



RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE CURSE OF
THE HUDROM MINE**

PARTS 1-3

Part 1

Through the wall of windswept sand emerged the shadow of a figure beneath a wide brimmed hat who leaned into the storm. Breaking through the light brown curtain, his weather beaten face dissolved into view; his unshaven chin gritting tightly, his steel blue eyes searching.

They found their mark quickly; the sharp dressed woman whose neatly cut hair all but defied the laws of nature. Her professional gait posed as though in a museum. He knew this stance well; she was his boss, a woman he was once married to, Mika Sinovi. “Welcome to Anovan, Lancaster,” Mika said with the formality of a diplomat, but a slight smile of familiarity.

Lancaster nodded and looked around. The wind lightened here under the protection of the camp, so he could see clearer now than he had since he unloaded from his partner’s ship. That partner had wanted to take some time securing Odin’s Revenge, so Lancaster was on his own to face his ex-wife and their business.

She had summoned him to this world to investigate a lead she had discovered at the university where she worked. Their team was presently investigating a series of planets found on a map Lancaster had recovered, and Anovan had been one of them on that list. It so happened that a mining colony run by the Hudrom Corporation was on that world, and they had recently uncovered alien ruins in several areas along the ridge they were mining. They had thought little of it until recently when they believed they had released a curse.

That was Mika’s way in. Corporations typically did not allow scientists onto their territory no matter how amazing the find unless they wanted an appraisal for their profits. But now that the alien ruins were slowing productivity, Mika was able to convince the executives that their services would be beneficial.

Mika showed Lancaster to the mining foreman inside one of the long-term tents where she had a bunch of her computer analysis equipment. The foreman’s crevassed face looked as worn as the land on which they mined, and whose beard was like a wild wood that had never been explored. His eyes bespoke an ongoing determination, yet a fear he could not shake. “Lancaster,” Mika said to her partner and ex-husband, “This is Otis Lyman. Mr. Lyman, my partner Lancaster James.”

As Lancaster stuck out his hand, the man broke in, “She says you can figure out what’s killing my miners.”

“Well, I can try...”

“Says you can lift the curse what’s been causing the trouble.”

“I never said he can do everything, Mr. Lyman,” Mika said. “Mr. James can go in and locate the source of the problem that’s viewing to be a curse, and I will be out here monitoring his progress with equipment to help him apprehend it.”

Otis’s eyes shot from Mika to Lancaster, digging deep into his eyes the way he would a mountain. “It doesn’t just view to be a curse. It’s the symbols. We uncovered the first of the cursed ones carved into the wall of a cavity, and three miners fell dead, starting with the one what located the symbol.” As he described the story, Otis pulled flat photographs of the carved symbols out of a folder and placed them on the table. Lancaster picked them up one by one and studied them as the grizzled miner continued, “When we found the second, four miners died, beginning with the one what found it. After that, no one’s going back.”

Lancaster looked over the second carved symbol. The photographs weren’t very good; no one there had apparently been particularly good with imagery equipment. They weren’t clear enough for him to make out what alien origins they were, and Mika’s equipment had not been

able to recognize it. “You said there were more ruins before you discovered these?” Lancaster asked.

“Wilco. She’s got them in her machinery.” Otis pointed at Mika, who was powering up the monitors on her work station. She popped up several 2D and 3D images on the monitors and the hologram table. They were pieces of buildings and pillars partially freed from their rocky imprisonment. Several of them had hieroglyphs of creatures that looked like snakes.

A couple of the ruins were archways, the most prominent of which served as a support inside the mine itself. Lancaster recognized the architecture as being Chiotho. The archway inside the mine particularly interested Lancaster as its beam sides were like totem poles with important carvings. Reading their symbolism, Lancaster theorized they once led to an important shrine that could hold valuable or perhaps powerful treasures.

“How did they die?” came a voice from the entry that startled them all. Standing there was a short figure in a long, dark trench coat that covered a slick suit. This was Lancaster’s partner Little Jack, who had finished parking his ship to join them. He stared blankly at Otis Lyman through his large, frosted-over glasses that covered most of his face, waiting for an answer.

“The curse,” the foreman answered as though to say of course.

“No,” Little Jack said definitively, then continued. “Try again. Where were they and what passed?”

Lancaster turned back to Otis a little embarrassed by the brashness of his partner, but aware that this was the question that needed to be asked.

Otis eyed Mika, then said, “Day we discovered it, we reported it to our union rep. Then everything was fine the next day; and day after that, we jonderedpast it, and Club Foot died.”

“Club Foot?” Lancaster asked.

“Everyone goes by a nickname. Hardly anyone knows each other by their real names.”

“Go on, Mr. Lyman,” Mika said.

“Later that day, Trigger bit it. Then the next day Braxton died.”

“How’d they die?” Mika asked.

“They all got very sick. First couple ripped their masks off; said they couldn’t breathe. They turned green, vomited, and died not long after. The others felt nauseous. Stumbled out of the mine or were carried out. Something got in them, though. They had breathing problems, then died day or two later.”

“And you credit that it was the curse of these symbols,” Lancaster said.

“Trouble began when we laid eyes on them. You aprend something else and prove it’s not something the aliens left behind, we’ll regress to work. Until then, our union rep’s standing behind us and we’re staying out of the mine.”

* * *

That union rep caught up with Lancaster, Little Jack and Mika near the main entrance of the mine. They were getting instructions from the executive manager from Hudrom Corp who was cursing about the miners. “Dango miners are all superstitious,” he was saying. “Unsophisticated slackers looking for any excuse to avoid real work.”

“Those slackers work for you 12 hours a day for your paycheck,” said the union representative as he stepped up to the small group. The executive rolled his eyes while the union

rep introduced himself to the others. “Pabu Grappa,” he said, then looked directly at Lancaster. “You shouldn’t go in there, Mr. James. There are some places man was not meant to venture.”

“Here comes the drama,” the executive said. “We have ore to mine and I have superiors to answer to. The sooner you can show them how crazy they’re being the better...”

“There is ore elsewhere. Easy enough for us to mine,” Pabu said. “Lives cannot be replaced.”

“Do you vis what I have to deal with on a daily basis?” the executive said to Mika, who tried to smile politely in return.

“I implore you, Mr. James,” Pabu said. “Your skills are too great to be wasted in a place of doom such as this.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Lancaster said. “I’ll be nove, though. I’ve got some good backup.” He motioned to Little Jack, who would be going with him into the mine, and Mika, who would be watching from the tent with all her equipment.

Pabu sighed, then said, “Then you should take this.” He held out an apparatus that would go over the lower half of the face, one for Lancaster and one for Little Jack. “It may be the only thing to protect you from whatever is killing my people. And you’ll especially need it if there is a cave-in.”

Lancaster took the mask, then Little Jack did, a little more hesitantly.

“Now get in there so I can put my people back to work,” the executive demanded.

Lancaster and Little Jack eyed him, then Mika said more diplomatically, “I’ll get on the line,” and she hurried off to her station. The two partners strolled toward the steep, rocky ridge and the yawning, blackness of the mine entrance. Lancaster took a deep breath. He had explored many dangerous worlds before, but this one played havoc with his nerves. He was used to uncharted space where the dangers were a mystery. Now he had been faced with the results of those dangers. He could see around him the friends of those who had fallen. They were strolling around the work camp, keeping a comfortable distance away from the mineshaft, many of them watching him.

“Getting stage fright?” Little Jack asked, noticing Lancaster slowing down and assuming it had to do with being watched.

“Let’s get inside,” Lancaster said, and they stepped into the darkness.

Directly within the opening bulge sat a lot of the mining equipment; the vehicles, the heat-picks, the sonic cutters and other explosives. A few paths led in various directions, but the larger main path was clearly visible, and had a magnorail path that led the way along the floor. Lancaster walked along this main path, lighting up the way with his Illuminator while Little Jack used the sensors within his glasses.

“I’m in vorlie of taking our time,” Little Jack said.

“What do you mean?” Lancaster asked.

“That executive reminded me why I used to take jobs undermining thicktils like that.”

“Yeah, he was a tyl,” Lancaster said.

“I don’t mean the way he treated us,” Little Jack said. “Corporations like this one work their employees to their marrow. They use them for all and the novas they’re worth to their dying day.”

“I’m abso it doesn’t help that the corporation is their nation,” Lancaster said.

“You speak up, you’re fired. If you’re fired, you’re deported. You lose your home, your family, everything.” Though Little Jack spoke in his usual monotone voice, it was more than he usually said at one time. Lancaster knew he was passionate about this.

“What do you register about this corporation?” Lancaster asked.

“Primary business is metallic materials. Their portfolio’s narrow but profitable, their chief rival is Burbank Corp and they used to be part of the Cordova Barony.”

“Used to?” Lancaster asked.

“Bankruptcy, hostile takeover, that sort of thing,” Little Jack answered.

“Oh. Well, the planet’s on our map, which means the aliens who used to live here were once a target of the Siguerans. So let’s see if we can find anything about them. Oh, and watch out for any ancient curses.”

“That’s your job,” Little Jack reminded Lancaster.

They soon came upon the alien archway the miners had discovered. The supports on both sides were carved into designs like totems. Little Jack could not tell if they were supposed to be animals or just some sort of archaic sculpture. Lancaster explained they were a little of both. Statues by the Chiotho tended to be so impressionistic that they typically formed esoteric shapes. Wrapped around these posts connecting the constructs were more snake-like creatures, only these had thin wings that turned into insectoid arms, and their heads were bulbous knots with no eyes or mouth. The top of the archway was still mostly buried in the ceiling rock, and what was revealed was worn down with no discernable shape or writing, if there ever was any.

Lancaster studied the structure and captured some images, as did Little Jack. They sent their findings back to Mika, who ran them through her computers at base camp. “It’s Chiotho all right,” Mika said. “This archway denotes the entrance to a shrine. It could be a shrine to several things, a landmark, sacred preservation, government or holy site.”

“I didn’t hear anything about curses,” Lancaster said.

“I don’t have any records of them leaving any,” Mika reported. “So this is new.”

“Or made up,” Little Jack said.

“Always a skeptic,” Lancaster retorted.

“That executive may have been a thicktil, but he’s on the bull to be annoyed about the miners’ excuses.”

“Let’s vis what they saw,” Lancaster said, and led the way further into the mine shaft.

The passageway now was a mixture of rough cave textures and smooth masonry on the walls and ceiling; alternating quickly between the two. Lancaster surmised that this had been the alien hallway the miners had uncovered, but it had partly caved in, and the miners were cutting their way through.

A hundred yards further Lancaster’s Illuminator detected a carving up ahead on the wall. He hurried forward, then slowed, realizing there could be some triggering device. He scanned the surrounding walls, floor and ceiling, switching through various settings on his Illuminator, to locate anomalies, pressure plates, weapons, gases, and other signs of traps. He found nothing.

Carefully, Lancaster set his feet down one by one, watching them settle and looking up now and again to spot any changes in the walls or ceiling. Nothing. Little Jack had remained behind, standing still, his hand on his pistols Huginn and Muninn, watching through the sensors in his glasses, barely blinking.

When Lancaster arrived at the wall he crouched down to get a look. It was crudely carved, but deeply cut. Scanning the depth with his Fathomfinder, he found that the cuts was uneven. As for the design, even he couldn’t make out if it was supposed to be an animal, or just a drawing; even from an impressionist’s point of view.

“It got real quiet out there,” Mika said, breaking the silence so loud that it caused Lancaster’s heart to jump.

“Phonicking you something,” he responded, and he delivered all the data he had collected to her. Mika, too, was silent for a while. Lancaster used the time to search around himself. He found nothing, so he continued down the passage, which continued to follow the ancient alien hallway. He could now make out brick layouts in the floor, and occasional flourishes in the design. The miners must have made quick progress here as they got through nearly another hundred yards before the cave came to an abrupt halt. Soon before it, another one of the crudely carved designs rested on an up-swinging stalagmite.

Mika at last responded, telling Lancaster that there were no records of that design anywhere in any of their databanks. He had discovered something new by the Chiotho.

“I’m starting to doubt that it’s by them,” Lancaster muttered as he slowly approached the second carving. Little Jack remained behind again, scanning the surrounding area with his glasses.

“What do you mean?” Mika asked.

Lancaster now pulled out another device from one of the many pockets in his jacket. This one measured the age of cuts into rocks. It was by no means exactly accurate, but it could measure the difference between a cut done millions of years ago and...

“Recently made,” Lancaster said. As he said it, Little Jack, still far behind him, focused in on one part of the ceiling.

“What?” Mika asked.

“Someone here carved th...”

“Cover!” Little Jack shouted, and just in time. The cave between them exploded.

Part 2

Lancaster curled into a ball behind the stalagmite. Little Jack, who had spotted something just before the blast, managed to dive away from it just in time, though he was flown a few meters onto the hard ground.

“Lancaster!” Mika called. “What happened? Lancaster, do you register? What’s your sixty? Little Jack!” Mika continued to signal to them. Hearing the explosion, some of the miners rushed to the entrance to see what had happened. Others reacted with shrugged shoulders, certain it was the curse.

Mika was shaking. She looked across at Otis Lyman, the mining foreman. He closed his eyes in dismay and drew a deep breath.

At last, a crackling signal broke the silence, and Lancaster’s voice emerged. “Still here. The explosion happened between Little Jack and I.”

Mika took a deep breath and collected herself with a sigh of relief before revealing her voice on the radio to him. “Good to hear you’re okay.”

“Lost my hat, though,” Lancaster said.

“You’ve got a tril of those,” Mika responded. Lancaster lost his hat on every adventure, yet he still seemed surprised by it. “Is Little Jack near you?”

“We got separated by a cave-in,” Lancaster said.

Coming out from behind the stalagmite, the now hatless Lancaster studied the wall of stone and debris. It was solid, perhaps even air tight. He reported this to Mika. “You have your breather, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Lancaster said absently, still looking for a way out. Then he asked if Little Jack was okay.

“Superb,” Little Jack said dryly, also looking for a way through the wall.

“You’re trapped in a pretty small area,” Mika said. “You’ll want to put on your breather sooner rather than later.”

Lancaster continued to scan the wall of debris with the Illuminator in one hand, and he placed the breather up to his face with the other. Just before it reached his nose, he detected a faint odor. Looking around a moment, he realized it was coming from the mask. That was not oxygen, nor any vapor chemicals intended to sustain him. Without sniffing anymore, Lancaster ripped the mask from his neck and tossed it to the floor.

Lancaster put all the pieces together in his head: the shallow, recently carved symbols that didn’t match the alien architecture, the mask with the gas, the miners who died after wearing them; and as he put them in chronological order, he realized that the alien structure was found first, then the first “cursed” carving was found a couple days later, then the second was discovered the day after that. Someone had learned of the alien structure, wanted it left undiscovered, carved out the symbols, then killed the first miners who found them so it would seem like a curse.

Who could have done this, though? The rival corporation? Lancaster looked down at the mask and remembered it was given to him by the head of the union. Lancaster couldn’t imagine him having a reason to kill his own workers unless he was paid by Burbank Corp to do it. The miners had shown the union rep the archway, and he had had a day in which to contact someone else before the murdering began.

Lancaster brought his Talki to his lips, “Mika, it was an inside job. The symbols on the walls were f...”

The message cut out. Mika called into the mic and turned the signal, but she couldn’t reconnect with Lancaster. She then thought about it, confused. There was no reason they should have lost connection. If it was something in the stone of the mountain, it would have blocked their signal at the beginning. The fact that they had spoken after the cave-in, and now lost the signal implied that the problem was something else.

Lancaster realized after speaking that he had lost connection. All he could hear was fuzz. He didn’t know how much of his accusation had gotten through, but someone must have blocked the signal. He tried to shout to Little Jack, but the hard-pressed rock was too solid to hear through. This meant it was air tight as well. Lancaster had to get out, and soon.

He turned in the direction they had been traveling. Just past the stalagmite and a little more of a curve stoned wall he found the faint, round outline of what appeared to be a giant gear. Lancaster stepped up to it and brushed off some of the dust and sand, then scooped away some mud and tossed aside some rocks.

Slowly, Lancaster uncovered something that resembled a roll-away door. It was stuck in place, but there were outlines of buttons and levers that were the size of his hand. He traced the edges with his fingers, digging out crusted in clay that had collected over the millennia, and scraped off the front to reveal the symbols on the doorway. He recognized some of them from the archway; the totem figures.

Lancaster picked up his Imager and found the pictures he took of the arch. He found all but one of the creatures along the post represented on the door, so he continued searching. At last he kicked away a clump near the bottom, and there found the button with the proper symbol. Now he knew which buttons to press, but in what order? Sometimes it mattered, sometimes it didn’t, but when it did, it was deadly. Would he follow the pattern of creatures up or down?

Lancaster considered the Chiotho. Whether an alien race chose their clues to go up or down depended on their culture. He yanked out his notebook and ran the light over it. Lancaster noticed himself coughing, the first signs that he was running out of air, so he needed to hurry. Flipping rapidly through the dog eared pages, Lancaster came to the Chiotho section and looked over the pictures he had drawn and the notes he had taken. He found another reference to a totem archway, but he hadn't recorded whether the symbols were to be written upward or down. But, thinking back on his adventure to the Rendon Woods where he had seen those Chiotho ruins, he recalled following their messages up the tree. The beginning of their thoughts, whether in the form of architecture, statuary, or crops, began at the base and worked their way up.

There was Lancaster's answer. He pressed the button that reflected the bottom symbol on the archway, then the next, and the next, and finally, the one at the top of the arch which was set in the middle of the doorway. He heard an instant click, which was either a very good or a very bad sign. He waited as the rusty clanging of gears groaned to life. A couple loud clicks reverberated in his small chamber, and the gear-like door rolled aside, crushing dozens of tiny rocks and scraping boulders. Ancient air burst out like ghosts escaping their graves. It was a stale smell, but a welcome one as it meant more time to breathe.

Beyond, blackness yawned, and the light of Lancaster's Illuminator faded away into oblivion. He stepped inside and followed the age-old corridor. The walls were far enough apart that he barely caught them both in the light, so he watched the floor instead.

His feet felt that it was flat concrete, not rocky like a cave. That caused him to take notice when a series of bulges revealed a design on the floor. Lancaster stopped short of it and knelt down. His hand brushed away a little of the dirt, and he blew away at it, sending a narrow wall of dust into the air that revealed a design underneath. It was a metallic carving of an animal that resembled a snake which wound from one side to the other like a wave. Lancaster scanned the rest of the hall with several light spectrums in his Illuminator. Finding nothing else carved or placed into the floor, Lancaster determined that this design held a strong significance. Many of these alien races kept their valuable artifacts behind deadly traps that still worked, so he had to be cautious.

Lancaster stood, then carefully laid one foot on the metallic snake, then the other. In this way he made his way across until he reached the point where the dirt still covered the design. He scraped it off with his foot, revealing a little more, then a little more, then more. It was a slow process, but Lancaster made his way steadily across the corridor.

When at last Lancaster found the featureless head of the snake, he knew he was safe, and he stepped off the other end. The walls of the corridor ended, and he had entered a large chamber, the sides of which he could not see. What would have happened had he stepped off the snake, Lancaster did not know, nor did he wish to learn.

Dust in the air had built up quickly and steadily until it was at last pervasive. But a cool smell that penetrated Lancaster's nostrils told him there was something more to it. There was an aroma of moisture in the air. In holding his light up in front of himself, Lancaster realized that what was limiting his vision was fog.

He adjusted his Illuminator to cut through mist and see what was further inside the chamber. He found that the floor continued ahead of him until it dropped down into a chasm. On the other side of the canyon was an ancient, elaborately designed building with large, imposing doors.

Lancaster stepped toward the cliff and looked out over it. He could hear rushing water far below. A river? Or perhaps an ocean, he could not tell, and the Illuminator could not reach

the bottom no matter what setting was used. His foot, meanwhile, sank into the dirt floor that sat for more loose near the edge, so he stepped back.

Turning his attention onto the building, he found that, despite it clearly being the important structure in the chamber, there was no way to reach it. The chasm was far too wide for a human, or a Chiothofor that matter, to cross. Had the bridge been destroyed, he wondered.

A pulsating, thin light emanating from the building's small windows and slicing through the fog caught Lancaster's attention. It faded and lit up at regular intervals. He couldn't imagine what could be causing this to happen, and the desire to get across the chasm became even stronger.

Lancaster studied the building as best he could from this distance, splashing his strongest light from the Illuminator across it. He found vines draped over the structure which had thick little shapes attached to them. He zoomed his Imager in on the vines and snapped a picture, then looked at it. The growths on the vines were a fungi that resembled mushrooms. Outside, there wasn't a scrap of foliage to be found, but in this underground cavern, life was literally sprouting. There was nothing on his side of the canyon, so Lancaster was now desperate to get across.

He took a wider shot of the building with his Imager, this time getting a 3D image to record all the measurements, the nooks and crannies, all the details that explained what the building was so he could project it as a hologram. He then sent the information over to his Pad, and set it to analyze the structure against other known buildings of alien make. Like Lancaster, the majority of the Chiotho had been fascinated with the cultures of other alien civilizations that had come before it. Unlike humans, however, the Chiotho governments prized ancient discoveries, and ordered shrines to be built to house them. These sanctums sometimes took on the architecture of the structures housed inside. It could therefore offer a clue if Lancaster could get some more information about the building, so he used his Imager again to get a wider shot of it.

Once the image was captured, he sent it over to his Pad and had it analyzed against the large database inside. The Pad took a moment to go through its extensive inventory, then at last presented several possibilities. The most likely candidate was the Yorkorath, a race of which Lancaster and the university he worked for had an unfortunately small amount of information. When he brought up the database's image of the building in 3D, he also saw a symbol floating next to it. This appeared to be the crest for that building, or perhaps that faction of the Yorkorath. Who knew? There was no information about it in the database, so apparently not the university researchers, and it definitely wasn't Chiotho.

Lancaster was stumped. He leaned his arm on a partial wall next to him while he considered how he was going to get across the chasm. He suddenly felt the arm sink in much the same way his foot had sunk into the dirt near the edge of the canyon. He pulled away, and he felt something cling to his arm until he pulled it back far enough. He brought over the Illuminator and focused it on the wall on which he had been leaning. He discovered it reforming just before it froze in place, like a caught child going into hiding.

Lancaster kept the light on the wall while he hovered his hand over the waist-high wall again. He lowered his hand carefully, then rubbed it against the top of the wall. He felt the rock turn into a more rubbery substance, and his fingers were able to mold it upward. It even clung to his skin, and as he pulled up his hand, the wall followed like clay, releasing when he pulled hard enough, and slowly reforming back into place. Lancaster set up the Imager and captured video of the strange, putty-like substance as his hand found its borders. It covered about a foot of distance along the top of the wall, as though it was a single brick.

Developing a theory, Lancaster put the imager at one end of the brick and projected a hologram of the symbol shown next to the building. He then traced the symbol into the malleable substance, making sure to get every detail right. When it was complete, a low gurgling began to rumble, and the dirt he had partially sunk into earlier grew outward; molding and forming into a flat structure that stretched across the chasm. It was taking the shape of a bridge!

Lancaster watched until it had built a platform all the way across, then faded into a lighter color along with the sound of crackling stones. It looked firm, but if it wasn't, Lancaster would have a very long fall to his doom. He placed one foot forward and tested the bridge. It felt like hard stone on a mountain, as firm as it could possibly be. He took another step, testing it carefully. Terra firma. He took every step with extreme caution, especially near the middle; for not only was it made of an unusual architecture, it also had no support beams beneath it. He didn't know how such construction was possible, but he wasn't going to question it for the superstitious fear that his doubt would cause the whole thing to collapse.

At last he blew out a sigh of relief as he stepped off the opposite side. Looking back, he expected the bridge to disappear, but it remained. He didn't know how long he had, but he figured he should be quick.

As Lancaster turned toward the building, he heard a moist rustling emanating from it. He spread the light from his Illuminator across the whole face of the building and brightened it to see everything he could. Nothing; and the sound had dimmed. He figured that it could be a common noise from inside the caves, perhaps down in the canyon by the water, but it seemed different, closer, and he became extra cautious as he approached the building.

The front door was a sliding mechanism with a hand slot just below the height of Lancaster's chest. He grasped it and slid the door open. This revealed a single large room that took up the entire building. At the moment he opened the door it was pitch black inside, and equally silent, as though nothing was present to carry sound waves.

Just before he could illuminate the room, a bright glow faded up from a globe on a pedestal in the center, casting a golden hue across the chamber. The walls and ceiling were covered in the vines he had seen on the outer walls. Here, however, they had grown so wild the chamber resembled a jungle.

Then, as quickly as the glow had appeared, it faded away.

Lancaster used his Illuminator to check the floor to see if there was anything dangerous he might step on. Nothing, including the vines, which were evidently relegated only to the walls and ceiling. He nevertheless took every step cautiously, watching the floor as he laid down his foot, then immediately scanned the walls to make sure nothing was happening. Just as he did, the light from the globe faded up again, casting everything in a golden aura. It remained on the same amount of time as the first beam, then disappeared again.

In the still darkness, Lancaster heard the moist rustling again, this time from all around him. He flashed one of the walls with the Illuminator and the noise fell silent in that direction, but it continued in others. He turned the Illuminator, and as the light swept across the wall, the rustling he heard fell silent until it was only coming from the parts of the walls he hadn't yet lit up.

All the noises faded as the globe pulsated with light again. Lancaster stared at it, despite the damage to his retinas, for it felt like he was staring into the sun. It was magnificent. And to say it was mysterious was a gross understatement. What caused it to emit light on these regular intervals, and how it still operated after millions of years was beyond Lancaster. He couldn't

even grasp what purpose the room had originally served, though he might be able to figure it out if he could look past the vines at the walls. Just then the light from the globe went out and left him in darkness.

Lancaster noticed that the moist, sliding noise returned almost immediately as it got dark. When he instinctively lifted his Illuminator to see what might be moving, the noises stopped in that direction, but continued in all others. He decided to let the noises continue while he pointed the spot of his light down. Manipulating the buttons with his thumb, Lancaster switched the setting of the Illuminator to ultraviolet. He then pointed it at the walls again.

In the direction he had been pointing the white light, there was nothing of note. The vines hung limp as they had been when he looked at them before. But as he scanned to the left he spotted movement among them. Many tiny, dark dots were weaving among the vines. Some of them were stalled where they were, reaching into the room.

Lancaster carefully stepped toward this wall, taking a quick look at his feet to make sure they were landing on solid ground each time without threat. He made it about halfway when the light from the globe beamed again. Everything on the walls fell limp, as though falling suddenly asleep. Out of a strange sense of obligation, Lancaster froze as well, and waited for the light to dim again.

When it did, Lancaster had the Illuminator pointed directly at the plants, and he was staring intensely to see what he could. The glow of the globe faded, but the ultraviolet light remained; and just like clockwork, the plants rose again, as though returning to life. Lancaster found that the dark dots he had spotted moving were the same mushrooms he had spotted outside. Some were sliding up and down the vine with an unseen mobility. Others were reaching out toward the middle of the room. Lancaster moved to the side slightly to look at more of the wall, and the reaching mushrooms turned with him, and froze when he stopped. Baffled, Lancaster stepped back to where he had just been. The mushrooms followed. 'Could it be?' he thought.

Lancaster stepped toward the wall and noticed the mushrooms recoiled. Some of them even retreated into the bramble of vines which, Lancaster could now see, went back more than a foot. As he did this, the glow returned, and the plant life hibernated again. He took advantage of the time and hurried up close, taking one of the many chances his ex-wife Mika had warned him against taking.

When the light dimmed again and left the wall in Lancaster's purple glow, he studied the fungi coming to life. One of them that was close tilted up toward him fearlessly. Rather than scurrying away, as the others did, this one stopped close to his nose, studying him as he was studying it.

The small beast had tiny antennae and no discernible eyes. There were discolorations along the membrane that could be sensory organs, but nothing besides the antennae that Lancaster could definitively categorize. He lifted a hand to feel it. The tiny antennae looked in the direction of the hand and the mushroom creature scurried away into the brambles along the vine on which it was connected. A survival instinct. Even more interestingly, another larger mushroom slid down the vine and cut Lancaster off from the first. It swayed at him, the way a human would when readying to box someone. A protection instinct.

Lancaster straightened up, and as the glow relit the room, he looked on in awe. These were tiny, living, thinking creatures and plant life that had evolved in this chamber over time. And it was still evolving. He captured as many images, videos, and 3D captures as he could of

the walls and ceiling. He wanted to take a specimen, but he was certain they would die if he did, and it hardly seemed worth it. He should have enough of this incredible discovery.

And now for the globe, which should provide the university with unspeakable information. He walked toward it, slowing as he came near. There were patterns on the floor which could be innocuous, or they could be traps. Lancaster didn't want to find out. He placed his feet carefully to avoid them, spacing out his legs to steady himself.

He then looked over the globe, studying its patterns, its shape, sizing up its weight; how much effort it would take to carry. The pulsing light was blinding, but it would likely go off when he pulled it up, but the researchers could probably turn it back on when he got it to Saberaux University. What he needed to know most importantly was, would it set off a trap or an alarm? He didn't see anything; in fact it sat in a sort of bowl without any visible connections. This didn't mean there wasn't any trap associated with it. With power running through the device, there could even be wireless connections to something else in the room.

Lancaster scanned it with several spectrums in his Illuminator, and with other devices he had to aid him in such matters. As he did this, more and more of the mushroom-like creatures came out of hiding and stretched out toward the intruder in the middle of their room. They stared at him from their connected vines. Lancaster didn't notice. He was too focused on the globe.

At last, satisfied that he had checked over the device as much as he could, Lancaster put away all of his gadgets and held out his arms. He shook out his fingers and tightened his muscles, ready to grasp the artifact. It was glowing now, radiating heat that permeated Lancaster's clothes. He was waiting for it to dim; and as soon as it did, he snapped in his arms, grasping the globe.

Part 3

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

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

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

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

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

But his legs only took him a couple steps before he couldn't bring himself to go any further. He couldn't run away from the truth that these conscious plants were the entire reason he

sought out ancient treasures. *They* were the end goal, not the means to it. What was evolving on these walls was far more precious than any relic Lancaster could find in any ruins.

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

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

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

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

When it felt as though the goo was sufficiently covering his face, he snapped off several leaves, apologizing to the plant for taking them. "Sorry, but, well... This is for your own good." Lancaster hurried out and crossed the bridge. He made sure to rub his hand over the stonework on the opposite side to cause the bridge to disappear. Lancaster took one last look at the rays of light that beamed out of the building on regular intervals. With any luck, it would be the last time human eyes would see it. Then he hurried to the exit.

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

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

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

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

"That's disgusting!" Little Jack responded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This is it," Lancaster said.

"What?"

"This!"

"Leaves."

"Yes."

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

"Absolutely."

"I could hit you."

"This is a treasure."

"I should hit you."

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

"The leaves."

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

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

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

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

Then he punched Lancaster in the arm.

The End