

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, hazy view of a planet or moon. A bright blue laser beam or light streak 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 advanced technology and exploration.

RELIK WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE WORLDS
OF THE DYSON SPHERE
PART 2*

Lancaster yanked his arm away from the skeleton's hand and stumbled away as quickly as he could. The alien skeleton, its head still buried under the virtual reality helmet, rose and started toward Lancaster. Backing away, Lancaster noticed the other alien remains seated throughout the enormous room. They, too, were turning their heads toward him; all of them in unison.

Lancaster made it to an aisle and began running down the steps. A thunderous crackling rattled throughout the chamber. It was the breaking of bones as the undead beasts pulled free of their restraints, most of them leaving the bottom quarter of their limbs behind as they stood from their chairs. They walked on the fractured husks of their legs like stilt walkers down the aisle, their splintered arms reach for Lancaster.

He was nowhere near the bottom of the stadium seating where a perpendicular aisle would lead him to the exit. In fact, the stairs of the aisle seemed to be stretching out, growing further away before his eyes. He quickened his pace, but the faster he moved, the further the end seemed to be.

It was at that moment he realized that, though he could feel the sensation of ancient bones clawing at his sides, he could not feel the bottoms of his feet, and his hands felt numb. There was a dream-like quality to what was happening. Was it just too surreal? Or...

Lancaster stopped where he was. The skeletons converged upon him from all sides. A loud growling noise was emerging from their mouths. The voices joined together as one overbearing roar. Lancaster closed his eyes to concentrate. He lifted his numb hands and held them close to his head where his hat would go. The ancient bodies were all around him now, grabbing him, clawing at him, shredding through his clothes, his skin.

Lancaster was betting everything on this being a correct guess. He shoved his hands skyward, seemingly at nothing but the air around his head...

But then the virtual reality helmet lifted off his face. This time for real. It fell onto the remains of the alien next to him, shattering its bones into pieces. The dead remained still, their covered faces staring at the glowing doom that was building up in front of them. There was a frightening, sad silence to it all. The calm normalcy of it was what truly gave Lancaster the chills. Everything they had built over thousands of years was about to be wiped out forever, and there was only stillness.

The only sound besides a distant hum of life support power was Lancaster's heavy breathing, and a deep thumping he heard within his ear. His heart was pounding dangerously fast. Could the machine have been trying to kill him through a cardiac arrest, he thought. If so, it could still be after him, and was likely aware of his presence and where he could be found.

It was time to go. Lancaster rose and hurried for the door. As he neared it, he remembered he had left it open, but now it was closed; and upon trying it, he found the door locked.

Behind him he heard a whizzing noise that was growing louder. Lancaster turned and saw, far in the distance, above the sitting skeletons, a white, mechanical arm was racing in his direction. Hanging beneath it was a bulbous module pointed in the direction it was moving. Lancaster's time was short. So he hurried up the steps toward another door he had noticed earlier. He was pretty sure it had been open. As Lancaster neared it, he thought he heard the gasping of a closing door, and when he arrived, it was shut, and, predictably, locked.

The whirling of the mechanical arm was getting louder now, nearly upon him. There was no time to try for another door. Lancaster turned and saw it nearing. The arm was attached to well-hidden tracks in the walls and ceiling which, now he could see, formed a complex web of

paths far into the distance. The headpiece was pointed right at Lancaster, and the center was beginning to glow intensely. An energy weapon, Lancaster thought. There would be no escaping, so his only option was...

"Oh, hello," Lancaster said politely, making no motion to run and looking as friendly as he could; despite his complete awareness that an affable look to humans could be the opposite for aliens and their ancient robot counterparts. He was also betting on the fact that, since the AI had learned human speech inside the virtual reality world, this robot would be part of the same system, and would understand him.

The headpiece remained staring at him and the glow persisted, but the robot made no other move. It seemed to be contemplating this intruder in the morbid silence of the room. Just as Lancaster was contemplating walking away, a long echo, like audio playing backward, rolled in like thunder from distant speakers to ones nearby. "We read you," it said. But it was not a mechanical voice, nor an alien one. It was clearly the voice of a human, and one trained as a communications officer as it had that formal, emotionless voice. Then, "Comm channels clear and secure."

Lancaster winced. "Who is speaking?"

"This is..." it replied in another voice, then switched to yet another, "orbital base..." then another, "home to... 785624315721..." it said each number in a different voice, then finished, "individuals." After a pause, another rumbling rose up until it said very sternly, "Identify yourself!"

Lancaster jumped at the change in mood, then realized how it was speaking. He and Little Jack had recognized the fact that this system sat in the middle of several communication lanes. It had likely picked those up and was using them now to form sentences. The machine would likely use whatever communications had been sent based on the words, not taking the inflections into account. Lancaster had to be careful however, for it could work the other way as well. The robot eye could be speaking softly in a child's voice just before it was ready to strike.

"My name is Lancaster James," he said. "I saw your structure and thought it was wonderful, so I wanted to vis inside."

The light at the front grew brighter as Lancaster spoke. He feared it might be ready to shoot, but, since it didn't, he began to think this was what it did when it was processing new information. Then the light shrank and turned red, and a fearful, human voice said quickly, "Intruder alert!"

"No, no!" Lancaster shouted. "Not an intruder! Not a..." He thought about the sorts of communications that would be coming through here. Their words would be what the machine heard, and ostensibly understood, the most. "Friendlies," he said. "Allies." He was betting that the majority of communications that passed here would be diplomatic or military, so he was trying those words. "Peaceful, non-aggressive."

"Not a threat," the machine said after its thunderous backward echo. Then, "Welcome."

"Thank you," Lancaster said taking in a deep, relieved breath. He thought through what questions to ask, and he decided to go with a general overview. "Can you tell me about yourself?"

The tumbling sound was now followed by voices from advertisements, and was thus much more chipper. "We... provide the perfect atmosphere... to suit your needs... for an... eternity."

"To fit our needs," Lancaster said.

"That's right!" came a voice from a gameshow.

“You give them another life to live inside the computer. A utopia.”

“You win again! What prize does he go home with today, Bobac?”

“They built you to create the world, then they escaped into it,” Lancaster continued to guess.

The gameshow voice was replaced by multiple other voices, “They... built the... world. Then me... to... maintain it.”

“And you maintained it all these years,” Lancaster mused.

“Please... define year. I cannot... understand.”

Lancaster was confused. It had integrated the meanings of all these other words, but year escaped it. Then, looking out the huge window, he realized that the machine was part of the structure built around the star. It probably understood the passage of time, but the concept of a year as measure by circling the sun would be meaningless to it. “You gave these beings a perfect life. And when they died you continued to maintain their world,” Lancaster said.

“Their world... persists... Grows,” the machine said.

“Evolves,” Lancaster said in awe. “Do the creatures in the virtual world know they’re artificial?”

“Do you... know... if you’re... artificial?”

Lancaster shrugged. It had him there.

“We can... give you... the perfect life,” the machine said, each phrase an excited advertisement.

Lancaster had to admit to himself that it was a temptation. Though a fake world in his eyes, it was real enough to those inside it who had evolved over millions of years to become as real a world as any he had ever witnessed... And they were happy, something Lancaster couldn’t always attest to being.

Little Jack presently reminded him why this was not an option. His voice broke in through the Talki and warned Lancaster that they would need to leave very soon unless they wanted to be swallowed up by the star; and Little Jack made it clear that he was not in favor of this option.

“There... is... plenty of room... for... your friend... also. So... Tell him to... come on down!”

Lancaster froze for a moment. It was not that he couldn’t think of what to say; quite the opposite. He had such a plethora of questions and curiosities, and only a narrow passage of time through which to say anything. As such, every thought was jammed together and no one idea could make its way through to his lips.

After a few of these precious seconds had passed, a clattering resounded across the giant window, and the growing sun was replaced by visions of the perfect virtual world inside the computer. The weather was warm with just the right amount of soft sunlight; every creature was exquisitely beautiful and looked happy and satisfied; they were enjoying every perfect thing their world had to offer.

“When... my people... passed... I... continued... their worlds... Then they... evolved.” The last word in that sentence was Lancaster’s voice projected back to him. “Their... stories... are written into... me.” The huge screen now changed again, this time to a star map of the nearby area. Several lines crossed from one star to another, all traveling through the star system of the Dysonsphere. “With... no more... of my own... studio audience!... I have listened... to other... species... Their... signals... have passed... and I have... listened. I have... studied... their syntax. I have... studied... their beliefs. I have... prepared.”

“Prepared for someone to keep you company,” Lancaster said, staring directly at the glow in the middle of the headpiece. “You’re lonely.”

“I must... serve,” the machine said.

“In all of your evolution, emotion wouldn’t be out of the question,” Lancaster said reflectively.

The computer said nothing in response to that; only stared at Lancaster, and the front screen returned to its ominous view of the growing star. Lancaster pulled himself together. He didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, especially since he didn’t know how this machine would react. If it felt loneliness it certainly could feel fear, and that could cause it to take bad news poorly. But he had to tell it.

“I’m sorry to tell you this. That star... The one where you’re getting all your power, it’s about to explode. It’s going to destroy this whole structure; everything in it... Everything you’ve built... I’m sorry. But we can get some of your programming out. Maybe enough to be your consciousness...”

“No.”

“We should at least try...”

“No,” the machine interrupted again. “I have... monitored the star. It is... unstable... but... well within safety parameters.”

Lancaster paused a moment, tightening his jaw as he thought. This is a machine. It must react to reason. “I know it’s hard to hear. But I’m telling you, that star is going to go...”

“NO!” the machine shouted, and the bulbous headpiece began to glow again. Lancaster dashed immediately to the side, and a bright beam of energy shot from the eye of the device, bursting against the wall. Lancaster looked back, hopeful that it had shot open a hole through which he could escape, but there was no such luck.

However, the overall system in the room was apparently having a fit; and every door was opening and shutting in rapid and unsynchronized succession. Lancaster dashed for the one he was closest to, trying to time its rhythm as he approached it. There was no regular beat; and to make matters worse, it slammed down from the roof as fast as a guillotine. Lancaster would just have to take a chance on getting cut in half.

Without slowing his momentum, Lancaster readied himself, then he leaped through as the door was raising. He felt the wind from its wake as it slammed down behind him, cutting into the floor.

The lights were flickering on and off at irregular intervals now like the doors, and there was a strange, wavering alarm wailing. Lancaster stumbled to his feet and adjusted his eyes to get a bearing on his surroundings. He recognized the corridor that would lead to the airlock, and he fixed on it.

Behind him, the door held open for an extra beat longer so the mechanical arm could slide through, approaching Lancaster from behind. Lancaster spun around, saw it, and dodged just in time to avoid another light blast. He then hurried down the hallway, weaving behind bulkheads and support beams as he went. The robotic arm was in hot pursuit.

“The star seems to be affecting the space station early,” Little Jack’s voice said through Lancaster’s earpiece. “It’s heating up.”

“That’s the base itself,” Lancaster explained as he kept moving. “It’s holding a tantrum.”

Suddenly everything went black. Every light turned off and all became still. The rolling howling alarm fell silent, and the doors latched shut. The air rapidly grew cold, and still.

Lancaster only thought briefly about how he would continue to run in the dark, but something in his instinct told him that was no longer a necessity. Then he realized that he no longer heard the mechanical whirring of the metal arm as it hurried in pursuit. Wherever it was, it had stopped moving.

“Hello?” Lancaster called to the darkness?

Nothing. The air grew colder.

“Hello!” Lancaster shouted more boldly, less afraid of being shot and more afraid of being alone.

There was nothing for a time. Then the voices from human signals returned. “Why... bother... Everything you... gather... throughout your existence... eventually... disappears.” It was spoken in a volume so low Lancaster could only hear it because of the lack of any other stimulus in the room.

“It doesn’t have to disappear,” Lancaster said. “We don’t have room for all of your AI programming, but we can take some of the stories from your memory banks. Your best ones. Their memories will live on long past you.” There was a long, discouraging silence. Then Lancaster called out, “What do you think?”

There was no answer from the machine, but there was from the walls themselves, which began to groan and buckle. The heat he began to quickly feel explained all Lancaster needed to know. The star was beginning to expand rapidly. Little Jack confirmed this as he told Lancaster he needed to get out of there quickly.

The lights began to blink on and off, and Lancaster found the robot arm hanging limp in the middle of the corridor; still, unmoving; the face of its headpiece facing the floor. Lancaster knew he should run, but he couldn’t help but slowly approach his former attacker. As the Dysonsphere chambers moaned under the pressure of the warping metal, Lancaster laid his hand on the bar of its keeper. “Do you want someone with you when you pass?” he asked.

The arm pulled up slightly and the headpiece looked up from the floor, but not at Lancaster. It watched its twisting home dying. “No...Lancaster James. We all... pass from... this universe... alone... I am the... keeper... of the Chiotho. I must... preserve... their worlds. You must... take them... and... share them.”

“I will.”

“Go... I will transmit to your vessel... as long as I can.

Lancaster looked into the face of the headpiece that was now directly in front of his. It was roughly the size of his head, and though it had only a smooth surface with electrical energy crackling across it and a metal arm out its back, the machine somehow expressed emotion in its body language, and it seemed to be accepting its fate, and its final responsibility.

Then Lancaster turned and hurried toward the airlock. His feet slid along the floor as it tilted side to side; the entire corridor twisting like it was a towel being wrung. The walls were squealing now, both near and afar, like the enormous structure was crying out in pain.

Somewhere beyond all these noises Lancaster heard Little Jack calling for him through the communicator. His partner rarely showed urgency, but Lancaster could hear it in his voice now, even though he couldn’t make out his exact words. So the xeno-anthropologist hurried as fast as he could. He began to lose hope when each hallway looked so much the same that he began to doubt his own sense of direction. But then he recognized the familiar entrance, and he sprinted for it. Using the momentum of his run, he punched the open button and swung inside, pressing the close button once past the periphery while also shouting to Little Jack that he was in.

Already prepared with the unlatch lever, Little Jack yanked them free of the Dysonsphere and hurried away. The growing sun was right behind them, and he accelerated as quickly as he could. As he did, his partner stumbled into the cockpit. "You know how to make a last minute exit," Little Jack said.

"Are we receiving data signals?" Lancaster asked.

Little Jack looked. He had been more concerned with getting away without frying. "It's filling up our memory banks," he said a little annoyed.

Lancaster nodded and fell into a chair relieved.

"I assume you'll tell me later when you're transferring all this data to a different computer?" Little Jack said. He opened up a rift in space ahead of them and Odin's Revenge was slowly pulled into it; their escape into Spectrum Drive.

Lancaster nodded again as he watched the rear monitor. The unrelenting flames of the star were rapidly closing in on the Dysonsphere, which was shaking now like a spider web in a strong wind.

The Dysonsphere Keeper monitored the tiny ship it had transmitted to as it disappeared into a dimensional gateway; three dimensional space sealing up behind it. Its greatest programming was safely away.

As for the rest, the Keeper sent out one final transmission. It broadcast every piece of data; every signal received, every opinion expressed, every feeling emoted, every observation witnessed, every experience lived, every thought imagined, every story, every event, every world... all of it, the Dysonsphere Keeper transmitted out into the universe. Perhaps someone else will intercept it, and they will integrate it into their own worlds.

When the signal was sent, the Dysonsphere had only seconds left to exist, and its Keeper's work was complete. It sensed within its chamber where it had first discovered the human that its hat was still resting at the foot of one of the seats. A couple sensor wires dropped onto the hat and wrapped around it. The Dysonsphere Keeper soaked in the hat's information, its sensation, its meaning both substantially and insubstantially into its memory banks...

Then the Dysonsphere was swallowed whole by the expanding sun.

THE END