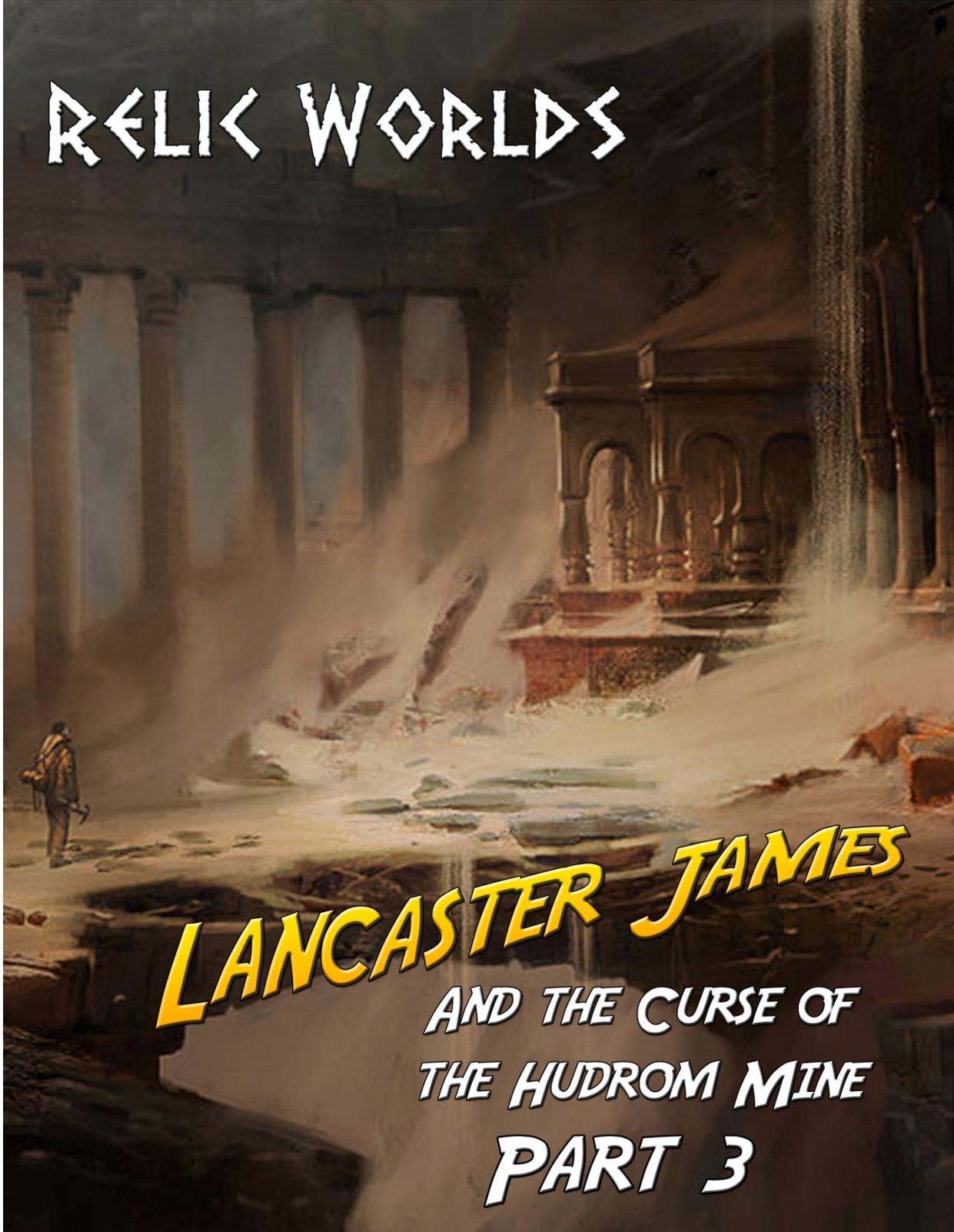


RELIC WORLDS



LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE CURSE OF
THE HUDROM MINE**

PART 3

The globe was warm in Lancaster's arms, but it was bearable, and it would cool off as he went. So he swung it under one arm while he grabbed the Illuminator with the opposite hand. He found the exit and headed for it.

But as he started to walk, Lancaster paused. The fauna looked different somehow. He shone the light on them and all the mushrooms that had pulsed to life with the rhythmic glowing of the globe now drooped lifelessly. Nothing moved anymore. The room had died when he took the globe.

Lancaster felt a sudden tinge of horrible guilt. He reminded himself how much educational value there would be in studying this artifact. It fostered life much the way a star does, and it retained its energetic properties through millions of years. That had to be worth something; at least a little plant life.

But his conscience stopped him in his tracks. He knew these were not mere plants. They were somehow alive, and they knew the source of their existence, as exemplified by the way they all stretched toward the globe when it lit up. They had motor skills and sensory organs, and they were growing curious about their surroundings. These were animals which were evolving.

Lancaster tried to make his legs outrun his nagging guilt. After all, the mining corporation was going to get here soon, and they would take it anyway. And they wouldn't use the globe to further human understanding of the cosmos. In the long run, what Lancaster was doing would certainly help far more species than this one small breed.

But his legs only took him a couple steps before he couldn't bring himself to go any further. He couldn't run away from the truth that these conscious plants were the entire reason he sought out ancient treasures. *They* were the end goal, not the means to it. What was evolving on these walls was far more precious than any relic Lancaster could find in any ruins.

He took the globe back and he gently placed it on its pillar. For a long, uncomfortable moment nothing happened. Lancaster worried he had broken it forever, and had doomed the plant species. But then the intense light pulsed, and the mushrooms stood again, reaching for their source of energy. Lancaster looked around him, smiling, certain he made the right choice. This species may have little to offer now, but give them a few millions years to evolve, and the possibilities were endless.

That is, if they were left alone by the miners and their corporate managers. This was highly unlikely, especially considering the valuable metals that were inside the sphere. So Lancaster had to think fast of a way to keep them from it. He ran his mind through several options as he paced around the room.

His eyes landed on the leaves of some of the plants he had saved. As the light pulsed he noticed a purplish goo stuck to the bottom of some of them. He removed from one of his pockets a device that checked for poison. He scanned the goo with it and waited a moment to get the analysis. The small screen said that it was only harmful if ingested.

Lancaster put the device away, then scraped out globs of the purple slime. He rubbed it over the exposed skin on his hands, then all over his face and neck, forming globs that dripped slowly off his skin like something out of a horror movie. He tried to make it as horrific as he could.

When it felt as though the goo was sufficiently covering his face, he snapped off several leaves, apologizing to the plant for taking them. "Sorry, but, well... This is for your own good." Lancaster hurried out and crossed the bridge. He made sure to rub his hand over the stonework on the opposite side to cause the bridge to disappear. Lancaster took one last look at the rays of

light that beamed out of the building on regular intervals. With any luck, it would be the last time human eyes would see it. Then he hurried to the exit.

Little Jack was chipping away at the rock with all his might and speed. He used his frustration at the miners for refusing to help as fuel to move quickly. He didn't know how long Lancaster had inside without outside air, and he hadn't heard from him in nearly an hour. So he chipped and he cut and he pulled back rocks and scraped away mud...

And suddenly a hand emerged from the other side reaching right for him. It was covered in a purple slime which lined the fingers in a crude webbing. Little Jack leaped back, drawing his pistol Huginn and pointing it at the assaulting appendage. "Rub this all over yourself!" came a voice connected to the hand from the other side of the rock wall.

Little Jack kept his gun before him. "Get that out of my face!"

"First take some from me and rub it all over you!" Lancaster said, his hand spread wide in Little Jack's face.

"That's disgusting!" Little Jack responded.

More rocks fell away, and Lancaster began squeezing through. Little Jack saw Lancaster had the sludge all over his own face and hands, and he was carrying another blob in his other hand. "I don't have time to explain," Lancaster said, worried that someone could come along at any moment and destroy the whole idea. "Put it on."

Lancaster and Little Jack emerged from the cave stumbling and coughing. Lancaster added to the sight by spitting out large clumps of phlegm. They both feigned difficulty breathing.

Most of the miners kept their distance, but when a couple of them started toward the pair, Lancaster warned them to stay away. "It's the curse," he said, making certain to throw in a couple coughs between words. "The curse is a deadly chemical... which rises in the form of gas... It turns into... solid form on its host." Lancaster finished, holding up a hand with the purple glob dropping from every finger.

Many of the miners, who were already keeping their distance, now rushed away. They didn't even want to be within a kilometer of this infected man.

Mika rose from her seat, concerned. She didn't believe in any curse, but she did believe in diseases that could kill someone it infected. She knew she would be risking herself to go near Lancaster, but she didn't care. She started toward her former husband.

Lancaster looked at her for a brief moment and stole a wink. It was barely detectable, and only something she noticed, but it was confident enough to tell her to play along. She froze a moment, uncertain what to do. If she was wrong about reading him, he could die from whatever he picked up. She looked at Little Jack whose own expression was never helpful. However, she spotted a very slight shake of the head as he looked directly at her, so she kept her distance.

"Is that what was killing the miners?" someone asked. Lancaster noticed that it was someone from the union offices. The union boss in particular was wide eyed, surprised to see Lancaster. But the question itself could be a trap. They had set the gases that killed the miners, so they could be asking to see if he was lying.

"No!" Lancaster said, still coughing between many of the words. "This is something far worse... It comes up... from crevices in the ground..." Lancaster had coughed so much that he had now irritated his own throat, and he was coughing severely for real. He used it. "You

must... You must quarantine that area... of the mountain... from everyone... All who enter... will die!"

Little Jack was concerned now, not for Lancaster's safety, but for his acting skills, which were becoming increasingly melodramatic. He grabbed his partner and hurried him toward their ship, coughing and spitting on the ground. The miners gave them a wide berth.

The managers didn't wait for orders. They immediately demanded that seals be placed on the entrance. When Pabu Grappa from the miners' union suggested they were being a bit hasty, several burly workers stopped what they were doing and approached him suspiciously. "How many got to die to satisfy your curiosity?" one of them asked with a threatening posture. It was clear that no one from the union or from any corporation was going to get them back into that hole.

The mining operation moved down the ridge. Gang bosses ordered scouts to find good entry points to begin drilling, and their large vehicles with their enormous mountain cutting tools made their way behind.

The executives on site looked on disappointedly. This was an expensive move, but losing their miners would be more expensive, especially in sight of their union reps. To make certain there would be no problems from them, they assured Pabu Grappa and his co-workers that the entrance would be sealed, and there would be no way for anyone else to get inside again.

Pabu pretended to be reassured by the news, but knew this meant his mission for Burbank Corp would be a failure, and he would not be paid. Grudgingly, he began preparations for moving his office.

Mika, returned to her little makeshift office disappointed and confused. She had hoped they would find something to justify this excursion. The university where she worked did not have unlimited resources to send them out, and they needed results to keep their expeditions going.

The monitor blinked to life as Mika tapped on her keyboard. A file appeared in the center of the screen, and beneath it were the words, "Open alone". Mika checked around her and saw that the few people who had been nearby were distracted with the move, so no one paid attention to her. Still, she had the screen projected onto her table so she could control the size and look down at it, then she opened the file.

A plethora of pictures and 3D renderings of a subterranean building emerged. In some, beams of light streamed out the windows of the hovel. Images from inside the building revealed a brightly glowing sphere sitting upon a pedestal shining a nearly blinding light. This only confused Mika more because the globe would be a target Lancaster would want to pick up. Her bafflement heightened as the images progressed, focusing more and more on the plant life within the building.

Then she noticed it. Flipping between two pictures taken from one spot she saw how the mushroom-like creatures shifted from one part of the vines to another. Some even switched vines. They were creatures. And judging from their postures, they likely got their energy from the globe the way many animals got theirs from nearby stars. She understood immediately. Lancaster had left the device to save the creatures.

She had to sometimes remind herself that he was an anthropologist, not an archaeologist like herself, and his heart bled more for the living than for objects. It was a different value than her, but she admired it. This would be a hard pill to swallow, especially when she explained it to the school regents, but she couldn't help but respect his decision.

She even went so far as to help him. Mika sent out an alert to all news wires on the Galaganet that this mining location was discovered by scientists to be poisonous and deadly. She cited the miners who had died, and claimed their deaths were caused by the gases. That should keep anyone from wanting to unseal this location again.

Her work complete, Mika packed up her things, and got out as quickly as she could.

Little Jack was reminding Lancaster of the very thing Mika was thinking about; they were returning empty handed. Lancaster was hurrying in and out of the cockpit bringing disposable wipes and wet towels for them to clean their hands. Little Jack refused to get the gunk all over his ship. What they really needed was a high pressure chemical shower, but Lancaster wanted them to get out of there as quickly as possible, so he provided Little Jack with what he needed to get them out of the atmosphere. This included getting his hands entirely clean, because he would need to hold the controls tight for exiting the atmosphere, and he wanted his butt clean of the dust from the cave.

Lancaster silently took the chastisement during the cleaning and as they took off. Little Jack complained during the entire process as remnants of the goop dripped off his fingers onto the steering column. Little Jack rarely showed expression, but his face was now turning red. He was so fastidious he got tense over fingerprints on his controls. This... This gunk would probably never come off. And he reminded Lancaster of that fact.

Lancaster bided his time, quietly apologizing for everything Little Jack brought up. Then, after they had left the planet and were in Spectrum drive, and after they had both had showers and gotten three quarters of the slime off, Lancaster sat down and explained that they were not going home empty handed. He reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a fist full of leaves and he showed them to Little Jack, grinning from ear to ear.

"When are you going to show me what we thrusted all this way for?" Little Jack asked.

"This is it," Lancaster said.

"What?"

"This!"

"Leaves."

"Yes."

"You're saying this was worthy in line because of leaves."

"Absolutely."

"I could hit you."

"This is a treasure."

"I should hit you."

"No, listen. New life was spawning there. We saw the dawning of new life, a new civilization even."

"The leaves."

"No, the little creatures that looked like mushrooms..."

"Okay, I'm going to hit you now..."

"Just listen. These leaves carry their DNA. We can study how they formed, and how they are likely to evolve. It may even provide us with a lot of information to cipher glowing globe in the middle of the room. That's not only as valuable as the artifact itself, it's the very reason we're out here searching for relics in the first place, to put the pieces together; to understand the lives and civilizations that built them and used them."

Little Jack was silent for a long while. He had hoped for something more tangible, and he knew that if they kept coming back with this sort of poetry Lancaster was spewing their clients wouldn't hire them for long. But for now Little Jack silently turned back to his controls and looked out at the dark shades of the brane in Spectrum space.

Then he punched Lancaster in the arm.

The End