



RELIC WORLDS

**LANCASTER JAMES**

**AND THE HUNT FOR  
THE UTHER MARIS**

**PART 2**

Lancaster awoke to his face crashing into water, his head held down by one of the gangsters. There he was held, now conscious, and unable to breathe. Up to this point, Lancaster had kept his cool relatively well. But now he shook and seized, trying to get air. At last the hand yanked him up, and he sucked in a huge breath.

Nikos Kazakis was sitting in front of him, just past the trough of water into which Lancaster was being dunked. His hand was still inside the metal glove. He was leaning over, his eyes peering empathetically into Lancaster's. "You didn't credit you'd get away from us that easily, did you, Mr. James? We've still got things to talk about."

Lancaster merely sputtered and spat out water. Some of it went toward Nikos. One of the gangsters grabbed him tightly, ready to dunk Lancaster again, but Nikos waved him off.

"We all have standards," Nikos said. "Yours are perhaps more noble than most people's, and that's admirable. I respect you. I really do. But you must acknowledge that you are alone in most of these beliefs. The universe does not spin on good intentions. In reality, profit is king. Now, you can accept that, and live as royalty, or you can die uselessly."

Lancaster stared Nikos down. He had no snarky remark, and he knew the longer he looked at his old nemesis silently, making Nikos think that he might say something, the more time he bought.

Nikos at last grew tired of waiting and he nodded at the gangsters, who dunked Lancaster underwater. This time, Lancaster had had time to prepare. So he held his breath, and for a few seconds, was having little problem, though he squirmed so they would think he was drowning and bring him up faster. Then Nikos grabbed the edge of the metal tub with his electronic glove. Lancaster felt a devastating shock jolt through his body. His scream of agony went silently into the water, and turned to air bubbles that rolled to the top.

After what felt like an eternity, Lancaster was pulled back up, gasping and panting. Almost immediately, Nikos was in his face, shouting, "Where is your partner? The little guy who drops you off! Where did he go to get the other piece?"

Lancaster was shivering, coughing, and looking around him panic stricken, half drowned and half electrocuted. Nikos grabbed him with both hands, small amounts of electricity still emanating from the metal glove as a reminder. He met Lancaster's eyes with his own and demanded, "Tell me now!"

Lancaster's blubbing suddenly stopped. He looked back into Nikos's eyes, and he saw something that gave him confidence. Lancaster's facial expression changed to joy and he began laughing. The more he laughed, the angrier Nikos became. At last Lancaster said, "You're not asking because you want the other half of this piece. You know it was never finished being developed. You know it won't work. What you want to know is where he went because you know it's an ancient factory where they developed new items and you want to find all of them."

Lancaster looked around the room at the other gangsters. He had already seen in Nikos's eyes that he was correct. The other gangsters were even worse at hiding their shock. They were caught. That mattered little in the greater scheme of things because Nikos still had the upper hand, but at least Lancaster knew what he was actually searching for. He had meant to intimidate Lancaster, then "settle" for information on the planet.

When Lancaster looked back at Nikos with the smile across his face, Niko yanked his head back into the water himself, then turned the power of the glove up. The electric shock knocked Lancaster unconscious immediately.

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Lancaster stood before the door made up of roots trying to decipher how to open them. The Siguerans often left behind some secret way that they could re-open their hidden passages whenever they returned. These were secrets that were meant to last millions of years, so they involved miraculous feats of genetic engineering and evolution. Some would never be solved by those who happened to pass by them. But Lancaster was determined to try.

He thought about what he had seen, and wondered if he would need to study the few remains of the ruins for some sort of clue. He considered everything in the woods. Just as the trees that formed this door with their roots were not here when that wondrous civilization was around, yet now they formed the door, so too should the key be something that had formed during their absence.

The animals cackled teasingly all around him, and Lancaster had to remind himself it wasn't toward him. But then he remembered the birds. He did not hear them now, but he had heard them earlier. They had all whistled one specific tune over and over without variation. It was enough to drive someone listening to it insane, and he wondered if it affected the mental health of the animals who lived here. But that exactness was not common in nature.

Lancaster pursed his lips and whistled the tune as best he could remember, mimicking the birds as exactly as he thought possible. When nothing happened, he tried again, then again, and on and on, altering it just a little to try to get the notes just right. He did it enough times to satisfy himself that he must have stumbled upon the correct tune and inflection at some point, but still nothing happened, so he surrendered and considered other possibilities.

But then he returned to the thought again. If the key had indeed been the bird song, what would have stopped one of the birds from fluttering down here and opening the door on accident? The Siguerans would have altered the necessary tune to match their voices to make sure only they could open it. Sigueran language was, in fact, musical in tone. They had evolved with multiple orifices through which sound emerged along their spines and long necks. As such, their methods of communication involved musical auras; their conversations like orchestral arrangements. Lancaster had heard an ancient transmission of their speech before. It sounded like whales speaking through a mixture of oboes and saxophones whose notes occasionally drifted out of the wavelengths that humans could hear.

Lancaster removed a sound recorder from a pocket and recorded himself whistling the bird tune into it. He then used filters that came with the recorder which he never expected to use. They were designed into the device for young people to play with when they wanted to remake popular tunes or friends' voices into their own creations. He hoped there were enough filters for him to do what he wanted to do now.

Crouching down in a clearing as far away from logs and other underbrush that could be hiding dangerous animals, Lancaster meticulously went through every note altering the sounds to as close as he could remember the Sigueran language. At last he got it where he wanted it. It was an educated guess, but it was as good as he was going to get. Lancaster took the recorder to the door, held it aloft, and played the finished tune.

The last note faded away into the cacophony of animal noises with no results. For several seconds, Lancaster was convinced he had wasted his time. But then, a crackling of wood groaned out of the tangle of branches, and the roots receded like fingers slowly letting go of something they had grasped. The door lost its shape, but as the last wooden fingers pulled away, a dark hole was revealed.

Wide-eyed, Lancaster stepped toward the opening. He stopped just short of it, returning the recorder to its pocket, then pulling out his Illuminator, which he shined into the darkness; switching through several light spectrums to see if anything was inside. It was spacious, but sparse. Nothing appeared to be moving, and nothing resembled an animal, but that didn't mean there weren't any hiding, so Lancaster moved cautiously inside.

The floor ramped downward, opening broadly into a large underground chamber. Thin beams of light sneaked in between tree roots above and crisscrossed through the room. The walls were flourished with winding décor, a sign of Sigueran architecture; carved with the sort of designs and skill of their appearance during the Second Epoch of life in the galaxy; a time before they enslaved the brilliant stone artisans known as the Tesklavo.

It was a lot of pomp and circumstance for a single altar with only one item on top. But this was no simple item. It was the Maris, one of the two pieces that, when combined, could be used to do massive damage. The altar was no simple decoration either. It looked like tree roots winding up out of the ground, its ends, like tendril fingers, reached up to the sides of the artifact, which nuzzled inside like a comfortable nest. Interspersed along its edges were dots of flowers and other greenery whose faces turned up as though watching whomever came near.

Approaching it cautiously, Lancaster could tell that it was not natural wood, nor anything that would biodegrade. Rather, the altar was constructed of material that would last the eons until the Siguerans' return. It was probably also protecting this important artifact. Taking the Maris would not be easy.

Lancaster took from another pocket yet another scanning device. This one detected the inner workings of machinery. Whether mechanical, electronic, or some other automation, the Machination Scanner helped Lancaster figure out how the item worked. He ran it over the entire platform, watching the screen and readings on the back as he did. He found an unknown gaseous substance at the base of the flower stems, which Lancaster believed meant that they would spray him with some deadly chemical. The roots, meanwhile, were made up of a malleable substance which would react to anything happening within their palms.

Lancaster began with the flowers. He pulled a small aerosol can from his utility belt and sprayed a foamy substance over the flowers to block their attack. He then poked the backs of the roots hard enough to get their attention. As he suspected, they curled backward, reaching for the hand that was poking them. He did this with several of the roots, careful to stay out of their reach when they pulled back toward him.

Once enough of the roots were folded back, Lancaster prepared himself near the edge that was most clear. He looked the shrine up and down one last time, then he leaped forward and grabbed the artifact! The tendril roots snapped inward like fingers into a closing fist. Lancaster pulled back as quickly as he could, slipping through two of the branches just as they came together. He had in his hand the Maris, the reason he had come.

Relieved, and satisfied, Lancaster tapped the brim of his hat, placed the Maris into his bag, then turned toward the door...

Silhouetted at the entrance was the figure of a man waiting for him. There was another behind that man, and likely more behind them both. The ones Lancaster could see bore the confidence of people who had not come across him by accident.