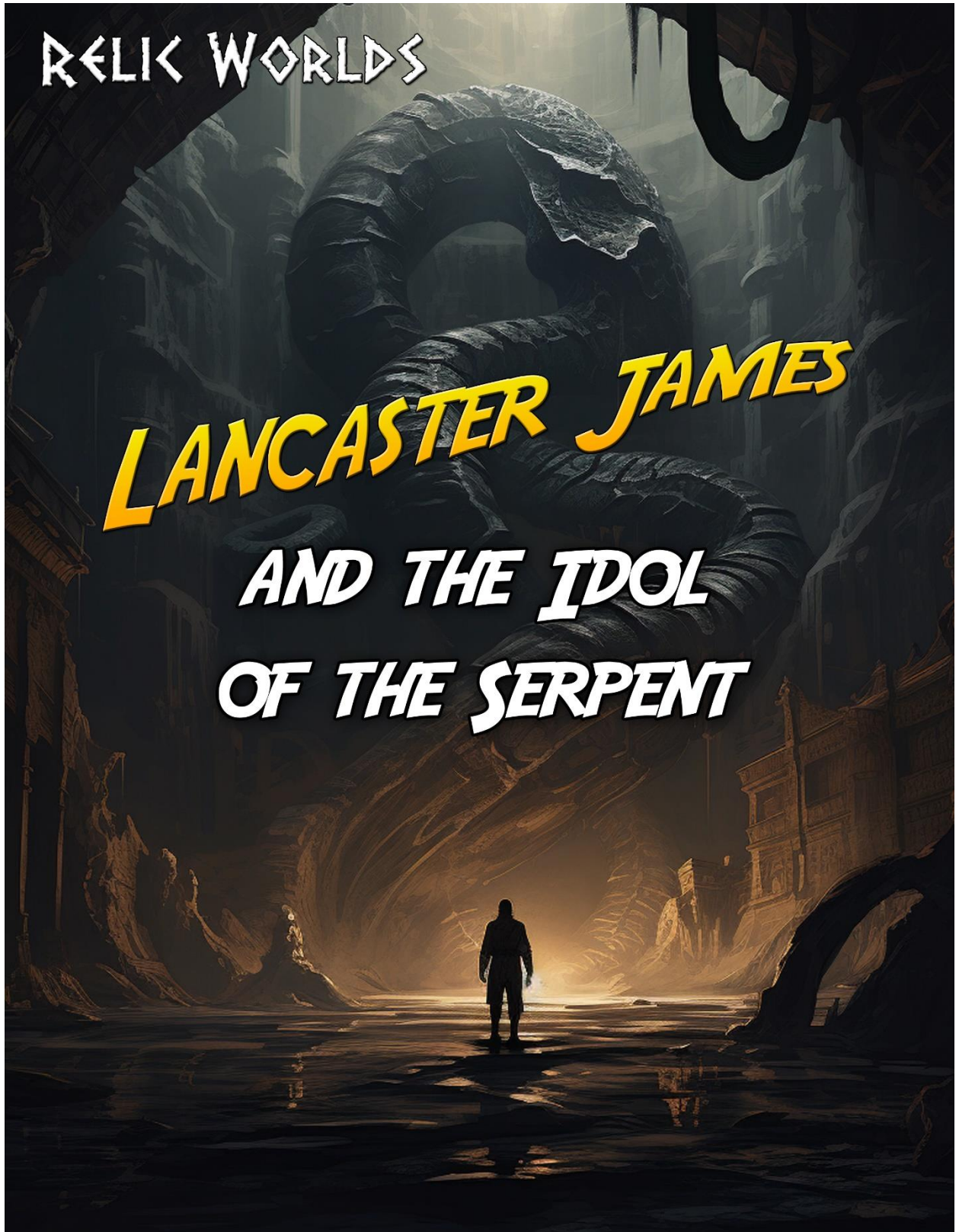


RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE IDOL
OF THE SERPENT*



The star system had no name designation, only a series of letters and numbers; meaning it was far from anywhere human civilization cared to settle. The planet's number within the system was two, making it second from its sun. It was just barely within the human habitable zone, so it would be hot, but there was plenty of water; meaning it recycled between its oceans and heavy cloud cover on a consistent, ongoing dance.

The Odin's Revenge had come out of spectrum drive close enough to get a good look at the planet. They were above its south pole, and they could see the oceans and land through the breaks in the clouds. It seemed to be a world with small, yet solid continents, most of which were heavily wooded with occasional rugged mountains. Around the planet were more than a dozen moons, one of which was a cluster of asteroids orbiting one central rock whose gravity kept them together.

Little Jack, the ship's pilot, was interested enough in seeing how this worked that he wanted to go check out that moon; but his partner, Lancaster James, had brought them to find something important.

He had a device which had been gifted to him by the descendants of an ancient alien race which he called the Quantum Scepter. It was linked to crystals on numerous planets in some way that sounded like spooky magic to Little Jack. Lancaster corrected him and said it was referred to as "spooky physics" and explained something about entanglement. Little Jack didn't try to understand; he was just the pilot. What was important was that holographic images of the places where these crystals were located were projected above the scepter. Lancaster was able to swipe through these and see various locations where this ancient civilization had once lived.

One of these images revealed ruins that Lancaster said looked like the Palace of Kir'chick; a presumed word of the Milak Shivar. Anthropologists like Lancaster had been trying to guess at the proper sounds of every alien language, and now that he had met the descendants of that race, he figured he had a better sense of the way they spoke.

Within the ruins of Kir'chick was believed to be an artifact that archaeologists called the Verdurous Shell; one of the powerful items made by the Milak Shivar which held within it perpetual energy. It had been built as an idol for its people, but it had uses far beyond worship. If any of the corporate empires got hold of it, the device would give them an edge on their wars which had sparked up over these relics. If someone got it who desired to use it for the betterment of humanity, it could help millions.

Lancaster held the scepter up before him. The holographic image was already set to this world. All it showed was the crumbled walls covered in vines and the deep courtyard half filled with swamp water. But he had learned to connect with the device on a mental level. The descendant priest who had given it to him had somehow granted him the ability to interact with the scepter, and Lancaster could tell where the image was coming from just by looking at it. He had been able to provide Little Jack with the coordinates, and now that they were here, he was able to feel where it was on the planet. During previous interactions on other worlds he had been able to only get them close to what they were looking for; but he had learned a little more each time. Now he hoped to get them right on target.

Lancaster gave directions of where to land on the planet by pointing to an area along the horizon and saying, "thereabout."

"That's just as good as coordinates," Little Jack said sarcastically. "I'll just plug in 'thereabouts' and I'm abso we'll have a safe landing."

Lancaster growled with frustration. The device wasn't giving him numerical directions; it worked on a different system than human mathematics. Mankind did not even exist when it

was invented. So he turned toward his part of the dashboard, placed the scepter between his legs and squeezed it in place; an act he felt was somehow sacrilegious. He then concentrated on what it was showing him while he rolled around the image of the planet's surface as constructed by their scanners. When he felt he had the correct location, he pressed down his finger.

The coordinates of the location came up on Little Jack's screen. He could see where it was, and his scanners detected some form of artificial construction. But there were two problems. One, the area around it was too rugged. The thick jungle and the jagged rocks, not to mention the ruins themselves, denied a landing zone. Second, the cloud cover was thick, and there was a heavy rain. It would be a lot to risk Odin's Revenge going through this. However, there was the glider. Little Jack mentioned this, and was beginning to explain that they should wait until the weather cleared, but Lancaster was already in the back suiting up.

"You know, there is a sift where one has to ask whether this is all really worth it," Little Jack said.

"Those corporate overlords are apprending how to use these things," Lancaster explained, "and I'd rather they be in our hands than theirs. Get me as close as you can." Lancaster opened a hatch in the floor and climbed into the small craft in the bottom.

Little Jack dropped into the atmosphere, then down to just over the cloud cover. He monitored the weather patterns and found an area where the rain and wind was less intense, and there was no lightning. Lancaster could see this as well through his heads up display. So when they got close enough to his target, he said, "Don't miss me too much."

"Don't stop to read every historical plaque," Little Jack responded, and Lancaster released from the ship.

The glider had been improved to a more solid aircraft design than they had been using in the past. Having made some money on low-level relics they had sold, the duo had made it possible to fly around a bit more before finding a landing spot so Little Jack could drop him off further away.

The solid design was going to help today in protecting the anthropologist from weather conditions. Not long into his flight, Lancaster could feel the shaking from the bottom of his craft. There was going to be a lot of turbulence.

As if that wasn't enough trouble, Little Jack detected a spacecraft coming out of hiding from behind one of the moons. Though it was smaller than most warships, it was large enough to be categorized as a capital ship. "Pirates," Little Jack snarled. He then warned Lancaster what was happening, and told him to re-dock.

"Re-docking takes time we might not have," Lancaster answered. "Besides, that's all the more ration I need to get this artifact."

They had done this sort of thing enough times in the past, so Little Jack knew what to do. "I'll be back in a couple hours," he said. "Send a signal on our frequency when you're ready for a pickup."

"Wilco," Lancaster said, and he dropped down toward the clouds while Little Jack turned and shot back toward orbit.

The glider vibrated with greater intensity while it was enveloped by the white plumes of condensation. As he dropped further into them, all grew darker gray, and the vibrations turned to shaking. Lancaster had to hold the control stick harder as the wind tried to throw him to one side, then another. Suddenly he dropped a couple hundred feet, then stopped falling almost as if he had hit something. He then jostled up, then down again. Lancaster pressed the stick forward, dipping himself further down until he peeked out of the bottom of the cloud level. Rain now

pelted the roof of the glider, pounding like marbles on a tin roof. But the pressure was not as bad as it sounded, and the rain was only moderate.

Far below, green and blue and yellow treetops stretched away into fog in every direction except to his right where, after a couple dozen miles, it turned into ocean. Brown and gray mountains broke up the view, creating uneven lines across the landscape.

The image Lancaster had seen in the Quantum Scepter included mountainous terrain in the background behind some of the ruins. Lancaster zoomed in the view to get a closer look at the mountain ranges. He was trying to match what he had seen.

After about a minute of searching, Lancaster stopped. He had not found the background from the hologram, but he had found the crumbled remains of a building. The ruins. Lancaster steered in that direction, lowered in altitude, and searched for clearings near his destination. The rain struck harder now as he got further from its source, causing him to need to hold firmer to the stick, and blasting louder in his ears. But it was still not a real danger.

As he came closer, he did not find a clearing, but he found what appeared to be the part of the ruins for which he was searching. Lancaster focused in on the spot. It looked right. As long as he could find a landing...

An explosion blasted near his plane. He had been so focused on his destination that he had not seen the trail of a rocket arcing through the sky toward him. He looked over to see another heading in his direction; this one with better aim. Lancaster pulled hard to the right, narrowly avoiding the rocket, which he heard rush by beneath him.

He looked down at the canopy of trees beneath him and spotted two more puffs of smoke. Now he could see where they were headed, so he steered past them, increasing his speed by pointing down. They swished by, and both exploded not long after he was past, their shrapnel spreading uselessly away.

Lancaster pulled up not far from the tips of the trees. Birds leaped out, disturbed from their perches. He slowed slightly, getting his bearings on where his destination was. That was the perfect time for one more well-aimed shot, and this time it found its mark; or at least the shrapnel did.

The plane jolted forward. Every alarm went off and added to the cacophony of the explosion, the flames, the wind which entered through the now gaping hole, and pelting rain still slamming on the top. Lancaster kept hold of the steering stick, doing everything he could to keep it out of a spin. He felt the bottom dropping, slowly at first, then it picked up speed. Luckily, the wings were still mostly there, and his descent was slowed, though nothing could stop it now. The best he could do would be to find a flat, un-forested parcel of land where he could set down.

There was none. Woods were everywhere, with the only exception being the sides of some of the jagged hillsides, but those would be worse. He kept searching, even as the tips of the trees nipped at his landing gear. Finally, and all at once, they grabbed hold of his plane's bottom frame, and he jolted to a stop. Lancaster James fell forward into the dashboard, his head hit the glass. His seatbelt kept him from flying through it, but he nevertheless fell unconscious.

* * *

The loud, obnoxious cawing of a bird woke Lancaster into a splitting headache. His eyes blinked open, and the first thing he saw was a blur of white. It wasn't just his vision; the light was refracting off the cracks on the front window, creating a blinding light which now added to his headache. Lancaster forgot momentarily why he was in a small plane sitting atop the trees. It was raining out. Could that have something to do with it? A clap of thunder woke him up further and he realized that he was not there due to the rain. It was for an idol. An artifact! That was it. And slowly it came back to him.

The bird squawked again. What Lancaster would give for a rock to throw at that thing! Then he remembered the pirates! They must have had raiders on the ground who shot him down. That meant they'd be looking for him; to confirm their kill. Lancaster began unfastening his seatbelt at a faster rate.

He had just released the belt when he heard the whir of a hovercraft approaching through the jungle, and the screaming animals leaping out of its way. Lancaster had seconds now, not minutes. He scrambled out of a gap in the hull of the vehicle made from its crash landing. He found that he was in a tree. The ground was about ten yards below, maybe slightly less. But there was a branch nearby that should sustain his weight, so he leaped onto it and crawled across to the next tree.

It was none too soon. The branch was still shaking slightly when the hovercraft appeared below. It was a transport with a solid top. Two men exited from the driver and passenger sides of the front. The driver's face was covered in tattoos; the passenger's face was clear. He was wearing the usual casual clothing, along with items useful for survival attached to him at several points. Lancaster recognized him as an archaeologist on expedition.

The two men were looking up at the glider. They spoke about it, and Lancaster could hear their voices, but not their words. Lancaster used their noise and the hum of the hovercraft to mask the sound of his climbing down the tree. His muscles ached as he did, and sharp pains nearly caused him to fall, but he managed to make it to the next level of branches.

The driver reached into the truck and pulled out a short, thick rifle. He pointed it at the glider and fired. The sound of a thud followed and something flew through the sky, landing on the glider and setting it ablaze. The gunman grinned.

Lancaster looked over the truck and spotted a logo on it. Corporations couldn't help but place their logos on things wherever they could. These people were financed by the Valeze Corp. These weren't pirates, they were hired guns; privateers. Perhaps the archaeologist was an independent contractor; but the driver, the crew of the ship that appeared, and whoever was undoubtedly in the back of the hover truck were all mercenary pirates.

The archaeologist eyed the glider with a slight bit of regret, but when he saw the privateer's joy, he smiled back, and they got into the truck. The driver shouted something to those in the back and he put the vehicle in gear. Lancaster only had once chance to tag along, so he skimmed down the tree, his limbs aching as he did, and he dropped onto the roof from a few feet above. He hoped it was close enough so his fall was not heard by everyone inside, but he would have to take his chances.

As it so happened, a few of the guards in the back heard him, but they went by orders of those who paid them, not on their own initiative. So they said nothing.

The hover truck drove for half an hour, sometimes smoothly around trees, sometimes tediously searching for enough room, or weaker branches to plough through. Lancaster crawled close enough to the front to listen in on the driver and the passenger. Most of the time it was complaints of the driver, musing on whether this treasure was truly worth it. The archaeologist

tried to reassure him that it was, and that it was far more than treasure. It had value and power beyond what could be measured upon the surface. The privateer leader did not care; as long as he was getting paid.

At last they arrived in a clearing. Before them was revealed the walls of a giant ruin at the base of a mountain. Lancaster pulled out the scepter and turned it on to the jewel he was currently seeking. The truck he was riding on, as well as the image of himself atop it, could be seen driving into view from a distance. Lancaster looked in the direction from which this image was projected. He could see nothing, but he knew that he was close.

As they passed a few crumbled walls, Lancaster slid off the side and rolled over to some cover so those in the back of the truck would not see him. His ribs ached with every thud, but he bared it, knowing that being spotted would be infinitely worse.

The sounds of the hovercraft disappeared into the distance, and Lancaster found himself in the silence broken only by the buzzing of the local insects. He peeked around the corner and saw that the ruins stretched out across an open space with sparse trees and brush which dipped down like a shallow bowl into a pit whose bottom Lancaster could not yet see. The hovercraft flew along the perimeter of this as if exploring the rim before going any further.

Lancaster decided to get a jump on them by heading out first. He maneuvered behind the walls, keeping them between himself and the privateers; making his way downward toward the center of this former settlement. This was Kir'chick, Lancaster was certain of it; an ancient colony of the Milak Shivar. He could stop at each wall and study it for information to gain the most incredible knowledge, but he continued on, feeling the ground lower as he went in pursuit of the Verdurous Shell.

The ground became wetter, and splotches of puddles became more abundant the lower Lancaster went. Eventually, most of the ground was wet, and Lancaster was either squishing soft ground beneath his feet or wading in water past his ankles. He had also gone so low that the late afternoon light did not beam down onto him, and it became as dark as twilight. He guided his way with the recognition setting of his Illuminator.

The privateers had found a place to park on the opposite side of the periphery. The squad filed out, 12 in all. There were 10 tarmen privateers, the tattooed commander, and the archaeologist. This was where they were ordered to search, so they got to work; heading down the decline. The archaeologist was in the lead, excited by what they were likely to find.

Lancaster arrived at a small island with a few walls around it at the base of the natural bowl. He had discovered enough artifacts by now that he knew the décor around them, and they either looked something like this, or they had traps around them which were more enclosed and likely to kill the intruder if they did not know the exact methods by which to enter.

Lancaster believed this was the former, and he set about locating the artifact for which he had come. It was entirely possible that the item was not here. The Milak Shivar could have moved it while they still existed, or some other species could have come and taken it in the hundreds of thousands of years since. Whatever the case, Lancaster wished to...

A laser blast rang out from a distance and echoed against the walls of the ruins. Lancaster instinctively dove for cover. The shot hit a wall nowhere near him, but close enough to be certain it was meant for him. He peeked out, and spotted the entire squad of privateers heading in his direction, guns drawn, searching.

Lancaster looked around for a way to move about the ruins with minimal exposure. He would not have time within these ruins with the privateers on the move, but he needed to at least

take a look for the relic of Kir'chick before it was taken by these mercenaries. If they were willing to go to this extremity for it, the object must be powerful.

He rounded a corner and there it was, all of a sudden. Lancaster felt as though he had not even earned it; the artifact had simply appeared before him. It was still a dozen meters from him, but it was there; real, a physical fact of nature sitting on a stone ledge. It was about a meter in size. A well rounded green egg sat on two bird-like creatures whose necks were craned upward, cradling it. The egg was cut, and golden stitching, like surgery, ran across its mid-section. At the top were two brass leaves. At the bottom was a landing pad with decorative controls to hold it in place, and, it appeared, to create a light source.

Then the long shadows of people appeared at the other end of this lowest point of the ruins. Their voices echoed against the crater-like borders; so much so that it was difficult to get a bearing on where all of them were. Even their footfalls and the splashing in the puddles sounded like they could be anywhere. Lancaster did not know whether he should make a run for the device, or at what angles he would be spotted. They would likely have vision enhancers given to them by their corporate sponsor. He had only his Illuminator, which was giving away his position as much as it was revealing anything to him. He switched it to infrared, and got readings of heat signatures in scattered locations to the left and right; and, of course, ahead of him where the privateers had parked their vehicle.

Lancaster also caught a glimpse of something briefly; something that seemed larger than a person and with no regular form. It appeared in a wall's gap; then disappeared behind the opposite end. He wondered if the privateers had brought an animal with them to sniff out opposition.

He reasoned that there would be no better time than the present, so he set his Illuminator to a low beam, found the idol, and started for it. Someone spotted him right away; or likely heard him because his feet splashed in a large puddle of water. They shouted for him to stop; then opened fire. Lancaster dove forward for some cover there. The shots were good; they managed to hit the wall he was hiding behind. The bright flashes of the laser beams revealed his location, and others from the opposite side joined in. Lancaster hoped there would be a break, but they didn't let up. His chance for the device was gone, and now he searched for a way to escape. He didn't know where others might be maneuvering around to hit him from the opposite end, and corporate paid pirates weren't known for taking prisoners. The shots pinning him in place were intensifying, and he could just hear someone giving orders over them, so his time was short.

Just as he had set himself to run for what looked like an ancient window, a scream came from one of the clumps of enemies. Shouting followed, and the shots hitting Lancaster's wall lightened; even stopped from one of the directions. Now more laser blasts sounded, but not toward Lancaster. They were firing at something closer to them. More screaming followed from several voices. They were desperate, panicked, begging for help. A monstrous roar boomed above all of them, and it stopped with a crunch, and one of the voices died out.

Lancaster peeked in that direction, pointing his Illuminator on infrared. He could only make out shapes, and they were in total chaos. There was a mass of frantically moving limbs and laser blasts, and one large blob whose specific body parts Lancaster could not make out. There seemed to be a large, tangled, serpentine body, and there appeared to be vine-like arms slapping or grabbing the people. One of those people fell apart, its body popping like a balloon and its limbs exploding in every direction.

The firing that was coming at Lancaster from the opposite direction stopped. They were clearly distracted with something more important. Now was his chance, and Lancaster leaped over the wall and dashed at the artifact.

Bumping into a wall, he found that he had misjudged where it was. Lancaster flicked the Illuminator to white light again and looked around. The loud chaos of the battle disoriented him, and his light shook as he searched. He found his own footprints, and he followed them back up to where he had gone in the wrong direction.

But there in front of him was the privateer with the tattooed face. He appeared happy to see Lancaster, and he lifted his carbine. Lancaster tried to lift his Illuminator first.

But the one who had the initiative was the monster. Its body slithered suddenly down from above, landing on the tattooed man and squashing him against the ground. His arm writhed to the side, its finger firing the gun. A tendril rolled out from the monster's body, wrapped around the arm, and yanked it off.

The back of the body passed by Lancaster, and he saw where the artifact was sitting. He dashed to it and tried to pick it up. It was attached to the ground. He knelt down and looked it over as he heard privateers dying all around him. There were latches holding the device down. He felt around them, seeing how they worked while also searching for traps. He found none, and he knew the latching mechanism, which was lucky because it sounded like the monster was running out of corporate pirates.

Lancaster's hand shook as he worked at one latch. He paused and took in a breath, and he was able to stop shivering just long enough to undo it. He could feel the device loosen in his grip. The last of the screams died out. He could hear the hovercraft flying away, and Lancaster was still working away at the other latch. It had rusted to its base; and it felt like it was welded. No amount of working at it was going to help.

Now he could hear the beast. Its muscular body was pulling its weight over, through, and around the ruined walls. It slithered across the dirt and through the water. A rattling shivered from within, like bones purring. It was getting louder, as though moving toward Lancaster; but it veered off toward the sound of the only remaining privateer. Someone was struggling for breath and crawling over the ground and masonry, trying to get out of this forsaken crater.

This distraction gave Lancaster the time to pull out a laser cutting tool he had in one of the pockets of his jacket. Holding the artifact with one arm, he cut with the other. A shiver of fear and guilt ran down Lancaster's spine as he heard the person scream in terror, then agony, and finally fade into death. The noise had gone on just long enough for him to finish the cut. He froze for a moment, listening for any noise. There was none. Even the monster seemed to be taking a break. So Lancaster gingerly put the device in his jacket pocket.

He then slowly stretched a bungee cord out of one shoulder of his jacket. Watching for any sign of the monster, he reached the cord over the artifact, then attached it to one of the bird decorations at the bottom. Then, just as quietly, he pulled another bungee cord out of the opposite shoulder and stretched it over the artifact, attaching it to the other bird decoration at the bottom. There was a slight "cling" noise as the cord attached, which seemed to reverberate through the small remains of a room Lancaster was in; but he told himself it hadn't carried any further.

He could hear the noise of shifting in the distance. It sounded like a serpent moving, but he could not be sure. The beast might have heard him, or it might just be moving around, or the sound might be nothing.

Regardless of what it was, Lancaster needed to move. He hoisted the artifact onto his back, resisting a grunt that tried to jump out of his throat. Then he began to creep out of the ruins in the direction from which he had come.

Lancaster eyed the left and right only briefly as he went. In the darkness within the crater, it would be difficult to see anything unless he shone a beam onto it, which itself was a terrible idea. And the best thing he could hope to do would be to keep his feet and make as little noise as possible. So he watched ahead of him as he carefully stepped over boulders, past puddles, and around walls.

It was slow, yet steady progress. Subtle noises sounded all around him, but their sources were always unclear. He kept on his path.

But then the unmistakable rattle fell upon his ears from the left. It was approaching fast, along with the leathery sliding sounds over crusted walls. Additional thudding sounds Lancaster did not understand also grew in intensity, and he turned to see they were the tendrils grabbing pieces of ruins to pull the monster forward. Its face had a snout like a yellow and orange shark. Its neck stretched out like a chromatic cobra. Lines of bones pressed against the skin made it almost seem to have an exoskeleton. Its size in girth was difficult to measure as it fluctuated when it moved; making it anywhere from eight feet wide at its smallest, and twenty-five at its widest. The fluctuation and the bones explained the rattling noise.

But the explanation would do Lancaster no good if he was devoured. And so he grabbed his Illuminator tightly. He would have only one chance at this. As the creature's dead eyes opened wide, prepared to lurch at him, Lancaster pointed the device directly at him and fired off a blast of light. It was so intense and so sudden that the beast recoiled in shock. It looked away, blinking, then began shaking, as if that would take away the spots all over its vision. The beast's body bulled back, then stumbled. Soon it fell to the side, and it rolled over onto some ruins, crushing them entirely. It then rolled over, smashing more and more ancient walls as it fell to the bottom.

Lancaster felt a strong pang of guilt, both for what he had done to the monster, and to the ruins. But he had the relic, and he needed to get out of there. So he continued along, reaching the top and hurrying into the jungle.

Once he had put some distance between himself and the ruins, he pulled out his Talki and tried to call his partner. He could hear only static coming from it. He looked up and found the treetop canopy to be thick with foliage. He moved around, listening to the static as he tried to find a location where it went clear, or at least where he could see the sky. He could not find it.

But he did find that the ground began to rise again in a certain direction. Lancaster decided to walk that way, climbing upward steadily, and slowly, as he listened for a sign, and spoke into his comm.

After at least half an hour, he heard a voice. "Little Jack," he said excitedly. But then he realized that it was not his partner he was hearing. There was still only static from his Talki, but voices were emerging from a point in the woods up ahead. There was also the hum of an engine. A ship. A shuttle, if he was not mistaken. Lancaster lowered his head and sneaked forward.

He came upon a clearing. Within it he could see a small, temporary building. Just past it was a shuttle. He had been right. A pair of privateers were standing around it.

A hover truck sped out of the woods from the left and came to a stop behind the shuttle. Driving it was the archaeologist who bore a scar of fear on his face.

The privateers approached the vehicle. Lancaster took the opportunity to hurry up to the back of the building. There, he could hear the archaeologist stammering out an incoherent

description of what he had witnessed. The others were confused, and asked where their commander was. He began to blubber, and said he just wanted to get out of there.

Lancaster peeked around the corner at the shuttle. It was temptingly close, and it was ready to fly. The privateers were not far away, but they were distracted with the archaeologist; so Lancaster took his chance and rushed the shuttle!

Just as he reached it, the pilot appeared at the doorway from inside. Lancaster did not stop. The weight of the idol on his back gave him greater mass, and his momentum was at full speed. He lowered his head, and smashed into the man!

The two of them flew into the shuttle. The pilot fell to the floor on his back. Lancaster heard an audible gasp as his breath was knocked out of him. He would be stunned for a moment; perhaps just long enough for Lancaster to launch the ship. Little Jack had taught him how to do this quickly, and a shuttle had some of the simplest controls. He would need to do it fast, as he could hear the others from outside closing in.

The first one had reached the doorway as Lancaster managed to make this ship lurch into the sky. The one at the door held onto the side and pulled himself in while he pulled his pistol with the other hand and pointed it at Lancaster. Lancaster pulled back the stick, putting them into a steeper climb. The commander managed to hold on and fired, hitting the artifact still on Lancaster's back. It provided him with a little bit of cover, but a slight readjustment would be all the tarman needed.

Then the pilot stood. Still partially dazed, he was getting his breath back... and he was between the two other men. Lancaster rose from his seat. Keeping the artifact between himself and the others, he hurriedly backed up toward them. The one with the pistol took a shot, hitting his pilot in the shoulder, then hitting the artifact again. Lancaster kept backing up quickly. He felt himself hit the pilot, and they kept going, backing into the other. The weight overcame them, and the two men fell out the door.

Lancaster, too, felt himself falling backward out into the rushing wind. He grabbed the side and held on for dear life. The weight of the idol pulled him backward, as though willing them to slip outside. Lancaster's hand felt for the door button. He found it and pressed it. The door began to close. He yanked forward, but he did not clear the door on time. It was stopped by the artifact, which held the door open, and held him in place.

Now the shuttle began to drift to the side. With no one controlling it, the shuttle was drifting from its course, and beginning to stall. Lancaster tried to yank forward, but the door would not let him budge. To make matters worse, he could see out the front that a shape was beginning to form out of the clouds. It was the main pirate ship. It had no doubt learned about the stealing of their shuttle, and was coming to blow him out of the sky.

Lancaster tried to wiggle out of the straps to run to the controls, but they were attached tightly to him. He tried to tear his clothes and rip away. But then suddenly his Talki began to make a sound again. It was his partner's voice. Lancaster grabbed it and held it to his mouth. "Little Jack?" he shouted.

"You need some help?" his partner asked.

The pirate ship was lining up on him. "You register you could pick me up?" Lancaster asked.

"I'm right below you," Little Jack said. "Drop on."

It would be the biggest leap of faith Lancaster had ever made, but he knew he had mere seconds. His hand reached over and smacked the door open button. He felt the impromptu backpack come loose. It began to pull him backward, and this time he let it. He fell out of the

shuttle. As he fell below it, the craft exploded. The concussive blast pressed at his torso and hurtled him downward.

It was a half second later his descent suddenly stopped. His limbs flailed like a turtle which had been thrown backward onto the ground. It took him a moment to get his breath back. He heard the familiar voice on his Talki. "You landed? Get in here before they blast us out of the sky."

Lancaster saw the pirate ship lining up on them. Little Jack could hardly maneuver without throwing him off. So Lancaster yanked over to the side. He knew where the top hatch was, so he opened it. He rolled inside, praying that the artifact would fit. It did... barely. Once inside, he closed the hatch immediately and shouted, "In!"

Little Jack did not hesitate. He turned, then twisted, avoiding laser blasts from the privateer vessel. The weight of the artifact was helpful to keeping Lancaster nailed to one spot. But he could do nothing more.

It was all up to Little Jack, and his flying ability. The Odin's Revenge juked and lurched unpredictably until he could get it up into cloud cover. There, Little Jack disappeared from the privateer. The billows were extensive enough that he could remain within them, unseen for many hundreds of miles. At last, when he believed the coast was clear, Little Jack pulled up out of the cloud cover, and made his way to orbit.

Lancaster left his prize in the hold and made his way to the cockpit. He was dizzy, unsteady on his feet; and he was relieved to at last sit. There he rested silently for a couple minutes. Little Jack said nothing as he opened up the hole in space which allowed them to use the spectrum drive and get far away from this planet and solar system. He, too, sat back and took a rest.

The two men sat silently in the darkness of the brane. The hole to their universe closed behind them, and the vibration of this gravitational dimension shivered through every material. For a long time there was no sound save for their occasional deep breaths.

Then, when sufficient time had passed, Lancaster opened his eyes again and sat upright. He pulled the Quantum Scepter from its holster. Turning it on, he began to page through more of the holographic locations to find their next target.

The End