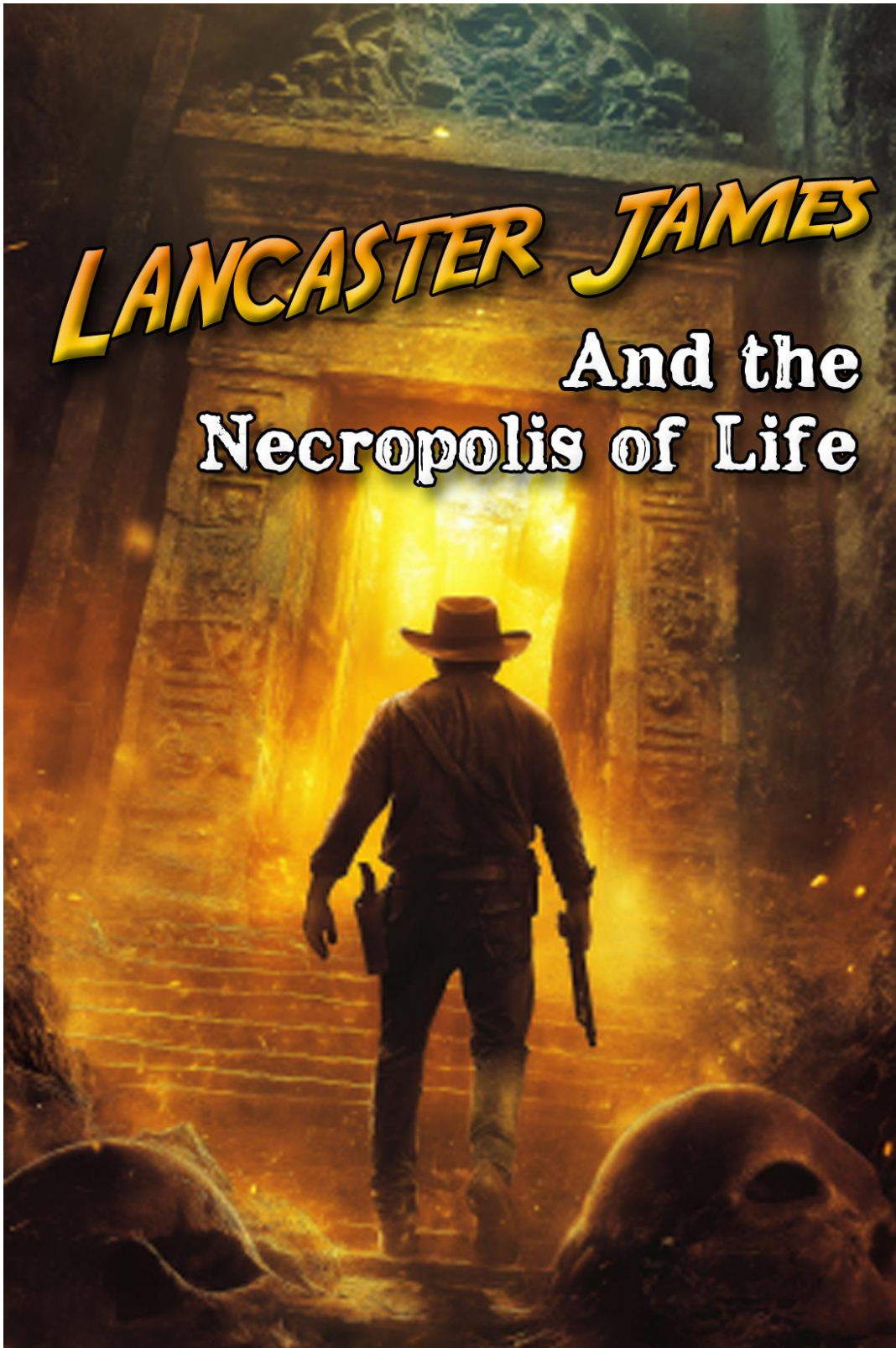


LANCASTER JAMES

**And the
Necropolis of Life**



Lancaster was riding the lift, half kicking himself for what he was about to do; and forgiving himself in alternating turns because he understood why it had to be done. He was essentially begging for money. Well, the forgiving part of him thought, it wasn't really begging. He was willing to do a job to earn the electros. But he was never happy about doing a job for corporate interests; particularly when it involved his own line of work. He scoured the galaxy in search of ancient artifacts inside of ancient ruins of long-lost alien civilizations. Many of these relics were powerful, and could tip the balance of power among the ruling corporate empires which stretched across the galaxy like giant tendrils, ruling over star systems and blanketing over everything that had been on every planet for eons before.

Lancaster was afraid that if he found one of these powerful relics on the corporate dime, that they would utilize it for their own gain, leaving more destruction in their wake; and it would be on his conscious forever. But his own searches yielded little revenue. Most of the time he donated or sold the items he found to museums for little profit; money that was soon spent on fuel for his partner Little Jack's ship so they could continue their vagabond lifestyle. He still had no home. He either stayed in a room on board Odin's Revenge or at a motel on a space station, in a vacc-tent on some remote planet, or the slums of some corporate city.

He needed electros; enough to get by for another several months so he could follow up on some incredible leads. And so he had returned to this accountant.

Carter was a friend of Mika's. He had worked with her when she needed funding for projects at her university. It still pained Lancaster to think of her. They had parted amicably; his life drove him to the far reaches of the galaxy, she wanted a more steady life with a real home, but he still wore their wedding ring, even though it had no more true merit. Thinking of her made him almost hate his own life. It made him question his choices. She was sleeping in a large, warm bed while he was out... wherever. When he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure which he really missed more, her or the comfortable lifestyle they had once shared. This memory would probably stick with him as long as he was working with Carter, but at least he'd be able to visit a planet he wouldn't normally have access to.

The lift doors wiped aside to reveal a large room that mixed sleek new designs with the ancient past tucked tactfully aside. They melded so perfectly with the room designs that one could pass by without noticing them. But not Lancaster. He immediately spotted every alien relic and could tell from where almost every one of them came.

He was still eyeing them, taking note, when his legs almost bumped the desk of Carter's assistant. She was thin with blonde streaks over her brunette hair. Her features had been trimmed, her skin smoothed and cleared of every blemish. Her lips, too, appeared to have been punctuated with a slight pout. She was probably still just under thirty, a bit early for one to start altering their body, but it had become a fad, recently, particularly among those who wished to get far. Her tight top emphasized just how high she wanted to climb. Or perhaps it was just Carter's dress code. It wasn't uncommon for executives to make certain requirements. He had even known a female executive who required her male assistants to wear dog collars and see-through, silk shirts.

Lancaster found himself covering over his wedding ring while he told her who he was there to see and she smiled at him like an old friend with a touch of flirtation and told him, "He's been expecting you, Mr. James. Right this way."

'Mister,' Lancaster thought. If there's one thing that tells a man in his 30s that he's growing old it's that word. That's what he called truly old people or... Or people in Mika's

profession. That's what a teacher or a professor should be called. Not someone who still hasn't found a home to settle down to.

He followed the assistant up the open stairs, her perfume trailing into his nose. As if she sensed him smelling it, she looked back and dropped a momentary smile. He smiled back, subconsciously putting his ring hand into his jacket pocket. 'Mister!' he thought.

She tapped the wall and the door swung open to reveal a wide room with a dramatic, slanted ceiling. The lighting on the walls and floor were dramatic, as though waiting for something extraordinary to happen. Like the lobby, Lancaster could see several relics of alien design stitched into the architecture. It was what they did at this firm, after all, design buildings. It was what brought them such wealth. Every planet needed architectural structures, and the profession grew with each expansion to new worlds. They had even designed the buildings that had been built over the ruins of alien cities Lancaster had been exploring. Carter didn't know it, but the two had been rivals on more than one occasion. And Lancaster was still kicking himself for switching sides.

Carter smiled broadly, and Lancaster forced a smile onto his own face. They shook hands, and Carter led him further into the room. "What worlds have you rounded the road to lately?" he asked.

"Not a tril," Lancaster said. "Fes, actually I've been to a few. Hopping from one place to another trying to find clues. And I wound up on this moon where I credited there'd be clues spread out all over, and chance be some artifacts. But all I found were some walls. Just enough to keep me searching and think there was more. It took a lot of time and I wound up empty handed..." Lancaster looked up at Carter and recognized the look of patient boredom on his face. He was hiding his lack of interest behind a thin veil. Lancaster cut his rambling, realizing he was about to drift into self-pity, and that wouldn't be good for anyone. "At any rate, that's where I was when you reached Little Jack."

Carter nodded politely, gave the silence a moment of its own, then jumped right into the point. "We have an alien necropolis on one of our planets. It's been there for some time. We just haven't disturbed it because there's nothing there for us, and the land isn't good for building on anyway. But recently..."

"What planet?" Lancaster interrupted.

"Poltoe."

"That would be the Cerritac race," Lancaster said.

"That or its original inhabitants," Carter said. "They rubbed out the people who were there before them."

"What was the shape of the skeletons?"

"We haven't blicked. Once we stripped a few nice looking ornaments from the entrance, we kept the front doors closed and left it the way it was." Carter had a look of annoyance on his face, as though the idea of looking inside was crazy. Lancaster couldn't imagine why he would leave it alone. "But the discoveries by your girl on one of her expeditions... Sorry. Your ex-wife. Her recent expedition on MA-84-C uncovered what looks like clues about our little graveyard."

"MA-84, that's another Cerritac system."

"Uh, right," Carter said. "She pointed out the similarities to me. Said I might be interested."

"You saw her?" Lancaster asked, holding himself back at the last minute from looking too pathetic?

“That’s right,” Carter said, studying him. “Do you want to know how she looked?”

“No. Sorry,” Lancaster said, pulling himself together. “Why me, though?”

“Pardon?”

“Why come to me about this?”

“She recommended you. I need someone to go into the necropolis and find something for me.”

“She recommended me?”

“Should she not have?”

Lancaster shrugged slightly, looking around uncertainly.

“According to the mythology they uncovered on their dig, the necropolis is a place of incredible import,” Carter said.

“What kind of import?” Lancaster asked.

“An artifact of incredible power. We want you to go get it for us.”

“What does it do?” Lancaster asked.

The man rose up away from the desk, at last excited by something. “It raises the dead,” he said, his eyes glowing.

It was the opposite from the usual. Now Lancaster was baffled and the client was animate. “Raises the dead?” Lancaster asked.

“I know. Pretty crazy stuff, right? But even if it doesn’t work, it’s got to be worth a might on the plastic. And if it does... Just image.”

Lancaster was lost in thought, so Carter continued by saying, “We trust you not to run away with it because Mika spoke so highly of you. And we’re familiar with your work.”

“If this thing can raise the dead, why is it in a necropolis?” Lancaster asked. “Why didn’t the Cerritac raise their own dead?”

“I don’t know. I suppose you’ll find out while you’re there,” Carter said. “But like I said, even if it doesn’t work, it’ll still be worth a lot of electros. And we’re willing to pay you 25,000 just to take a look.”

That took Lancaster back even more than the news of the artifact. He had only once been paid that much, and it was for a couple months worth of interplanetary work. This was really worth something to them. It made him both more excited about the job, and leery about it.

“Here are holos from your ex-wife’s expedition.” Carter pressed a button on his desk and a portion of it flipped over to reveal a holoprojector. It flipped through a few 3D images; some mundane discoveries, a spike trap that had been set off atop what looked like a star or pentagram, a line of alien skulls which looked like they were Cerritac. They were all neat and orderly. The site was segregated in square sections with laser-wire. Small, labeled flags stuck out of walls, the floor, shelves, or wherever they could place them. Some walls were half dug out, and interns were using fine brushes to tediously scrape the layers away. They had spent months getting as far as they had, perhaps years, slowly making their way through the discovery, being careful with every step, labeling every small detail, but never noticing the big picture. It was far tidier than Lancaster’s rush in and find it methods that Mika had always criticized.

Lancaster finally saw her in one of the holopics. He didn’t even notice what was in the foreground; he was too busy focusing on a shape with long hair in the dark background. He knew it was her; he could spot her anywhere, even without seeing her face.

Then the image flipped to a 2D shot of a wall. Cerritac writing had been etched onto it. It was a curved, almost cursive language with occasional hard edges and sharp turns in their letters. Unlike many languages Lancaster had encountered which used characters to express a

full idea, Cerritac writing was a few letters to each word with spaces between words that were sometimes too small to notice.

Carter knew he was staring, trying to remember the sounds of Cerritac letters, and he said, “The direct translation is, ‘Once before the angel of death, speak thee downward for the stair of life.’”

“Speak thee downward?”

“That’s the translation Mika’s people sent me.” Carter noticed Lancaster’s look of confusion. “Is there a problem?”

“If it’s a translation, there shouldn’t be any reason to use the word ‘thee.’”

“It appears to be a riddle. That’s why we’re hiring you, Mr. James. You are better suited for this than anyone we know. Here’s a data stick. It has all the images, translations, etc, and most important, the coordinates of the catacombs. It’s everything we register you’ll need. We would send a team with you, but we understand you have a vorlie to work alone with your partner.”

Lancaster nodded, looking at the data stick. He told Carter he would give him an update as soon as he had one, and he turned to leave.

“She looked great, by the way,” Carter said, calling after him.

“Who?” Lancaster asked.

“Your ex.”

One could always tell whether Lancaster was on his way to do a job or to get a job by the stubble on his face. When speaking with an investor, or anyone else in “descent society,” Lancaster used the Lasraz to disintegrate his facial hair. Of course, he missed a few spots these days without the second opinion of someone who was a lot more careful than he was. But when he was on his way to an empty jungle, a desolate snowscape, or a wild jungle, it was almost as though he was altering his face to fit in with the wilderness.

Little Jack, on the other hand, never let that change his appearance. He was sharply dressed in his signature black from head to toe at all times. His face looked like it was unable to grow facial hair. (It was, but he set his own Lasraz settings so high they didn’t grow again until he got in with another scan, shaving the hairs before they even broke the edge of the skin. His hair was an exact length, grown the same distance all the way around, and his large, black-rimmed glasses were polished on their edges; only their glossed over front was without shine.

“Raise the dead?” Little Jack asked caustically.

“Mm-hmm,” Lancaster answered.

“If it can raise the dead, why didn’t they just raise the ones in the...”

“That’s what I asked. He didn’t know.”

“It’s going to be a fake,” Little Jack said after a short pause.

“The Cerritac are not known for their fakes,” Lancaster said. “But they are known for being metaphorical. Or their language just isn’t clear. It’s hard to tell. Like the writing they found on this wall. , ‘Once before the angel of death, speak thee downward for the stair of life.’”

“‘Speak thee downward?’ Little Jack asked.

“That’s what it says.”

“Where are they from, the dark ages on Earth?”

“I’m trying to see if it’s a name, or something like that. Cerritacs used words and phrases for names, much like the American Indians on Earth used to.”

“The what-what?”

“American Indians. It’s an extinct culture that died out when Earth did.”

“Oh.”

“It was a nocturnal race, too, so maybe this clue has something to do with the night.”

“What does the American Indians being nocturnal have to do with this clue?”

“Not the Indians, Jack, the Cerritacs. Their eyesight was such that they saw better at night. Their gods were moon gods, they worshipped star formations. They registered the afterlife to be the great night.”

“Where do you find these alien races?” Little Jack asked. “Why can’t you settle down with a nice, normal alien race that puts up signs that say, ‘powerful, lost relic, this way’?”

“If you were going to go extinct, would you put up a sign like that?”

“If I was going extinct, I’d be pulling out the booze and saying to hell to anyone who might find my graveyard.” And with that, knowing that the ship was on autopilot flying through the brane on spectrum drive, Little Jack laid his head back and lulled to sleep.

Lancaster kept looking at the holo pictures, but he always returned to the same one, the picture where he could see Mika in the background.

Arriving near the planet Poltoc a little ahead of schedule, Little Jack made contact with the district managers while Lancaster got on his gear. Snapping on his utility belt, he took a look in the mirror. The scruffiness of his beard had grown to a comfortable five day length, but he wondered if he should laser it to meet with the local executives. Determining that they probably needed him more than he needed them at this point, he shrugged it off and threw on his jacket.

Little Jack was informed of a clearing near the ruins in which to land. He and Lancaster wondered if they were being helpful by landing them close to their destination, or purposely keeping them away from their offices, and both determined that it was probably a little of both.

The tall grass blew in every direction like rapid waves, and the trees bowed away from the lowering ship, crackling under the weight, their leaves stripping from their limbs. The landing gears reached out, tapped the ground, then the weight of Odin’s Revenge settled slowly onto them. When all sides seemed satisfactorily on the ground, the engine cut to low, the ripples under the ship slowed, and the trees reached back toward the sky. The roar of the engines became a loud hum with a distant wine, and then those dropped to the sound of a sighing breath with occasional creaks as the ship settled into place.

A new hum whined in the silence and a strip of one of the walls began to lower on one side. Light poured out like water from a pitcher into the depths of the trees. A shadow broke its stream, one with a shirt wrapped around a utility belt at the waist, a bag around the shoulder, a jacket blowing in the wind, and a flat-topped fedora hat. Lancaster stepped off the end of the platform onto the mossy ground. He was at last in his element.

The short, dark form of Little Jack still stood at the top of the platform, calling out to him like a mother scolding her child. “Put your head gear on, you meatball!” he said, breaking Lancaster’s heroic-feeling mood. “Unless you register you’re going com-silence today.”

“Nooo,” Lancaster said, shuffling his feet. He pulled out of his utility belt the thin headset, then raised up his hat so as to fit the device on his head. He affixed the mic so it was pointing toward his mouth and ran a couple tests.

Confident that everything was in order after hearing Little Jack respond, Lancaster pulled from one of his many jacket pockets his planetary compass. He had already plugged the coordinates into it, and now he only needed to watch the holographic map and the digital arrow and numbers on the plate’s surface to see which way to go. It had to calibrate first to the planet

and the local surroundings, then it would give him instructions. After a minute or so, the compass pointed the way and he trudged into the woods, his boots squashing something damp every step of the way.

As soon as he was out of sight of Odin's Revenge, Little Jack called to him. The sound of the com crackled into existence until Little Jack's voice was clear. He was counting from one to ten until Lancaster responded.

"Is that your IQ this week?"

"It's the number of times I made a Dame of your mother," Little Jack said.

"I just hope you were polite enough to say hi this time," Lancaster said.

"Are you watching your step?" Little Jack asked. It was good he did this sort of thing; Lancaster wasn't. He had gotten so wrapped up in talking and in watching the bright colors all around them that he hadn't noticed that a fog covered over the ground before him. Anything could be down there.

When he scanned the ground with his Illuminator, a handheld device that saw in many spectrums and wavelengths, he found something that took the database a few moments to analyze. He popped it up on the hologram above the top surface of the handle to look at it while he waited for the data to be compiled. Then he saw it. A plant slithered and moved in the underbrush, like a coiled snake waiting for its victim. Below it, the ground was unsteady, like quicksand which could devour him and swallow him whole.

"I'm watching where I'm going," Lancaster said.

"Uh-huh," Little Jack responded knowingly.

"Do me a solid and scry me a road," Lancaster said. "There must be a road the aliens here used, and more importantly, the corporate shells were using when they came upon the necropolis--"

"Yeah, I got it," Little Jack said, interrupting. "It's three quarters of a click straight ahead from where you're... Well..."

"Yeah?" Lancaster said. "Straight ahead?" He began moving that way.

"Fes, not now. You turned while I was talking. Turn back. There... No. Back... There you go. Straight from there. Don't step on anything that can kill you. Or poop for that matter. I don't want you smelling up my ship."

"That might not be helped," Lancaster said, making his way toward the path, hopping on short logs, walking across small rock outcroppings, all after he checked them with his Illuminator. Progress was slow, but deliberate. "I'm going into a necropolis. A place of the dead."

"You won't get stank from the dead," Little Jack said.

Lancaster supposed not, and he had only been half paying attention to Little Jack anyway. He needed to concentrate his efforts; and soon they paid off as he found a trampled bit of land that stretched into the jungle, covered here and there by a patch of cement. This had once been a road, and it was where Carter's men had traveled to find it.

He kept his Illuminator on the ground, but watched the jungle around him. Noises echoed out of the long, straight trunks. Leaves wavered and branches vibrated. The animals were watching, but keeping their distance. The road seemed to be the safe place to be.

After a few minutes of uneasy walking, he saw the cement doorway nestled in among the brush, as though it had made itself comfortable in the furry vines and grass. It somehow looked different than it had in Carter's hologic, but then again, most things looked different when seen

in person. Lancaster attributed the feeling to the excitement he felt at seeing something this old up close.

Nevertheless, he double checked the holopic on his own projector, holding it up before the door itself until he had the holograph and the real thing lined up one in front of the other. A slight smile flashed across his face, and he turned it off. Pocketing the projector, he stepped toward the real door.

He took a couple minutes to figure out how to open it. It would have gone faster, but he was searching for a hidden switch or secret button when instead he should have been looking for the door handle. The latch mechanism was a lever he put his hand in from the top, then pulled down, much like other Cerritac doorways. It moaned and squeaked with the sound of scraping, rusty metal and stone. It stopped, caught on the latch, and when he pressed further down, a clack sounded from deep inside, and he could feel it loosen in his grip. He pulled slowly, carefully, and the door began to pull outward.

He could feel the rush of air as it escaped the ancient chamber for the first time in perhaps millions of years. He recognized the stale smell, despite his holding his breath. He waited for it to pass before breathing normally again. He pulled harder at the door, bringing it wide enough to walk through. He hesitated a moment, placing his Illuminator ahead on its brightest mode, and took one last look inside before stepping forward into the darkness.

He moved cautiously, scanning the walls, the floor, everything in front of and around him as he moved deeper into the corridor. He left the door open; there was no way he would close himself in, and the light from outside guided the way for a few dozen meters before slowly fading into darkness. In that dimness he could see that the walls were stone masonry, evenly stacked to last the ages, but not smoothly carved for visual appeal. It was certainly an appropriate place to lie the dead. Thousands of dust particles danced in the sharp ray of light, but as it dissolved, they dispersed from view, like partygoers leaving for the night.

And at last, all that remained was darkness, and the glow of the screen from the Illuminator. Lancaster had not relied on his eyes, but rather the information from his handheld device. It was programmed to locate information that was gathered from decades of research by thousands of explorers like himself; whether it be clues, discoveries, or traps set by the aliens before they died off to keep grave robbers like himself out.

He knew that was what he was being now, a grave robber. But the hunt for eternal life was an important one, and perhaps more important was why this race didn't use it to keep themselves alive.

"What's the sixty?" came a roaring voice that shattered Lancaster's ears and echoed down the chamber. It had been Little Jack's voice, and it sounded so loud because of the total silence around Lancaster. There hadn't even been insects to keep him company.

Lancaster pulled up his comm. and spoke into it while continuing forward. "It's dead."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious. It's a necropolis. Anything else?"

"I haven't come upon skeletons yet. I meant there's nothing to tell you about."

"Right. Check in regular, though."

"Will do."

Lancaster kept his comm. out while continuing carefully forward. When he pointed the Illuminator straight forward and pressed the button to check on the distance to the nearest wall, he found it surprisingly far, more than a hundred meters away. And on both sides there was nothing; no bodies, no hallways, just one long path with a solid, dusty wall that let in nothing, not even drops of moisture.

Behind him, even the doorway he had come through was now just a small light in the distance. He stared at it a moment, his mind playing tricks on him, picturing it being slammed shut, trapping him inside. But that was a thought only motivated by insanity. Who would even be out here to do that?

Stepping forward, his footfalls sounding like falling logs in the emptiness around him, he saw a change at last in the Illuminator. He had gotten so used to the same readings that he almost missed it, but now he noticed that the walls opened up around him, and that the floor stepped down below him. He stopped at the edge of what was evidently a large room. He scanned the steps with his Illuminator, carefully studying each step. Then he checked the walls directly next to him at the entrance, then those further into the room. They seemed clear, and in looking at the shapes formed in the screen, he could see alcoves where skeletons were stored.

Lancaster was anxious to get into the room. He placed his feet firmly on the steps, rushing faster than usual, landing on the floor after three stairs. There was a deeper echo now with every step, as if the sound waves went from his feet, flew into the sky, swirled around to the walls, explored dozens of knocks and crannies, then swirled back down to him.

Lancaster scanned the area directly around him one more time with the analysis filter on the Illuminator, confirming it was safe, before shifting to white light and beaming against a wall.

He realized immediately why the entry hall had been so long. It needed to take him far enough to get under a large hill, or even a mountain. The room rose approximately 40 meters all around him. The walls were honeycombed rectangular, carved out slots; tombs where bodies could be laid to rest. Lancaster had seen them before with other alien races, particularly those which had mass burials during a short period of time, but still wanted some form of a dignified burial. He didn't know if that was the case with the Cerritac race, as this was common practice for them, but he had not seen anything of this size.

And something else was new to him. There was a clear material that reflected off the holes where the bodies lay. He swept the light across, the dark shadows swinging with the light as he moved downward to a hole closer to the bottom. It was on the last level, just above his head where the lowest level of graves were stored. He could just barely see the side of the skeleton, its arm laid upon its side. There was a sort of translucent material, perhaps like plastic, covering the inside of the hole. Lancaster reached into one of his jacket pockets and pulled out a tube. He reached it up to the clear material, pressing it to the surface. As he did, he found that it was softer than plastic, almost like a membrane. He pushed the back of his tubular device. The tube yanked a small chunk of the material into it and he pulled it away, plugging it into another small, square device that he got out of another jacket pocket.

The ChemiRight, as it was called, ran through a series of numbers and symbols. It was running an analysis of the material. It came back describing it as an unknown substance, but something that would hold a body in place, preserving its features for a time, so the bodies might have laid in state for a while before decaying.

Fascinated, but needing to move on, Lancaster discarded the material from the tube, placed them back in his pockets, and continued to look around him.

The room was too large to shine a light across the whole thing, so he held the Illuminator aloft and pressed the flash. After a few moments of analysis, the Illuminator created a holographic reproduction of the room above its projector. It showed in glowing detail the curved walls which pulled slightly inward toward the top, the hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of rectangular holes in the walls, the dip in the center, upon which he was standing, a raised

platform along the edges by the walls, and perhaps most importantly, four figures which stood at the end of the room opposite the corridor.

He turned suddenly toward them, holding forward his Illuminator on full brightness so he could see them, and if they viewed white light, they might be blinded by it.

The four shapes which stood atop the platform were cloaked figures, each in dramatic poses, as though the wind was flowing through them. It was clear immediately that they were immovable statues. Lancaster breathed a sigh of relief. Then he hopped up the steps, got onto the platform, and made his way around to the statues. He ran the Illuminator across each one of them, the light casting a white beam across their chins, and spreading out the blacks of the shadows in their eyes.

They all looked like skeletons with long, thin skulls. The tops of their heads rose up behind them, as though blasted backward by the light, an exaggeration of the Cerritacs themselves. Their other features more closely resembled the former beings, with eyes that began at the front and ran along to the sides, a chin and mouth similar to humans, with a nose at the base of the chin. However, these seemed to have shells for ears along the side of the head, rather than on the neck, where the Cerritac actually had them. They each wore robes and had hooved feet which floated just above the ground. It was the cloaks which actually kept them connected to the floor.

Also like the Cerritac, they had two oversized arms and two undersized ones. Each held an instrument in his undersized arms.

One of them held a farming instrument that resembled a human hoe. Another held an elaborately carved spear. A third held a bowl, and the fourth held a blunt tool similar to a hammer.

He wasn't sure of their meanings, but what was more important to him was their functions. He switched the Illuminator to several scans and found within them a small, electronic device which appeared to operate on audio waves. How they would operate and what would set them off wasn't clear. Nor was it clear whether they would still work at all. But Lancaster now determined to remain quieter than before.

He tiptoed, now, rather than walked, to get a better angle to look at the three beings.

"Lancaster, what's your sixt..." the comm. shouted in Little Jack's voice. Lancaster grabbed it, squeezing it hard and shutting it off, his heart stalled, his eyes wide, watching the statues in fear. In his rush, he also dropped his Illuminator. The light jolted around the walls and the faces of the still forms as it clanged on the floor. When still nothing had happened to him when the loud noises stopped, Lancaster was about to sigh with relief, until the Illuminator fell from the platform and thudded against the hard floor, the loud noise echoing all the way up the chamber, then coming back down for a second pass. He closed his eyes at his stupidity, waiting for whatever trap would go off.

Nothing happened.

He began to believe that the audio devices inside the statues no longer worked. He opened his eyes again, not much of a difference, though the light against the floor beneath him was lit up by the still-operational Illuminator. "Thank hades they don't make them like they used to," Lancaster whispered to himself, and he hopped down to retrieve it.

While inspecting the Illuminator, the beam of light fell onto the four statues. Looking up at them, he now saw that they were peering down at him on this floor. This was evidently where someone was meant to be when looking at them. They were fascinating statues, but he couldn't imagine what they were meant for.

After staring at them for a time, he shook his head, giving up. Looking around the rest of the room, there was no exit. He had reached a dead end.

Lancaster turned back to the hallway and began toward it, taking out the comm. and calling Little Jack. "Reached the end. I'm heading back."

"Why didn't you answer be..."

"Little pro... Never mind. I'm..." Then he froze in his track, remembering one thing and thinking of something else. He spun in place, looking at the statues, focusing on one of the two in the center.

"You're..." Little Jack said.

"Hold a tick," Lancaster said, putting the comm. away again. "The Angel of Death," Lancaster said quietly. He pushed forward the Illuminator, throwing light into the empty eye sockets of the skeleton with the spear. Like most skeletons, it appeared to have a menacing grin, though these mouths went slightly down near the back, giving it a sort of grimace.

Lancaster thought of the words on the wall of the site Mika had explored. 'Once before the angel of death, speak thee downward for the stair of life.' "You gave an odd riddle," Lancaster said to the statue, who stared back, clutching its spear. "Okay, I'm going to surm you're the angel of death." Then, looking at the one with the bowl he said, "Unless they had a lot of homicides by salad." He turned his attention back to the one with the spear. "So, you want me to speak downward? Like this?" He looked at the floor. "Is this so people will be bowing to you when they speak? Hello? Um... The instructions were to speak, not what to say. Testing? Testing?" Lancaster straightened up and looked. There was no change to the room. The statue glared down on him like it was laughing.

Lancaster sighed. "Maybe your sound device doesn't work," he muttered. But he decided to try one more thing. He pulled out his notebook from his pocket and looked for the page with the Cerritac language. He then bent over again, lit up the pages with his Illuminator, and read them aloud to the empty room.

After about a minute of this, he simply felt stupid. He flipped the notebook shut, replaced the band around it, and shook it against his other hand. "Speak thee downward. Speak thee downward. Speak thee down..." Then a thought passed through his angry brain. It came as he said the sentence too many times in his head and at least once said it wrong. "Speak the down word," he thought.

Lancaster threw off the band and paged through the Cerritac language. He found the word for down, then stood right in front of his presumed angel of death and he pronounced the word loud and clear, "dirchok!"

A loud clunk sounded all around him and echoed up the chamber. He felt himself lower slowly, but he stayed where he was. The rest of the floor was dropping faster. Three holes opened up to his sides, all directly in front of the other statues. The small circle of floor he was standing on was the perfect place to be. He balanced himself and put the book back in its pocket, this time without the band, which had tumbled down into the darkness.

The Illuminator, pointing down into the void, was going crazy. Everything below him was in motion. His best information came from the white light which revealed to his eyes the way the floor was moving mechanically, breaking into pieces, but very orderly ones. Those directly next to him lowered into two foot long steps, each lowering by a couple feet leading down in a curved fashion, first one way, then another.

Lancaster stood his ground, waiting, listening to the clicks and pops of the ancient mechanisms. The loud creaking that occasionally moaned made him uncomfortable, but there

was nothing he could do at this point. Even the platform on which the statues stood were now too high above him to jump to. He was committed to his path.

When the clicking and popping stopped, the creaking and moaning continued a few moments more, like a creature yawning after being woken from a long and comfortable nap. The loud echoes continued for a long time after. Lancaster didn't wait for those. He measured the distance to the floor, got a reading on everything around him with the Illuminator, then connected the comm. to it. He didn't have time to tell Little Jack about all of this, he simply let the data go back to him, then put the comm. back in his pocket, and crept down the stairs.

After weaving one way, then another, Lancaster arrived at the bottom; another stone structure, but this time, more smoothly curved. This was clearly the more important room for the Cerritac.

Once off the steps Lancaster noticed something to his right. It was blood. Not fresh blood, but certainly nothing from millions of years before. He stepped closer and saw the shriveled remains of a human body with spikes protruding from the floor through the torso and head. The wrinkles all over it looked like something had rumbled up the body like a piece of paper, then discarded it.

Looking to each side, he could see protruding spikes in three areas. He looked up and considered from where he had climbed, and he came to the conclusion that these were directly below the points before the other three statues. 'Stand before the angel of death,' Lancaster thought. 'The stair of life.' He ran the light of the Illuminator up the stairs which had saved his life, grateful for them, and their builders who had made them to last. Then he looked around himself for an exit.

Analyzing the room, he found only one exit, a corridor whose walls were adorned with ornate, royal designs and built with precious metals. He passed half a dozen sarcophagi, and these were no holes in the walls. They were coffins made of precious metals such as sun-silver, gold, and Eurichite. Lancaster tried to look into them, but they were sealed shut, and he did not dare peak inside, even if he could find hinges, which were not easily visible.

At several intervals he came upon wide rooms spread out to the sides. In the center of these rooms were important coffins. Their doors revealed the names of these once important beings. Star Shiner, One Who Waits, Wall Leaper, and Yellow Grass were a few of the names he could discern as he passed them by. He knew that treasures were inside, but he had not come for them, and he did not need to take the chance of being killed by a trap protecting them.

He came out of the corridor and into an octagonal room. In the center was a circular rise in the floor, and at the other end, the wall pushed inward with a small corridor. A closed door which led into the corridor sat atop the circular rise in the floor.

'This would be the royal entrance,' Lancaster thought. 'Certainly the location of their most precious secret.' He was close, he knew it. He stepped excitedly forward, approaching the door. He rose his leg up to step on the platform, then stopped. It was a sixth sense of Lancaster's; not of danger, but of memory. At times like this, he would remember something at the back of his mind that he had learned something about this, but he couldn't remember what he had learned. He stepped back, thinking. He looked around with the Illuminator, trying to get a clue.

He spotted something on the rise in the floor, but he couldn't tell what it was until he switched the Illuminator to contour mode. This brought out the details in the tactile details of a surface. There he could see more clearly the design of a star, or a pentagram, or some such artwork carved into the floor.

And at last he remembered. One of the pictures of Mika's site was of someone who met their end after stepping on a platform just like this one. It would be a trap, not unlike the spike trap he had just avoided. But he had to get to that door... Didn't he?

Lancaster walked around the platform and came to the side of the corridor which stretched into the room. Again using the Illuminator in contour mode, he scanned the wall. Out of the thousands of bumps along the coarse wall, he could make out two designs carved into two bricks, both laid into the wall. One design looked similar to a sun, the other looked like a rocky planet, or perhaps a moon.

He stood before the wall, looking at the screen on the Illuminator. He ran his hand against the wall, feeling the design of the star and the planet, or sun and moon. He could feel that the bricks were loose in the wall, and they could be pressed. But one would certainly lead to his destination, while the other would lead to certain doom.

The question, he believed, was what were they more likely to worship? He answered his own question by remembering what he had told Little Jack. They're nocturnal. They would more likely worship the moon.

Lancaster pressed the moon, as though he had pressed the up button for a lift. He heard a distant humming for a moment. If it was a trap about to go off on him, there was nothing he could do about it. He just had to wait.

Then a loud scraping accompanied the section of wall he had pressed lowering into the ground. Lancaster peered briefly into it with the help of the Illuminator, then entered.

It was another corridor, but this time it began thin, and opened up wide into a triangular room. In the center of the room was what looked at first to be a coffin, or was it a bed? The beam of Lancaster's light spread over it, reaching up over the sides and peaking in. Whichever it was, it did not look comfortable. An indentation in the center was in the shape of a Cerritac, with two legs and four arms, the lower ones smaller and the larger ones much larger, and a long head with large ears about the neck. It gave Lancaster the chills the way it was the right size for a human.

The base looked as though it was made of a hard foam, prepared to adjust to the contour of whomever laid in it. The sides were lined with silver, and its corners were rounded. Most creepy of all were the steps at the bottom end which invited someone to step up to it and lie down.

Lancaster now noticed the table beside the coffin, or bed, or whatever it was. It was made of the same foam, only this time the contour was not so specific. It curved inward with the basic shape of a Cerritac, but was not committed to a specific size or height. Small tubes ran into the base of the table, and above it was a large, metal tube whose mouth opened over the center of the table.

At the head of the table, on the opposite side from the doorway, was a screen; what looked like to be a console.

Lancaster was confused; completely baffled, even. He had expected this to be the chamber of a major emperor, a king or a queen, or a treasure room with the fountain of youth, their holy relic that would supposedly bring someone back from the dead. Not this.

He lifted his comm. to tell Little Jack, but hesitated, uncertain what to say, until he just said, "I might be a tick." There was no response. "Little Jack?" he asked. All he got was static. It made sense. He was underground, so there might not be a way to get through. He put it back and scratched his head, trying to figure this out.

The vacuum silence was broken by the clacking of shoes outside the room. It took a moment to register with Lancaster, even though the sound was blaring against the cloak of nothingness. It was such an impossibility to hear any sound that his mind assumed it a trick of his ears until he couldn't deny it.

He turned the Illuminator to the door. The light framed the entryway in a circle of gray. Small specks of floating dust drifted across, casting wider shadows against the wall, giving it a crawling sensation that matched the eeriness of the footfalls coming closer. As they became clearer, Lancaster recognized the sound of not one pair, but two, and then more sets of feet coming. They were in no rush, yet they did not amble, the way he might have supposed a zombie would walk. He listened for moaning or grunting, the sort of sounds he would expect from the walking dead as well, but there was not a sound save for the snapping souls of the feet against the stony floor.

He grasped his Blazecan, a blow torch device generally used to burn open entries into walls, but now perhaps to be used to bring back down that which should not be walking.

The footsteps came ever closer, neared the door, then slowed to a stop. Lancaster held his breath, waiting for whatever came through that dark space where the walls slanted together from the sides.

Then one of the shapes walked through, appearing in the light and approaching down the middle of the triangle-shaped corridor. It was a shadow at first, walking upright, neither slouched nor leaning, but walking like a man, and as tall as one, too. And as it took shape in his light, it became clear that it was a man, one wearing a suit, no less. When the light washed over his face, Lancaster saw who it was. Carter.

Carter wore no smile on his face, but neither was he angry. It was a look of complete indifference.

Lancaster took his hand away from the pocket that held the Blazecan as he stared gape-mouthed at his employer.

"That is indeed what you were searching for," he said, and as if on cue, five pairs of feet walked in behind him. It was his assistant along with four armed guards. "But it does not actually bring back the dead."

"I surmed," Lancaster said.

"What else have you figured out?" Carter asked, his expression in the expression much like a dare.

Lancaster thought a moment. "Clones?" he asked.

Carter nodded. "I still don't know why they didn't use it on themselves to continue their race. But we can continue work they decided not to do."

"You want to build an army," Lancaster guessed.

"An army? You think so small, Lancaster," Carter said. "I hereby claim this machine in the name of Maracorp. Ere go, all applicable laws, including, but not limited to, the right to ownership of everything built therein. In other words, every clone that comes out of this machine will be my property; to do with as I please. Armies, employees, slaves. They will be mine."

Some of the first expressions Lancaster had seen in Carter appeared in his face at that moment, and they all involved greed. "Why send me to find this?" Lancaster asked, knowing that now that he knew of this secret, Carter would want him dead.

"We could not find our way down to this chamber. We knew it was near here, but we couldn't locate it. We needed a master such as yourself to locate it."

“And now you don’t need me at all.”

“On the contrary, Mr. James. You’re still very valuable to us.”

“Do you pose to clone me?”

“No, it only clones the dead. It makes live beings from a dead corpse. Thus, the Fountain of Youth comparison.”

“We should leave the resting skeletons in peace,” Lancaster said.

A look of bemusement grew across Carter’s face. “I have no intention of cloning the aliens,” he said. “The corpse must be fresh in order for the machine to work.” Carter was now reaching into his jacket and beginning to pull something from his inside pocket. Lancaster looked around him. There was nowhere to go. He looked at the assistant. Her full lips gave no sign of emotion except for a slight smile that suggested approval. There was nothing he could do but reach again for his own Blazecan, which he knew he would never pull out before being blasted by a row of four guns already aimed at him.

“So you’re just going to kill me in cold blood?” Lancaster asked, desperately reaching for anything to save his life.

“As I said, Mr. James,” Carter said as he revealed the gun he was pulling out. “I would rather you be alive to help me.”

The assistant looked confusedly over at Carter, as though she was going to ask him a question. She saw him pointing the pistol at her. A brief and muted flash belted from the muzzle, and a single dart shot into her breast. She lived long enough to look down at the needle sticking deep into her chest, stretching into her heart, delivering a deadly combination of toxin and compressed air that caused her heart to explode on impact.

Her entire body crumpled, and she fell to the floor. Lancaster could see the pained expression of betrayal on her face as she lay still, twitching slightly, until, after a half a minute or so, she stopped.

Carter returned the gun to its place and looked casually at Lancaster. “I will need you to study the body when it’s cloned to see if it has any alien qualities, and if they can be useful to me.”

“What if I refuse?” Lancaster said.

His momentary bravado was silenced with the look Carter then gave. He would do as Carter said, or he would be buried with the rest... and the former young assistant.

As Carter was staring Lancaster down, two guards scooped up the fresh corpse and carried it to the enclosed bed. They placed it inside with such precision that Lancaster could tell at once they had been trained. Everyone had known the execution was coming but the woman herself. He could not help but feel some pity for her, but then he remembered that she had smiled when he was going to be shot, and all pity left.

Carter walked to the controls and placed his holo-projector on top. He turned it on and pictures from Mika’s expedition appeared as a cloud above the machine. He scanned through images Lancaster had seen, and slowed when he reached images he had not shown Lancaster. Some were of controls very similar to what he was standing next to, only half destroyed. Another was the image of a half-broken skeleton lying in another coffin, like the one the young lady rested in, only it was half destroyed and covered in debris as well. Lancaster watched these images sweep by over Carter’s shoulder, hardly regarding the anger at having been kept from these as his fascination overwhelmed him.

Carter used the holograms as instructions, figuring out what levers to pull and buttons to press. The machine came to life and began to hum. The guards’ mouths widened with

excitement, all focused on the now powering machine where Carter was nearly jumping out of his pants, now twisting knobs ever so slowly and carefully, watching the multiple holograms which he now had up so he could compare notes.

Lancaster watched, equally fascinated, but then he stopped on the image of the skeleton in the coffin. He wondered why it was still there if this thing had worked. He thought again about the fact that the Cerritac had not continued to use this. If it truly raised the dead effectively, the Cerritac would not have gone extinct. Something must be terribly wrong with this thing.

He backed away from the machine unnoticed by the guards, who were now coming closer to Carter and the chest-high machinery he was using. It was vibrating now, and humming. The millions-year-old machinery, dormant for most of those centuries, was coming to life again.

Tiny electrical discharges emitted from the coffin's walls and ran against the young woman's skin and clothes. Their fingers danced across her body, touching lightly, then disappearing, to reappear again further along. Second and third waves of these electrical currents overlapped, and soon the entire corpse was covered in a miniature lightning storm.

Suddenly a bright glow exploded behind Lancaster at the doorway. By the time he turned his head to see it. Bright electric waves were crawling across the ceiling like spiders at light speed. As they passed over his head, he felt a whiff of air which blew off his hat.

The tendrils of lightning raced to the platform near the coffin and lit up the cylinder on the ceiling. The cylinder glowed with heat, then cooled, and out the bottom they could see ash dropping to the platform below. It clumped together as it hit, forming first a foot, then a leg, then pants on the leg, forming then legs, upon which formed the torso, the arms out the sides, and finally a neck and finally the head, face, eyes, mouth, ears, and the long strands of her hair.

All looked on at the miracle. Even Lancaster watched, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. He had the perfect opportunity to escape. No one was paying any attention to him. But he was paralyzed with amazement.

As the ashes cooled, their outer shell shed and dropped to her feet, revealing color. Her face was slightly paler, almost gray, but it was the assistant, every inch of her, including her clothes. She wavered on her feet, but she was breathing, alive, and standing on her own.

"It worked!" Carter exclaimed, his smile ear to ear. He stepped forward, standing before his assistant, looking her up and down the way a driver would look at a prized car. "You look even more magnificent than before. And all mine, too. Welcome back to life, young lady! Don't be afraid. I always treat my property well. Better than my employers, some say."

Without noticing her reaction to him, he turned back to Lancaster, who was still standing behind them. Carter seemed surprised to see him, as though he had forgotten all about Lancaster, or perhaps that he had expected Lancaster to run. "It's your turn, Mr. James. Come check out my new toy and see if there are any flaws..."

Carter got no further. The assistant reached forward with both hands, grasped his head, and squeezed them together. The two hands came together with a clap, the two ends of his skull between them. His brains shot upward in a bloody stream and came down on the guards around him. Everyone froze in that moment.

Lancaster's eyes locked with hers. She was looking past her former master, directly at him. He could see into them, and he knew exactly what the problem was. Her eyes were neither blue nor green nor any natural color. They had no color at all, in fact. They were translucent. He could see right through them into the darkness of her head. This was no reincarnation of the eager assistant. This was a monster.

The guards all seemed to come to at once, and they lifted their guns. As quick as a helicopter blade, the monster twirled Carter's body, knocking the guns out of the men's hands. Thus disarmed, they backed away, some for their guns, some running for their lives. She jumped them, first one, going for his gun, tearing his arms off, then she used those arms to trip up a second so she could jump on him and punch through the back of his head. She jumped a third one and was tearing into his chest when Lancaster finally turned and ran.

The clone monster shredded the last guard apart, viciously spitting his blood everywhere. The screams, the splatters, and the ripping sounds died away as their echoes were drowned out by the sounds of dripping blood. She was not conscious, not in any way humans would define, but through a haze her pure adrenaline and aggression could sense the sounds of movement. Something was running away.

She looked around the room and saw no one. But then, resting on the floor near the exit, was a single hat. Someone had gotten away. That man she had locked eyes with. He must die. She knew not why, she didn't care why. She was all ferocity, built as a warrior to destroy the enemy, and the enemy was anything that was not Cerritac.

The monster ran to the door, trampling the hat along the way. She somehow knew to avoid every trap along the way, arriving in the corridor hunched forward, her legs racing at super-speed, her mouth lathering, her eyes searching.

She needed no light. She could sense where any obstacle and any living being was, like a silent sonar which shot out and brought back information. She was aware of the entrance to the royal rooms. She knew the names of all the rulers buried in them. She did not look, but listened as she passed them by. If anything moved inside them, she would hear them.

Next to Wall Leaper she stalled. There was a shuffling, not movement on the floor, but as though someone was adjusting their clothing. It stopped when she stopped. The creature that was in this room knew she was there. But it would not matter. When she approached the doorway, she blocked the only exit.

She could see the sarcophagus in the middle of the room. Its lid was off. Someone was desecrating the tomb. A little tuft of hair stuck out over the top, revealing the thief.

She slid forward, first one step, then two and three, then faster, ready to pounce on the victim.

Lancaster leapt out from behind the sarcophagus. He seemed to fly at the wall. The monster landed atop the coffin, lashing at the place he had just been. She looked up at him to see him flying at the wall.

He turned in mid-air and landed feet-first on the wall. Latching in place, he was now standing parallel to the floor. He held there for a moment, getting his bearings. He and the monster looked at each other, both seemingly surprised for a moment.

On his feet were two metallic boots, treasures he had found among Wall Leaper's remains. He had known he would never outrun the monster, so Lancaster had taken a chance that he would find something in this tomb, and it had paid off, albeit with an artifact he wasn't sure how to use.

The creature lunged at him. He ran along the wall, jumping to the next wall, then the next, until he reached the doorway, where he hit his head.

The monster lunged at him, and he jumped at the ceiling feet first. He latched on, and the monster clawed up at him, like a cat reaching for its string. Lancaster raced down the corridor, almost falling headlong with each step, but his boots grasping the ceiling like magnets attracted to a metal surface.

Reaching the stairs, he jumped onto the bottom side, racing up the spiral staircase. The monster dashed up the traditional side, remaining upright. Seeing Lancaster above her, she reached up at him, growling. Lancaster's face was not far from hers. Turned upside down, her snarling lips were at the top. They still had that puffed out pout, the mouth which had once smiled, chatted, and laughed. The face still had the echo of someone beautiful, now turned into this beast with hate-filled wrinkles at the eyes and mouth, whose teeth were filled with blood.

The monster suddenly got wise and ran past Lancaster, twirling up the spiral staircase and arriving just above him. She reached down and her claw-hand grasped one of his boots. Unaware what was happening until it was too late, Lancaster lifted his other foot to run, and found himself dangling at her mercy. She yanked him away from the stairs so he couldn't reach them. He had gotten so close. The top of the staircase was only ten meters or so. This made it all the worse now that the ground was a long way down. Lancaster could just see the spikes far below; the rotted remains of the other man who had fallen to his doom. He was caught between the beast who would tear him up above, and death by spikes far below. There was nothing for it but to learn how he would die.

The clone roared its victorious cry, and reached to rip him apart. Then another roar interrupted the dark. The boom of Little Jack's pistol, followed by the crash into the monster's body. It shuddered, stunned. Now Lancaster realized another problem. If clone fell over the side, he would fall as well and be just as dead. He swung one of his feet toward the stairs.

Another boom from Little Jack's gun. He was using the cannon, firing larger shots. It was overkill, but he didn't want to take a chance to not kill this creature. The shot did not glance this time, as it did the last. This time it went full force into her back, tearing open her skin and breaking the spine in half. She screamed a terrible, sad scream, the sort that reminded one of what she had once been, the helpless cry of someone in distress.

Lancaster cringed at it as he leaped upside down toward the stairs. He stretched his leg out as far as it would go, pointing his feet, reaching his toes to get every millimeter. There would be only one chance at this.

And it touched, first one foot, then the other. His body swung forward, and he grasped the stairs. Holding tight, he panted heavily.

Far below, he heard a squashing thud. It was over. He looked up at Little Jack, who was calmly putting his pistol away and walking down the stairs for him.

As his partner helped him back onto the stairs, Lancaster told him the bad news, that they were not likely to get paid since their employer was in pieces far below.

"You think I wasted all the time you were down there?" Little Jack said, half insulted. Finally upright, Lancaster looked at him confused. "I hacked their system. We got paid, all right."

Lancaster remained on the stairs, staring at Little Jack uncertainly.

"Why do you think you keep me around, anyway? Just to fight off she-devils?" Little Jack turned away and walked back to the ship. If Lancaster didn't want to trust him, that was his problem. He did business the way he saw fit.

The End