

Official Document

Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation

Ancient Starship Record #RE-991-458 - Captain's Log

Subject: Dark Earth

Today the starship, *Endeavour Horizon*, entered orbit around the planet Earth. The most recent recorded visit since the planet's destruction during the Great Terran War.

The planet is covered in dense clouds, but what could be glimpsed through the cloud cover showed the seas are as black as space. Radiation levels are off the charts—consistent with records that experimental nuclear weapons were used in the war and have decimated the planet's surface. Radiation levels are too high for the *Endeavour Horizon* to risk landing.

Scans of the surface are also hampered by the radiation, but show no human life signs. There are large and confusing biosigns, and the science team can only speculate that they belong to mutated animal lifeforms.

There have long been rumors that many valuables and pieces of Terran history remain on the planet, but it is the conclusion of my best advisors that it is far too dangerous to attempt any recovery. Possibly in the future, bold explorers may risk the journey.

I report that the planet that seeded much of the life in our galaxy is nothing but a dark Earth.

Captain James P. Darra

Endeavour Horizon

Out of Australia II Colony

Chapter One

He hated the jungle.

Niklas Phoenix pushed aside a giant, green leaf the size of his body and ducked under a thick branch. Here on Mazona V, the jungle was so dense, he could only see a few meters ahead. According to his Sync communicator, he was following a path, but he sure as hell couldn't see it. He stopped and slapped at a huge insect with a long proboscis that was buzzing around him, trying to find a spot to land.

Nik lifted his laser machete and started swinging again, cutting at the dense wall of vines in front of him.

"Can you see it yet?"

His brother Dathan's voice came through Nik's tiny nano-earpiece. "All I can see is jungle, jungle, and more jungle."

A laugh came through the line. "Sounds like you aren't having fun, big bro."

That voice was his youngest brother, Zayn. Zayn could sound cheery while handcuffed to an explosive device and traveling toward a black hole. He'd always been the easiest-going of the three of them, and since he'd married the love of his life, his cheer had become almost unbearable.

"Nik not having fun? Never," Dathan said.

Oh, and now Dathan with the sarcasm. Nik glowered at the vines in front of him and put some extra swing into his hacking. "You guys should give up treasure hunting and go into comedy. I hear the casinos on Cardon Prime are looking for stand-ups."

He swung again, the orange laser making a quiet hum, and the vines fell away. A tiny clearing was visible and overhead, some unknown animal screeched.

Thankfully the sun was still up, so the animals were of the friendly, curious variety. It was after night fell that Mazona's less-savory denizens made an appearance. Nik and his brothers really wanted to be gone by then.

"Who the hell can have fun while they're sweltering on this godforsaken planet, surrounded by choking jungle?" Nik grumbled.

"Focus on the treasure, Nik," Dathan said. "A beautiful golden idol said to originally be from Earth."

Right. Legend said that a thief had stolen the Terran artifact from a private collection, not long after the Great Terran War had devastated Earth. Many people had left the planet, heading out into the galaxy to form new colonies and to populate new worlds. And they'd taken priceless old Earth treasures with them.

Supposedly, the thief who'd stolen this golden idol had crash-landed here on Mazona V. He'd convinced the less-advanced, jungle-dwelling natives that he was a god, and he lived out his life here in relative luxury. A small monkey-like creature dropped down from a tree and landed on Nik's shoulder, making him stiffen. It tugged at his hair, sniffed, then leaped off into the vegetation.

He shook his head. Even being waited on hand-and-foot by the natives wouldn't have made this place worth it. The jungle-dwellers were long gone now, but the legends said they'd worshipped the idol the thief had brought with him.

Being a born skeptic, he was guessing they'd find a gold-plated tin can at best and at worst, nothing. Until he saw the idol, scanned it and verified it, he wasn't getting excited.

The thing that excited him the most was that a certain rival treasure hunter of theirs was reportedly after the idol as well. He smiled. Yes, he'd very much like to get his hands on it before her.

Nik stepped into the clearing, and froze.

Amongst the tangled vegetation, he saw a worn stone statue. It was as tall as Nik's six feet, two inches, and the rain had eroded it down over time. But it was clearly a man, with dark holes carved out for eyes and one arm held outstretched. Pointing.

Nik turned his head to follow the direction of the carving's hand.

And saw the cave entrance.

He touched his ear. "Dath? Z? I've found the cave."

“Nice work.” Dathan sounded excited. “Hang on, we’re coming your way.”

“I’m going in to investigate.” Niklas studied the rounded mouth of the cave. It appeared a little too regular to be natural, and there were carvings along the arch, too worn to be able to decipher.

He stepped inside. It was dark and dank, vines hanging down in the enclosed space. He grabbed his ion light out of his vest, flicked it on, and pointed it into the darkness. Nearby, a vine moved, and Nik controlled a start. Not a vine—a Mazonian viper. It hissed at him, and he gave the highly venomous creature a wide berth.

As he moved deeper into the cave, he pondered how his life had turned out. Here he was, one third of the galaxy’s best-known treasure-hunter trio. It wasn’t at all how he’d planned his career. He’d always loved knowledge, had been starved for it by a childhood that had lacked...just about everything. Their mother had left when they were young, and their father... Well, Brocken Phoenix had been a washed-up, drunken treasure hunter who survived on a diet of bitterness, high-octane kila, and smacking his boys around.

Nik shook his head. As soon as he was eligible, he’d won a scholarship and left their homeworld of Zerzura. Its ancient ruins had sparked his love of history, and he’d happily entered the Galactic Institute of Historic Preservation’s academy and never looked back. He’d dreamed of well-funded digs, of running the Institute’s grand, old museums, and maybe one day sitting on the Institute’s board. It had been a haven for him, a place dedicated to knowledge, learning, and history. It had fed his soul.

Up until the day that he’d discovered it was all a lie.

His jaw tightened and he headed deeper into the cave. Screw the Institute. He’d left it behind and he enjoyed working with his brothers. They were damn good treasure hunters. He still spent time learning and collecting history. He might miss the long excavation digs on occasion. Treasure hunting meant their jobs were quick, in-and-out incursions, where they tried not to get themselves killed...or worse, lose their treasures to someone else.

And now they were doing good work. Especially since Dathan had married Eos. The astro-archeologist had worked hard to convince Dathan to sell a number of their discoveries to reputable dealers and clients, and even to donate some of their finds.

The Phoenix brothers made a good team. Zayn was fast. Dathan was cunning. And Nik...well, he was smart. Put that together, and you had all the essential ingredients for successful treasure hunting.

Nik took another step and felt a stone depress under his boot. A click echoed around him.

Oh, shit.

He knew the jungle-dwellers had been renowned for their booby traps.

He followed instinct and dropped to the floor. His cheek pressed to cool stone just as he heard a *twang* of release. Then, there was a *whoosh* as something whizzed over him.

When everything went still, he turned his head and saw a sharpened spear buried in the wall behind him. Damn thing would have passed right through his gut. He also knew the natives had been experts at creating poisons. There was a faint, neon-green glow on the end of the spear tip, which Nik was sure would have left him writhing in pain and puking his guts up.

Yep, great gig this treasure-hunting thing.

“Nik?” Zayn’s voice. “You okay?”

Nik pushed to his feet. “Yeah. Triggered a booby trap.”

Dathan cursed. “I told you to wait.”

The words didn’t just come through the earpiece. They echoed through the cavern. A second later, Nik’s brothers stepped into view.

Nik dusted his hands off on his khaki cargo pants and studied his brothers for a second. It was clear the three of them were related. They all had similar, muscular builds, although Nik had always been a few inches taller and broader than the other two. Dathan always forgot to cut his hair, and the dark strands were getting really long, giving him a rakish look. Zayn kept his hair shorter—a trait left over from years in the military—and it was a few shades lighter and often turned tawny if he spent any time in the sun. Nik swallowed. Jesus, he was glad he had them. Not that he’d ever tell them that.

“Come on. Let’s find this alleged idol.” He headed deeper into the cave. “And keep your eyes open for more booby traps. Check the walls, floors, and ceiling.”

“Hell, look at the size of that snake.” Zayn edged away from the viper. “Can’t stand snakes.”

“Come on, flyboy.” Dathan clapped Zayn on the back. “We’ll have you back in your cockpit before you know it.”

They dodged two more traps, and Dathan accidentally set off one that had small darts whizzing out of the walls. Luckily, he was good at dodging.

The tunnel opened up into a wide cavern. Far above, a small opening let in a shaft of light.

“Engravings.” Nik’s gaze sharpened on the worn etchings on the wall. No language, just pictographs of daily life and rituals. Fascinating stuff. He lifted his Sync and snapped a few pictures. The geometric style certainly was reminiscent of some of the ancient Terran cultures.

“More over here. But be careful.” Dathan pointed to the floor. “There’s a ledge here and a big drop.”

Nik saw a ring of engravings in the floor. These were more sinister. Images of skeletons and demon-like creatures. Sure enough, the floor ended and below he saw yawning shadows.

He picked up a rock and tossed it over. They waited, and waited. Finally, he heard the distant *thunk* as the rock found the bottom.

Zayn whistled. “I’m guessing we don’t want to go that way.”

Nik stared out to where the shaft of light shone from above. “No. But I think we want to get over there.” The light illuminated an isolated platform that was covered in more engravings. It looked like a small island in a black sea of shadows.

“Fancy a jump?” Dathan was eyeing the distance across the gap.

“It’s too far,” Nik said.

“Not if we use this.” Dathan pulled a grappler off his belt and smiled. He aimed it, fired, and the line released. The pointed head whizzed across the expanse and hit the side of the platform. Small hooks exploded out of the head, embedding into the rock. Dathan tested the line, then he set the end he was holding on the floor. More metal hooks sprang out, digging into the floor.

“You going to show off your tightrope skills?” Zayn asked.

“Hell, no.” Dathan grabbed the line, then swung underneath. He started making his way across, keeping his gloved hands and crossed ankles on the slim metal line.

Once he was on the platform, he waved them over. Nik went next. They all kept in good shape. He might like poring over books and e-records, but he worked out diligently. Treasure hunting wasn’t for someone who kept in shape with an annual sculpting appointment at the salon. You needed real muscles to climb, leap, and run.

He reached the platform and grasped Dathan’s hand to climb up. Zayn started over.

Soon, the three of them stood on the platform that measured about ten meters by ten meters. Nik crouched, running his fingers over the engravings. These ones were much clearer.

“This looks promising.” Dathan stalked to the middle, his gaze on a circular pedestal set into the center of the platform.

Nik looked at the images under his fingertips and saw an engraved square. In a flash, he registered what the image meant. “Wait, Dath! Don’t touch—”

Dathan had already reached out, his fingers touching the stone pedestal.

There was a grinding sound—rock on rock.

Then the platform tilted.

“Shit!” Zayn leaped away from the edge. As he moved, the platform changed direction, tilting to the other side. Now Dathan cursed, windmilling his arms to keep his balance.

Nik stepped cautiously toward the center, fighting to keep upright. “We need to balance it. Spread out evenly and then stand still.”

The other two did as he asked, and soon they had the platform mostly level. Nik bent his knees, trying to keep the thing steady. He felt like he was surfing.

“So, now what?” Dathan asked.

It was a good question. As soon as one of them moved, the platform would tilt. Nik craned his neck and looked down. Black darkness loomed below them.

Another grinding sound.

Dathan groaned. “What now?”

The stone pedestal in the center sank downward, then a moment later, it rose up again.

The shaft of light from above glinted off the gold idol that now sat in the center of the pedestal.

Dathan swore. Zayn whistled. Nik just stared. The damn thing certainly looked like it was made of gold.

His pulse began to race. The idol was the image of a squat man with an elaborate headdress. His pulse raced. He’d seen this before. In historical records. “It can’t be.”

“What?” Dathan demanded.

“It looks Incan.” One of Nik’s areas of expertise. He took a step closer and the platform rocked again. He stilled. “The Inca were skilled metalworkers, especially in gold. And see the

green-blue inlays? That looks like turquoise. If I'm not mistaken, this is a statue of the Inca sun god, Inti."

"Inca," Dathan said reverently. "Highly valuable and collectable. Private collectors go nuts for Inca artifacts."

"Dathan? I think we have trouble." The female voice came through their earpieces.

"Babe, now isn't a great time," Dathan responded to his wife.

"I know you're in the middle of the hunt," Dr. Eos Rai-Phoenix said dryly. "But a ship has just entered orbit around Mazona V. And they're being stealthy about it."

"They spot you?"

"No. The *Infinitas* is safely tucked behind Mazona's moon."

"Is it Darc?" Nik asked. But even as he asked the question, he knew that if their rival, Nera Darc, was here, they'd never see her coming.

"No," Eos answered.

"Must be treasure hunters after our find," Zayn said with a frown.

"Wrong again," Eos replied. "I ran a search. The ship's coming up as Institute."

The Institute of Historical Preservation was here? Nik frowned. Jesus, he would have preferred rival treasure hunters. They'd be more trustworthy. "What the hell do they want?"

"I suggest we don't hang around long enough to find out," Dathan said.

"They've just launched a shuttle, so be quick. See you when you get back," Eos signed off.

Nik studied the idol and the platform.

"Now what?" Zayn asked.

"Let's all run to the middle at the same time. That should, hopefully, keep the platform steady," Nik said.

"And after that?" Zayn peered over the side. "It's a long way down."

Dathan's gaze narrowed. "Let's grab the idol, then all three of us need to run back to the grapples line at the same time."

"The platform will tip," Nik said.

"Yeah, but if we hold onto the line, we can use it to swing back to the other side."

If the damn thing held carrying the weight of three fully-grown men. Nik took a deep breath. "Not many other options. Ready?"

His brothers nodded.

“Go!”

They sprinted for the pedestal. The platform wobbled beneath them, but stayed reasonably stable. Nik lifted the golden idol off the platform. His heart thudded. It was in excellent condition. He couldn't wait to get it under a scanner and study it. So many old Earth records were lost, but he might be able to track down something on it.

“All right.” Dathan was looking at the grappler line. “Ready for phase two?”

“Not really.” Nik tucked the idol into his backpack.

“I'm ready.” Zayn looked just a little too excited about this bit. He'd always been the daredevil.

“On three. One.” Dathan tensed. “Two. Three!”

Together, they raced for the line.

The platform tipped under their combined weight. As Nik's boots slid downward, he cursed. Dathan grabbed the line first, swinging off the platform. Zayn leaped off the platform, grabbing the line with both hands. Nik slid the last few meters and with a silent prayer, fell into space. Darkness yawned below like deepest space. At the last second, he reached out and nabbed the line with one hand.

“Nice save, bro,” Dathan said. “Ready for a swing?”

Nik rolled his eyes. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be swinging across terrifying abysses on nice, boring, professional archeological digs. He nodded.

Dathan released the grappler from the now-vertical platform, and they swung back toward the other side.

“Woo hoo!” Zayn's voice echoed in the cavern.

Behind them, Nik heard a crashing sound. Ahead, the sheer wall of rock rose up to meet them. He tensed. *Damn*. This was going to hurt.

They slammed into the wall. Pain flared in Nik's shoulder, and Zayn's boots slapped him in the face. Below him, he heard Dathan swearing with his usual impressive vocabulary of the galaxy's ripest curse words.

But they were all alive, hanging from the grappler line. Dathan pressed the retract button and the three of them whizzed upward.

Nik pulled himself over the edge and sat for a second, staring back at the pillar of rock that had once held the platform. The platform was completely gone now—no doubt smashed to a million pieces below.

Dathan finished retracting the grapples and hooked it onto his belt. “Come on, boys. Let’s get out of here before those dickhead Institute grunts show up.”

They jogged back out of the cavern, avoiding the booby traps. At the cave entrance, they paused, the humidity smacking them in the face. Even the dappled light was harsh on the eyes.

Nik glanced around. The insects were making a huge racket in the trees, but the vegetation looked as it had before. There was no sign of an Institute team hacking away at it.

Dathan consulted his Sync, then nodded. “This way.”

The three of them moved in single file, following the trail Nik had cut through earlier.

Suddenly, a man clothed in a gray and black uniform stepped in front of them. And lifted a laser pistol.

“Stay where you are. The Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation has invoked the right to obtain any artifacts found on this planet.”

Dathan raised a brow and looked at Nik. “We got any artifacts?”

“Nope. Just out for a stroll.”

The Institute agent frowned. “Stay where you are. You will be searched and questioned.”

Dathan snorted. “Not today.” He threw something.

The small silver ball hit the agent in the chest and exploded. Pink goo splattered everywhere and the agent cursed, trying to pull the stuff off with no success.

“Let’s go,” Dathan said with a wave.

The brothers broke into a run.

“Lala gave you some of her goo balls?” Nik asked.

“Yeah. She said she was trying a new recipe. Stickier than before.”

Nik shook his head. The young explosives expert they’d adopted last year was trouble from the top of her wild pink hair to the bottom of her scuffed, pink combat boots. But the girl was a genius with explosives. At least, they’d mostly convinced her to stop blowing stuff up and stick to less lethal things like the goo balls.

As Nik vaulted over a fallen tree, he focused on running. They dodged under vines, leaped over fallen logs, and skirted low-hanging branches. They heard voices yelling behind them.

“They’re coming,” Zayn said.

Damn Institute. Nik had left them years ago, and they still managed to bother him, now and then. Lately, they’d left him all sorts of messages asking for a meeting. He’d ignored every single one.

They broke into a clearing and ahead of them stood a line of four gray-and-black-suited agents.

“Fuck,” Dathan bit out. They skidded to a halt.

“Our boss would like a word with you, Dr. Phoenix,” a tall agent with dark skin asked, his face set in an impassive mask.

Nik froze, his gaze going to the man’s face. A man who’d once been his best friend. Until Nik discovered he was as rotten as the rest of the Institute. “Galen. So, you’re with Institute Security, now.”

“Yes.” Galen Ryant looked older, harsher. “Now, like I said, my boss wants to talk.”

Nik took a deep breath. “Sorry, I’m busy today. Tell him to call ahead and make an appointment.”

Zayn snorted. “Since when did you find a sense of humor?”

He speared his youngest brother with a look he’d reserved for rowdy students back when he’d been with the Institute.

“I’m sorry.” Galen stepped forward and raised his hand, holding something. “That wasn’t a question.”

Next thing Nik knew, pain raced through his body. His muscles contracted, his teeth clicked closed. He fell to his knees, one hand fumbling at the side of his neck. A Tase weapon.

He heard his brothers yelling, then they, too, dropped down beside him, jerking violently from the electrical volts running through them.

Damn Institute. On that final thought, Nik blacked out.