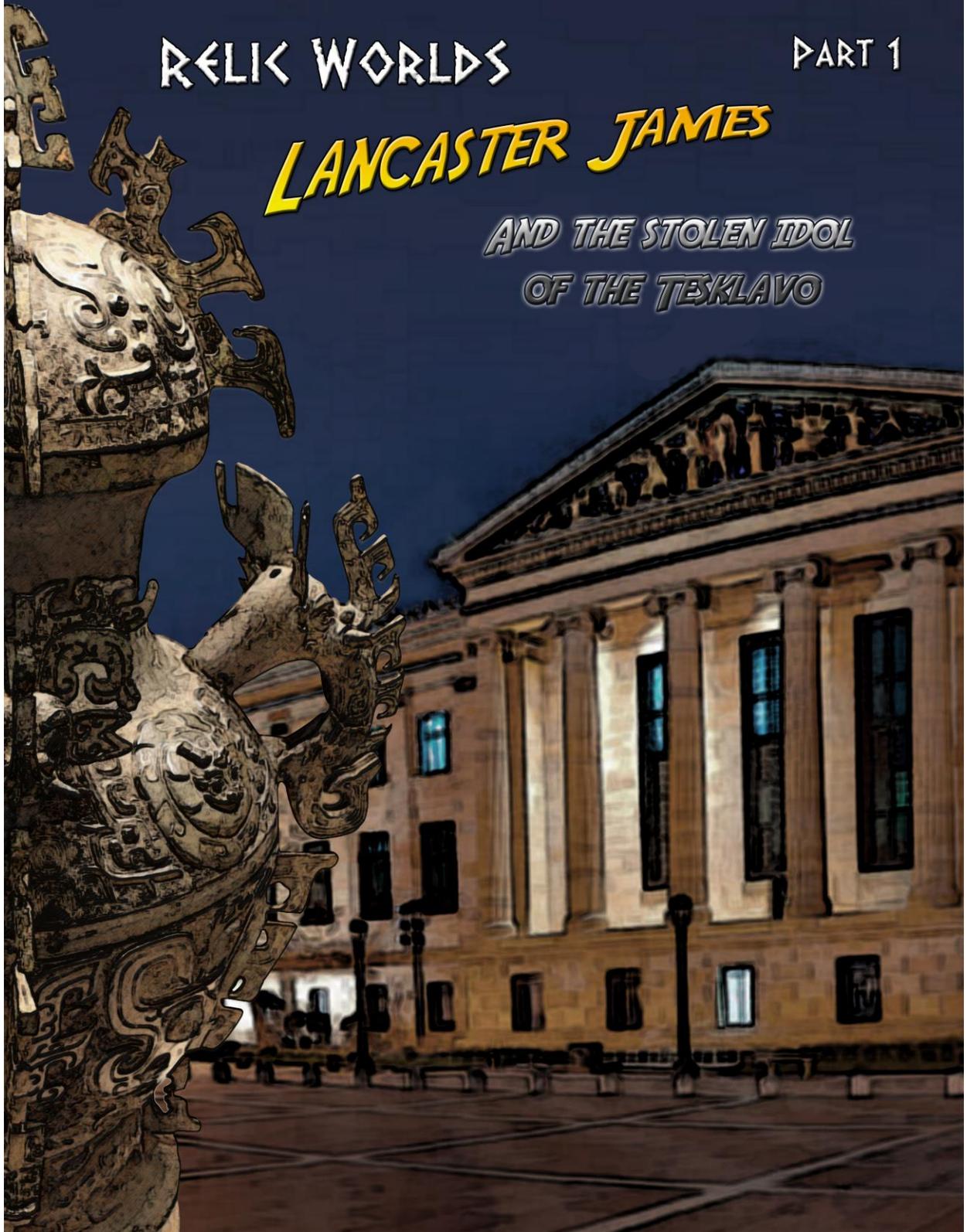


RELIC WORLDS

PART 1

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE STOLEN IDOL
OF THE TEKLAVO*



LANCASTER JAMES AND THE STOLEN IDOL OF THE TESKLAVO

PART 1

“I feel like we’re being called into the principal’s office,” Little Jack said.

“Don’t antagonize her,” Lancaster responded as the two men walked across the hardwood floor of the museum’s ancient animals wing, each of their steps echoing against the high walls of the empty room. Lancaster looked like he belonged in every part of the museum. He was still dressed in his tan jacket and leather hat, and his face still wore a partial beard. It was a departure from the way he usually cleaned up to look good for Mika, whom they were going to meet. Lancaster and the professor hadn’t been married for more than three years now, but he wanted to appear like he was doing well. Also, as he reminded Little Jack, Mika kept them employed by hiring them on behalf of the university to collect rare artifacts of ancient alien cultures. They didn’t want to mess that up by failing a dress code or causing an argument, (though the dress code had apparently gone by the wayside this time.) “I should probably do all the talking,” Lancaster concluded. Little Jack did not respond, a sign of his agreement, and they continued on into the section of the museum where Mika had told them to meet her.

Lancaster was wearing a cocky smile when they found her chatting quietly with a couple of the curators near one of the Sigueran exhibits. She interrupted the conversation and approached the two men who had come to meet her. “Take off that hat,” she immediately said to Lancaster. “You’re in civilized society now, not on safari.”

Lancaster’s smile faded, and he grudgingly removed his hat under the judgmental gazes of the other two curators. By the time he had it off, Mika was already passing by, leading them toward a neighboring portion of the museum. Lancaster and Little Jack followed, trailed by the two museum employees.

“You said you wanted to speak to me about another job,” Lancaster said.

“Actually, this time I want to speak with Little Jack about something.”

The two men stopped, blown back with surprise. Mika spun crisply around on her heels and looked directly at Lancaster’s short partner. She was standing at the intersection of a new section of the museum, one filled with relics from one of Lancaster’s discoveries; Treasures of the Promised World. It held items from a canyon city that once belonged to an alien race previously unknown, but Lancaster had uncovered.

He had been allowed to name it, so he had called them Xenosentia Kaukasos Aeolis Tesklavo. It followed the quadnominal nomenclature used for naming all alien species. The first word indicated that it was a sentient alien species. Non-sentient species would begin with xenocarnalis. The second word was typically the name of the first star on which a species was discovered. However, evidence of this species had been spotted on multiple planets for years but always mislabeled, so Lancaster used the name of the star system where he had gotten on track to discovering their unique identity. The last two words were the names scientist would give the discovered civilization. If it was related to another species, the first of these two words was to share part or all of its word with it, so Lancaster placed Aeolis there since it was part of the name

of the species with which these had been mixed up. And the last name could be anything Lancaster wanted, as long as it had the dignity appropriate for an alien race. He had decided on Tesklavo because it had been the last name of his first teacher who had influenced him to go into anthropology. Dr. Tesklavo, one of his grade school teachers, had been an archaeologist, but she had instilled in him a fascination for otherworldly creatures and the possibilities of what they could be like. This interest had turned him to anthropology instead, but her influence had stayed with him his whole life, and he felt her name should be attached to one of these alien races.

Lancaster always loved seeing that name lit up at the museum, but right now he couldn't concentrate on anything but Mika's still form, which seemed to be teasing him with its straightforward indifference.

It was one of the only times in his life Little Jack was taken by surprise as well. He stared at Mika through his glossed over glasses waiting for an explanation. At last, she provided it by holding out her arm to the side, directing them toward one of the exhibits.

The two men followed her direction and saw her point illustrated as she explained, "One of the artifacts has been disked. Someone broke in during the night and took it without setting off the alarms. When the manager came in to open, they found this."

The pedestal and casing atop it were clearly intended for something valuable, set at the head of the aisle and bathed in its own light. The crime scene was left as it had been found, undisturbed even by the police. "I wanted to show it to you first. I registered you might have some thoughts the corporate authorities chance be have cloudrafted on."

Little Jack studied the scene thoroughly, though it was hard to tell he was paying any attention. His head and body language barely moved. Though if his eyes had been visible, they be seen racing in every direction. The computerized display in his glasses were reacting to his pupils and blinks as he zoomed in to certain points of the crime scene, analyzed every particle that might be out of place, and tried to pull out every microscopic clue that could be detected. So far there was very little; not even hair follicles. The most he could find was that the clear acrylic casing was cut very cleanly leaving only a few tiny shards that dropped on the floor. This led to a conclusion he already had, the robbery was a professional job.

At last he asked Mika without looking at her, "Security footage?"

"Yes," Mika said, unphased by the bluntness she was used to from him by now. But she didn't move, assuming he meant to show it later. After an awkward pause, though, Little Jack looked up at her quizzically, and Mika jolted. "Oh, are you done in here?"

"Not a tril will be found here," Little Jack said.

"Right then," Mika said, and she stepped over to the wall near the door. "You two might want to jond a few steps back," she called, and they did as she said. She then flicked a switch, which dimmed the lights. Lancaster was amazed to see the missing artifact reappear. It was a small, stone statue, intricately carved with better precision than anything humans could even attempt, and with a mixture of extremely coarse and very smooth rock inlaid with precious metals. It was a beast of some kind, with insectoid eyes and thin legs which folded up and crossed over its chest.

Then a figure began dropping slowly from the ceiling. Little Jack was startled at having been taken by surprise. His glasses typically warned him in advance when someone unexpected was entering a room, and they hadn't. He drew his pistol Munin, set it to accurate shot and readied it to fire on the intruder.

Mika put her hand on the pistol and said urgently, "That's a hologram." It was a projection of what had happened the night before playing out where it happened at its real size.

The intruder, wrapped in tight black with bumps where its tools were stored, was lowering by a wire from the ceiling.

“Floor’s sensitive,” Little Jack guessed as he watched the projected figure.

“Mm-hmm,” Mika responded. “Either they knew or registered it. We don’t have a lot of security here. It’s a school. But with the valuables in here...”

“You should have drones,” Lancaster said.

“After this, we may have to raise the money for them. But we’d hoped to be a small enough operation that no one would try. At least no one this good.”

Little Jack said nothing. He was busy studying every movement; every action; every twist of every joint. He could tell it was a woman. There were tiny differences between the genders that gave a person away to someone who knew what to look for no matter how much they tried to hide their innate habits. Little Jack couldn’t explain them; someone just had to know. But there was something else more specific about this particular thief; something familiar in its almost robotic perfection. The figure was held aloft by wires from the ceiling, and it twisted like a professional gymnast, stopping on a dime as though it had been twisted then let go by an invisible hand.

Little Jack stepped around its side as the hanging body unfolded itself to face upright toward the artifact. As though sitting in a trapeze’s chair, the figure removed a tool from one of its pockets. Little Jack didn’t bother looking at the tool; he got the idea. It had already disabled the alarm somehow and used something to cut the case and swipe the item. He wanted to see its mask, and if possible, its eyes. The latter was not going to happen; it wore shaded goggles with adjustable rings around the rims. They were likely set to help the thief see in the dim light, or aid in detecting security systems, or all of the above and more. The person’s mask was wide and lumpy, clearly designed to hide the features of the face. Its breathing holes were located near the cheeks, much the way gills would be on a fish, and it had a dark screen in the middle to filter smells. These, too, were familiar.

But what tipped Little Jack off were the fingers. They each had tiny spikes that stuck out their ends. Each had their own uses in addition to being sharp claws that could slice deeply into a person, but none interfered with the nimbleness of the fingers themselves. Little Jack recognized this, and realized why he knew this woman’s movements. She was the Dingo; a renowned super spy and master thief who had worked both as a free agent and with several underground organizations. Though she had never worked with Unterorg, the corporate spy organization Little Jack had been a part of, she did run in the same circles. He had seen her handiwork in person once when she stole their target right in front of Little Jack and his team, then escaped without a trace.

Little Jack suspected she was half cybernetics; that would explain her robotic, perfect movements. It was even possible that part of her costume was merely part of her machine body; a suspicion that grew more prevalent when he noticed the goggle’s rims twist on their own without the use of her hand.

The artifact now in her possession, the figure zipped up toward the ceiling, and the cut it had made to the open sky, which was still there. Little Jack told Mika that he might know who the perpetrator was, but where she would be now was a different story.

“The school is willing to pay you a million on the plastic to get the piece back,” Mika said.

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, but we’d do better just catching a new piece to replace it,” Little Jack said. “And for you to get better security.”

“But if there’s any way to get *this* piece back...” Mika said, then she stopped herself. “The school has an anonymous donor who is eager to get it returned, and is willing to pay whatever it takes.”

Little Jack’s surprise was exposed by the raising of his forehead. He looked at his partner who also wore an expression of shock, and eagerness. They had been scraping by on what little the university could offer them for bringing back ancient relics, and after expenses and upkeep of Little Jack’s ship, there was little left for their lives. If this piece was that valuable, they may actually get ahead.

Lancaster had one question for Mika. “Do you sav whether Vidid is available?”

Vidid lived in a bungalow style house overlooking a cliff just off the campus of Saberaux University. The proximity of his house was very symbolic of Vidid’s association with the school. He had graduated fifteen years earlier, but had never fully let go. He made his living doing independent virtual odd jobs on the galaganet during the week, and hosted wild college parties on the weekends. His house boasted a bar out the front that could be opened and closed at will; even turned around for use inside.

Here his computer system was every hacker and Virtua gamer’s dream. Screens circled the center of the living room, which was rowed with recliner seats and couches, all adorned with soft pillows and liquid cushions. The kitchen was filled with nukeable fast food which could be delivered via robot to avoid the inconvenience of abandoning your post. And it was clear that Vidid rarely left this spot except during a party.

He was, in fact, on a recliner now. When Lancaster, Mika, and Little Jack arrived, they knew that after the first knock, if there was no answer, it was acceptable to walk right in. Vidid was, as predicted, deep inside a computer game; or rather, games. He had an ongoing action game on his center screen while he had turn by turn games on each screen flanking it. A hologram of a board game sat on a table beside him whose pieces were being moved by someone in a faraway place. He also had Wormmail on a side screen, news on another, a comedy show on yet another, and a couple other screens were tuned to something no one else recognized.

It was a cacophony of sound, but Vidid ordered it all silenced as soon as his friends appeared within the circle of light. He greeted them while continuing the action game, getting his character to a safe location so he could look away. They greeted him in return, strolling past and waiting patiently as they glanced at some of his latest gadgets and equipment. They knew the drill; that distracting him would only delay Vidid getting off his computer.

Neither Lancaster nor Mika understood much about the equipment, but Little Jack did, and it was his first time to the house. He did not regard the large child playing in his chair, but rather studied the equipment and their specs.

“Salutations, my friends!” Vidid at last exclaimed, breaking free of the game and standing. “Lancaster! What drags you to our neck of the galaxy?”

“She does, as always,” Lancaster said, motioning to Mika.

Vidid raised his eyebrows to Mika. “Can’t let a good man get away,” Vidid exclaimed. “I thought you...”

“He’s here on a job,” Mika said sternly. “One we need to get on with.”

Lancaster was smiling as he said to Vidid, “We need to run a trace. Something got stolen from the museum.”

“Did it have a tracker on it?”

“No. But we want to aprend any sales and private jobs. Maybe we can cipher where they’re selling it or who hired them.”

“That sort of info’s gonna be way under the wire, man,” Vidid warned.

“That’s why we have my back eyes here,” Lancaster said, motioning to Little Jack. “If you’ll let him, he’ll vis you a few things.”

“Go at it, man,” Vidid said waving to a chair.

Little Jack did not respond. He just stared back through his frosted over glasses, then sat back in one of the recliners next to Vidid. The chair shaped to his form, the perfect relaxation furniture. He wondered how this man avoided falling asleep every time he sat. His fingers felt the wiring on the arm rest, which he grabbed and plugged into the side of his glasses. Their vision switched to Virtua, providing him a view within the computer world as though he was there.

Everyone else watched on one of the monitors, (Vidid had to point out which one it was.) What they saw was a spare, dark world outlined in neon. It looked like glowing wires inside a computer, and that was precisely the intention. It was behind the scenes of the façade graphics seen on a monitor. From here, people who plugged into the computer world could use their consciousness to manipulate the very fabric of reality inside computer systems. In Little Jack’s case, he was not plugged directly in, but his glasses, which were a computerized system themselves, served as a conduit, and gave him almost all the abilities that a true net jockey would have.

Most importantly, he knew how to get around in the underworld of Virtua. He had worked side by side with some of the most infamous names in cybercrime, and they had taught him where to look. First he broke the features of the world down into their true components. Walls and floors turned into tiny zeroes and ones. These numbers layered on top of one another, which could be broken up and separated to learn their core settings, or manipulate them into other uses unless they were locked in place by a better programmer.

Little Jack had no interest in making changes at the moment. He very much wanted to see things as they were; to gather necessary information. So he traveled over to a children’s site where toys and necessities for children could be bought and sold. Everyone watching was confused until he manipulated one of the walls within the site to rip open and he went through. There, a layer of code stood like a pillar between two galaganet web pages. This was not uncommon, and in fact there were a couple other strings of code nearby. These typically served as programming data for the sites they served.

However, Little Jack pulled out several of the series of numbers, laying them across, and inserted a few more. His motions were all in Virtua, requiring no keystrokes, mouse movements, or even scanned hand gestures. His glasses, which had a remote neurological connection to his mind, did all the work, and the others watched in helpless awe as he turned the pillar into a shelf of information.

“This is where a lot of pirates and thieves post their information for each other,” Little Jack said. “You have to know where it is and have the proper codes to get in. They mark every visit, so if you misuse it, the next time you jack in, they fry your mind.”

“So you can just pike your way in and find out who stole anything?” Mika asked.

“Not even close,” Little Jack said as he searched the entries. “This is only a small hand of the underworld activity, and no one brags about what they found. But you can find calls for jobs similar to your loss, and from there you can hui who the employer and the employee are.

From there it's just a matter of sneaking into the corporate server and learning where their rendezvous will be."

Vidid chuckled. "Just," he scoffed. "And who's gonna do..." He stopped himself, figuring out the answer, and just to run the point home, Little Jack turned to him and glared. He was still doing complex data searches, but was able to nevertheless stare intimidatingly through his glasses at the young at heart man.

Vidid kept his mouth shut through the remainder of the search while everyone watched Little Jack's work on the monitor. Some job information was direct, saying they wanted this smuggled or that "very private" search done in a "sensitive" location. But most of it was written in code, both alpha-numerically and in word. Beyond all the unscrambling of computer language was a select use of language found only in the underworld. Little Jack seemed to know what they meant about half the time. The rest of the time they were verbiages understood only by the senders and receivers.

It was enough to make the rest of them dizzy, and slowly they drifted into other conversations among themselves, allowing Little Jack to do his work without distraction. A couple hours later, he at last removed the plug from his glasses and looked at everyone else in the room.

"Did you aprend it?" Lancaster asked.

"No," Little Jack said bluntly. "Not even a job offer that looked promising. But there was one possibility." He looked at Mika. "Do you know the Bennet Auction on Delphi?"

"Of course. It's one of the most prominent sales of priceless art and relics in the galaxy."

"Exacto," Little Jack said. "It takes place in two days. I register the timing is a little suspicious, so I took the liberty of getting us passes."

"Those passes are impossible to come b..." Mika stopped herself just short of finishing that foolish sentence.

Little Jack turned his head to Lancaster. "You're going to have to get yourself cleaned up."

To be continued...