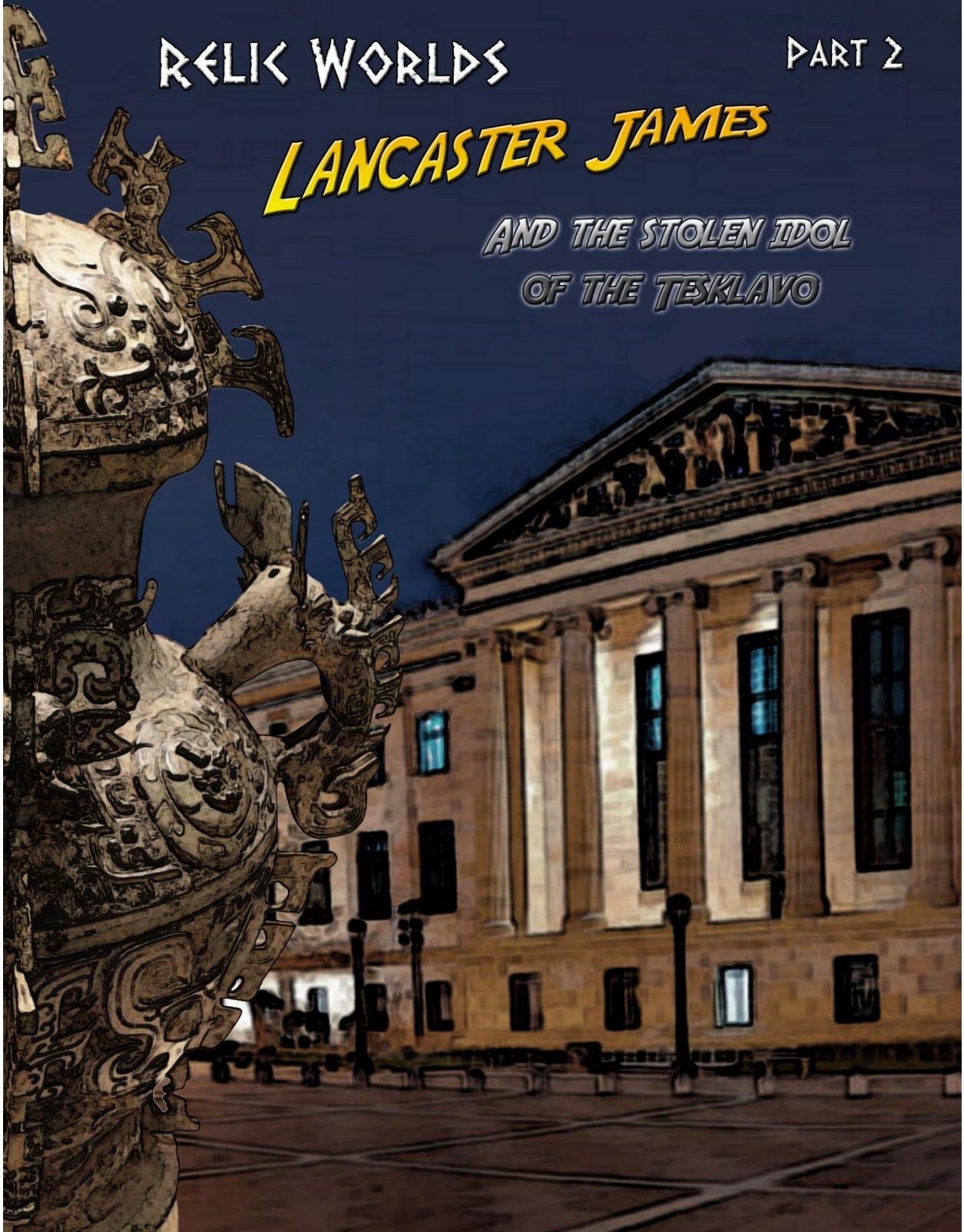


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PART 2

**LANCASTER JAMES**

*AND THE STOLEN IDOL  
OF THE TEKLAVO*



# ***LANCASTER JAMES AND THE STOLEN IDOL OF THE TESKLAVO***

## **PART 2**

Lancaster was uncomfortable in his tuxedo and his shaved face. He was even more uncomfortable with his surroundings. These were not the type of people with whom he was used to being surrounded, though they probably should have been. While he and Little Jack struggled to make enough money for fuel to the next planet, many of these patrons spent frivolously on décor for their many houses.

This auction was part of that habit. The artwork was more impressive by the names of the artists than it was by its own beauty or substance. Lancaster wondered what they would consider valuable artifacts, and he couldn't wait for them to begin showing it to the bidders.

But they would have to wait a little while for that. First was the hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and mingling; another skill of which Lancaster was lacking. He made sure to get a drink. That at least gave one hand something to do. The other occasionally fiddled with the bottom of his jacket.

Little Jack, on the other hand, managed nicely. Though he never fit in with higher class society, he had learned how to meld with it, disappear within the vapid crowds of people who spoke with one person while staring at another. And when he didn't want to be a part of it, his height helped him disappear from their view.

He was keeping his eyes peeled for the Dingo. Little Jack did not know what she looked like, but the face is not the only way to recognize a person. He had learned through years of experience to identify a person's height, weight, etc. But more importantly was the uniqueness of a person's movements. The subtle ways that people walk, gesture, move their limbs is all as identifiable as a fingerprint. Of course Little Jack also had help from his glasses, which were measuring all of these elements as well as recording them for future review. He kept watching, and studying the crowd.

Little Jack did not know what he would do if he found the Dingo, however. He hoped she wouldn't recognize him and know why he was there. The guards at the front had taken his gun, and he made a fair guess that the Dingo was better at hand to hand than he ever hoped to be. He was more interested in locating her at the moment. What they would do then would have to be improvised.

It was Lancaster who got engaged in conversation first, and not by his own choice. He was quite handsome when he cleaned himself up, and more than one married woman had approached him to talk. Far from his ignorance of the venue doing him harm, they found his lack of ease charming, and he was soon tugged between bits of conversation.

Little Jack took advantage of his partner's distraction to get a better look at the crowds, observing one person after another, and trying to take note and skip anyone he'd already seen. At last he recognized a form of movement; someone from his past, but not the Dingo. His glasses did not recall anything from the holographic recording they had watched, nor from its

memory banks of the master criminal. But Little Jack knew the motions. He stepped closer for a better look.

Her hair was a different color than he remembered. Rather than red with some blue highlights, they were striped with yellow close to the scalp, green in the middle, and a deeper shade of gold at the ends. It was funny how a different hue of hair color could so change someone's appearance, but it was enough to force Little Jack to maneuver around to her front to get a good look at her face. He tried to steal a glance as subtly as possible, and when he did, he was pretty sure he had correctly identified her as a woman he had worked with several times whose name was Jude. Like Little Jack, Jude refused to take on any last names. Who they had been before they were in Unterorg was not important. Only the reputations that they earned during and after their corporate spy days mattered, and they were part and parcel with those single labels.

Little Jack hoped he hadn't been seen, and it seemed he was in the clear when she turned toward the open doorway and walked out into another room. Little Jack gave her a moment, then followed at a comfortable distance.

He found her again in the lobby where the crowd was thinner, yet nevertheless present. He could still fit in and even hide in their shadows. Jude was harder to track than he had expected. Little Jack was not used to seeing her in a fancy, tight dress that constricted the movement of her legs. She was dashing, to be sure, which was most likely the point of whatever purpose she had here. But she would have difficulty with a fight should there be trouble; and trouble usually followed wherever she went.

Little Jack was nevertheless able to keep good track of her multi-colored hair. He even stayed out of her sight, merely watching the bright yellow and green bob up and down past other heads. It then found the stairs and began walking up them. Her form in its tight fitting dress emerged from the crowd as it curved up the winding staircase over the lobby toward the second floor, then disappeared through a doorway. Little Jack waited until she had almost disappeared before he scampered up the stairs in pursuit.

The loud murmur of voices diminished in the dimly lit corridor removed from the event. Only a small spattering of people mulled about, and they were on the opposite side of the stairs. The private nook where Jude had walked was uninviting and deserted; the neutral territory between the public region and the offices. Some of the less valuable artworks hung below splashes of light, and Little Jack spotted Jude standing before one of them, apparently studying the brush strokes.

Little Jack kept his eyes on her as he stepped into the corridor. Jude could be unpredictable, but Little Jack was curious what she was doing there, and couldn't help but wonder if she was somehow involved in his current mission. Before he got too close, he let his feet fall harder than normal. He didn't want to be right behind her if she became startled at having been sneaked up on.

Then she disappeared, vanishing in a flash. Little Jack jumped back in surprise, baffled for a moment; but only a moment. He suddenly remembered her cybernetic fingernail projection through which she could create a holographic image of herself. The illusion was so realistic she was able to use it a number of times to get the upper hand in fights. Little Jack said, "You're still using that old tour?"

"If it works, it prevays," a familiar mocking voice said behind him.

Little Jack turned around and found her leaning back against the corner of the wall, one hand held close to her thigh where he knew she had a cybernetic compartment in which she hid a gun. “Some day I’m going to have to find out what that means,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” Jude asked.

“Setting a sight to aprend you’re doing here.”

“You knew we were coming?” she asked.

“We?” Little Jack responded.

Jude did not take the bait, saying instead, “I could have killed you. I’m not pleasant with being tailed.”

Little Jack didn’t answer. He risked taking two steps toward her, his eyes on hers, his footsteps on the marble making the only sounds. Then he halted and said, “The Dingo is here. Or at least her handiwork. She disked off with a priceless artifact. Literally priceless. Shouldn’t be valuable to anyone except a museum.” He motioned his head toward one of the paintings and continued, “But some people will pay anything if they’re told it’s worth something.”

Jude’s face flushed a little at the mention of the Dingo. Little Jack’s glasses picked up subtle reactions of the body that the mind tries to hide and he knew she was disturbed by the news; but she let nothing else on about it and said, “I don’t see what that’s got to do with me...”

“I don’t see what anything here would have to do with you,” Little Jack said, keeping his voice down to avoid any unwanted ears. “Not exactly your scene unless you’re trying to... acquire something.”

Offended, Jude retorted, “As if you would register anything about my scene. Stay out of my way, Jack. Some of us have profitable work to do.” With that, Jude pushed past and was out of the small passage and back down the stairs.

Lancaster had reached the point at which he remembered why he didn’t attend more of these events, even when he was with Mika and they were expected to be present. The women in his little circle of conversation were rattling on about “important” works of art, both human and alien. What made Lancaster cringe was their measure of value. Human art was based on the popularity of the artist, and there was no mention of the skill or intent behind it. Alien artifacts carried similar weight, with the presumptions of the salesmen outweighing an interest in the cultures behind them. When Lancaster tried telling them about the rich histories behind these civilizations, the eyes of the women glazed over atop their plastic grins.

Lancaster, too, wore the artificial smile to avoid blowing his cover, but he was thinking, ‘That’s why these pieces belong in a museum rather than the homes of these tepid people...’ His thought was cut short as he noticed someone halfway across the crowded room. It was only momentarily when a few bodies parted, revealing a pathway to a man dressed in a long, white suit coat. He had a classic charm to him, and a salesman’s face that exuded confidence to the point of cockiness. He was a magnet to the sorts of people who came to these parties. Nikos Kazakis.

Lancaster had run across this mercenary archaeologist far too many times. Nikos was less interested in the artifacts he found and more interested in how much he could make from their sales. This was the perfect venue for him. He had likely even “donated” some of the pieces that were being sold tonight. But why bother coming to see them auctioned? Was he there to bid? He had the money to do so; but he typically knew how to find them himself; or, more likely, loot them from other, harder working archaeologists and anthropologists.

Lancaster kept an eye in that direction as he strobed in and out of sight. Fancily dressed bodies strode past, blocking the view, then revealing him, and back and forth, until suddenly

Nikos' face turned toward Lancaster. Lancaster turned his head suddenly, hoping not to be seen. But on next appearing, Nikos was walking toward him. Another body blocked him, then, when he appeared again, he was closer. 'Please don't be coming over here,' Lancaster thought, hoping that by averting his eyes Nikos would not be heading toward him.

But he was, and soon the man's arrogant face was beaming just a few feet from his. "Mr. James! This is not a venue I expected to see you at!"

"I wouldn't expect to see you either, Dr. Kazakis. Did I mose into the local rat museum?"

Nikos smiled smugly and turned to the others around them. They were shifting uncomfortably and looking at someone to socially save them. Nikos leaned over to one of them and whispered something in her ear. She smiled, then giggled and looked at her friend. She then motioned her head away and they left.

"At least you're good at one thing," Lancaster said, motioning his head toward the backs of the women walking away.

Nikos smiled agreeably. "You really hate me," he said in a slight chuckle.

"No, I'm blinged by the company of people who bury me in a tomb that's about to be sucked into a black hole. It's a real peachy neb."

"You take things so personally," Nikos said. Lancaster could only swallow in reply. It was the sign of a truly psychotic man who could not see murder as personal. Now with the initiative, Nikos went on, "I wouldn't do anything to coget attention tonight."

"Have you truly no sense of shame as an archaeologist?" Lancaster asked.

Nikos' smile grew slowly into a large grin, as though Lancaster had told some wonderful joke. "Pride cometh before a fall, Mr. James," he said. "Why wouldn't that be true also of someone who is too prideful to accept the benefits that come from profit?"

"I'll tell the organizers what you're posing..."

"Don't be that person, Lancaster..."

"I'm not going to let you get away with this..."

"If you try to do anything of the sort you'll be killed. And I don't mean buried alive where you can escape... How did you get away from that pit anyway..."

"They have security everywhere here," Lancaster said. "If you try to do anything, the organizers will come down hard on you..."

"The organizers of this event are the ones who asked me to do this," Nikos hissed through gritted teeth. He then took in a breath, pulling himself together, and leaned in toward Lancaster's ear where he told him quietly, "It's for the insurance money."

He said it as though this explanation made everything better, but it made no sense. Lancaster asked if the robbery at the school's museum was also somehow associated with insurance money, to which Nikos' eyebrows furrowed, confused.

Just then, the auctioneer called for everyone's attention, stating that the auction was about to begin, and everyone should find their seats. A woman in a tight dress and yellow and green hair stepped past Lancaster and up to Nikos, saying, "I'm all set. We should probably join the auction. Greetings Lancaster."

Lancaster squinted, trying to recognize her. As though to help him, the woman looked back at Lancaster. Her features were familiar, but it was hard to... Then it struck him. This was a friend and former colleague of Little Jack's. She had tried to kill him and Little Jack once, too. The number of people who participated in that activity was growing disturbingly high.

“I haven’t the thickest notion what you’re talking about regarding the school, or the museum,” Nikos said, “but I must take your leave and join the auction. Enjoy the spectacle, Mr. James.” With that, Nikos locked arms with Jude and the two headed into the auction room.

Little Jack rejoined Lancaster just as Jude and Nikos left. “Did you know about this?” Lancaster asked.

“Just aprended myself,” Little Jack answered.

“Any register why they’re here?” Lancaster asked.

“No idea,” Little Jack said as he watched them carefully. He noticed that Nikos took a seat, and that Jude was walking around the entire chair section, as though beginning to orbit them. The seats were filling up fast, but she was making no attempt to sit. Lancaster and Little Jack began to join everyone in the room so they could get some seats themselves, and Little Jack kept a firm eye on his former partner in crime. She was walking casually, but he knew she was up to something.

Then the lights went out.

*To be continued...*