



RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE
FORBIDDEN VALLEY**

Odin's Revenge shuttered, then settled into the orbit of Manwe like a train that had just finished switching tracks and locked onto its new rails. Little Jack felt the switch, and knew it meant they were free of spectrum space and connected to the planet's gravity. His eyes scanned over the instruments to make sure the transfer was as smooth as it had seemed; and when he saw that it had been, he opened up all the sensors.

These were set up for Lancaster James, who just then burst through the door with a level of energy that caused Little Jack to regret preparing things for him. "Ready to meet an alien race?" he asked as he made his way into the seat diagonally behind his partner. Little Jack had arranged the cockpit this way so that he would typically be the only one sitting at the front. There *was* a seat next to him, (also slightly further back from his chair,) but he'd purposely set it up with few instruments on the dashboard in front of it to discourage anyone who wanted to utilize controls from sitting there. If they wished to be in the front seat, they needed to sit back and enjoy the ride he was giving them.

Lancaster was not that type of passenger. They were hopping star systems in search of his passion; the hope of finding live, sentient civilizations. Even more importantly, they were trying to discover what happened to the ones whose ruins they had already found, but had vanished without a trace. Whatever had become of them could be the fate of the human race, and Lancaster felt a responsibility of finding out what that was before it happened.

Manwe became of interest to Lancaster when he found it listed among other worlds in the Quantum Scepter, an important artifact he had recently acquired. The scepter's top was a crystal globe through which Lancaster could see distant locations where other quantum crystal shards were located. Lancaster found that he could switch from the view of one location to another by willing it to do so. It was somehow linked to him, for Little Jack was unable to do the same thing. Lancaster also felt that he could detect where these locations were, and he was experimenting with the process. He had typed in the approximate coordinates of where he believed this view was, and the navsensors had brought up Manwe in the Kementari system.

Checking with some of his sources in the archaeological community, Lancaster found that this system was within the sphere of several races during a period known as the Third Epoch of Galactic Life; a time when several star-faring races tried to form an interplanetary senate. They were all wiped out by a race known as the Siguerans. But one branch of a species known as the Messierens may have survived and consolidated somewhere near Kementari. This would make Manwe a possible spot where they could have hidden.

What Lancaster had seen through the Quantum Scepter had been mostly darkness, like the crystal he was looking through was in a cave. But he had spotted the shadows of figures passing by several times, and it seemed as though they were wearing clothes; one of the surest signs of sentience.

When the two men arrived, they saw immediately why the planet may not have been searched by the Siguerans. The planet was blanketed in gray and white cloud cover with occasional mountain peaks poking through like icebergs in the sea. Lancaster had to rely on penetration sensors to see what was beyond. He found the planet covered mostly with an ocean of nitrogen-heavy water, freckled with mountainous islands of many sizes. The largest ones contained the majority of life, including some creatures among clumps of crude buildings which huddled near cliff sides.

Lancaster smacked the dashboard with his fist. Little Jack could tell it was good news. He hit the dashboard when he was happy, the wall when he was upset, and the ceiling when he was downright angry. In any of those instances, the diminutive pilot turned his seat and gave his

partner the death stare. Lancaster responded as he always did, "Sorry," and they each went back to what they were doing.

Having zeroed in on the location of one of the villages, Lancaster was able to perform a deeper laser scan of the area. He found that the creatures had wings, and they flew from their buildings to holes in the cliff and vice versa. These buildings, unsurprisingly, had access doors in their roofs. What *was* surprising was what Lancaster could make out about the architecture. Though they resembled huts which were standard of primitive civilizations, many were multi-storied with what appeared to be more sophisticated designs.

Little Jack interrupted Lancaster's thoughts with an uncharacteristic sound of surprise. It was not much; a simple grunt, but it was more emotion than he typically expressed; so Lancaster looked up at him.

Little Jack could tell his partner was watching him without seeing him or turning around. It was in the sound of his clothes shifting; then stopping for once. Little Jack pointed ahead, then sent the image from the sensor to one of Lancaster's screens. It was a satellite orbiting the planet. Though it was large, it was difficult to see in the darkness of space. Also, its surface was so rough that it resembled an asteroid, perhaps just large enough to be considered a small moon. What gave it away as a space station up close were two smooth sections on either end which Little Jack recognized as covered over solar panels. Lancaster recognized aspects of the design from what was known about the Messierens. But they were not known for making their entire vessels resemble rocks.

"You want to scry it out byway in or out?" Little Jack asked.

"Chance be I can apprend something from it fore we land," Lancaster said.

Little Jack engaged the thrusters and closed in on the satellite.

Lancaster turned the sensors on their target, but found little of note other than further confirmation of what each had determined. So he got out of his back chair and slipped into the one closer to the front as he peered out the window. Little Jack did not mind as he was leaning forward, studying the satellite. He was matching its velocity while getting readings through his specialized, sensor-reading glasses which provided vital information on the inside, and appeared frosted over on the outside.

As they neared, Lancaster stood a little, trying to get a better look at the hull. It was difficult to see; the whole thing was sleek black. But he could make out some basic contours, which still appeared chaotic in its design. He utilized one of the only controls on his side of the dashboard; flipping on a spotlight and turning it on the alien device.

Within the round, glowing beam he could see a blend of metal and rock, as though the two had been fused together. Each had its rough textures; the metal with its machinery, and the rock with its stones and craters. Where they blended they seemed to naturally coalesce, making it difficult to understand what was supposed to be natural and which artificial.

Little Jack could tell a lot better with his glasses gathering important data. He found that none of it was natural, but the majority of it was unnecessary. So he concluded that it was an asteroid-like shell made to disguise its true nature as a satellite. With all of its machinery turned off, it was undetectable at a distance. But up close... He found the maintenance hatch. Telling Lancaster about it, Little Jack steered in the hatchway's direction.

They steered toward the entry point, Lancaster turned and left the cockpit, heading toward the closet so he could suit up. Little Jack would go through the standard procedure of equalizing the pressure, pumping in oxygen and making it livable for humans before they entered

the vessel. But it was always good to be wearing some form of protection when they boarded anything in space. He saved being more cavalier for the ground missions.

Little Jack was still suiting up when Lancaster entered the airlock. Making sure the door was secure behind him, he spotted Jack through the airlock window, shaking his head with annoyance. "I won't move anything 'til you get on board," Lancaster assured him.

"I'm more concerned that you'll break something."

"Only one or two things," Lancaster said. Little Jack looked up to see Lancaster smirking from underneath his oxygen mask. Jack didn't change expression, but Lancaster could tell by the loosening of his jaw that he was amused. It was the most emotion Jack gave, and it had taken Lancaster years to recognize it. Little Jack returned to putting on his suit, and Lancaster turned toward the inner workings of the satellite.

There was no gravity, so Lancaster spun slowly around and floated in the middle of the corridor. He was able to grab thin rails on the sides, and pull himself forward along the primary access hatch. Three smaller ones branched out in different directions, each with ruffled ceilings and rails along the sides to hold onto. Lancaster continued forward, turning on the lights mounted on his suit. Their beams disappeared into the darkness ahead, illuminating the round walls surrounding him. They stretched just beyond Lancaster's shoulders.

He passed two more access tunnels to the sides before he came upon the primary system center through a narrowed gap he could only squeeze through by shrinking his shoulders and pulling himself along.

Once inside, he looked around to find a small chamber which resembled a command center. This should include an internal power switch. Brushing up on Messieren architecture on the xeno-archeological Galaganet had paid off, as he was able to find the most likely candidate rather quickly. He pressed his finger against a symbol on the wall he recognized as controlling the satellite's power output.

Outside, the covers of the solar panels receded; and as light poured onto them. Power flowed through the satellite like water pouring into a bowl.

Light illuminated the chamber just as Little Jack's face appeared at the opening. "I didn't break anything," Lancaster said.

"I'll be the judge of that," Little Jack responded, and he pulled away from the opening. While Lancaster watched him, he got an idea. As he peered inside at his partner figuring out the system, his concept was reinforced. He looked around at the smaller chambers branching off the main one, and his hypothesis was confirmed. The railings were thinner for a reason. The machinery was smaller for a reason. The ruffles he thought were on the ceiling were actually stairs on the floor, (which implied that there was, at some point, a way to walk on said floor.) "This isn't a satellite," he muttered. "This is an orbital station."

Little Jack stopped what he was doing for a moment and floated at what now appeared to be the control panel. He saw how every button, switch, lever, table, bar... everything was perfectly set to a height just a little shorter than himself. Then he said, "Well of course."

"Of course," Lancaster said sarcastically, calling Little Jack's bluff. Jack continued looking over the controls, trying to interpret everything based on his engineering knowledge, and everything Lancaster had ever told him about Messierens, which he consulted through notes he brought up in the inside of his glasses.

Lancaster drifted back the other direction, searching for the power plant. He turned down each corridor, pulling himself along by the thin bars, trying not to snap them. After three tries, he came upon a hatch with a large symbol embossed upon it. He didn't recognize what it meant

at first; it wasn't familiar. He tried to remember anything that was similar, but nothing came to mind. He pulled his notebook from a sealed pocket to look over his handwritten notes. Most of his colleagues kept notes in an electronic pad. Most of those colleagues also had stories of when their batteries ran out at the most inopportune times.

Looking through his notes of the Messierens Lancaster found nothing that matched the symbol. However, he found a couple symbols that came close. One was for a border, and another was for punishment. Many languages worked off of combined meanings, so Lancaster pressed those two together. "Border" and "Punishment" combined may best be described in one word as "Forbidden." This was, of course, not a certainty, nor a foolproof method; but it was enough to convince Lancaster to not open it; at least without checking it with his power scanner. He ran the device an inch away from the wall, checking the readings as he did. It was rising, like a jug under a faucet. This was the power being pulled into the machine from the solar panels. It was consistent with the speed of other non-human power devices. There was some fluctuation which was consistent with power flowing to other areas as the orbital device came to life, which further served to confirm Lancaster's suspicions.

Lancaster pulled out his pencil and drew the symbol before him. "Forbidden." This could be important as it had clearly stopped him from trying to enter a major power conduit which would likely surge lethal electricity through him.

Little Jack had figured out what each of the controls were, and what the machinery was throughout the control room. He marveled, as he always did while on one of these vessels, at the way these ancient alien civilizations were able to build their machines to last millions of years, perhaps indefinitely, with little to no degradation. Turning on different parts caused them to light up like they had been turned off the day before.

As far as maneuverability was concerned, there was no surprise that there was none, aside from the emergency thrusters to keep it in orbit. These were set to go off automatically once every few hundred years to adjust to planetary shifts, and to keep it from decaying in orbit. But who did this belong to, and why was it abandoned?

That's when Little Jack found the memory banks. He didn't know how to access them, or what he would be reading if he did, but he was fascinated to find them in the area that looked like the communications station.

By the time Lancaster floated back into the control center, Little Jack was figuring out how to beam the data onto his own ship. It was, after all, the comms station, so it should be the easiest station from which to do it. And if he could use the decoders on his ship, he may be able to find out why this hunk of metal and rock was in orbit in the first place, and who had owned it. Jack was particularly excited to learn about this one. There weren't too many alien races that were close to his size. Hades, there weren't many *humans* that were close to his size.

Lancaster, meanwhile, was making his way around like a sluggish underwater sailor. The smaller size mixed with the unfamiliar environment messed with his perspective, and he kept thinking obstacles were further away; so he knocked into them, and they caused him to spin until he grabbed hold of something to steady himself.

He managed to level himself off at a station that had maps and sensors of the planet's surface. It was much like the scans he had made on the *Odin's Revenge*, but with greater depth and detail. He found that he had chosen well when looking at one of the villages. It held some significance, according to this particular station. It would be as good a place as any to search on the planet. And if they missed anything on the station, they could always come back.

“You want to jonder already?” Little Jack scolded with annoyance. He would soon have what he wanted once the data had transferred, and he could study it anywhere. There was no need to stay at the source to study something anymore; not since the computers on Odin’s Revenge had been set up to decode alien programming and information. Little Jack would be better off sorting through the information in his cockpit anyway. But he still wanted to hold the moral high ground by pretending to wish he could stay.

Lancaster knew the game Little Jack was playing, but he did not engage; instead saying, “They’re about the right size of these instruments. But abso they weren’t the ones to run it. So what was the sift?”

“All right, well, if we’re abandoning the station,” Little Jack began with feigned disgust, “then give me a touch more time to transfer these files.”

“We’ll regress back if we need more,” Lancaster said. “But I have a suspicion this was pretty self-sustaining even when it was populated.” He looked into one of the view screens, one that held on the village, and said almost to himself, “Our answers are down there.”

Lancaster shimmied down the side of the rock face. The cliff dropped below him several hundred meters, but he was held by the waist to a wire harness which connected to an anchor point far above. He still had more leeway; but he surrendered it to a cozy ledge where he could hide behind a stone barrier and peek over the edge to spy on the alien village below. It would be nearly impossible to spot Lancaster even if they were looking directly at him, especially because it was still night time, shortly before dawn, and there was little more than star light at present to illuminate the area. Perhaps they might spot Lancaster’s hat, which sprouted up over his head that was peeking slightly over the railing of rocks, upon which Lancaster rested his Scannoeks.

Peering through them, Lancaster adjusted the settings. It was too far to get some of the readings; but the closer visual provided him with a personal view so he could come to conclusions himself.

It was exciting to at last be studying an alien race itself rather than taking its objects and studying them to infer conclusions. Over the past few years, Lancaster had come to feel more like a xeno-archaeologist rather than what he was: a xeno-anthropologist. He understood the behaviors of alien races, and his studies using objects always had to be based on how they would use such items.

Lancaster shared some of these feelings with Little Jack, an action he soon regretted. “Then pike closer,” Little Jack said. “Take one of them and interrogate it.”

“You lack a diplomatic flare,” Lancaster said.

“That’s what my mother always told me,” Little Jack said.

“We both know your mother didn’t talk to you,” Lancaster said.

“That hurt,” Little Jack said after a short pause. “I’m proud of you for that one.”

“Thanks,” Lancaster said. “I just mean that it’s been a tick since I was able to do what I was trained to do. And as for them, chance be they won’t react well to an outsider.”

“Comprehended,” Little Jack said, comfortably relaxed in his seat as he tapped away at the database. Outside the front window of Odin’s Revenge was a rocky, walled in plateau at the top of the mountain where the creatures would not find the ship unless they made a point to fly as high as they could. Little Jack played music in the background as he compared the data bases of the ship and the information they had on file from organizations with whom they had worked. One of them was the university where Lancaster’s ex-wife Mika worked. Little Jack pulled information from it, but said nothing about it to Lancaster.

Fluttering wings suddenly whisked by Lancaster. Then a second set flew by as well. Two flying creatures continued past him and glided down to a nearby cave entrance. Lancaster curled up to make himself as small as possible, hoping not to be seen. He had several items in his utility belt and within the pockets of his jacket which he might use to defend himself; but the truth was, trying to survive an assault against flying animals on a cliff would be like fighting a shark in the ocean.

As he pulled himself out of his fetal position, Lancaster looked down to see the Messierens land on a naturally protruding platform outside a cave entrance. They shook off their wings, folded them up, then went inside the cave. As they did, Lancaster noticed something odd about the doorway itself. He grabbed a sryer, a spying device from one of his jacket pockets and studied the door with it. The device analyzed the door's scale and dimensions. It also evaluated the smoothness of its edges, and its congenial contours. He also turned the device on the platform in front of the hole.

The sryer came back with answers that matched Lancaster's theory. This opening was not natural. Both the doorway and the balcony may have gained rugged contours over time, but their origins were unnatural, and not carved out by non-sentient animals. In fact, the balcony itself seemed to have points where posts were stationed to create a railing that would keep the occupants safe from falling.

One of the creatures appeared out of the door, followed by the second. Lancaster fell back behind the lip of his hiding spot. He breathed heavily, hoping that he was not seen. One of the creatures had looked in his direction, but it didn't seem like its eyes had rested on him yet. Lancaster hoped that their eyes took as long to adjust as human ones did, and that he was doing a good enough job of remaining out of sight.

When at last he decided to give it another chance, he peeked his head up and over to see the tail end of the creatures shrinking in size. They were heading back down to the village.

He gave them a bit of time to get a good distance away, then Lancaster repelled down to the point where the Messierens had just been standing. There, he released his tether, which snapped up the cliff face to disappear over the top edge. As it did, he peered into the cave, adjusting his eyes. He pulled out his Illuminator and pointed it forward. He didn't quite need it yet. There was a greenish glow emanating from within the cavern.

Lancaster stepped inside, his Illuminator still held forward like a pistol in case all light suddenly disappeared. He was on such high alert that as he passed the threshold, he noticed a sliding door hidden within a slit in the wall. Lancaster took a spike from one of his pockets and slid it into place in hopes that it would stop the door from closing should a trap be set off.

Every step was careful after that, watching for anything he might spring. The cavern stretched forward a little longer than wide before it appeared to open into a broader chamber up ahead. Evenly along the sides stood stalagmites which stretched from roof to floor like columns.

The inner glow was coming from several of these columns, and he could see that their source was from small lamp emplacements. These were the type of light sources more commonly seen in more advanced civilizations. They were based on chemical reactions that lasted for years and gave off a light whose color was based on the race's most dominant part of the spectrum. In this case, it was closer to the shorter wavelengths.

Lancaster approached and used his Analyzer to scan one of the lamps. He found more than he had expected. The stone and mud and moss in which the light source was nestled were all covering over a carved column. These were not natural stalagmites; they were pillars, covered over by stone. Looking around the room, he now saw the layout. This was a vestibule;

the entry to an important chamber. Scanning another pillar and the wall, he could make out the architecture, and it matched that of a more advanced civilization.

Continuing on to the end of the room, the second chamber opened wide to him. It was a circular room with a rise in the middle, and evenly spaced pillars. The evenness was disguised through additional rock formations, boulders, stalagmites, as well as stalactites hanging from the ceiling. These bore many more tiny lamps, which illuminated the room like chandeliers.

He scanned several of the pillars and the walls to confirm that these structures were facades on top of ancient architectures as well. On one of the walls, he could see a small section where the original wall was exposed, so he used the Illuminator to shine a light on it. He could see the edge of a painted design, but very little of it. So he pulled at the stone and wiped away some of the mud to reveal a little more. There still wasn't enough to make out what the image was supposed to be, and the effort had taken time and energy Lancaster did not have.

So he pulled out another device he used for looking past a structure. What it would reveal was crude and not always fully accurate, but it would be better than just the material structure of the wall. Lancaster set the Analyzer to a precise distance and held it up to the wall. He had to move it in and out slightly to get the exact point at which he could see what he was looking for. The image on the small screen warped and wavered like lenses trying to focus; but at last the appearance of the wall behind the rocky façade displayed on his five inch by 3 inch screen.

Lancaster had to hold the Analyzer steady as he carefully ran it across the surface. Occasionally it fell out of focus or the image garbled from an inability to make out what it was scanning, but it gave him a general idea of what was on the ancient wall. Mostly it was flourishes and designs, but a series of colorful lines revealed he had found a mural. Following some brush strokes, he made out a group of modern-style buildings. These stood behind the figure of a Messieren posed as if giving a speech. It was garbed in elaborate and sophisticated clothing rather than the loincloths Lancaster had seen them wearing outside.

What had happened to these people that they should de-evolve from where they had been, Lancaster wondered. The mystery baffled him further as the image changed from a mural to differing versions of terrain with writings which matched the alphanumeric symbols on the satellite. These had indeed been one people who gave up their technologies.

Lancaster realized he had come upon a map which depicted a location with names written in small parts. He froze on one of these words. He recognized the symbology. It was the symbol hieroglyph he had translated as "Forbidden."

Stunned by the revelation, Lancaster had to see this portion with his own eyes. He put away the device and peeled away the stone and mud façade. The word spelled out clearly across a wooded section of a valley. Lancaster pulled more aside, getting an idea of the surrounding area.

But soon he was interrupted by a sound. It was a cooing, like a melodic purr, mixed with the shuffling of feet. The Messierens had returned! They were in the antechamber heading in Lancaster's direction, and there was no way out but through them. Luckily, he had found three other exits from the immediate room. One was an alcove; perhaps a closet back when this room was part of a building. Not wanting to be trapped, Lancaster chose one of the other two at random. It was a chamber with so many outcroppings and dips that it could have been several rooms in the ancient structure. This was the perfect place to hide; though it was so dark that Lancaster would have to feel his way around and step with care. Any light he used would shine all the brighter in the darkness.

Two Messierens appeared in the main chamber. Their murmurs and gurgles seemed to be communication between the two. What they were chattering about, Lancaster had no idea. But when he heard them slow in the room, seemingly involved in their conversation, he decided to take a look. This was a golden opportunity to watch them up close. So he began to maneuver in the direction of the doorway.

This motion was halted immediately when his foot caught against a rock. He yanked it out, then moved it slowly along the jagged edge, trying to find where he could get a foothold. Unable to see anything, he could not tell where it would be, or how steady it would be when he found it. The effort took so much time and had so many uncertainties that Lancaster began to see it as untenable.

He cursed in his mind. This opportunity was slipping through his fingers. He could even see their shadows oscillating against the walls and ceiling. He could study their language from here, but he would likely never get this close to them again.

Lancaster then remembered that their sight was believed to be shifted further into the ultraviolet range, so they were believed to be blind to reds and infrared. Lancaster bet his life on the research they had done at Woodburr University and he set his Illuminator at the edge of human visible reds, then shone it by his feet. He was able to find a good foothold, then another, and he lifted himself into a satisfactory location to spy on the pair of Messierens.

From the back they looked like they were wearing green, fleshy sheets over their yellowish backs. Their four foot frames were outlined in lines of white hair. Their arms were like skeletons, while their legs were those of a feline, but with talons for feet. One of them was turned a quarter toward the other, giving Lancaster a side view of its face, which bore four eyes; two of which were on its temples. Ahead of them was a snout that resembled something between a canine and a chimpanzee, with a small beard drooping from the chin. When it spoke, Lancaster found that the mouth was below the beard, under the chin, just above the neck. The nostrils flared, along with several holes up the snout, which made the purring sounds. These made the majority of the sounds for the language as well, with the chin mouth adding emotion to the words through its cooing.

One of them stopped speaking suddenly. While the other continued making noises, the first walked across the room. When the second stopped talking, the room grew eerily quiet. The silent one suddenly burst out with emotion, then the second joined it. They had gone out of Lancaster's sight, so he maneuvered around to see them. The sounds of his motion were covered by their alarm.

When they came into sight around the corner, Lancaster got chills at what was upsetting them. They had found where he scraped away the rock to reveal the wall. Quickly, they rushed to cover it again, gathering up the rocks Lancaster had dropped to the ground and trying to restack them. One of them smeared the wall with mud and stuck the rocks to it like glue. It was hardly working.

Then one called to the other, pointing to the exit. The other hurried out, as if going for help. Lancaster knew that when it returned with others, they would come looking for him. His time was limited.

He gave it a little time, however, allowing the first to get outside and away from the exit before he made his break for it. As he did, he heard the one that remained. Even though it was alone, it still made noises. These were a mixture of high speed purring, and a sort of moan. Though its language was so far off from Lancaster's that its very evolution was different, he could still sense the emotion behind it. It sounded like panic and mourning.

Lancaster adjusted himself to get a better look. The Messieren was still trying to cover up the gap. The futility of it doing this alone was catching up with it, and it was slowing. At last, it simply stopped and stared at the word in front of it: "Forbidden." The Messieren gawked at it a long time, as if considering the meaning; as if tempted by the sign's prohibition. Then it had a new sound that was accompanied by a certain motion. It was jolting in time with gasps. Lancaster was pretty certain that it was crying!

Lancaster maneuvered closer to the door in hopes to get a better look at the wall, and the way the Messierens reacted to each part. But this time, the Messierens heard him and turned around to face Lancaster. It was so casual that neither of them reacted at first. They just stared at one another. They were frozen in time. For a blissful long moment, neither knew how to react. Then they both realized what was happening at the same time, and they both reacted in about the same way for two different reasons.

Lancaster yelped in horror and dashed for the exit. The Messieren seemed to scream as well with a cacophony of sounds out of every orifice in its head. Lancaster looked over his shoulder to see the person lifting one of its skeletal hands to point at him while it shouted something. Lancaster imagined it being "Heretic!" by its intonation.

He turned his head back toward the exit while his body was still racing forward. He had a swift reminder of the obstacles in the hall as his head came into contact with stone; and the next thing he knew, he was on his back barely able to breathe, staring up at the stalactite above him. Luckily he had only been on the ground a moment, but it had been long enough for the Messieren to nearly be at him. It was screaming the same sounds, like a siren coming out of an emergency vehicle.

Lancaster didn't know what it would do when it caught him, and he didn't want to find out. He leaped up and started away. His legs froze when his head felt empty. He realized his hat was still on the ground. He turned to get it, but his pursuer was closer to it than he was. He had to run.

Now he had the Illuminator out, shining his path to get him to the exit without colliding with anything. Up ahead, light was pouring in through the cave entrance. The sun had risen. But no sooner had he seen the light than three silhouettes appeared in front of it. They had landed on the balcony, cutting off his escape.

Lancaster slowed a moment, adjusting the settings on the Illuminator. He could now hear the Messierens in front of him, and the one behind him screeching to each other. They were noises whose emotions could not be mistaken. They were angry. Lancaster would have one shot.

He pointed the Illuminator's light directly at the ones ahead of him and pressed a button. A flash which Lancaster barely saw shone like lightning. It was an intense beam of ultraviolet. It worked on the Messierens ahead of him. They stumbled in each direction just as he reached them. None interfered with his escape, but one of them fell backward off the balcony.

Lancaster put away the Illuminator, grabbed the remaining Messieren's arm and pulled it toward him. Its eyes were glazed over and its mouth was wide open in shock. The noises coming from its snout were deafening, and as it seemed to come to, it tried to hold onto the human. Lancaster turned it around and pushed it into the cave entrance, falling backward himself off the lip of the balcony.

Not panicking, almost routinely, Lancaster pulled his grappling gun and fired it into the bottom of the balcony. Once it attached, his descent slowed. With his second hand, Lancaster

signaled with his Talki. “Time for a pickup,” he said with enough urgency that his partner recognized it. Little Jack responded that he was on his way.

Though Lancaster had slowed his fall, he did not stop it. He kept going a little further, then a little further, so that when the Messierens came out of the cave, he would be hard to spot. It took the better part of a minute, but at last their wings appeared at the edges of the balcony. He spotted their heads occasionally appearing over the platform. They were looking for him.

At last, one of the Messierens saw him, and it screeched at the other, whose head came around. But at that moment, another noise blurted that caught everyone’s attention; that of engines. Odin’s Revenge. It was swooping along the cliff below Lancaster. He gave one last wave at the Messierens, and he released the grappling hook. Free falling for a few meters, Lancaster landed on the roof of the ship.

The Messierens took chase after him. But this sort of escape was routine at this point. Lancaster rolled over onto the top hatch and opened it, dropping inside. Once he told Little Jack he was clear, the thrusters engaged, and they rushed out of there.

Lancaster knew that the image he had seen of a forbidden valley was real; the Messierens would not have been so desperate to cover it up if it wasn’t. But he did not know where it was. He was, however, determined to find it. So he and Little Jack flew into orbit and scanned the planet as it passed, allowing the ship’s computer to try to match the image with a location.

Little Jack, meanwhile, played the audio from the files he had found within the database. They were messages from the planet’s surface to the satellite. A few came from deep space as well. Though Lancaster did not know what was said, he was able to compare the sounds to what he had heard in the cave. The way they spoke had evolved as much as their bodies had, but he could tell it was the same race of people.

What was particularly moving was the clarity that these were mostly messages of endearment. Some of them had the rapid professionalism of informative messages; but most had a soft edge to them without rush. These were the voices of the long since passed; the people who had hope of pushing off their world; exploring space and the great beyond. But something had caused them to abandon that hope; that dream.

The computer found a match for them, and Little Jack flew them down to the part of the planet with similar terrain features. It was night time, so nothing looked exactly as it had in the mural. Additionally, the terrain had changed somewhat drastically over the millennia, but they bore enough of a resemblance to be clearly the same features which had been displayed.

The flora and fauna in the valley became uneven close to the middle. Sometimes it rose slightly in a symmetrical square, sometimes they jolted out of the ground, as though wrapped around a coil, then covered over something a meter high by a couple meters long. It all looked to Lancaster like it was hiding something.

Little Jack lowered them down for a closer look and shone the spotlight on the covered structures. Lancaster knew what he was doing, and flipped on the lidar to scan just below the surface. He quickly found what he suspected: a landing pad, buildings for a small space port, and machinery to support it. It was unlikely that any of it still worked, and not worth trying out. The Messierens had abandoned it for their own reasons. What that reason was would require years more research, and perhaps what they had would assist in that search.

But the location below – while proof that the people here had once flown off the world, but had chosen to de-evolve their civilization – held no answers of its own. The risk of having to

deal with some of the wildlife that had now taken up residence within the overgrowth was greater than the possible reward.

So Lancaster recorded his readings, then told Little Jack he was done. Little Jack paused a moment to notice something about Lancaster. "You lost your hat again," he said.

Lancaster rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I..." He trailed off, then said, "Never mind."

Little Jack continued to stare at Lancaster, and, after a double take, Lancaster remembered. "Oh yeah," he said. "I'll catch the next sit-down meal ticket."

"Yeah, you will," Little Jack said. And he pointed the nose skyward. Increasing the thrust, they launched skyward into the night. Anyone on the ground within sight could spot the red dot and trailing line arcing upward toward the stars. This may cause panic among local natives, but they would fade away like exhaust fumes themselves, never to be remembered again. Soon, the ship would disappear, and just be part of everything else in the celestial sphere that frowned down unwelcomingly at the mysterious race, disconnected from its own past.

The End