

LANCASTER JAMES



**And the Eye
of Fire
Part 2**

The lost city was not hard to find. M2950 had only four planets. The second was the only one in the Milak Shivar habitable zone, which matched similarly to the human one, though they could live in slightly more heat. This planet's orbit lay in the first third of the zone, promising a hot exploration.

The only trouble was the large amount of cloud cover, created by a heavy precipitation on this mostly oceanic planet. Much of where there was land had been washed over by the sea, and when they found the city, well within the continent, it was flooded over into a swamp. They knew, however, that this was their target, as a wide, circular temple with a sharp steeple rose out of the muddy water pointing skyward.

Lancaster recognized it as a N'vwarik Temple. That was, at least the best approximation they could come up with for its translation. It made sense, as the N'vwarik were among the last of the Milak Shivar religions. They had what they called Qui'kichtal, their holy word which meant, in essence, survival through fighting. Or, in human terms, "the best defense is a good offense."

Lancaster and Little Jack saw the shape of roads cutting through the town, all of them originating from the temple, like spokes in a bike wheel. The other buildings of the city twisted up from their bases, like cream finely swirled out of a bowl, or rose sharply, like knives cutting out of the wet ground. They were surrounded by thin, sickly trees whose branches reached out desperately, as if grasping for something to hang on to. The first couple meters or so were covered over by water, which was itself crusted over with algae and swamp grass. Patches of damp ground stuck out of the mire in random patches near jagged remains of long fallen buildings.

Lancaster studied the lumps of ground, searching for a spot to set down. Most looked unsteady, and he wasn't even sure if they were all solid. He would probably have to drop in on one via a wire from the base of the ship.

Then Lancaster thought better of it. "Drop me off on top of one of those buildings," he said, pointing to a few 20 meter tall ones which were missing their roofs and part of their walls. He would have to make his way to the temple, but he thought it better not to run the ship's thrusters over the roof of the Milak Shivar's sacred shrine in case it couldn't take the heat.

Lancaster tossed on his new hat, straightened his jacket, and made his way to the ship's belly. There he attached the wire to his utility belt and waited while the lower doors spread open, revealing the ruins of the building below. The walls shook and debris flew around under the roaring thrusters. He was glad he hadn't had Little Jack lower over the temple.

Lancaster heard the voice of his partner in his earpiece. "Remember to pick up some valuables that we can sell while you're down there. We need to sell some things if we hope to keep flying."

Little Jack had to remind him. Lancaster never liked to take items for the purpose of profit, and he pretty much always forgot. But without electros in their account, they couldn't buy the fuel to go from planet to planet. It had been so easy in the days when Mika had been in charge of raising the money. But those days were over. Mika had offered to continue helping, but it would be awkward to always do business with Lancaster's ex-wife, so this was the best way.

"I read you," Lancaster shouted over the thrusters, then leaped out and held the wire as it fed him down onto the top of the building. He stretched out his toes, searching until they reached the top level of the building. When he was firmly on the floor, he released the wire from his belt and sent it back up into the ship. The ship's belly closed behind it, the engines roared louder, and the ship lifted up into the sky.

It wasn't long before the engines of Odin's Revenge were a distant roar, and Lancaster was alone with the repetitive insect sounds of the swamp. He took a few moments to listen to them, as he always did on a new planet, trying to get a sense of what kind of animals were around. Their voices told him more than any device he carried could. Most animals on the planets he explored had no recorded information, and he could only go by what his instincts suggested by the resonance of the sounds.

This planet was alive with critters. It sounded like thousands of species, most of them tiny, making chirps, clicks, and croaks. They huddled primarily around the swampy mires where tall grass grew out of the water. There seemed to be very little life on the islands, but the trees were teeming with small animals, most of whom were likely inside the trees based on the muffled resonance of their sounds.

He found a ramp with small rivets. The Milak Shivar didn't use stairs, but rather ramps with traction for the feet. He made his way downward, heading toward the island he was on, and keeping his eyes open for anything of value he could loot... or as Little Jack put it, "liberate."

He was on his way down when he vaguely spotted something below on the swampy grass. He paid no attention at first, his mind too distracted with things to steal... liberate. But he snapped out of it and looked in the direction to which his peripheral vision had alerted him. It wasn't there anymore. It had been half the size of a human, very chubby, and walking on all fours, but that's all he had gotten of it. He searched out the window, cautious not to stick his head too far out to make himself a target; but still he saw nothing.

He went to the ramp and descended to the next level. There, he took another look out a window toward the point where he had seen something move. Still, he saw nothing. Just the mossy ground, which he could see now was pocked with lumps. From his vantage point above, he could see behind the small hills, but he could spot nothing hiding behind any of them. He noticed the occasional rodent on the ground, but nothing to be alarmed about, and nothing close to the size of what he thought he had seen before.

He went down a couple more floors before he heard a noise from below. It sounded like the rustling of ground and a quick snap. He poked his head out a window and tried to locate the source of the noise. It had come from the same area he had looked before, but again, he saw nothing. In fact, the few rodents he had seen before had now disappeared. Lancaster slowly pulled his head back, then looked out again quickly in case the creature was hiding when it saw him.

Nothing. He looked closely at each small lump on the ground, trying to see any sign of something hiding behind them. Still nothing.

He went down one more ramp. He was now just two stories from the ground. Before he reached the window, he heard a rustling of the moss below, but when he reached it, the sound was gone, and there was no movement. He pulled out his Illuminator, a handheld device that allows the viewer to see in multiple spectrums, and viewed the ground in infrared. He didn't expect much; most creatures here would be cold-blooded, but he hoped it would give some sign. Still nothing.

As he was about to pull away from the window to consider what to do, he noticed something peculiar. He had focused in on one of the small hills before, looking for life behind it. Now that hill looked like it was turned sideways; as if someone had come along, lifted it, then placed it back again at a different angle. Could they be...

Lancaster looked back at the room and found a piece of debris about the size of his hand on the ground. He picked it up, then tossed it out the window, close to one of the lumps in the ground. It hit the ground with a soft thud, made one bounce, and immediately the lump lifted up. Lancaster spotted a smooth, grey mass beneath the camouflaged exterior as it leaped onto the rubble he had thrown and swallowed it whole. It moved with a violent speed, and shook heavily as it devoured the stone, then settled down into place, returning to a calm state that looked just like a lump in the ground. Lancaster looked around at all of the lumps on the ground and realized they were likely all the same. The ground was virtually covered in them. He would not make it more than a few feet without being attacked by one of them.

His eyes moved on to the water, and he saw it stirring. He didn't know how big the animals were underneath its brown surface, but he didn't want to find out up close. And there was no telling how dangerous the water itself was to his health, not to mention how deep it might be. He needed a better way to get to the temple.

Lancaster looked around at the surroundings. He spotted another roofless building at the edge of his island, then the ruins of a couple buildings in the water between his island and the temple. They were little more than walls, but there was still a structure above the water.

He climbed the ramps a few floors, then looked out the window, judging the distance to the building on his island. It was way too far to jump, and the distance was greater than its height, so he could not grapple it and swing in. However...

Lancaster pulled out his grappling gun nonetheless. He took aim at the other building, then compensated a little higher for gravity, and fired. The line burst from the gun and flew across the sky at the other building. The end sank more than he expected; the gravity was a little heavier than he had thought. But it still latched on to the wall of the second floor and held firm. Lancaster snapped the line on his end

and attached it to the wall. He replaced the grappling gun to its holster and pulled out a zip line rod. He put one hand through the loop, placed the rod over the line and put his other hand through the opposite loop. He took one last look at his surroundings, sucked in his breath, then leaped from the building.

The wire screeched, disturbing the animals below. The lumps rose from their resting reposes and glanced skyward in confusion. Lancaster pumped his legs to give him more speed. He wasn't sure if this actually worked, but always felt like it did, and he needed a distraction from the multitude of eyes and whatever mouths they might have.

He reached the other side and caught a glimpse of a lump right by the wall of the building toward which he was heading. Lancaster lifted his legs, and just in time. The lump rose up and reached for the sky, just missing his feet which had been dangling close to it a moment before. Now they landed against the hard, stone wall with a smack.

With surprising agility, the mossy creature twisted in the air and launched itself at Lancaster. He scooted his legs horizontally across the wall's surface just as its gray underbelly slapped the surface. His left foot felt the window sill, and he let go of the zip line. Reaching quickly for the window frame, he grasped hold and yanked himself inside.

He landed on the cold, hard floor, the air knocked momentarily out of him. Coughing for breath, he turned to see if anything was following him. Nothing. Barely even a sound. The moss outside was moving, clearly the creature getting back into its camouflaged position.

The next thing Lancaster noticed was the smell. It had been rank ever since he opened the bottom doors of the ship and the putrid air had raced up into his nostrils, but now it was almost overwhelming.

He looked around the room and saw that half of it was flooded by the dank water. He knew immediately that that was the source of the smell. He quickly found the ramp and walked up. He found his way to the highest point, about seven stories to the wide open top floor. There he looked across at the snaggletooth ruin of a building pointing out of the water almost half way across to the temple. He fired the grappling hook and made the connection. 'This one will be a bit easier,' he thought, latching his end to the building. Then he suddenly realized, he had let go of the zip line rod at the last point. It was about a hundred yards across, a long way to be climbing arm over arm, and if he dropped, it was a long way down into water filled with who knew what.

And so Lancaster removed his hat, flung it over the wire, and grasped the other end. The hat was made of leather; he didn't know what animal it was made from, but it was leather nonetheless, and he figured it would hold. He hoped it would hold, in any event. "Here goes... something," he whispered to himself, and he launched off from the building. He pumped again with his legs, hoping it was getting him across faster but still not sure. The odd plan was working. He smiled at his ingenuity as he saw the wall getting larger in front of him.

Then he heard a horrific ripping sound. He could feel his hands dropping lower. He smelled burning leather. He didn't even bother to look up; he knew what was happening. He simply gripped harder on the hat and pumped more with his legs. He felt like an idiot and knew he probably looked even more like one, but he was stretching for that wall. The tearing sound stopped for a moment, and he sighed with relief. Then it tore again, faster this time. His hands were dropping further. He could almost feel how much of the hat was left. It was down to almost a string. But he could see the details in the wall. He wasn't twenty yards away.

The ripping stopped again, a momentary reprieve. Fifteen, perhaps ten meters away. Then a loud snap sounded, and each of his hands came down clutching half of the hat. He looked down at the upcoming water, trying to see what creatures might be waiting for him. Then he looked forward to see an even bigger danger, the wall flying at him at incredible speed. He curled up into a ball, waiting for the impact.

Amazingly he flung straight through a window, and Lancaster felt himself hit the floor and roll across until he slid into a ramp. Still bouncing, he fell off the ramp onto the floor below. Hitting the ground chest first, he finally stopped, dust dancing into the air all around him. He sighed with relief, and the air had no sooner left him than the floor beneath him collapsed and he fell to the level below.

The deafening thud echoed out of the building and across the swamp for a whole minute before it calmed. He could hear outside that animals of every sort, which had not heard many sounds their entire lives, were roused into angry protests.

Lancaster stayed still, partly to recover, partly to check on himself, and partly to listen for any animal that might come in searching for the source of the sound.

After a time, even the animals began to calm, and their voices echoed into the distance, much like the crashing sound had. Lancaster pulled himself up, each muscle aching as he did. He looked across at the next building, not anxious to get moving, and quickly running out of wire on his grappling gun. He had enough to get to the next building, but after that, he wasn't sure.

Lancaster fired at the cement wall, pulled tight, attached his end, then climbed out, dangling underneath the wire, climbing hand over hand toward the other side, his feet a few meters from the water. He didn't know how far. He was trying not to look down; not to even think about it. He focused on each reach of his hands, moving one at a time. He focused so much on his hands, in fact, that he almost ran into the wall on the other side. He stopped just short of it, and hopped onto a platform through half a window frame.

Peering at the water, he saw there were only a dozen or so yards of swamp land from the building to the shore with the temple. He could take a chance, dive into the water and swim, or wade, depending on how deep it was; assuming the smell wouldn't knock him unconscious.

Then he noticed the dead trees again. Some of them were growing out of the water. They could be his salvation. He approached the one closest to the building from one story above it. He studied the branches, locating the thickest point in range. He backed up a few feet, then took a running leap.

Twigs at the top broke before him, splintering into his face and causing him to close his eyes. He felt his body smash into a heavy branch and bounce off. He opened one eye just soon enough to see his body smash through a branch, then snap a second one. He flailed his arms, searching for something as his body helplessly sank through the branches.

His fingers managed to grasp one branch thick enough to hold him, then his other found another, and a moment later, he felt himself dangling, swinging slowly, with his arms held out in two wildly divergent directions. Breathing heavily, he pulled himself up and placed a leg on a knob of the trunk. He felt every muscle that he had chosen to move. They screamed with pain, begging for mercy. But he could only move forward at this point.

Another tree stood within reach. He could feel his body begging 'No! No!' So his mind had to overcome the fear to move his feet onto one of the thicker branches and edge outward. He got a couple yards and realized he would have to make the jump soon before he ran out of steady branch. He studied the other tree, found his target, then made his running leap.

Lancaster flew through the air, going straight for the tree. His aim was good, but his leap was not sufficient. He remembered the heavier gravity as he felt yanked to the water below. Crashing through the surface, his feet touched the ground and he sprang back up. He could feel the algae all over him, but he didn't take time to care. He found the temple's island and crawled to it, pulling himself up onto the shoreline and yanking his legs out of the water.

That's the one time he looked back, and when he did he found that he was none too soon. Something in the water had followed him. There might have been several of them, because he could see a few lines of wake trailing behind something that was moving. They all came right to the point where he had exited their home, then turned away.

Lancaster gave his heart enough time to stop beating a hundred miles an hour while he breathed in slowly. Gradually, he felt more in control, until he was finally ready to rise to his feet and approach the temple.

A long ramp flanked by walls that rose out of the ground like title-waves led to the front double doors. They were laced with a shiny metal Lancaster did not recognize, perhaps something from the ocean depths, with small, creamy pearls framing each door. He pushed on one, and it did not budge. He pushed harder, but it remained in place. He took a running jab at it, but his shoulder merely dug into the metal right at the point of his bruises from the tree. He hopped back in pain, cursing at the door and looking it over. At

the bottom he saw metal guides along the door frame. Both doors had this, with a break in between them. He approached again and his hand grasped onto the pearls for leverage. He shoved it to the side and it slid easier. They had not opened because they are sliding doors. This was one story he would not be telling Little Jack.

He entered into what was the outer ring of the temple. Each direction stretched out as curved corridors which disappeared into their turns a few dozen yards away. It was ten meters, or perhaps a little further, to the wide opening on the other side which he passed through into a second ring. Here, small, shallow platforms emerged out of still water which had leaked inside, forming a sort of mire whose stink had been trapped, and thus was nearly overwhelming. Lancaster shoved his arm against his nostrils and continued forward toward the next opening; an archway where clearly a pair of doors once proudly stood, but had evidently crumbled into ruins and mixed with the other debris that littered the floor.

Under less stressful conditions, Lancaster would have loved to go through the wreckage of the room as it gave so many pieces of the puzzle that was the Milak Shivar, but he wanted to get through the opening and hoped that the next ring would be less putrid.

There was some relief. A high step brought him out of the damp and onto dry cement. He pulled himself up, glad to be out of the water, but the moment he did, his foot felt itself sinking. His instinct kicked in faster than his mind could deduce, and he felt his foot lurch his body forward. He flipped several times on the ground and was a few yards ahead before his mind caught up with him.

He had been doing this long enough to know when a trap was about to be sprung, and his body reacted when it sensed danger just at the moment it was happening. Behind him, the door sprang shut and spikes flew out from either side. After a short time recovering his breath, Lancaster realized he had felt the wind of one of the spikes fly past the back of his neck.

He felt something in his chest and grasped at it. Perhaps he'd been hit! And then he realized what he felt was the heavy beating of his heart. He had been clumsy, recklessly moving forward just to get out of the water and wanting to be done with this business. He had even been pre-warned. The Milak Shivar made a regular practice of guarding each ring of their temples. He had somehow gotten past the first couple unharmed; perhaps they had rotted with time, but even still, he had not checked for them, and had only survived because of dumb luck. 'No more being stupid,' he thought to himself, then got up.

The first thing he did now was run his Illuminator along the ground and the surrounding area; first in visible light, then in several other spectrums to check for anything around him. His way out was sealed, and now it was darker than ever. He realized that he may have survived the immediate pain of death only to perish in a much longer and painful one as he saw and felt the bones around him of another creature, perhaps several. They might have been the bones of a local animal. They seemed large and thick. He looked even more carefully, remembering suddenly that Nikos Kazakis, his own personal arch rival, was supposed to be searching for the Eye of Fire, and Lancaster hoped to find his remains among the dead here.

But no such luck. Only the bones of something large, and probably as unfriendly as Kazakis by the look of its sharp teeth.

Lancaster decided to deal with his imprisonment later, and turned toward the center of the room, which was, it so happened, the center of the temple. A locked chamber rose out of the ground and reached up to the ceiling, an octagonal spoke in the round building. A few of the Milak Shivar religious symbols were engraved upon it on each side approximately half-way up. He had been right, this was a temple of the N'vwarik. The spoke reached the roof, where supports and pipes seemed to grow out of the spoke and stretched down to the floor all around.

Lancaster studied the central hub, careful not to step on anything as he headed toward it. There he studied the series of gears and levers that littered its surface. He didn't recognize any of them, nor could he understand what they would do. He ran his Illuminator across them and sensed nothing of danger, and so he decided to experiment with them.

He blew the dust off of one metal wheel, then ran his hand across the top of it. After a moment, he tugged it clockwise. It resisted, then, with a rusty squeal, it budged a little, then a little more, then gave way and turned end over end.

He heard a sudden rush of water spitting upward, through the piping, and up toward the roof. He shined his light up at it, concentrating the beam of his Illuminator to see further. There, about twenty meters up, the pipes evidently became transparent, as he could see the white, foamy water rushing through the pipes like veins, continuing the rest of the ten meters to the top, then turning onto the roof and sliding down the side until it reached a container ten meters above the ground. A transparent vertical stripe on the side of the container showed how much it was filling; and when it had become $\frac{3}{4}$ full, it began to lower; slowly at first, but picking up speed. Lancaster shone the light below the container to see where it was going, and spotted a pedal directly beneath it.

Alarmed at not knowing what might happen, he turned quickly back to the spoke and pulled the wheel the other way. It held against his strength, not budging. He could tell immediately that there was no force that could move it.

That's when he spotted the levers next to it. He didn't know what they did, but he figured it would be better than what the pedal would do if he had turned the wrong wheel or began the process out of sequence, and so he pulled one of them, the closest to the wheel.

He heard a momentary squawk, like a seal protesting, and the rushing water stopped. But the moaning creek of the container lowering was still audible from the edge of the room. Lancaster shone his Illuminator on it and saw it was lowering less than a foot above the pedal.

He tried the wheel again. This time it budged, screaming at him in its rusty whine. He yanked with all his might and brought it back to its neutral position. It clicked there, and the lever yanked back into place. Then wheel felt to Lancaster like it could go further, and so he continued to push.

A sucking sound now filled the air, coming from all points along the pipe. The water reversed, going back up the pipeline and back to the core. The container, which had come within inches of the pedal, now rose up to safety again.

When Lancaster had gotten the wheel to its further point, it yanked out of his hand and twisted back to its starting point. Lancaster held his hands away from it, waiting for anything to happen next, but nothing did. He looked around at the rest of the spoke, and saw several more of these same set-ups, with the metallic wheel in the center, and a few levers around it, one in particular right next to the wheel. One piece of the puzzle now solved; now to figure out what he needed to do to move forward, or get out.

He walked over to the container and looked it over. It was old, dusty, clearly hadn't been used in years, more likely centuries, or even eons. But it obviously worked, and there were no holes in it, so it would continue to serve its function. He could not tell what the pedal did, not even with his Illuminator set to X-ray. The gears and pipes that jutted out of the pedal went in a plethora of directions, like intricate webbing that only its maker or a master engineer could understand, and even then the answer looked like it would be complicated.

On the wall just behind container was a symbol. Lancaster expected it to be religious in nature, but was surprised to recognize it as lettering for the Milak Shivar, one that made the sound "tal." Uncertain what it could mean, he moved counter-clockwise along the wall until he reached the next container.

Next to it was the symbol that made a basic clicking sound from the back of the throat. He continued around the circle, finding next a container with a "fff" sound, then a "kich" sound, then "lu," "vo," "rrr," "qui," "et," "ti," "be," and finally "gu" before returning to "tal." It was almost the entire Milak Shivar alphabet. He didn't understand why the rest of it was left out, and was even more confused as to why it was there in the first place.

It finally dawned on him, and he felt stupid for having taken so long to figure it out. He was supposed to spell something by feeding water into the proper containers. But what to spell? And what would happen if he spelled the wrong thing?

While he stewed on this question, he followed the piping from the containers up to the ceiling, then across to the center, and finally down the hub to the gears, wheels, and levers. 'This would have been easier if they had labeled this end,' he thought, but then realized it was not supposed to be easy. Someone was supposed to know the code, or not use it at all. He noticed the holy symbols, however, and how they each matched three letters. He wondered if this had any religious significance, but he didn't want to take the time studying. He just wanted to get out of there.

Then it struck him like lightning to his mind. What would their most holy symbol be? It would be their holy word! Qui'kichtal. He looked at the symbols again. The first he had found was "tal." And on differing sides were "qui" and "kich."

Lancaster hurried to the part of the spoke that connected to "qui." He grabbed the wheel tightly, and, filled with confidence, he yanked it. He heard the water build up below him, then it shot skyward through the tube. It reached the ceiling, then went across, and then down the other side, filling the container. He kept pulling, watching the container drop as though he was doing it with his mind. It sped with weight and gravity and landed hard onto the pedal.

Lancaster heard a click, and then gears moving, but then heard nothing more. He had two more to turn.

He went to the second one, "kich." He grabbed the handle and turned. End over end he yanked, and the water billowed up through the pipes, raced to the ceiling, then across to the outer wall where it spilled downward into the container that fell toward the floor. He watched it, smiling, certain he was on the right track. He watched the pedal below, the container's bottom inching toward it. Then he looked at the letter beyond. "Lu," he read, then his face dropped, horrified. This was the wrong one!

He yanked on the lever, pulling so tight it felt like it would fall from the wall. The container was slowing, but it would not stop immediately, and in a moment it would tap the pedal.

Lancaster grabbed the turning wheel and pulled the other direction. The machinery cried out in protest, and he yanked harder, screaming back at the machine.

The container tapped the pedal. It gave way ever so slightly...

Then he felt the wheel click, and the container stopped dropping. He felt the sweat on the outer portion of his hand stand on end, as if too frightened to drip down.

Now, with the container stopped, Lancaster felt the wheel give way, and he was able to turn it the other direction. Like before, he heard the water suck upward and across the ceiling, then drop back down into the spoke. When it was done, the wheel jumped free of his hand and everything replaced itself.

Lancaster looked more closely at the symbols this time, locating the proper "kich" and pulling at it. The water shot up, flew across to the outer wall, dropped down into the container, which then sank onto the pedal, and the satisfying sound of the gears played like music in Lancaster's ears.

At last he went to the "tal" section. He carefully made sure this was the right one, then grabbed onto the wheel and confidently twisted it. The water streamed up, then across the ceiling, and back down the other side. It landed in the container. Lancaster kept his Illuminator on the container as it dropped down. He wasn't holding the wheel or any of the machinery now. He had placed his faith in this bet, and if he was wrong, he didn't even want to know what fate awaited him.

The container lowered slowly onto the pedal, which gently gave way beneath it, and at last hit the ground with a click.

Lancaster heard the gears move, which were then followed by more gears, then more, and larger ones. Soon it sounded like the entire room was alive just beyond the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. He felt a rumble and heard giant gears rolling, metal clacking against metal. Whatever it was, it would reveal itself momentarily.

And it did. The inner spoke pulled upward, the walls stretching outward like pedals on a flower opening to see the sun. They revealed a room hidden from view for millennia, its only hidden content, a pedestal with an ancient weapon inside which glowed with a faint red hue.

Lancaster approached it as the metallic flower was still opening above him, his eyes fixed on the artifact. It looked like a cross between a sword and a spear, with a long, metallic stick running across the dull end of a curving blade, like a sail attached to a pole blowing in the wind. Near the handle was a partially enclosed space wherein a glowing crystal resided. Its red hue ran all the way up the shiny blade, making it seem like the source emanated from all the way up its spine.

He was impressed by the sight, but wondered where the Promoth Dirge could be kept. Certainly, this couldn't be it. A race that celebrated weaponry as much as the Milak Shivar did would have to have had a more powerful weapon than this as its prized possession. Certainly there must have been something else that was used to repress populations under their rule.

But upon further investigation, this was it. There was no trap door, no secret compartment, only the sword-spear held aloft by a hilt that allowed it to curve over the pedestal. In looking for other options, Lancaster also determined that there was probably no trap, and so he carefully placed each hand below two sides of the weapon, and lifted them both. It easily came off the hilt and he held it up to his face. He was surprised, for though it was beautiful, it was nothing by which to be too impressed.

When he was able to pull his eyes away from it, he saw the doorway, for the glow of the sword illuminated the room. The seal was gone, and he could leave. Lancaster hurried before the room could change its mind, and he left as quickly as he could, rushing through the chamber with the horrible stench equally fast.

When he arrived in the sunlight, Lancaster lifted up the sword to look at it again. He held the base of it, studying the hilt. It was adorned with waves in patters that, characteristic for the Milak Shivar, looked like a perfect order in chaos.

He felt it jolt suddenly, taking his hand with it as it swept to the side. Before he knew what was happening, the sword had sliced through one of the grassy mounds. Like the mound that had attacked him at the building, this one was lifted up, its belly revealed, and its hungry mouth wide open, ready to devour him. The sword cut right through the beast, ripping it in half, and then both sides dissolved quickly into nothing. He barely got a look at it before it was ashes at his feet.

Lancaster trembled, fearful of what had just transpired, both at the beast that had attacked him and the weapon that he held. "Little Jack," Lancaster said into his Handicom when he could keep his voice from shaking, "I'm ready to be picked up now." Then, thinking about his smell and the weapon he held which might not know friend from foe, he added, "Get the shower ready, and don't come near me until I say so."

"Whatever you say," Little Jack said plainly.

To be continued...