

RELIC WORLDS



Lancaster James

And the
Eye of Fire
PART 1

The thin man sitting across from Lancaster had deep ridges which ran down his long face. His eyes were like craters which sank down into the earthen features of his rocky visage. Lancaster found himself mesmerized by it, like he was peering into the landscape of a dead alien planet. He wasn't sure if the man was staring back at him or not. He could barely make out the pupils hidden in those deep eye sockets, as if he was wearing sun glasses.

The mystery was appropriate for his line of work. Lancaster knew little about him beyond what Little Jack had told him; that he was known as Mr. Urago, and he was one of his past associates in the dark world in which Little Jack had once lived. He was known for being dangerous, and Little Jack had warned Lancaster to not try to lighten the mood with humor; the man was not known for being light hearted, particularly not to those he killed in cold blood and with little discernible reason.

Mr. Urago and the dour mood of his entourage made for a striking difference between themselves and the beautiful scenery of the restaurant around them. A layer of bright flower arrangements wove a line across the middle of the walls, the real flowers always in bloom thanks to botany techniques developed by the company. Upon entering, one could look along the wall of fresh fruits that developed that day and choose from them, or from the fish in the aquarium along one of the walls. Along the ceiling, wind chimes clanged softly in a melody created by puffs of wind that blew onto them at perfect intervals. A large one in the middle which hung all the way to the floor and ended in a shallow pool of water clanged slightly louder than the others when they knocked against it every few bars.

The waitresses, all with long, silver dresses that looked difficult to walk in, wove among the tables holding silver platters with covers exactly at the height of their bellies. They opened the platters at the tables to reveal the contents to the seated customers with large smiles on their faces. The over-the-top civility, though clearly manufactured, was a feature upon which this high priced restaurant on the 100th floor of Mimar Tower prided itself.

In dress, Mr. Urago and his boys matched the restaurant more than Lancaster and Little Jack. They wore the suits and vestment jackets that slashed across their chests, covering one side of the body and one arm while leaving the other side clear. Lancaster wore his best suit, which revealed all too clearly its lack of travel out of the closet, shedding occasional dust when he moved too quickly, which he tried not to do for fear of ripping it. His face was lazered clear, save for a few whiskers he almost always missed, and his head, usually covered by a hat, had difficulty getting used to being free, and seemed to jump out in various points as if exploring the air for the first time.

Little Jack was more used to dressing up for the occasion, and his hair was pulled back and polished so perfectly Lancaster could have used it as a mirror to straighten himself up better. He wore his trademark glasses which were so fogged in the front his pupils were barely visible, and he wore his usual leather jacket, not changing it for a suit, aware it would look pretentious on him. One of the women placed a platter in front of Little Jack and he turned to her suddenly, eyeing her outside the rim of his glasses. For a moment she was startled, but the far too large smile returned quickly to her face and she half nodded, half bowed, removing the lid from the tray, revealing appetizers that she then left with the men.

"I'm blinged that Little Jack had this connection and was able to arrange this," Lancaster said after an uncomfortable silence that felt like hours when it had likely been less than a minute.

No matter how many times Little Jack and his connections had done this, there was still an awkwardness that came with opening negotiations with no legal authority to watch over.

Mr. Urago barely regarded Lancaster. His eyes were mostly on Little Jack, who was staring back seemingly passively. "We begin no negotiations as long as he has Munin," he said, his voice dark, but with a certain nasal twang Lancaster had not been expecting.

A waitress was at Little Jack's side immediately, leaning down and holding a tray in front of him with one hand, and the lid with another. Little Jack eyed Mr. Urago suspiciously, not moving. Lancaster tapped him with his shoe, unsure whether Little Jack had not heard, or if he was refusing to give up his weapon. Little Jack did not react, but after a moment, his head moved slightly behind his fogged over glasses as he scanned the team of men across from him. He then turned on the woman beside him, face to face with her giant, forced smile. He memorized her face, even got an image of it on his glasses. She was slightly older, with the first signs of wrinkles buried beneath a thick layer of make-up, and a few strands of gray hair colored over.

After the long, awkward silence, Little Jack at last reached his hand into the interior of his jacket. He could see the men across from him tense their arms, as if readying to grab their own weapons, so Little Jack moved slowly, and removed his pistol from his jacket holster. Its handle was made of ivory, and the revolving barrel, which could turn to whichever weapon he chose to fire, was coated with brass. Drawn across its side was its name, Munin, named after one of the ravens of an ancient god named Odin. He had already lost the weapon's sister gun, Hunin, and he did not intend to lose this as well. His eyes never left the face of the waitress as he slid the weapon onto the tray. He was not only memorizing her face, he was showing her his own, and how serious he was to get it back.

As soon as the gun was in place, she slammed down the lid. Without the grin ever leaving her face, she nodded, rose, and disappeared into the dark restaurant, Little Jack watching her go.

"It appears we can begin," Lancaster said.

Mr. Urago smiled politely and leaned forward. "We certainly can. Let's start by seeing the rocks you promised."

Another waitress appeared at Lancaster's arm, the silver platter in her hand and the lid raised. Lancaster shook his head. "No, no. It's not going to work that way. I put it in there, and the diamonds are gone forever."

Mr. Urago looked over at Little Jack, the polite smile still on his face. "Jack, is this any way to do business..."

"Show us the eye, Urago," Little Jack said impatiently.

The smile left Mr. Urago's face. It was truly time for business. He looked back over at Lancaster and said, "I believe we may have a problem if we cannot take stock in each other."

"I don't see why there should be a problem," Lancaster said. "As long as it's the true Eye of Fire and not some counterfeit. But how do we know unless we put eyes on it?"

Mr. Urago stared at Lancaster a moment, then instantly rose his hand up and snapped in the air so loud it could probably have been heard from another room with loud music. Another waitress appeared at Lancaster's side opening a tray. Lancaster could have sworn Mr. Urago had snapped in a different direction than the waitress had come, but he supposed they probably all had their own snapping sound to come to.

Upon the tray rested a round, red jewel. Though very beautiful with a perfect gloss, little about it looked extraordinary. Legend had it that this artifact had the power of the eye of a god. Upon his initial look at the thing, it appeared like it would capture the eye of a jeweler far more.

Lancaster reached into his suit pocket and noticed the same tenseness of those across from him, as though he was preparing to grab a weapon. A confused look on his face, he pulled out a small rod, about the size of a Swiss army knife, and they relaxed, but only a little bit. He pressed a button and a small, two inch diameter magnifying glass-like device swung out. He placed it over the jewel and looked into it from the back end. Information immediately appeared on the glass of the device, appearing, then disappearing to make room for further information. After a moment, everything disappeared, replaced by the word "Authentic".

Lancaster looked over at Little Jack and nodded. Little Jack looked across at Mr. Urago, said nothing, and reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a bag of diamonds about the size of his fist and held them up for a moment. Another waitress came by, the tray open, her smile wide, waiting for him to place the bag on her tray. Little Jack hesitated a moment, holding the heavy bag over the tray. He eyed each of the gangsters, searching for any hint that they might spring. There was no sign of trouble, and so he turned over the bag, the diamond shards dribbling onto the tray like heavy rain, and they were instantly swallowed up by the lid.

The waitress shuffled to the other side of the table and knelt down next to Urago, opening the lid wide. Urago reached in with one hand, his fingers fingering the small pieces, while with his other hand he pulled a monocle out of his jacket pocket and placed it in his eye. His fingers held aloft one of the diamond fragments while he squinted through the eyepiece. It did as Lancaster's magnifying glass device, scanning the rock and feeding information to the glass of his monocle. It had to burn through a layer of dust that came from the site before symbols and lines appeared, analyzing the diamond rock. Then appeared the word "Authentic".

Urago smiled, opening his eye wide and allowing the eyepiece to fall into his hand. Glancing at Lancaster, he said, "It's good."

Lancaster's muscles relaxed. It was almost over and they would be on their way.

Then Urago turned to Little Jack. "Do you remember Akua?"

Little Jack rarely showed emotion, but Lancaster knew when he was tense. He could see the subtle yanking of his face muscles. He looked at his friend, then back at the man across the table. Little Jack took a moment to answer, then said, "I remember being betrayed by her."

"You murdered her, as I recall," Urago said. The bodyguards behind Urago twitched ever so slightly. Most would not have noticed this, but Little Jack caught the movement, as though they had just received a cue.

"She got herself rubbed when she fell out of a 202nd floor window," Little Jack said.

"You didn't save her."

"No."

"You didn't set a sight to."

"No."

"You could have saved her."

"I'm not in the habit of helping those who just tried to kill me."

"She was one of my best agents," Urago said.

“And a touch more?” Little Jack said. His glasses were scanning now, adjusting through various vision types, X-ray, infrared, etc. to spot what type of weapons his opponents were carrying, and where they had them. Small target symbols appeared on each person, who was also highlighted and color coded.

Urago said nothing for a moment, trying to keep his cool, but Little Jack’s last statement, though true, was insolent. His face reddened, and he looked ready to explode. Then he breathed out and looked calmly at Lancaster. “My apologies, Mr. James, but today you will be collateral damage.”

Lancaster didn’t understand at first. The man was speaking so calmly that Lancaster could hardly imagine he was telling him that they were to be murdered right then and there.

He came out of his stupor just in time to hear him give the official order to his guards, “Rub them both.”

The guards were ready, and they pulled their pistols from their jacket pockets. Little Jack just sat there in his chair, staring at Urago, unmoving, unflinching, as if he didn’t care.

Urago was so transfixed on this, and the others were so concentrating on Little Jack, expecting him to be the trouble, that they were taken by surprised by Lancaster rising and leaning half way over the table. He blew on Urago, like an excited kid blowing out his birthday candles. A cloud of dust flew up from the diamond shards, covering Urago and the guards around him. It spread quickly to all sides, flowing away from Lancaster and Little Jack. Within the plume, a popping and crackling snapped, like lightning in a storm cloud. The diamonds on the tray leapt up, crackling like fireworks in a heap. The diamond piece in Urago’s hand sparked in a near explosion, severing part of his hand, and scarring his face. He screamed in pain, falling back off the chair.

Little Jack ducked instantly below his chair. Though it was a low table, he still did not have to crouch very far. He scanned the dark, and now hazy restaurant, looking for the waitress who took his gun. His mind instantly connected to his glasses through his temple and he paged the memory bank for her image he had stored away. He found it, and each face was compared to that image. After only a couple seconds, he found her. She was on the other side of the room, near the bar, beyond a host of tables. He targeted her, coding her orange in his glasses so she would stand out from everyone, and he rushed in that direction.

Lancaster stood, prepared to run, but suddenly realized the Eye of Fire was still on the table. He reached for it, and just as he did, the form of a large man flew out of the dust at him. He was choking, trying to get out of the smoke. Lancaster took a step back, and the large man fell face first on the table, the side of which Lancaster had been sitting crashed to the ground, flipping the other end skyward, and smashing into Urago’s face.

As the table did its summersault, the small, red crystal Lancaster had risked his life for flew into the air, catapulted across the restaurant. As Lancaster watched it arc in the sky, a plate from the table swung just over his head, and flung off his hat. Lancaster ignored it and chased after the Eye of Fire. It bounced off someone’s table, flipped in the air before landing on another table, then crashed to the floor and slid below yet another table.

Lancaster weaved around the tables, pushing through the confused crowds as they stood, watching the commotion, some shoving back at Lancaster who was rudely smashing into them. One man at last decked Lancaster, and he fell to the ground. There, he saw the Eye of Fire below a table.

Little Jack didn't bother with the crowds, at least at their level. He jumped on one table and skipped across them, racing directly across the restaurant at his target.

The waitress saw him coming, and reached into a cabinet of the bar. She pulled out a bottle, smashing it in one quick motion while she jumped atop the bar using only her legs. There she waited for him, and Little Jack slowed, seeing this.

Lancaster began to crawl quickly along the ground toward the crystal, but was yanked up by the back of his collar by the man who had decked him. Lancaster looked up at the man confused. The man smirked, and pulled his hand back to punch Lancaster again. Lancaster put his arms up to defend himself.

Then a blast came from the smoke, followed by a series of other loud pops, the roar of laser gun fire. It was accompanied by screams and cracks as bodies were cut into. The man who had Lancaster exploded in front of him, and he dropped to the ground.

Now all was chaos. Legs ran all around him, some kicking into his sides as they ran for exits, or sometimes just away from where they stood. He fixed on the crystal just a few yards away, and he crawled toward it, trying to be careful to weave around the people and trip as few as he could. He got under the safety of a table, but then saw one of the feet kick the Eye of Fire away. He tried to follow where it went, but only saw the running legs of dozens of people, and the bodies falling.

Little Jack hopped onto the bar with the waitress. She was in her stance, the broken bottle ready in her back hand, while her fore-arm was stretched out toward Little Jack, ready to defend his advance. In contrast, Little Jack stood across from her, his arms at his sides, his small body standing upright, looking at her almost as though she was a fool. In truth he was no fighter, at least when it came to hand to hand. He was quick, and highly intelligent, but when he began to rumble with someone, he knew they would have him pinned in no time. He looked her over, searching for his gun, hoping she had it on her, but then realized that if she still had it, she would probably use it rather than a broken bottle.

The gunfire momentarily distracted him, then he began to look around the bar for some sign of his gun.

Insulted by his lack of concern for her, the waitress came at him, hopping once, swinging a couple feints with her hands, then coming at him with a leaping kick that could knock off his head.

He coolly turned his head toward her, then a bright flash ejected from his glasses, and he ducked below her kick. Unable to see, she flew past him, and smashed through a window. She reached into the restaurant and grabbed onto the edge, her fingers digging into the glass.

Lancaster found the crystal again among the plethora of running feet. It was being kicked around like a puck on the floor from one person to another, like a crowd of unwilling hockey players. He kept close to the ground, chasing after it, keeping his eye on the prize, as the shots kept coming, and bodies kept falling.

Lancaster reached it behind a table, and leapt, but just as he did, another foot knocked into it as they ran by, then tripped over Lancaster, sprawling him on the ground.

Blood was oozing from between the woman's fingers as the broken glass bit into her flesh. She screamed, crying for help, her legs dangling a hundred stories in the air.

Little Jack appeared at the window. He grabbed one of her arms, lifting her hand off the sharp frame. She looked at him gratefully, and he held her there. "Where's my gun?" he demanded.

With tears in her eyes, the woman said, "Bring me up, and I'll show you."

Little Jack stared at her a moment with his intimidating blankness, then proceeded to pull. She placed a foot on the side of the wall and began to lift herself. Her other arm found Little Jack's arms, and grabbed on.

The laser blasts were still flying, but primarily into the center of the restaurant. There were still live bodies between himself and the gangsters, and they were half blinded by the dust, shooting at anything that moved quickly, but it wouldn't last long, so he pulled harder.

Little Jack looked over at a nearby table which sat behind a fake wall. The inner wall was made to look like it was the edge of the restaurant through an optical illusion that was only broken when you came toward it from the correct angle. The table had several odds and ends, mostly weapons. Prominent among them was Munin, his prized gun.

"There it is," Little Jack said, and he dropped the woman's hand. She didn't scream; she was too surprised to at first. Her eyes simply widened, and she dropped from sight. Her hands had been on him, and her feet were not secure to the wall, and so her body fell the entire thousand feet or more to the city beneath.

Little Jack grabbed the gun, looked it over, then searched for his friend.

Lancaster managed to get the man off of him and shuffled through the crowd until he found the Eye of Fire again. He leapt at it, and as he did, he noticed there were fewer legs in his way. He scooped it up and quickly threw it in a jacket pocket. As he did, he noticed the place was far more quiet.

The crowds were dispersed, either out the doors, or hidden in cover. The gangsters, meanwhile, had recovered from their blindness and stood a few yards away from him, covered in white powder, their guns leveled on the anthropologist. Urago was centered among them, limping, his face a mess, and one of his hands limp. His good hand had his hand up, ordering his guards to wait a moment while he asked a question. "Where's your friend?"

As if on cue, a flurry of snapping bursts crackled deafeningly in the restaurant. A line of continuous shots sheared across the men like a switch blade through butter. They barely had time to react, and they all fell, some sawed in half.

Lancaster saw his hat still on the side of the room where he began, and he stepped toward it. Little Jack grabbed him as he raced by, pulling him toward an already broken window. He shot out the bottom of it and jumped through, pulling Lancaster with him.

Outside, falling hundreds of feet toward their doom, Little Jack grabbed onto Lancaster. Lancaster felt around his utility belt for a moment. 'You better not have lost it,' Little Jack thought, looking at the rising ground. Lancaster pulled out his grappling gun and shot at the roof, only a couple floors above the restaurant. It connected, and they slowed to a stop. Little Jack now pointed his own gun at the window from which they came.

As Lancaster reeled in the grappling wire and they zipped toward the top, Little Jack shot at any head which popped out the windows. Lancaster connected the gun to his belt, and placed his feet on the wall, running upward as they hurried toward the roof.

Little Jack continued to force the heads back by firing at them, and they raced past the window, running straight upward, then over the top. There, sitting among a few other ships in the prime parking spots, was Odin's Revenge, Little Jack's ship. They found the valets looking it over, playing cards to determine who would get it. They had evidently known what Lancaster and Little Jack's fates were supposed to be, and they looked on with surprise at the survivors.

"Sorry to disappoint you, boys," Little Jack said, pulling out a spare set of outer controls for the ship. "Don't bother getting up. The ones I gave you don't work anyway."

The entrance ramp lowered down for them and they hopped in, closing it again before it had reached the bottom.

* * *

The duo had nowhere specific to go, they just knew they wanted to be off that planet... and far enough away that any notion of following would be disheartening. They made their way to the system's asteroid belt where they blended in with rocks and other space debris.

They were used to traveling now, and had gotten accustomed to cramped quarters of ship life. For Little Jack, it was no problem. He had lived like this for decades while hiding from one law source or another, and besides, nothing was cramped quarters with his small size. Lancaster, on the other hand, had simply had to learn to live hunched partially over and to duck through doors. He sat a lot to ensure his head would not hit the ceiling, and he worked his muscles against resistors to keep in shape as best he could. But little could compare to true gravity, so he longed for the times when they would touch down on a planet.

They were currently following a map they had found on a Sigueran world a little more than a half a year earlier. It was in the form of a medallion with a green crystal in the center and two wings swirling around it. Within the wings were tiny silver crystals which sparked when one twisted it in the light. Surrounding this central section was a round frame with seven red pearls inlaid. Lancaster and Little Jack had discovered early on that these pearls were buttons which could be rolled in their sockets and pressed to get a variety of patterns projected out of the crystals.

These holograms were of floating dots, like sand pebbles drifting clockwise over the surface of the medallion. Depending on what red pearl buttons were pressed or rolled, various dots glowed brighter than others, or shone with alternate colors. Some had smaller dots still orbiting the colored ones. These colored dots, Lancaster discovered, were stars, and the smaller ones planets; and the medallion itself, a map, leading him and his partner to the ends of the galactic arm in search of their secrets.

The human name for the race which built the medallion was the Siguerans, though it was anyone's guess what they had once called themselves. They had disappeared hundreds of thousands of years ago after dominating the galaxy on and off for millions of years. They had been spread out into many solar systems, and this map presumably would lead to those planets. However, in exploring most of the planets on this map, it seemed that it led primarily to the planets of other races. Sometimes Sigueran cities sat next to, or on top of the ruins of other alien races, but it always led to a race other than them. Little Jack had suggested that this was a list of targets to conquer, which Lancaster hated to consider, but the evidence was mounting that he could not ignore. Whatever the reason, however, Lancaster wanted to know why the Siguerans

were interested in them. The best way to do that was to learn as much about them as possible. One of the races the Siguerans seemed interested in was the Zeborno. They had several of their planets listed on their map. Their home system of Polaris had been labeled on the Sigueran map as “Untamable.” One of the planets of a different system was curiously titled “Sleeping god,” which of course piqued Lancaster’s curiosity. He brought the subject up with other archaeologists he knew who were studying the Zeborno, and they told him of a legend the Zeborno had had regarding a slumbering deity. In the story, someone had taken the god’s eyes and scattered them. Because their god was blind, the Zeborno were lost, and it broke the spirit of many of their people. Lancaster asked how many eyes the Zeborno had had. Beings create gods in their own image, and if the Zeborno had twenty eyes, that was going to be a lot of work for Lancaster and Little Jack. Luckily, they had only had two. So Lancaster and Little Jack had sent out feelers into the Galaganet to locate them.

They each got a response at about the same time. Little Jack had gotten a response first from one of his underworld contacts that he had never trusted, but now found he would have to deal with in order to get this priceless treasure. That was the man they had just scrapped with in the restaurant.

The other had come from connections Lancaster had known through his ex-wife Mika. Their profiles had never been unlinked on some of the social sites, and so her connections still found him from time to time. He felt odd about utilizing those connections, especially since many never even learned about the divorce, but he continued forward regardless.

The person who contacted him was Nuala of the Stellar Arcane Foundation. They had been researching a half-land, half-sea based species called the Madek Shivar whose mixture of religion and war had once made them a fierce and far reaching culture. Their weaponry was upheld as coveted religious artifacts and protected in their most pristine temples. One of these artifacts was known as the Promoth Dirge, a handheld weapon evidently useful in every environment, which shields the owner while finding the weakness in the enemy that will most likely take it down.

Stellar Arcane had not yet collected this artifact, but on other Madek Shivar worlds they had read mention of it, and had even seen a schematic of the device. The reason this was of interest to Lancaster was because the power source appeared to be the very crystal Lancaster was searching for. The rarity was what made the Promoth Dirge a one-of-a-kind artifact, and also what made it so deadly.

Little Jack opened the wormhole communication to Nuala and Lancaster asked her to get him up to speed about where the Promoth Dirge might be.

“We have hued the final resting place to be M2950-B,” Nuala said. “There should be a giant temple in which it was placed at its core.”

“A completely unlisted star?” Lancaster asked, eyeing Little Jack’s annoyance at having to fly so far from civilization. Anything with an alpha-numeric designation rather than a name meant a great deal of travel time. It also meant that no human had spent much time there, unless they were hiding from something.

“That is correct,” Nuala said. “Their scriptures describe the high priests piking it to that planet for safe keeping after it was used in a war. They prepped it there for use again, and no mention is made of it being removed before the Madek Shivar disappeared. It was laid to rest in its temple, in the city of... I have trouble with Madek Shivar.”

It was not an easy language to speak. None were, but the Madek Shivar in particular used a series of sounds, usually made in the back of the throat and with the tongue, broken by breaks and clicks. She did her best to pronounce it.

“A map will be fine,” Lancaster told her.

“There is none,” she said. “But I will send over images of how we expect the temple to look, so if there are multiple cities, this being at the center should ping you to it.”

To be continued...