

LANCASTER JAMES



**And the Eye
of Fire
Part 3**

The red light along the spine of the weapon flickered, revealing that Lancaster was making progress on getting the crystal out. It was in there tight, which made sense considering it had resided inside the weapon for hundreds of thousands, or even millions of years. Lancaster had hoped beyond hope that it would have possibly gotten loose over time, but he had no such luck. The Milak Shivar worshipped their weapons, and they crafted them with the intention of keeping them together, even if the heart of this one came from an alien race from whom they had stolen it.

There would be time enough to study the weapon, learn its story, and in what years it was used. But for now they were on their way to the Zeborno planet from where it had been taken, and he needed the crystal to place inside the sleeping god's eyes.

The doorway opened behind Lancaster and he could hear Little Jack stop momentarily, sniffing the air and reeling before stepping in further. Lancaster could tell from his reaction that the smell still clung to him. He had just gotten used to it.

Little Jack leaned over Lancaster's hunched form and saw him working away at the half domed enclosure in which the crystal was placed. It was wrapped up like a baby snuggled into its bed with its blankets pulled around each side. Lancaster had given up searching for a latch that would open up this container and was trying other means. Those means had apparently included several high tech devices as he had several of them scattered on the floor near him, such as Robotclaws, a Vibro Loosener, Adhesive Melt, among others. These had evidently been abandoned in favor of more crude tools, such as a screw driver, which he was scraping away at the sides, trying to wedge an opening.

"You're going to scratch that," Little Jack advised.

"I'm being careful!" Lancaster snapped back, frustrated at the crystal and taking it out on his self-proclaimed advisor.

Little Jack took a moment to look over the weapon. Despite the fact that it was an archaic sword, he was impressed by the look of it. He didn't let it show in his voice, however, as he said, "This is what we thrusted all the way out here to find?"

"It's not as primitive as it looks. It creates a force field that protects the wielder and guides him to hit the opponent."

"Why not have that on a projectile weapon?"

"As best as I can surm, this is more useful above and below water. This way they could use it in both locations."

After considering a moment, Little Jack was alarmed. "Don't you register we should keep it if it's that good of a weapon?"

"It's not what we came for."

"But it might be better than what we came for."

"This crystal is supposed to be the eye of a god. This weapon can't be more impressive than that."

"It's not the eye of a god."

"The legend says it is."

"Not a real god."

"It's something! I have to get this thing out so we can at least scry what it is they valued so highly."

Little Jack was silent. He couldn't disagree with Lancaster more. A weapon would be of far greater value than a myth, but if it meant so much to him, so be it. He had his gun Munin anyway. Who needed a sword? His thumb pushed a button and the cartridge under the pistol shifted to the smallest chamber. He then held it over Lancaster and said, "'Scuse me a tick."

Lancaster leaned over and was part way through asking, "What are you d..." when Little Jack fired a thin, tight laser beam into the sword's chamber, right next to the crystal. One of the pieces holding the crystal in began to cut away. "Wait!" Lancaster cried. "You might hit the..." But Little Jack was half way across already. His steady hands made the line almost perfectly straight. His glasses were set to guidance and he was able to trace right along the side of the crystal without damaging it.

Before Lancaster could protest again, the chunk on one side holding the crystal came loose, and fell. He was able to reach in and pull out the crystal. Having accomplished what he came to do, Little Jack turned and marched out the door. "We'll be planet-side in an hour. You'll want another shower."

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The planet they were approaching had no name, only the designation H2673B. Humans had gone nowhere near it, despite its beautiful oceans and lush forests. It was a long way out, for one thing, and the dense jungles would make clearing areas for exploitation difficult. And so Lancaster gave it a name, "Sleeping God." Little Jack called him on the lack of effort, pointing out that he was being lazy just going with the reason they were there.

"It's my planet. I can call it what I want!" Lancaster teased.

Little Jack reminded him that it probably belongs to the god they're visiting, and he should be careful to watch out for it.

Lancaster did keep an eye out for it as they broke the atmosphere and swooped down toward the ocean. Most of the land masses on the planet were islands broken up by miles and miles of ocean. That seemed to be how the Zeborno liked it; most of the planets where Lancaster encountered their remains were primarily oceanic. Perhaps that was another reason corporations hadn't gotten out to this planet, too little on which to land.

They pushed through a nomadic rain storm that pressed at the canopy of the ship and they emerged near an island. It was as if a curtain had been drawn to reveal paradise.

Lush green trees spread out and rolled softly over hills and up mountainsides as the island climbed toward its hub. A long string of water fell down a cliff-side, fed from an underground river and pouring out a hole. It fell for almost a kilometer before hitting the bottom where mist sprayed up high into the air, the moisture feeding the tall, leafy green trees all around it. The water which settled at the bottom conglomerated around a lake before feeding out into a river which meandered into the distance toward the ocean, weaving around clumps of heavy woods and thick rocks which poked out of the ground in seemingly random intervals.

The god would be somewhere on this island, but where exactly, Lancaster did not know. Part of him had simply assumed the god would make itself known when he arrived, and he could appease it by giving the god its eyes.

But he had no such luck, and Lancaster had to solve the riddle that stood before him. He turned to what he knew of their mythology to figure it out. Ancient Zeborno lore spoke of the sleeping god upon the wall allowing the truth of the giver of life to flow through his mouth. Lancaster had expected a wall, perhaps a large one he could spot from space, but he had had no such luck.

He asked Little Jack to fly low over the trees, following the river in search of a wall, or something that resembled one. All life forms depend on a liquid, or liquid-like energy source, and they often built their civilizations around them, so a river was the most likely place to start searching.

But as they looked and found nothing, Lancaster began to think deeper about the scripture. Perhaps it was speaking more figuratively. The text said that the god was "allowing" the truth to flow through it, which did not necessarily mean it was actually speaking. And the truth was about the giver of life. As Lancaster was already thinking, the giver of life was a liquid, most likely the water. If the god was allowing the truth about the water to flow through it...

"The cliff wall!" Lancaster exclaimed.

The ship rocked violently side to side. Little Jack, not usually shaken, was reacting to Lancaster's sudden outburst, and as a result almost crashed them into the ground, over which they were not particularly high. "Indoor voice!" He scolded, not taking his eyes away from the horizon which he was trying to steady.

"Take us back to the cliff wall," Lancaster said excitedly, but with an obediently lowered voice.

"Always back and forth," Little Jack complained, turning around nevertheless.

The ship approached the cliff wall and followed the long string of the waterfall up the side. Lancaster studied the steep rock, searching for some sign.

He got it at last when they reached the source of the waterfall. The river came out of a tunnel before crashing down its long drop. The cave out of which it tumbled had unusual patterns along its sides. Along each end was a crater, sunken in as though they had been pummeled by asteroids. Just above the cave, an

indentation curved back and arched upward with what appeared to be a few remaining carved steps. The cave out of which the water flowed had an upper lip which did not simply droop like a cave's lip does, but rather had a curved definition with aging lines like the lip of an animal, or more specifically, an old man. Peering beyond the waterfall, Lancaster could see nothing of a bottom lip; it had probably eroded with time, but he was pretty certain he could detect the remains of a sharp tooth which caused the water to separate around it. This was it! The face of the god, eroded by time, but still allowing the truth of the giver of life. It did not look like a Zeborno face, but gods have often been made to look like the faces of animals, or given an entirely new appearance.

Little Jack could almost read Lancaster's mind. No words needed to be exchanged. Lancaster was too in awe to speak anyway, and Little Jack knew that if he was to wait for him to pull his eyes off this statue and speak, he'd be waiting as long as it took for that god's face to erode, so he flew them up over the cliff and over the woods above.

Here, they could not see the river; it was underground. But the woods which grew here were more full and vibrant. It was difficult to see the ground. Lancaster peered as hard as he could, trying to detect anything that didn't look like it belonged, the sure sign of an intelligent civilization. After a few moments he found a single roof peeking out of the trees. Little Jack flipped on a sensor which covered the windows of their canopy with a sort of X-ray that saw through the branches and leaves of the trees. Immediately, they saw the ancient village spread out before them. Most of the buildings were in ruins, eaten away by the jungle over time, and covered over now by moss and vines, but still just visible as a sign of their past existence.

Lancaster lowered down on a wire toward the canopy of trees. His legs broke through the leaves, which broke off and tumbled down at the same speed as him; rolling end over end, as if accompanying him through this green and brown layer. It was a lot like drifting through a cloud zone; everything above and below disappeared, and all that was left was the billowing silence of the immediate surroundings. But unlike the clouds, this layer had noise; a faint chattering that echoed against every branch and trunk. It began with his entry. Something was disturbed by his intrusion.

As quickly as he arrived, he broke through the lower level of foliage, breaking free a new generation of leaves that dropped with him and landed on the soft grass all around, as though creating a landing pad for him. Lancaster stomped the ground to make sure it was firm, then released the wire from his utility belt, tugged it a couple times, then watched it zip up, disappearing into the green canopy above him. It was gone, and he was now alone.

He looked around at the ruins of the buildings. They were made of a kind of cement mixture, something whose substance withstood time, but which could not stay in a formation, such as a house or other structure. All that remained were the bases of the walls and chunks on the ground which looked like boulders; and in a few of the ruins, a single support beam from the center of the structure still stood like a lone ghost keeping watch. All the buildings were gone except the one they all surrounded, the one whose bit of a roof Lancaster had seen just over the blanket of trees. The temple.

The material from which it was made was far more solid, like granite, or a type of metal that never rusted. It was a material the Zeborno clearly saved only for their most sacred buildings so they would last forever, and it was lined with shiny, valuable and strong crystalline, such as diamond, only with faint shades of blue and orange which glowed from them. The building had a base which rose at an angle and a body which lifted at a steeper angle which disappeared into the tree layer above. The bottom layer was carved like flames, its walls twisting sharply and chaotically with layers over layers of sharp points. The second layer, the body of the building, twisted more smoothly. Lancaster couldn't decide for certain if it was a tornado, representing air or perhaps smoke from the fire, or water. A hole in the wall resembling a fish caused Lancaster to believe it was water, but he couldn't be certain.

On closer examination of the hole, he saw sharp points glinting in the sun. He found a couple other holes that were similar, and found that the sharp points were colored glass. These were once windows, and when he saw one still partly standing, he could tell it had been a stained glass window.

He followed a ramp toward what looked like the front entrance, but when he reached the end of it, there was no door. All that faced him was a straight, flat surface made of the same substance as the rest of

the building. There was something different here, however. Unlike the rest of the building, here it was straight up and down, and perfectly flat. None of the design or flow of the rest of the building existed.

He carefully rested the palm of his hand on the surface to feel it, to test it. It was cold to the touch, like a frozen surface that desired to grasp his skin and hold it in place. Then, suddenly, it became searing hot, and it felt like hundreds of tiny needles were poking him lightly. It was more of a tickling sensation, but the surprise caused him to leap back. A green glow remained where he had touched the wall, still in the shape of his palm, and fading away until it was gone.

Amazed by what he had seen, and a little skeptical of his own sanity, Lancaster tried it again, touching the wall in a few places. The green glow appeared instantly this time, the wall apparently having warmed up, and it glowed only in the places where he touched. Smiling now, he looked the wall up and down, wondering how far out it reached. He danced his fingers across it, then squiggled a quick design on its surface.

The next thing he knew he was lying on his back half way down the platform. He vaguely remembered having gotten a sharp shock through the wall, as though it rejected what he was doing and pushed him away. Presently, he remembered; that was exactly what had happened. It had shot him through with electricity, which had felled him away from the wall, and made him tumble half way down the platform. He could hear animals in the treetops chattering loudly, as though laughing at him.

Lancaster got to his feet, raising up on one leg at a time, slowly, achingly. He glared at the door. Apparently it had not liked what he was drawing. Then he remembered; it was not a door. Or was it? Perhaps the drawing was the way to open it. If only he could figure out what to draw. If he drew the wrong thing again, the electric shock might not just send him tumbling. This time it could kill him.

He studied the building, thinking hard. The animals still chattered overhead. He didn't like the way they sounded. They didn't seem to be afraid of him. He kept looking up to see if anything was just above that could drop down quickly on him, then he studied the building again.

He found himself in front of one of the stained glass windows. It was so broken up that it was hard to see what it had once been anymore. Could that have been the design? He stood directly in front of it, trying to get a good view in hopes that he could figure out what it had been. Then he traced its direction, looking behind himself toward a building that had once stood. Its walls were all crumbled, but it was one of the structures which had a central pillar still standing. He had assumed it was something like a chimney which would stand in houses when the rest burned down, but this looked more like a support beam. On closer inspection, however, it had a subtle design carved into it. Lancaster scanned it with his Illuminator, capturing the image, and separated the carving from the rest of the pillar to get a better look. It appeared to be a kind of large bird in the process of taking flight.

Lancaster walked over to another side of the temple where he found a second broken window. He traced it to another broken down building with a support beam still standing in the middle. He scanned it and found a sort of fish with arms and hands, but no fingers reaching out. Next he found a sort of rat-like creature, its head peeking out of a hole. And finally, he found a bug flying toward a flame, attracted, apparently, to the light. These were all four stained glass windows looking in four directions, each paired with the only standing structures in town. He captured the image of each one with his Illuminator.

Lancaster returned to the flat surface he guessed was the door and took in a deep breath. "Here goes... something," he said to himself, and he held the Illuminator in one hand and stuck out his finger with the other. Touching the wall, he traced the image of the large bird on his Illuminator. The green glow crackled beneath his finger as he traced the design onto the wall as closely as he could. Every time a spark gave him a little shock, he jumped, but he did not dare to pull his finger away for fear the wall might think he considered the design complete, and zap him for being incorrect. He kept at it until finished with the design, then pulled away.

Unlike before, the design remained in place, glimmering in green sparks for a time, until it faded backward, as though being sucked into the wall. He heard a loud clacking, but strangely, not from the door. It came from the platform below his feet. He suddenly felt that he could not leave the platform until this was done. He had begun this process, and the machine expected him to finish it. So Lancaster drew the next design, the fish with arms. He had difficulty with the arms, but when the wall accepted his submission even

with poor artwork, he knew he didn't have to be exact. The floor made another clunking sound, both confirming his try and frightening him a little.

Lancaster drew the rat-like animal with the same results. The third one was a bit more difficult, having to get flames drawn on. When he came close but did not put some of the flames in the right place, he grit his teeth and closed his eyes, expecting to be thrown across the town, or struck down with lightning. But instead, nothing happened. He looked at the part of the wall where he had made the mistake, and his mistake was gone, erased by the wall, while the rest remained in place. He tried again, this time creating a better drawing. The wall hesitated when he was done, as though considering, then, apparently satisfied, it pulled the image back into itself.

That was it, the last one. Lancaster awaited the verdict, aware that it could be his entrance into the temple, or his doom. He heard the clacking beneath him again, and he waited for a similar sound from the door. It didn't come.

Instead, the entire ramp lowered. He had to steady himself to keep from falling over. It lowered down into the ground, then broke into steps. The walls on each side were covered with the same granite surface as the building. When it came close to the bottom, a door was revealed in front of him, and when it was fully in view, the ramp came to a stop, the clacking gears slowing until they came to a clunky halt. He reached forward and found a door handle near the left side of the door. He pulled at it, twisted, and the door pushed open.

Dust danced in the long beam of light which poured in from behind him, giving his elongated shadow a sort of shimmering halo. It was a large room, but exactly how large he could not tell; most of it was pitch black. He only knew that it was one single chamber, and that several items littered the room. They looked like machinery, but he couldn't quite tell for certain, not without lights.

He felt the wall on each side in futility. He didn't really expect to find anything, but there was no reason not to try. After all, there was some form of electricity on the wall used to get him in. There was some chance it would work here, but it didn't. Instead, he changed the settings on his Illuminator to a wide beam so he could see.

It lit up a face, one mangled and filled with rage, and the body of a creature whose arm reached out to him, its gnarled hand ready to claw him. Lancaster winced, pulling back, but holding the Illuminator forward as if it would keep the animal at bay.

Then he stopped, relieved. No one was reaching out to him. It was a statue, and its hand was not actually reaching, but rather pointing, perhaps revealing the way out; a full-bodied exit sign. Lancaster's biggest misunderstanding, one he would not be telling Little Jack about, was the look on the creature's face he had so feared. It had no actual expression. It just resembled a Zeborno. Its face was curved with the two ends folding forward, its eyes at the ends, and its mouth and nostrils on the back side of the fold. This statue differed from the Zeborno in that it had horns that stuck out of its neck which rose to its face and pointed outward toward whomever it was looking. Its body was rough and hairy, like a bear, or mythological beast one would expect to find in a cold, wild environment; and its legs, like the Zeborno, bent the opposite direction of humans, and it had hooves for feet.

Lancaster could see more shapes hovering at the edges of his light, and so he decided not to be surprised again. He changed the setting on the Illuminator, and in a moment, the entire room faded into view.

It was wide and would be round, but for a number of corners which made it an octagon, or a pentagon, or something of that nature. He didn't know how many corners there were so he couldn't put a name to it. Several pillars provided support for the room, and a few hourglass doorways on the opposite end showed a way further into the basement, or perhaps to stairways leading up to the surface level of the building. Within the room stood several statues, all made of solid silver: The one which pointed at him when he entered, one which was grasping a lever attached to the floor, two which pointed at the other doorways, two more which stood over the statue of a large chalice, the edges of which were covered with carvings of fruit, one which pointed at a part of the floor which had a line carved into it that ran about a meter, and four more, adorned in flowing garbs, which stood over a much larger statue, at least seven meters

in length, this one made of solid gold, that was lying in the very center of the room whose folds in his face lay flat on either end of his slumbering form.

Also in the room were various tables and shelves adorned with what Lancaster had learned to be religious artifacts of the Zeborno, which sat beside jewels, pendants, seals, and other signs of government. Some relics were both; the Zeborno made little distinction between the two. Some shelves looked like they once held far more, but were now covered in dust; most likely the remains of books and other forms of text long since dissolved by time. Near the top of the center of the room, hanging from the high ceiling, more than ten meters up, were three globes, one larger than the other two. At one end of the room, a half wall rose out of the floor, behind which was a bench; perhaps where spectators watched, or perhaps it was where the holy one spoke, as there was a pulpit near the center and speakers on either end. Or maybe it was where the ruler sat, as what was once a fancy chair sat in the center, behind the bench.

Each Zeborno site was different. The local leaders and holy ones had their own individual methods of running their villages, even though the overall cultures remained essentially the same. Their methods of living usually seemed so primitive that it was a wonder they had such a high level of technology and that they were spread out across the stars.

This one was supposed to be special, though. This temple supposedly housed a god, which Lancaster guessed had something to do with the golden statue lying in the middle of the room. Its arms were crossed, common for the Zeborno, and its legs were straight, which was uncommon for them. Zeborno typically laid, and were buried, with their legs sticking out to the sides, then bending back inward, creating the shape of a diamond with the lower half of their bodies. This had its hooves pointed straight toward the wall, and its legs stretched as far as they could go. Lancaster studied the body. It was muscular, and had wide shoulders, a feature the Zeborno admired. Its hands were like long needles, a trait the Zeborno did not have, nor did any of the other statues in the room. They had something that resembled claws, but longer and thinner, almost fingers.

Any doubt that this was the representation of the god went out the window when Lancaster came upon the face and saw that the eye sockets were empty, and were the perfect size for the crystals. This was what he had come so far for, what he had risked his life for, and for which others had been willing to die. It didn't seem worth it. Despite the solid silver statues and this huge solid gold one, there wasn't much to look at. This did not seem like the throne room of a god. Perhaps it once was, before the millennia took it, but now it was just a dusty, oversized room. Lancaster scolded himself for expecting more, then realized what he had been hoping for was perhaps a real god, or something like it. At least something to explain the cosmos.

At least he might understand the Zeborno better, and even the Siguerans, for they were the ones who had written down this location in their map, getting Lancaster and Little Jack's attention in the first place. He could finally learn what the cause for all this trouble was. Lancaster went to an eye socket on one side, studied the hole, compared it to the crystal, then fit it inside. He walked to the other side, then carefully placed the crystal inside that socket. When he released it, he felt it latch into place, as though the statue knew it was there and was pulling it in. Lancaster instinctively pulled back, and just as he did, that statue came to life.

The crystals lit up bright pink, and the folds of the face turned inward. Without looking around or taking its time, the statue bent upward. The hoofed feet grasped the ground, and in one quick motion it stood up without the help of its hands. It happened so quickly, Lancaster was unable to step back fast enough, and the shaking ground caused him to lose his footing. Flat on his back, he watched helplessly as the robot turned to him, its enormous legs slamming down on the ground next to him. He curled up into a ball, expecting to be squashed, but the other foot stepped over him, walking toward its clearly predetermined destination.

When Lancaster unraveled himself, he looked up at the statue. It had stopped moving, and was standing at one end of the room. The other statues that had been standing around him had also now come to life, and were rushing to his side, looking the tall one over, inspecting its hinges, its gears, and its basic functions. Everything seemed in order.

Curious why the “statue,” or more like robot, had chosen this point of the room to walk to, Lancaster walked around the side and took a look. The “god statue,” which Lancaster was now calling it, was standing in front of the giant chalice, looking down into it, as if waiting. The two statues by the chalice were now pointing into it. Looking at the design at the edge of the chalice, Lancaster knew right away what they wanted.

He rushed up the stairway out into the village. He went to the nearest group of trees and searched the branches. It took him a little while to search, but at length he found some fruit dotted among the leaves. He hopped up to the branch, ran along it, reaching down to pick up several of the fruits, then, with half an armful, he rushed back inside. As he did, he realized that he didn’t know how many were supposed to go inside. Would they be insulted if he didn’t give them enough, or he provided the wrong type of fruit? He didn’t know, and frankly, no amount of second-guessing would help. He just rushed over to the statue of the chalice and threw in what he had, then looked up at the god statue.

He heard a click come from the chalice, and the statues next to it seemed to attend to the fruits. They reached in with their robotic hands and smashed the fruits. As they did, their eyes glowed, and a moment later, so did the lead robot’s. Lancaster half expected laser beams to fire from those eyes and zap him to oblivion. But they didn’t.

Instead, the god statue stood up tall. Its arms were at its side, but not at rest. They were bent, at the ready. Its eyes glowed a brighter pink, and then the whole room came to life. Music roared from the speakers, a harmony so out of tune from human ears that it sounded like a chaotic racket created for the purpose of hurting one’s ears. For the Zeborno, it must have been sacrosanct.

Out of the eyes came projections which shot against the walls, the images beaming between the corners. They landed on the dust, the rough surfaces making it impossible to see what the beams of light were trying to reveal. The god statue clearly knew what was on them, for though it showed no emotion in its visage, it reacted with celerity, looking quickly from wall to wall, starting new projections, stopping to send signals, lighting up the ceiling, and moving its arms as if to reach out for something. It was clearly going into action, but for what, Lancaster could not tell.

He went to one of the walls that had a projection on it and he brushed off the dust with both hands. After wiping for several seconds, he blew as hard as he could. The dust flew into the air and caught in the projection’s cone of light, basking him in silhouette. He could see part of the wall beneath, and the projection more clearly. It was the image of another Zeborno village. It looked pretty much like the one he was in; the walls of the buildings were shattered to the ground, surrounded by woods. One building, probably the temple, still half remained. His hand rested on a short ledge, evidently the bottom part of a frame in which the image was projected. He felt some roughness under the dust, and he scraped it off to look at it. There he saw a Zeborno name, one that’s almost impossible to pronounce in English, most likely the place that was being projected.

He hurried to the next wall and dusted it off as well. The projection he saw there spoke the same story; the remains of the Zeborno civilization long since decimated, only a few things remaining to reveal anyone was ever there at all. He found the location’s name at the bottom. The nameplate flipped, and another image appeared on the wall, this one underwater in a dome. The buildings were still intact, as the dome was still holding back the ocean from flooding it. However, the buildings were empty.

At this point, Lancaster noticed a couple small lights blink on and off inside the city in the projection. Lancaster looked around to see a small light glinting in the robot’s eye. It was sending the signal, even though this world was light years away. It had some way of communicating to it. Looking back at the other projection, Lancaster saw a single dim light somewhere deep within the remains of the temple blinking on and off. The robot was trying to send a message. The frantic way it looked around at the screens and switched projections, Lancaster could tell it was surprised by the disappearance of its masters, or were they its subjects? He could not tell for certain. Either way, he was afraid for them.

Despite the air getting choked with dust, Lancaster kept running around the room dusting off the walls, looking at the images. He found in one a few robots among the rubble. The god statue sent a message to them, and they straightened up. A signal was sent to them, and they began to move among the rubble.

When Lancaster got to one of the projections, he was disturbed by what he witnessed. To make sure he was seeing it correctly, he blew as hard as he could to get the dust to fly off. The cloud drifted, and fell into the light of the projection creating a white, sideways pyramid around him as Lancaster watched in fascinated horror. A host of bipedal robots stood in a line along a dirt road inside the deep fog of a jungle. They looked like a military detail, except they were grown over by the woods. A few of them were pointing, as though they had been frozen while giving direction to the others. Lancaster dreaded their being activated, not knowing of what they were capable. But when the god statue clearly tried to control them, they didn't budge. Lancaster half sighed with relief, half felt sorry for the large robot, losing control of its subjects, which, it seemed, it had control of earlier.

At the same moment, something blinking from the roof caught Lancaster's attention. He looked up and saw that light beams were projecting out of the large robot's head, creating a series of dots floating around the three globes. One was blinking orange. He didn't know what it meant, but he took note of it.

That's when the sound of someone clapping broke the silence of the room. It was so sudden and out of nowhere that it was almost deafening, and it took Lancaster a moment to register that it was coming from a person in the room.

Standing at the entrance was the shadow of a man flanked by two others. Behind them, two more came in. They were clearly armed. All Lancaster could tell about the man in the center was that he was thin and wore a well-pressed suit. "Well done," the man said, and before he was finished with his second word, Lancaster turned and dashed away. The four guards lifted their guns and fired, and Lancaster leaped behind the half wall. "Now, now," the man said. Lancaster recognized the voice as that of Nikos Kazakis, the infamous archaeologist he had had a run-in with before. Kazakis was interested in the profitability of archaeology, not the curiosity of it. He knew that many of the relics held hidden powers; powers that corporations could use in their bids for supremacy. He had no allegiance to any single entity, just whoever would pay him the most. "There's no need for dramatics. Why don't you come back out?"

"Why don't you come in?" Lancaster called back. One of the guards fired a volley of shots for the smart-ass remark, and Nikos silenced him.

"We've been in this position before, my friend," Nikos said. "It did not go nove for you."

"Who says I'm your friend?" Lancaster said.

"Now you're just being hurtful. Come on out. I'm not going to harm you. I'm too curious how you survived our last encounter."

"When you left me trapped on a planet to be sucked up by a black hole?"

Nikos feigned a memory loss and said, "Yes, I register that would be it."

"It's because I have friends rather than hired goons!"

"Well, that friend won't be able to help you now. The temple interferes with communications. And there's no other way out of here, so you have to deal with us. Come now, Lancaster. Don't drag this out."

Lancaster thought through his options. He tried to figure out something, some way to escape from this. There were no options; none that did not involve surrendering first.

Lancaster rose up, raised his hands, and stepped out. Nikos stood near the center of the room, smiling. The large robot was near him, still frantically rushing through the footage on the walls, trying to communicate with the other Zeborno outposts, learning for the first time that it was alone, and its makers long since extinct.

One of the guards tensed as if about to shoot Lancaster, and Nikos put up his hand, "Uh, uh, uh! We are friends! You see how I'm not trying to kill you? I've learned restraint."

"Right," Lancaster said, stepping through the room.

Now Nikos pulled out his own pistol, pointing it at Lancaster who was about a meter away from the statue that was pointing at the floor. "That will be far enough," Nikos said. Lancaster had not been walking toward him, but he didn't want anything out of order. "Take a good look around, Lancaster," Nikos said. "This is the place you will die, if you can't give me a good reason why I should keep you alive."

To be continued...