



# RELIC WORLDS

*Lancaster James*

AND THE GHOST  
SHIP FROM BEYOND

[Odin's Revenge](#) came out of spectrum drive a healthy distance from the large gas giant. Having never been anywhere near this system before, its pilot [Little Jack](#) felt it the better part of valor to leave room for any mistakes, or possible debris or moons or even rings that may hover around the planet.

His partner [Lancaster James](#), on the other hand, was less satisfied with the reentry when he got to the cockpit and saw how much time it was going to take to get to the planet. Time was of the essence, and once their target was gone, it would never be available again.

They were here to investigate the appearance of a mysterious ghost ship that had recently been spotted after appearing out of seemingly nowhere. It had been discovered by defense observers of the Ponderosa Corporation on Lamark Upon Tejo, the inner most planet of the [Shiloh](#) system, and the only one settled by humans. The anomaly had hardly caught their interest at first since no energy readings emitted from it, and it was therefore not an invasion. However, its large size and its heading disturbed middle management in charge of planetary safety. Regardless of what it was, if it hit the planet all life on the colony would be wiped out. An urgent investigation discovered two things. First, it was a spaceship of some sort; enormous in size and like nothing humans had ever seen, and it would not hit the planet. It had indeed been on a precise heading to collide, but the gravity of the much larger seventh planet of the system, the gas giant before Lancaster and Little Jack, had nabbed the limp ship and pulled it into its orbit.

With little interest now in the ancient alien hulk, Ponderosa Corp observers and vessels steered clear and focused their attentions back onto more profitable endeavors while the giant hulk began its decent toward its inevitable demise within the gaseous folds of the planet. It would have disappeared forever without anyone else learning about it had there not been a former student of Saberaux University working as a data entry clerk in the observation center. Breaking her nondisclosure agreement with her employers, she sent a message to [Mika Sinovi](#), her former archaeology professor telling her about the incredible find.

Mika received a number of reports from former students who had had to take jobs in other fields when they discovered they couldn't make a living in xeno-archaeology. Most had to watch helplessly as the businesses for whom they worked destroyed and built over ancient discoveries and smashed priceless artifacts to build offices and supramalls; human "advancement." But sometimes these former students did more for the study of ancient civilizations than they would have if they had gotten the jobs they wanted by sending a message that a great discovery needed to be saved.

Mika lacked the drive to go investigate the claims herself, but she knew someone who did not; someone who was perhaps a little over-eager to leap into the ruins of ancient cities in search of lost artifacts. Though she knew her ex-husband was at times a bit reckless, he knew what he was doing, and he had enormous respect for the relics he was attempting to rescue.

Today that find was whatever was in that ship, and its orbit was decaying rapidly into the highly pressurized gases of the enormous planet. Every minute he and his partner lost as they thrust toward the ship was time taken away from exploration inside it. It was not likely that Lancaster would be able to power it up again and break orbit for a number of reasons, including the fact that its control system was likely far from his understanding, and its power source probably hadn't worked in millennia. So whatever time he had between boarding the ship and its sinking into the atmosphere was the limit.

The exact number of hours, or even minutes, he had was unknown, even when they got close to the large hulk. It would be entering the gaseous waves at the very edge of the planet any minute. How far into the planet it would go before falling apart was anyone's guess.

They did an initial fly-by, shining a spotlight on it as they drifted slowly under the ship, (or over it. It was hard to tell which direction was up on the alien craft.) Lancaster tried to identify the source of the craft, but so few intact alien space vessels were ever found, so it was hard to identify it by sight. There were three sections, each formed like a misshapen bubble with rough edges and textures. The back formed a half bubble with the rear flattening out at the end into thrusters. In the center section, a long gash scarred the undercarriage. The cut was rough. Little Jack guessed it was caused by a piece of debris, not a weapon, though it could have been a missile attack. However it was formed, a lot of chambers were exposed, providing a skeletal view into the innards of this dead ship.

Lancaster took his seat next to his partner and studied his control panel carefully, scanning through the outer cameras in search of any information he could discover. He first noticed several inner airlocks which were sealed shut. This gave him some hope that air could be pumped in and stay; at least for as long as they would need it. The other thing he spotted caused his hair to stand on end and then freeze as though the temperature had suddenly dropped below zero. A shadow drifted by one of the windows. It was dark inside, the spotlight barely breaking through, and Lancaster could not be certain of what he had seen, but it definitely appeared to be some form of movement.

Running back the video, he watched several more times, each viewing convincing him further that something had floated past the window, and it had a humanoid shape to it. Was this an ambush? A strange alien trap? Their odd way to reveal themselves before slaughtering the civilization they came upon?

This all seemed too unreal to Lancaster, but he could not deny what he was seeing on the screen. He reset to a live feed again and tried to locate a window with movement, but to no avail. The small human craft continued drifting toward the front of the large alien ship, past the open scar, and on to the head section. Little damage had been done to it, and Little Jack believed he could identify where the bridge would be. Even alien craft would have the basic elements of a ship, the same as a body: The brain, where orders are given, the energy, where power is produced, and the locomotion. All else would be identified based on who made it, and those differed wildly even among humans.

Little Jack located an entry point back on the broad center of the ship. It was an airlock attached to the outer hull. A slight bulge protruded tipped with a round hatch a little over two meters in diameter. It would be one of the easiest connections he'd ever done on one of their expeditions; all he had to do was match the speed of the alien ship and come up alongside of it.

Once they were connected, they entered the ship in their space suits. Lancaster hadn't wanted to pump air and pressure inside just yet in case it might poison whatever was inside. Little Jack understood the logic, but his skepticism came from the very fact that something *could* still be alive in there, so he kept his multi-use pistol Munin ready, locked into one hand.

Small pieces of debris of varying sizes and shapes floated throughout the corridor dancing in and out of side chambers, occasionally colliding with one another to shift their directions. Some may have been tools still in one piece, though Lancaster could not tell. He spent the first minute or so worrying about punctures to his or Little Jack's space suits.

When he was able to overcome this concern, realizing that everything was floating too slowly to damage what he was wearing, he was able to notice more about the layout.

Everywhere he looked there were short rails either protruding from, or contained within, the walls and ceiling. The floor had occasional unsharpened hooks and sometimes gaps with short bars hidden within. The corridor was tall with shorter rooms to the sides, the openings of which were small and did not always reach the floor. Approximately ten yards in they began spotting boxy protrusions from the walls and octagonal bars that stretched across the corridor, a couple of which Lancaster had to duck under to avoid. He found a few openings higher up, near the ceiling, access of which appeared to be through the use of the proverbial obstacle course.

After turning a couple sharp corners, the duo found a larger, deeper corridor that seemed to connect the front of the ship to the back. Metal lines crisscrossed like a web connecting openings to side chambers through which small articles perpetually drifted, lit only by the long beams of their lights. Lancaster ran his Illuminator across both directions, getting readings in various spectrums of light and electromagnetism. Through this he formed a vague map of the area. "That views to be the direction of the bridge, wouldn't you credit, Little Jack?"

"Yes," Little Jack agreed. He had kept track in his mind of the direction toward the bridge ever since he had seen it, as though his mind had marked it as the North Pole in the compass of his brain.

"You register you can find it?" Lancaster asked.

"Yes."

Lancaster heard the certainty in Little Jack's voice. He didn't need many words from his partner; he depended on the subtle differences in his voice to say more than any words could. "Fesit then. Our time is short, so let's scry out as much as we can. You blick the bridge, and I'll blick the power source."

"Perfect. Nothing thick ever came from splitting up," Little Jack said. His sarcasm was palpable, and Lancaster knew he was taking the sort of risk people usually made before being murdered piecemeal. But he also knew that the ship would be crushed in a matter of a few hours thanks to the time lost having to catch up with it, and they needed to cover as much area as they could. Little Jack knew this, too, despite his snide remark, so he turned toward his "north" and floated away.

Lancaster turned his body toward the back of the ship. The ground was several meters below him, the walls and ceiling were the same, while metallic beams angled across his path. He wanted to make this fast, so he bent his knees and leaped forward. The webbing of bars came up quick, faster than he had expected, and he threw his arms out in front of him. He caught one with a hand, gently guiding himself below it, then caught the next with the other hand, pulling himself over it. A platform between two beams that he had not noticed came up quickly and he pulled over it, then pulled himself down over the opposite side. To regain momentum, he shot off from the platform with his feet the way a swimmer pushes off from a wall. He dodged a few more crisscrossing bars, lightly grabbing them and pulling himself along, almost using them as a ladder. He began to wonder if that wasn't precisely what their purpose was. This was an alien race that clearly used these thin levels as much as they used the floor.

Once he made it to a bottleneck which seemed to connect the middle section to the back section, he stalled and reached into his utility belt, which he had made certain to wear outside his spacesuit. He pulled out his Aldaketor, a device he occasionally used to find past sources of energy. Studies had long ago discovered that prolonged use of energy in a contained field mutated some molecules within metallic compounds ever so slightly. The alterations were only detectable by humans in that they noticed that containment walls had to regularly be replaced. Once this discovery was made, it gave way to an inventor who managed to find an alloy that was

pulled ever so slightly by these mutations when it was within about a hundred yards of them. In attaching this alloy to an arrow on a 3D compass, it made for a good way to find a current or even former power source.

The arrow directed him through the opening, then down, then into a lower corridor, which dipped back upward until Lancaster found himself floating in what was once the engine room. Consoles lined the walls both near the ground and along the thin catwalks that crisscrossed upward toward the high ceiling. A group of consoles surrounded a clear enclosure near the center, what Lancaster surmised to be the containment field for their power source. It grew from the bottom getting large near the top, like a bowl whose edges clutched the ceiling. There was a long crack that began near the top and worked its way halfway down. ‘Was this what killed the crew?’ he thought. Or rather, he wondered if perhaps a breach may have caused them to abandon ship, and they made it back to safety long ago, leaving their vessel adrift for millennia to eventually arrive here millions of years after their entire race had disappeared?

Little Jack, meanwhile, had made it to the bridge, and was trying to make heads or tails of it. The structure was more vertical than it was horizontal. Consoles were on different levels with chairs attached to tracks that could move the person seated in them to different points of the bridge. It appeared that the higher ranking one was, the further their track took them. The seats themselves looked as though they were made for humans, except that they had holes right at the small of the back. The consoles, too, were exactly at human size, or, average human size, which were always a little high for Little Jack.

Little Jack’s glasses were set to see with dim light, and his suit’s sleeve flashlight was set to an overall glow to the room with a slightly brighter beam directly in front of him. He therefore saw little detail in the specter that drifted across his peripheral vision. As soon as his mind caught up with what he was seeing, he turned the high beam directly toward it. But as soon as he did, he saw nothing. Then something again caught his attention to the right, a shape of some sort wafting across the wall. He twisted on it, but again, nothing.

There was a short break this time before he detected it again out of the corner of his eye. He took a snapshot with his glasses and saved the image, then turned on it, and again, it was gone. He ran the image back to take a look. There was definitely something there. Its torso was long and twisted, its head bend down, as though half broken off. One arm reached up over itself.

The entire specter was blurry and faded, and ran across the wall... It ran directly against the wall. Little Jack noticed it distort as it moved up over the consoles, contorting with the every bend and dip in them. A brighter speck that had been closer to him caught his attention, and he zoomed in on it. There was a piece of floating debris. It looked like a bent over body with a head half broken off, and one arm... The specter on the wall was merely a shadow of the debris. Little Jack looked around the still image and found several specters on the walls, each with a small bit of rubble closer to him, projecting their ghostly visages. The beam directly in front of him was so bright that the shadows were smaller and harsher, more easily detected for what they were.

As though teasing him, one of the pieces of debris tapped his helmet. Little Jack rolled his eyes at himself and the annoying little pieces of metal and plastic, and he continued to investigate.

Lancaster, meanwhile, had gotten used to being tapped by small pieces of debris. It was more of an annoyance to him. So when he brushed off something that was rubbing against his back and found his fingers interlocked with the bones of a skeleton, he jumped in horror and turned around to find himself face to face with the hollow black eyes of a menacing skull. Its

face was growing as the free-floating body continued to approach him. He shook loose of the fingers and dropped to the ground. The skeleton's hand snapped off and spun toward one wall while the rest of the body continued on toward the clear enclosure.

With such a close look beneath it, Lancaster studied the remains of the beast, regretting that he had removed a hand. This was an intact skeleton, not one recreated in a museum. It had not been returned in pieces, as so many skeletons were, and assembled with only best guesses. This was a full specimen; one that could educate them all about the real appearance of the... What was it? He looked it over from several angles as it continued on to the containment field, then, knocking against the clear enclosure, bounced upward, back into the room and higher, toward the ceiling. Lancaster followed after, tapping his foot against the metal ramps to propel him closer. The best he could guess was that it was Xenosentia Jalil Raginor Bjarte, usually shortened to Raginor. It would explain much of the way the interior was designed. Raginors were known for living in trees and utilizing their tails extensively, which might be why they would utilize thin rods protruding from the hull rather than stairs and catwalks.

Little Jack was propelling himself upward as well, continuing to explore the vertical bridge, trying to identify each position. It seemed this task would not be difficult considering the fact that the layout was closer to any human ship than any other alien civilization he'd seen. But he wanted to be certain.

Having reached the top, he was making his way back down, inspecting the various stations a little closer. The specters continued to waltz across the walls, and now a ghost had joined them. Little Jack paid no attention, not allowing himself to get suckered into that again, but his instinct kicked in, and he suddenly realized that this new visage was not conforming to the shape of the walls. It was, in fact, floating in front of some beams and behind others. It even bounced against the wall and redirected in a vector closer to him.

Little Jack turned his suit sleeve flashlight directly on the figure. It was indeed real, and three dimensional. It had the outline of a misshapen child. Its elongated head was tilted slightly, as though curious. One arm reached toward him, as though begging for his attention. The other bent back, its whole side of its body appeared ripped open. A few tiny features took shape, such as a gaped mouth and tiny fingers, but it was hard to make out because it was transparent, and only visible from its edges, or how it affected the light refracting through it. What shape existed even shimmered, rippling larger before simmering down to its normal shape.

Little Jack reacted the way he always did when he was truly afraid, his eyes widened behind his frosted glasses and his muscles tensed. He felt his heart freeze cold, but he refused to allow any other symptoms to show. He grabbed a bar and pushed against it, projecting him quickly downward. His foot knocked against another bar, causing pain, but he didn't notice. He shoved past it and continued down as fast as he could go. The spirit was not following, but for how long, Little Jack did not know.

At last he got one word into his helmet microphone. "Ghost."

"What?" Lancaster asked.

"Ghost."

"Goat? Why would..."

"Ghost! Dango shazing ghost."

Lancaster was silent for a moment. Little Jack wouldn't say something superstitious. He would be the last person to believe in extra-natural beings. "What's your sixty?" Lancaster asked, meaning where was he?

Little Jack did not respond with his location. He instead described what he had seen. He had the beam of his light pointed up at the top of the bridge while he stood at the bottom. The long beams projected sharp shadows across the roof through which the spirit was fading in and out.

Lancaster's brow furrowed as he free floated next to the skeleton. He turned to the remains and asked, "Do you know about this?" He at last came upon a platform and grabbed on, as though steadying himself in a pool while the skeletal form continued onward. At last he had a thought, and asked, "Is it following you?"

"No," came the tight lipped response.

"Is it regarding your presence in any way?"

"No. Just floating on the roof."

Lancaster was now certain of the origin of the ship, and he said, "The Raginor had a pet called a cora. They had some lizard and some sloth-like features. They shed their skin about once a year. It's possible one of them had shed soon before whatever disaster hit, and it got frozen and preserved all this time."

Little Jack raised his head to get a better look. He zoomed in with his glasses. Aside from the wavering of its features, the ghost did not adjust itself. It was stuck in one position and was not moving through the beams, but was rather knocking against them like a pinball against the obstacles. He breathed out a sigh of relief, making sure the mic was off as he did, then turned it back on and told his partner that's what it was.

Lancaster caught up with his skeleton, sitting on a perch where he could watch it without having to be careful of running into any obstacles. Now that he knew what it was, he could consider its features more specifically. He noticed that a separate bone connected to the spine made for what at first seemed like a short, thin, third leg, but Lancaster determined that it must be the tail bone. Its limbs were long and flexible, bending in two places each, yet its head and torso were not as truncated and malleable as xeno-paleontologists had imagined. Putting these creatures back together through their bones was like putting together a puzzle whose pieces had been scattered. It was a fun activity Lancaster had taken part in a couple times. And even though this one was complete, floating a couple meters in the air so he could get a 360 degree view of it, Lancaster was entertained in much the same way, trying to figure out what each bone's use had been.

Little Jack called to him again, telling him he had found the gravity controls, and they seemed to work. Certain he could do more work faster with his feet firmly planted on the floor, Lancaster told Little Jack to go ahead. A moment later, his heart jumped into his throat as he remembered the skeleton of the Raginor floating in the middle of the room. He called to Little Jack, but just too late. Gravity took hold, Lancaster felt his butt yanked into the platform, and he watched helplessly as the perfectly intact skeleton flew at the floor, as though thrown, and crashed into a million puzzle pieces.

"What did you say?" Little Jack asked.

"Nothing," Lancaster said.

Little Jack connected his ship's power to the alien craft and had lights on immediately, but it took the better part of an hour for him to pump oxygen across. Lancaster used the time to explore the rest of the ship. By the time he was able to take his space suit off and move more freely, the vessel had sunk into the atmosphere. He still wasn't certain how much time they had, but it couldn't be much more than an hour. They were already beginning to feel the occasional

bumps and shaking from the outer atmosphere. It would get worse as gravity and pressure increased. Lancaster fitted his latest hat to his head, and got to work.

Since he was more capable of understanding how the Raginor systems worked, Lancaster took the bridge while Little Jack went to storage to find the most valuable items to salvage. It was, after all, the reason they received the funding to get to the ship in the first place. They had to retrieve collectibles for the museum at Sabereaux University.

Lancaster started with the flight controls. There should be information on the ship's past trajectories; what systems it had been to, where it traveled, and possibly where it had started. Sitting back in the chair, it was surprisingly comfortable, he paged through the databanks, first getting a sense of how to interact with the navigation computer.

While waiting for the machine to open a file, he glanced across at Little Jack's "ghost" hanging limply over one of the beams where it had fallen when the gravity came back on. It was hard to make much of it, but it had some physical characteristics of a cora.

The file was now up and Lancaster took a look. He found that he had inadvertently selected where the ship was currently heading rather than where it had been. No matter. That was just as important. It had been on a course for what was now a human settled system called Mintaka. Their ETA had been rather short, so they had clearly been using some sort of faster than light technology and had fallen out of it to drift aimlessly in space as they now were. If he had time, he would like to check...

'Did the cora move?' Lancaster wondered. Looking up, he saw the pet's shed skin still dangling, but he could swear it was now on a different rod. He stared at it a moment trying to convince himself that it must have been there all along, and he remembered its placement wrong.

The ship shook, reminding Lancaster of his limited time. He could even see flashes of lightning beginning to appear outside the front window, so he got back to work. A series of numbers and letters were appearing at the bottom of the screen. Coordinates perhaps? Lancaster began analyzing them, but soon he couldn't help himself. He had to look at the shed skin again. It was still in the same place, but now it looked as though its head was pointed toward him. Lancaster didn't remember this, and he was certain he would have noticed that before.

A faint beep from the console and a flashing data on the screen drew his attention hesitantly back to it, though he kept the deflated spirit in the corner of his eye. The screen itself was rattling off seemingly random information. Lancaster was so used to translating alien languages into English. If he had time, he would like to check...

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The ship shook, reminding Lancaster of his limited time, so he got back to work. After a few moments, however, he couldn't help himself. He had to look at the shed skin again. It was still in the same place, but now it looked as though its head was pointed toward him. Lancaster didn't remember this, and he was certain he would have noticed that before.

A faint beep from the console and a flashing data on the screen drew his attention hesitantly back to it, though he kept the deflated spirit in the corner of his eye. The screen itself was rattling off seemingly random information. Lancaster was so used to translating alien languages into English in his head that he didn't at first think of the fact that the information on this alien spacecraft was providing information in his own native language. He thought for a



second, wondering if he had adjusted something or plugged in his translator, but he hadn't taken the time.

Then he recognized some entries; locations on planets where he had grown up, places he had taken, then names he recognized... His parents, and their gypsy lifestyles, moving from one planet to another. Then information about himself, where he had gone to school, meeting Mika, and his life with her; his adventures studying alien life forms. He tried to press buttons to stop this flurry of data. He didn't know why it would matter, but this should not have been here. This information shouldn't have been on any computer. Frustrated with its lack of response, he hit it, stood, and hurried away from the console.

Lancaster called to Little Jack, if, for no other reason, than to hear his calm, cold, distant voice of reason. But there was no response. Fear was beginning to set in, and Lancaster moved his legs to take him off the bridge. He needed to not only get away from that console, but to avoid going paralyzed with fear.

He called Little Jack again with no response. He called a couple more times as he made his way back toward the hold. Nothing. A few chambers away he heard his voice, not through the Talki, but echoing against the metallic walls. Little Jack was screaming in anguish.

Lancaster dashed to the open hatchway, ducking under a beam or two along the way. Hurrying inside, he first found his friend was doubled over on the floor, leaned over as if puking. His screaming had morphed into a suppressed roar of anguish. His hands were in front of his face, and his fingers were clawing at his eyes, but were stopped by his glasses, which prevented him from doing irreparable harm. The fingers were trying to reach around the frames to pull them off, but he was in such a panic that they would not work independently. His frustration made him breathe and scream harder.

Lancaster grabbed Little Jack's arms and pulled them away. Little Jack's mouth flew wide and he whaled like a toddler, falling back on his butt and kicking out his feet. Lancaster looked around them briefly to see if there was anything in the room to fear, but there was nothing. He knew he only had a moment, for though Little Jack was small, he was compact and an experienced fighter, and one of them would end up unconscious. Going off a hunch, Lancaster ripped Little Jack's glasses from his face and threw them across the room.

He had never seen Little Jack's face without his glasses, and had not expected how small, dark, and beady his eyes would be. And right now they were red and bloodshot. But there was some sense that returned to his face, so Lancaster knew he had made the right decision. And now it was time to get him off this ship.

Back on Odin's Revenge, Little Jack refused to talk about what he'd seen. He just sat across the room from his glasses that Lancaster had never seen him without, silently moping; silently kicking himself inside.

Angry and unwilling to give up, Lancaster yanked Little Jack's pistol Munin from his holster and marched back into the alien ship. He had no sooner crossed over when he found his target. Someone had to be playing with their heads. He didn't know how, but he was going to find out. Whatever it was, he did not get a great look before it disappeared around a corner. Lancaster dashed after it, gun at the ready. Rounding the first corner he saw it rounding the next. He hurried after it.

He reached the arterial corridor when he got a better look. The creature was masked by the beams and platforms as it swung its way down the large hall. What Lancaster could make

out were the features of what he now believed the Raginors to look like. It had short hair all over its body, had two joints for each limb, a muscular torso and a slightly oversized head.

Lancaster jumped onto the bars and began swinging from one to another, kicking his foot against the wall at once to propel himself forward, rushing across a short platform and launching himself to another beam.

The Raginor rushed around a corner before he got close enough for a better look, but Lancaster saw where it had turned and made the corner himself. His hand grasping a metal bar, Lancaster found the Raginor closer to the floor. How it had gotten down so quickly was beyond him, but Lancaster did not hesitate. He lithely hopped down the bars with his feet and tumbled onto the ground, rounding the next corner. He heard a distant voice. It sounded vaguely like Little Jack. That didn't matter at the moment, he had the Raginor cornered now. He could not see its face, but he saw its legs below a part of the wall that jutted out. It thought it was hidden, but he knew exactly where it was, and it had nowhere to run.

Little Jack's distant voice again. It was calling his name. Probably a trap. Yes, definitely a trap. The voice said stop. He didn't understand what it was talking about. He held up the pistol. The hand that held Munin touched the air just in front of him. It was not air, it was a wall. In fact, it was a control panel on a wall.

He jumped back into reality, the illusion now broken from him. He had just pressed the button to an air lock, and the door flew open. He was sucked out into the swirling storm that was the gas giant. His hat was yanked from his head and fluttered away like a bird caught in a tornado. He swung around like a rag doll, and would swing helplessly into the planet if not for the fact that he had stepped out into the gash at the bottom of the ship. He was instead thrown into one wall, then the opposite one, zigzagging downward toward the abyss, and oblivion.

The voice had been Little Jack on the Talki. He had likely monitored his progress on the Talki's tracker, and seen from the map of the ship they had created that he was about to leave. Lancaster's life had depended on listening to his partner, and now he was about to pay the ultimate price for not doing it.

But then Odin's Revenge appeared below the gap. Still tracking him, Little Jack had found Lancaster, and he opened the top hatch. Lancaster grappled a broken piece of the ship and held on, then he planted his feet and lunged at the gap. The wind pushed him off course, but Little Jack adjusted, and Lancaster managed to get a grip on the hatchway. He climbed in upside down and landed on his head, gasping for air.

"We're done here," came Little Jack's voice over the ship's speakers.

Lancaster shook himself out of his daze and ran to the cockpit. He could already feel the ship pulling away and steering out of the gas giant. By the time he reached the front, they had passed out of the blowing colored dust. "I know how to overcome it," Lancaster said.

"Said the addict of his drugs," Little Jack responded without even looking back. He had even refused to put his glasses back on, he was so afraid of being controlled again.

"No, listen. I'm not regressing back on there. You are."

"Like Hades," Little Jack said.

"You'll have your glasses," Lancaster said, as though that would make it better.

Little Jack just raised his voice, "Like Hades!"

"Listen," Lancaster said, sitting and trying to reason with his partner. "There's something big ticket on that ship. Why else would it have such a strong defensive system? And that's what those illusions were. Nothing happened as soon as we regressed to this ship, but as

long as we were over there, it happened. And notice how it started only after we fed power into it.”

Little Jack cut the engines, but did not turn the ship around, nor even his body to face Lancaster. But he was listening.

“Here’s what we can do,” Lancaster said. “We don’t reattach their power. You regress in wearing your glasses. I vis through them remotely here on Odin. That way I can say what’s really there so if you start seeing something that isn’t right rip, I can warn you away from it. You then get to that hold and find out what’s so big ticket.”

Little Jack wasn’t speaking. His head was slumped in an expression of fear Lancaster had never seen nor expected of his partner. But he saw the logic in what Lancaster was saying, so, slowly, hesitantly, he relented. “We’ll need to get as much loot onto this ship as we can before that ship crunches.”

Lancaster smiled and nodded.

Little Jack was back to relying on his light. This time, he used the ones on his glasses, which shined a high beam of light in front of him. He was aided by an occasional lightning flash now blinking outside the ship and filling it with temporary light through its porthole windows.

Little Jack no longer trusted his peripheral vision. The gravity was off as well, so he was floating toward the cargo bay. Little Jack was focusing hard on everything he saw, making sure it was real by listing it to Lancaster and having it confirmed.

Lancaster sat at his control station on Odin’s Revenge’s cockpit, watching what Little Jack was seeing in the monitor. He was tempted to make a couple jokes about seeing something menacing, but his memory of the horror on Little Jack’s face convinced him not to.

The duo had left the oxygen and pressure still on the ship, not wanting to take the time to drain it, and also finding that it would be quicker to get in and out without a space suit. Little Jack found this to be true as he got to the hold quickly. This came as a relief to him, as he was already beginning to hear the ship groaning under the pressure of the atmosphere as he neared the doorway.

Inside, Little Jack had found that he had unlatched several cases. Again, he made sure Lancaster saw the same thing, and this time Lancaster couldn’t resist, asking if that was a hand reaching out of one of them. “I can leave this ship right now,” Little Jack said sternly. His voice was not joking, and he even began to turn away.

“Sorry, sorry. I had to...”

“No you didn’t. You want me to leave now?”

“That was wrong. There’s no hand. Sorry...”

“Just say something like that and I can leave...”

“It won’t happen again. See what you can find.”

Little Jack reluctantly got back to work. He threw open a couple containers and several odds and ends came floating out. Some of it had degraded over the centuries and only small pieces or even dust drifted out. But some articles were still in one piece, including several made of precious metals that appeared valuable. “Will this do for her highness?” Little Jack asked. He wasn’t the largest fan of their employer.

Lancaster’s eyes were wide. They were not imperial treasures, governmental seals, or religious artifacts, nor were they anything with any powers. But they were the sorts of relics that museums and universities craved; the sorts of items that helped one understand the day to day lives of a race of beings.

Little Jack had two large bags slung over his shoulders into which he shoved some of the more important items; the ones Lancaster told him to get. The ship was beginning to shake, the walls were rattling, and a low moan began to echo, and Little Jack was losing patience as Lancaster second guessed what he should grab.

Lancaster only faintly felt the effects. The shielding on Odin's Revenge was specifically made to resist the effects of such atmospheric pressure. It had been built during a time when Little Jack's hideout was inside a gas giant that was only a little weaker than the one they were currently in. What little rattling there was, Lancaster didn't notice, but Little Jack continuously reminded him.

There was, however, one danger to Lancaster at the moment; the lightning strikes, which were now growing in amplitude and rapidity the deeper they got. Though the ever increasing light they bathed in was harmless, the bolts themselves, should they ever cross Odin's Revenge, could, at the very least, take out their electronics, and thus render them helpless; dooming them to sink ever deeper into the planet's core.

When a sudden loud roar of metal was accompanied by one wall of the alien ship's hold bending in a few inches, Little Jack called it. But just as he was doing this, Lancaster's eyes were focusing on something he had not yet seen until now. "Turn back to your right," he requested.

"Forget that, I'm..."

"Back to your right!" Lancaster called with urgency. Just as Lancaster rarely saw Little Jack in a panic, Little Jack rarely heard Lancaster insist on something with such urgency. And so he turned to the right. There were no crates here, but there were several thin drawers latched into the wall. Each had a label just above the drawer. Lancaster recognized the top-most label, the one that was tagged a little larger than the other. It was a code. It took Lancaster a couple moments to recall where he'd seen it, then remembered it had been on the bridge. While searching the ship's records, he had found a series of numbers and letters in the Raginor language, and here it was written on a label just above a drawer. His answer as to what the purpose of this ship was may just be in there.

The walls were creaking louder than ever now. Distant popping was audible. Parts of the ship were coming apart. "Can I go now?" Little Jack asked, a slight shaking in his voice.

"Come on out!" Lancaster shouted.

The whole ship was swaying with occasional jolts when Little Jack got three quarters of the way to the exit. The last thing he expected to see was Lancaster coming in and floating past him, but that's exactly what happened.

"Where are you heading..."

"I'll be right behind you! Monitor my progress!" Lancaster shouted, holding up the Talki with the tracking device very much on. His free hand grabbed passing rods and bars and he pulled himself up, propelling himself forward. All around him, the corridors were twisting, like a rag when someone is squeezing out the water. When he reached the hold, he grasped the edge of the doorway and swung himself in. He shown the light on the wall he had seen planted his feet on the opposite wall, and shoved toward it. The ceiling and floor were now bending inward like bubbles, so Lancaster wasted no time with caution. Holding his hands out ahead of him, he collided with the drawer. It clicked inward, then slid out.

It was an empty table, the kind that pulled out of the backs of chairs in commercial flights where one would place their food. It was discouraging to not have the answers right there, but

Lancaster had planned on this possibility, and he had set the power to pump into the ship again based on a timer to go off right... now.

As the lights shot on and the artificial gravity pulled Lancaster's feet to the ground, the opened tray lit up with holograms, numbers, codes, etc. A whole litany of information that was far too much for him to take in, so he held up his recorder to capture as much as he could. Luckily, a few moments of time were bought for him as the ship seemed to settle for a brief respite.

In the center were several dots of light of varying sizes, a star map of sorts. Much of it was similar to what he had seen on the bridge with Mintaka labeled in Raginor characters. Another star off to the right was also emphasized with bold numbers and letters. Lancaster would look at that later when he reviewed the video footage. For now, he found that the hologram reacted to his hand gestures, and he shifted it upward to reveal the series of numbers and letters again that were written just above the drawer. These, however, continued on. Lancaster slid the hologram to the left to reveal more symbols along the string of numbers and letters. Some now were written above the other symbols, some below, and as they continued on, they wove in and out as though weaved together. Lancaster began to recognize the design: This was a genetic code. He had barely begun to read it; the string would logically go on for much longer, but he didn't know how much time he had.

Looking around again, it seemed he had plenty of time. The crunching and shaking had clearly calmed into remission. All he heard was a distant sound; like a voice calling him, but he couldn't make out the words. With any luck, it would remain that way long enough for him to record a significant amount of...

In a flash, the room was shaking; every wall was pressing inward; debris was flung in all directions. A consistent roar screamed in his ears mixed with the horrific screeching of metal tearing. Lights blinked on and off as power struggled to restore, and the door cracked...

The room was serene again. The containers were overflowing with valuable relics, and the tray revealed a plethora of information. The genetic code fed out...

The walls shrieked like ancient beasts as they bent into sharp shapes. The lights strobed, and...

...came back on, and the room was peaceful and inviting...

...then dark and chaotic. Little Jack's voice was calling frantically to Lancaster. He couldn't make out the words, but he knew his partner was ordering him to get out of the ship. A not so distant boom implied that the power plant was now destroyed, crushed by the pressure of the planet. The ship could no longer lie to him, but he had to get out now. He pressed his feet against the bulging wall, bent his knees, and shot toward the door.

Out in the corridor, the metallic beams had come loose and were now sharp, free floating spears. Lancaster would not have time to dodge them. He spun around the edge of the doorway, placed his feet against the wall, and shoved off, propelling himself as quickly as possible toward the outer hatch. Debris knocked against him as though trying to change his course, but Lancaster kept on along the straight line. Little Jack was still shouting to him on his Talki, but Lancaster was not using the energy to respond. The ship was crumpling behind him. He could hear it, and in one look behind him, he could see it. The end of the arterial corridor smashed into itself as though an outer hand was crushing it in the middle of its fist. Meter by meter it collapsed, coming closer and catching up to him.

When Lancaster reached a corner, he held out a hand to change his direction, and he shoved off to give him more speed. One of the sharpened beams brushed by him at a bullet's

speed, leaving a gash on his side. He knew blood was emerging, he could see a trail of red dropping behind him, but he didn't take the time to think about it. The hatchway was achingly close.

He could feel the pressure on his own body. His ears were ringing and his muscles were tense. It felt as though someone had his head in a vice grip and it was closing rapidly. The hatchway in front of him grew red past his bloodshot eyes. He reached his hand forward to grasp it, and found it difficult to move, as though he was being turned to stone and formed into a statue. He felt his fingers take hold and somehow he pulled himself into Odin's Revenge, but he had no consciousness of how he did it. The next thing he knew, he was shivering on the ship's floor, and the hatchway had closed. His body remained rigid, only slowly relaxing out of its tense repose as he gradually decompressed.

Though more prepared for these high pressure situations than most ships, Odin's Revenge was not immune to the planet's forces. The alien vessel crumpled up beneath it, but the winds still jostled her around, and the gravity yanked at its hull, trying to pull it down into its abyss, as though hungry for another morsel.

Little Jack knew enough to fly with the wind, then gently pull up and away from the center of the planet. As the hurricanes blew around him and the lightning flashes struck at every side, Little Jack piloted them out of the gas giant and back into normal space.

When Lancaster came to again, he felt stupid for having risked both their lives to get absolutely nothing. He couldn't trust the information he had seen. Anything there could be, and probably was, an illusion. But he did have his recorder, which ostensibly should have seen everything for what it was, unaltered by the ship's defensive mechanism.

Lancaster waited for a time when Little Jack was not paying attention to him in the cockpit to plug the data into his own console. If it wound up being an empty tray, which he assumed it would, he was already beating himself up enough. He didn't need Little Jack to do it, too. His partner was already put out with him that he had so endangered both of their lives.

But, much to his surprise, Lancaster found everything he had seen on the alien vessel: The map, the partial genetic code, more symbols and numbers of the Raginors, and the second star that was highlighted after Mintaka on the holographic map: Sol, the star system of Earth.