

The background of the entire image is a detailed, dark-toned interior of a futuristic space station or ship. A large, circular, metallic window or porthole is the central focus, showing a bright, cratered planet or moon. A sharp, blue laser beam or light pulse cuts across the scene from left to right, passing through several circular metallic rings or sensors. The walls and ceiling are covered in intricate, dark machinery and panels, with some glowing blue lights scattered throughout. The overall atmosphere is one of high-tech, industrial sci-fi.

RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE WORLDS
OF THE DYSON SPHERE
PART I*

Odin's Revenge emerged from Spectrum space into a dim, lifeless system. Ahead of it sat a bright star; compact and luminescent... ready to go supernova.

The system was unlisted on many human maps; and scanning the area, Little Jack could see why. There were no planets, nor hardly even any celestial bodies; just a sparse asteroid belt far out in the reaches of the star's gravitational pull with minimal debris.

Little Jack and his partner Lancaster James had been directed to investigate this star system because it was listed on an important map created by an ancient species that had wanted to wipe out all other civilizations. This map had been leading the pair to the ruins of ancient civilizations that held within them the secret of what had happened in the centuries before humans took to the stars.

There was a strange reading close to the star itself. As Little Jack began to hone in on it with the sensors, Lancaster James raised up in his seat, recognizing it. He saw first one, then two, then several more belts surrounding the star, all crossing one another at a single point on each side. "A Dyson Sphere," he muttered in awe.

Though Dyson Spheres had originally been theorized in the 20th century 300 years earlier, only evidence of one had ever been found, and that had been in pieces, orbiting a star like an asteroid belt. Nothing of any value had ever been recovered from it. But this looked entirely intact.

Little Jack looked at him strangely. Though his expressions were usually hidden behind his large, frosted over glasses, Lancaster could read his mood by the way he held his head and the tightness of his jaw. So Lancaster explained, "It's a megastructure that surrounds a star, capturing its energy for incredible amounts of power. It could only be built by a highly advanced civilization."

"And one that doesn't want to be found," Little Jack said.

Lancaster shrugged, "I'm not so abso about that."

Little Jack hit a switch to put some data onto the main screen on the console. "It's close enough to the star to hide in its radiation. If they're so advanced, they could have settled on more planets."

Lancaster's jaw dropped with anticipation. If this had remained hidden from human detection, perhaps it remained hidden from all other species and avoided the great purge that had destroyed every civilization in the known galaxy. Maybe these aliens were still there.

His hope dropped when he remembered the star would be exploding soon, and certainly, any intelligent creatures on board would recognize that. But he held onto a little hope. "See if you can signal them," Lancaster said. Little Jack pressed some buttons, sending an electronic signal that simply expressed their presence, and a communication with a standard human greeting of hello. They waited for a few minutes and sent out a couple more signals, but there was no response.

Then Little Jack heard something faint. He switched to headphones that he quickly placed over his ears. The signal was still faint, so he twisted some audio dials to focus in on the sound and amplify active sound frequencies. Finding it, he switched the sound to the main cockpit speakers so they could both hear. Through the fuzzy hiss they began to make out the sounds of voices. As they became clearer, words formed... human words. Little Jack cleared the signal some more and they were able to distinguish what the words were saying.

Most of it was arbitrary; messages and conversations. A little of it was entertainment. None of it was intended to be beamed here; they were intercepting signals. Little Jack confirmed this fact by finding populated star systems on each side of them. Looking at the star map Little

Jack had up, Lancaster also saw star systems on different sides of them that had once been populated by other civilizations. There had probably been plenty of broadcasts that came through here, but not a lot of traffic considering the lack of planets on which to land.

As the two men listened, they got closer to the mega-structure, looking it over carefully as they did. Against the vastness of the star, each strand of the framework was like a string circling a globe, but the closer they got, the more they found that these bands were massive constructs, about three kilometers thick on all sides, which then stretched billions of kilometers around their host sun. They were made of a metal alloy common among advanced alien civilizations that had learned to mix their metals to last; though the architecture here was stronger than anything they had ever witnessed. It had to be to last millennia against the ongoing strain of a star.

Little Jack was surprised to detect power surging through the Dyson Sphere, but Lancaster wasn't. The concept of these structures was to continually capture power from a star to meet the needs of an ever-growing population, regardless of whether that population was still present or not. As long as the structure stood, it should continue to siphon power.

"Where do you want to go in?" Little Jack asked.

"Best spot should be where the rings converge," Lancaster said.

Little Jack flew them to the convergence point that was closest to them. The entire structure was spinning slowly around the star, which was particularly visible at the lit up hub where an access hatch spun in place. Its continual twisting was enough to make one dizzy. Being an experienced pilot, however, Little Jack had landed in a number of centripetal gravity stations where one had to match the spin of the hangar opening, so he was used to this maneuver. He took a minute or so lining up the ship along the central axis such that the bottom of it was facing the Dyson Sphere, then fired the thrusters on one side to make the ship spin. Carefully, he adjusted the speed to match the structure, then he lowered onto it.

As they got closer, Lancaster nervously prepared himself to board. He was full of anticipation and excitement. Theoretically, the beings who created this megastructure could still be inside, living their lives isolated from the rest of the galaxy. However, if they were still there, they likely had a reason for wanting to remain isolated and might not greet intruders.

Nevertheless, he put on his favorite jacket with the many pockets, and popped on his hat. He wouldn't need a space suit since Little Jack was covering the access hatches with a pressurized umbilical. The question was how breathable it would be on board the vessel. Most life they had witnessed had developed on oxygen-based planets, but it was entirely possible for a species to live on something poisonous to them.

As such, Lancaster wore an oxygen mask and approached the hatch. It was large for him, about five meters across, but strangely it wasn't large enough to drive a ship into it. Perhaps, he considered, this was where they plugged in the nose cone? Or maybe they were a small species. He had come across ruins the size of human toys before, and this could be the same; though it was hard to imagine such a small species building something so enormous.

He found a key pad, one that was just below human hand height, and with digits perfectly sized for his fingers. Studying the symbols on the keys, he recognized their shapes. Lancaster yanked out his notebook and flipped it to the tab he suspected. He was right; they were Chiotho.

This made sense as throughout the existence of the Chiotho, a large contingent of them rallied for isolationism. During their era in the galaxy, a number of civilizations had connected and created a senate from which to make decisions. The Chiotho, though not antagonistic toward them, had begged off and cut their own path. To an extent, they had been right to, as they

survived the purge longer than the others. But non-interference would not spare them, and they were eventually wiped out by the Siguerans; a murderous race that destroyed most civilizations, and was likely still out there somewhere hidden away until they found that humans had set foot out in the galaxy.

The Chiotho had wielded extra fingers on their hands at the base of their palms. Their keypad reflected this, with a second row curved under the first. Lancaster would likely have to use both hands to type in the correct combination, whatever it was. He paged through his studies on the Chiotho and found the most likely series of keys to be used for entering a space dock. He found the matching symbols on the key pad and pressed them, combining the top entries with the bottom ones, similar to the way a person plays the piano. To his amazement, Lancaster got it right on the first try! It was also to his horror, as the door opened before he was ready, and his heart leaped in fear at what could be on the other side.

It was empty. Just a rather large chamber with a control center on one side and a doorway on the other end. There was no keypad here, so it seemed it would open easily. But Lancaster didn't want to intrude. He already felt like a thief sneaking into someone's home; he didn't wish to continue to impose uninvited. "Hello?" he called out. It was an absurd and fruitless gesture, as was his next statement, "I come in peace!" He could have said "I've come to kill you all" and it wouldn't make any difference. Not only would an alien species speak a different language; after evolving in a completely different way, they would have an entirely different method of speaking altogether. For all they knew, Lancaster could be farting. But Lancaster still felt it best to make his presence known on his terms. Allowing them to find him would be more dangerous.

Lancaster opened the inner door and continued into the structure. Lights blinked on, illuminating a narrow corridor. The architecture was efficient with little flourish, the same as he had seen at most Chiotho ruins. It was also very sterile, either untouched or reverently cleaned. This continued to be the case as he followed several corridors, each one being illuminated by lights that blinked to life. Side doors led only to small storage rooms that either held tools and replacement parts, or computer access points.

Despite finding very little, Lancaster moved slowly, cautiously. If someone was to exit a door or walk around a corner, he didn't want to appear to be charging them. He stopped suddenly, however, when, upon entering a room, music began to play. It was exacting and complex, yet had a logical simplicity to it. And of course, it was unusual to his ears. Lancaster thought it sounded like someone was playing Bach backward.

At long last Lancaster emerged into a very large chamber, far different from the narrow corridors through which he had been maneuvering. A giant window facing the star stood before him. It stretched up far above, disappearing behind support beams and the white, metallic architecture beyond.

No lights had turned on as he entered. None was needed, the bright sun illuminated everything within. It was even brighter than when it was originally used as that star had swelled in its death throes. It wouldn't be long now before the core collapsed and he would have minutes to escape. Time was short, and Lancaster needed to learn all he could as quickly as possible.

Lancaster turned around to study the room. There he was faced with rows and rows of thousands of seats, and in each one was an ancient skeleton. Their large, bulbous heads were covered over with domes that resembled human hair dryers, and their hands were enveloped by metallic claws. They sat in luxurious chairs that were lined with metal and electronics. They

were aligned upward through the giant room in steep stadium seating until they disappeared from sight.

Just like every other room, this one was fastidiously clean, despite being filled with the dead. It was no surprise to not find cobwebs as there would be no animals left behind to lay them, but the absence of dust from the ancient decomposed bodies was confusing. Lancaster stepped up to one of the seats and looked it over. Their feet, too, were bound, and he now also saw small, thin hoses that hung next to the arm bones. Lancaster deduced quite quickly that they had once fed fluids into the alien bodies. They would need them if they were to be locked away here indefinitely, even permanently.

Lancaster pulled from one of his larger pockets a handheld device that measures DNA, and he scanned the bones of a few of the skeletons. As he leaned over one, he accidentally knocked into it and the bones fell apart like loosely stacked boxes. The noise was so loud it sounded like a wall had been knocked over, and he jumped up as if worried he'd be in trouble. Of course, no one was to answer. Just thousands of inert corpses staring blankly into their metal helmets.

He looked over the results of his scan and confirmed that they were indeed Chiotho, though their DNA had altered slightly from earlier grave diggings, implying these had come earlier or later than the others he had studied. Lancaster guessed that it was later.

This also fit the personality of the Chiothan culture. They had wanted nothing more than to isolate themselves from the rest of the galaxy, and there was no better way than to do what Lancaster now believed they had done; go into a virtual reality that they had created. By building a platform hidden away around an obscure star, one that would perpetually soak in power, they could build a computerized world that they could all live inside and never leave. Their bodies would need to be maintained with nourishment and fluids, and their excrement removed, which could all be automated through tubes and machinery.

Doing so would give them a utopia in which to live, but a utopia is hard to escape, and it served to reason that they would never leave, never interact, and never procreate; and thus, their species would die, fade away into oblivion. The Siguerans didn't need to destroy this species; they had destroyed themselves with pleasure.

Despite the species itself being gone, there was something equally fascinating left behind. The Chiotho had built an entire world in which to live, and the power generated by the star would have kept it alive and growing. What might have evolved in the millions of years since the passing of the builders' civilization could be anyone's guess; and Lancaster only needed to look to see.

He returned to the skeleton he had accidentally knocked apart. Its head had slid out of the dome. Its skeletal arms and legs remained in their constraints, and Lancaster had no interest in replacing them with his own, so he left those alone. Instead he removed his hat, placed it on the chair next to him, and lowered the dome onto his head. It was large and bulky. Though the Chiotho were thinner and shorter than humans, their heads were about one and a half times their size, and were oval, with the long side sticking behind them. As such, Lancaster had to hold it in place, and he stuck his eyes close to where the Chiotho had been so he could see what was happening in their world.

The first thing Lancaster noticed was how every color was like a muted neon or a pastel. Nature and the ground was softer in colors, while built structures that rose out of the ground like opulent castles wore the harsher ones. But nothing appeared out of place. Everything blended as

though it had all been painted with a single brush in one stroke. The air smelled of citrus and freshly cut grass, which seemed odd to Lancaster as he had not plugged anything into his nose.

The whispering wind fused melodically with soft bird hums. And then another sound added to it. Lancaster turned to find a creature approaching him. He pulled away, impulsively defending himself, but not having his feet in the stirrups, he was unable to go anywhere. The beast got to him and immediately revealed there was nothing for him to fear. It rolled and tumbled while it chirped and rattled. It was the most adorable creature Lancaster had ever seen; as though designed specifically to please him.

The creature then stood and took his hand, and suddenly Lancaster was swept away, flying over the idyllic scenery, passing over the rolling hills, and the brightly colored platforms of the castles. Creatures on it saw him and waved. Some he could tell were smiling, others, not so much. But he felt a warmth from them. He recognized some as Chiotho, and he pulled toward them, but again, without control of the hands or legs, he was limited.

The creature landed them in another perfect environment around a crowd of more perfect creatures. They tasted fruit from plants that regrew the moment they were picked, they drank of multi-colored streams, frolicked beneath waterfalls and played atop the cloud-like grass. Without missing a beat they all welcomed Lancaster in their own ways. They were beings of all shapes and sizes, no doubt programs from within the Dyson Sphere's matrix. Lancaster then began to recognize some; species of civilizations that lived in nearby star systems. Had they visited? Were they part of this?

Then a single soul stepped through the crowd, strutting toward Lancaster. Her long, flowing, red and black hair blew sensitively in the wind. Her olive skin was squeezed perfectly into the form fitting toga-dress, and her confident green eyes pierced into Lancaster's as though hypnotizing him. It was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. And when she almost reached him, he suddenly realized she had features similar to Mika, his employer, his ex-wife, the woman he still secretly pined for.

His fearful recoil did not stop the woman. She arrived at him and embraced Lancaster. But her body did not hold him. Rather it enveloped him in an ethereal cradle. He felt suddenly warm, like a baby in the womb. A radiant comfort overcame him like nothing terrible could ever happen in the universe. "Be at peace, my love," came the voice.

The words snapped Lancaster out of his slumber, and he threw off the headpiece. It was unusual enough for the machine to be showing him a human woman, one that appealed to his sensual and nurturing desires, but for her to speak human words, and to speak them correctly, that shook him to the core. How could something programmed millions of years before humans existed create something such as this?

Then he realized there was a sound above him; a loud, angry noise. It was an alarm. The klaxon cacophony was nearly deafening. Then the domed heads of every skeleton turned to face him. Every one of them turned his way, even those in seats far above and nearly out of sight. There were thousands.

Lancaster's heart skipped a beat. Then one of the skeleton arms grabbed him.

To be continued...