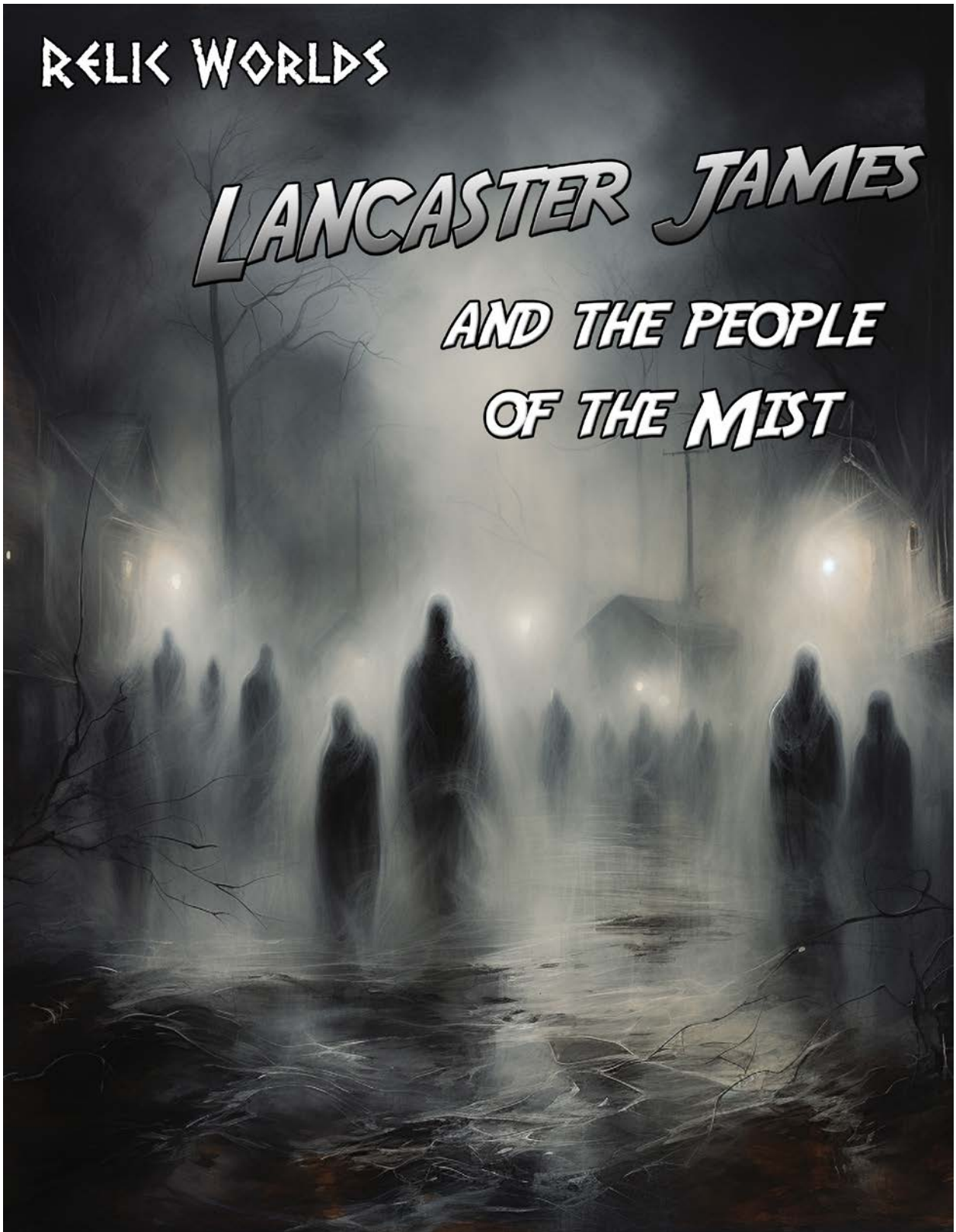


RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE PEOPLE
OF THE MIST*



The still silence that had sat undisturbed for millennia save for the occasional moaning howls of shifting wind was broken by the footfalls of an approaching figure through the thick muck of mist. His shadow faded slowly into view like a sea creature drifting through the ocean depths, taking on details as he neared. The many pockets on his jacket took form and segregated themselves from the strap of his bag slung over his shoulder. His face refused to reveal most of its features, taking shelter under the long brim of the hat above. Yet somehow, the figure's eyes were visible; their outlining eyebrows and cheekbones revealing a man studying his hazy surroundings.

Lancaster James had come to this place based on information he had gathered from ancient ruins on another planet. This had been the last hideout of the Digu, a civilization that had once thrived across myriad worlds, but had been hunted into extinction. Now this was all that was left of them; these hovels whose empty, dark eye socket windows seemed to all be staring at him at once. Occasional wafts of fog congealed within as if to form dim pupils before fading away within their deep voids.

Though the Digu had been an interplanetary species, they had not spread out as far as many other civilizations of their age and caliber. They preferred to focus on the worlds on which they lived, building upon their technological advancements rather than expanding and exploring. This made their worlds, primarily covered in cities that were marvels to behold. Although this one was so covered in precipitation that it was hard to study much of it at any given time.

It seemed that this ever-present mist had saved the structures from destruction. The blanket of gray and black covered all signs of intelligent design. Even electrical signals had difficulty getting through due to static interference within the fog. Lancaster himself had only learned of this location from other sources.

And so was left the largest question; why had the Digu on this world gone extinct if their hunters could not find them, and had clearly never attacked this world? Where had they gone?

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise from inside one of the buildings. He considered that it could be the wind, but there was too much complexity in its cadence; like a group of words sung slowly and played backward through an oversized instrument. He considered the possibility that it was his imagination. But the noise lingered too long for his mind to be playing it as a trick. So he hurried through the gaping maw of a doorway, ducking his head to go through. The Digu were just over half as tall as humans, and so everything within their walls were miniaturized, and Lancaster had to keep his knees bent and his neck crooked.

The stone and perma-plastic compositions had held the architecture together over the millennia, but much of the interior decor had decomposed over time. What few shelves remained were fragile dust which fell apart when the vibration of footsteps came near; and they puffed into the air like fading gray fireworks as they dissolved into the haze.

Lancaster now had his Illuminator out, turning it every which way to locate the source of the sound. Finding nothing but thousands of small particles now drifting in the air, he shifted the device to other ranges along the spectrum, twisting it first toward ultraviolet. Though the deep purple-blue light provided a more chilling atmosphere, it furnished no results. Lancaster was turning it the other way to pick up infrared when he heard the noise again, though this time it sounded like different words. They were coming from above him, somewhere up the stairs.

Lancaster was now legitimately feeling fear, or at least anxiety. He went to the stairwell, which was more like a steep ramp with notches every few inches. The next floor was not very

high, so Lancaster stuck a toe in one of the ramp notches and hopped up to grab the second level floor, which he used to pull himself up.

Dim blue light worked its way through the fog in the room from the window on the opposite end. Some of it outlined one side of a figure standing near the wall. Lancaster grabbed his Illuminator and shone it toward the silhouette. All he could see was the writhing fog just in front of him, bright and blinding as if throwing the light back at his eyes. Lancaster adjusted his device to be more directional, and it cut further through the clouds; but it found no person, nor any living being. He switched through the various light spectrums, assuming he'd at least get a heat signature in infrared, but there was nothing.

Scanning the room, he found there were bed-like platforms lined across each side whose molecular forms had survived the ages. He approached one of them, running the light of the Illuminator across it. A crusty plastic covering still remained over the top. Lancaster placed the Illuminator on a thick counter that still remained sitting between the beds. He waited a moment to make sure the counter wouldn't fall into dust, then he reached for the top of the plastic covering on the bed and pulled it down, revealing what was beneath. It was a long puddle of oil; the remains of what was once a thinking person millions of years ago. Beneath it, a faint indentation revealed the fossilized imprint of this Digu's bones.

Lancaster looked about the room, at the coverings over all of what he assumed were beds. One theory held that the Digu had been hit with a terrible plague that wiped most of them out. Whether the disease was forced on them by their hunters or it happened naturally hardly mattered; no amount of their great technology was able to save them.

Lancaster stepped reverently through the room toward the point where he thought he had seen a silhouette. Nothing was there. But out the window was a short, dark figure staring directly at him. Though it was the size of a Digu, its features were dull and did not fit the salamander-like appearance of the ancient race. They had been able to shape shift to a limited degree, but this looked more like an un-detailed drawing or a bad 3D rendering of a creature. Its face was like muddled clay with four sunken points where eyes should have been. It stood just outside the door of a building across the street, staring up at Lancaster like it had been waiting for him to arrive.

"Hello!" Lancaster called. It was a lame attempt at communicating with an alien being who may not even recognize the same use of a mouth to speak, but he wanted to act fast before it could disappear.

Its attention remained on him, but a moment later a plume of gray wind blew before it, obscuring the creature. It seemed to move behind this dark curtain for a moment; but when the misty veil lifted, the figure was nowhere to be seen.

The front door of the building the Digu had been next to had also been covered by the shifting fog, so Lancaster made the assumption that the person he had seen had run inside. He quickly jumped out the window, landing not too far beneath on the ground. He B-lined for the door across the street and peered inside, his Illuminator stretched out before him splashing out a cone of light.

Nothing, save for the ever-present swirling fog, another thick, square counter like the ones he'd seen by a few of the beds, and another ladder-like stairway. Lancaster wasted no time, rushing for the ladder-stairs and attempting to scramble up them. He slid down a couple times when his feet couldn't find the footholds, so he jumped for the second level floor again and pulled himself up.

With no beds this time, the chamber looked empty, save for the dusty remains of furniture, some brittle decorations ready to dissolve at the first touch, and a couple of the squat, square counters. Atop one of these counters sat a granite statuette that resembled a skull. After shivering a moment from the chilling feeling that'd been running up his spine, Lancaster stepped toward the item to take a closer look. None of his studies of the Digu had ever described anything like this.

The item indeed resembled a Digu skull, though only the top half; and its eyes were merely flat surfaces with small, star-like symbols that had elongated tops in the middle of them. When he grabbed the skull, it felt light enough to hold, though solid. Time had not deteriorated it one bit, and that made it something worth looking over at the museum.

A thump on the wood behind him made Lancaster jump for cover behind the counter. Standing at the doorway was a short figure adorned in all black whose face was nearly fully covered in round, white spectacles. It was his partner Little Jack. "The damage we took coming in is patched up and Odin's Revenge is ready to take off," the man said.

"Have you seen floating figures or heard moaning noises?" Lancaster asked.

Little Jack hesitated a moment before answering, "I'm getting rid of the whiskey."

"So that's a no?"

"The place does give me the creeps," he said. Then, noticing the skull statue he said, "Case in point. But no, no ghosts."

Lancaster gestured toward the small statuette. "To add to its pleasant appearance, the carvings in its eyes are the Digu symbol for the afterlife."

"That's pleasant," Little Jack said. "And... come to think on it, my glasses did go tulko and rip on the way over here."

"You saw forms that weren't there?" Lancaster asked.

"Let's not go crazy. But they kept turning on their own, and it seemed like dark forms were floating up and down the street. I assume it's just the fog."

"I don't know," Lancaster said, considering.

"You want to take that with you?" Little Jack asked.

Lancaster suddenly realized he was leaning on the counter and shifting the skull piece in his hands. "Oh... Yeah. Yeah, we should study this." Taking it with him, Lancaster headed for the stairs. "Let's look a few more places and..."

An omnipresent horn blew, like the sound of a fog horn trapped in an echo chamber. It began on one side of the pair and drifted past them, fading away into the distance. Lancaster's hair stood up on end, and he looked at his partner. "You hear that one?" he asked more sarcastically this time.

"Who did you anger this time?" Little Jack asked.

"Let's look one more place, and then we'll go," Lancaster suggested.

"You're the boss," Little Jack said, following Lancaster down the stairs and outside.

Traveling along the street, Little Jack was now more aware of what he was seeing. What he had blown off before as optical illusions, he now recognized as apparitions, or at least anomalies. One moment he would see the mist slowly roiling past as it had since they arrived, then suddenly the image in the glasses jostled and the view became darker, more abstract. Clumps of fog now seemed to be moving independent of their surroundings, and one part near the front which looked like a cloaked head turned to look at the two walking men before it turned and traveled a different direction.

Little Jack stopped to watch one of these clouds go and spotted others in the distance that it seemed to be joining. Then his glasses returned to normal.

"You see something?" Lancaster asked.

"Not important," Little Jack said, his voice more shaken than it'd been on any of their travels.

Lancaster now kept an eye on his partner as they entered the tallest building in the town. It appeared to be a tower with perhaps antennae at the top. Lancaster scanned the area with his Illuminator, finding the passage that would lead them to the stairs. Again, dust lined the floors save for a few pieces of furniture made with materials that lasted the ages, though most broke down to dust when the vibrations of their footfalls shook their foundations.

As they moved deeper into the bowels of the building, Little Jack froze. Lancaster saw him staring at the doorway through which they had entered. "You see something?" Lancaster asked. He shined the Illuminator in that direction, but nothing was there except for a buildup of mist.

This buildup, seen through Little Jack's adjusted glasses, formed the shape of a large person, or perhaps a beast. Its body twisted like a forming tornado. Its head looked like a perpetually melting skull of wax. Its mouth dropped open to the side like a broken jaw with tiny bolts of lightning striking inside, and its one eye was a rolling vortex dropping into oblivion. Little Jack's hair stood on end, an experience he was not used to.

"Jack?" Lancaster asked. His voice seemed far away, though clearly right next to him.

Then the apparition drifted apart, floating beyond the door, and Little Jack was free of the fear that had gripped him. Back to normal, he turned to his partner and said, "You didn't see it."

"Something over there?" Lancaster asked.

"Get your work done and let's leave."

"Starting to believe in ghosts?" Lancaster teased.

"Get it done!" Little Jack snapped.

Lancaster recognized the change in his tone, and hurried to finish what he was doing. He found their way up a couple levels and soon came upon another boxy counter like the ones he had seen in the other rooms. This one had another Digu-like skull on the ground next to it surrounded by ash. Bearing in mind that objects that were made to last this long typically had important meaning, Lancaster approached it.

He scratched his chin as he studied the short, thick piece of furniture. Little Jack looked it over as well. "It's out of focus," he said.

"What do you mean?" Lancaster asked.

"I mean there's something about this that's interfering with the sensors in my glasses. The other one did the same thing, but I thought that was just the fog tinkering with my mind again."

Lancaster ran his hands along the box, feeling its plastic surface. His forefinger suddenly felt a latch mechanism. He pressed, feeling a button go into the machine, and the door clicked open just enough to let out a long breath of ancient air that blew past the two men. Behind them, as if answering the escaping wind, they heard a distant, low moan. But whether natural or artificial, they could not tell.

Lancaster gently pulled open the door, revealing a web of mechanical and electronic parts. With no dust nor deterioration, the machine was perfectly preserved. Lancaster's eyes widened in amazement. Little Jack, who was seldom impressed, circled the machine, looking over every part of it. "Isn't it amazing?" Lancaster asked.

"There's no electrical outlet," Little Jack said.

"What sort of battery would last millions of years?" Lancaster asked.

Little Jack looked closer at the machine. Being alien parts, he couldn't tell at a glance what parts did what. However, studying the way they interacted, he got a sense of their purposes. "There is no battery," he said. "No storage device either. This is a computer without a hard drive."

"So everything programmed into it..." Lancaster started.

"Has to be stored outside of it," Little Jack concluded. "But there's nowhere to plug a storage device into it either."

Lancaster fixated on a few small devices that he recognized as Digu transceivers. Then he said, "Unless they're transmitting the data somewhere."

"Like a cloud," Little Jack said.

"Yes, like a cloud," Lancaster said, eyeing the mist around them.

"Cloud is just an expression," Little Jack said.

"Is it, though?" Lancaster said, grabbing the granite skull. "For them, I mean. Could they have..." Lancaster trailed off, holding up the skull and looking underneath. Hollowed out from the bottom, it would fit a small sized head with the eyes fitting like goggles on its wearer. There, four scanners pointed inward, and electronics that resembled what was inside the machine branched out over the interior of the helmet. Several probes pointed down toward whatever head would be placed inside. "Here, put this on," Lancaster said, holding the skull toward Little Jack.

"No."

"It's a perfect fit for you."

"Get that thing away from me."

"It's for science!"

"Go carn yourself!"

"Fine. But I think I know what the ghosts are," Lancaster said.

Little Jack stared at Lancaster with his usual expression that showed he was listening, so Lancaster continued, "It's them. The last survivors of the Digu. Or, a computer clone at least." Little Jack could see some of the plume spirits drifting by, their movements not dictated by the wind, but altering directions like a conscious being. He adjusted his glasses to see digital representations better as Lancaster continued, "They uploaded who they were as a last case effort to preserve something of their species." Little Jack completed his adjustment and the ghostly visage of another world faded into view. It was vague and distant and hard to see, but it was unmistakably there, like a virtual universe of digital reality. The beings who inhabited it took many shapes, tall and short, flying, aquatic, whatever they wanted; but all retained some element of their original Digu form.

And then he saw something else that was unmistakable. Some of the shapes were merging together; and as they did, the mists of the air grew dark and ominous. Even Lancaster could see this without the benefit of Spectrum Glasses. The black cloud was swirling, and roiling with thunder. "Time to go?" Lancaster asked.

"It's their anti-virus," Little Jack answered, "And we're the virus."

The two men rushed for the stairs, jumping down a level. They started for the next flight, which was across the room, and the thick cloud dropped through the ceiling, blocking their path. "This way!" Lancaster shouted, and they rushed for the windows. The cloud took chase.

Lancaster reached the window and without hesitation planted his feet on the bottom ledge and jumped as far as he could go. Little Jack slowed a little, but soon saw where Lancaster was going and jumped as well. They both landed on the roof of the next door building, which

Lancaster had noticed was nearby when they entered. Right now they had little time. The cloud came through the wall, and as it traveled through the air it gathered more vapor from the air, building its mass and its power.

The two men ran. Little Jack fired at the cloud as they went, but to no avail. The shots went through and blasted away chunks of buildings. They jumped off the end of the building and rolled across the ground. Electrical discharges coursed through the air at the two humans like miniature lightning bolts and shocked them. They stumbled but kept going.

Up ahead, other forms were swirling, merging together. The wind was picking up all around them, blowing Lancaster's hat off of his head. Here and there the air swirled in the form of miniature tornadoes.

They dodged around the dark plumes as the large one gained ground behind them. One of the smaller ones slammed into Lancaster. He spun in the air and fell to the ground. Little Jack was desperate. He drew his two pistols Huginn and Muninn, and he spun the cartridge to high voltage. Unsure whether it would work or cause the entire area to explode, Little Jack fired into the swirling mass that had knocked down his partner. The cloud seemed to overload with electricity and it veered away.

Emboldened, Little Jack fired Muninn at the larger cloud gaining on them. It flashed with several bright lights, followed by a loud crack of thunder which hurt the men's ears, but it slowed.

Seeing this, Lancaster got to his feet and continued running. He reached into his utility belt and grabbed a group of small globes he rarely used.

No sooner had he pulled them out than Little Jack was ambushed from the side, knocked over by a sudden strong gust of wind that felt like a giant fist. Lancaster tossed one of the marbles he had pulled out. It flared up as it hit the ground, then shot up a bolt of electricity which stunned the wind fist that had just taken down his partner. The flares were meant for signaling ships by attracting the attention of sensors searching for power sources; but this seemed equally useful.

Scrambling to his feet, Little Jack fired both his guns behind them without looking. He knew the cloud was large enough now that he hardly had to aim; and he knew that even if he did miss, their pursuers were literally all around them.

Luckily, the ship was not far away, and they closed the distance in record time. Lancaster tossed a couple more of the flares in front of the door, which cleared the path, but also caused the lights on board to blink.

"Don't damage the ship's electronics!" Little Jack shouted.

"Wilco!" Lancaster said, still holding on to a handful of his marble flares.

Little Jack opened the door just enough for them to jump in, and he immediately began closing it. He then started for the cockpit, but Lancaster didn't follow. Little Jack had most of the controls turned on when he noticed his partner wasn't with him. He looked back and saw Lancaster still at the door looking back at him.

"You ready?" Lancaster asked.

"What the hades are you doing?" Little Jack shouted.

"Looks like you are." Lancaster said and he started to open the door.

Little Jack shook with anger, but there wasn't time. "I'm taking off!" He started to lift up the ship, but it began to shiver. The lights blinked on and off, his alarms sounded all at once, and the vessel began to sink back to the ground.

The door had opened enough now that Lancaster was able to toss out the marbles. They all got caught up in the swirling wind outside and flew around the ship. One by one they began to ignite, each one tossing out short bursts of electricity. The sky lit up with bright flashes, and soon the wind steadied.

"Punch it!" Lancaster shouted.

Little Jack reset everything, and turned the thrusters on full power, lifting off at emergency speed from the planet. The short pilot did not breathe easy until they had cleared the cloud cover, and were above the weather.

Lancaster slumped down into his seat in the cockpit; just behind and to the right of Little Jack. He wasn't looking at his partner, nor the stars of the cosmos outside. He was staring at the granite skull; the helmet, in his hands. It had been a gateway to a world he would never know. Not even the Digu knew it. The world they had made was populated with their clones; a representation of who they had been, one that had likely even evolved over time and would continue to. But it would always be a virtual one.

The End