



RELIK WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE HUNT FOR
THE UTHER MARIS**

PART I

Lancaster felt every knuckle land against his cheek like a rough-hewn brick wall. His face was going numb, and his eyes were beginning to glaze over. He could barely see now, and it was for the best. Lancaster wasn't about to give these thugs the information they wanted, and the sooner he could sink into the comforting embrace of unconsciousness, the better.

Though Lancaster hadn't gotten a good look at them, he could tell that the men giving him the beating were large enough that they could do a lot more damage. And they were taking breaks between poundings. This wasn't just so they could ask questions. They were trying to keep him from going under. And there was a small pool of water nearby clearly intended to be used if he did.

The tiny ripples on the surface of the water, mixed with a distant, low hum, confirmed a suspicion of Lancaster's; they were on a ship of some kind. What type and how big it was, he did not know. But it was larger than a flying home... perhaps a cargo vessel, judging by the metallic interior and lack of décor. Lancaster's body was chained to a metal chair; something not made for comfort but for work purposes.

All Lancaster knew for certain was that the ship they were inside of belonged to a crime syndicate that wanted the two pieces of an artifact he had been seeking; something called the Uther Maris. The two names each stood for one half of the relic. When put together, the joined pieces would create a powerful gravitational weapon; one that could disintegrate matter in a given area, causing everything around it to get sucked into the vacuum and crushed. Such a particle disruptor could tear objects and people apart for a very long distance.

The gangsters had one of the two pieces for this weapon, the Maris. They had gotten it off of Lancaster when they captured him. Now they needed the second half, and they knew that Lancaster could find it. They were going to beat that location out of him.

"Come on, chum. This can't be worth it to you," one of the thugs said after landing one of his harder punches. "You're not getting this piece back, so you might just as jondo give up the other one and we'll let you go."

Lancaster could see the second thug chuckle at the last sentence; confirmation that they were never going to let him go. Once he provided the location of the Uther, they would throw him out an airlock, waiting only until they had confirmed the location if they were smart; and these two didn't come across as particularly brilliant.

"He's not heading on telling us," the second thug said, resigned. "We might as well kill him."

They weren't covering their faces. They definitely planned to end his life sooner or later. Lancaster's best hope was to make it later, and hope for an opportunity to escape sooner. He made the attempt with a snarky remark. "If you loosen these chains a little, I can lean over and you can kiss my..."

Another fist slammed across his face, then another, and another. It wasn't pleasant, but Lancaster hoped it gave them enough satisfaction that they would put off throwing him into deep space. He also hoped that each swing would knock him out. They didn't. But the panting coming from the man beating him implied it was wearing him out.

Lancaster spat out some saliva, and noticed some blood mixed in with the bile. It was getting bad; but he thought of how many people the syndicate would kill if they put the two pieces of the Uther Maris together.

The second thug saw that the first was needing a break, so he told him to stand aside, and he came at Lancaster with another relic they had had stored on a shelf; one that fit well in his hand and had sharp corners. He brought it down on Lancaster's head, causing a loud whack and

spinning Lancaster's head. A ringing overtook Lancaster's ears, and he began to see flashes of light dance before his eyes. He was unable to focus before another heavy blow came down on his head, knocking it the other direction; then a third blow knocked it back again.

Lancaster felt like a rag doll at this point, and he was barely able to pull up his head. Sticky fluid was now drooping from one side of his mouth, and he could feel his skin swelling by one of his eyes. He was able to open it enough to see the item the gangster was holding. Like the Uther Maris, this was ancient Sigueran; an artifact in its own right.

Breathing heavily, the second thug said between labored breaths, "So, Mr. archaeologist; you will tell us where the second piece is that we're looking for. You will tell us now."

One side of Lancaster's mouth raised in a slight smirk. They didn't even know the name of what they were search for. Then he nodded at the artifact his assailant was holding and said, "Careful with that. It's valuable."

His face turning red, the thug beat him again with the relic, then again the other direction. Lancaster had hoped he would. Sweet unconscious was drawing nearer with each blow, and he hoped it would be strong enough that he wouldn't wake up easily, even with inducements.

But a calm, familiar voice interrupted his plan; one Lancaster had not heard in almost a year, and it made his heart sink, as well as his skin crawl. It was Nikos Kazakis, Lancaster's old rival, and he said, "He's an anthropologist, Caros, not an archaeologist. A big ticket distinction." Nikos' voice was accompanied by steps landing on a metallic staircase as he descended into the room. A light from above captured his faded second class suit worn with a first class gait. His body stood perfectly erect like a statue with one hand held behind his back, as though holding up his spine. Something about his clothing revealed the mileage Nikos had been through while on the run and in hiding from some of the more powerful corporations. But he wouldn't let it hurt his pride, nor his posture. "An archaeologist would comprehend the value of something. An anthropologist only credits life; as though it holds any value at all." He stopped on the last line, his head dropping below the line of the ceiling. His typically clean cut face was covered in mossy, uneven hair. He had shaved recently, but not in the last couple days. Darkness under his eyes said he had slept about as much as he had shaved.

"Hi Nikos," Lancaster said, trying to sound informal.

The second thug raised the artifact, ready to strike Lancaster again, but Nikos interrupted him while he continued down the steps. "Put that thing away, you're going to break it. Mr. James over here registers that it belongs in a museum, like so many of the rest of the trinkets we dig up. He doesn't understand their true value."

The first thug placed a chair before Lancaster and Nikos stepped up and sat in it, placing the hand that had been behind him into his pocket. Lancaster noticed he had obtained a bit of a limp. From which enemy Nikos had received it, Lancaster didnot know, but he figured it was probably a good story.

Nikos looked deep into Lancaster's eyes. He probably surmised what Lancaster was thinking, especially from the sly smirk on his face. But he ignored it and continued his thought. "If he did, he'd know that where these items truly belong are not sitting uselessly under some glass case. Nor do they belong in the hands of some gangsters to hurt people. No, they belong in the hands of wealthy corporate interests who magically turn them into money. People like us find these toys buried in some ancient ruin. Then we show them to some CEO or acquisitions executive and, poof. The item disappears from our hands, and tens of thousands of electros appear in our bank accounts."

“You’re selling your soul for tens of thousands now?” Lancaster asked. “It used to cost hundreds of thousands.”

Nikos smirked. “You got me there, Lancaster James.” His good nature sucked away whatever small slam Lancaster was trying to make. Then Nikos continued, “There is a growing arms race between the corporate empires. They have aprended the value of our play things, and they are all gathering them up for hostile takeovers of one another. Pleasant with it or not, we will all have to choose sides sooner or later. Anyone who doesn’t will be figured an enemy to everyone. You can either profit from it, or die as an innocent bystander who happened to be in the way.”

“You want me on your side again, don’t you?” Lancaster sighed, stalling again for time, and slightly annoyed.

“I really just want you to give me the information I need,” Nikos said. “But if that means cutting you in on the deal... I’m a businessman. I comprehend when it’s in my best interest to lose a little to gain a lot.”

Lancaster rolled his eyes. “No matter how many people you hurt. No matter what damage...”

Nikos yanked his hand from his pocket and slapped it against the side of Lancaster’s cheek. The hand was covered in a metal glove that was itself wrapped in electronic parts with small ridges and tiny needles. Lancaster felt them all dig into his skin, and before he knew it, electrical surges were coursing through his head and neck. It came so sudden it made him shout, and he continued to scream in terror and pain as the currents shot through him back and forth in waves. Despite his best efforts to hide his feelings, Lancaster could not help but reveal his pain, and he soon could feel froth building up around the side of his mouth.

Nikos spoke loudly so Lancaster could hear. “I found this little beauty at a Zeborno ruin! Wonderful isn’t it? No need to answer, just enjoy it! I magged to keep it for myself because I just couldn’t part with this one.” Nikos pulled the glove away from the side of Lancaster’s panting face. A long line of drool connected to the floor.

“So what do you say, my old friend?” Nikos asked. “You ready to make a deal?”

Lancaster took in a few deep breaths to recover. Laboriously, he lifted his eyes to Nikos. Then he said, “I can suggest a few more things you can do with that glove of yours.”

Nikos reacted without thinking. Furious and tired of waiting for the information, he smacked Lancaster as hard as he could against the side of his face with the metal glove hand. It was too much for Lancaster’s senses, and at last he felt the numb, sweet relief of unconsciousness.

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The flames of re-entry parted like an orange-red curtain, revealing the golden emerald woods below. A shimmering, reflective string wound its way through, cutting a swath for the river that glowed blinding white when catching the local sun’s light. Lancaster’s eyes were wide as they took in every inch of the land below.

“Sensors,” Little Jack reminded him from the pilot’s seat. Lancaster was supposed to be watching his monitors in the co-pilot’s seat which were providing local GPS readings and various scans of the ground. The latter were not providing much information, as Lancaster had expected. The Siguerans were known for having left little of their presence on any planet. They were usually discovered when exploring the ruins of whatever nearby civilization they had

conquered. But here, their lost city had been on its own, and Lancaster did not expect to find much in the way of ancient structures; especially from a couple miles above the ground.

They knew the Sigueran ruins were here, however, as it was marked in the Siguerans' own Constellation Crest, which Lancaster and his team had been using to locate ancient sites across the known galaxy. Therefore, the local GPS directions would be their greatest guide. This was the site of one of the two pieces of the Uther Maris. The other was listed as being on a planet that was currently being scouted by corporate surveyors. It was better for Little Jack to go retrieve that piece since he was better at sneaking in and out of locations without being detected, and Lancaster was better with wild environments such as this one.

Thinking about this fact, Little Jack asked, "Why did these aliens put the two pieces in separate places so far away, anyway?"

"The Siguerans were only developing the technology in the Uther Maris," Lancaster explained. "They were still working on the Uther part of it on the world you're going to. The Maris was done and is somewhere down there." He pointed at the trees below.

"Why didn't they finish it?" Little Jack asked.

"They built something much more powerful. The TaiperAnslees. But we have no idea where that is."

There was a short pause before Little Jack changed the subject. "You know there are a lot of creatures that want to have you for a meal down below."

"Nah. I taste too bitter," Lancaster retorted as he pressed his hat on his head and headed out of the cockpit. He was now running through his head everything he needed to know. The Siguerans didn't leave a lot to find; but they often had some hidden cache preserved and protected by chambers that lasted the eons and genetically engineered animals and plant life to protect it until they emerged from wherever they disappeared for millions of years. Despite his happy-go-lucky tone to his partner, Lancaster knew he needed to be extra careful.

Little Jack flew Odin's Revenge to just over the tree tops, the bottom tips of the wings nearly skimming their peaks. He had gotten good at detecting clearings in the nearly five years of dropping Lancaster off on planets like this. Today he had the added benefit that he didn't need to land, so he found a clearing that he could lower into that was close to the site, even though it wasn't big enough for his entire ship. He stopped, hovered, and lowered just a little, snuggling in among the branches of trees that were all leaning away from the thrust keeping them aloft. "Drop point," Little Jack said into the intercom.

Lancaster heard him, and he opened the bottom doors, revealing the chaotic swirling of the woods below him. Attached to a wire line, Lancaster dropped out and hurtled to the grass. A few meters up he slowed, and he landed gently on the ground. He tapped his Talki, the signal to Little Jack, and the wire retracted into the ship. Lancaster cleared out of the way, and the hover thrusters were joined by the liftoff boosters, and Odin's Revenge disappeared into the sky.

The roaring of the ship was replaced by the cacophony of the jungle. Though slightly quieter, it was no less tempestuous. The local animals were disturbed by the intrusion, and they made their objections known. Some seemed to be calling to each other, perhaps going about their daily chatter. Lancaster tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. He usually had a great deal of information on animals on a planet he was exploring; but not this time. This was a world that didn't even have a name, it was so far off the beaten path of human planets.

The woods virtually boasted at being untouched. Lancaster had to perpetually run his Flora Scanner ahead of him to detect animals hidden in the tall undergrowth. The massive trees grew unchecked, their roots spreading out like spider legs just before entering the ground and

rippling in and out of the mud like ocean waves; sometimes bridging gaps where the land dipped into the ravines. Atop the trees, birds sang an exacting tune repeatedly, all of them conforming to the same notes in an endless cycle. It may have been enough to drive Lancaster mad if it weren't for the other animal noises that chattered all around him.

It wasn't long before Lancaster spotted short, spiked mounds peeking out of the earth. Their color and texture conformed to the jungle; they even had yellowish leaves growing out of dirt upon them. But Lancaster knew how to spot an unnaturally manufactured structure built by an intelligent species. He approached them and confirmed his suspicion. Scraping off some of the layers of mud, he found carved stone wound in the corkscrew design the Siguerans often used. Looking around, he saw other sudden contour changes to the ground typically associated with construction. These formed well with the jungle, just the sort of integration the Siguerans would have wanted.

But Lancaster was still certain they would have left a cache of something behind, especially after marking it on their master map, the Constellation Crest. There would be a building, or at least a few rooms, somewhere out here. He just needed to find it.

This was why Lancaster James carried with him a trove of technological tools. Between his jacket covered with pockets inside and out, and his utility belt, he carried a seemingly endless supply of whatever he needed in almost any situation. The trick was remembering which pocket whatever he needed was in. He took his time and located his Infundibulator, which he used to scan the ground and surrounding hills for underground cavities. The device's accuracy varied depending on the ground type, but it was never extremely reliable. However, it did often point him in the correct direction.

In this case, he found evidence for gaps in the ground not far from a dip in the earth. Several trees grew on the edge, and the ravine was covered in their tangled roots. This somehow made sense to Lancaster, who began to climb down the roots like they were stairs.

Arriving at the bottom, Lancaster turned in the direction he believed the underground structures to be. The web-like roots interfered with his search, but from what he could tell, the gully's wall was nothing more than mud. There was no door, as far as Lancaster could tell; even one left over from centuries of misuse.

But then Lancaster got a hunch. He stopped trying to look past the roots and he began staring into them. They emerged from the ground, reaching up near the muddy ravine's edge, the two sides connecting at the arched top. Much of the rest of the door was out of place unless one looked directly on, in which case several branches of the roots that grew out a few meters from the other parts fit into the shape of the doorway perfectly, completing it. It was an optical illusion Lancaster had nearly missed.

This at last posed another question; how to open it? The wood was too strong and immovable; and even if it was forced or cut, that would likely lock him out from ever getting inside where he wanted to go. Worse yet, this would be the exact type of place the Siguerans would set a trap; something that utilized nature to capture and murder trespassers.

He had to figure out how to get through this door, and he had to do it right on the first try.