



RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE CURSE OF
THE HUDROM MINE**

PART I

Through the wall of windswept sand emerged the shadow of a figure beneath a wide brimmed hat who leaned into the storm. Breaking through the light brown curtain, his weather beaten face dissolved into view; his unshaven chin gritting tightly, his steel blue eyes searching.

They found their mark quickly; the sharp dressed woman whose neatly cut hair all but defied the laws of nature. Her professional gait posed as though in a museum. He knew this stance well; she was his boss, a woman he was once married to, Mika Sinovi. "Welcome to Anovan, Lancaster," Mika said with the formality of a diplomat, but a slight smile of familiarity.

Lancaster nodded and looked around. The wind lightened here under the protection of the camp, so he could see clearer now than he had since he unloaded from his partner's ship. That partner had wanted to take some time securing Odin's Revenge, so Lancaster was on his own to face his ex-wife and their business.

She had summoned him to this world to investigate a lead she had discovered at the university where she worked. Their team was presently investigating a series of planets found on a map Lancaster had recovered, and Anovan had been one of them on that list. It so happened that a mining colony run by the Hudrom Corporation was on that world, and they had recently uncovered alien ruins in several areas along the ridge they were mining. They had thought little of it until recently when they believed they had released a curse.

That was Mika's way in. Corporations typically did not allow scientists onto their territory no matter how amazing the find unless they wanted an appraisal for their profits. But now that the alien ruins were slowing productivity, Mika was able to convince the executives that their services would be beneficial.

Mika showed Lancaster to the mining foreman inside one of the long-term tents where she had a bunch of her computer analysis equipment. The foreman's crevassed face looked as worn as the land on which they mined, and whose beard was like a wild wood that had never been explored. His eyes bespoke an ongoing determination, yet a fear he could not shake. "Lancaster," Mika said to her partner and ex-husband, "This is Otis Lyman. Mr. Lyman, my partner Lancaster James."

As Lancaster stuck out his hand, the man broke in, "She says you can figure out what's killing my miners."

"Well, I can try..."

"Says you can lift the curse what's been causing the trouble?"

"I never said he can do everything, Mr. Lyman," Mika said. "Mr. James can go in and locate the source of the problem that's viewing to be a curse, and I will be out here monitoring his progress with equipment to help him apprehend it."

Otis's eyes shot from Mika to Lancaster, digging deep into his eyes the way he would a mountain. "It doesn't just view to be a curse. It's the symbols. We uncovered the first of the cursed ones carved into the wall of a cavity, and three miners fell dead, starting with the one what located the symbol." As he described the story, Otis pulled flat photographs of the carved symbols out of a folder and placed them on the table. Lancaster picked them up one by one and studied them as the grizzled miner continued, "When we found the second, four miners died, beginning with the one what found it. After that, no one's going back."

Lancaster looked over the second carved symbol. The photographs weren't very good; no one there had apparently been particularly good with imagery equipment. They weren't clear enough for him to make out what alien origins they were, and Mika's equipment had not been able to recognize it. "You said there were more ruins before you discovered these?" Lancaster asked.

“Wilco. She’s got them in her machinery.” Otis pointed at Mika, who was powering up the monitors on her work station. She popped up several 2D and 3D images on the monitors and the hologram table. They were pieces of buildings and pillars partially freed from their rocky imprisonment. Several of them had hieroglyphs of creatures that looked like snakes.

A couple of the ruins were archways, the most prominent of which served as a support inside the mine itself. Lancaster recognized the architecture as being Chiotho. The archway inside the mine particularly interested Lancaster as its beam sides were like totem poles with important carvings. Reading their symbolism, Lancaster theorized they once led to an important shrine that could hold valuable or perhaps powerful treasures.

“How did they die?” came a voice from the entry that startled them all. Standing there was a short figure in a long, dark trench coat that covered a slick suit. This was Lancaster’s partner Little Jack, who had finished parking his ship to join them. He stared blankly at Otis Lyman through his large, frosted-over glasses that covered most of his face, waiting for an answer.

“The curse,” the foreman answered as though to say of course.

“No,” Little Jack said definitively, then continued. “Try again. Where were they and what passed?”

Lancaster turned back to Otis a little embarrassed by the brashness of his partner, but aware that this was the question that needed to be asked.

Otis eyed Mika, then said, “Day we discovered it, we reported it to our union rep. Then everything was fine the next day; and day after that, we jondered past it, and Club Foot died.”

“Club Foot?” Lancaster asked.

“Everyone goes by a nickname. Hardly anyone knows each other by their real names.”

“Go on, Mr. Lyman,” Mika said.

“Later that day, Trigger bit it. Then the next day Braxton died.”

“How’d they die?” Mika asked.

“They all got very sick. First couple ripped their masks off; said they couldn’t breathe. They turned green, vomited, and died not long after. The others felt nauseous. Stumbled out of the mine or were carried out. Something got in them, though. They had breathing problems, then died day or two later.”

“And you credit that it was the curse of these symbols,” Lancaster said.

“Trouble began when we laid eyes on them. You aprend something else and prove it’s not something the aliens left behind, we’ll regress to work. Until then, our union rep’s standing behind us and we’re staying out of the mine.”

* * *

That union rep caught up with Lancaster, Little Jack and Mika near the main entrance of the mine. They were getting instructions from the executive manager from Hudrom Corp who was cursing about the miners. “Dango miners are all superstitious,” he was saying.

“Unsophisticated slackers looking for any excuse to avoid real work.”

“Those slackers work for you 12 hours a day for your paycheck,” said the union representative as he stepped up to the small group. The executive rolled his eyes while the union rep introduced himself to the others. “Pabu Grappa,” he said, then looked directly at Lancaster. “You shouldn’t go in there, Mr. James. There are some places man was not meant to venture.”

“Here comes the drama,” the executive said. “We have ore to mine and I have superiors to answer to. The sooner you can show them how crazy they’re being the better...”

“There is ore elsewhere. Easy enough for us to mine,” Pabu said. “Lives cannot be replaced.”

“Do you vis what I have to deal with on a daily basis?” the executive said to Mika, who tried to smile politely in return.

“I implore you, Mr. James,” Pabu said. “Your skills are too great to be wasted in a place of doom such as this.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Lancaster said. “I’ll be nove, though. I’ve got some good backup.” He motioned to Little Jack, who would be going with him into the mine, and Mika, who would be watching from the tent with all her equipment.

Pabu sighed, then said, “Then you should take this.” He held out an apparatus that would go over the lower half of the face, one for Lancaster and one for Little Jack. “It may be the only thing to protect you from whatever is killing my people. And you’ll especially need it if there is a cave-in.”

Lancaster took the mask, then Little Jack did, a little more hesitantly.

“Now get in there so I can put my people back to work,” the executive demanded.

Lancaster and Little Jack eyed him, then Mika said more diplomatically, “I’ll get on the line,” and she hurried off to her station. The two partners strolled toward the steep, rocky ridge and the yawning, blackness of the mine entrance. Lancaster took a deep breath. He had explored many dangerous worlds before, but this one played havoc with his nerves. He was used to uncharted space where the dangers were a mystery. Now he had been faced with the results of those dangers. He could see around him the friends of those who had fallen. They were strolling around the work camp, keeping a comfortable distance away from the mineshaft, many of them watching him.

“Getting stage fright?” Little Jack asked, noticing Lancaster slowing down and assuming it had to do with being watched.

“Let’s get inside,” Lancaster said, and they stepped into the darkness.

Directly within the opening bulge sat a lot of the mining equipment; the vehicles, the heat-picks, the sonic cutters and other explosives. A few paths led in various directions, but the larger main path was clearly visible, and had a magnorail path that led the way along the floor. Lancaster walked along this main path, lighting up the way with his Illuminator while Little Jack used the sensors within his glasses.

“I’m in vorlie of taking our time,” Little Jack said.

“What do you mean?” Lancaster asked.

“That executive reminded me why I used to take jobs undermining thicktils like that.”

“Yeah, he was a tyl,” Lancaster said.

“I don’t mean the way he treated us,” Little Jack said. “Corporations like this one work their employees to their marrow. They use them for all and the novas they’re worth to their dying day.”

“I’m abso it doesn’t help that the corporation is their nation,” Lancaster said.

“You speak up, you’re fired. If you’re fired, you’re deported. You lose your home, your family, everything.” Though Little Jack spoke in his usual monotone voice, it was more than he usually said at one time. Lancaster knew he was passionate about this.

“What do you register about this corporation?” Lancaster asked.

“Primary business is metallic materials. Their portfolio’s narrow but profitable, their chief rival is Burbank Corp and they used to be part of the Cordova Barony.”

“Used to?” Lancaster asked.

“Bankruptcy, hostile takeover, that sort of thing,” Little Jack answered.

“Oh. Well, the planet’s on our map, which means the aliens who used to live here were once a target of the Siguerans. So let’s see if we can find anything about them. Oh, and watch out for any ancient curses.”

“That’s your job,” Little Jack reminded Lancaster.

They soon came upon the alien archway the miners had discovered. The supports on both sides were carved into designs like totems. Little Jack could not tell if they were supposed to be animals or just some sort of archaic sculpture. Lancaster explained they were a little of both. Statues by the Chiotho tended to be so impressionistic that they typically formed esoteric shapes. Wrapped around these posts connecting the constructs were more snake-like creatures, only these had thin wings that turned into insectoid arms, and their heads were bulbous knots with no eyes or mouth. The top of the archway was still mostly buried in the ceiling rock, and what was revealed was worn down with no discernable shape or writing, if there ever was any.

Lancaster studied the structure and captured some images, as did Little Jack. They sent their findings back to Mika, who ran them through her computers at base camp. “It’s Chiotho all right,” Mika said. “This archway denotes the entrance to a shrine. It could be a shrine to several things, a landmark, sacred preservation, government or holy site.”

“I didn’t hear anything about curses,” Lancaster said.

“I don’t have any records of them leaving any,” Mika reported. “So this is new.”

“Or made up,” Little Jack said.

“Always a skeptic,” Lancaster retorted.

“That executive may have been a thicktil, but he’s on the bull to be annoyed about the miners’ excuses.”

“Let’s vis what they saw,” Lancaster said, and led the way further into the mine shaft.

The passageway now was a mixture of rough cave textures and smooth masonry on the walls and ceiling; alternating quickly between the two. Lancaster surmised that this had been the alien hallway the miners had uncovered, but it had partly caved in, and the miners were cutting their way through.

A hundred yards further Lancaster’s Illuminator detected a carving up ahead on the wall. He hurried forward, then slowed, realizing there could be some triggering device. He scanned the surrounding walls, floor and ceiling, switching through various settings on his Illuminator, to locate anomalies, pressure plates, weapons, gases, and other signs of traps. He found nothing.

Carefully, Lancaster set his feet down one by one, watching them settle and looking up now and again to spot any changes in the walls or ceiling. Nothing. Little Jack had remained behind, standing still, his hand on his pistols Huginn and Muninn, watching through the sensors in his glasses, barely blinking.

When Lancaster arrived at the wall he crouched down to get a look. It was crudely carved, but deeply cut. Scanning the depth with his Fathomfinder, he found that the cuts was uneven. As for the design, even he couldn’t make out if it was supposed to be an animal, or just a drawing; even from an impressionist’s point of view.

“It got real quiet out there,” Mika said, breaking the silence so loud that it caused Lancaster’s heart to jump.

“Phonicking you something,” he responded, and he delivered all the data he had collected to her. Mika, too, was silent for a while. Lancaster used the time to search around himself. He found nothing, so he continued down the passage, which continued to follow the ancient alien hallway. He could now make out brick layouts in the floor, and occasional flourishes in the design. The miners must have made quick progress here as they got through nearly another hundred yards before the cave came to an abrupt halt. Soon before it, another one of the crudely carved designs rested on an up-swinging stalagmite.

Mika at last responded, telling Lancaster that there were no records of that design anywhere in any of their databanks. He had discovered something new by the Chiotho.

“I’m starting to doubt that it’s by them,” Lancaster muttered as he slowly approached the second carving. Little Jack remained behind again, scanning the surrounding area with his glasses.

“What do you mean?” Mika asked.

Lancaster now pulled out another device from one of the many pockets in his jacket. This one measured the age of cuts into rocks. It was by no means exactly accurate, but it could measure the difference between a cut done millions of years ago and...

“Recently made,” Lancaster said. As he said it, Little Jack, still far behind him, focused in on one part of the ceiling.

“What?” Mika asked.

“Someone here carved th...”

“Cover!” Little Jack shouted, and just in time. The cave between them exploded.

To be continued...