

LANCASTER JAMES



**And the Eye
of Fire
Part 4**

Lancaster's hands were raised. Five people had their guns pointed at him, one of them a dangerous rival who had tried to kill him before. They were underground where Little Jack could not reach them, nor would even know things were going the way they were. Nikos had just asked Lancaster why he should let him live. It was a bad day for Lancaster James.

"Because I'm so very pretty?" Lancaster asked.

"Perhaps because you're so funny," Nikos responded.

"You wouldn't have asked me that question if you didn't have a reason to keep me alive," Lancaster said. "If you didn't want me alive, you'd have already killed me."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere," Nikos grinned.

"Well, you mind telling us?" Lancaster asked. "I'm sure your henchmen have better things to do."

Nikos pointed at the screen that had caused Lancaster to cringe earlier: The line of robots. "The power of a god!" he exclaimed. "It is within my reach!"

"So now you're playing god," Lancaster said, unimpressed.

"Playing? No. I needed into this room to scry where this was." Nikos walked to the wall with the projection. He blew hard at the sand, assisting with his hands. So much dust blew into the air he almost disappeared in a chalky plume. He shook it away, and as it dissipated, Lancaster could see something faintly painted on the wall. He took a step toward it, and two of the hired men reminded him of their presence. Nikos smiled. Lancaster could see now. Several of the robots were pointing at one location. That location was a specific point on the map. "That is our destination," Nikos said.

"Why are you telling me that?" Lancaster asked.

"Because you're either going to help me, or you're going to die right here."

"I don't suppose there's a choice C."

"You're wearing out my patience."

"What do you need my help for? You're the archaeologist."

Nikos sighed with annoyance. He stared at Lancaster for a few moments, then said, "You're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Fine," Nikos said. "You're better at this than I am. I couldn't even cipher how to get into this chamber. I knew what to look for once I was here, but getting down here was a pain in the... You come with me, and you help me, and you live like a god. Well, a demi-god. We can't all be deities. Or, as aforementioned, I shoot you right here." Nikos was at his wit's end. He held his gun on Lancaster and approached him, insistent Lancaster make a choice right then and there.

Lancaster sighed. He had no choice.

The large, golden robot next to Nikos moved suddenly. It was continuing its frantic hunt through its sensors for the Zeborno, but in the instant it moved, it looked to Nikos and his guards as though it was threatening them. Right next to the monstrosity, Nikos had to twist and look up to fire at it. Despite several of the shots hitting, the robot roared and swatted at them like they were flies, but nothing more than an annoyance.

This was Lancaster's only chance. He jumped onto the spot of ground in front of the robot which was pointing at the floor, made sure he was directly over the meter-long line, and with a single swift motion of his right hand, he flung his hat off his head and threw it at the lever like a Frisbee. It landed on the hands of the robot which was holding the lever, and it yanked back. The meter-long line on the floor swung open beneath Lancaster, and he fell straight through.

Quickly aware of what was happening, Nikos ran from the giant golden robot and looked into the hole. Water was roaring by in this underground river, foaming white and furious. He turned back to his guards, who had their guns on the robot. It had gone back to its business as though nothing had happened, and they were standing, waiting, not wanting to anger it again, but being ready if it turned on them. Cursing under his breath, Nikos headed toward the exit, and the others fell into line behind him.

Lancaster spurted for air. Every time his mouth got above the surface, a new layer of water rushed over him, and poured over his face. He felt himself dragged under, then thrown up again. He tumbled and twisted, the angry, rushing waves carrying him along at a dizzying rate through the underground tunnel.

Though his eyes were mostly closed, he sensed light coming toward him. The end of the tunnel was near, and soon he'd be out of it.

At the last moment, he remembered what was outside that hole. The waterfall! It fell for hundreds of meters. He was doomed! He grasped for the sides, but the cave walls were slick, and the rushing water pushed him further along. He flailed, desperate to find anything, but there was nothing other than the prodding ride.

The outside light overwhelmed him, and he hurtled out into it. One of his hands felt something below him and he grabbed it with his other hand. They both held tight together, and his body swung out underneath the waterfall. He looked up to find he was grasping onto the bottom tooth he had seen in the mouth of the face statue carved into the cliff wall. Looking down, he held onto it even tighter, for the water dove down as far as he could see, disappearing into a cloud of mist that billowed back up a long distance. He was safe for the moment, but when his arms gave out, he would have a long drop before disappearing forever.

He suddenly remembered something. Lancaster pulled himself up slightly; then clasped the tooth with one of his arms wrapped around it tight. He let go with the other hand and reached into one of his pockets. There he found his Handicom. He pulled it out and called Little Jack.

"I can barely comprehend you," Little Jack responded, referring to the hissing racket of the waterfall.

"I'm at the cave under the waterfall!" Lancaster shouted.

"Did you lose your hat again?" Little Jack asked, not fully grasping the gravity of the situation.

"Not what's important right now!" Lancaster shouted. "I'm going to fall soon, and I need you to catch me."

"What do you mean? I don't see you at the waterfall."

"Do you see it?"

"Yes. But you're not there."

"I'm under the waterfall."

"What?"

"I'm under the waterfall!"

"What are you doing there?"

"I ran into Nikos!"

"Nikos!? Where?"

"Not a big ticket right now! I'm going to drop and I need you to catch me!"

"Drop where?"

"Under the waterfall!"

"I can't fly under the waterfall."

"Ready? One..."

"No! Stop..."

"Two..."

"Lancaster, I can't put Odin's Revenge under the waterfall. The pressure will make me crash."

"Oh." Lancaster looked around him for an alternative. Maybe a convenient vine?

"You need to jump through the waterfall," Little Jack informed him.

"What? I won't know where I'm jumping."

"It prevays better than crashing the ship."

"All right, all right. Here goes nothing." Lancaster put his Handicom away, then held on to the tooth again with both hands. He looked at the waterfall encompassing his view. He saw the water rushing by, dragging down everything in his path. This would be a leap of faith... quite literally. He took in some deep breaths, then tensed, preparing himself to jump.

Then his concentration was broken by, "What are you waiting for?" Little Jack was waiting for him on the other side and still couldn't see him.

Lancaster didn't grab the Handicom again. He wouldn't take the chance like he had before. He left the Handicom where it was, built up his courage again, tested his feet a couple times, then, bent, and pushed off with all his might.

He broke through the water barrier. Lancaster felt the coarsing stream begin to drag him down momentarily, but then he beat the crashing water and found himself high above the ground falling freely. His eyes set on Odin's Revenge far below, its cockpit pointed toward the waterfall as if watching for him.

As soon as he came through, the ship looked to Lancaster, and floated easily upward. It adjusted for him to land on it, but the wing tapped the waterfall, which yanked it down. It was tilted at a steep angle when Lancaster landed on the roof. He felt his body bounce off, and his hand reached out and grasped an embossed piece of the hull. His legs flailed as his fingers held tight while the ship floundered under the weight of the waterfall. Little Jack pulled away and straightened out, and Lancaster held on for dear life.

When at last it was steady, he pulled himself up and, shaking heavily, stumbled his way to the top hatch. As he did, he caught a glimpse of a dot in the sky making its way out of the atmosphere. Nikos. He'll be going into spectrum soon, on his way to wherever that robot army was.

Lancaster punched in the code for the top hatch and it opened wide. He hopped in and closed it behind him. Inside, he dashed to the cockpit. Little Jack looked him up and down in confusion at his wet appearance. "We have to follow them!" Lancaster exclaimed.

"You *did* lose your hat," Little Jack observed.

"We have to break orbit," Lancaster said, sitting in his chair and touching some of the controls to get up the navigation. "We have to..."

Little Jack slapped his hands. "You're going to short the computer," he scolded. "Dry off."

"They're going to raise up an army of robots! We have to follow them," Lancaster said.

"Good for them. We need electros for fuel. Let's loot this village so you can sell some things..."

"There isn't any time!" Lancaster exclaimed.

"Yes. Robot army. Should be fun. We're gonna get trinkets to sell." Little Jack flew up the cliff to the village again.

"It's Nikos!" Lancaster told him.

Little Jack immediately tensed. He had been trapped on that planet with Lancaster when Nikos had sealed them underground. They had almost been sucked into a black hole, and had barely made it out. As if a switch was flipped on in Little Jack's mind, he immediately turned the ship skyward and raced for outer-space.

* * *

Just where Nikos was going was another question which Lancaster had to answer in a hurry. The answer had to have been inside the temple as there must have been a reason Nikos needed to go inside. He must have learned something that Lancaster saw, but needed to resolve. He remembered the three globes near the roof, then the dots that were projected in orbit around them. That was it! In orbit. The three stars made up a system of planets, and there were only a few such solar systems in the known galaxy, and one of them was the home system of the Zeborno, Polaris. Thinking hard about it, Lancaster believed he could remember which of the orbiting dots had turned orange, and he believed that to be the one where Nikos would be going.

They came out of spectrum closest to the Ab star of the tri-star system. It was the smallest of the three and most overlooked due to its enormous neighbor, Polaris A, whose huge mass and light overshadowed it. Polaris B swung out in its orbit further away, obscured by gasses released by Polaris A which formed a kind of nebula that gave the system its ghostly, colorful appearance. Painters came from every sector to capture the unpredictable beauty of light catching and refracting in the celestial clouds as the two stars and their planets danced their way through these incandescent cloaks.

Little Jack pointed the ship toward Polars Ab 2, a gray-green planet whose outer atmosphere shielded it from the heavy rays of the stars on both sides. It seemed too close to one star and too far from the other to support life, but this was the orange dot on the roof-map of the temple, so that was where they headed.

As they broke through the ionosphere, the veil parted, making way for miles of green foliage below lying inside a blanket of mist. Only the top halves of trees made it above the grey haze, like animals gasping for air above the surface of a lake. This view was broken up by plumes of dark vapor which covered the ground like large swabs of dirty cotton.

Little Jack flipped on the sensors, and they each scanned their screens for signs of Nikos. Lancaster, wearing another replacement hat after losing the last one in the temple, found it first; a group of three ships still cooling in a valley. As they came closer, they could see a clearing in which the three had landed. A break in the trees denoted a path that led into the deep jungle. Lancaster and Little Jack didn't want to be so conspicuous, so they flew the long way around, coming to ground in a much smaller break of trees on the opposite side. The ship nestled down into the gray fog, and they exited into a sky so thick they couldn't see more than a few feet. It took them several minutes to get their bearings enough to trudge into the woods. Once they did, they were surprised to find the path was not far from where they had landed.

There, they found Nikos and his people. Little Jack and Lancaster crouched amongst the foliage to spy on them. They could see Nikos and his small army of a couple dozen soldiers and scientists walking among the Zeborno statues. They were the same ones Lancaster had seen earlier in the projection. They were standing at attention, most of them holding weapons. The road here was wider, and the robot soldiers stood on each side of it, all holding up their weapons as if presenting arms to anyone who passed. The remains of a shrine stood close to the center, off barely to one side. In the middle, blocking the road, was a statue of a large bowl, much like the one inside the temple Lancaster had seen. Unlike it, this bowl did not have smaller, childlike statues standing around it, but rather a giant of a beast, its muscles rippling, its hand outstretched, pointing at its troops with one hand, and at the bowl with his other. The bowl itself was similar to the temple one in that it had carvings of fruit on its edges, making it obvious what needed to happen.

Nikos clearly knew what to do as his assistants were bringing fruits from the nearby trees and gathering them onto a platform next to Nikos. The scientists were studying the fruit, and the guards were looking over the statues, admiring the weapons and the craftsmanship.

Lancaster felt helpless. Even with Little Jack's incredible skill, they could never fend off Nikos' guards, let alone the statues if he brought them to life. But this may be the one and only chance to stop them before a galactic tragedy occurred. He considered having Little Jack shoot the bowl, but after revealing their position, it may still have no effect.

He thought through everything he knew; the temple, the Zeborno, the Polaris system, the planet, the Siguerans... And then he stopped, frozen in his tracks. What had their name for this system been? "Untamable." If there had been a robot army to wield, the Siguerans would have used them for their own means. If they could not tame this army, how could Nikos.

Lancaster stood suddenly. Little Jack, completely startled, whispered, "What in hades are you doing?" "Nikos! Don't!" Lancaster shouted. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at Lancaster, completely stunned. He had acted just in time. Four of the assistants were lifting up the platform, ready to pour the fruit into the bowl.

Little Jack pointed his gun at the others, whispering to Lancaster, "You know I don't have my other gun."

Nikos took a while to pull himself together enough to speak. "Doctor James," he said in amazement. "You really should do a magic act and take it on the planet circuit. How do you keep escaping..."

"You can't control them!" Lancaster insisted. "Only the Zeborno and their god can control them. You'll..."

"How quaint of you, Lancaster, believing in gods. Most of human civilization gave up religions a century ago..."

"Whoever it is that controls them, it's not you," Lancaster said. "Don't go any further. They'll kill all of you and then who knows what other destruction they'll cause."

Nikos was clearly offended at the slap at his ego. He could not control them? Nikos would show Lancaster just what he could and could not do. At that moment he noticed a guard sneaking through the woods toward Lancaster. He had managed to get far, disturbing the branches and leaves as little as possible, ducking under the cloak of fog effectively. It was a golden opportunity, as he seemed to be sneaking up on

Little Jack's flank without being noticed. But Nikos needed to show his success to Lancaster. "Don't fire!" he told his guards, ordering all of them, including the flanking soldier, to stand down.

Little Jack looked around at that and saw the man on his flank. Disturbed at having been sneaked up on, he pointed his gun at the lone guard rather than the army of robots and the others in the middle of them.

"I want you to see this," Nikos told Lancaster. "I want you to behold me harnessing the power of a god!" Nikos nodded at the four assistants. They held up the wooden slate and tipped it over the bowl. The fruits tumbled in, and when there was a sufficient amount, the bowl dropped slightly, and a click sounded from inside it.

Immediately, the robots were triggered. Their heads rose in unison, and they turned toward their leader. Their leader, in turn, straightened up, its arms dropping to its sides. As they did, the robot seemed to grow. At first it just appeared to be aligning to its full height, but after a few moments it was obviously growing taller. Nikos and Lancaster both saw how it was unfolding. Its muscles were not mere decorations, but layers which could bloom, and by which the body and limbs could extend. By the time it was done, it was more than five meters tall, and was looking down at Nikos, arching almost directly above.

Nikos had to concentrate against the intimidation, holding himself together enough to shout to his guards who were pulling out their guns. "I have this under control! They are under my power! Hold your fire!" The guards lowered their guns, not wanting to threaten the robots, which were standing perfectly still, looking at their tall leader.

Nikos began speaking in Zeborno. They were words Lancaster did not quite understand. He had learned to read it, and had gotten a sense of the language enough to recognize the speech, but he couldn't follow at the speed Nikos was going, which was a little faster due to the fear in his stomach. Lancaster did recognize the final words, however, which Nikos shouted out one word at a time, its meaning simply, "I AM YOUR GOD!"

The words hung in the air, echoing against the trees into the distance. It startled birds, which abandoned the area, protesting as they went.

The statue did not react immediately. It merely stared at him for a time, as if waiting. Nikos nodded. He had them under his control. He took in a breath to speak again, and was slapped out of the way.

Before he even hit the ground, the other robots spun on their heels and their shots ripped through the guards before they even knew what happened. The four assistants were sawed in half by blades emerging from the large robot's torso. The scientists were grabbed and stabbed ruthlessly into their vital organs. The shots were quick and efficient. They had been studying the humans, scanning their bodies, before their attack. They knew exactly where to strike before the first shot was fired.

As soon as the firing began, Lancaster dropped down. He and Little Jack backed away under the cover of the fog, not knowing if that would help at all. When they had a little distance, they began to sprint, Lancaster always ducking to stay as much in the fog as possible.

Not far behind them, they heard a shot, but this one from a human gun, and firing the opposite direction. Little Jack suddenly remembered, the guard that had been flanking them. "Idiot!" he exclaimed. Their position was now compromised.

Clearly the human soldier was a good one. He took out two robots before they reacted, and another two while they opened small hatches on their arms and shoulders from which copter and jet tools emerged. A half dozen of them hopped over to the man while the rest of them rushed on foot. They were followed slowly by the commander robot, which took its time, scanning, and assessing the situation.

The guard managed to take out another two with shots, and dodged the first blow of melee, utilizing his gun as a club and taking out a third. But despite his incredible ability, the one man to ever outflank Little Jack was stabbed in the heart by one robot at the same moment his head was crushed by another.

At the exact moment, the lead robot spotted Little Jack and Lancaster racing away, tumbling over the thick foliage hiding in the fog as they went. The large mechanism didn't have to say a thing. Its signals went out to its subordinates, and they raced after the duo.

Little Jack could hear the buzz of the jet-choppers revving up and taking chase. He spun round briefly, switching the barrel of Munin as he did. Rather than taking the time to aim, he fired off three rockets,

each hitting the ground around the robots, which sent large splinters of debris into the air. Pieces of everything from rocks to trees to vines to the metallic pieces of the rockets lodged into the machinery of the robots, and two of them crashed to the ground, falling into several pieces.

The survivors fired back at Lancaster and Little Jack, who ducked behind trees as the shots came. Little Jack switched the barrels again, this time to overdrive rapid shot. He fired behind him as they ran, not looking where it was hitting. Each shot was so weak it would hardly take down a human, but each robot it knocked into was disrupted. Though not destroyed, its machinery was confused enough that it smacked into trees, or tripped on the underbrush.

Lancaster reached into one of his pockets and pulled out what looked like a shiny pebble. He dropped it behind them, and it beeped for a short count before exploding in a bright flash. It sent out an electric current that overloaded several of the bots passing over it, giving them some more room.

Lancaster and Little Jack were almost to the ship, but by now the large robot was catching up, along with a pair of the flying bots, and four of its personal body guard. They fired their own rapid shots, which were zeroing in on the pair. The shots came in so close that a flurry hit the rim of Lancaster's hat, knocking it off his head.

Little Jack turned Munin upside down and flipped one switch, then another. Just as he did, he lunged forward and grasped Lancaster by the foot, tripping him to the ground.

Odin's Revenge lit up, and the on-board cannons ripped into the jungle, throwing explosions up into the air, knocking down trees, and slashing apart robots. Little Jack didn't know how many were destroyed. He didn't wait to find out. He got up, grabbed Lancaster, and they rushed into the ship.

As they flew into the air, rising out of the fog like a body emerging from a bath, they could still see movement on the ground. A few of the robots had survived, including the large one. They didn't wait to see more, and they ejected from the planet as quickly as they could.

In the distance, Lancaster and Little Jack also saw a ship fading away into the mists of the upper atmosphere. "Nikos," Lancaster said. "He got away."

"That could have been any of his cronies," Little Jack said.

Lancaster shook his head. It was Nikos. He knew it. "Nikos said he didn't sav how I escaped," Lancaster said. "What he doesn't realize is, I learned from him."

Odin's Revenge sank into the dark grey sky, then burst out onto the other side. The bright yellow gaze of the overpowering primary star bore down on them, along with the brightness of its little brother star closer by. In the distance they could see the third star, and not far from that, another small flash was closing; the residual spark of a ship going into spectrum drive. Nikos was away, and he had left behind him a flurry of chaos on a planet long forgotten by time.

The End