



RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE CURSE OF
THE HUDROM MINE**

PART 2

Lancaster curled into a ball behind the stalagmite. Little Jack, who had spotted something just before the blast, managed to dive away from it just in time, though he was flown a few meters onto the hard ground.

“Lancaster!” Mika called. “What happened? Lancaster, do you register? What's your sixty? Little Jack!” Mika continued to signal to them. Hearing the explosion, some of the miners rushed to the entrance to see what had happened. Others reacted with shrugged shoulders, certain it was the curse.

Mika was shaking. She looked across at Otis Lyman, the mining foreman. He closed his eyes in dismay and drew a deep breath.

At last, a crackling signal broke the silence, and Lancaster's voice emerged. “Still here. The explosion happened between Little Jack and I.”

Mika took a deep breath and collected herself with a sigh of relief before revealing her voice on the radio to him. “Good to hear you're okay.”

“Lost my hat, though,” Lancaster said.

“You've got a tril of those,” Mika responded. Lancaster lost his hat on every adventure, yet he still seemed surprised by it. “Is Little Jack near you?”

“We got separated by a cave-in,” Lancaster said.

Coming out from behind the stalagmite, the now hatless Lancaster studied the wall of stone and debris. It was solid, perhaps even air tight. He reported this to Mika. “You have your breather, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Lancaster said absently, still looking for a way out. Then he asked if Little Jack was okay.

“Superb,” Little Jack said dryly, also looking for a way through the wall.

“You're trapped in a pretty small area,” Mika said. “You'll want to put on your breather sooner rather than later.”

Lancaster continued to scan the wall of debris with the Illuminator in one hand, and he placed the breather up to his face with the other. Just before it reached his nose, he detected a faint odor. Looking around a moment, he realized it was coming from the mask. That was not oxygen, nor any vapor chemicals intended to sustain him. Without sniffing anymore, Lancaster ripped the mask from his neck and tossed it to the floor.

Lancaster put all the pieces together in his head: the shallow, recently carved symbols that didn't match the alien architecture, the mask with the gas, the miners who died after wearing them; and as he put them in chronological order, he realized that the alien structure was found first, then the first “cursed” carving was found a couple days later, then the second was discovered the day after that. Someone had learned of the alien structure, wanted it left undiscovered, carved out the symbols, then killed the first miners who found them so it would seem like a curse.

Who could have done this, though? The rival corporation? Lancaster looked down at the mask and remembered it was given to him by the head of the union. Lancaster couldn't imagine him having a reason to kill his own workers unless he was paid by Burbank Corp to do it. The miners had shown the union rep the archway, and he had had a day in which to contact someone else before the murdering began.

Lancaster brought his Talki to his lips, “Mika, it was an inside job. The symbols on the walls were f...”

The message cut out. Mika called into the mic and turned the signal, but she couldn't reconnect with Lancaster. She then thought about it, confused. There was no reason they should

have lost connection. If it was something in the stone of the mountain, it would have blocked their signal at the beginning. The fact that they had spoken after the cave-in, and now lost the signal implied that the problem was something else.

Lancaster realized after speaking that he had lost connection. All he could hear was fuzz. He didn't know how much of his accusation had gotten through, but someone must have blocked the signal. He tried to shout to Little Jack, but the hard-pressed rock was too solid to hear through. This meant it was air tight as well. Lancaster had to get out, and soon.

He turned in the direction they had been traveling. Just past the stalagmite and a little more of a curve stoned wall he found the faint, round outline of what appeared to be a giant gear. Lancaster stepped up to it and brushed off some of the dust and sand, then scooped away some mud and tossed aside some rocks.

Slowly, Lancaster uncovered something that resembled a roll-away door. It was stuck in place, but there were outlines of buttons and levers that were the size of his hand. He traced the edges with his fingers, digging out crusted in clay that had collected over the millennia, and scraped off the front to reveal the symbols on the doorway. He recognized some of them from the archway; the totem figures.

Lancaster picked up his Imager and found the pictures he took of the arch. He found all but one of the creatures along the post represented on the door, so he continued searching. At last he kicked away a clump near the bottom, and there found the button with the proper symbol. Now he knew which buttons to press, but in what order? Sometimes it mattered, sometimes it didn't, but when it did, it was deadly. Would he follow the pattern of creatures up or down?

Lancaster considered the Chiotho. Whether an alien race chose their clues to go up or down depended on their culture. He yanked out his notebook and ran the light over it. Lancaster noticed himself coughing, the first signs that he was running out of air, so he needed to hurry. Flipping rapidly through the dog eared pages, Lancaster came to the Chiotho section and looked over the pictures he had drawn and the notes he had taken. He found another reference to a totem archway, but he hadn't recorded whether the symbols were to be written upward or down. But, thinking back on his adventure to the Rendon Woods where he had seen those Chiotho ruins, he recalled following their messages up the tree. The beginning of their thoughts, whether in the form of architecture, statuary, or crops, began at the base and worked their way up.

There was Lancaster's answer. He pressed the button that reflected the bottom symbol on the archway, then the next, and the next, and finally, the one at the top of the arch which was set in the middle of the doorway. He heard an instant click, which was either a very good or a very bad sign. He waited as the rusty clanging of gears groaned to life. A couple loud clicks reverberated in his small chamber, and the gear-like door rolled aside, crushing dozens of tiny rocks and scraping boulders. Ancient air burst out like ghosts escaping their graves. It was a stale smell, but a welcome one as it meant more time to breathe.

Beyond, blackness yawned, and the light of Lancaster's Illuminator faded away into oblivion. He stepped inside and followed the age-old corridor. The walls were far enough apart that he barely caught them both in the light, so he watched the floor instead.

His feet felt that it was flat concrete, not rocky like a cave. That caused him to take notice when a series of bulges revealed a design on the floor. Lancaster stopped short of it and knelt down. His hand brushed away a little of the dirt, and he blew away at it, sending a narrow wall of dust into the air that revealed a design underneath. It was a metallic carving of an animal that resembled a snake which wound from one side to the other like a wave. Lancaster scanned the rest of the hall with several light spectrums in his Illuminator. Finding nothing else carved or

placed into the floor, Lancaster determined that this design held a strong significance. Many of these alien races kept their valuable artifacts behind deadly traps that still worked, so he had to be cautious.

Lancaster stood, then carefully laid one foot on the metallic snake, then the other. In this way he made his way across until he reached the point where the dirt still covered the design. He scraped it off with his foot, revealing a little more, then a little more, then more. It was a slow process, but Lancaster made his way steadily across the corridor.

When at last Lancaster found the featureless head of the snake, he knew he was safe, and he stepped off the other end. The walls of the corridor ended, and he had entered a large chamber, the sides of which he could not see. What would have happened had he stepped off the snake, Lancaster did not know, nor did he wish to learn.

Dust in the air had built up quickly and steadily until it was at last pervasive. But a cool smell that penetrated Lancaster's nostrils told him there was something more to it. There was an aroma of moisture in the air. In holding his light up in front of himself, Lancaster realized that what was limiting his vision was fog.

He adjusted his Illuminator to cut through mist and see what was further inside the chamber. He found that the floor continued ahead of him until it dropped down into a chasm. On the other side of the canyon was an ancient, elaborately designed building with large, imposing doors.

Lancaster stepped toward the cliff and looked out over it. He could hear rushing water far below. A river? Or perhaps an ocean, he could not tell, and the Illuminator could not reach the bottom no matter what setting was used. His foot, meanwhile, sank into the dirt floor that sat for more loose near the edge, so he stepped back.

Turning his attention onto the building, he found that, despite it clearly being the important structure in the chamber, there was no way to reach it. The chasm was far too wide for a human, or a Chiothofor that matter, to cross. Had the bridge been destroyed, he wondered.

A pulsating, thin light emanating from the building's small windows and slicing through the fog caught Lancaster's attention. It faded and lit up at regular intervals. He couldn't imagine what could be causing this to happen, and the desire to get across the chasm became even stronger.

Lancaster studied the building as best he could from this distance, splashing his strongest light from the Illuminator across it. He found vines draped over the structure which had thick little shapes attached to them. He zoomed his Imager in on the vines and snapped a picture, then looked at it. The growths on the vines were a fungi that resembled mushrooms. Outside, there wasn't a scrap of foliage to be found, but in this underground cavern, life was literally sprouting. There was nothing on his side of the canyon, so Lancaster was now desperate to get across.

He took a wider shot of the building with his Imager, this time getting a 3D image to record all the measurements, the nooks and crannies, all the details that explained what the building was so he could project it as a hologram. He then sent the information over to his Pad, and set it to analyze the structure against other known buildings of alien make. Like Lancaster, the majority of the Chiotho had been fascinated with the cultures of other alien civilizations that had come before it. Unlike humans, however, the Chiotho governments prized ancient discoveries, and ordered shrines to be built to house them. These sanctums sometimes took on the architecture of the structures housed inside. It could therefore offer a clue if Lancaster could get some more information about the building, so he used his Imager again to get a wider shot of it.

Once the image was captured, he sent it over to his Pad and had it analyzed against the large database inside. The Pad took a moment to go through its extensive inventory, then at last presented several possibilities. The most likely candidate was the Yorkorath, a race of which Lancaster and the university he worked for had an unfortunately small amount of information. When he brought up the database's image of the building in 3D, he also saw a symbol floating next to it. This appeared to be the crest for that building, or perhaps that faction of the Yorkorath. Who knew? There was no information about it in the database, so apparently not the university researchers, and it definitely wasn't Chiotho.

Lancaster was stumped. He leaned his arm on a partial wall next to him while he considered how he was going to get across the chasm. He suddenly felt the arm sink in much the same way his foot had sunk into the dirt near the edge of the canyon. He pulled away, and he felt something cling to his arm until he pulled it back far enough. He brought over the Illuminator and focused it on the wall on which he had been leaning. He discovered it reforming just before it froze in place, like a caught child going into hiding.

Lancaster kept the light on the wall while he hovered his hand over the waist-high wall again. He lowered his hand carefully, then rubbed it against the top of the wall. He felt the rock turn into a more rubbery substance, and his fingers were able to mold it upward. It even clung to his skin, and as he pulled up his hand, the wall followed like clay, releasing when he pulled hard enough, and slowly reforming back into place. Lancaster set up the Imager and captured video of the strange, putty-like substance as his hand found its borders. It covered about a foot of distance along the top of the wall, as though it was a single brick.

Developing a theory, Lancaster put the imager at one end of the brick and projected a hologram of the symbol shown next to the building. He then traced the symbol into the malleable substance, making sure to get every detail right. When it was complete, a low gurgling began to rumble, and the dirt he had partially sunk into earlier grew outward; molding and forming into a flat structure that stretched across the chasm. It was taking the shape of a bridge!

Lancaster watched until it had built a platform all the way across, then faded into a lighter color along with the sound of crackling stones. It looked firm, but if it wasn't, Lancaster would have a very long fall to his doom. He placed one foot forward and tested the bridge. It felt like hard stone on a mountain, as firm as it could possibly be. He took another step, testing it carefully. Terra firma. He took every step with extreme caution, especially near the middle; for not only was it made of an unusual architecture, it also had no support beams beneath it. He didn't know how such construction was possible, but he wasn't going to question it for the superstitious fear that his doubt would cause the whole thing to collapse.

At last he blew out a sigh of relief as he stepped off the opposite side. Looking back, he expected the bridge to disappear, but it remained. He didn't know how long he had, but he figured he should be quick.

As Lancaster turned toward the building, he heard a moist rustling emanating from it. He spread the light from his Illuminator across the whole face of the building and brightened it to see everything he could. Nothing; and the sound had dimmed. He figured that it could be a common noise from inside the caves, perhaps down in the canyon by the water, but it seemed different, closer, and he became extra cautious as he approached the building.

The front door was a sliding mechanism with a hand slot just below the height of Lancaster's chest. He grasped it and slid the door open. This revealed a single large room that

took up the entire building. At the moment he opened the door it was pitch black inside, and equally silent, as though nothing was present to carry sound waves.

Just before he could illuminate the room, a bright glow faded up from a globe on a pedestal in the center, casting a golden hue across the chamber. The walls and ceiling were covered in the vines he had seen on the outer walls. Here, however, they had grown so wild the chamber resembled a jungle.

Then, as quickly as the glow had appeared, it faded away.

Lancaster used his Illuminator to check the floor to see if there was anything dangerous he might step on. Nothing, including the vines, which were evidently relegated only to the walls and ceiling. He nevertheless took every step cautiously, watching the floor as he laid down his foot, then immediately scanned the walls to make sure nothing was happening. Just as he did, the light from the globe faded up again, casting everything in a golden aura. It remained on the same amount of time as the first beam, then disappeared again.

In the still darkness, Lancaster heard the moist rustling again, this time from all around him. He flashed one of the walls with the Illuminator and the noise fell silent in that direction, but it continued in others. He turned the Illuminator, and as the light swept across the wall, the rustling he heard fell silent until it was only coming from the parts of the walls he hadn't yet lit up.

All the noises faded as the globe pulsated with light again. Lancaster stared at it, despite the damage to his retinas, for it felt like he was staring into the sun. It was magnificent. And to say it was mysterious was a gross understatement. What caused it to emit light on these regular intervals, and how it still operated after millions of years was beyond Lancaster. He couldn't even grasp what purpose the room had originally served, though he might be able to figure it out if he could look past the vines at the walls. Just then the light from the globe went out and left him in darkness.

Lancaster noticed that the moist, sliding noise returned almost immediately as it got dark. When he instinctively lifted his Illuminator to see what might be moving, the noises stopped in that direction, but continued in all others. He decided to let the noises continue while he pointed the spot of his light down. Manipulating the buttons with his thumb, Lancaster switched the setting of the Illuminator to ultraviolet. He then pointed it at the walls again.

In the direction he had been pointing the white light, there was nothing of note. The vines hung limp as they had been when he looked at them before. But as he scanned to the left he spotted movement among them. Many tiny, dark dots were weaving among the vines. Some of them were stalled where they were, reaching into the room.

Lancaster carefully stepped toward this wall, taking a quick look at his feet to make sure they were landing on solid ground each time without threat. He made it about halfway when the light from the globe beamed again. Everything on the walls fell limp, as though falling suddenly asleep. Out of a strange sense of obligation, Lancaster froze as well, and waited for the light to dim again.

When it did, Lancaster had the Illuminator pointed directly at the plants, and he was staring intensely to see what he could. The glow of the globe faded, but the ultraviolet light remained; and just like clockwork, the plants rose again, as though returning to life. Lancaster found that the dark dots he had spotted moving were the same mushrooms he had spotted outside. Some were sliding up and down the vine with an unseen mobility. Others were reaching out toward the middle of the room. Lancaster moved to the side slightly to look at more of the wall, and the reaching mushrooms turned with him, and froze when he stopped. Baffled,

Lancaster stepped back to where he had just been. The mushrooms followed. 'Could it be?' he thought.

Lancaster stepped toward the wall and noticed the mushrooms recoiled. Some of them even retreated into the bramble of vines which, Lancaster could now see, went back more than a foot. As he did this, the glow returned, and the plant life hibernated again. He took advantage of the time and hurried up close, taking one of the many chances his ex-wife Mika had warned him against taking.

When the light dimmed again and left the wall in Lancaster's purple glow, he studied the fungi coming to life. One of them that was close tilted up toward him fearlessly. Rather than scurrying away, as the others did, this one stopped close to his nose, studying him as he was studying it.

The small beast had tiny antennae and no discernible eyes. There were discolorations along the membrane that could be sensory organs, but nothing besides the antennae that Lancaster could definitively categorize. He lifted a hand to feel it. The tiny antennae looked in the direction of the hand and the mushroom creature scurried away into the brambles along the vine on which it was connected. A survival instinct. Even more interestingly, another larger mushroom slid down the vine and cut Lancaster off from the first. It swayed at him, the way a human would when readying to box someone. A protection instinct.

Lancaster straightened up, and as the glow relit the room, he looked on in awe. These were tiny, living, thinking creatures and plant life that had evolved in this chamber over time. And it was still evolving. He captured as many images, videos, and 3D captures as he could of the walls and ceiling. He wanted to take a specimen, but he was certain they would die if he did, and it hardly seemed worth it. He should have enough of this incredible discovery.

And now for the globe, which should provide the university with unspeakable information. He walked toward it, slowing as he came near. There were patterns on the floor which could be innocuous, or they could be traps. Lancaster didn't want to find out. He placed his feet carefully to avoid them, spacing out his legs to steady himself.

He then looked over the globe, studying its patterns, its shape, sizing up its weight; how much effort it would take to carry. The pulsing light was blinding, but it would likely go off when he pulled it up, but the researchers could probably turn it back on when he got it to Saberaux University. What he needed to know most importantly was, would it set off a trap or an alarm? He didn't see anything; in fact it sat in a sort of bowl without any visible connections. This didn't mean there wasn't any trap associated with it. With power running through the device, there could even be wireless connections to something else in the room.

Lancaster scanned it with several spectrums in his Illuminator, and with other devices he had to aid him in such matters. As he did this, more and more of the mushroom-like creatures came out of hiding and stretched out toward the intruder in the middle of their room. They stared at him from their connected vines. Lancaster didn't notice. He was too focused on the globe.

At last, satisfied that he had checked over the device as much as he could, Lancaster put away all of his gadgets and held out his arms. He shook out his fingers and tightened his muscles, ready to grasp the artifact. It was glowing now, radiating heat that permeated Lancaster's clothes. He was waiting for it to dim; and as soon as it did, he snapped in his arms, grasping the globe.

To be continued...