



LANCASTER JAMES

**And the Beast
of the Mountaintop**

The wind blew so hard it felt like it was biting him, even through the layers of heat jackets and Temptra-scarves Lancaster James was wearing. It picked up the flakes of snow and threw them into his eyes so that all he saw was a blinding whiteness. At this altitude, he would be struggling for breath if it wasn't for his Gil-breather. It stretched out his face and made him look like a fish, but it kept his muscles moving. They had to. He could still hear the roar of the three meter tall beast that was hungry and searching for him. He had turned so that he was no longer directly upwind from the creature, but that had brought him to a precipice that overlooked a deep ravine. Peeking over the edge, the wind caught his hat and it flew into the chasm. As he watched it fall, he got an idea of how unendingly deep it was.

He lifted the com to his mouth. "Little Jack," he said, trying to speak softly enough as to not alert the animal.

"I read you," Little Jack responded, his sharp voice piercing through the wind far too loud. Lancaster heard the creature grunt, a possible reaction to the sound.

He spoke again, trying to talk above the wind, but below the range of the monster. "Still not where you can land to get me. I need coordinates to get down..."

"Try that again!" Little Jack said as almost a shout through the com. "I can't comprehend you with that thing in your mouth!"

The ground shook dramatically with the footfall of the creature. Lancaster stumbled to the side and grasped a jutting rock which grew out of the icy slab he was standing on to cross the chasm. The footfalls continued, and Lancaster held on.

As his fingers dug into the stone, he felt the bumps of a well-crafted carving. He pulled his fingers away and brushed off a bit of caked on snow to reveal a design. He got to his knees and looked over the edge. His hand brushed away some more snow, and there, buried below a layer of ice, was the evidence he was searching for. Sentient beings had lived here! Skillful hands had dug out a design and laid down this bridge some thousands of years ago.

He would have hopped for joy, but for the fear that he'd slip off and join his hat in the abyss below.

The beast appeared at one side of the bridge. Its footsteps alone caused Lancaster to shake and almost knocked him off.

The beast was blocking the exit that led down the mountain into wider, softer terrain. The other side led to rocky outcroppings, and higher up the mountain where Little Jack could not land. This wasn't going to be easy.

Little Jack had left him off on a flat plateau not far below where the snow layered a couple inches thick over the rocky ground. The wind carried ice crystals

and snowflakes horizontally across his face, and they felt like tiny bullets against his scarf. His eyes were covered by large goggles, which gave him basic information through a heads up display on their inside. He knew how high up he was, and that he couldn't go much further without a respirator.

After he got clear of the ship, Little Jack launched Odin's Revenge off the natural platform to fly overhead until Lancaster was ready to leave. Remaining on the surface could be dangerous; not because of the cold alone, Odin's Revenge was used to the freezing temperatures of deep space, but the elements on every planet they went to had a tendency to get inside the workings of the ship and cause them problems; not to mention animals that might be living up in this region.

Lancaster had his comm to call Little Jack if things went bad. Not that it would do a lot of good. Little Jack would not be able to fly into the area Lancaster was going. He was on this planet because he had scanned underground chambers within the most rocky canyons of this mountain. Lancaster could fit inside these walled cliff-sides and balance on these small ledges, but the ship could not hope to land anywhere near them.

So Lancaster would have to climb up to the area where he suspected cave openings would lead to these underground chambers, where, hopefully, he would learn more about the Siguerans; the powerful alien race that once dominated the galaxy, then suddenly disappeared.

After parting with Little Jack, Lancaster approached an icy wall that he needed to climb to get to the elevation he needed to explore. He pressed his fingers forward and tiny spikes emerged from their tips. He stomped his feet and slightly larger spikes popped out of his boots. Thus armed, he found a crack in the ice wall that he could climb inside and he began to ascend, one arm reach at a time. Each hand slapped into the ice wall in turn, and he pulled himself up, kicking his feet in to then lift himself further.

He took a couple breaks, looking over his shoulder at the view as he did. The planet provided endless mountains across a cloud-filled skyline. He could see little below the clouds, but the tips of plenty of other mountains peeked through and kept his mountain company. Lancaster wondered how many of the of these mountains the Siguerans inhabited, or if the location he was about to explore was only an outpost.

That would be a question for another day. The key-map he had acquired had pointed to this planet and this mountain, so there was something special about it; something they had been pointing to, and he had to find it. He pulled himself up the rest of the way.

After about a hundred meters, Lancaster climbed over the lip, rolling over onto the ground and lying on his back to recover. His breathing was heavy and he was using the air from his Passif, the breathing device that he placed in his mouth

when he was having difficulty. At 35, Lancaster was just beginning to feel the riggers of age, despite being in better shape than anyone he knew. Those long days in spectrum drive between planets really stiffened his muscles. Even though travel between stars made him look younger, he didn't feel it.

It was at this point when he first heard the creature's roar. He wasn't sure what it was at first; the sound was so garbled as it bounced against the icy walls all around him that he wasn't certain whether it was the wind, a falling clump of ice, or his imagination. It was a mumbling, indiscernible sound that resembled nothing Lancaster had heard before. He lifted his head to hear better, but the sound stopped just as he did.

All he could see around him were the cliff-sides which rose up around him like walls in a maze. Layers of ice covered over black rock, which contrasted sharply against the white snow which gathered at the base of the walls and dripped from the overhangs; a few specks occasionally clinging along the side in small, splattered patterns. These walls curved inward at varying grades, like a mouth half closed. They created what looked like corridors that led further onto the mountain, splitting occasionally to create a true maze that may make him quickly lost when he started down them.

Lancaster waited patiently, listening for the sound to repeat, but all he heard was the wind beating against his ear. He waited a little longer, and at last gave up and got to his feet, brushing off the snow which had been slowly building up on his body, threatening to bury him.

The loud crunching of snow beneath him overwhelmed his ears, and he was unable to listen for the return of the roar for a few moments. When he was up, he stopped again to listen for the sound. Nothing. Maybe just the wind.

Lancaster began his trek down the icy corridor and guessed at the first branch, then guessed again at the second. They were dividing into multiple directions every few meters. He reached into his utility belt and pulled out his Breadcrumb, a handheld device that recorded where he had been, the geographical coordinates of key points, and how to find his way back. It also mapped his surroundings as he walked. All he had to do was hold it up and show the globe on top of the device what his surroundings were, and it mapped it out in 2D and 3D for quick reference. It couldn't show him where he needed to go, but it wouldn't let him get lost on the way back, as long as he didn't lose it.

He needed a better way to find how to get through. Lancaster studied the walls and saw nothing but ice. The spikes in his gloves and boots could only aid him so much, and Lancaster knew he wouldn't make it up those cliff-sides, short as they may be. The inclines were literally steeper than 90 degrees.

Then he caught a break. One section was free of ice. An overhang had somehow kept that portion free of condensation, and it had never hardened.

Lancaster didn't stop to study why this was so. He was no geologist anyway. He just pulled out the spikes in his gloves and boots and began his ascent, grasping every nook and cranny he could grab.

Once on top, Lancaster looked out over the plateau, studying the tangle of crevasses out of which he had just climbed. He held out his Breadcrumb so it could read everything within range in hopes that he could spot a pattern. The range was not far, and he could detect no intelligent design to the layout; so he tried something else. He pulled from one of his many pockets a Geo-scanner, and held it forward to try to detect any patterns of architecture above or below ground.

There were a couple possibilities, both of them underground. Lancaster set out for the closest and most promising one. It looked like a chamber buried under the snow and ice. It stood out from other caves because of its squared walls, and a few structures in the middle of the room that looked like pillars. He wasn't sure how he would get down to it, but he headed in the direction to at least be over it where he could hopefully get some better scans.

He reached one of the crevasses which stood in the way of his goal. The gap was only a little over a meter long, but running in the snow made jumping difficult. Still, he wasn't sure he could see what he needed from inside the natural corridor, so he stepped back several paces and began to sprint. He planted one of his feet solidly on a patch of ice and he felt himself skid toward the gap. He lost his breath for a moment, sure he would tumble inside. The fall would not be far, but if he broke his leg, or even sprained it, he may not be getting back down the mountain.

Lancaster kicked his other foot hard into the ground, which launched him into the air. He watched below him and saw his body hurtling over the dark gap below. He held his breath until the blackness of the gap turned into the white snow. His legs both hit the ground at the same time, neither catching it with their feet, and he tumbled sideways, spinning on the snow until he came to a stop.

He lay there for a moment, listening to the wind, and testing his legs to make sure they both worked. They were in pain, but they lifted and bent. He was fine.

Lancaster rose to his feet and continued on until he reached the point above the chamber he had detected. He scanned the ground again and watched through the monitor at the back of the scanner. He could see more details about the room. The structures he suspected were pillars looked now to be dividers. The chambers had originally been multiple rooms, but much of the walls had disappeared, and the pillars were more like supports.

The room continued on to one side where it seemed to become part of one of the cracks in the ground. Lancaster connected his grappling hook to the side and lowered himself down into the crevasse.

As soon as his feet were firmly on the ground, he pressed a button and the hook at the top folded into itself, and the wire shot back down into the gun. A loud

whirring came from the gun as the cable wound itself up inside of it, then snapped as the grapple itself locked into place at its nozzle.

When it was finished, Lancaster heard the loud roaring he had heard earlier. It seemed that the roar had started a moment earlier, but had been covered over by the whirring of the grappling hook gun. Lancaster crouched down and looked in every direction. There was nothing to see, but the sound bounced off of every icy wall, as well as the overhang above where the two walls almost touched above.

As the first roar was dying down, another sounded; more like a wail, or a scream. This noise was closer, just around a corner about five meters away. Lancaster didn't have the firepower that Little Jack had. If he was there, he would be pulling out his two pistols, Huginn and Muninn, both ready to shoot whatever type of shot they needed. But Lancaster had a few varieties of stun guns, a few which sent electrical shocks to stop whatever was coming at him, and others with tranquilizers in them.

He pulled out one that had both. It was the closest thing he had that looked like a pistol other than the grappling hook gun. It had a handle at the back with a barrel on the top and bottom and a trigger in the middle. On both ends were tranquilizer tipped darts with cords back to the gun, through which a strong, electrical shock could pulse until the animal was immobilized. To help target, a light projected out the center which focused on the animal, and sent a signal back to him to let Lancaster know when he was in range.

Slowly he stepped forward, noting every step which made a sound. He stopped occasionally, waiting to see if the animal would come out.

The braying scream shouted out again, echoing down the corridor, and hurting Lancaster's ears. He resisted the temptation to put his hands over his ears, and held tight to his tranquilizer stun-gun.

He reached the corner around which it seemed the sound was emanating. The tip of his gun remained focused on the corner, his finger holding tight to the trigger. If he fired it too soon, he would not get a second shot. He kept himself ready, but fought the desire to fire too soon.

Then it came into view; a four legged creature with a wide body and the neck and head in the middle of the torso. It looked like a deformed animal, but it seemed to have no trouble. In fact, it had made a home for itself in this small alcove where a stream of water passed and a flurry of purple-leaf weeds grew out of cracks in the ice. The animal had a nest made of stones built in the corner where it appeared to spend most of its time.

What gave Lancaster the most comfort was its eyes. They were placed at the sides of its head, not the front; the tell-tale sign of an animal further down on the food chain, not one looking for meat. This creature had evolved to watch out for its hunter rather than to find its prey.

Lancaster remained cautious, keeping his gun pointed forward until the animal saw him and reacted however it was going to react. It turned its head and looked straight at him. Its mouth seemed to be chewing on something, and it stopped for a moment, evidently studying Lancaster. The two stared at one another for a time, both waiting for the other to make a move. When it became clear that Lancaster wasn't going to do anything first, the animal continued its chewing and looked passively away.

Lancaster lowered his weapon and sighed with relief. He stepped slowly back around the corner, the animal looking up curiously to watch him leave, until he was out of sight.

Lancaster put the gun away and pulled out his scanner. The room connected with the corridor further down the opposite direction. He turned the back of the scanner onto hologram and watched through the 2D projection as he hurried along. When at last he reached the point where the chamber connected with his crevasse, he looked around. He could see portions of the former constructed walls sticking out of the cliff walls on both sides, along with jutting-out pieces that looked like they had once been shelves and floor pieces; perhaps furniture or chests.

He spotted one small section of the wall that appeared to be a designed embossment. He looked closely to see if it was a sigil that may explain the building's purpose; but as he studied it, he noticed something unusual. He could see a gap between the embossment and the wall, and suddenly realized that it was no design at all, but rather a device separate from the wall that had been frozen to it by the ice. Perhaps it had been in a frame, or somehow hanging, but it now appeared as part of the wall only because of the eons of frozen temperatures.

Lancaster reached into a zipped pocket of his utility belt in the small of his back. He pulled out a cylindrical device that was about an inch tall. He flipped a switch in the back toward the red side and held it close to the wall section that had the artifact. He waved the small, pill-like item back and forth, then up and down; then made a square formation in the air. He continued to do this until one arm grew sore; then he did the same with the other.

He heard the roar again down the corridor. It echoed against every wall and the overhangs. "Yes, girl," Lancaster said. "I sav ya."

He kept moving the pill-sized machine. The heat that radiated from it shot forward and his fingers felt none of the pain, but they did feel the strain of the constant movement. He stopped being so careful with the square movements and the corners became rounded as the pattern of his waving hand became more of a circle.

Long strings of water flowed down from the wall like tears. It was resisting, but slowly giving up its prize. The wall crackled, then chipped, and at length, began to give way. The little crystals fell to the ground as the dripping water

became a small stream. His arm felt a bit of relief when he saw the trapped relic move, letting loose of the wall.

Lancaster held forward his other hand, ready to catch it as the ice wall opened up. Cold water ran through his gloved fingers. He held it there until the relic dropped from its prison into his hand. Lancaster held it up to look at it. It resembled a drawn star, with two squares interlocked, one at a 45 degree angle on top of the other. Out the front jutted a hollowed-out square with a round cylinder in the middle. There were holes at the end of this cylinder, as if they were supposed to fit into something. He didn't know exactly what it would fit, but he had a suspicion. This had been the room he was looking for; a storage facility that held some of the important artifacts for use throughout the underground village.

He would test the device out later. For now, Lancaster placed it in one of the pockets of his jacket and sealed it shut.

He headed back down the corridor toward the chamber where his only companion on the mountain resided. The second chamber he had detected was in this direction, and he wanted to see how the little guy was doing in any case. It got lonely up there in that mountain very quickly.

A few paces before he rounded the corner he heard slurping, and he smelled something that should have stopped him, but he didn't recognize the smell until it was too late. As soon as he rounded the corner his eyes immediately told him what he had been smelling.

It was blood.

The four-legged animal was in pieces, scattered about his little home. His orange blood lay in pools on the ground and splattered on the walls. His legs were discarded about the chamber, globs of orange liquid still seeping from them. His torso lay in the lap of a much larger creature which sat squarely in the middle of the dead animal's nest. The creature was about three meters tall with grey patches on top of white fur. Its long, furry arms connected to hairy fingers with no hands. There were eight of these digits on each arm, and they had razor sharp, dagger-like fingernails that hooked on the end. The arms themselves looked like they had no specific joints, but rather muscles that could bend at any point. The souls of its feet, which stuck out the front end of the nest, were the only parts where skin could just barely be seen. Tiny spikes stuck out of them, the perfect accessory for something that needed to climb and walk on ice all of its life.

It was utilizing the animal's torso like a soup bowl, slurping the blood, then pulling out organs, tugging them loose of their veins; then tossing them into the beast's enormous mouth. Its swine-like nostrils, hidden mostly behind the hair on its face, was covered in the animal's blood, which must have blocked the smell of Lancaster coming around the corner.

What frightened Lancaster the most were its eyes. Silver, bright, and reflective, they focused on their prey. And when they looked up at Lancaster, they were not passive, but had intent in them. And they were set directly on his face.

Lancaster lost no time. He drew his gun from its holster, but it was not the stun gun. Who knew if that would work on this enormous monster? Sitting, it was already taller than Lancaster, and its skin had to be extraordinarily thick to survive in this environment. Lancaster instead drew his grappling gun and fired at the top of the crevasse.

While the cable was reaching skyward, the creature rose to its feet, roaring as it did. It was the same sound he had heard echoing from a distance, but now it was near enough to deafen him. Its current meal rolled out of its lap, tumbling over its rib cage as its inside spilled across the small chamber.

As the beast began to take a step toward him, Lancaster felt the grappling hook grab the top of the crevasse wall. The beast took a second step and was about to pounce, but Lancaster took a moment to tug on the line to make sure it was tight. If he escaped, he didn't want to come right back down into the monster's mouth.

Just as the creature lunged at him, Lancaster pressed the switch for full speed and rushed toward the light above, both hands clinging to the grappling gun.

He reached the top and was swung over the lip where he rolled over and looked down into the crevasse from which he had just escaped. The monster was chasing, and, as Lancaster had suspected, he used the spikes in his fingers and feet to climb straight up almost as quickly as if he was running across flat ground. If Lancaster tried to run, the monster would get to the surface and be upon him in no time. He had to do something.

He pulled out the tranquilizer stun-gun and pointed it into the hole. He knew it wouldn't work on most of the animal, but he knew one place where it would have an effect.

The animal opened its mouth and let out its terrible roar. Its stained teeth were like large stake knives, each strong and sharp enough to tear him to shreds.

Lancaster fired. One of the needles hit the side of the face and bounced off, just as Lancaster had suspected. But the other shot inside and hit the tongue. The monster recoiled momentarily, an exasperated look on its face, but it didn't stop. It slowed briefly, then kept climbing harder than it had before.

Lancaster pulled the trigger. He felt the surge race through the gun. He waited for what seemed like an eternity, but was only a second. Then saw the result. The monster's face winced, vibrated, then jolted backward. Its large mouth opened wide, roaring loud enough to start an avalanche. Chunks of its last meal flew out its mouth and stained the wall. Lancaster kept hold of the button, watching its claws, its feet, almost willing them to let go.

The whole creature shook violently. Then one of its arms slipped. This one lost pillar brought down the whole structure, and the large animal fell backward into the shallow canyon.

Lancaster turned and ran in the direction he had been going, lifting his legs high to come out of the snow so he wouldn't trip. As soon as he came close to an outcropping of rock, he rounded it to get out of sight. The beast would be down, but not out, and not for long.

He was far from the two underground chambers, but they could not be the only signs of a former civilization on this mountain. Those two points would only give the sign of a building on the mountain. But his research had led him to believe there had once been an entire village, or even city, upon this peak. He needed something that might show this.

Before he could find anything, however, he needed to know where he was. He tried to get a fix on his position with his own location device, but the instruments were too cold and it was having difficulty getting a lock on where he was. He turned to Little Jack for help. Pulling out his comm, he tried to reach his partner.

The wind had picked up and fast moving snow crystals were stinging his face when he pulled down his scarf to speak. He could barely hear parts of words coming through the static, and he knew his own voice wasn't coming through successfully, so he made his way through several more icy outcroppings and trudged up an embankment to a wider area. The wind was stronger, and a deep canyon dropped before him, but it seemed his signal was connecting.

That was when he found the bridge, and when the beast began to gain on him again, where this story began.

Lancaster rushed across the bridge, careful not to slip on any ice that might take him over the edge into the seemingly endless abyss. Reaching the other side, he climbed up a steep embankment to get around a wall of rocky outcroppings.

He reached the top feeling much safer. He knew the monster would have no trouble climbing the embankment, but at least it would be a while before it knew he had headed in that direction.

Lancaster checked his location device and got a reading on his location, both in numbers and with a small map of the surrounding area. It was exactly what he could see, a long, flat plateau of white snow with an almost blinding wind. The ground lowered slightly ahead of him before reaching a point where it dropped dramatically on one end, and rose steeply on the other.

Lancaster began to hike across the long plateau. He would check the land on the other side, as well as take a reading of the ground around him, and determine what direction to go when he got there.

The snow got deeper, and his steps became more labored as he had to pull his legs up higher to walk. He began thinking that what he should look for was the other end of that road. Perhaps it would come out on the other side of this rise, likely on the level below. He would approach the cliff that looked down and try to see if he could spot a smooth surface that stretched across the mountain. Certainly a road would lead him to all the important spots.

Then he felt a rumbling at his feet. The snow thinned out below him. It felt like it was crumbling, letting loose; as if he was inside an hourglass filled with sand that was funneling to the other side. Then he realized what was happening. The ground was sinking below him.

He made a break for it, running forward, lifting his legs as high as he could with every step. The ground did sink all around him, and as far to each side left and right as the plateau stretched. It fell into a dark chasm, as if a mouth had just opened wide and swallowed the snow whole.

The deafening crash of all the falling snow roared and spurred Lancaster on all the faster. Panic gripped at his heart, and he tried to control himself as he kept running, even as the chasm opened as wide as it was going to go. He kept running, just in case.

He ran so far, as a matter of fact, that he landed on another fissure, which began to open up beneath him. He ran again, dashing out of the sinkhole as the dark mouth opened wide to consume him. He fell up to his waste, and this time the panic took his breath away. He scattered the snow ahead of him with his hands and hopped forward. The roar of the shifting ground groaned behind him, nipping at his feet, which began to slide backward. He leapt forward with one leg, then another, moving as fast forward as he could.

The mouth, again, opened as far as it was going to go, and stopped. Lancaster was several meters from it and turned to look back at the two canyons that had opened up into the dark abyss.

Just as he was beginning to see inside, and before he could catch his breath, he felt the ground yet again caving in below him. He staggered as he turned to run, his feet slipping below. He didn't know how much more running he could take, but he was relieved to see the ground sloped down up ahead. He hoped that would mean it would settle, and he would no longer be falling into sinkholes.

He managed to find his footing and ran across the ground with greater ease than before. The ground was still sinking, but at least this time it was behind him rather than directly below his feet.

But then his heart sank. The beast from which he had been running, which he had thought he had outsmarted by coming up into this plateau, rose up before him, blocking the path for which he had been dashing. It had climbed up to meet

him. There was nowhere else to go. He had committed to that direction. It was the beast, or the hole behind him.

Lancaster didn't choose. He stopped out of sheer surprise, and the opening maw of the ground swallowed him whole. He felt his stomach drop faster than his body as he free fell into the darkness. He wondered if this was death.

But he didn't have long to wonder. He hit the ground hard a couple seconds into the fall. He couldn't breathe, and for another moment he wondered if he would die. It was as though he had assumed there would be no way out of this and all there was to discover was the method that death would take him.

He felt his lungs fill with air, and he was able to sit up, gasping for more. He had just had the wind knocked out of him. Aware that much more could be knocked out of him if he didn't get a move on, he stood and stumbled away from the edge, where the monster would slide down if it came after him.

As he stumbled, he realized that the ground was much more flat than he expected. Aside from the clumps of snow that had fallen from the ground above, it felt like the land he was on was actually paved. Looking down, he could see what his feet had been feeling. It looked like a road.

Lancaster reached into one of the pouches of his utility belt and pulled out his Structural Analyzer, another handheld device that scanned the physical make-up of material and gave him the approximate age of whatever he was studying. He crouched down and brushed aside the snow, then scanned the ground.

The readings that came back were consistent with many of his Sigueran discoveries; a rock hard substance that was built to last as long as the planet on which it sat. Though artificial, it was in so many ways one with nature.

Lancaster followed the path of the road, swaying to one side and approaching a wall that was half covered in snow. Rounding the corner, he saw more buildings, these not covered in snow as they were not below the gap. Above them, the ceiling over their entire town protected them from the environment outside, except for the tears in the ceiling that had just been caused. These rips illuminated the buildings like three thin, long lights spaced evenly across the five-block town.

He counted about a dozen buildings, but he could not see the everything. He pulled out his Illuminator, a device which flashed a light in whatever spectrum he needed, be it white light or infrared, or a low beam that would only be visible to him, and lit up the buildings further as he passed by them. Their hollow windows opened up their contents as the light found its way in for the first time in hundreds of thousands of years. The shadows that were cast panned across the walls on the far side, as if stalking him, and silently watching his movements.

He caught a glimpse of the shadow of an animal atop the corner of a building, crouching, watching him. He felt at first the fear that something was

about to attack him, then the hope of finding intelligent life. He waited a moment for it to act, and when it remained frozen, he pointed his Illuminator up at it. The creature had been perfectly still because it was a statue; a gargoyle type of carving that resembled one of the local animals, which had likely gone extinct sometime between when the people who carved it disappeared, and Lancaster arrived. Still, something in the way it stared at him unnerved him, and he turned the light away from it as soon as he could convince himself he'd seen enough.

Then he remembered something about it. The animal looked like it was local, that was true, but it had a wing span similar to something he had seen on other planets. It could be, he thought, this planet's version of a mythical beast used in one of the Sigueran religions.

The Siguerans were not known as a very religious race, but some, particularly the underground dwellers among them, had very broad religious practices. They often put their most valued commodities in these temples.

Lancaster approached the building, noticing now that it was one of the tallest among the structures in this underground community. Others had supports which reached to the ceiling, but the buildings themselves primarily remained approximately five meters tall. This temple, or whatever it was, stretched close to the ceiling, approximately twenty meters up. There was likely to be something inside.

He approached the large, double doors. There were no doorknobs, only long handles which ran across the doors which looked to be intended for being pushed or pulled. But Lancaster could do neither now. He tried shoving it and yanking at it, but it wouldn't budge. He looked for a latching device and found none.

But he did find a square decoration in the middle of both doors with a round carving in the center, along with a number of holes etched into the circle. Lancaster remembered the artifact he found in the other building, just before he came upon the beast. He pulled it from his jacket pocket and compared it to the door. It was a perfect match.

Lancaster then placed the device against the door, matching the square part up with the decoration, and pressed the cylinder into the round part of the center. As he shoved, he could feel it fitting snugly. Then came the satisfying snap. He knew it was locked in place. Presently he twisted the cylinder. He could hear the ancient gears turning. They were like tectonic rocks grinding against one another, sliding into place. Then came a 'click-click snap!' The artifact would neither move, nor could it be pulled out. It was stuck. He couldn't even twist it back to its beginning position. He thought for a moment that he had done something wrong, and it was forever stuck to the door.

Then he heard a larger latch switch clatter and the door he was pressing the key against gave way. Lancaster was taken aback. The sound of rock sliding

against stone permeated the silence as the door swung into a waiting darkness. Dust kicked up and covered over the entrance. By the time the door stopped, a great cloud covered the entire doorway.

Lancaster put one hand over his scarf-covered mouth and used the other to beam a low-level, fog cutting light into the building. He couldn't see much except for a few structures that rose out of the ground; perhaps shelves or statues or podiums. The majority of the room was barren, and a thick layer of dust covered the floor.

He walked in, placing down the first footsteps in the building in centuries. He found that a few of the edifices he had seen were shelves, a couple might have been furniture, and some statues were placed in a pair of rows. They were tall; one of them reaching further than he had the settings of the Illuminator to reach. But he could see the top of it as it was illuminated by one of the rips in the ground above. Light poured in and down one side of the statue, which was carved like a four-legged animal standing on two of them and folding its others on its chest.

This would be the building that was taller than the others. He had located the temple.

He almost stumbled over a tall stair. The step led to a second, then a third, and he found himself on a platform overlooking the rest of the wide room. Looking out, he could see the outlines of where seats once rested, but whatever structure they had been made of dissolved over time, and they were seats no more.

In the center was a shrine; a single, square pulpit with thin fingers reaching upward. They were spread out, almost like flames, or perhaps upside down roots, tangled and wild as they held up a silver ornament. It was round, but its carvings gave it an uneven feel. The design carved into it was different on every side, and seemed to have a separate meaning depending upon which angle it was viewed. Lancaster looked out at where the seats once sat and saw how each part of the idol faced a different row of people. Each seemed to have its own meaning.

One side looked to have a dropping face, as though it was melting. Behind the face, it appeared like a waterfall fell backward, almost like hair on its head. On one side of the waterfall, flames rose up, and smoke billowed away from it. On the opposite side of the flames and smoke was a roughness that seemed to have no meaning, and every meaning at the same time. It appeared as an average rock face at first sight, but Lancaster could tell there was something very carefully carved into it that he couldn't make out. At least not in the darkness of an ancient temple.

The carvings were common of the subterranean Siguerans. Their over-ground cousins were masters of color and light, while the underground ones were unmatched in their ability to carve and shape objects that lasted the millennia. He knew that there would be intricate designs written into this treasure that he would find only with long study.

He checked the podium for any traps, and detecting none, he attached his light to a strap on the shoulder of his jacket. He then reached forward, very carefully, and with both hands, lifted the artifact from its place and held it before him. This could prove to be one of his most important finds.

Wasting no more time, Lancaster placed the artifact in his bag and turned toward the door. He suddenly froze. Blocking the exit was a tall shape. He couldn't see it well, but he recognized it all the same. It was the hairy beast that had been tracking him. "Persistent bugger, aren't you?" Lancaster said.

He stepped back. The monster stepped forward, matching his step, but not going far from the door. Lancaster could hear him growling under his breath. He pulled his tranquilizer stun-gun. The creature stopped, wiggling its fingers, readying itself. It didn't roar; its mouth was closed tight.

The two stood for a moment, staring at one another, Lancaster now showered in light from one of the fissures above, the monster outlined by the edge of Lancaster's light. He switched through several spectrums on his Illuminator to get a better look at the beast. Now that he had it stopped, he might as well study it. He froze on the black light for a moment. The white of the animal shown a bright blue, but large splotches glowed all over him. This would be the blood of the animal he had seen earlier. Lancaster didn't want to join the stains.

The beast now took a couple baby steps toward him. Its legs were spread, its knees bent, as though it was ready to spring to the side as soon as Lancaster fired anything. Lancaster put his gun away. It wasn't going to be useful. The beast's courage raised, and it stepped closer at a faster pace, rising up the first step. Lancaster pulled a gun out again. The beast stopped. This time it did a curious thing. It stepped back toward the wall, as if covering the door again. It knew that Lancaster wanted to slip around it. This beast was smarter than Lancaster had thought.

It quickly proved that it was even smarter than Lancaster had suspected. With a clinched fist of its fingers, the monster hit the wall. Its powerful muscles shook the building, but there was no chance of bringing it down. Lancaster wasn't sure what it was trying to do, or if it perhaps was merely frustrated.

It hit the wall again, and again, the building shook, but there was no structural damage. Then a giant ice crystal fell next to him. It was sharp, and large, enough to have sliced Lancaster in half. He looked up and saw a dozen or more of these giant ice crystals falling down toward him. He dodged out of the way, first one direction, then another. They were coming down all around him. There was almost nowhere to avoid them; and they came too quickly for him to see before they fell on him. The beast kept hitting the wall, and more ice crystals fell.

Lancaster noticed where the light came into the building, and saw the giant fissure in the roof. He ran underneath it. The ice crystals fell all around him, some splashing shards into him, but nothing that could kill him.

The beast continued to smash the wall, but when fewer began to fall, it soon realized that the roof had run out of its deadly weapons, and it would have to go at Lancaster itself. It began to creep forward.

Lancaster would have only one chance at this. If he missed, the time to recoil the cable would take too long, and he would be set upon before he could escape. He readied his finger around the trigger. Then he pointed the Illuminator at the beast's eyes, closed his own, and he shot a flash of light which blinded the monster. It stumbled backward and fell off the step, landing on its back. It roared, but kept its mouth closed, so a strange, muted noise filled the room.

Lancaster fired, but not at the monster. He shot his grappling hook onto the tall statue which led to the open fissure. It latched on and he climbed while reeling himself upward. His legs kicked against the surface of the statue like he was running straight up.

The beast managed to shake the white dots out of its eyes and rose to its feet. It looked around the room, unable to see Lancaster, then looked upward and spotted him. It screamed, this time with its mouth wide open, the loud roar hurting Lancaster's ears and almost causing him to let loose of the grappling gun. But he held tight, running straight up the statue, letting the cable pull him upward.

The monster ran to the base of the statue, dug its fingers into its surface, and pulled itself upward. Launching with its feet and reaching ever higher with its arms, it began to climb at three times the speed Lancaster was going.

Lancaster kept hold of the grappling gun with one hand while he reached into a pocket with the other and pulled out his comm. "Little Jack. Need a pick-up just above my position."

"Can I land?"

"No! Don't land. Hover just above the ground!"

The beast roared behind him. It was almost within reach of its long arms.

"You bringing a friend?" Little Jack asked.

"Get there quickly," Lancaster said.

As he put the comm away, he saw the beast swipe at him. It was close enough to reach him, and Lancaster was still at least five meters from the top, where he would have to slow down to climb out. "Right," Lancaster muttered to the beast. "Let's see how badly you want me."

With the hand he had put the comm away, he pulled out his Illuminator. He planted his feet on the statue and bent his knees, then waited for the beast to come at him. It climbed with enormous speed, like a spider racing to its prey. It reached its muscular arm at him, and Lancaster pushed off with all his might. He also

lowered himself down, parallel to the beast. In its desperation to grab him, the creature reached out to Lancaster. At that moment, he fired the Illuminator. Its eyes were at its widest. Believing it had Lancaster within its grasp, it had had its eyes as focused as they could be. The blinding light flashed in its face less than a meter away. The pain was disorienting, and it lost its grasp with its feet. Its fingers, which were in the air searching for Lancaster, flailed as the mighty beast fell to the ground below. Its whole body writhed, trying to understand what was happening, grasping for anything blindly, until it smashed on the ground with a loud thud, the dust flying up all around it.

It groaned pathetically. Lancaster landed back on the statue and looked down. He felt sorry for it. The sounds now roaring from the beast's mouth were not natural; not healthy. It was a crying moan mixed with a crumpled body. Something was seriously wrong with it, and it would not likely survive; or if it did, it would not be strong enough to hunt again. It had not been evil, merely surviving. That was life in the wild.

There was nothing Lancaster could do that would not mean sacrificing his own life, so he took one last look at the powerful beast; the animal which showed some semblance of intelligence. Perhaps if there were others like it on the planet, they might evolve into the role of sentient species, and build upon the ruins of the Siguerans.

For now, however, it was time to leave. Lancaster reeled himself up the rest of the way on the statue, then climbed up over the lip of the fissure. There, on the plateau, Little Jack was already lowering with the entrance ramp open. The hot engines immediately melted the snow all around him, and more cracks opened in the ground. The entire roof of the temple began to collapse. Lancaster had been clumsy in not considering this when he asked Little Jack to fly in to rescue him; although, to his credit, he had been desperate as well.

He dashed to the ramp and jumped onto it just as the ground beneath him tumbled into the abyss. The ship rose and Lancaster stood on the ramp, watching below. The broken land had caused a chain reaction and now the entire plateau, which had evidently been the roof of the temple, and perhaps of the entire town, was collapsing. The snow crashed down and buried everything beneath. Lancaster hoped to perhaps see the tips of the buildings appear as the snow landed around them, but the ice and rocks that had made up the shell protecting the ancient village were likely crushing the buildings under their weight. It was gone.

Lancaster held tight to his bag, to the one remaining artifact from the mountain town, as the ramp rose up into the belly of the ship. He watched the mountain become smaller beneath him until the air lock was shut, and he could see no more.