

~ 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...

Chapter One

Dr. Eos Rai gripped the edge of her seat and gritted her teeth. The pilot of her hired minishuttle executed a dizzying spiral descent toward the moon below.

The free fall was exactly what her life was like at the moment. Her hand clenched on the seat. How much longer until she hit the bottom?

Eos focused on the irregular, pockmarked surface below. Her first look at Khan.

The moon was a captured asteroid that now orbited the market planet of Souk. If she craned her neck, she could just make out the large planet with its urban areas interspaced with farms and forests.

Here at the edge of the known galaxy, Souk was the stopping-off point for explorers, colonists and daredevils heading off into unknown space to make their fortunes. And its small moon of Khan was home to the most notorious treasure hunters in the galaxy—the Phoenix Brothers.

Another sharp turn and she almost head-butted the synth-glass windshield. She shot a narrow look at the pilot, but the weathered old man peered straight ahead through his thick glasses—who still wore glasses when you could visit a medbooth and get your vision fixed for a few e-creds?—didn't even glance at her. In fact, he looked bored.

As long as she landed in one piece...

She had to make the Phoenix brothers help her.

She pulled in a deep breath and rubbed the fingers of her left hand together. She felt the slight bump at the end of her index finger and thought of the precious cargo it carried.

It challenged all her beliefs to put this into the hands of treasure hunters, but she was out of options.

She'd worked with Niklas years ago at the Galactic Institute for Historical Preservation. He was steady and smart. She trusted him. His brothers, though, were the wild cards.

Why the hell had Niklas thrown away a promising career in astro-archeology for this? She stared at the scratched and dented hulls of the various starships that littered the moon's surface. A spaceship graveyard.

But she knew it wasn't the brothers' main business. No, they went after items far more lucrative than scrap metal.

Dathan Phoenix had a reputation for sniffing out the choicest ancient relics.

Right or wrong, it was a skill she needed. *If* she could convince him to chase a myth.

He was legendary across the Exodus quadrant. Not to mention cursed in the halls of the Institute. Heat seared under her rib cage. Artifacts that should be in vaults or museums, taken by his grubby hands and then sold to the highest bidder. Her mother had died trying to keep artifacts out of the hands of pirates.

Eos smoothed a finger over the floral markings that traced up the back of her hand and twined around her wrist. The familiar habit soothed her. No one had the right to steal someone's history.

"There she is," the pilot said.

Eos's gaze shifted downward. A large huma-dome shimmered pink-purple on the horizon. The energy field of the dome kept the atmosphere inside but also permitted solid objects to pass through. Moments later, the bubble-shaped shuttle shot straight downward—along with Eos's stomach. The light lunch she'd had earlier at the spacedock on Souk threatened to come back up. The shuttle descended through the dome and touched down on a small landing pad.

"Thank you." Eos didn't hide her eagerness to exit the shuttle. She'd already transferred payment into the pilot's account before the trip, leaving her e-cred account dangerously low. Her stomach clenched. She'd already forked out a small fortune for the commercial fare to get to Souk. What she had left was to convince the Phoenix brothers to help her.

As Eos slipped on her small backpack, the shuttle shot upward, bathing her in steam. Spinning, she faced the building.

No one to greet her.

Hmm, security sucked. Her boots made a quiet tap on the smooth floor as she headed inside the monstrous warehouse.

The inside was packed with...junk. Mostly ships—or parts of them—of all types and sizes. She spied lights in one corner of the building and wended her way through the debris.

As she passed a small pile of rusted metal, she glimpsed paintwork on the...whatever it was. She stopped and crouched, smoothing a hand over the surface.

"It can't be," she breathed.

NASA was written in faded white paint, with a small flag made up of stars and stripes. Remnants of a Terran satellite!

She shot to her feet. So little was known about the world that had seeded life on so many planets in the galaxy. Most of the planet's records had been lost after its nuclear devastation in the Great Terran War. She imagined for a second what it must have been like with the world's superpowers at war. Even over the name of the planet itself. Earth had been the English term used by the United Countries of the Americas, but the records showed that in the other powerful group of countries, the Northern Federation, they'd used Terra. Both terms were now commonly used throughout the galaxy.

Eos's mouth firmed. This satellite should be in a museum being studied, not rotting here on a desolate moon. She marched toward the back of the warehouse. The light she'd spotted was spilling from a half-open door. She pushed it open.

Living quarters. Not tidy ones. She noted the clothes strewn across the floor. A large bed with rumpled covers was pushed against one wall. A battered metal desk was closest to her.

What sat on it had the breath rushing out of her lungs.

She circled the desk. "By Suva's grace." A Renaissance bronze in mint condition. She'd only ever seen pictures of them in records. She reached out a trembling hand.

Then she was yanked backward.

A strong arm wrapped around her chest like a steel band. A hard male body pressed against her back. She stiffened and shoved her elbow into a firm abdomen. A wet, naked abdomen. The cool metal of a weapon pressed against her temple and she froze.

"I've already had one woman sneak up on me today. I don't plan to make it two." The male voice was low, raspy.

"I don't care what kind of day you're having." She wasn't violent by nature but she'd been trained to defend herself on isolated digs. Acting on instinct, she dropped low and swiped out at his ankles with her foot.

She obviously surprised him, because he toppled. Pulling her over with him.

For a second, she glimpsed the lean, tough body of a runner—all firm, sinewy muscle. She had a quick impression of dark ink covering one of his arms. She didn't let her gaze go lower.

He was strong and she realized she'd never beat him in a fair fight.

He was cursing in a language her lingual implant didn't recognize. She scrambled off him, reaching for the laser pistol that was now lying on the floor.

Her fingers brushed metal. Then she was tackled from behind.

She hit the floor face-first and all the air was forced out of her lungs in a rush. The man's heavy weight settled over her and her cheek pressed against the smooth concrete.

Warm breath tickled her ear. "Now what, darlin'?"

"Now nothing. Get *off* me." Eos bucked her body. But all that did was grind her butt into a hard stomach.

"Not until you tell me who you are and what the hell you're doing in my place."

She sucked in a breath. "No one met my shuttle."

Footsteps.

"Her name's Dr. Eos Rai."

Eos recognized Niklas's voice. Relief flooded through her. She turned her head enough to see Niklas and a younger man with tawny hair in the doorway.

The younger man smiled. "Twice in one day you've gotten beaten up by a girl, Dath."

"Screw you, Z," the man above her said.

She guessed the one with Niklas was the former Galactic Strike Wing fighter pilot, Zayn. Which left the hard, dangerous man on top of her as none other than Dathan Phoenix.

His weight shifted off her and she sat up.

Now she knew who he was, she let herself look.

Tanned skin over hard muscles. Actually, he was a bit pink, like he had bad solarburn. Not that it detracted from his blatant masculinity. A washboard stomach and a deep V of muscle that disappeared...downward. Where she wasn't going to look.

One strong arm and shoulder were covered in black ink. Her heart stuttered as her gaze traced the wild, masculine design. She pressed her hands together, touching her own designs. His markings were nothing like the elegant mehndi markings the men and women on her world were born with.

Dathan grabbed a towel off a nearby chair and wrapped it around his hips, then he crossed his arms over his chest. Her gaze met eyes the color of the bright blue-green mountain lakes on her home world. Hair the color of deepest space fell around a slightly battered face and a small white scar cut through his left eyebrow.

"How are you, Eos?"

She forced her gaze away from Dathan. "Niklas. It's nice to see you."

“So you know each other?” Dathan asked with a frown.

Niklas nodded. “We worked together at the Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation.”

Dathan’s face tightened. “We’re not real fond of Institute snobs around here.”

She arched a brow. “I’m on a leave of absence.” A forced one, but they didn’t need to know that.

Dathan extended a hand, his intense eyes burning through her. “Well, regardless of your profession, I’m sorry about the gun in your face. Like I said, it’s been a rough day.”

She put her hand in his. Ignored the tingle where their palms met. “Spent in the sun?”

He rubbed a hand over his stubble-covered cheek and she thought the color in his face deepened. “Something like that.”

“This is the last place I’d expected to see you, Eos,” Niklas said.

She lifted her chin, forcing her mind off the distracting treasure hunter beside her. “I need your help. I want to hire you.” She let her gaze move over them. “All of you.”

The brothers traded a quick glance. She marveled at the fact that such a quick look and they all seemed to understand each other. Some sort of sibling shorthand.

“Let me get dressed.” Dathan strode to an adjoining room. “Why don’t you guys take the doctor to the living area?”

The living area was section of the warehouse adjacent to the bedrooms. Lived-in furniture was clustered around a bank of large screens. A tiny kitchen was tucked against one wall.

Zayn called out a command and the screens flickered to life—showcasing the latest sporting craze, VelocityBall. Eos was not a fan of the new version of football with a powered ball. Niklas sat in a leather armchair and she watched him extend the superthin palm-sized Sync communicator until it was tablet size. He flicked at information on the clear touchscreen while Zayn prowled to a nearby cold unit and plucked out a drink. He glanced her way. “Want one?”

Eos shook her head. “No, thank you.” She wandered to a window. Through the glass, she saw the shimmer of the huma-dome. “Pretty interesting setup you have here.”

“We do what we can,” Niklas said.

She’d had a taste of what it was like without the Institute’s large resources this last week. “You miss your work at the Institute?”

“No.”

She sensed...something. “Why did you leave?”

Something stirred in his dark blue eyes. “Dathan needed me. Our father had died and...it was time to come home.”

She cast an eye across the cavernous warehouse. “You have pieces in here that should be in museums. Pieces we could learn so much from.”

Footsteps.

“Locked away for the rich and educated to admire? Gathering dust in some storeroom somewhere?”

She turned. Dathan looked just as good clothed.

Worn jeans hung low and his white shirt was unbuttoned, giving glimpses of that sculpted chest. His ink was hidden, though, and she was sorry she couldn't see it.

She looked away. It was dangerous to stare at him. Dathan Phoenix wasn't just legendary for his treasure hunting. “In the hands of people who will ensure their proper preservation.” She wanted to reinforce the galactic laws, but she needed to hire these men, not alienate them. She bit her lip instead.

Dathan shoved his damp hair back and raised an eyebrow. “Yet I'm guessing since you want to hire us, you need us to take something for you?”

He had her there. Her jaw locked. No, she was nothing like this man. “Yes.”

“You going to share, darlin'?”

“It's Dr. Rai.”

Niklas coughed. Or maybe laughed. “Eos is one of the foremost experts on Terran artifacts.”

“You won't get us anywhere near Earth,” Dathan said. “No one who goes there ever comes back.”

Eos longed to explore Earth, but she knew the radiation levels from the nuclear fallout of the Terran War were off the scale. Besides, rumors were that *something* had survived down there...and it didn't welcome visitors.

“I'm not after Earth.” She lifted her chin. *Okay, here goes.* “I need you to help me find the last remaining piece of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.”

Silence.

All she could hear was the gentle whoosh of the internal environmental system. It made her nerves stretch tight.

Dathan threw his head back and laughed.

“I’m serious,” she snapped.

He shook his head. “We only take jobs that have a sure payout. The *Mona Lisa* was destroyed when Earth’s inhabitants turned their planet into a nuclear wasteland.”

“No. It’s at Star’s End.”

Dathan laughed again, grabbing his stomach. Eos felt a burning urge to kick him.

“Star’s End is a myth,” he choked out.

Zayn leaned back against the wall, popping a piece of gum into his mouth. “Legend. Fable. Fairy tale.” He blew another bubble.

Niklas shook his head. “Star’s End and the Lost Treasure of the New Louvre have become so muddled with pseudohistory and garbage no one can be certain it’s even real. No one really believes the director of the New Louvre sent the museum’s most precious treasures on an expedition to set up a distant colony.”

“It makes sense,” Eos insisted. “Earth was on the brink of destruction. The United Countries of the Americas and the Northern Federation were decimating the planet in their bitter war. Lots of people were leaving Earth with the hope of finding habitable planets to set up new colonies, to make new homes. What better way to preserve the Earth’s greatest historical treasures?”

Dathan shifted. “It’s the Holy Grail of the crazy.” He tilted his head. “You crazy, Dr. Rai?”

“No.”

He stalked closer, circling her. “What’s a fine upstanding astro-archeologist like you doing searching for something that could ruin your career?”

He was getting too close. “Finding the last fragment of the *Mona Lisa* would be a crowning achievement.”

Niklas leaned forward in his chair. “The Institute thinks the expedition never left Earth.”

“My research indicates otherwise.”

Dathan watched her. Silent. Like a predator.

“I found a journal.” Well, partial records of a journal but they didn’t need to know all the detail. “Written by the daughter of one of the head colonists. She didn’t want him to go.”

“Maybe he never did.”

Eos held his gaze. “She talks about how much she missed him.”

“Plenty of Star’s End hoaxes out there.” Dathan shrugged. “I think I have a record of a man who opened the first strip club at Star’s End.”

She ground her teeth. “I’ve seen an archived document from the New Louvre that shows they packaged the last known fragment of the *Mona Lisa* ready for transport. It was loaded onto the starship *New Hope*, which was headed for Star’s End.”

Silence again.

She knew it was big.

Dathan raised a brow. “You’re telling me you have a verified document that links the New Louvre to Star’s End?”

She huffed out a breath. “No. I couldn’t take it—”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I’ve heard of the document,” Niklas said. “Institute ruled it a hoax. The last fragment of da Vinci’s masterpiece perished when Paris was nuked at the beginning of the Great Terran War.”

“It isn’t a fake.” God, they were her last hope. She knew it’d be a hard sell, but she didn’t think treasure hunters would be worried about verification of documents.

“Didn’t your mother work on the original authentication?” Niklas asked.

“Yes.” Dr. Asha Rai had been one of the Institute’s most talented. “She never believed it was a fake but bowed to pressure from her team. That belief led to her death.”

“How?” Dathan asked.

Eos felt the familiar tightness of grief. “She went on an expedition to find Star’s End. She was killed by space pirates.”

Dathan leaned closer and her chest tightened. “I’m really sorry about your mother, but do you really want us to scour the galaxy searching for a mythical old Earth colony?”

She smelled him now. Some citrus-scented soap and warm male. “I hear you’re very good at finding things.”

They stared at each other.

Zayn snorted, breaking the moment. “Not so good at holding on to them, though.”

Dathan flashed his brother a narrow look before he turned back to Eos. He caught her chin. “Why isn’t the Institute backing you?”

Oh, she really didn't want to go there. She tried to jerk away from his touch. "They don't have enough evidence—"

"I want the truth, Doc. You smell a little of desperation."

Her spine stiffened. "It's an old promise I intend to keep and the Institute isn't interested. Now, do you want to hear what other information I have or not?"

His eyes narrowed and he moved closer. His chest brushed against her. "Not really. This is already more trouble than it's worth."

"I can pay you."

One dark brow rose. "How much?"

She thought of the last e-creds in her account. It was more than most people saved in a lifetime, but she knew it was no fortune. "Five million."

He snorted. "Not enough to tempt me."

Eos *had* to convince him. "I have more information that helps narrow down the location."

His gaze was so sharp it felt like it cut through her skin. "I'm listening."

She shook her head, ignoring the heat coming off him. "I won't tell you until you agree to take the job."

"That's asking for a lot of trust, darlin'." Dathan stepped closer still. They were plastered against each other.

Something told her he was seeing what would make her back away. She stayed where she was and lifted her chin. "I guess trust isn't a commodity you have in abundance."

Those intense eyes burned through her.

"You can trust us, Eos," Niklas said.

She shook her head. "Trust the most notorious treasure hunters in the galaxy? Not with Star's End and a Da Vinci relic worth a trillion e-creds."

Dathan's grip on Eos's jaw tightened, the rough calluses on his fingertips abrading her skin. She felt like he was staring straight inside her.

"You have a location," he said.

She swallowed. Heard Niklas's chair squeak and saw Zayn straighten behind Dathan.

"Look at me."

She obeyed, caught again by those eyes.

"You know the location of Star's End, don't you?"

“Yes.”