



RELIC WORLDS

Lancaster James

AND THE TOMB
OF DUMACHA

The mist was like a pale, slowly drifting river of water with the moonlight caught in its ripples of vapor. Lancaster James and Little Jack looked as though they were swimming through it as they pressed forward in the thinning jungle toward the crest of the hill. Little Jack was leading, utilizing his large, frosted over glasses that covered almost half his face. He could see more than visible light in them, and even had additional functions that aided him whether he was in a gun fight, flying a ship, or just trying to get around. Right now he had the coordinates Lancaster had provided to lead them to their destination atop the hill.

Arriving at the peak, Lancaster lifted his hat momentarily to wipe the sweat from his forehead, and to brush some of his hair back which had dropped into his eyes. He caught his breath and glanced around. It would make sense that this was the location written about at another Cerritac ruin. Though the area was wooded, the trees on this hill had mostly given way to underbrush, and the jungle valley below opened up before him like a rumpled carpet in the bluish light of night.

Just as reported also, giant boulders of varying shapes and sizes stretched out from the trees' canopies like fingers pointing skywards. Everything was as it had been described, but there was supposed to be a marking where he was standing. Lancaster had not expected a full building to be intact, but he assumed he'd find some sort of stone monument. Lancaster stuck his foot below some vines and felt around. His boot bumped something, though it could be just more underbrush. He leaned over and started to pull at the greenery. Little Jack saw what he was doing and helped. The two men pulled back one layer, then Lancaster pulled back another. He could see now at the bottom there was a solid surface of something other than dirt. He pulled back one more overland system of roots to reveal the cement flooring at the bottom covered in soil; the monument he was hoping for. And it had a carved symbol in it.

"Hold this," Lancaster said absently to Little Jack as he handed over his vines and roots. Little Jack's eyebrows rose in alarm, but Lancaster let go of them, so Little Jack had no choice but to hold on tight, despite the plants trying to yank back down to the ground. Lancaster didn't notice. His eyes were fixed on the symbol as he brushed the dirt off and scraped mud from its pores. He stuck a flashlight in his mouth and pointed it toward his target to get a better look at what he was doing. He then pulled his notebook out of one of the many pockets of his beige jacket. A few dozen tabs that only he understood marked specific pages. His finger ran down them until he found the tab he wanted, and he flipped open the page.

Little Jack was beginning to sweat and the muscles in his clenched hands were beginning to cramp by the time Lancaster found the drawn image for which he was searching. It was a symbol for a language never created by humans; alien in nature, and it matched the symbol on the ground. Lancaster tapped the page a couple times, as though thanking it, then closed the book and put it back in his pocket. He was standing again before he noticed the way Little Jack was gritting his teeth and suffering under the strain of holding up the greenery.

"You can let that go now," Lancaster said, as though unsure why Little Jack was still holding the pile of vines. Little Jack dropped it all, and the tangled mass thudded loudly onto the cement ground.

Lancaster stepped atop the dropped pile and looked out at the valley before them. Where in the valley he was supposed to go would be the important part, as somewhere out there was supposed to be the Tomb of Dumacha. It was, of course, not the original name. Xeno-linguistics was a tricky field considering that alien voices and even their means of speech varied widely based on their anatomy. Some words were impossible for humans to say. Others were impossible to figure out. The Cerritac language and anatomy was not so far from humans that it

could not be distinguished. They even had a letter system, much like the predominant human language did. But many anthropologists, like Lancaster, chose close approximations, or words that related to some other nearby discovery. The aliens could correct them if they were ever found. The only sign of them so far was these ruins and the relics they left behind inside them.

It was one artifact in particular Lancaster was searching for. Archaeologists, such as Lancaster's ex-wife Mika, called it the Idol of Ekani. Its presence on this planet would prove the Ekani Dynasty had stretched to this sector of the galaxy. They wanted it back at Sabureaux University so they could study the metallic compounds which could uncover the century of its manufacture, and its planet of origin. Such answers would unlock a number of secrets about the Cerritac.

This was Lancaster's job; and it was also his duty. He owed it to his ex-wife to recover a number of relics after an earlier foible cost her university a number of priceless artworks and artifacts. He had promised to refill the school's shelves and display cases with new treasures that could be researched and studied. To help him accomplish this, the school financed his expeditions. Mika also sent him the results of their studies which helped solve the mystery as to what happened to alien life in the cosmos; a question that plagued Lancaster's mind every day.

The present expedition was launched off of previous information the school had had. They had been aware of this idol's existence, but had not dared search for it themselves due to the possible dangers in the tomb, and the surrounding jungle; which was not only populated by potentially dangerous animals, but also the Ocanuate, a semi-sentient species of ancient tribesmen who lived in the valley around the tomb. Rumors claimed that they guarded its secrets. Lancaster knew they did, and he knew why also. The Ocanuate had been the pets of the Cerritac when they lived on the planet millions of years ago. Whatever killed the Cerritac did not kill the animals, and so their pets evolved into sentient beings. Something deep in their subconscious must have remembered their masters, and Lancaster theorized they worshipped them like gods. They would try to hide their secrets at all costs. Lancaster would be unable to explain to them that his grave robbing would be helping them also; for whatever killed the Cerritac may very well come back to kill them as well someday. The sooner he could figure out who that was, the sooner humanity might be able to stop them. That was, if they could stop building profit machines long enough to save themselves from extinction.

Even this planet would soon be a target for their short sightedness. Though it had thus far gone unnoticed by corporations, the minerals on Terisol of Vinithra were sought by most companies, and their scout vessels were getting closer. Once they got here, the trees would be leveled, and all past signs of previous civilizations would be destroyed in favor of refineries, offices, housing, or whatever else could make them more money. Even the local life, including the Ocanuate, would be displaced at best, or at worst, exterminated, which was the more likely result.

In order to discover the location of the tomb, Lancaster had follow the clues, which the university had gathered from another Cerritac location. When the moon reached a specific height, he was to "follow the arched claw to the final resting place of the Idol of Ekani." Researchers at the university had figured out when exactly the moon would be in that location again, adjusting for the moon's and planet's displacements over the millions of years since the Cerritac lived on the planet, and came up with the time that was soon approaching. Lancaster was none too excited that it had to be at night, but the Cerritac were nocturnal, so it only made sense that their riddles and directions also took place at night.

Lancaster began to wonder if the researchers had gotten the time wrong. The moon currently hovered near the horizon, half covered by a range of thin, mountainous boulders. But then he noticed a long shadow from one of them; the tallest, standing in the center of the others. The shadow trailed out over the trees of the forest until it came to a point. The tip of the rock was sharp, and its shadow pointed distinctly at one location. It was so definitive, it seemed to even be singling out an individual tree.

Lancaster pulled out his Universalis Sextant from his utility belt and aimed it at the location. He held it there at arm's length for a moment, remaining still for it to get the reading. After a quick beep, Lancaster looked at the readings. It provided coordinates for the location, and marked it for directions and distance. He was approximately two kilometers away, but it would involve a climb down the steep side of a hill, and may be tricky. 'But,' he thought, 'nothing I can't handle.' "You ready to fly cover for me?" Lancaster asked Little Jack.

"I thought you'd never ask," Little Jack responded. He far preferred the temperature control of Odin's Revenge to the humidity of this planet, or the weather of any of the planets they explored, really. "Can you pike your way?"

"I've got my Illuminaor and the sextant," Lancaster said, holding up both devices. The Illuminator did much of what Little Jack's glasses did, except that it shot out beams of light to help him see. He would be exposed to any animal or the Ocanuates if they saw him.

"You have the gun I gave you?" Little Jack asked.

Lancaster was used to Little Jack handling the violent necessities. He did not prefer to use a weapon, and had gotten overly reliant on Little Jack's backup. "Yes," he said, feeling around his jacket pockets. "I've got it... Right..."

"You need to be able to pull it..."

Lancaster pulled it from the holster Little Jack had provided him with a grin on his face. Little Jack met the grin with a serious scowl. "It won't be funny if they're throwing spears into you and you can't shoot back."

"No, but it's funny now," Lancaster quipped, returning the pistol to its holster. Little Jack was not amused. "Besides," Lancaster said, "the sun will be up soon and I'll have the advantage."

"When it does, you replace the Illuminator with the gun."

"Will do," Lancaster said.

"Keep your talki on," Little Jack said. "I want to hear you say I told you so when you get skewered by a spear."

"I think the Ocanuates mostly use bows."

"I'll keep eyes in the sky," Little Jack said, disappearing into the darkness of the woods behind Lancaster using the path they had forged on their way to the hill. In front of Lancaster lay the valley, the gateway of which was through an archway of trees into pitch blackness.

Lancaster stepped cautiously into the jungle, the light of his Illuminator set to a dim, reddish setting. He saw less, but he also hoped he'd be less of a target as a result. He also understood the Cerritac had been weaker in seeing the red spectrum of light, and he hoped that, if true, it had passed to their pets.

It was a long journey through darkness surrounded by sounds of insects and animals. Most were going about their business, but some seemed disturbed by his presence, protesting a loud chatter as they made way. He wanted to shush them to avoid alerting the Ocanuates, or larger hunters. He sometimes heard the sounds of movement in the trees or across the ground; sometimes the rustling of bushes, or the scattering of leaves. When these noises were

accompanied by more animal sounds, Lancaster was unconcerned, but he was most disturbed when the movement was alone. Only someone creeping should be making such a sound.

All along, the Universalis Sextant counted down, the arrow occasionally shifting directions to adjust Lancaster's trajectory. The numbers moved aching slow. He dropped it about halfway to the destination when he heard a loud cracking noise to his right. He spun toward the source of the sound as he ducked, pointing the light toward it and increasing its intensity. He yanked at the pistol, but it would not come loose. His cramped position had put it at an awkward angle and made it hard to pull out. Luckily, he did not need it. He saw a furry animal with a bushy tail scurry away. It had evidently broken a limb along its path as a freshly broken one lay half against the tree.

Then Lancaster noticed another, very thin branch sticking unnaturally out of the same tree. It was broken at one end and stuck directly outward. He approached it, the light never leaving the thin stick. When he got to the branch, it became clear why it looked so unnatural. It was an arrow which had shot into the tree trunk. It had evidently gotten something with small feathers as a tuft of skin with a couple black feathers was pinned to the tree. The back half of the arrow was snapped off and lay on the ground. He was definitely in Ocanuate territory.

Suddenly a booming voice interrupted the still darkness, "Come in, Lancaster. I'm in the air. What's your 60?"

Lancaster stumbled with the talkie, juggling it out of his utility belt. He twisted the volume down as quickly as he could, scanned the area around him with the Illuminator in both the human visual light spectrum and infrared, then answered back, "Sending my beacon now. He pressed a button that revealed his coordinates to the receiver. "And you can use your indoor voice."

"Already using it. I'm indoors," Little Jack said. "I'm jondering to you now."

"See how close I am to the nearest Ocanuate camp."

There was a long pause now while Lancaster retrieved his Universalis Sextant. He needed more than two hands to do everything he was required to do now, and he cursed the nighttime. At last Little Jack called, "They're about a tick to the east. I'm detecting only that one camp. But they're awake."

"They'll be awake until approx sunup," Lancaster said, still keeping his voice down. "Keep a range on them."

By the time he at last reached the destination, the shadow of the "arched claw" had subsided. The moon that had created the umbra was high in the sky throwing the shadows of slowly dancing palm leaves onto Lancaster's torso. He trusted that the sextant was correct and looked around for a passageway, or another clue as to where it was. Nothing. No amount of light from his Illuminator revealed a thing. He turned it off and looked around in hopes there was something to be found that could only be seen in the darkness. Still nothing.

But the pitch black gave him a thought. He began to wonder how much the Cerritac saw since their vision was along a shorter wavelength than humans. Some scientists had speculated their vision dipped into the ultraviolet. He therefore set his Illuminator to an ultraviolet setting and did another sweep. Soon, he saw something different. Something reflected off one of the trees a little ways in the distance. He weaved through the foliage to get to what he saw and focused the Illuminator on the trunk. It now shone bright blue with a slight sparkle. A clear Cerritac symbol. It was not a letter or a word, but an image Lancaster recognized as one that honored the dead. He didn't know precisely why it was here, but he knew the temple was close.

He pointed the Illuminator past the tree with the ultraviolet carving and searched the woods beyond. A few seconds later he found another blue symbol on another tree. He hurried to it and looked it over. It was the same symbol, though this time he recognized it as having a flourish that was prominent during the Ekani Dynasty. He felt the carving briefly with his fingers, smiled slightly, then turned the Illuminator on further trees. He found one symbol after another on trees that led him along a path in the woods. They were in a nearly straight line, clearly going somewhere specific. He was moving so fast now that he didn't notice that the underbrush beneath him was trampled before he reached it. This was a regularly traveled path.

At last he came upon a mound of earth, the front of which was covered over by the roots of a tree which stood at the top. He didn't believe the trail continued. He was certain it ended here. He pulled back the roots and found at first they did not move. Upon further examination, he realized that the first roots he pulled were too large and firmly in place to be budged. But there were smaller ones underneath and to the right side. He ducked under the first roots and pulled at the others. These gave way, and opened up to reveal a stone door with the Ekani Dynasty symbol embossed on the front. He had located the tomb.

After informing Little Jack, Lancaster studied the door to figure out how to get inside. He found a latch on the right side about the height of his head. This made sense as the Cerritas were taller than humans. It also pulled downward, the way most of their latches did. But at the same time he found this, he also discovered something was not right about the cobwebs strung between the door and the roots and vines surrounding it. They were too orderly, too perfectly placed. He ran the Illuminator over them in several spectrums and found nothing unusual about them. But then he found where they stretched over the top of the door. They clung tightly to several thick vines with long thorns on them. On closer examination, these thorns did not appear to be naturally a part of the vines, but attached. He examined them further with an electronic swab which he used to get a sample. Sure enough, they were poisonous.

He kept the sample safe in a sealed pouch of his jacket and stepped back. Looking around to make sure no one was around, he pulled out another device he used for just such incidents. He pointed it at the cobwebs and fired. A static charge emerged and broke them apart. The vines sliced downward from all sides, enveloping the door like a closing mouth, the thorns slamming against the cement door.

Lancaster stepped up to it again and studied the vines and the doorway one more time to make sure that was the entirety of the trap. When he accepted the coast was clear, he reached past them and pulled down the latch. The door gave way and swung slowly inward. Lancaster pushed past the vines, stuck forward his Illuminator, and crept into the tomb.

The chamber which met him was a long corridor which arced slowly to the left. The walls were smoothly carved, but scarred with dozens of small holes. The roof had occasional roots which tangled through the ground and the roof, and the floor was cluttered with occasional greenery growing through cracks in the cement. Each footfall echoed all the way down the hall, bouncing across both sides like a pebble dropped down a well. He tried to make his footfalls gentler to avoid the noise, both for caution and out of respect. Moving his feet slower didn't have much of an effect, so he turned his light to the floor to see if he might be able to find patches of moss on which he could step.

He saw splotches of moss all over the floor which would be convenient for stepping over. However, they seemed too convenient. There was a pattern about these patches of greenery, and each one was about the same size. The fact that they were within easy reach of one another made them even more suspicious. He knelt down to one of the patches and looked closely at it.

He then pulled out from one of his many jacket pockets a one inch long rod. Pressing a button at the bottom, the rod stretched out to 18 inches with small claws on the end. He reached down and pulled gently on the moss, peeling a small section of it back. As he suspected, a foot pedal trap was embedded in the floor. He turned his Illuminator to the wall and concluded that most of the tiny holes had darts inside which would fire on anyone who triggered them by stepping on the lichen. He was certain now that these traps were not set by the Cerritac, but rather by the Ocanuate. The former pets likely worshipped them like gods, and determined to keep their resting place hidden from prying eyes such as his. Maybe it was even to keep some of their own out.

Though the traps were crude, they were fresh; and the one outside proved that they worked, so Lancaster continued with extra caution, stepping one foot forward at a time after he scanned the floor thoroughly to make sure he wasn't stepping on anything other than flat stone.

When he was clear of the patches of moss, he made it a few more yards around the corner before he slowed again. Something wasn't right. It was perhaps Lancaster's greatest gift; his intuition that acted on all the information that came to him through his peripheral vision. It was a subconscious thing, and he rarely knew what the problem was immediately; but as long as he stopped and took a closer look, he found what his mind was trying to tell him.

Presently, it was the roots peeking through the ceiling. Rather than branching outward, they reached toward one another, like a hand making a fist. Inside this grasp were boulders, some of them large enough to crush Lancaster instantly. Wrapped around each root was another cobweb which led down to a hole in the wall, then re-emerged through another hole and stretched across the corridor about waist high. One was only a foot or so ahead of him. He ducked below the wires and stepped under them, watching carefully for more cobwebs as he inched forward.

When he found he had bypassed the roots holding the boulders, he checked one more time for wires, and seeing none, he stood up. The corridor had now straightened out. It looked like a different building altogether. The walls, floor, and ceiling were smooth with no cracks or holes; nothing earthen sticking through. They were adorned with precious metals, especially golds, sun-silvers, and Eurichite. The spot of light from his Illuminator increased to a bright glow from the multitude of reflections. Despite the millions of years that passed, little of this area had been covered in dust, a near miracle in and of itself.

There were six open passageways on each side, and one at the end. All were shrouded in blackness; his own source of light unable to penetrate into them at this angle. Beside each doorway, two masterfully carved busts hung on either side. One was a creature of the jungle, (each door had a separate one,) and the other was a Cerritac head, no doubt of the individual buried inside. They had long, oval heads which stretched back behind their faces, as though pulled toward their backs. Their eyes began at the front and ran the length of the sides of their heads, ending halfway back up their heads. Their mouths were just above their noses, which were at the base of their chins. The busts ended at their necks where their shell-like ears rested.

Judging from their appearance, and where he was, these were the last royal family of the Ekani Dynasty. Lancaster peeked into the first chamber, lowering the intensity of his Illuminator, and confirmed this fact. The room included a sarcophagus with the carving of a lying Cerritac on the top. Its two long arms and two small arms carved over the top. Its elongated head draped over one end. And its long legs bent at the two points where it had joints. Along the rim of the ceiling, thin, jewel encrusted eyes watched over the grave. A true grave robber could make a lot of money cleaning this place out. But there was likely some curse on

them, and Lancaster did not dare take even one, no matter how desperate for money he might ever become again.

He checked out the other six rooms, and all were the same with slight variations that represented the individual's place in the family and personality. Only the second to last one in which he looked was any different. Here, a piece of the ceiling had fallen at some point and cracked open the sarcophagus. He could see the long foot of the creature inside. It was, strangely enough, perfectly preserved. The mummification, or perhaps the preservatives they had put in this Cerritac's body had kept it from decaying. He would have to come back another time with a physiologist to study these bodies. But for now, he had a specific mission, and he didn't intend to let Mika down.

He stalled at the entrance to the last room. It was the largest, and most well-adorned. The floor was a slick, solid gold. The walls sparkled with star silver and bronze lining. The ceiling was made of the most precious metals of the Cerritac. Colorful jewels watched in the corners, and when the light from Lancaster's Illuminator passed them, they shot beams toward the four mighty sarcophagi resting on the far end of the room. The leaders' visages were carved onto the tops of these in silver, as they were also embodied in silver statues in a square at the center of the room. The eyes of these statues were crystals all staring down at a small gold statue on a shrine in the very center. The shrine had Cerritac writing on it, and the statue was the idol for which he had come. It was a curled up snake wrapped tightly upward as though forming a pyramid with its head at the top. Wings drooped over the sides as though folded in, but with the tips spread outward. They looked like they would be good finger-holds, though Lancaster wasn't sure that was the purpose of the wings.

He then worked his way through the writing on the altar. He had time, so he compared each symbol to Cerritac letters he had written in his notebook. Slowly, the words took shape to something like, "Lift up your sleeping form and rise oh doppelgangers." It was not unusual for the Cerritac to speak in metaphors or riddles. They had not so much been hiding information from someone, as it was a general part of their culture to say things in a roundabout way. Lancaster considered what it might mean. He had not done a lot of work with the Cerritac, and his last encounter with their ruins, which also happened to be in a necropolis, though a less royal one, had ended with a young lady being killed and turned into a monster utilizing one of their devices. In trying to create eternal life, they had built a machine that instead took it and replaced it with a beast.

Lancaster had been cautious to avoid any traps which might do the same to him; but so far there seemed to be none. He used a handheld scanner to check the statues, the altar, even the eyes to make sure no such device was hidden inside them. Nothing he could detect. The idol, too, seemed to just be an idol. Despite spending several minutes walking around it, Lancaster could find nothing unusual about it past its form of exactly what Mika wanted. 'Perhaps this was why the Ocanuates set traps of their own,' Lancaster thought. 'Because there were none already in place.'

He approached the idol slowly, carefully, his knees bent, ready to run or jump away. He looked again at the altar, closer now, trying to find any holes or slits through which sawblades, lasers, gases, or spears could emerge. Nothing. So he leaned forward, his arm outstretched as far as it would go. He held his breath, then swiped the statue all at once with one hand.

It came off easily, though it was a bit heavy in his hand. He glanced around the shrine in surprise, waiting for some shoe to drop, or at least a failed trap to reveal itself. Nothing. So he

shifted the bag out from under his jacket, opened it up, and tossed the statue inside. One treasure down in his count to repay Mika.

Then he heard a distant sound. It was long and slow, deep and deliberate. The resultant echoes rattled even lower than the source. It was like a metallic moan trailed by a chorus. Then more voices added to the baleful sound, their reverberations almost drowning out the original noise, and he could not identify them.

Then he heard the same noise behind him. Closer now, he could identify the sound more clearly: metal scraping metal, an almost grinding sound. As it had outside, the abrasive noise was repeated by another, then another, then another. Four sources of the same sound all roaring together. He turned to see, though his body protested, causing him to move slowly, as in a dream, or underwater. The Illuminator shed light on the back half of the room, and he saw immediately what was causing the hair raising scraping. The lids to the coffins were sliding off.

He had several theories as to how this was happening. The most likely involved these “corpses” actually being the beasts he saw at the other necropolis. Perhaps they never died, as he had assumed, but rather went into a state of torpor until something reactivated them. But he didn’t stop to consider these options. He just started running... out through the doorway into the passage without even looking. He led with the Illuminator, its spotlight shaking with his sprinting body. It flung left and right, searching for the sources of the sounds, which were now loud clangs as the lids fell to the ground. “Lift up your sleeping form...” That’s what the altar had read. The lids were laying forms of the Cerritacs inside. “...and rise oh doppelgangers.” It even said what they were. Lancaster was kicking himself for being so stupid.

But he could not stop to do that now. By the time he was running past the first pair of doors he could hear the soft thuds of feet landing on the cement floors. He could not see them past the hollow blackness of the doorways, but he knew they were in there. When he passed the second pair of openings, tall, shadowy shapes were emerging. The light only passed one of them briefly. Its long, gangly arms bulged away from its thin form. Its second, smaller pair of arms were unfolding. Its large hands were the size of its head, and the fingers were like full claws. Lancaster could hear a constant gurgling emanating from them, the sound one would make when choking, under the gasps and spurts of his own panic. He remembered the beast the last time around, and it was faster and stronger than he. A single one of them had almost killed him and he had escaped only by sheer luck and Little Jack’s skills with a gun.

The gun! He drew the pistol Little Jack had provided him just as the last pair of beasts emerged from the last two rooms in front of him. He chose the one on his right and fired repeatedly into its face, trying to hit the eyes. As otherworldly as it might be, it still needed some way to see. The concept worked, and the creature fell back against the corner of the doorway. Lancaster slammed into it, knocking it back into its chamber while Lancaster bounced off and staggered down the hallway.

The remaining beasts roared a deafening barrage, a sound much like a lion’s but with a bass strong enough to shake the stone walls, and started after Lancaster. Their long feet propelled them so each step was a virtual leap. This put one of them on Lancaster’s tail almost immediately. His saving grace was the fact that the corridor curved, and he seemed to be able to take the corners better than these running zombie beasts. And the fact that he was drawing energy to run from reserves he didn’t know existed. His entire body burned. The very air he was breathing felt like it was on fire. His chest was tight and he did not even fight the panic. This was the most frightened he had ever been.

Lancaster could feel the breath of the creature directly behind him on his neck by the time he reached the straight away. It needed only to swipe its hand to knock him down, or to grab him, and little did he know, it was raising its arm to do just that. He dove onto the ground, his momentum rolling him side over side, underneath the wires set by the Ocanuates.

The beast, though it could see much better in the dark, had no mind to watch for traps, and it ran directly into the fixed “cobwebs.” The roots opened and the large rocks dropped on top of it. The first couple, though they would have cracked open the head of any other animal, simply made the creature reel. But the pile that followed pinned it down to the ground.

The next pair simply ran up and over the rock pile and continued on, setting off the next root and rock trap. One was taken down, but the other continued forward, setting off a third, and then a fourth tripwire. The multitude of rocks pummeled the beast’s body, making it stagger with every hit, but at last it was taken down and buried, a pair of limbs sticking out the only evidence of its existence.

Though three were down, Lancaster knew he had plenty more coming. He could hear them. Their grunting and snarling was peppered with their roars of disapproval. He heard their footfalls as they scrambled effortlessly over the rocky mounds. He had bought some time, however, which he used to look for the patches of moss. Locating them, he set the Illuminator to scan the floor in front of him, and he did his best to avoid the mossy chunks while still maintaining a fast forward momentum.

The beasts were on his heels in no time, and within seconds they would overtake him. But, as before, they did not watch where they were going, and the traps were sprung. Much to Lancaster’s surprise, they were not mere darts or arrows, but entire spears which launched at lightning speed. The sheer mass of them knocked over one beast, then another. A third tripped over the body of the one in front of it and the tangle of spears around it. A fourth made it most of the way through the obstacles through a sheer force of mass. This was one of the mighty rulers whose sarcophagus had been in the final “throne” room, as it were. Spears pierced it from both sides, but it kept moving. Its unnatural strength gave it the energy to stumble forward, oblivious to all pain in pursuit of its prey. It could not resist the sheer weight, and it was soon dragging its feet along the ground, setting off each foot pedal as it went by, adding spears into its body as it went. At last, with a multitude of poles sticking out of its legs that caught on every rough piece of ground, with the sheer weight dragging it to the ground, and with other poles sagging out his front hitting the ground, it at last tripped itself up and fell into such a heap it would have taken a mastermind to untangle the beast.

That left two still on the chase. They lost some ground having to get around their fallen comrades and the maze of sticks and poles, but they made it and lunged forward. Again, their feet flew forward with every step. The space between them and Lancaster was shrinking rapidly.

But Lancaster found the door. He shoved his heels into the ground to stop very suddenly, remembering the vines just outside. Though the growling noises were nearing in the dark hallway, he had to take a moment to check for a gap through which to escape. He found the break in the natural curtain, and slipped out.

The two beasts did not slow. The one slightly in front slammed directly into the vine. Its thin body impaled on the oversized thorns. The poison was lost on the creature, but that wouldn’t matter. It was stuck. Its arms flailed desperately to find its prey. It even found the gap and made it outside, but it found nothing. The one behind smashed into the first, crushing it further into the thorns. Neither, however, had the brainpower to figure out how to exit this chamber.

And so Lancaster found himself safely out of the tomb, panting heavily on a tree stump. His lungs and legs burned with pain. He felt like they would have lit on fire if he had been in there any longer. Regardless of his present safety, however, he did not wish to stay. He pulled up the talki to his mouth and said, "Little Jack, I'm ready for a pickup."

"What's your 60?"

"I'm at the mouth of the tomb. I even got out with my hat."

"Didn't you reg my message?"

"No, I was underground. Probably didn't get th..."

"Get out of there! The oc-nut buggers are..."

Just then an arrow took off his hat. Lancaster didn't look for the source. He knew what it was. He pushed past the searing pain coursing through his muscles and ran. He didn't know where he was running, he just weaved around trees as fast as he could. The first glimmers of dawn were beginning to peek through the trees, so Lancaster did not need to illuminate the way artificially. Instead, he raised his Illuminator to the sky and set it to beacon mode.

"You registering my signal?" He shouted into his talki.

"Is that you bravely running from danger?"

"Helping or hurting, Little Jack!" Lancaster panted, the pain in his side now affecting his breathing. He caught a glimpse of some of the Ocanuates beginning to flank him. They were much like leopards, but with a multitude of bright colors and spots, and wearing thin layers of hides. They alternated between using two legs and four, whichever was more efficient at the moment. Some hurried through trees while others chased on the ground. All wielded ancient weapons such as spears and bows. Some slowed to take shots while others continued the chase. Lancaster, at a disadvantage both physically and in terms of knowledge of the jungle, kept pumping his legs and raising his beacon, which blinked a colored light into the sky.

"Turn twenty degrees left," Little Jack said calmly.

Lancaster turned, still running. He had shortened the distance to some of the pursuers, but he hoped it would get him to safety. "Is that twenty degrees?" he asked.

"More like 25, but it'll do." A few spears raced past Lancaster. "I told you they use spears," Little Jack said.

"I'm running out of time!" Lancaster shouted. The Ocanuates were crowding in on all angles. Some more were preparing to throw their spears, this time with better aim. Lancaster bought some time by diving over some bushes which led to a small ravine. He rolled down into a small creek valley before gaining his feet again. But when he did, he found the opposite bank was too steep to climb quickly. He looked back in horror to see the Ocanuates lining up as though in a firing line. He was trapped!

Suddenly a bright spotlight shone from above directly into the eyes of the sensitive Ocanuate pupils. They withdrew in fear and pain. A few chucked their spears which clanged off the hull of the ship.

Lancaster pulled out his grappling pistol and shot at Odin's Revenge, just above the hatchway entrance. He reeled himself upward, swinging onto the doorway which opened for him, and he collapsed inside.

"Inside, Jack," he shouted in a muffled voice, his lips half stuck to the floor.

"Did you lose your hat again?" Little Jack nagged from the cockpit, watching Lancaster through a screen as he remotely closed the hatchway. "How do you do that every time?"

"We can go now," Lancaster said, his mouth still half buried.

The Ocanuate watched as the alien vessel backed away from them, turned, and flew off into the rising sun. They would have tales to tell their children of how they had bravely taken on an iron light-beast and had scared it away, just as they had frightened away the heretic who had defiled their temple and angered their gods. But for now, the cursed sun was rising, and it was time to burrow themselves from the day.

The End