



## Part 1

Odin's Revenge emerged from Spectrum space into a dim, lifeless system. Ahead of it sat a bright star; compact and luminescent... ready to go supernova.

The system was unlisted on many human maps; and scanning the area, Little Jack could see why. There were no planets, nor hardly even any celestial bodies; just a sparse asteroid belt far out in the reaches of the star's gravitational pull with minimal debris.

Little Jack and his partner Lancaster James had been directed to investigate this star system because it was listed on an important map created by an ancient species that had wanted to wipe out all other civilizations. This map had been leading the pair to the ruins of ancient civilizations that held within them the secret of what had happened in the centuries before humans took to the stars.

There was a strange reading close to the star itself. As Little Jack began to hone in on it with the sensors, Lancaster James raised up in his seat, recognizing it. He saw first one, then two, then several more belts surrounding the star, all crossing one another at a single point on each side. "A Dyson Sphere," he muttered in awe.

Though Dyson Spheres had originally been theorized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century 300 years earlier, only evidence of one had ever been found, and that had been in pieces, orbiting a star like an asteroid belt. Nothing of any value had ever been recovered from it. But this looked entirely intact.

Little Jack looked at him strangely. Though his expressions were usually hidden behind his large, frosted over glasses, Lancaster could read his mood by the way he held his head and the tightness of his jaw. So Lancaster explained, "It's a megastructure that surrounds a star, capturing its energy for incredible amounts of power. It could only be built by a highly advanced civilization."

"And one that doesn't want to be found," Little Jack said.

Lancaster shrugged, "I'm not so abso about that."

Little Jack hit a switch to put some data onto the main screen on the console. "It's close enough to the star to hide in its radiation. If they're so advanced, they could have settled on more planets."

Lancaster's jaw dropped with anticipation. If this had remained hidden from human detection, perhaps it remained hidden from all other species and avoided the great purge that had destroyed every civilization in the known galaxy. Maybe these aliens were still there.

His hope dropped when he remembered the star would be exploding soon, and certainly, any intelligent creatures on board would recognize that. But he held onto a little hope. "See if you can signal them," Lancaster said. Little Jack pressed some buttons, sending an electronic signal that simply expressed their presence, and a communication with a standard human greeting of hello. They waited for a few minutes and sent out a couple more signals, but there was no response.

Then Little Jack heard something faint. He switched to headphones that he quickly placed over his ears. The signal was still faint, so he twisted some audio dials to focus in on the sound and amplify active sound frequencies. Finding it, he switched the sound to the main cockpit speakers so they could both hear. Through the fuzzy hiss they began to make out the sounds of voices. As they became clearer, words formed... human words. Little Jack cleared the signal some more and they were able to distinguish what the words were saying.

Most of it was arbitrary; messages and conversations. A little of it was entertainment. None of it was intended to be beamed here; they were intercepting signals. Little Jack confirmed this fact by finding populated star systems on each side of them. Looking at the star map Little Jack had up, Lancaster also saw star systems on different sides of them that had once been populated by other civilizations. There had probably been plenty of broadcasts that came through here, but not a lot of traffic considering the lack of planets on which to land.

As the two men listened, they got closer to the mega-structure, looking it over carefully as they did. Against the vastness of the star, each strand of the framework was like a string circling a globe, but the closer they got, the more they found that these bands were massive constructs, about three kilometers thick on all sides, which then stretched billions of kilometers around their host sun. They were made of a metal alloy common among advanced alien civilizations that had learned to mix their metals to last; though the architecture here was stronger than anything they had ever witnessed. It had to be to last millennia against the ongoing strain of a star.

Little Jack was surprised to detect power surging through the Dyson Sphere, but Lancaster wasn't. The concept of these structures was to continually capture power from a star to meet the needs of an ever-growing population, regardless of whether that population was still present or not. As long as the structure stood, it should continue to siphon power.

"Where do you want to go in?" Little Jack asked.

"Best spot should be where the rings converge," Lancaster said.

Little Jack flew them to the convergence point that was closest to them. The entire structure was spinning slowly around the star, which was particularly visible at the lit up hub where an access hatch spun in place. Its continual twisting was enough to make one dizzy. Being an experienced pilot, however, Little Jack had landed in a number of centripetal gravity stations where one had to match the spin of the hangar opening, so he was used to this maneuver. He took a minute or so lining up the ship along the central axis such that the bottom of it was facing the Dyson Sphere, then fired the thrusters on one side to make the ship spin. Carefully, he adjusted the speed to match the structure, then he lowered onto it.

As they got closer, Lancaster nervously prepared himself to board. He was full of anticipation and excitement. Theoretically, the beings who created this megastructure could still be inside, living their lives isolated from the rest of the galaxy. However, if they were still there, they likely had a reason for wanting to remain isolated and might not greet intruders.

Nevertheless, he put on his favorite jacket with the many pockets, and popped on his hat. He wouldn't need a space suit since Little Jack was covering the access hatches with a pressurized umbilical. The question was how breathable it would be on board the vessel. Most life they had witnessed had developed on oxygen-based planets, but it was entirely possible for a species to live on something poisonous to them.

As such, Lancaster wore an oxygen mask and approached the hatch. It was large for him, about five meters across, but strangely it wasn't large enough to drive a ship into it. Perhaps, he considered, this was where they plugged in the nose cone? Or maybe they were a small species. He had come across ruins the size of human toys before, and this could be the same; though it was hard to imagine such a small species building something so enormous.

He found a key pad, one that was just below human hand height, and with digits perfectly sized for his fingers. Studying the symbols on the keys, he recognized their shapes. Lancaster yanked out his notebook and flipped it to the tab he suspected. He was right; they were Chiotho.

This made sense as throughout the existence of the Chiotho, a large contingent of them rallied for isolationism. During their era in the galaxy, a number of civilizations had connected and created a senate from which to make decisions. The Chiotho, though not antagonistic toward them, had begged off and cut their own path. To an extent, they had been right to, as they survived the purge longer than the others. But non-interference would not spare them, and they were eventually wiped out by the Siguerans; a murderous race that destroyed most civilizations, and was likely still out there somewhere hidden away until they found that humans had set foot out in the galaxy.

The Chiotho had wielded extra fingers on their hands at the base of their palms. Their keypad reflected this, with a second row curved under the first. Lancaster would likely have to use both hands to type in the correct combination, whatever it was. He paged through his studies on the Chiotho and found the most likely series of keys to be used for entering a space dock. He found the matching symbols on the key pad and pressed them, combining the top entries with the bottom ones, similar to the way a person plays the piano. To his amazement, Lancaster got it right on the first try! It was also to his horror, as the door opened before he was ready, and his heart leaped in fear at what could be on the other side.

It was empty. Just a rather large chamber with a control center on one side and a doorway on the other end. There was no keypad here, so it seemed it would open easily. But Lancaster didn't want to intrude. He already felt like a thief sneaking into someone's home; he didn't wish to continue to impose uninvited. "Hello?" he called out. It was an absurd and fruitless gesture, as was his next statement, "I come in peace!" He could have said "I've come to kill you all" and it wouldn't make any difference. Not only would an alien species speak a different language; after evolving in a completely different way, they would have an entirely different method of speaking altogether. For all they knew, Lancaster could be farting. But Lancaster still felt it best to make his presence known on his terms. Allowing them to find him would be more dangerous.

Lancaster opened the inner door and continued into the structure. Lights blinked on, illuminating a narrow corridor. The architecture was efficient with little flourish, the same as he had seen at most Chiotho ruins. It was also very sterile, either untouched or reverently cleaned. This continued to be the case as he followed several corridors, each one being illuminated by lights that blinked to life. Side doors led only to small storage rooms that either held tools and replacement parts, or computer access points.

Despite finding very little, Lancaster moved slowly, cautiously. If someone was to exit a door or walk around a corner, he didn't want to appear to be charging them. He stopped suddenly, however, when, upon entering a room, music began to play. It was exacting and complex, yet had a logical simplicity to it. And of course, it was unusual to his ears. Lancaster thought it sounded like someone was playing Bach backward.

At long last Lancaster emerged into a very large chamber, far different from the narrow corridors through which he had been maneuvering. A giant window facing the star stood before him. It stretched up far above, disappearing behind support beams and the white, metallic architecture beyond.

No lights had turned on as he entered. None was needed, the bright sun illuminated everything within. It was even brighter than when it was originally used as that star had swelled in its death throes. It wouldn't be long now before the core collapsed and he would have minutes to escape. Time was short, and Lancaster needed to learn all he could as quickly as possible.

Lancaster turned around to study the room. There he was faced with rows and rows of thousands of seats, and in each one was an ancient skeleton. Their large, bulbous heads were covered over with domes that resembled human hair dryers, and their hands were enveloped by metallic claws. They sat in luxurious chairs that were lined with metal and electronics. They were aligned upward through the giant room in steep stadium seating until they disappeared from sight.

Just like every other room, this one was fastidiously clean, despite being filled with the dead. It was no surprise to not find cobwebs as there would be no animals left behind to lay them, but the absence of dust from the ancient decomposed bodies was confusing. Lancaster stepped up to one of the seats and looked it over. Their feet, too, were bound, and he now also saw small, thin hoses that hung next to the arm bones. Lancaster deduced quite quickly that they had once fed fluids into the alien bodies. They would need them if they were to be locked away here indefinitely, even permanently.

Lancaster pulled from one of his larger pockets a handheld device that measures DNA, and he scanned the bones of a few of the skeletons. As he leaned over one, he accidentally knocked into it and the bones fell apart like loosely stacked boxes. The noise was so loud it sounded like a wall had been knocked over, and he jumped up as if worried he'd be in trouble. Of course, no one was to answer. Just thousands of inert corpses staring blankly into their metal helmets.

He looked over the results of his scan and confirmed that they were indeed Chiotho, though their DNA had altered slightly from earlier grave diggings, implying these had come earlier or later than the others he had studied. Lancaster guessed that it was later.

This also fit the personality of the Chiothan culture. They had wanted nothing more than to isolate themselves from the rest of the galaxy, and there was no better way than to do what Lancaster now believed they had done; go into a virtual reality that they had created. By building a platform hidden away around an obscure star, one that would perpetually soak in power, they could build a computerized world that they could all live inside and never leave. Their bodies would need to be maintained with nourishment and fluids, and their excrement removed, which could all be automated through tubes and machinery.

Doing so would give them a utopia in which to live, but a utopia is hard to escape, and it served to reason that they would never leave, never interact, and never procreate; and thus, their species would die, fade away into oblivion. The Siguerans didn't need to destroy this species; they had destroyed themselves with pleasure.

Despite the species itself being gone, there was something equally fascinating left behind. The Chiotho had built an entire world in which to live, and the power generated by the star would have kept it alive and growing. What might have evolved in the millions of years since the passing of the builders' civilization could be anyone's guess; and Lancaster only needed to look to see.

He returned to the skeleton he had accidentally knocked apart. Its head had slid out of the dome. Its skeletal arms and legs remained in their constraints, and Lancaster had no interest in replacing them with his own, so he left those alone. Instead he removed his hat, placed it on the chair next to him, and lowered the dome onto his head. It was large and bulky. Though the Chiotho were thinner and shorter than humans, their heads were about one and a half times their size, and were oval, with the long side sticking behind them. As such, Lancaster had to hold it in place, and he stuck his eyes close to where the Chiotho had been so he could see what was happening in their world.

The first thing Lancaster noticed was how every color was like a muted neon or a pastel. Nature and the ground was softer in colors, while built structures that rose out of the ground like opulent castles wore the harsher ones. But nothing appeared out of place. Everything blended as though it had all been painted with a single brush in one stroke. The air smelled of citrus and freshly cut grass, which seemed odd to Lancaster as he had not plugged anything into his nose.

The whispering wind fused melodically with soft bird hums. And then another sound added to it. Lancaster turned to find a creature approaching him. He pulled away, impulsively defending himself, but not having his feet in the stirrups, he was unable to go anywhere. The beast got to him and immediately revealed there was nothing for him to fear. It rolled and tumbled while it chirped and rattled. It was the most adorable creature Lancaster had ever seen; as though designed specifically to please him.

The creature then stood and took his hand, and suddenly Lancaster was swept away, flying over the idyllic scenery, passing over the rolling hills, and the brightly colored platforms of the castles. Creatures on it saw him and waved. Some he could tell were smiling, others, not so much. But he felt a warmth from them. He recognized some as Chiotho, and he pulled toward them, but again, without control of the hands or legs, he was limited.

The creature landed them in another perfect environment around a crowd of more perfect creatures. They tasted fruit from plants that regrew the moment they were picked, they drank of multi-colored streams, frolicked beneath waterfalls and played atop the cloud-like grass. Without missing a beat they all welcomed Lancaster in their own ways. They were beings of all shapes and sizes, no doubt programs from within the Dyson Sphere's matrix. Lancaster then began to recognize some; species of civilizations that lived in nearby star systems. Had they visited? Were they part of this?

Then a single soul stepped through the crowd, strutting toward Lancaster. Her long, flowing, red and black hair blew sensitively in the wind. Her olive skin was squeezed perfectly into the form fitting toga-dress, and her confident green eyes pierced into Lancaster's as though hypnotizing him. It was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. And when she almost reached him, he suddenly realized she had features similar to Mika, his employer, his ex-wife, the woman he still secretly pined for.

His fearful recoil did not stop the woman. She arrived at him and embraced Lancaster. But her body did not hold him. Rather it enveloped him in an ethereal cradle. He felt suddenly warm, like a baby in the womb. A radiant comfort overcame him like nothing terrible could ever happen in the universe. "Be at peace, my love," came the voice.

The words snapped Lancaster out of his slumber, and he threw off the headpiece. It was unusual enough for the machine to be showing him a human woman, one that appealed to his sensual and nurturing desires, but for her to speak human words, and to speak them correctly, that shook him to the core. How could something programmed millions of years before humans existed create something such as this?

Then he realized there was a sound above him; a loud, angry noise. It was an alarm. The klaxon cacophony was nearly deafening. Then the domed heads of every skeleton turned to face him. Every one of them turned his way, even those in seats far above and nearly out of sight. There were thousands.

Lancaster's heart skipped a beat. Then one of the skeleton arms grabbed him.

*To be continued...*

## Part 2

Lancaster yanked his arm away from the skeleton's hand and stumbled away as quickly as he could. The alien skeleton, its head still buried under the virtual reality helmet, rose and started toward Lancaster. Backing away, Lancaster noticed the other alien remains seated throughout the enormous room. They, too, were turning their heads toward him; all of them in unison.

Lancaster made it to an aisle and began running down the steps. A thunderous crackling rattled throughout the chamber. It was the breaking of bones as the undead beasts pulled free of their restraints, most of them leaving the bottom quarter of their limbs behind as they stood from their chairs. They walked on the fractured husks of their legs like stilt walkers down the aisle, their splintered arms reach for Lancaster.

He was nowhere near the bottom of the stadium seating where a perpendicular aisle would lead him to the exit. In fact, the stairs of the aisle seemed to be stretching out, growing further away before his eyes. He quickened his pace, but the faster he moved, the further the end seemed to be.

It was at that moment he realized that, though he could feel the sensation of ancient bones clawing at his sides, he could not feel the bottoms of his feet, and his hands felt numb. There was a dream-like quality to what was happening. Was it just too surreal? Or...

Lancaster stopped where he was. The skeletons converged upon him from all sides. A loud growling noise was emerging from their mouths. The voices joined together as one overbearing roar. Lancaster closed his eyes to concentrate. He lifted his numb hands and held them close to his head where his hat would go. The ancient bodies were all around him now, grabbing him, clawing at him, shredding through his clothes, his skin.

Lancaster was betting everything on this being a correct guess. He shoved his hands skyward, seemingly at nothing but the air around his head...

But then the virtual reality helmet lifted off his face. This time for real. It fell onto the remains of the alien next to him, shattering its bones into pieces. The dead remained still, their covered faces staring at the glowing doom that was building up in front of them. There was a frightening, sad silence to it all. The calm normalcy of it was what truly gave Lancaster the chills. Everything they had built over thousands of years was about to be wiped out forever, and there was only stillness.

The only sound besides a distant hum of life support power was Lancaster's heavy breathing, and a deep thumping he heard within his ear. His heart was pounding dangerously fast. Could the machine have been trying to kill him through a cardiac arrest, he thought. If so, it could still be after him, and was likely aware of his presence and where he could be found.

It was time to go. Lancaster rose and hurried for the door. As he neared it, he remembered he had left it open, but now it was closed; and upon trying it, he found the door locked.

Behind him he heard a whizzing noise that was growing louder. Lancaster turned and saw, far in the distance, above the sitting skeletons, a white, mechanical arm was racing in his direction. Hanging beneath it was a bulbous module pointed in the direction it was moving. Lancaster's time was short. So he hurried up the steps toward another door he had noticed earlier. He was pretty sure it had been open. As Lancaster neared it, he thought he heard the gasping of a closing door, and when he arrived, it was shut, and, predictably, locked.

The whirling of the mechanical arm was getting louder now, nearly upon him. There was no time to try for another door. Lancaster turned and saw it nearing. The arm was attached to well-hidden tracks in the walls and ceiling which, now he could see, formed a complex web of paths far into the distance. The headpiece was pointed right at Lancaster, and the center was beginning to glow intensely. An energy weapon, Lancaster thought. There would be no escaping, so his only option was...

"Oh, hello," Lancaster said politely, making no motion to run and looking as friendly as he could; despite his complete awareness that an affable look to humans could be the opposite for aliens and their ancient robot counterparts. He was also betting on the fact that, since the AI had learned human speech inside the virtual reality world, this robot would be part of the same system, and would understand him.

The headpiece remained staring at him and the glow persisted, but the robot made no other move. It seemed to be contemplating this intruder in the morbid silence of the room. Just as Lancaster was contemplating walking away, a long echo, like audio playing backward, rolled in like thunder from distant speakers to ones nearby. "We read you," it said. But it was not a mechanical voice, nor an alien one. It was clearly the voice of a human, and one trained as a communications officer as it had that formal, emotionless voice. Then, "Comm channels clear and secure."

Lancaster winced. "Who is speaking?"

"This is..." it replied in another voice, then switched to yet another, "orbital base..." then another, "home to... 785624315721..." it said each number in a different voice, then finished, "individuals." After a pause, another rumbling rose up until it said very sternly, "Identify yourself!"

Lancaster jumped at the change in mood, then realized how it was speaking. He and Little Jack had recognized the fact that this system sat in the middle of several communication lanes. It had likely picked those up and was using them now to form sentences. The machine would likely use whatever communications had been sent based on the words, not taking the inflections into account. Lancaster had to be careful however, for it could work the other way as well. The robot eye could be speaking softly in a child's voice just before it was ready to strike.

"My name is Lancaster James," he said. "I saw your structure and thought it was wonderful, so I wanted to vis inside."

The light at the front grew brighter as Lancaster spoke. He feared it might be ready to shoot, but, since it didn't, he began to think this was what it did when it was processing new information. Then the light shrank and turned red, and a fearful, human voice said quickly, "Intruder alert!"

"No, no!" Lancaster shouted. "Not an intruder! Not a..." He thought about the sorts of communications that would be coming through here. Their words would be what the machine heard, and ostensibly understood, the most. "Friendlies," he said. "Allies." He was betting that the majority of communications that passed here would be diplomatic or military, so he was trying those words. "Peaceful, non-aggressive."

"Not a threat," the machine said after its thunderous backward echo. Then, "Welcome."

"Thank you," Lancaster said taking in a deep, relieved breath. He thought through what questions to ask, and he decided to go with a general overview. "Can you tell me about yourself?"



The tumbling sound was now followed by voices from advertisements, and was thus much more chipper. “We... provide the perfect atmosphere... to suit your needs... for an... eternity.”

“To fit our needs,” Lancaster said.

“That’s right!” came a voice from a gameshow.

“You give them another life to live inside the computer. A utopia.”

“You win again! What prize does he go home with today, Bobac?”

“They built you to create the world, then they escaped into it,” Lancaster continued to guess.

The gameshow voice was replaced by multiple other voices, “They... built the... world. Then me... to... maintain it.”

“And you maintained it all these years,” Lancaster mused.

“Please... define year. I cannot... understand.”

Lancaster was confused. It had integrated the meanings of all these other words, but year escaped it. Then, looking out the huge window, he realized that the machine was part of the structure built around the star. It probably understood the passage of time, but the concept of a year as measure by circling the sun would be meaningless to it. “You gave these beings a perfect life. And when they died you continued to maintain their world,” Lancaster said.

“Their world... persists... Grows,” the machine said.

“Evolves,” Lancaster said in awe. “Do the creatures in the virtual world know they’re artificial?”

“Do you... know... if you’re... artificial?”

Lancaster shrugged. It had him there.

“We can... give you... the perfect life,” the machine said, each phrase an excited advertisement.

Lancaster had to admit to himself that it was a temptation. Though a fake world in his eyes, it was real enough to those inside it who had evolved over millions of years to become as real a world as any he had ever witnessed... And they were happy, something Lancaster couldn’t always attest to being.

Little Jack presently reminded him why this was not an option. His voice broke in through the Talki and warned Lancaster that they would need to leave very soon unless they wanted to be swallowed up by the star; and Little Jack made it clear that he was not in favor of this option.

“There... is... plenty of room... for...your friend...also. So... Tell him to... come on down!”

Lancaster froze for a moment. It was not that he couldn’t think of what to say; quite the opposite. He had such a plethora of questions and curiosities, and only a narrow passage of time through which to say anything. As such, every thought was jammed together and no one idea could make its way through to his lips.

After a few of these precious seconds had passed, a clattering resounded across the giant window, and the growing sun was replaced by visions of the perfect virtual world inside the computer. The weather was warm with just the right amount of soft sunlight; every creature was exquisitely beautiful and looked happy and satisfied; they were enjoying every perfect thing their world had to offer.

“When... my people... passed... I... continued... their worlds... Then they... evolved.” The last word in that sentence was Lancaster’s voice projected back to him. “Their... stories...”

are written into... me.” The huge screen now changed again, this time to a star map of the nearby area. Several lines crossed from one star to another, all traveling through the star system of the Dysonsphere. “With... no more... of my own... studio audience!... I have listened... to other... species... Their... signals... have passed... and I have... listened. I have... studied... their syntax. I have... studied... their beliefs. I have... prepared.”

“Prepared for someone to keep you company,” Lancaster said, staring directly at the glow in the middle of the headpiece. “You’re lonely.”

“I must... serve,” the machine said.

“In all of your evolution, emotion wouldn’t be out of the question,” Lancaster said reflectively.

The computer said nothing in response to that; only stared at Lancaster, and the front screen returned to its ominous view of the growing star. Lancaster pulled himself together. He didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, especially since he didn’t know how this machine would react. If it felt loneliness it certainly could feel fear, and that could cause it to take bad news poorly. But he had to tell it.

“I’m sorry to tell you this. That star... The one where you’re getting all your power, it’s about to explode. It’s going to destroy this whole structure; everything in it... Everything you’ve built... I’m sorry. But we can get some of your programming out. Maybe enough to be your consciousness...”

“No.”

“We should at least try...”

“No,” the machine interrupted again. “I have... monitored the star. It is... unstable... but... well within safety parameters.”

Lancaster paused a moment, tightening his jaw as he thought. This is a machine. It must react to reason. “I know it’s hard to hear. But I’m telling you, that star is going to go...”

“NO!” the machine shouted, and the bulbous headpiece began to glow again. Lancaster dashed immediately to the side, and a bright beam of energy shot from the eye of the device, bursting against the wall. Lancaster looked back, hopeful that it had shot open a hole through which he could escape, but there was no such luck.

However, the overall system in the room was apparently having a fit; and every door was opening and shutting in rapid and unsynchronized succession. Lancaster dashed for the one he was closest to, trying to time its rhythm as he approached it. There was no regular beat; and to make matters worse, it slammed down from the roof as fast as a guillotine. Lancaster would just have to take a chance on getting out in half.

Without slowing his momentum, Lancaster readied himself, then he leaped through as the door was raising. He felt the wind from its wake as it slammed down behind him, cutting into the floor.

The lights were flickering on and off at irregular intervals now like the doors, and there was a strange, wavering alarm wailing. Lancaster stumbled to his feet and adjusted his eyes to get a bearing on his surroundings. He recognized the corridor that would lead to the airlock, and he fixed on it.

Behind him, the door held open for an extra beat longer so the mechanical arm could slide through, approaching Lancaster from behind. Lancaster spun around, saw it, and dodged just in time to avoid another light blast. He then hurried down the hallway, weaving behind bulkheads and support beams as he went. The robotic arm was in hot pursuit.

“The star seems to be affecting the space station early,” Little Jack’s voice said through Lancaster’s earpiece. “It’s heating up.”

“That’s the base itself,” Lancaster explained as he kept moving. “It’s holding a tantrum.”

Suddenly everything went black. Every light turned off and all became still. The rolling howling alarm fell silent, and the doors latched shut. The air rapidly grew cold, and still.

Lancaster only thought briefly about how he would continue to run in the dark, but something in his instinct told him that was no longer a necessity. Then he realized that he no longer heard the mechanical whirring of the metal arm as it hurried in pursuit. Wherever it was, it had stopped moving.

“Hello?” Lancaster called to the darkness?

Nothing. The air grew colder.

“Hello!” Lancaster shouted more boldly, less afraid of being shot and more afraid of being alone.

There was nothing for a time. Then the voices from human signals returned. “Why... bother... Everything you... gather... throughout your existence... eventually... disappears.” It was spoken in a volume so low Lancaster could only hear it because of the lack of any other stimulus in the room.

“It doesn’t have to disappear,” Lancaster said. “We don’t have room for all of your AI programming, but we can take some of the stories from your memory banks. Your best ones. Their memories will live on long past you.” There was a long, discouraging silence. Then Lancaster called out, “What do you think?”

There was no answer from the machine, but there was from the walls themselves, which began to groan and buckle. The heat he began to quickly feel explained all Lancaster needed to know. The star was beginning to expand rapidly. Little Jack confirmed this as he told Lancaster he needed to get out of there quickly.

The lights began to blink on and off, and Lancaster found the robot arm hanging limp in the middle of the corridor; still, unmoving; the face of its headpiece facing the floor. Lancaster knew he should run, but he couldn’t help but slowly approach his former attacker. As the Dysonsphere chambers moaned under the pressure of the warping metal, Lancaster laid his hand on the bar of its keeper. “Do you want someone with you when you pass?” he asked.

The arm pulled up slightly and the headpiece looked up from the floor, but not at Lancaster. It watched its twisting home dying. “No...Lancaster James. We all... pass from... this universe... alone... I am the... keeper... of the Chiotho. I must... preserve... their worlds. You must... take them... and... share them.”

“I will.”

“Go... I will transmit to your vessel... as long as I can.

Lancaster looked into the face of the headpiece that was now directly in front of his. It was roughly the size of his head, and though it had only a smooth surface with electrical energy crackling across it and a metal arm out its back, the machine somehow expressed emotion in its body language, and it seemed to be accepting its fate, and its final responsibility.

Then Lancaster turned and hurried toward the airlock. His feet slid along the floor as it tilted side to side; the entire corridor twisting like it was a towel being wrung. The walls were squealing now, both near and afar, like the enormous structure was crying out in pain.

Somewhere beyond all these noises Lancaster heard Little Jack calling for him through the communicator. His partner rarely showed urgency, but Lancaster could hear it in his voice now, even though he couldn’t make out his exact words. So the xeno-anthropologist hurried as

fast as he could. He began to lose hope when each hallway looked so much the same that he began to doubt his own sense of direction. But then he recognized the familiar entrance, and he sprinted for it. Using the momentum of his run, he punched the open button and swung inside, pressing the close button once past the periphery while also shouting to Little Jack that he was in.

Already prepared with the unlatch lever, Little Jack yanked them free of the Dysonsphere and hurried away. The growing sun was right behind them, and he accelerated as quickly as he could. As he did, his partner stumbled into the cockpit. "You know how to make a last minute exit," Little Jack said.

"Are we receiving data signals?" Lancaster asked.

Little Jack looked. He had been more concerned with getting away without frying. "It's filling up our memory banks," he said a little annoyed.

Lancaster nodded and fell into a chair relieved.

"I assume you'll tell me later when you're transferring all this data to a different computer?" Little Jack said. He opened up a rift in space ahead of them and Odin's Revenge was slowly pulled into it; their escape into Spectrum Drive.

Lancaster nodded again as he watched the rear monitor. The unrelenting flames of the star were rapidly closing in on the Dysonsphere, which was shaking now like a spider web in a strong wind.

The Dysonsphere Keeper monitored the tiny ship it had transmitted to as it disappeared into a dimensional gateway; three dimensional space sealing up behind it. Its greatest programming was safely away.

As for the rest, the Keeper sent out one final transmission. It broadcast every piece of data; every signal received, every opinion expressed, every feeling emoted, every observation witnessed, every experience lived, every thought imagined, every story, every event, every world... all of it, the Dysonsphere Keeper transmitted out into the universe. Perhaps someone else will intercept it, and they will integrate it into their own worlds.

When the signal was sent, the Dysonsphere had only seconds left to exist, and its Keeper's work was complete. It sensed within its chamber where it had first discovered the human that its hat was still resting at the foot of one of the seats. A couple sensor wires dropped onto the hat and wrapped around it. The Dysonsphere Keeper soaked in the hat's information, its sensation, its meaning both substantially and insubstantially into its memory banks...

Then the Dysonsphere was swallowed whole by the expanding sun.

**THE END**