



RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE HUNT FOR
THE UTHER MARIS**

PART 3

Lancaster came back to consciousness slowly and painfully this time. He ached almost everywhere. He felt numb everywhere else. He believed he had been revived by several slaps to the face, but he couldn't be certain. He was too weak to move; too weak even to resist the gangster who had him by the back of his shirt. All he noticed about his surroundings was that they were no longer in the cargo bay. Instead, they were in a corridor next to an air lock.

Nikos saw Lancaster notice the outer door and said in a no-nonsense voice stripped of all pleasantries, "If you aren't willing to tell me what I want to know, you're useless to me. So I'll throw you out this air lock into deep space where your body will never be found."

Lancaster tried to speak, and as he did, he found that each word came out in a drunken slur. "If I tell you, you kill me anyway."

"Not true," Nikos said, his pleasant voice returning. "You're more valuable to me alive. You see, I know that you are better at xeno-historical research than me. You always have been. I may have the doctor title, but your knowledge and skills far exceed mine. I need you to help me find what I'm searching for. To know what I'm looking at. Without you, I'll just be glossing over dusty objects; many of which will be valuable. So come with me and live like a king, Lancaster."

Lancaster could not help but smile. Though he hated Nikos, he had always sought approval from the official society from which Dr. Kazakis had come, and this was the first time he could remember hearing it. He kept grinning, even looking away; remembering how long it had been that he had...

Nikos grabbed Lancaster's face and turned it toward him. His own face revealed that he was out of patience, but he still spoke in that kindly manner, though with a tight jaw. "If you don't help me, I'll still get what I want if I have to kill everyone you care about to get it. We'll kill your partner, we'll kill everyone at that university you work for... We'll kill Mika, and we'll get that Constellation Crest she's hiding. And then I will have the location of every secret in the galaxy."

Lancaster could not help but smile pathetically. He was unable to laugh, and this was the closest he could get. He then met eyes with Nikos with a "get real" expression and said, "You're going to kill Little Jack. Really."

Just then, the ship's alarm sounded; a squawking, raucous noise, the sure sign of a low rent civilian vessel. Just as everyone was reacting to the sound, a loud explosion was accompanied by the ship shaking violently. All four of the men in the corridor stumbled. The gangsters tried to regain their footing, but found they were beginning to float. The suction from the floor that created the artificial gravity was failing, as were the lights, and anything else that used power. While the thugs began to scream in panic, Nikos waited for the reserve power to kick in. Even lesser ships usually had something to fall back on that was not attached to the main power plant in case it was taken out.

While they waited, Nikos looked at Lancaster. He was holding onto the floor, smiling. Nikos simply asked him, "How?"

Lancaster didn't answer. He didn't want Nikos to know about the tracking device in his jacket, nor the button he pressed to warn Little Jack of danger. Lancaster also knew that Little Jack had methods of entering a star system undetected, dropping out of spectrum drive in the outer ring, using the sensors to find his target, then jumping through spectrum to appear very close to the target; close enough to get a hit on it before it was able to turn on its defense systems.

After nearly a minute of stumbling in the dark, the lights and artificial gravity turned back on. After everyone landed hard on the floor, they saw Lancaster. He had not in any way tried to escape. He was just holding onto the grating of the floor with a large smile on his face. "Keep a gun on him!" Nikos ordered, and the thugs did as he said. All of them were looking around, wondering what would happen next.

Just then they got their answer. They saw outside the windows of the airlock doors a vessel pull up and stop, then connect to the outside air lock door. Nikos called for reinforcements, and in a few moments, they had a crowd of armed syndicate soldiers in the corridor looking through the same window they were looking.

They saw the outer air lock open and a small figure step through into the airlock chamber. He wore large, frosted over glasses that covered nearly his entire face, and a thick, padded, black outfit. He was in no hurry, strolling casually inside. They noted his two custom crafted laser pistols with various settings; the kind only the most skillful gunmen carried.

Lancaster looked at Nikos and noticed he was growing uneasy. But as Little Jack took his time, Lancaster became uneasy as well, wondering if his partner was trying to come up with a plan.

The small man was stretching his neck in different directions, cracking his knuckles, as though preparing for a fight. One of the gangsters said, "I'm tired of waiting. Someone open the door so we can crack his shaft."

One of the thugs stepped forward toward the control panel. Little Jack did the same, each of them arriving at their own side of the door at the same time. Little Jack was so short that only his glasses and forehead were still visible in the window, and they were staring straight at the gangster who had approached the door controls. Unnerved by Little Jack's calm behavior, the woman kept her gun pointed straight at where Little Jack's body would be, and she pressed the button to open the door...

Nothing happened. She pressed it again, and a few of the others shouted at her to get the door opened. "He locked us in," she said baffled.

Nikos had an idea what was about to happen, so he hurried for the door toward the front of the ship.

A hood flapped over the back of Little Jack's head, and a mask covered over the front. He lifted a gloved hand which was holding a detonator. Every eye grew wide in the corridor except Lancaster's. He laced his fingers as tightly as he could into the floor grating.

Little Jack pressed the trigger.

The ceiling exploded, and the syndicate crew was sucked out. The one with a gun on Lancaster tried to hold onto him, but his grip slipped, and he tumbled outside with the others. Lancaster's legs flew up as well, but he kept hold of the floor.

Nikos made his escape, throwing open the door and slipping through just as the explosion occurred, then closing it before he could get sucked back out. Little Jack paid him no attention. He opened the door, reached in, and grabbed his partner, then yanked him back out, closing the inner airlock door behind him.

Lancaster was panting as he dropped to the floor. "Come on," Little Jack said, and he began toward his ship.

"Wait! We need to get the artifact."

Little Jack wanted to argue, but he sighed, knowing that if it got left behind, their trip would be for nothing. "What does it look like?"

Lancaster described it to him, and Little Jack agreed. But he first had to put Lancaster in his ship so he wouldn't get sucked out when he opened the door to the corridor again. Once Lancaster was safely stored, Little Jack entered the syndicate's vessel and made his way to the hold. They were using a cargo ship with a standard design, one Little Jack knew well. It wasn't far away from the airlock through which he was walking.

Once he arrived in the room, he spotted the equipment they had used to torture Lancaster. He shook his head, muttering, "Amateurs." He scanned the items in a shelf behind glass. Some were relics, some were standard equipment on a ship. While he was searching, another doorway opened. Without turning toward it, Little Jack raised his pistol and fired, hitting the first person through the door, who tumbled back onto his partner, and the door slammed shut again. Little Jack blasted the door controls, hoping that would keep it stuck for a little while. He then shot the glass of the container, reached in, and grabbed the artifact Lancaster had described. He picked up Lancaster's pack and shoved the item in there. He also shoved in Lancaster's jacket, and slung the utility belt over his shoulder. He saw his hat, but didn't want to use the other hand to carry it, and it wasn't carrying tools as the jacket was, so he left it. Thus equipped, Little Jack made his way back to the corridor.

The door closest to the front of the ship opened with a couple thugs behind it. Their guns were drawn and they fired immediately. Little Jack fired back instantly, shooting the enemy laser bolts out of the sky, deflecting them into the walls. He then fired two more rapid shots into them, killing the thugs. He pressed a button on the gun with his thumb and the cartridge on the bottom of it swiveled and locked in place. He fired again, and a small rocket flew down the hall and exploded at the end. Little Jack didn't want anyone else bothering him. That done, he made his way through the airlock, and onto Odin's Revenge.

As they pulled away and flew into spectrum drive, Lancaster pulled the artifact out of the pack. It was not the Maris. Instead it was a device with a square bottom and a round head with spikes, some of which had a few blood stains on them. Lancaster smiled with delight.

"I thought we came for the Uther Maris," Little Jack said.

Lancaster shrugged and said, "This was much more big ticket. And more valuable. The Uther Maris was still in development by the Siguerans, so it won't work no matter how many R&D people they put on it. But this..." Lancaster held the item aloft as well as he could in his weak state. "The Taiper Anslees is a deciphering machine, and it can lead us to one of the most important discoveries in the galaxy."

There was a silence as Lancaster beamed with pride, and the light outside dimmed from the glow of a star system to the darkness of the brane in spectrum drive. "And they were beating you with it."

"Ironies will never cease," Lancaster said, as the star system disappeared behind them.