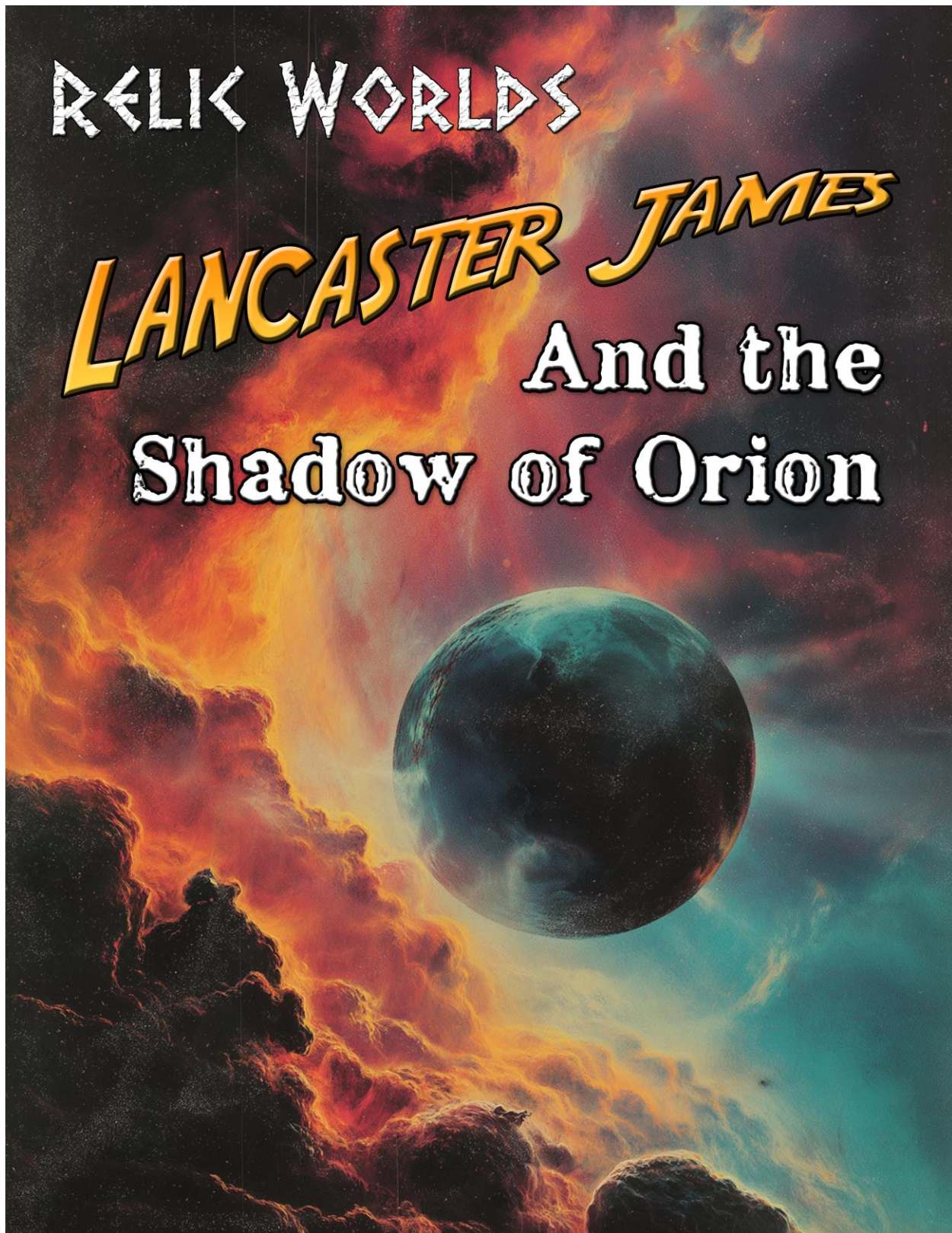


RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

And the
Shadow of Orion



The vessel shook with every flash of light. Lancaster James could see the swirling colors out the line of small windows, the only visibility allowed to the passengers of the drop-carrier. It was better they not see where they were going; the military preferred its personnel to simply trust their commanders and follow orders. More importantly, most of the locations they dropped into looked so bad that they might not like the look of where they were going. It was more important the marines rush out fearlessly when they landed having no trepidation over what was outside.

But Lancaster James and his partner Little Jack were not marines. They were used to flying from planet to planet, even landing on dangerous ones with strange atmospheres. What they were not used to was giving up their control to a commander. Lancaster was surprised to see his friend's hands clenched tightly to the arm rests, his knuckles white with fear, and his face set tightly. His eyes were hidden, as usual, behind the opaque whiteness of his glasses. They fed Little Jack data and information continuously, but more importantly, they hid his emotions, a trait most valuable to him at this moment.

Lancaster had never seen Little Jack like this. He was usually the steady one that Lancaster turned toward to pretend everything was all right. The fact that he was so unhinged rattled Lancaster even more than the shaking of the ship.

In truth, the problem was that Little Jack simply wasn't in control. As long as he was doing the flying, he had no problem, but as soon as it was left to someone else, he wasn't comfortable.

It had been a deal breaker, though. This was the only way that the Takawa Corporation would allow them on the planet. Their representative had approached Lancaster, asking to hire him to help investigate the disappearance of an outpost. He could be of aid because of his experience with alien ruins on uncharted planets, and this outpost had been built on such ruins. Lancaster could help them understand what happened to the crew of the outpost while he meanwhile searched it for his own interests. But they insisted that he had to drop onto the planet with their marines. If he refused, they would hire someone else, and Lancaster needed the money.

Little Jack was not pleased about having to travel with a group which had a chain of command. He had a disdain for authority, but he recognized the need for an income even more than Lancaster. Their fuel bills had run them dry, and they were almost done being able to fly. And so they held onto their seats while the capsule shook violently.

The marines were strapped into chairs in circles with one ring above another. The ten strapped in above Lancaster and Little Jack were laughing. Lancaster heard one of them say, "I know people who'll pay to have this ride!" and another screamed like he was in an amusement park. This calmed Lancaster's nerves a bit. It couldn't be so bad if these experienced soldiers were used to it.

Then a loud bang sounded off to one side. All heads shot in that direction, expecting to see a breach in the wall, and perhaps to be enveloped in flames, but nothing like that occurred. Instead, they saw a yellow flash and golden sparks rush by the windows. A couple of the marines groaned, aware what it was before everyone else could see. The second drop-carrier passed by the row of windows. It was rolling, out of control. A small fire was struggling against the heavy winds that alternately fed it and kept it from spreading.

Lancaster knew what a disaster this could be. Not only were the marines on that vessel friends of those inside their own, it was the primary drop-carrier, carrying forty individuals, the core of the landing party. If whatever had made the researchers disappear was at all strong, they may not be able to overpower it with the marines who were left.

The other drop-carrier shook in the air, thrown about like a toy, and tumbled toward their ship. Apparently, the pilot knew it was coming, and swerved out of the way as the metal craft tumbled by them like a drunkard giving in to its intoxication.

Little Jack tensed every muscle, another first for Lancaster to witness. After the craft was past, Little Jack muttered to him, "Sporting planet, Lancaster. Want to open a bed and breakfast?"

Lancaster smiled politely, but he was only a heartbeat away from panicking as he looked over at their formerly laughing hosts and how they now stretched to peer toward the slot of windows for a sign of the other ship.

They were landing on M8436-C, the outermost world of a small star not far inside the Orion Nebula. It had been detected from one of Takawa's R&D centers on Aria, a planet in a solar system just outside the nebula. Aria itself was primarily a tourist destination for people wanting a close-up view of the nebula known as The Great Creator, and was not a very good location for building up further research. But landing a team on one of the planets that was just inside the nebula would be perfect. From there they could study the nebula, and see what living conditions were like when surrounded by a giant cloud of gas. It had been only a few weeks before the entire team disappeared.

Lancaster felt his seat rise up into him as he heard the roar of the thrusters below. The ship was slowing its decent, but not by much, it seemed. He wondered how far they still had yet to go, and was answered by a thudding halt that shivered through the ship and his body.

A moment later, the walls opened up, and the floor dropped out. All that remained behind him was a shallow wall and the backs of the chairs which stuck up over the passengers. It looked like the tower of a castle wall, which was the intent. In one motion, the marines unfastened themselves from their seats, spun round and kneeled, their guns ready to defend their position. While half of them covered the area around the entire circumference of the ship, the other half slid down poles in the interior, landing at the bottom where they quickly took positions and spread out into the rocky planetscape.

Lancaster was slower to get up. By the time he was turned around in his seat to peek up over it, Little Jack was knelt down and ready similarly, but not exactly like the marines. His posture was more loose. His legs were not tight to the ground like the marines' were. His knees were still bent, ready to spring, his feet still prepared to push off. Only one hand clutched his gun. The other was on the chair, like a third foot ready to push off or help maneuver. Little Jack was used to fighting alone.

Lancaster opened the compartment in the armrest and pulled out his hat, which he placed snugly on his head, yanking last at the tip to bring it down slightly in the front. Little Jack eyed him with his subtle disapproving glance. "Why are you even getting that out?" he asked. "You're just going to lose it."

"I'm going to keep this one," Lancaster said.

"What do you mean, keep it? You never keep your hats."

"This one I like. I'm determined not to lose it."

Little Jack stared at him a moment longer, another sign of disapproval, then looked out at the marines.

They had secured the position. Lancaster and Little Jack climbed over the side and shimmied down the outer ladders. A gentle slope led to the ruins of some stone structures that surrounded an intact metal building. Lancaster could immediately identify the stonework as Sigueran, and the metal building was obviously the human outpost.

But the marines were not heading that way. Several kept close eyes in that direction in case something should come at them from the structures, but the majority of them, including their commander, walked the opposite direction, toward the wreckage of the other drop-carrier. To Lancaster's surprise, it was not entirely flattened or destroyed. The vessel had cracked open and was lying on its side, but much of the structure's integrity was intact. Apparently the landing thrusters had managed to fire and it had slowed just enough to save it from annihilation.

The occupants were being carried out on stretchers in a line that looked like blood flowing out of a wound. About a quarter of the marines inside were dead, and most of the others were too badly injured to go into action. The commander from Lancaster's ship took what few were still healthy enough to maneuver and fight and placed them in his command. Despite this, he did not gain any numbers, as he had to leave his medical team behind to take care of the wounded of the second ship. There would be only 25 of them searching for the missing researchers.

They would be in five teams, the command team known as Gold. The other four were Steel, Bronze, Iron, and Quartz. Lancaster and Little Jack were part of Gold, making their total number seven, while the others were made up of five marines each. None seemed concerned with Lancaster or his partner. They marched on, no one looking back to see if the two civilians were keeping up, or checking on them to make sure they understood the orders being sent out. Not even the commander acknowledged their presence. They would be more or less on their own.

Steel led the way up the slope toward the ruins and the outpost. The muted, glowing colors of the dark sky swirled behind the shadowy walls. The wide flashes of lightning strikes outlined the buildings, which stood like specters overlooking their advance.

The teams remained in sight until they reached the ruins, at which time they were broken apart by obstacles. Gold stayed in the center with Steel in front of them. Bronze spread out to the left while Iron took the right, and Quartz ran the perimeter, prepared as everyone's reserve. Each gave regular reports to the command team as they made every discovery.

Though it was a treasure trove for Lancaster to explore, there was little of interest to the marines. They mostly reported their positions. Steel and Bronze entered buildings built by the researchers, while Iron and Quartz were in the rubble of the alien city.

Gold followed Iron inside. The foyer chamber was empty; the weather closet where various types of clothes to change into were placed on hangers and in drawers sat to one side while shelves of tools lined the other.

Gold took the time to look these over. There was no obvious sign of damage, but something seemed out of place to the commander, who was used to rigid placement of gear and equipment.

Lancaster soon discovered what was troubling the commander. Observing one of the coats closely, he saw shredding at the hems, as though something had bit into it and tried to drag it out of its closet. One of the equipment drawers was partly open, and, while most of the equipment was laid out in a neat line, categorized and easy to get to, several near one side were strewn carelessly about, like they had been pulled up and dropped again. Opening the other drawers, Lancaster could see that everything else was in order. Something had come in here and explored around with its mouth, but had left without doing any real damage.

Lancaster pointed this out to the commander, and the commander sent out an alert to the other teams: "Bring in the net a little bit. Consolidate on my position."

The others acknowledged and began readjusting.

That's when they got the call from Steel. "We found a body."

"Confirm that? You have located a body?"

"Well, not a body per se."

“What do you mean, per se? Is it a body or not?”

“More like a body part.”

Lancaster winced. He expected he would see blood spewed all over the room; for a trail to go in or out the door, and pieces of muscle, skin, and bone to be thrown about recklessly. He prepared himself for the worst.

And when they entered the chamber, they did see pieces strewn about, but not the blood. Though several chunks lay spread across the room, only small patches of blackish red rested beneath them. Nothing sprayed on the wall, and there was no trail going in and out the door.

The chunks themselves were hard to identify. Lancaster couldn't tell what parts of the body they were from, but he could see teeth marks in them.

“I want every team to report in immediately,” the marine commander ordered.

Steel was in sight of them, just entering the next room, so the team leader merely waved at him.

Bronze reported in from the other research building they had seen. They were following a corridor that led further into the former alien ruins and apparently would connect with the other building.

Quartz reported from the ruins. They had swung out to the right along the edge of the former alien settlement and had now entered it, coming back closer to the rest of the group to consolidate.

It was silent for a short time while the command team caught up with Steel at the edge of the building they were in. They had found an open door to the ruins, and were investigating it. The commander suddenly realized he hadn't heard from one of the teams. “Iron, report in.” No response. “Team Iron, report your position.” Silence. “Quartz, do you see Iron?”

Silence. Then: “Negative.”

“You should be on top of their last known position.”

“We saw them a little earlier. They were moving forward pretty fast.”

Lancaster heard the commander mutter under his breath, “Damn Chang, always outrunning the other teams.” He then got onto the communications again. “All right, now we have bodies and our own squad to search for. Everyone stay close and report anything suspicious, understand?”

They all responded affirmative... all but Iron.

Lancaster and the command team stepped across the rubble strewn street, rocks and stones crunching under their feet. The old walls curved as Sigueran architecture often did, resembling the natural boulders which surrounded the ancient town. The surest sign of Sigueran structures was the twists and angles that were usually only found in nature. Many were often overlooked for decades because they blended in so well with their surroundings. Their colors, too, matched well to the environment.

One building they almost passed remained intact; a structure which resembled an unbloomed flower bud with sharp angles at the top, as though it was pointing into the sky. There were only two gaps in the building, a small hole which had opened up with erosion near the top, and a doorway, which remained open. “We should check in there,” Lancaster suggested.

“Don't have time,” the commander responded.

“Isn't this close to where Iron disappeared?” Lancaster asked, manipulating the commander's sense of duty. The commander considered, then directed Gold Team into the building. Once it was secured, they waved Lancaster and Little Jack inside.

The beams from the flashlights cut through the dust-filled air to reach the crusted over floor and rounded walls of the oval room. Underneath the dotted layer of particles, a shiny surface reflected back.

On the floor was a written design that looked vaguely familiar. Lancaster scraped at the crust with his feet, brushing some aside. It looked like a map. When he had cleared away enough, he realized why it looked familiar, it was where they were, a map of the ruins. The Takawa representative had shown him a satellite picture of the area before they went, and he had seen a rough overview of the ancient town. It had a central hub with spokes heading out of it in each direction. They were on the outer edge of one of those spokes.

On the walls, multiple thin lines stretched horizontally across a couple meters before breaking for another meter or so, only to start again. There were perhaps thirty or more of these lines in each section stacked in layers that reached from the floor to three quarters of the way to the ceiling. Lancaster noticed that they would all be in reach of a Sigueran, which were one and a half times the size of humans.

Lancaster approached one of the walls at a smooth portion where the lines took a break and studied the original surface. He pulled out a small container of tools from one of the many inner pockets of his jacket. He took from the container a small scraper, about the size of his hand, and he carefully scraped the crust from the wall. Beneath he found the confirmation of his suspicion; he found Sigueran writing. It had a flowing nature to it, almost like a painting, with strokes falling away from small designs, crossing lines that were then dotted with round and rectangular dots.

He had learned to understand the basic gist of what Siguerans were saying, though Lancaster could not say that he could “read” Sigueran writing; at least not the writing of the surface dwellers. Another branch of the Siguerans, the subterranean ones, had a simpler language that was always raised from the surface, which made it easier to find. But this was not the subterranean version. This was complex writing, made all the more difficult as it was made by the higher order, probably even royalty.

Lancaster didn't take the time to try to decode it. The marines would never have the patience. But he wanted to at least know what this room was used for. He scanned the wall, his eyes searching beyond the crust at whatever writing he could find, until they landed on something familiar; a circle with two designs, like long fins twirling in a whirlpool, their tips pulled back by the swirl. Within these fins were shimmering dots, perhaps tiny crystals which glowed a bright white when a beam of light was placed directly on them. He knew this design; it was the placement for a key-map, one of which he carried with him. It was a medallion the size of his palm with a layout similar to the one on the wall. The small crystals inside the fins also shimmered, and when activated, they projected colored dots, a star map which led Lancaster to many of the locations he explored.

He had found it on another Sigueran planet. It gave directions to many of the ancient Sigueran planets, and unlocked the most important locations when he arrived at them. This planet, however, was not on his map, and so it was no surprise to him when he pressed his key-map to the wall and nothing happened. That would require another key-map, or the master-key, the one he called the Constellation Crest.

He continued to study the wall, searching for anything else he could find in only a minute or so, but only came upon complex writing and more lines. He found several of the round designs, and he pressed his medallion against them, but to no avail.

“We need to keep moving,” the commander said, and began to round up his staff.

Lancaster moved faster, trying to find something worthwhile.

“You’re under our orders, too, Mr. James,” the commander said, all of his staff now at the door. “It’s time to go.”

Just at that moment, as Lancaster pressed his key-map into a slot, the wall grabbed hold, like a magnet to metal, and a faint blue-green glow emanated from it. The commander stopped talking, but remained slackjawed, and the other marines halted at the door, looking in.

The clicking of a latch sounded inside the wall. Then a thin, metallic fan waved out of one of the lines. A fast series of clicking noises shuddered as the fan took shape in a semi-circle out of the wall. Once it took its completed form, the metallic pieces melded together so it looked like one solid table. It was low to the ground, about knee level, and so Lancaster knelt down to it.

He could see designs and writing underneath the dust, but could not make them out. He wiped a little off, then blew hard, and the dust flew up into a wide cloud. While the others looked away to avoid getting their eyes caked over, Lancaster stuck his neck through the brown mist and peered into what had been hidden. It was a star map, one that revealed several important locations.

In one spot was a design of a box with an almost completed circle inside it, and a line reaching out from the center. The line connected to another almost completed circle out of which was drawn the Sigueran symbol for “Danger”.

At another point, a red line began at a star and jutted out another direction. Red was an important color for the Siguerans, and often meant a major discovery, plus it was placed near a central point of the map, so Lancaster believed it to be worth following.

The line led to dots representing stars and planets, which led to other lines, pointing the direction for Lancaster to follow.

The path led beneath the dust, and so he blew again, this time harder. His stream of air followed the path, kicking up dust before it until it led him to a single star, and a planet around it. There was Sigueran writing beside it, something he could not fully interpret, but he got enough of the concept to get its meaning. It spoke of a betrayal. And what was particularly interesting, the planet itself had drawn into it the design of what he believed to be the Constellation Crest. He had been on the trail of this master key-map for two years now, and he had learned the signs. This key-map would open up the universe of the Siguerans, showing him everywhere they went, why they destroyed everything in their path, and possibly where their entire race disappeared to.

Lancaster pulled from another pocket his Universalis Sextant, a device that compared coordinates both written and in the sky with its database and told him where the location was. He found that it was a planet humans called Vallouris. He’d have to try that place next, but for the time being, he had a lot to study in this building.

Suddenly a loud scream escaped from the communicator on the commander’s armored suit. He and the other marines sprang into action; not by choice, but by conditioning, like a muscle that flexes in reaction to another part of the body being hit.

“What passed?” the commander called into the comm. as he headed out the door. His men led the way, and Little Jack followed. Lancaster grudgingly snatched his medallion from the wall and followed along.

“Under attack! Dogs!” came the voice of Steel’s team leader.

“On our way!” the commander said quickly. “All teams, converge on Steel! Weapons ready!”

Everyone acknowledged, and they weaved around the walls of the ruins until they came to an open door of the research center. To the right, chaos was abounding with the marines flailing at four legged beasts which were clung to their torsos, heads, and legs, clawing and biting at their armor, snarling and screaming in turn. Some of the animals had been thrown off the marines and

were being shot at by others, but they moved with unnatural speed, practically disappearing into a blur only to reappear a couple meters away.

The other marines raced into action, using the butts of their guns to knock the dogs off their friends. Little Jack spun the barrel of his pistol until it reached the stun cartridge, and he fired it at the dogs. If he hit the marines, they would merely be knocked down.

Lancaster stayed back, away from the carnage, noticing the corpses of several researchers in a heap closer to the door. Again, their bodies were torn, some pieces pulled away from others, so it was clearly the dogs who did the damage, but there was something strange once again. Though a shallow puddle of blood clung to the ground below the remains, there was far less than one would expect.

Another quick movement caught his attention from the area of the melee. Several smaller dogs which had been hiding in a corner sped by between Lancaster and the marines. They moved so quickly they were little more than a blur. One stopped long enough to look over at Lancaster and snarl at him. Lancaster was certain he was about to be attacked. His heart froze and every muscle tensed, trying to be ready for a fight, and the terrible pain that would come with claws and teeth. But the pup hesitated. It looked fiercely at Lancaster, but it didn't lunge at him. They stared at each other a moment, and Lancaster got a look at its teeth. They were dull and flat, much like a human's, with two sharp teeth close to the front. There was something familiar about the animal, as though he had seen it before, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Then the dog followed the others in a haze of speed.

Then, as though cued by the pups, the other dogs leaped off the marines and charged the door. The marines turned, raised their guns and fired. Most of the dogs were too fast for them. One of the rear dogs was hit and came out of its blur, sliding across the floor, its orange blood smearing behind it. Little Jack stunned another, and as it tumbled end over end, one of the marines shot it dead.

Outside, they heard a flurry of rapid shots; one of the other teams had been surprised by the river of blurred dogs. The commander went to the door and saw the flag attached to the back of the team leader's armor identifying them as the Quartz Team.

"Bronze team, what's your 60?" the commander said into his comm. There was no response. He repeated the question, and still no response. He ordered them to come to him, and they waited, but no one arrived, and no one spoke.

"The bastard dogs killed them!" one of the marines said. "They probably killed Iron, too!"

The others agreed, and they fed off each other's rage, building up into the mentality of an angry mob.

Little Jack walked away from the scene to see what Lancaster was up to. He was studying the human corpses. There was something odd about them.

"Find any good loot?" Little Jack asked. The crowds he used to run around with wouldn't leave without some sort of profit off the dead.

Lancaster barely acknowledged Little Jack. He was deep in thought. "No," he said. "Jack, you've seen more dead bodies than I have. Is there something odd about this?"

Little Jack crouched down, looking them over. Though he showed little emotion in his face, his stillness said he was now in as deep of thought as Lancaster, confused by what he was seeing. He lifted his head, studying the walls.

"No blood," Lancaster said.

"No," said Little Jack.

"There should be more," said Lancaster.

“Yes,” said Little Jack. And he looked back at the bodies.

Outside, the marines were working out their plan. The commander had finally calmed the others down and made his decision. Teams Gold and Steel would go after the dogs while Team Quartz searched for the other two missing teams to see if they could find them, dead or alive. They agreed and split up.

Steel Team’s ranger stepped forward and a monocle rose out of his suit. He looked through it at the ground, and it fed him information about the tracks. He locked onto them, and led the way.

Lancaster and Little Jack didn’t move; they were enthralled by the mystery of the bodies. Lancaster looked away a moment, glancing at the area of the melee. The room had an alcove to the side where the dogs had evidently been discovered. They had been trapped there, and clearly had wanted to escape. He doubted that they were vicious, but why come in and attack the researchers?

He heard a banging sound from the vicinity of the bodies, like a hammer. He looked over to see Little Jack knocking a severed arm against the floor. “What are you doing?” Lancaster asked, appalled.

“Listen,” Little Jack said, and he knocked it against the floor again. It made a sort of cracking noise, rather than a thumping one would expect from a body.

Still, Lancaster didn’t understand, and he looked confusedly at Little Jack.

“It’s frozen,” Little Jack said, and hit it against the floor again. Lancaster could hear that it sounded like soft wood rather than flesh and muscle.

“Are they fake?” Lancaster asked.

“They’re real,” Little Jack said. “But they were dead before the dogs got them. Somehow froze.”

“How?” Lancaster asked.

Little Jack shrugged his shoulders. “But that’s why they didn’t bleed. They were dead before their skin was punctured.”

Then Lancaster realized why the dog had looked so familiar. They were similar to a breed of dog he had seen before. They were scavengers, not hunters. The teeth were a sure sign; dull, but strong, prepared to break bone, with a couple sharp teeth to tear at the meat. These dogs would eat that which was already dead. This would mean they likely were not attacking the marines so much as they were afraid, and defending their children who were cowering in the corner.

“Come on!” Lancaster said as he leaped to his feet and ran out the door. Little Jack followed.

They hurried down a slope toward an area where the rocks grew to boulders, and the jagged terrain wielded shallow cliff-sides. Lancaster could tell where the others had gone when he heard gunshots go off. He ran in that direction, and soon he heard the yelping of dogs accompanying the sounds of the shots. He was too late, but he kept running.

When he arrived, all the dogs were dead except the pups, which were backed up to a corner. They looked around them, their eyes pleading for mercy, of which the marines had none. They would ask what happened to their friends if the animals could answer, but since they could not, the marines would have to satisfy themselves with vengeance.

Lancaster arrived, sliding on the pebbles. “Stop!” he shouted. “They didn’t kill anybody!”

“Don’t be stupid,” the commander said. “Finish them off.”

“The researchers were dead already!” Lancaster shouted, running in front of the dogs.

“Then what the hades killed them?”

Lancaster didn't have an answer yet, and he hesitated. Suddenly he felt a large, sharp pain in the back of his leg. It began to twist, pulling him down, and he looked to see it was one of the puppies biting him. "I'm trying to save your little lives, you moron," he said to it through his groan.

One of the marines lifted his gun, ready to shoot.

"No," Lancaster moaned toward him, holding up a hand. With the other, he pounded the dog on the head. It shook off the pain and looked up at him, its jaws still around his ankle. Lancaster poked at the eyes, knocking the dog between them, and the animal let go, snarling at him.

The marines all lifted their guns now, ready to fire, and Little Jack's pistol went up, too, but his was pointed at the commander.

"What the hades are you doing?" the commander shouted.

Little Jack motioned his head to the other marines. Astounded at the audacity, the commander looked over at them, then grudgingly ordered, "Lower your weapons."

Surprised, the other marines did as they were told, pointing their guns at the ground. All but one, who lifted his gun quickly and fired at Little Jack. Little Jack fired back, hitting the bolt out of the air, then fired again, hitting the gun out of the marine's hand. They all looked at him impressed and astounded as Little Jack waved his gun toward all of them, shaking his head.

Lancaster turned toward the dogs. All of them looked up at him fearfully, their eyes afraid he might poke them. He shouted suddenly, waving his arms around, and they raced away, turning into blurs and disappearing among the boulders.

The commander looked balefully at Little Jack and said, "You two will be tried later by Takawa. But for now you're in charge. What'll you have us do?" "Let's start by seeing if Quartz found anything," Lancaster said, stepping up next to Little Jack since that seemed like it was the safe place to be. The commander looked defiantly back at them, then pulled up his wrist comm. "Quartz Team, give us your position." No response. "Team Quartz, report in." Nothing. "Brilliant leadership," Little Jack said. "After you've already lost a couple teams, what better move than to divide up your teams again?" "Bronze, Iron, Quartz, respond! Someone respond!" Nothing. "Where was Quartz going?" Lancaster asked. "They weren't going far. We should have heard them if anything happened." "Let's go take a look," Lancaster said, and he motioned for them to lead the way. The commander stared at him a moment, unhappy to be given orders rather than giving them, but he saw the logic as well as the threat, and so he began up the slope, followed by his marines. Lancaster followed along with Little Jack, who lowered his pistol, but had it ready, and his eyes on the marines in case anything should happen. He also kept his glasses set to an alert mode, registering the finer movements of each person to predict whether they would turn on him.

They got onto one of the main Sigueran roads, though it was hard to tell the road from off the road with all the rubble. Not far ahead they could see the central hub from which all the streets led. They were at the back of the outpost now, just beyond where they had built.

"They should be somewhere near here," the commander said, scratching his aged chin, weathered by years of stress and experience. He was no longer paying attention to Little Jack, but worried for his people.

Lancaster was looking up ahead at the central hub; an octagonal plaza that was perhaps once a great meeting place, but now was empty... too empty. As he stared at it, he suddenly realized why it seemed so strange. There was no rubble in it. The cobblestone was completely clear, just as it must have been millions of years ago when Siguerans lived here. Something was not right.

One of the marines spotted something on the other side of the plaza, a body... one of theirs. He recognized the armor of a Takawa marine, and from the color of the ring on the helmet, it was from the Iron Team. He started toward it, saying, "Look over there!"

"Stop," Lancaster said quickly. The marine stopped, and so did all the others. The one who had spotted the marine pointed, and Lancaster saw the body, but for him, it was all the more reason not to let them go. "Stay put," he said.

Lancaster stepped toward the plaza, carefully taking each step. He studied the ground and saw where the rubble ended. Just before he reached the point of change, he knelt down. He could see something written into the road. Lancaster cleared away the debris and brushed away some dirt. Sure enough, there was a design, the same he had seen in the flower bud room. A nearly completed circle sat inside a box with a line sticking out. The line pointed at the plaza.

Everyone was watching Lancaster curiously. They couldn't understand what he was looking at.

He pulled off his hat, stared at the plaza, then threw the hat forward like a Frisbee. As soon as it passed the line of cleared rubble, it disappeared. He heard a couple gasps of astonishment, not easy to do with marines, and he smiled slightly at his achievement. "You had to use your hat?" Little Jack said annoyed.

"B... Th..." Lancaster tried to explain, then gave up. "Yeah, I guess I should have used a rock or something."

"What is that?" the commander asked him as Lancaster reached into his utility belt.

"My guess is it's a gateway," Lancaster said. He pulled out a small, handheld camera. Then he stretched out wire from another part of his utility belt. He yanked and yanked until he had at least a dozen meters. He then attached one end to the camera, then disconnected the other end from his belt. He didn't want to get pulled in if it came to that. He connected the wire to a small screen with a handle. He looked at it a moment to make sure the screen was seeing what the camera was seeing, and it was working properly.

"How did..." one of the men began to ask, then hesitated, knowing he was out of line asking a question past his commander.

"How did your teams stumble into this?" Lancaster asked for him. "All the roads lead through this. Each one was outside when they disappeared. The first one went too far ahead. The second was trying to race to you, so it was probably using the road. And the third one was so brilliantly sent away by your commander in this direction while you hunted puppies."

"I sent them to where the others had disappeared!" the commander insisted. "How was I to know..."

"Shhh," Lancaster hushed. "I need to concentrate." With a flick of his arm, he threw the camera into the void. It disappeared, and he held tight to the wire with one hand, firmly enough to stop it from going forward, but loosely enough to let it go should it try to drag him inside. His other hand grasped the small screen, and he looked inside it.

Blackness. The screen had picked up what the camera was seeing right up until it crossed the threshold, and now it saw absolutely nothing. The chord sagged slightly at first, but as soon as it entered the void, it was pulled taught, as though someone was on the other end holding it.

Lancaster watched the screen, and he waited. It was silent for more than a minute as they all awaited the results. Then it flashed to life in a deep, crimson red swirled with black, and dotted with occasional white stars in the far distance. Floating closer to the camera were several shapes, the shadowy figures of people, all frozen solid in the cold of space. Their hair was wild, waving chaotically without gravity. Some of the marines recognized them as members of the missing

teams. Others were dressed in the clothes of the researchers. There were also a few furry animals with four legs, their hair pulling in all directions; the dogs that had slipped into the vortex as well. In the center of them all, spinning end over end, was Lancaster's discarded hat.

A couple of the bodies knocked against one another, and shifted directions. Others drifted off into eternity.

One of the marines watching over Lancaster's shoulder said what the others were thinking, "What in Hades?"

"Wormhole. The Siguerans might have formed one and it got left, or it formed in some way and they left a marking to warn everyone. But it's right here in the central area where everyone walked."

"But the bodies that are here," the commander started.

Lancaster interrupted, "They floated back through the entrance on that side. Landed out here, like that one you spotted over there." He pointed at the body lying on the other side of the plaza. As if to prove his point about floating out of the vortex, he yanked at the cord. The camera pulled away from the floating bodies and went black. "The dogs found the bodies and pulled them into an enclosed space to gnaw on them and eat," Lancaster finished as they waited.

The others watched in astonishment. No one could argue; they could see the proof. Some tried to come up with a solution to rescue the others, but knew it was too late.

"Only problem for me is..." everyone looked at Lancaster, wondering if there was something more to this tale. "...I would have liked to get my hat back."

The camera appeared out of thin air, and dropped to the ground, breaking on the hard rocky surface.

"You think we can get back to the ship without you destroying something else?" Little Jack asked.

The End

This story leads into Relic Worlds, book 1:
[Lancaster James and the Search for the Promised World](#)

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