it always is, second shelf in the vacufridge!"

Seated at the table, surrounded by all the proper condiments and utensils, Lancelot sliced into the meat covered in bright green ketchup, chewed his delectable first bite, and felt contented.

"...no, he wouldn't even notice for days if..."

"Are you coming, dear?" Lancelot called.

"I have to go, lcky....later...I promise. Bye."

Stella entered the kitchen and pulled her own meal from the dispenser.

"Was that call for me?" Lancelot asked.

"No. Just a, um, a salesman. A salesman, with, a, a wrong number." She sat opposite Lancelot and dug into her chicken salad.

"Ah. Good. I thought it might be the colonel with some fresh emergency among the stars." Lancelot smiled and winked at his lovely wife, found the newspaper on the table where the housebot had thoughtfully left it for him, and read the headlines. "'Pizgot the Petulant Implicated in Sex Scandal.'" He chuckled. "Oh, that guy. Again?"

Every couple of minutes his fork would emerge from behind the paper to spear another chunk of steak.

"Melvin's eating with Tag Lightfire's family tonight."

"Huh?" Lancelot noticed the empty chair. "Oh. That's nice." He returned to his paper.

"At least he's not with the Ender kid again, playing that silly game all day," she said.

Lancelot chewed noisily.

"He took the dog with him. The *Lightfires'* restrictor field is working just fine. You know, Joe's too nice to complain, but that dog of ours has been leaving little presents on his lawn."

"The restrictor field is out, right." Lancelot's paper rattled. "I'll see what I can make of it."

"I had quite a rough day today myself out beyond—"

"Uh huh. Listen, Stel, honey, can we talk about that a bit later? I'm just reading the paper here."

"All right, Lance. If you say so."

"But be sure to tell me later." He peered over the top edge of the newspaper at her. "I am vitally interested. I really am." He winked at her again and went back to reading.

"Oh, sure. I just thought I'd mention it, because you might notice the scar. I lost my left arm fighting a Zenzorian muckdragon, and had to have it replaced. The doctor says the itching—"

"Mmmm hmmm."

"Well, I guess I'll tell you that later too."

"Fine, darling." The fork stabbed porcelain. "Is there any more steak?"

"I'll get it."

"Great." Lancelot put down the paper. "I really ran up my appetite today. I was hanging on a sheer cliff face, a horde of Drig's thugs howling for blood above me. But where's Melvin? He'd want to hear this."

That night Lancelot clicked on his favorite purple mood light in the Nova master bedroom and snuggled into bed beside Stella.

"Lance, please, not now." She edged further onto her side.

"I'm a red-blooded Earthman, Mrs. Nova, with typical red-blooded desires."

She sighed. "Yeah, except for that time with Jack."

Lancelot's tongue clicked. "A youthful indiscretion, Stella. I haven't talked to him for weeks. Days, anyhow."

"I don't blame you, Lance." She rolled over to look at his face highlighted in dim purple. "He's got a cute b—"

"If you say so, dear. I haven't noticed." He looked away for a moment.

"You two are assigned to work together in sector 101 next week, right? The colonel says you requested—"

"Oh, maybe. I think so. I don't remember. Now," he reached for her, "about those desires...."

"Lance, I'm all doped up to stop the awful itch in my arm. It makes me nauseous."

"Oh, you know it won't take long, dearest." He snuggled closer. "Just let me—"

"Lance, no!"

She squeezed him – pinched, actually – in a sensitive area and he backed off.

"Okay, okay. I just thought you'd want to give me a pleasant memory for next week when I'm off patrolling sector 101."

"With Jack Darkstarr?"

"Mmm. You know, there've been indications of serious trouble in that sector. The colonel suspects Morkar the Alarming has been building a new base somewhere in the vicinity. Oh, that reminds me. Is my uniform clean for tomorrow?"

"Yes, I washed it when I did my own...and...how about Ixor the Insensitive? Do you think he'll be back, Lance?"

Lancelot folded his arms under his head with a sigh. "Oh, I think old Ixor has finally learned not to tangle with me. There hasn't been a peep out of him in months."

"Maybe he's planning something."

"No doubt his devious mind is even now working on some insidious plot. Whatever it is, you can bet your asteroid he'll stay as far away from me as he can...and from you, too, of course, dear. You've had dealings with him yourself, I know."

"Yes."

He turned on his side toward his wife. "But about those all-too-human needs that I have...."

"Oh, Lance, for Pete's sake!"

As it turned out, Morkar the Alarming had built a secret base from which his minions issued to menace the peace-loving peoples of the galaxy. Lancelot gained the upper hand and restored stability in the far away sector 101 though his ship was destroyed in the process, delaying his return home.

A black hovercar blocked the driveway, requiring Lancelot to park on the street in front of Joe's house. He waved to his neighbor. "Hello, Joe."

Joe nodded while putting together some contraption of hollow metal poles and chains.

Lance walked to the fence. "I guess I have company." He gestured at the black

hovercar. "Know who it is?"

"Uh...no, Lance. I guess Stella's having friends over or something."

"Stella's home? I thought she was on assignment."

"Yeah, she's home. I saw her out earlier working on the restrictor field."

"Ah," Lancelot tapped his forehead, "I meant to get to that myself. What are you working on, Joe? Looks awfully complicated."

"Oh, just a swing set for the kids." Joe sat back on his knees.

"Why, that's ingenious. Perhaps Melvin will be over to try it out after you complete it."

"He'd be welcome." Joe smiled, brushed his hands against his jeans. "I'm about ready for a break. Have a beer with me, Lance?"

"Thanks, Joe. No more time for chatting. I've got a wife, a son, and a steak waiting for me inside!"

"Another time, then."

Lancelot bounded inside. "Honey, I'm..."

Stella was lugging a flight bag toward the front door and Melvin followed her with his own bag. Behind them, a familiar horned, demonic visage leered.

An icy hand clutched Lancelot's heart. "Ixor the Insensitive!" he gasped. "How dare you reach into my home and attempt to snatch away that which is most dear to me!"

"Lance!" Stella dropped her bag.

"Fear not, my darlings!" Lancelot held one hand out to shield her and Melvin, and snatched his blaster from its holster with the other.

Stella swatted away Lancelot's gun, then backhanded him across the face.

"Sorry, dear."

He crumpled to the floor, dazed.

Stella, Melvin, and Ixor the Insensitive stepped over him.

Lancelot was powerless to stop them. He struggled just to sit up.

His wife and son threw their bags into the black hovercar. Ixor opened the passenger door for Stella, lifted Melvin into the back seat, and slid into the driver's seat. The ignition started.

"Stella?" Lancelot couldn't believe his eyes.

The family dog brushed by him, bounding out the door and into the car.

No, it couldn't be, he thought. Lancelot staggered to his feet. "Stella!" He took two halting steps.

The black hovercar backed out of the driveway.

Lancelot found himself dashing across the yard, a plan already forming in his mind. Yes, he would leap into the car, and....

He slammed into an invisible wall and slid to the grass. Every inch of his body throbbed.

Stella got out, placed the restrictor field remote control on the driveway, and walked over to Lancelot. "I fixed it myself and boosted it a bit." Her smile sparkled. She kneeled to Lancelot's eye level. "I'm sorry it had to be this way, Lance. I met Icky when we were both marooned on the ice moon of Algol VII. I, I tried to tell you about it, but you wouldn't listen. Later, we ran into each other in the fetid swamps of...oh, it's no use. I wanted to talk to you, but you and I don't...." She sighed, shaking her head, and stood

up. "We're in love, Lance. Completely in love! And he's a great father to Melvin. Don't worry, of course you'll still be able to see him. We'll work out visitation via hyperwave." She walked back to the car and got in. "Goodbye, Lance. Take care."

"Farewell, Lancelot Nova!" crowed Ixor the Insensitive, an arm around Stella.

The car soared away.

"Sorry, Lance."

Lancelot's gaze traveled from the hovercraft's exhaust to his neighbor's yard.

Joe was trimming his roses. "Tough break, huh?"

"I can't believe it," Lancelot said, shaking his head. "I just can't believe it." He stumbled back inside and collapsed into his chair. The delicious smell of cooked beef did not waft from the kitchen. Melvin's room did not echo with the sound of his three-vee. Stella did not greet him or offer her soft cheek for a kiss.

Lancelot Nova was entirely alone, lost, bereft of companionship and sympathy. He slumped further into his chair, brooding.

Later, his hand, as if of its own accord, snaked to the vidphone console. He punched in a number.

"Darkstarr residence," answered a deep voice.

"Hello, Jack?"