

~ Official Document ~

Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation

Private Memo from Director Niklas Phoenix to Head of Security Nera Darc

Subject: Sensitive information re: Markarian Expedition

Nera,

I've finished reviewing the old Earth archives you...acquired for me. I've discovered something fantastic but incredibly sensitive to our expedition to Markaria. It directly relates to the starship, *Excalibur*, that crash-landed on Markaria and founded their culture.

I won't divulge the information in this memo. Please find me when you finish training with your security team and we can discuss the matter in private. We cannot afford for this information to get out before we reach the planet.

The *Magellan* is ready to depart, and I suggest we start our expedition as soon as possible. My astro-archeologists are ready and I'm certain your team shakes in their boots whenever you speak to them, so I'm sure they won't complain if we move the launch date up a few days.

Sincerely,

Niklas

P.S. I may have neglected to mention that we have a student assistant joining the expedition. I'll tell you more about that later, too.

P.P.S. When I say we'll discuss this in private, I mean in our cabin, alone, no one else there, just the two of us. Don't take too long.

Chapter One

Her kick slammed hard into the spar-droid's face with a satisfying *thunk*.

Honor Brandall pulled back, bouncing on the balls of her feet, before attacking again. Her roundhouse kick sent the floating droid rocking wildly away.

She rubbed an arm across her sweaty face. She'd been training in the ship's gym for the last two hours. She had a few new moves she'd picked up from reviewing some historical military documents from Darrus III, and she'd wanted to test them out.

Conclusion: difficult, but effective. She bounced on her toes again. If she adjusted a few things, like her posture and positioning, she might have more luck with them.

The gym doors whispered open, and a fellow member of the security team entered.

"Hey, Derek," she called out.

"Agent Brandall." The young man headed for the free weights.

"Want to spar?" she asked. "Best of three rounds?"

He quickly shook his head, his straight, dark hair flipping back and forth. "I like my body parts where they are, thanks." With a smile, he held his hands up as though to ward her off, and then turned to the weights.

Honor raised a brow and shrugged. Most of the security staff groaned in protest when she was in charge of their training sessions. At just shy of six feet tall, and with the strength and combat training to go with it, she was used to people—men *and* women—shying away from her.

She slammed a fist into the middle of the spar-droid.

She refused to apologize for her strength or her dedication to her job.

The gym door opened again, and this time, the person who entered made Honor snap to attention.

"Relax, Brandall," the tall, lean woman said.

Nera Darc was Honor's new boss. Honor had transferred to the Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation ship, the *Magellan*, just over a month ago. They were still settling into each other's work styles.

Honor took in Nera's black uniform. The standard Institute uniform was black and gray, but she'd never seen Nera in it. The woman had short hair the color of platinum, multi-colored eyes, and a face that could have put all the latest supermodels in the central systems out of business.

Honor was a military brat. Raised by a military father, she also had two brothers in the Galactic Security Services. Honor might work security for the Institute's expedition ships, but she'd still had military professionalism instilled in her since she was a young girl. She liked rules and order.

Nera Darc, on the other hand—former treasure hunter and all-round badass—tended to disregard rules when it suited her. Most people were still reeling from the fact the woman had joined the Institute about eight months back—and some were still seriously hoping she would change her mind and leave.

But Honor suspected that would never happen. Not unless the new Director of Acquisitions—Dr. Niklas Phoenix—left. He was Nera's lover...hell, that word didn't even begin to describe what was between the couple.

Nik and Nera rarely indulged in public displays of affection, but Honor had seen the connection between them. It almost felt like something you could touch. She had no doubt that Nera would give her life to protect Niklas. And Nik might be an astro-archeologist, but he'd also been a treasure hunter with his infamous brothers. He could hold his own and, if needed, fight for the woman he'd made clear was his.

Honor fought the restless urge to shift her feet. She'd never seen a man love a smart, dangerous woman like that before.

For all of Nera's lack of military bearing, she was a hell of a fighter and a good leader. Honor had learned tons from her already.

"We've arrived, Brandall."

Nera's voice broke Honor's musings. She turned to look at the large, round window at the back of the gym.

A perfect, blue-gray orb of a planet hung in the blackness of space.

"It looks pretty from here," Nera murmured. "The barbarian world of Markaria."

Honor had done her research. Markaria was a rocky world, with small amounts of water. It had snow to the north, bands of dangerous, mountainous areas, and some gentler meadow areas with small lakes and some low vegetation. It was apparently populated by hordes of dangerous beasts.

It was also home to a part-human race of barbarian warriors.

“So, when do we get started on our mission?” Honor asked. They were here to look at the ancient crash site of an old Earth ship that had crashed here thousands of years ago...and forever changed the planet and her people. In her head, she was already organizing the supplies and the security team for protecting the archeologists as they worked.

“Soon,” Nera said. “Brandall, I need you to stay on your toes. There’s added information that hasn’t been shared about this mission.” Her gaze flicked to Derek Wu on the other side of the gym and she lowered her voice. “It’s been classified until we reach the planet.”

Honor felt her interest sharpen. “What?”

Nera shook her head. “I can’t share yet—” she held up a hand when she saw Honor’s face tighten “—I’m sorry, it isn’t my call. Niklas wants the Markarians to be the first to hear it.”

“You have to give me something,” Honor protested. “I’m your second-in-command, and this really hampers my work. How does it affect the mission? Does it make it more dangerous—?”

“Yes.”

When Nera didn’t add any more, Honor released a breath. “That’s it?”

“For now. You’ll get all the details on the ground when we meet with the Markarians. All I can tell you is that Niklas got his hands on some ancient records about the ship that crashed here. There’s more to the story.”

Honor raised her brows. She felt a slight electric buzz through her body. It was the feeling she got when a tightly planned mission was about to spiral out of control. “So, what now?”

“We’ll take a shuttle down to the surface shortly to meet Niklas’ cousin, Aurina, and her bondmate.”

Right. Nik’s cousin Aurina, a former deep-space scout, had discovered Markaria when she’d crash-landed here. She’d since mated with a barbarian warlord and made her home here. Honor couldn’t imagine giving up technology for a man—no matter how good he was in bed. She loved hot showers, laser weapons, and twenty-four-hour VelocityBall channels too much.

“Unfortunately, we won’t get to work right away.” Nera’s face didn’t change, but Honor got the impression the woman wanted to grimace. “We’re to be welcomed with a sword-fighting display and feast in our honor.”

Sword-fighting? Honor hid her smile. That didn’t sound too bad. Maybe she’d find a few moves she could incorporate into her training. “At least it gives us a chance to scope out our hosts before we head out on the mission.”

Nera nodded. “Assess their strengths and weaknesses.”

“Ah...they aren’t our enemies, right?”

One of Nera’s brows rose. “Everything can change in an instant. Be prepared. Always.”

Right. She’d forgotten that Nera Darc trusted no one...except Niklas Phoenix.

“Oh, Nera, there was one other security issue I wanted to discuss with you,” Honor added.

“Yes?”

“The explosives sensors keep going off in Lala’s cabin. I’ve searched the girl’s room numerous times, and I can’t find where she’s hiding the damn stuff.”

Nera’s lips turned up for the briefest second. The closest she got to a smile. “Our student assistant won’t blow the ship up, Brandall. She’s an expert with the stuff.”

“It’s against protocol to allow a student to bring uncatalogued explosives aboard.” Honor didn’t care if Nik’s ward was an explosives expert. She was a teenage girl, and Honor didn’t think teenagers and explosives were a good combination in any situation.

“I’m sure,” Nera said, that smile threatening again. “I’ll talk with her. Now, back to our trip to Markaria. Ensure you gather as much data on the planet as you can. We know it’s home to some unpleasant beasts. I want to know the best ways to take them down if we come across any.”

Honor snagged a towel from a nearby shelf and blotted her face. “Surely you faced worse on old Earth?”

Nik and Nera’s expedition to the war-ruined planet that gave life to most of the systems and planets throughout the galaxy was legendary. As were the wild, mutated beasts they’d discovered there.

Nera shot her a bland look. “Let’s hope so. Now, while we’re on Markaria, we’ll be assigned a warrior guide.”

Honor groaned. “I get the impression, from what I’ve read about Markarians, that they like to be in charge.” Not to mention appeared to be more brawn than brains. They carried giant swords, for star’s sake.

“Brandall, all men think they want to be in charge.”

Nera wasn’t wrong, but Honor had seen Nera with Nik. He respected her—her skills, her opinions, her intelligence. If he had trouble letting Nera take the lead in a fight or a security situation, Honor didn’t see it.

“All right,” Nera said. “Let’s go meet some barbarians.”

Honor glanced at the planet again out the window. Weeks with primitive, testosterone-ruled men on an undeveloped, wild planet.

Wonderful.

He sensed his prey was close.

Colm Mal Kor crept through the trees, keeping his foot treads silent. The Forest of Brandar, a favorite hunting ground for warriors, rose above him.

The trees had thick trunks, and between them dangled curling vines the size of Colm’s wrists. On the rocky ground, smaller bushes snagged at his fur-lined boots.

Recently, a wulver beast had been reported here. It had slaughtered deer, other forest animals, and attacked a man passing through.

The sound of a twig snapping broke the silence, and he stilled. He let his nanami—the tiny organisms that lived within him—free. His senses expanded, information flooding him. He could hear the tiny insects of the forest buzzing, feel the warmth of the sun filtering through the trees, and smell the rank scent of rotting meat.

The stench of the wulver.

Colm reached over his shoulder. His sword made the slightest noise as he pulled it free of its leather scabbard. The blade was a true warrior’s weapon—long, heavy, with engravings at the hilt. A sword made for a man to use to kill, hunt, and protect.

Another sound reached his ears. Heavy breathing. A snort.

The wulver beast charged out of the undergrowth.

It was huge, its back as tall as Colm's six feet, five inches. It was covered in dark-gray fur, and its elongated jaws were filled with huge fangs and covered in blood.

It reared back on its hind legs, rising above him like a nightmare, and roared.

Colm stayed calm, tightening his grip on his sword. His dual hearts beat a steady rhythm in his chest. He stared at the burning yellow eyes of the enraged beast.

"Today is a good day to die, my wild friend," Colm said calmly.

It roared again, like it was defying Colm's words.

He raised his sword, his gut hardening. "When we lose the fight with the wild inside, it is time to leave this world...with honor." He wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or the beast.

The wulver charged at him, and Colm leaped forward with a cry.

He dodged under the beast's claws, using the increased speed his nanami granted him. He reached up and sank his blade into the underbelly of the wulver, working through the thick, gray fur.

Its roar this time was deafening, echoing through the forest. Colm yanked his sword out, twisted away, and ducked another swinging claw.

He thrust the sword into the creature's side. It caught the edge of the thicker fur, and he had to put more strength behind the blade.

The animal didn't give up. Wulver beasts were known to become more enraged when they were injured.

Another thrust to the beast's belly, and the creature fell backward. It was still struggling to rise, to fight, its yellow eyes fixed on Colm.

Colm wiped the blood off his sword on the beast's fur and knelt beside the dying animal. "May you hunt well in the next life."

When the creature breathed its last breath, Colm closed his eyes. He felt a deep, helpless sorrow as his nanami surged, threatening to break his control. He tightened his jaw and fought back the restless fury.

There was the sound of pounding footsteps and a body barreled out of the trees. Colm's best friend pulled up, coming to a halt next to him.

Kavon scowled. "You killed it already and left nothing for me." He lowered his massive sword.

Kavon was dressed like Colm, in black, leather trousers, with just a leather harness crossing his chest. The harness held Kavon's sword scabbard to his back. Around his wrists were gold cuffs topped with gray fur. They were from a preda wolf, and matched the ones Colm wore on his own wrists. He'd been there the day Kavon had taken down the great beast, and Colm had killed his own. They'd been twelve.

Kavon's golden-brown gaze zeroed in on Colm. There was a shrewd intelligence there, and an unwavering determination. It was those qualities that had made Colm pledge allegiance to this man, far more than Kavon's legendary sword arm.

Colm was so very sorry that soon, he would have to break that allegiance.

He shook off his bad feelings and hid them behind a smile. "I'm sure there are some ground hares to be found."

Kavon muttered a curse.

Colm's smile turned real. No warrior would ever deign to hunt hare.

"Maybe mated life has made you slow, my friend." Colm pressed his tongue to his teeth and finished cleaning his sword. "A beautiful woman in your bed has made you lazy. You need to be faster next time."

Kavon snorted. "I think you are jealous, Colm. You cavort with whatever female takes your interest and toss her out of your bed the next day. You cannot seem to hold onto one. I'll take Aurina in my bed every night over hunting a wulver any day."

Colm liked the free-spirited skyflyer Kavon had claimed as his, but Colm knew he would never have a woman of his own.

He couldn't ever claim a bondmate.

His gut hardened, like a rock had settled there. He sucked in a breath. It didn't matter. He enjoyed a variety of pretty females when it suited him.

"How about we get this wulver home? You have your grand feast to prepare for."

Together, they hefted the beast up, and set off through the trees.

"The skyflyer ship from the Institute of Historical Preservation is already in orbit," Kavon said. "It is an honor to have them here to study and learn more about the First Warriors."

Colm already knew. Everyone in the village, across Kavon's lands and beyond, had been talking about it. It made Colm scowl. He'd known Kavon's mate, Aurina, would change their lives, but he didn't have to love it. Kavon and their King, Corant Mal Rann, were controlling

outside access to Markaria, trading for advanced technology—like medscopes, that could cure all manner of injuries and disease, and personal computer devices like Synes.

But Colm was a warrior. He lived to ensure the security of his people, and knowing there were more advanced peoples out there—and some of them were interested in his world—made him uneasy.

“The Institute team wants to explore our world,” Kavon continued. “And I want you to lead them. I’m assigning you to be their guide and protect them.”

Colm stopped. “No.”

“Colm—”

“No.” He shook his head and stared at Kavon. “I am not a babysitter.”

And he had his own issues—issues he’d kept secret from Kavon—that would only be exacerbated by outside influence.

Kavon tugged on his end of the wulver and they kept walking. The tense silence was only broken by their heavy treads.

They cleared the trees, and ahead, their two hargon beasts waited, grazing on the grassland where they’d left them. The large, muscular animals were favored by warriors. With their tough, black, leather-like skin, sharp horns atop their heads, and spikes down the back of their long necks, they were excellent animals for a warrior to ride into war or a fight.

“Colm, you are my friend and my best warrior. Aurina’s cousin is the leader of this group, and I need you to ensure he doesn’t get eaten by a darken beast or get lost in the Darken Wilds. Our world is not what they are used to.” The warlord turned to look out across the meadow.

Colm followed his gaze. In the distance, the spiked peaks of the Grimore Mountains in the Darken Wilds were visible. The Wilds were a dangerous place, especially at night. They were home to all manner of beasts and desperate raiders. Kavon also had mines there and his warriors worked hard to protect the miners.

The highest, most jagged peak caught Colm’s attention. Mount Furioso. It was where their ancestors, the First Warriors—explorers from old Earth—had crash-landed thousands of years ago. It was where they had gone on to use their advanced technology to create the nanami and give birth to the modern-day Markarians, from the wild, primitive animals they’d been before.

With Aurina’s help, they’d discovered the crash site of the First Warriors’ ship on a wild, daring adventure into the Wilds that had almost cost Kavon his life.

But that dangerous quest had also gained Colm's friend his mate, and the Terran treasures they'd found, including the legendary sword, Durendal.

"Who is this cousin of Aurina's?" Colm asked reluctantly. He'd never let his friend down before, and he didn't plan to start today.

Colm took the wulver beast from Kavon and hefted it over the back of his hargon. The animal snorted steam in protest.

"Niklas Phoenix," Kavon answered. "He is an astro-archeologist. He studies history and works for the Institute. His woman travels with him...as head of his security."

Colm raised his brows. "His woman is his security?"

A small smile flashed on Kavon's usually serious face. Since Aurina had come into his life, Kavon had shed much of the darkness of his childhood and smiled more frequently.

"Apparently. If Aurina has taught us anything, it is that women are capable of doing more things than we've ever imagined."

Colm coughed to hide a laugh. Aurina did not let her warrior get away with riding over her, or ordering her around. Kavon had gotten very good at asking nicely—something with which most warlords had great difficulty.

Markarian women were the lifeblood of their society. Colm was well aware that, apart from their soft skin and delicious smells, women ran and contributed to most aspects of Markarian life. The head of Kavon's mines was a woman, his head healer and scholar was a woman. Colm knew better than to underestimate a female. But they were not as physically strong as warriors, even with their nanami, and they were rarely warriors.

He scraped a hand through his long hair. "I still think I am better off here, training the warriors, rather than traipsing around the Wilds with these skyflyers."

"I am still your warlord, Colm," Kavon said quietly. "Besides, you have been training more lately than ever before. The warriors complain you drive them into the ground." Kavon's intense gaze drilled into him. "You keep driving yourself to be better, to hone your skills and your control."

"As any dedicated warrior does, warlord." This was a topic he wasn't going to discuss with his friend.

"You know I hate it when you 'warlord' me. Anyway, you don't have time to wriggle out of this assignment...they are due here on the hour. They will probably be waiting for us when we

return to the estate.” He slapped Colm on the shoulder. “Come, let’s get this wulver beast back to be skinned and the meat delivered to the kitchens. Then you will need to prepare your sword.”

Colm frowned. “Why? I don’t need my sword to eat a feast.”

“I have promised our visitors a sword-fighting display before the feast. A fitting welcome to Markaria, don’t you think?” Kavon swung up onto his hargon beast.

Colm groaned and grabbed the reins of his hargon. *The Great Warrior grant me patience.* He heaved out a breath. The training he had planned, followed by a quiet dinner and possibly talking a willing female into his bed, looked like a distant dream.

Now, he would have to spend his time entertaining goggle-eyed outsiders who considered him a dumb, unthinking, fighting machine.

He nudged his hargon into a fast pace. Hopefully he could ride out his frustrations and at least face the skyflyers with his famous warrior control intact.