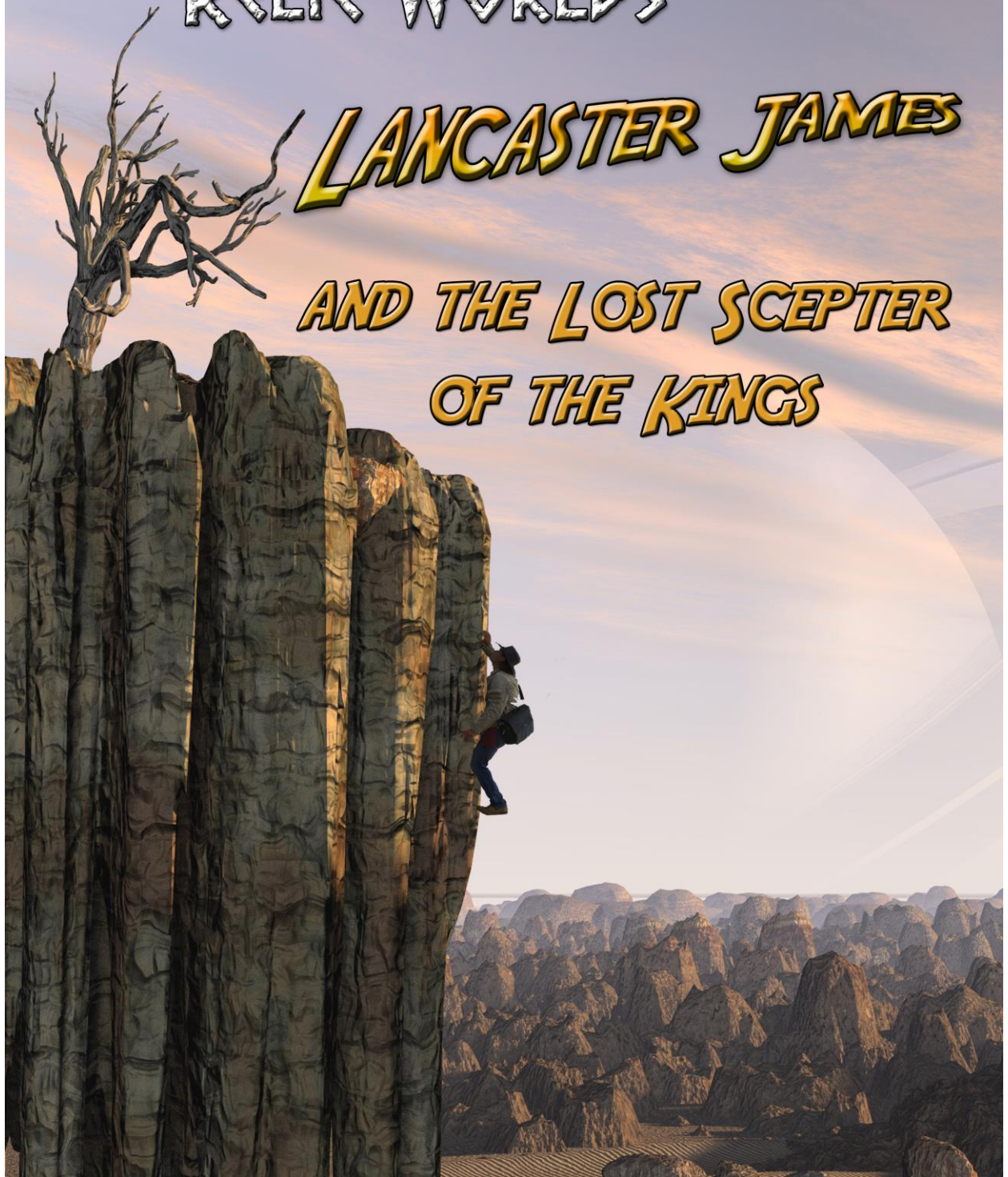


RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE LOST SCEPTER
OF THE KINGS*



“Lost Scepter of the Kings is in the Altar of Obedience. Location – Ministry building in town surrounding spire. Expedition sent to recover. We are still in our craft. Nestled safely inside mouth of the spire near canyon wall. Will leave and return when expedition returns... Beware the dragon.”

It was a rough translation, to be sure, and one that had been decoded by students at Sabereaux University. But it was likely the closest anyone could come to getting a true understanding of what the words in the 150 million year old transmission meant. Some of the more descriptive words, like “dragon” had been shortened translations of longer descriptions.

Little was known of the mysterious species xeno-anthropologists named the Trag. None of their worlds had been discovered, but their occasional signals had been picked up in deep space in various parts of space humans now called the second quadrant. Whenever scientists had followed a signal to its source, they had found no Trag ruins nor any sign they had ever been there.

The transmissions that were detected were used to piece together what scientists currently knew about the Trag. The present signal had been intercepted by a passenger liner, and thus had been recorded along with everything else that happened on board. Luckily for scientists trying to understand the Trag, the ship’s sensors commander had taken enough interest to locate the source of the signal and found that it had come from the Vinithra system. She then sold the information and the communication to the school for a hefty profit. The price was worth it, however, as it provided scientists another lead to try and find a Trag world, or at least one on which they had settled for a time.

The Trag themselves had vanished, as had every other species in the known galaxy, many centuries before humans ever took to the stars. What had happened to them and why they disappeared remained a mystery; one that came closer to being solved with every explored world. The Trag had been one of the first space faring races, traveling first in sub-light spacecraft which took them decades or even centuries to venture into outer systems. When they later developed spacecraft that got around the light speed barrier, the newer explorers set out to reconnect with the older colonies.

Researchers at Sabereaux theorized that this most recent intercepted signal was a later expedition that had gone to examine one of the older settlements. A Scepter of the King was the symbol of the seat of power in the early days of Trag exploration. If one was to be “recovered” it meant that the government had fallen, or everyone in the colony was dead, and so they were going to bring it back.

This could mean that the human expedition could find nothing except for some empty buildings and whatever the Trag left behind, but this would at least provide an insight into how they once lived. The expedition may also find the remains of the recovery ship itself. After having discovered the signal, the sensors operator of the passenger liner had kept a line open toward the star system from which the signal had come. Nothing more had been picked up, and therefore it was concluded that the ship may never have taken off.

This was what Lancaster James was hoping as he climbed the giant spire on the rocky world of Vinithra 2. (The world did not yet have a name as it had not been explored by mankind yet, despite being in the habitable zone of its solar system.) This was the best match to the short description in the intercepted communication. It rose in the shadow of a tall canyon with a gaping hole approximately three quarters of the way up. The hole in the spire was large enough for a ship to fit inside, and even resembled an actual mouth. It would be a tight fit for a vessel to slide into, (it was too tight for his partner’s ship, Odin’s Revenge,) but this was alien technology

after all, and might be able to make the tight turns. Why they would land up here was another question, but he supposed that would be answered once he knew more about the Trag.

Right now Lancaster was more concerned with the ever steepening cliff-side, the occasional loose rocks, and the “dragon” spoken about in the transmission. When he heard a high pitched roar he looked up startled and his foothold slipped from under him. His hand instinctively found a grip he had located a few moments earlier in time to stop his fall, but the sudden motion caused his hat to drop down, tapping the rocky spire while it danced in the breeze on its way down nearly a half kilometer to the surface. It was, in fact, the wind which had caused the noise that had startled Lancaster. He’d have to get used to the sound, as it was growing louder the higher he climbed. He didn’t have much longer to go, but his destination couldn’t come soon enough.

Lancaster was relieved to hear the familiar rattling inside his bag that was slung around his shoulder. He still had the Scepter of the Kings. Whatever had broken off inside it caused a clattering noise whenever the scepter was jostled, reminding Lancaster it was there with every sudden move. It had been distracting earlier, but now he found it a comfort. He hadn’t gone out of his way to recover it only to now see it smash hundreds of meters below.

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He had located the scepter inside a cave; ostensibly the ministry building. Once he and his partner had located the spire, Lancaster had explored the area around it, finding only one entrance. If there had been a colony here in the past, it had long since crumbled and been swallowed into the environment. The occasional holes in the rocks might have denoted entryways into long-ago structures, but he saw no sign of anything inside them; not even architectural walls. Each could be a cave entrance for all he knew; but he was certain he had reached the correct area, especially when one of the entryways delivered a discovery.

Rising out of the floor closer to the right side of the cave was a stalagmite formation that came up approximately to Lancaster’s waist. It was the perfect size for a former altar, though it no longer bore any discernable architectural shape. About halfway up the stalagmite was a gap in which sat a metallic item. It was thin in the middle with a round globe on one end and a rectangular protrusion on the other. There were few, if any, precious metals on it, though it was so crusted over that some could be hidden. When he took a closer look he found some decorative paint below the caked on dirt, but he found no jewels or usual royal ornaments. Nevertheless, Lancaster was certain this was the scepter.

He was careful not to take the artifact right away. He needed to study it; consider whether there may be some hidden traps. There were several sections of the cave where the rocks formed boxy shapes, and he sat on one that felt like a natural chair. It may even have been the throne at one time, with a pair of quadratic frames forming on each flank of the seat, though one was lower than the other. He would have time to study the décor at length later. For now, he wanted to study the stalagmitic altar and its prize.

The shrine had worn down with time, and now looked more naturally part of the cave than the boxlike walls. Though rough, Lancaster could find no markings that would spring any type of trap. He glanced over the walls and saw dozens of tiny holes; a sure sign of darts or some other weapon to attack him should he try to steal their treasure. Pulling out his Illuminator, Lancaster studied the holes, trying to locate what might be inside them, or attempting to locate a power source that would operate their weaponry.

He found nothing but the bones of tiny animals. Mice-like creatures, it seemed, with an unusual style of burrowing. Their walls were steep and smooth with sharp corners, much like the

equilateral walls of the cave. In one he found a tiny, shining jewel sitting upon a small, orthogonal mound; likely one they had gotten off of the scepter. Lancaster figured he would probably find all of the lost jewels scattered about the holes, but he didn't want to spend the time. He had determined there were not likely any traps, so he approached the ancient lectern. He spread out his legs, bent his knees, and placed his eyes level with the scepter's cradle. He studied it closely again, looking over ever part. He lifted his hat and brushed away sweat, then readied his hands. For a moment, Lancaster stood still like an animal ready to pounce, and then he did just that. One hand swept into the hole and grabbed the scepter, then tossed it to the other hand. It was a trick he taught himself in case one hand should be chopped away by a trap; at least the artifact would be going into the other.

All was still and silent, save for the occasional whisper of wind outside. He was startled when, a moment later, a howling bat flew in rasping as if chewing him out for disturbing his home. The animal, whose wingspan spread approximately two feet, circled Lancaster at a safe distance, enough for them to size one another up, but not close enough for either to be in danger. Lancaster found that the center of the animal had more in common with a lizard, and would probably resemble one more when it landed than it would a bat. But for the moment, it was hard to ignore those fleshy wings with needle-sharp points along them. It seemed to be giving Lancaster warning before it spun by the entrance and flew out.

Lancaster had what he needed, and he saw no reason to loiter. He wanted to see if the alien ship was still on the spire, so it was time to go. As he placed the scepter into his bag, he heard it rattle for the first time. He looked at it briefly, and realized it was lighter than it should be if the relic was solid. Something had clearly broken loose and was jangling around inside. That would be something to look over when he got back to his partner's ship.

The clattering sound made one last dramatic jolt as Lancaster yanked himself up over the lip into the cave on the spire. Once on the solid, flat floor, he was certain to roll over onto his back in the opposite direction of his bag. He did not know how strong this artifact really was. Lying on the cave, Lancaster caught his breath. He felt his chest lifting and dropping rapidly, then slowing bit by bit until deep breaths were giving his body the resemblance of calm ocean seas.

Sufficiently calmed down, Lancaster brought himself to his feet and peered into the cave... Nothing. Even when he pointed forward his Illuminator and increased it to its maximum intensity, all he found was the wall at the far end. There was no ship. It was empty; a dead end.

The aliens could have taken off and made it home. A part of Lancaster was happy for them, but disappointed for history. Locating their ancient ship would provide a lot of insight; and with a bit of luck, they might even have data as to their original location or destination coordinates inside their antique computers. But nothing was here, not even the remains of a ship.

Lancaster had to remind himself that it was a longshot anyway as he strolled to the edge of the cave. It was a beautiful view at least. He could see why they had chosen to land here to get a better perspective over the alien city that once sat beneath them. Despite mostly facing the canyon wall, Lancaster could see a long way to the left and right; and he could even see much of the land in front of the canyon that stretched out into a rocky desert. Lancaster tried to imagine what the colony might have looked like, despite his little knowledge of the Trag.

In trying to do this, he began to be confused by the fact that there was no sign at all of the Trag's civilization; not even ancient foundations. Typically there was some sign left behind, even if the alien culture didn't want it to be found. Here it seemed as though a conscious effort

had been put into erasing all signs that anything was ever here. He considered the extreme age of the site, but he had found other signs of civilization that were almost as old. Why was this so drastically different?

Lancaster now considered also how far away the cave where he found the scepter had been. Though within the general vicinity, it was further away than he'd imagine anyone wanting to travel; and there were plenty of landing locations that were closer, even if they wanted to land on higher ground. True, they were not spires, but if the Trag voyagers had wanted to land with a good view over the colony, they could have done it much closer.

Lancaster began to wonder about the scepter itself. Was it what he thought it was? He pulled it gently out of his bag as it rattled its hello. He squinted, studying it closely. There were little holes beneath all the dust. He blew off the age-old dirt and scraped off the caked-on ancient mud to reveal the painted designs he had noticed earlier. They were shapes in orange and purple with violet and yellow trim outlining ridges and small holes. Scraping at these holes, Lancaster came to realize they had translucent material over them. At the front these holes were long slits with one circular hole in the middle. Tapping his fingernails against the see-through material, he realized these were windows. No sooner had he asked himself why one would have windows on their scepter than he began to find more small windows all along the side. Few were on the bottom of the scepter, but many of them dotted the round "head" of it. 'Had this been where the jewels had gone?' Lancaster wondered. Then it struck him like a knock to the head. He had to tighten his grip on the scepter to keep from dropping it and grasp the edge of the cliff-side to keep from falling off.

This was not the scepter. This was the alien spacecraft.

He blew down the middle section revealing more of the texture that resembled a fuselage. Additional windows were exposed, and a small hatchway came into view. It all looked like a model, and it still could be if his theory was wrong. He scraped at the hatchway with his fingernails, trying to pry it loose, but the centuries-old mud was keeping it sealed. Lancaster reached into one of his many jacket pockets and pulled out a pryer-blade which he used to slice into the tight gap between the door and the wall. Once inside, he twisted it down and pried open the door.

Immediately several bones tumbled out. He recognized a few ribs, a limb or two, and a couple broken ones he couldn't identify. Then there was the head. It was tiny, about the size of a mouse, with the shape of a raccoon. Then Lancaster remembered the ones he had seen in the holes in the cave; the perfectly shaped walls of their burrows; the square homes they had carved into the walls of the cave on which he had so carelessly sat. That *was* the colony. The stalagmite he had mistaken for the ancient altar was the spire, for to these tiny creatures that would have been a high climb. And from the hole halfway up, they could look over the settlement while still having a reasonable climb down, (much smaller than the one Lancaster was going to have from his current perch, which he presently made after replacing the bones back into the ship.)

By the time he got down, the planet's star was low on the horizon. Lancaster's partner Little Jack asked if he wanted to be picked up, but Lancaster asked for a little more time, and he returned to the cave.

Inside, he saw the room with whole new eyes, realizing the cavern wall was what constituted the giant cliff. The flying lizard, which now sat perched threateningly upon the thin rock outcropping, was the dragon. Every small hole was an entrance to a home or a business, and the tiny bones inside were the people. He now noticed tiny roads that connected many of

them, and zigzagged up the wall face to reach other rectangular structures. How had they died? Lancaster doubted it was the “dragon’s” ancestors. The skeletons would not be so intact in their homes, and would, at best, be in a pile. Perhaps it was a disease, or possibly something in the air they could not breathe on a long basis. Whatever it was, it had worked fast on the ship’s crew and claimed their lives before they had had a chance to take off; and the Trags had been wise enough not to return to this world with more explorers.

There would be many things to learn, and it would take a great deal of time and study. This would be aided by having everything where it had been when he discovered it, which included the ship. Normally, Lancaster would bring back artifacts and discoveries, but this was different. It felt disrespectful. He didn’t know why, but it did. And so he slowly approached the miniature spire to return the craft. The flying lizard pulled its head back, its eyes narrowed as if threatening to strike. It watched Lancaster suspiciously as he crept forward, his legs spread, his arms held up to his side in an expression half of defense and half of surrender. He pulled the craft out slowly and showed it to the lizard, whose head cocked slightly while it focused on the relic. It recognized the item, and seemed to relent ever so slightly.

Lancaster took a cautious step toward the stalagmite first with one foot, then, slowly, with the other. The lizard gave him a sidelong, warning glance, its eyes on his, its jaws parting to reveal a hundred or more tiny sharp teeth and a couple fangs. Lancaster assumed it was probably poisonous. He considered leaving, but he really felt this object belonged in its place. He froze, then again held the object aloft, as though reminding the creature of what he was doing. The lizard seemed to grant permission again, as it leaned away from the hole in the side.

Gently, Lancaster took one step, then another, letting each foot move independently, as he edged his way toward the spire. When still a meter away, Lancaster stopped moving his feet and instead leaned his torso in along with the hand holding the ship. The other hand remained behind him, but ready to swing around and punch the animal if it came at him.

It just kept staring at Lancaster with a warning written on its face. Lancaster’s own said he understood. He looked away for just a moment, long enough to make sure his hand was entering the hole and the tiny ship was fitting in the sides. At his closest, the creature screamed its raspy, strained voice, as though telling him that was far enough. Lancaster’s fingers unwrapped from the hull, and he pulled out his hand, making sure not to bring the ship with him. He then leaned back on his legs, his eyes always on the lizard’s eyes. Its torso matched the motion of Lancaster’s, leaning forward as Lancaster leaned backward.

Once his torso was aligned with his center of gravity, Lancaster stalled a moment. The creature did as well. There was a quiet moment when Lancaster wondered if, now that it had back its prize, it might pounce. The transmission had said “Beware the dragon.” Maybe it would even breathe fire, a thought that excited Lancaster as much as it terrified him.

Nothing happened, but the face of the lizard denoted a hint of impatience, so Lancaster moved one leg back, then followed with the next, and one step after another made his way backward out of the cave. The flying lizard watched him go, visibly relaxing its muscles as he went. Just as Lancaster left the cave, the animal made its way down to the hole, and curled up around the metal craft.

As Lancaster watched the ground drop beneath him from the window of Odin’s Revenge, he wondered how many more Trag worlds had been discovered but they were never noticed. Perhaps there were other sentient species, even whole empires, that were simply overlooked.

What were thought to be the remains of rodents, or even toys of other races, could be entire histories of long-ago civilizations.

And as his mind wandered, Lancaster also considered what the universe would appear like to such small creatures. Worlds would be much larger; a single cave could constitute a nation. Hills would be mountains, and mountains worlds. All would be more wondrous, yet more frightening. An animal that was a nuisance to humans would be a monster to them. Short distances may seem insurmountable, and therefore what bravery would it take to explore the galaxy; yet how much more exciting?

As Lancaster pondered over the thoughts of stature and saga, Little Jack made a single, annoyed observation as they emerged from the bubble of the atmosphere into the cold blackness of space, "You lost your hat again."

The End