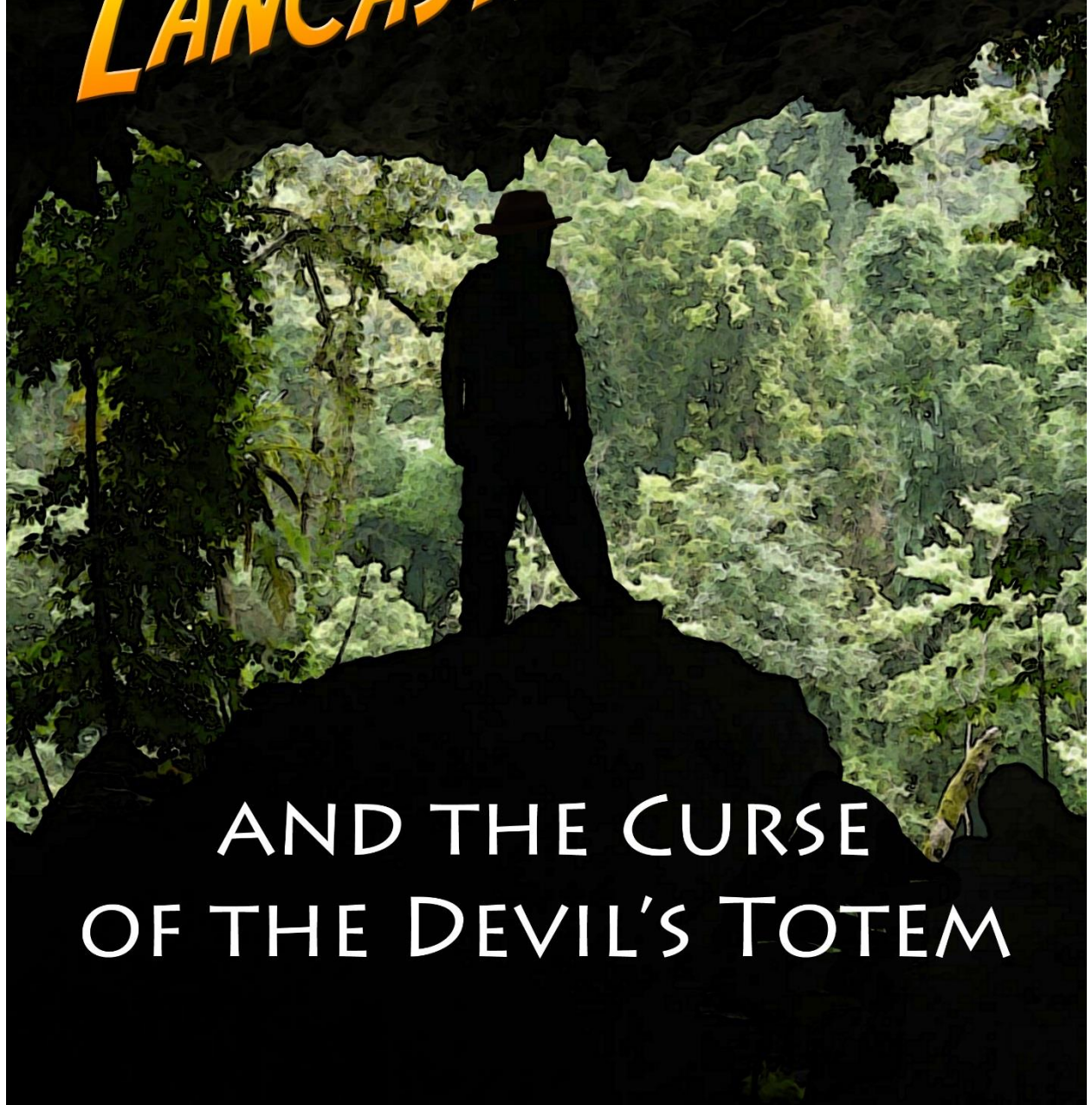


RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES



AND THE CURSE
OF THE DEVIL'S TOTEM

A long corridor of brushed up sand shot into the desert. The line was formed by the wake from the engines of Odin's Revenge; a long-range personal vessel with enough living space for a pair of men and a bit of storage space for their belongings and what they found along the way. Today they were going to fill that cargo space just a little further with an ancient relic they had traced to this desert planet.

Most of the inside was made to accommodate its short pilot, Little Jack. So his passenger and partner, Lancaster, who stood just over two meters tall, had to constantly watch his head and limbs before bumping into parts of the ship. His searching eyes now watched carefully out the front, trying to find any sign of an ancient city abandoned millions of years ago by the Milak Shivar.

Most former cities they visited were crumbled ruins, left desolate by some attack or panicked extinction event. This one had been abandoned because of a sudden climate shift on the planet which had quickly dried up all the oceans. The sand they were now flying over had once been a sea bed, and the city, which had been underwater, should now be visible by air, though likely half buried in the sand.

But all they could see was black-gray rock outcroppings which stuck out of the ground like peeking heads. Some of similar height sat in a row, others stood defiantly alone. But nowhere could Lancaster find signs of a former civilization. Neither could they find anything on the sensors, which could typically locate fluctuations belowground if there were buried structures. But all they could pick up was the rust-brown and purple sand and the giant boulders.

Lancaster checked his notes again, as he had more than a dozen times before, to make sure they were in the right place. He had narrowed the location of the Devil's Totem to this star system from a clue left behind by a Havakan who had returned the item to its rightful owners, the Milak Shivar. He had then studied what he could about the Milak Shivar back at the University he called his home base, Saberaux. There, his ex-wife Mika, who did a lot of the research for him, had found information in the museum databases that described a planet much like the one in the habitable zone of the target star system. Xeno-archaeologists at the university had read about this world in Milak Shivar writings, but had never been able to find the planet itself. Lancaster's discovery at the Havakan grave site had revealed it. And now, with the two pieces of information combined, they were able to narrow down the location to this dried out seabed and this world orbiting the star system Romos.

It seemed to be just in time as well, for when Mika cross-referenced the planet with corporate news, she found that the Langley Corporation had recently claimed the rights to begin prospecting the world for its minerals. Once they found what they wanted, they would be leveling the ruins for their own business the same way they had on Sekuntos 4 and on many other worlds where priceless treasures and entire histories of ancient civilizations were destroyed to make room for Supramalls.

But for now they were alone on the world. They would have time to get the Devil's Totem, or learn where it had gone, and leave long before the wreckers, or even the prospector scouts, arrived. Lancaster suspected the totem was still here, that the Milak Shivar had left it behind when they moved because they considered it to be cursed. It had been stolen from them first, then it had ruined the life of the Havakan who returned it to them, and upon arrival on their world, the climate had changed drastically, destroying the planet. Lancaster knew it was a matter of circumstances and coincidences, but their research had implied that the Milak Shivar were distrustful of the relic, and so they seemed to have left it behind when they abandoned this world.

After finding no trace of the city for a long time, Lancaster was beginning to despair. He wondered if the Milak Shivar, or one of their enemies, such as the Havaka or the Siguerans, had destroyed it after they left. Or perhaps it had been buried in the sands deeply enough that he and Little Jack weren't going to be able to pick anything up. If this was the case, his search would be over.

But then he had a thought. He considered the rock outcroppings for a moment, then asked Little Jack to fly closer to one of them. As they neared it, he began to formulate his theory, and he got up from his chair, swinging his bag over his shoulder and putting on his hat as he did. "Steady us off near the base of it," he said, pointing to the boulder.

"You building a rock collection?" Little Jack asked.

Lancaster ignored the comment and hurried toward the back of the ship. He opened the floor hatchway and grabbed the wire line. Below, the land settled to a standstill, the sand blown about by the thrusters, revealing more of the rock. Lancaster smirked, his theory expanding.

He leaped out of the ship and lowered down toward the ground. Once there, he called into his Talki to Little Jack, telling him to circle around so he could have a break from the nearby thrusters causing a whirlwind around him. The line recoiled into the ship, the belly of Odin's Revenge closed up, and the ship launched into the sky. Lancaster removed a device from one of the many pockets in his jacket and scanned the rock. Visibly, it was pocked with thousands of bumps and holes of coral. But he suspected there was something more to it, and the Particle Analyzer confirmed it. There were traces of coral obsidian within, though the molecules had altered over time, most likely from the unique atmosphere. The Milak Shivar had built most of their structures with special alloys that resisted the elements for millions of years, even those underwater as these would have been. But when the oceans dried up, the unique structure of the air must have mixed with the compounds of their metals, causing it to bubble and mutate into these rocks.

With a broad smile growing across his face, Lancaster called Little Jack on his Talki and asked him to fly up above the region and get a two kilometer shot of the area. Odin's Revenge corkscrewed up into the peach colored sky and drifted slowly overhead. Lancaster then heard him say, "Coming to you now."

Lancaster pulled out his Pad and flipped on the image that was beamed to him: a flat blanket of deep brown and purple freckled with black-gray boulders... and him. He brought up the map of the city Mika had made and overlaid it on top of the image Little Jack had just taken. He had to readjust both images, zooming them in and out, twisting each one until at last he found a match, or at least something very close to it. This was the city; he knew it. From here he could find the Hall of Qual'kath where the Devil's Totem was supposed to be stored.

"Little Jack," he called.

"Still here," Little Jack responded.

"I need a pick up to this other rock." He beamed back the image with the boulder building highlighted.

Little Jack's response was delayed. "You're too lazy to walk a tad way?"

"I don't want to lose time. Hurry up."

Little Jack sighed, and dipped Odin's Revenge down, flying just over Lancaster's location. He slowed and dropped the line in front of his partner. They had done this sort of thing enough that Little Jack knew how to place it exactly where Lancaster needed it. He grabbed on, and Little Jack flew him in no time to the outcropping where he needed to go.

Lancaster dropped off and thanked his partner, then began searching for an entrance. Even though they were far above where the ground had been when it was inside a city, the Milak Shivar had entrances in their underwater buildings all up and down their sides, so there should have been an entrance near the top. Scanning the structure, he found a latch mechanism inside the door, but the alloys had been so warped that it didn't seem as though it would continue to function as a door.

"Are you trying to get inside that rock?" Little Jack asked incredulously.

Lancaster explained what he had discovered, and that there had to be some way into these buildings. He continued to study the entryway so intensely that he didn't notice the sound of the ship lowering again on the opposite side of the boulder-building. But he did notice it when the ship blasted a large hole into the rock.

"Well isn't that a kick? There *is* a building inside," Little Jack mused.

"What are you doing!" Lancaster exclaimed.

"Gifting you a way in," Little Jack answered simply.

"It doesn't do me any good if you destroy the dango building!" Lancaster shouted.

"Don't be over-dramatic," Little Jack said.

Lancaster stepped around the rock wall to assess the damage. A large gaping hole gave way to an otherwise perfectly preserved Milak Shivar room. He was at a loss for words. As if saying "your welcome," or perhaps more out of embarrassment, Little Jack said, "I'll put eyes in the sky for anyone coming. You can go find your trinket."

Before Lancaster pulled himself together enough to form a come-back, Odin's Revenge launched into the sky. 'Millions of years intact, and then the room meets Little Jack,' Lancaster thought as he stepped inside.

There were round doorways to multiple chambers, each a part of an observation center, it appeared. The walls were closer to the blue-green hue of their original metal, though it was slightly warped with occasional bumps and bubbles as it began the same transformation as outside, just far behind in the process. This gave Lancaster the biggest feeling of guilt of all considering the fact that the large hole would be letting the atmosphere in to alter everything inside that had been preserved for so long due to being sealed. However, he reminded himself, there wouldn't be anything left after the corporate landscapers came through.

Lancaster located a ramp leading down, the usual method the Milak Shivar used for going up and down rather than stairs or ladders. The ramp wound down in a corkscrew fashion around the building, leading through a plethora of fascinating chambers, all with exotic architecture. Some had domed roofs with statuary carved out of it, others had textured walls of hexagonal columns, and still others had partial dividing walls which gave the rooms an asymmetric, broken up, yet artistic feel to them. All them were designed as though their creators did not believe in the laws of gravity and felt that craftsmanship in architecture should come from any direction.

Lancaster wanted to stop in these rooms and study them further. Like most alien buildings, especially those as well preserved as this, it had a lot to say about who the aliens were. But he was there to locate one item. He had been in Milak Shivar halls such as this one, and he knew where they kept their treasures. He needed to get to that room, and, given time, he could continue to study the rest of these areas in more detail.

For now he came upon the largest chamber of all, or, more accurately, a canyon within the building. Structures on Lancaster's side of the divide stuck out slightly from a steep wall before a thirty meter gap to the opposite side. A wide, cathedral-like opening yielded to a deep

room beyond, and was framed by ornate décor shrouded in a thin mist. This last, easily overlooked detail was what confounded Lancaster the most. Looking down, the fog became thicker, and he saw through it evidence of plant life clinging to the walls, their vines climbing up several stories. At the bottom the mist settled in among shadows of trees and bushes which swayed like ghosts. Lancaster theorized that perhaps the water beneath the soil was preserved, that they had somehow broken through points at the bottom of the building, and plants were re-growing inside this airtight enclosure.

The gap itself without its bridges was not unusual for an underwater Milak Shivar building like this. Though sealed from the elements of the open ocean, they were often filled with their own fresh water or other synthesized liquid in which the Milak Shivar thrived, (they did not care for the extreme tides of oceans.) They had both gills and lungs, and could live both above and below water, so buildings like this could be swum across and gravity would not be an issue. That is, until a curious human came around millions of years later trying to get across to the main part of the building.

However, Lancaster was prepared for eventualities like this, and he simply took his grappling gun from his utility belt and he fired it into a low-hanging decoration between the two artificial canyon walls. He latched it to his belt and swung across. As soon as his feet touched the other side, he froze. About halfway across he could have sworn he heard the echoing cry of an animal. He looked down to see if he could spot it in among the trees, but the mist was too thick, and the light from his Illuminator was limited for him to see much. The shadows of the plants stared up at him as though mocking, and as they continued to sway, Lancaster could see how some of them shook a little stronger than others. That wasn't wind causing them to move.

Then he heard it again, and then another sound, lower this time. There were several animals here. Then there was another sound. Could it be a whole ecosystem? He could see nothing, but he knew they were out there. He wasn't alone in this hall.

Lancaster turned toward his destination, and continued deeper into the building following the spot from his handheld Illuminator. The corridors were wide and circular with occasional supports and handles. He felt the grade of the floor dropping gently; he was on a ramp leading downward into the bowels of the tower. Almost immediately he began noticing greenery threaded among the beams and décor. It grew exponentially thicker, as though he was leaving a building for a jungle, but he could feel the metal past the shaggy foliage. Soon after he began to hear the rhythmic buzzing of insects. He could not see them, but they were all around.

Lancaster explored several passageways and rooms; partially out of curiosity, and also to give his Geocoordinator, attached to his belt, a reference to build a map. The rooms themselves still held enough of their original forms to be identifiable as Milak Shivar. Lancaster took a few moments in each to try to interpret their original functions, and locate some of the structures and even some furniture.

After a few minutes of cautious wandering and procrastination, Lancaster got enough of a reading in his device to match it to maps of known Milak Shivar buildings, and this was indeed the Hall of Qual'kath. He locked this into his Geocoordinator and created a map of the surrounding rooms and halls on the screen. He then found the chamber where a sacred, or in this case cursed, item might be stored, and set the program to give him directions. Its first instruction practically shouted in the still silence, and bounced off the walls into the darkness. He turned the volume off and followed the visual instructions.

They led him further downward through numerous halls and past a number of rooms. He was so focused on his movements that Lancaster didn't notice that the flora and fauna was

getting thicker, and that the insects were growing larger. He was snapped out of his focused daze when splashes of water washed across his face. He looked around himself, baffled. It was odd enough that any water at all was hitting him in these dark, artificial caverns, but this light shower was coming up from below him. Looking around himself he saw that he was in a wide room with a ceiling so high he could just barely make out the top at the edge of his Illuminator's light. Waves of mist were gathering and stirring below a thick layer of shrubs, vines, and other undergrowth. Droplets were forming on the bottom of this greenery, and before they had much time to form, they were evaporating upward. These tiny droplets, though turning into gases, retained enough of their structure long enough to make it appear as though it was raining upward. Lancaster marveled at this, watching this reverse shower rise a few meters above the ground before dissolving into obscurity.

After a short time, he realized he needed to accomplish his goal before too long, and he continued into a corridor, following the path of his map. He knew that he couldn't get distracted or he would never get to his destination, so he stayed focused on his Geocoordinator, looking around himself only to make sure he didn't trip or walk into anything. In this fashion he walked across a balcony that overlooked a huge jungle enclosure without even noticing. That is, until he did a double take and froze a step shy of the exit.

Beneath him grazed several dozen animals of varying sizes; some of which he could only detect by the motion of the undergrowth. Others waded through the tides of green and gray, some searching for food, others spying on one another. Still others had necks that stretched to high trees whose sculiose trunks wound their ways around their green cousins like dancing hips on their way toward the ceiling. And those with shorter necks grazed on bushes that flourished like wild hair with dots of chromatic fruits. All were shrouded within a blanket of gray mist that drifted like a lazy sea over every living thing in their tranquil valley.

Lancaster studied them as best he knew how. He was no zoologist, but he took in whatever he could memorize about them. He identified several features of both lizards and fish, and he recognized elements of animals he had spotted on Milak Shivar worlds in the past. They fit perfectly within the environment around them. Their hues were of a gray-green camouflage, some with a flourish of color, but those remained near like-minded flora.

Few paid any attention to him, despite the introduction of his bright light into their environment. Having had no light since their induction, they had evolved without the need for it, and had sensors for sound, smell, or vibrations on their heads. And the few that did detect Lancaster's presence showed no interest beyond a casual glance. They were all grazers, and none would be on the hunt for a human. Though Lancaster did not want to cause a stampede in case they saw him as a predator, so he remained unobtrusive and silent, marveling at what nature had evolved into living beings inside this enclosed space.

The air had felt damper the further down he went. Lancaster was becoming more convinced of his theory of a water source at the bottom having broken through a seal in the building as plant life seemed to grow upward, out of the bowels of the tower, and the environment grew thicker the further down he went.

A loud, panicked squawking broke the harmonious serenity, and the beasts of one section scattered, toppling over plants and animals alike in their desperate sprints. Lancaster stretched to see what they were running from, but could find nothing. After a few moments, as the loud panic spread through the chamber to every animal, Lancaster spotted the wake of something within the fog. Like swimmers just under the surface of a pool, they left traces and silhouettes, like zigzagging ghosts shadowing their prey. A pair of them lifted up over the veil momentarily

to grasp onto a four-legged animal whose face expressed a horrid realization of its fate. The hunters weren't half its size, though they bore large, razor fangs and long claws, along with gray, green, and black stripes; the perfect camouflage for a hunter here. All three dropped below the gray waves, leaving only the echoing cries of the captured animal.

Still others raced their way through the chamber, their presence only detected by the retreating animals and the ripples the hunters left behind in the fog. Lancaster did not know how high the predators could jump, but he didn't want them to test their limits. He backed away slowly, then turned his Illuminator to infrared and faced it forward to see if anything was creeping through the dark, and the ever-gathering fog around him. As the chaotic noises faded behind him, it was replaced only by his own cautious footfalls stepping over branches and metal. He listened carefully as he scanned the surrounding blackness. His eyes jumped from the dim red light in front of him to the Geocoordinator in his hand leading the way to his goal.

The quiet was interrupted by, "How's your ETA looking?" The sharp voice of Little Jack made Lancaster nearly jump out of his skin, and his heart skip a beat. He cursed and grabbed his Talki, immediately turning it down.

"I'm close to the totem," Lancaster whispered. "And if my voice isn't enough of a clue, I'm setting a sight to keep a low profile right now."

"Something after you again?"

"Not presently, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Wilco," Little Jack said, then... "And your ETA?"

"Give me ten minutes!" Lancaster hissed, and he stuck the Talki back on his belt. Then he froze, having spotted something he hadn't seen or expected since entering the sealed, ancient building... another source of light. Actually a bunch of spots of light, all of them small, either tiny in size or far away. They were bobbing and weaving erratically; so much so that the concept of them being a light source for a person far away disappeared quickly. As Lancaster crept closer, the bodies around the glows began to glow faintly red from the Illuminator's projected infrared light. They were the shapes of small, vertical animals, like hummingbirds with the visible glow emanating from their tails. He added a small amount of white light to his projection and found that these firefly hummingbirds were swarming around a bramble of vines and branches, feeding from them and dancing in alternating turns. As they became aware of him, they pulled away gently, as though giving space, but not panicking and dashing, as though from a predator. They had clearly never met man before.

It occurred to Lancaster that he could name all of these animals whatever he wanted by announcing them to the scientific community. There would be botanists, zoologists, ecologists, and others of every field wanting to research this place. But his heart sank at the realization that this would be in vain. A corporation had already labeled this location for demolition, and no amount of incredible discoveries would get in the way of profit. His heart sank as he came to the ugly truth that this entire ecology would be wiped away whenever they would come through. He needed to just get the artifact he had come for and get out.

It was close now, a room away. The firefly hummingbirds parted, revealing a doorway framed with wild vines and branches and blanketed in a thin gray sheet of fog. Beyond was the glow of more dancing lights, their dots of illumination diffused into a soft, wavering glow. Lancaster increased the intensity of his own light and found that the underground jungle had entirely taken over every section of wall, ceiling, and floor. They were only visible now as boundaries through which he could not walk.

The round opening that framed the firefly hummingbirds within the chamber of the Devil's Totem was itself partly masked by jagged branches and leaves. He spotted some thorns of which he determined to avoid. As he lifted his first leg over it, he noticed a sappy mildew dripping from one of these thorns, and was glad he had been cautious. There was likely poison within them.

Once inside, he took a moment to look around. It was a large room of greenery. The domed ceiling was entirely covered over by a canopy of leaves and branches. Tent-like moss draped between branches and support beams that were wrapped tightly in winding vines. Dots of flowers with accompanying aromas canvassed over large swaths of the former walls. The knee-deep plant life concealed a floor whose sharp rises were once platforms and steps of metal, now turned to mud and compost after centuries of growth.

And in the center, with verdant vines drooping above like spindly arms reaching for its treasure, was the artifact for which Lancaster had come; though it was difficult to discern it from its surroundings. The three foot long rod was buried within a tangled nest of stale branches, twigs, and vines. A couple dozen bulbs of light bobbed around it, orbiting and swaying in turn, some landing, some taking off. The firefly hummingbirds had turned the sacred shrine into their nest.

Lancaster took on everything one at a time. First, he was certain the Milak Shivar must have set some sort of trap around the device; something to protect it from theft or at least ruin the day of whomever was trying to steal it. However, as he searched around for signs of anything, running his Illuminator across the woods and greenery, he found that whatever devices were built had long been grown over and locked into place with roots and mud and other foliage.

Safe from traps, he approached the nest sitting upon its emerald pedestal. It glowed in the shimmering light of the dancing birds. Lancaster stepped into this illuminated dome and studied the nest. It was well crafted in an order out of chaos way. Nestled within the center were tiny stones; most likely the birds' eggs, Lancaster assumed. The Devil's Totem was on his side of them, close to the eggs, but not under them. He recognized it by the bronze moon held aloft by a shooting flame embossed on its surface.

Lancaster leaned over the edge of the nest, and reached his arm down at the yard-long staff. He suddenly felt a knock on his cheek. A mere blunt sting, but it still hurt. He then felt a similar light pounding to his left rib. This one was even less powerful, but he still noticed it. He recoiled to see what was happening, and he found his vision filled with a face full of glowing birds, and his ears filled with the rapid droning of their wings. They swarmed all around him, knocking into every part of his body, poking at his face, his limbs, his torso. Lancaster closed his eyes and swung his arms about. Every swipe found a group of birds that were knocked away, but they were replaced by more. He felt his hat knocked from his head and they began pecking at his scalp.

Lancaster blinked one eye open just long enough to spot the small totem, and he reached in to grab it. The bird attacks became more erratic and forceful, and his arm recoiled in pain. But then he reached forward again. Unable to see, he felt his finger knock one of the eggs, which rolled away. The birds were enraged now, and they were poking him hard, puncturing his skin. Lancaster blinked open his eye briefly again. It was hard to see without his Illuminator on and the light from the birds was scattered, but he managed to grasp the artifact and pull away. He tumbled through the flock of birds in the direction he remembered the doorway to be. Tossing the rod into his bag, he pulled out his Illuminator and Goecoordinator to find his way out. In doing this he lost his footing and tripped into the vines and mud.

The birds took advantage of Lancaster's helpless situation and they swarmed over him, knocking at every part of his body. They were so many in number now they weighted down on him and he was unable to get up. They were now smothering him as well as pecking him to death. He had to do something.

Lancaster grabbed his Talki, turned it all the way up and caused it to feedback. The deafening sound was painful to his ears, but more so to the animals who counted on subtle audible cues for survival. They scattered, and Lancaster got up and sprinted away.

For close to a minute he did not check on where he was going, he just ran until every bit of glow from the firefly birds was out of sight. Then, stopping to catch his breath at a Y intersection, Lancaster consulted the Geocoordinator. He had run off course, but the map showed him where a corridor should exist that would get him back on track. Lancaster began in that direction. He knew he was hungry as he heard his stomach growl, but then he realized he was not feeling the pangs that would go with such a sound. He froze, realizing what it meant.

He switched his Illuminator to infrared and pointed it down the corridor he would be traveling. Nothing. He pointed it down the other one. Two four-legged forms were creeping toward him through the underbrush. Though mere silhouettes, he recognized their outlines. These were the hunters he had spotted in the menagerie of animals, and they were hunting him. At the moment, they didn't seem to think he was aware of their presence. Lancaster didn't want them to know he was onto them, so he slowly meandered down the other hall. The two forms followed, continuing their pace, and slowly catching up.

Once Lancaster was firmly in the new hallway with a clear path, he flipped on the feedback to his Talki again. The creatures froze, cringing and stunned by the sound. But after a few short moments they pursued. Lancaster pointed the Talki back at them like one would a gun and fired off another audio blast. They flinched again, reeling back in horror and pain while Lancaster made some headway.

However, when they pursued again, this time they gained some ground on him, and though he continued to fire the high pitched wine, it was less and less powerful with every use. It also seemed to be attracting more creatures, as he saw three more forms soon in pursuit. The only thing working in Lancaster's favor was that the greenery was becoming more and more sparse, giving way to the original metal hallways. This was human territory on which to run, with fewer obstacles over which he could trip; though the creatures were still gaining on him.

Lancaster switched the Talki to call Little Jack. "Yep?" Little Jack said.

"I need your help!" Lancaster yelled.

"As always," Little Jack responded.

"This one's a little strange," Lancaster said.

"What is it?"

"I need you to sound like you're running and panting like you're fearful for your life."

"So mimic you?"

"For once that's not a joke. Yes, sound like me running for my life."

Little Jack was silent for a moment, then said, "That is strange."

"Do it now!" Lancaster shouted as he passed a T intersection. He threw the Talki down one passage while he ran down another. He held in his breath and as much sound as he could, allowing Little Jack to take over. Lancaster could hear Little Jack's panting breath echo through the chambers. It sounded like a combination of a heart attack and a creepy prank caller.

Lancaster rolled his eyes at the poor impression, and secretly wondered if he maybe did sound a little like that. Regardless, the trick worked, and the animals turned in the direction of the Talki.

Lancaster slowed his pace and began to catch his breath, but not for long. He soon heard the sound crackle and silence amongst another sound of crunching metal and plastic. The beasts were destroying his Talki. Lancaster tried to remain silent, but he knew the tiny sounds of breathing that were escaping his mouth were being picked up by the hunters, so he began to run, and the chase continued.

He was close. The chasm was just down the hall, so he put away his Geocoordinator and yanked out his grappling gun. The panting of the animals was growing louder. He could hear their lips smacking, could even smell their breath. Soon one would take the leap and bring him down. Lancaster saw the light from his Illuminator disappear from the walls ahead of him, escaping into a void; the chasm.

He heard two legs hit the floor hard as one of the four-legged hunters began its leap for him. Lancaster fired the grappling gun before reaching the cliff and tried to dodge to one side. It was to no avail. He felt one of the claws scratch over his back. It was landing on him. The wire from the grapple went taught; it had hit its target. But Lancaster was already being brought down, the force on his back was too great. The growl of the monster was in his ear now and its putrid breath washed over him. Lancaster could smell the carcass of its last meal. He heard the others beginning to jump as well. These would not take time to smother him as the birds would. The teeth of the one atop him dropped down to the back of his head.

Lancaster pressed a button, reeling in the grappling gun. He slipped out of the grasp of the monster and out over the cliff. Lancaster swung himself across to the opposite end of the canyon and felt his feet land firmly on the opposite platform. He had made it.

He looked back across at the dogpile of beasts now watching their escaped prey. They reminded Lancaster of what a lion might look like if it had the skin of a dinosaur and the scales of a fish, but with no eyes. They would have to find their next meal elsewhere. But despite the fact that he had almost been their dinner, Lancaster could not help but feel something for them. They were an extraordinary species that had beaten the odds of evolution and withstood the test of time. None of that would matter, however, to those coming to make way for “progress.” Soon this entire ecosystem would be destroyed, casualties of corporate expansion.

One of the creatures opened its mouth wide; perhaps a yawn, perhaps a protest, perhaps some sort of salute. Whatever it was, the animal soon closed its mouth again, turned, and, with the others, strode back into the darkness, disappearing one by one from view. Below, the droning of the myriad voices cackled and squawked. A party for the doomed who knew nothing of the outside world, nor what it was bringing to them. Perhaps it was another curse of the Devil’s Totem.

With a sad realization there was nothing more he could do, Lancaster placed a hand in his bag, resting a couple fingers on his captured artifact to make sure it was there. Then he turned his back on the lost building and headed out into the desert.

The End

This story leads into Relic Worlds, book 2:
[Lancaster James and the Secret of the Padrone Key](#)

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