

*The Untimely Death of +++Lance Sterling+++ *

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To begin with (said Nicodemus Mayflower), he wasn't born +++Lance Sterling+++. His real name was Mortimer Smurch. I once asked him why he changed it, and he asked me if I'd lay down my life for a man named Mortimer Smurch, and I thought about it for a few minutes and never asked him again.

By the time he was nineteen he was dedicated to freeing oppressed people, human or alien, wherever he found them. He knew it would be dangerous, so that's when he decided to wear the mask.

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"If he didn't want to call attention to himself, why did he wear that shining silver outfit with the cape?" asked Max.

"You want to hear this or not?" said Mayflower.

"All right, all right, I won't interrupt again," said Max.

"Until the next time," predicted Baker.

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I didn't mind the mask so much (continued Mayflower). It was the sword that bothered me. I mean, what sane man uses a sword when his opponents have burners and screechers and pulse guns? But after he led the revolutions on Briarpatch II and Blue Alaska and came away without a scratch, he decided that God was on his side and that he was invincible.

By then he'd made a bit of a reputation for himself, especially since he let everyone know it was +++Lance Sterling+++ beneath the mask, and a lot of idealistic young men and women sought him out and offered to fight for his cause. I was one of them.

I still remember my first action. The Governor of Piastra VII had revoked the constitution and literally enslaved the people. They were forced to labor 18 hours a day in his gold mines (and this was on a planet with a 22-hour day), working on half rations, while he and his army grew fat off the sweat of their brows. +++Lance Sterling+++ couldn't tolerate such a situation, and he gathered his followers about him and announced that we were going to attack Piastra the next morning.

When I asked for our battle plan, he looked at me as if I was crazy.

"Battle plan?" he repeated. "My plan is to go in there with swords flashing and burners blazing and not to stop until every last villain is dead."

I gathered my courage to ask another question, and said, "What I meant was, their army numbers about 20,000, and we are less than 150. Isn't some strategy required?"

"My strategy is to free the poor citizens of Piastra VII," he answered firmly. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, I guess my math must be faulty," I said.

"Are there any other questions?" he asked, staring at us. "No? Good. I will leave the pleasure of decimating the army to you, but the Governor is mine."

"You mean you're not going to lead us into battle?" I blurted out.

"Of course I am," he said. "At least, until I spot the Governor, who, though evil through and through, is nonetheless no coward. He and I will match swords and skills up and down the balustrades, in full sight of his men, and when I dispatch him, it will take the heart out of his army, and most of those who are still alive will lay down their arms and swear allegiance to whomever the liberated citizens elect as their new leader."

Well, I could see about 83 ways his plan could go wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to challenge him a third time, so I kept my doubts to myself and prepared to die as nobly as possible the next morning.

You've all read the history books, or seen the holographic recreations of the Battle of Piastra VII, so you know that it turned out exactly the way +++Lance Sterling+++ had predicted, with him running the Governor through and the army suing for peace less than a minute later.

That's when his reputation really began to grow, and we never again had a problem recruiting volunteers. By the time we liberated Hacienda III a few years later, we had more than two thousand men and women fighting on our side.

Of course, success hadn't changed +++Lance Sterling's+++ approach to warfare. It had cost him 42 of his most trusted lieutenants during the last six revolutions, but I began to think that he himself could only be killed by a silver bullet or a stake through the heart.

I still remember the day he outlined his plans for Hacienda. The gist of it was that we, his followers, would create a diversion five miles from the Emperor's castle, while he would boldly enter through the front door, slash and hew his way to the Emperor's private quarters, tickle his Adam's apple with the point of his sword, and demand his immediate surrender.

I asked him if he wouldn't feel a little more comfortable (one never suggested that he might want to feel safer) with a few hand-picked men accompanying him.

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"It seems foolhardy to assume that the Emperor won't be well-guarded, even within the walls of his own castle," I said.

"Of course he will," was his response. "But then, that's what makes it fun!"

"You think going up against 60 armed men with nothing but a sword is _fun_?" I asked incredulously.

"I _am_ +++Lance Sterling+++," he answered, as if that explained everything. "And besides, I have it on good authority that there are only 55 of them."

"Obviously my math has failed me again," I said as apologetically as possible.

He laid a heroic hand on my shoulder. "You're decent and you're loyal, Nicodemus, old friend," he said. "There's no law that says you have to be intelligent, too."

"Thank you, glorious leader," I said.

"Tut tut," he said. "A simple +++Lance+++ is sufficient. Or +++Lancelot+++ , if we're being formal."

Well, we set Hacienda free, as everyone knows, and +++Lance Sterling+++ did indeed get the Emperor to agree to his terms ... but we also lost ninety percent of our forces.

"They died in a noble cause," said +++Lance Sterling+++ during the funeral service. "Their mothers should be proud."

I waited for his funeral oration, but he evidently felt he had no need to say anything further, and besides, he wanted to get back to the ship and go off to liberate other oppressed peoples.

We spent the next two years liberating Melancholy III, Greenwillow, Wheatfield, Pius XIV, and New Tahiti, and even stopped by the university planet of Sorbonne long enough to help the students take over the Administration Building ... and then we came to that fateful day on Brookmandor II.

As you know, the planet had been conquered by a megalomaniac who called himself Alexander the Greater. He feared an uprising among his unwilling subjects, and as a result his army was dispersed across the planet.

+++Lance Sterling+++ decided that a lightning-swift attack on Alexander's headquarters would have the desired effect, that once the head of this hideous political and military structure was cut off, the body would crumble.

"He's got to have a couple of hundred guards and retainers on the premises," I said. "Just this once, I wish you'd let some of us go with you."

He smiled in amusement. "Mathematics again, Nicodemus?" Then he shrugged and relented. "All right. You and Zanzibar McShane may accompany me. Will that make you happy?"

I assured him that it would, and the next morning, before sunrise, the three of us sneaked into Alexander's headquarters. We climbed to the top level of the building, and had made it almost halfway to his private quarters when Alexander himself stepped out into the corridor we were traversing, his burner aimed right between +++Lance Sterling's+++ eyes.

"I've been expecting you," said Alexander with an evil leer. "My men said that you would launch a full-scale attack, but I knew that an egomaniac such as yourself would never be willing to share the glory with his cannon fodder. Now drop your sword."

+++Lance Sterling's+++ sword fell to the floor with a noisy clatter.

Alexander the Greater approached him, turned him so that he was facing us, and placed the burner next to his ear. "Now tell your men to drop their weapons," he ordered.

"Do what he says," said +++Lance Sterling+++, showing no sign of fear. "He has the upper hand ... for the moment."

Zanzibar McShane dropped his pulse gun and his screecher. I pulled my burner out of my holster, but I didn't drop it.

"Drop it, or I'll kill your leader," said Alexander.

"You're going to kill him anyway," I said, aiming my burner at him. "If I drop it, you'll kill us both."

"I'm not kidding!" yelled Alexander. "Drop it or your boss is a dead man!"

"That's stupid," I said. "If I drop it, we're all dead men."

"I'm going to count to three," said Alexander.

"Count to five hundred for all I give a damn," I said. "I'm not dropping it -- and if you kill him, I'll kill

you."

"Then I'll kill your friend, too," he said, indicating Zanzibar McShane.

"He's not my friend," I answered. "I hardly know him."

"Damn it, Mayflower!" said +++Lance Sterling+++. "Just drop the fucking burner!"

"He'll shoot me if I do."

"He'll shoot me if you don't!" snapped +++Lance Sterling+++.

"One way he kills one of us," I explained logically. "The other way he kills two or maybe even three of us."

"I hate you and your goddamned mathematics!" he snapped just before Alexander the Greater burned a hole through his noble head.

I fired an instant later, Alexander toppled over, and Brookmandor II was free before noontime. Zanzibar McShane stayed on to become their new governor, while I took +++Lance Sterling+++ home and buried him in his family plot.

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"So that's why no one ever found his grave!" exclaimed Three-Gun Max. "Who'd think to look for Mortimer Smurch?"

"I'm surprised no one else here fought for him," said Bet-a-World O'Grady. "I mean, hell, he was the most popular revolutionary of his time."

"Oh, I fought in my share of revolutions," answered Max. "I just never got around to fighting in the same ones as +++Lance Sterling+++."

"I think we've probably all seen our share of action," agreed the Gravedigger.

"Yeah, but not in wars or revolutions," said Catastrophe Baker.

"You never fought in a war?" asked Max.

"I'm not a joiner," said Baker.

"Sometimes you don't have to wait to join up," said Max. "Sometimes a war sneaks up on you when you're not looking. Like this one that's heading toward the Outpost."

"This doesn't sound like much of a war," said the Gravedigger. "Just a few dozen enemy ships. If you want to talk about a real war, I could tell you about the Peloponnesian War. Strangest enemy I ever saw."

"You were there?" asked Max.

"Yes."

"Well, damn it to hell, so was I!"

"You, too?" said Nicodemus Mayflower. "That's where I saw my first action, before I hooked up with +++Lance Sterling+++."

"Are you guys sure you have it right?" asked the Bard.

"Of course we do," said Max.

"But the Peloponnesian War was held back on Earth, almost ten thousand years ago."

"We're not talking about that Peloponnesian War," said Max.

"There was another one?" asked the Bard.

"Sure. About fifteen, sixteen years ago, out past the Albion Cluster."

"I'd like to hear about it," said the Bard.

"As if you had a choice," snorted Catastrophe Baker.

"Who should go first?" asked the Gravedigger.

"Anybody got a three-sided coin?" said Max with a grin.

"I just happen to have one," volunteered O'Grady.

"Why I am not surprised?" muttered Max.

O'Grady produced the coin. "Okay," he said, holding it up so everyone could see it. "This is heads, this is tails, and this is fists."

"Fists?"

O'Grady shrugged. "I had to call it something." He tossed it in the air. "Call it."

All three men called fists. It came up tails.

"Looks like you'll have to tell the story," said Baker.

"No, but I'll choose the order. Nicodemus Mayflower, you go first."

"Why him?" demanded Max.

"Because the Gravedigger is polite enough to wait, and I'm tired of listening to you," said O'Grady.

Max considered that for a moment, then nodded his head thoughtfully. "Okay, that's a valid reason."