

~ Official Document ~

Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation

Ancient Terran Records Extract #03-K64

Subject: Treasures of the New Louvre

...war is imminent. The treasures of the New Louvre are no longer safe. We lost so much during the terrorist bombings of the original museum a century ago. As director of this institution, it is my duty to ensure the safety and survival of mankind's greatest treasures...

[Record damaged]

...graciously accept your offer to take some of the museum's most important pieces on your expedition. They will be sent to the *New Hope* for loading as soon as they are packaged. Captain Hawkins, I entrust much into your capable hands—Egyptian, Greek and Roman treasures, sculpture and paintings by the masters. But the most revered piece I give over with greatest reluctance—the last surviving fragment of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

All of us can gaze upon the quiet magic of the *Mona Lisa* and find our own meaning. Mankind needs this if we are to survive this coming war... *[Record damaged]*

...take care of our history, Captain. As soon as Earth is safe again, I look forward to these artifacts finding their way home.

I wish you and your colonists a safe and speedy journey to the end of the stars...

~ END DOCUMENT ~

Chapter One

“You’ve got five stellar minutes before you’re going to fry like a Shar’an desert rat, big brother.”

Dathan Phoenix ignored his younger brother’s voice coming through the tiny nano earpiece. It wasn’t hard. He was used to ignoring Zayn and he was concentrating on not breaking a leg.

He leaped over a patch of rough, twisted ground. Landing on a smooth area of old lava, he didn’t slow his ruthless pace, pumping his arms and legs as he sprinted.

His goal was dead ahead.

Rising out of the red-gold landscape were the crumbling ruins of a once-mighty city. A millennia ago, Lumina had been the pride of the galaxy, but then its three suns had all reached the red giant phase. Now, all that was left of the once-thriving planet was a scorched, barren landscape that boiled during the day and froze solid at night.

“Dathan, the old museum building should be straight ahead on the right.”

Dathan’s older brother had a much more serious tone. Niklas was the sensible Phoenix brother.

“And you want to get moving. The suns are rising.”

Dathan swallowed a snort. Like he couldn’t feel the heat of the rising triple suns on the back of his neck. Sweat poured down his face, soaking his shirt and utility vest. Once all three suns scaled the horizon, the surface temp was going to hit nine hundred thermals—liquefying the surface and making it molten lava once again.

He did *not* want to be here in four minutes.

He focused on the museum rising out of the orange-lava landscape. A recent earthquake had uncovered the ruins lost to the galaxy so long ago. The building had once been grand with a huge central dome that was now just a shattered ruin.

A sweet little geologist at the Galactic Geological Survey had slipped him the info. But he was well aware that if he knew about it, then no doubt every treasure hunter, thief, and scavenger in the Exodus quadrant knew about it. He forced himself to pick up the pace.

The prize inside was *his*.

As he neared the building, he slowed. Climbing over rubble, he checked the Sync screen strapped to his wrist. An ancient blueprint of the museum—purchased at an exorbitant price on the black market—was displayed.

The timepiece should be at the center of the building. It had been the star attraction.

Damn, acquiring a Terran timepiece would be a hell of a coup. Dathan's heart rate sped up. Not to mention the supernova-sized profit from selling it. Old Earth artifacts were revered across the galaxy.

His father had dreamed of acquiring a Terran timepiece. Of course, he'd also dreamed of finding the famed last fragment of the *Mona Lisa*. Dathan's jaw clenched and he climbed over a pile of rubble, landing in a crouch on the other side. Brocken Phoenix had done a whole lot of dreaming and not a lot of doing.

Then Dathan saw it.

Holy Stars. It was intact.

Blood pounding, he rose. A small display case with a domed, glass lid stood among the ruins, untouched by the destruction around it. It was probably made of synth-glass and been enhanced to make it near indestructible.

Under the glass, he saw the glint of something metallic. *Hope you turn in your grave, old man.*

There was the thud of rubble falling from above. Dathan tensed and glanced up.

His gut tightened. “Fucking hell.”

Standing on a crumbling ledge directly above the timepiece was a tall, lean figure encased entirely in black StarWolf light body armor with a built-in helmet.

Even though Dathan couldn’t see through the dark visor, he knew exactly who was in there.

“Darc’s here,” he murmured. His brothers’ curses came through loud and clear.

He stared up at the rival treasure hunter for several seconds.

Then he ran.

Okay, get the timepiece, avoid Darc, exit the building, meet his brothers at the rendezvous point. *Easy.*

There was a near-silent *whizz* above him. A single glance up and he choked back a curse.

Darc was zooming down a micro zip-line.

Dathan pushed harder for every bit of speed. He leaped over a shattered display cabinet and slid to a stop at the timepiece case.

As he rammed a fist into the case controls, he took a microsecond to admire the timepiece through the glass. Made from some kind of lustrous metal, its interlocking links gleamed. It had a round face that had been shattered millennia ago and cracks snaked across the surface. He could just make out some numbers on the black background and the letters O-L-E-X.

With a hiss, the dome retracted. He snatched up the timepiece. His fingers closed on the metal and he felt engravings on the back.

A sharp pain pierced his side.

He sprang away, clenching one hand on the timepiece and clutching his side with the other. He felt sticky warmth on his fingers.

Gritting his teeth, he yanked a slim metal throwing star from his side. Darc never messed around.

Backing away, he looked at his nemesis and dropped the star. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

Darc lifted a gloved hand and pressed the release button on the side of the helmet. It retracted soundlessly.

Platinum hair glinted in the intense sunlight. An outrageously flawless face was dominated by eyes the color of a multi-colored nebula. Shame Nera Darc was a soulless bitch who sold her services to the highest bidder. And she wasn’t picky on how dark and slimy they were.

“I want the timepiece, Phoenix.”

He backed up, holding the timepiece high. “You’re still pissed that I outsmarted you on Nihon Prime and took that choice little netsuke sculpture right out from under you.”

Her face stayed impassive but her spine stiffened. “Your older brother outsmarted me, you simply ran faster. Tell him I won’t hold back next time.”

“Tell him yourself.”

She extended an arm. “Hand it over. I won’t warn you again.”

Dathan’s mind raced, searching for an exit strategy. He knew Darc wouldn’t hesitate to take him down as painfully as possible. *There*. He glimpsed a clear path through a still-standing wall.

“Here you go.” He swung his arm like a champion VelocityBall player. When she dived to catch, he ran for the hole.

She wouldn’t be fooled for long.

The timepiece was snug in the top pocket of his vest. His Sync was now lost in the rubble of Lumina's old capital.

He ran out onto the street.

Straight into the roaring glare of Lumina's first sun.

The giant red-orange orb balanced on the horizon, round like the ballo beasts on his desert homeworld of Zerzura. He threw an arm up. The heat stung his exposed forearms, prickling his skin.

Damn. The second sun wasn't far behind.

He raced down the street, dodging rubble and warped lumps of lava. Then he felt a slight pinch as something tiny gripped the back of his neck.

He recognized the weapon. *Oh, fuck.*

An electrical charge poured through him. His entire body shuddered under the painful voltage. He dropped to his knees, his teeth knocking together so hard he expected them to fall out.

Black boots stepped in front of him.

"I have to give you points for sheer grit, Phoenix." Darc leaned down and plucked the timepiece from his pocket.

No. He couldn't get the shout past his lips.

She didn't even glance at the watch, just slipped it into some unseen pocket in her skintight suit.

"B-bitch," he managed between gritted teeth.

She shook her head. "No points for wit though. Your insults are particularly uncreative." Then she leaned down, until her lips brushed his ear. "This makes us even, Niklas. Until the next

time.”

Nik’s curses were more creative than Dathan had ever heard from his strait-laced brother.

Darc straightened and stepped out of view. He didn’t hear her leave. He didn’t know where the hell she’d learned to be so quiet, but she never made a sound when she moved.

“Dathan, you need to go. *Now.*” Nik’s urgent voice.

“Ground’s gonna get supernova hot,” Zayn added in a cheerful tone.

The electrical charge from the Tase stunner cut out. Dathan pitched forward and hit the grit-covered ground. A rock jabbed into his cheek. He fought to gain back some control of his body. His fingers twitched.

“Dathan?” Worry scored Nik’s voice. His big brother always worried too much.

“He’ll never make the rendezvous,” Zayn said. “We’ll come to you, bro.”

No. Dathan didn’t want them down here. It was too dangerous. He managed to turn his head and bright light speared into his eyes. He squeezed his eyelids closed. The bright glare of the suns was burning now, searing his skin.

He managed to push to his knees and clawed at the small device sticking into his neck. He tossed it on the ground. He never let anyone willingly get the best of him. Not even his father on one of his drunken rampages.

But as Dathan kneeled there, dizziness making his head swim, he saw something that made his gut clench.

In the distance, the third sun was joining its partners. Their combined heat was moving across the landscape like a wave. Ahead of it was a giant cloud of steam where the heat was turning the ground molten.

Fuck. He got to his feet and staggered. He wasn’t going to make it.

Screw that. He set off down the street, ignoring the burning pain of the sun on his arms and neck. His pace wasn't fast but he was moving. He gritted his teeth to stay upright. The thought that kept him going was picturing Darc's face as he snatched the timepiece back.

A gust of hot air blasted dust into his eyes. He shielded his face. Shit, the heat wave had caught up with him.

He cracked open one eye. Nope, he hadn't turned to molten soup. He looked up.

Ah, he'd never seen such a beautiful sight.

His salvage ship, the *Infinitas*, hovered above him. Her body was shaped like scorpione desert insects. A large movable tail was a powerful crane and the two large pincer claws at the front were excellent for in-space salvage.

In the angular, synth-glass cockpit at the front he could just make out Zayn at the control screen and Niklas' large frame leaning over him. *Idiots*. They shouldn't have risked themselves.

A titanium line fell in front of him, hitting the ground. He quickly snapped the clip on the end to his belt and in seconds, he was zooming upward.

Nik yanked him aboard. "He's in!"

The *Infinitas* pulled away with enough force to send Nik staggering and Dathan crashing to the metal floor. Salvage ships were usually lumbering and slow, but Zayn, along with their cousin, Mal, had added a few "extras" to the ship's engines. Zayn liked to go fast.

"Not going to become fried Tanari hash today," Zayn called out from the cockpit. "We're clear of the suns."

Dathan sat up. His brother handled the ship with amazing skill—left over from his time as a space fighter pilot with the elite Galactic Strike Wing. Dathan glared at Niklas. "You shouldn't have come down."

Nik clasped his shoulder. "You're welcome."

"If something had gone wrong—"

"We're all okay."

Dathan shook his head. "Z, find Darc on the scanners."

"There's nothing on scanners," Zayn said.

"Fuck! We have to find her." He wanted the timepiece back.

"She'll be long gone." Nik stared out the side window that stretched all the way to the floor. It gave a dizzying view of the planet below and the ground that now looked like a molten orange ocean. "If she made it off the planet."

"She made it." Dathan didn't doubt it. The treasure hunter was too cunning and too quick.

Nik's blue gaze swung back to him, held for a second, then he nodded. "You're bleeding."

Dathan swiped a hand at his side. "Yeah, Darc's pretty handy with a shuriken."

Niklas mumbled something under his breath then held a hand out. "And you have some solarburn. I think you need a date with the medscope."

"It'll keep until we get home. I want you to find her buyer." Nik was a genius on the comp. "I want that timepiece back."

Nik raised a brow. "And if she's sold it to someone we shouldn't mess with?" He gripped Dathan's shoulder. Squeezed. "There are other treasures, Dath."

"I want this one." He had to have this one. He shoved his hands on his hips. "You content to let her get away with it?"

A pause. "No."

"That's what I thought. Us Phoenix brothers, when we want something, we go after it until we get it."

That was a lesson they'd learned themselves. Their father certainly hadn't taught it to them.

Turning, Dathan stared out the window at the receding sphere of Lumina. What he wanted now was a bottle of Beduan ale and a plan for re-acquiring the timepiece.

As long as he had another adventure, another treasure on the horizon, he had everything he needed.