

# **PLANET NINE**

## **Part I: The Voyager Records**

By Elowyn Unzicker

The ship is quiet. Dust fills the air, illuminated by streaks of ice blue light seeping through the foggy windows. You take a hesitant step into the darkness, the sound reverberating off the cold metal floor. You adjust the bag hanging over your shoulders half-full of scavenged parts and notice a doorway leading into another room. It appears to be a passenger's cabin.

There's a humble, neatly made bed that's been tucked into a depression in the wall. The covers are midnight blue, giving off a regal air. You guess this was the captain's room. You try the manual light switch on the opposite wall and much to your surprise, a white glow fills the space. Now that you can see better, you take a glance at the writing desk in the corner.

The thing is ancient; it looks like a first gen HoloPad mounted on that table. A priceless artifact like that could sell for *at least* a week's worth of energy rations. But now comes the task of removing said priceless artifact. It's basically part of the table, and prying it out with force would probably destroy any data left behind. Thankfully, you have your trusty NeuroDrive, enabling you to mentally download the information stored on the HoloPad's memory.

You rub the dust off the LCD screen. You only have a little experience with physical computers- holograms are far more mainstream. The black, mirror-like square on the table lights up and some kind of peculiar logo or symbol appears- it's two "C"s, mirror opposites of one another with a vertical line through the center. Then, lines of text begin to run across the expanse of the screen.

FILE DETECTED: Captain\_Skaj.log

OPEN?

ACCESSING ARCHIVE DATA...

Please wait.

*Greetings. If you've found this log, we've succeeded. Hopefully the world you live in is better than we found it. If you're wondering who I am, I'm not important. What matters is that life has returned to a nearly dead planet. I can assure you, we looked far and wide for other options- but the world you're living on is (by logical reasoning) the one we went with. I hope it's working out well for you. I wonder if you had to translate the text you read before you into something your generation could understand, just as we had to translate the Record. Yes, the Record... the golden disc that led us here.*

The Record? It didn't ring a bell with you. You chide yourself for not paying enough attention to the data streamed into your NeuroDrive, whenever you'd been studying the history of your planet. Something that important should be well-known, though, right? You

activate the Drive implanted in your hippocampus and take a deep breath. You'd never been one for lectures, but this one seemed... different.

You scroll through the list of files, stopping at the earliest folder modified. The date reads "011.012.5003". *That's weird.* You think to yourself. The "day" and "month" slots have three-digit places instead of two. You open the .hlg file entitled "Public Copy" and a holo-projector whirs to life.

A young female human appears. Her outfit is crisp and formal, and her ice-blue hair is styled in a clean-cut asymmetrical bob. She has bright green eyes, a bright contrast to the cool, bluish tones of her uniform. A silver band with the same double-C symbol from earlier wraps around her upper right arm.

"This is Captain Eris Skaj speaking. Date zero-one-one, zero-one-two, five-zero-zero-three. Commencing first log entry." You notice her name appears as "E. SKAJ" engraved on the armband, though she pronounced it "sky". "My people... my friends: I've been chosen by the Space Force of X-23 to lead a squadron out into the galaxy in search of a world habitable for human life. This squadron includes me, navigator Andromeda Polaris, engineer Jax Aquarius, pilot Beckett Gemini, and android assistant Yuri." She seems serious and stern, but behind her gaze lies something... foreign. Her voice breaks ever so slightly- but not because of the recording being decades old.

"Tomorrow we will be embarking on a journey to a planet recently discovered, thanks to the golden disc found aboard the extraterrestrial craft "Voyager". I myself was the one to recover this disc when it crashed near my home." She holds up what appears to be the "record"- and it does indeed seem to be a disc of solid gold. "We concluded that whatever race of extraterrestrial beings could figure out how to store information like this... well, they couldn't be mindless animals. And upon closer inspection, we realized that our species weren't so different after all."

You process the message. *Extraterrestrial? She seems more like the E.T. to me.* "According to the data on this record, there were more humans- people like us- living on a planet that was thriving in a nearby galaxy. And considering the state of our own world..." she trails off. "That was a chance we had to take. Not just as a Space Force, but a species. As a planet." You can see the determination in her eyes. Human emotions could be difficult to perceive given the awkwardness of mental implants, but this... this is something more. "And I'll close with this. No matter what stands in our way, we *will* find a place for you. We're *all* going to survive," she states firmly. "This is Captain Eris Skaj, signing off." The hologram dissolves, and the quiet whir of the projector dwindles to silence.

You open the next file, the one entitled "Navigator's Log". This time, a different young woman appears in the hologram. She has well-tanned skin and long, platinum hair tied

back in a braid. Instead of blue, she wears a uniform of olive green. Golden accents line each seam. The armband she wears has an upside-down triangle instead of the “C” symbol, and the name below it reads “A. POLARIS”. She carries a white clipboard and seems to be making calculations.

“This is navigator Andromeda Polaris. Commencing first entry. The Voyager was traveling at an approximate six millionths of light speed before it entered the planet’s atmosphere. According to the date imprinted on the disc, it must have been in the vacuum of space for at least seven decades, if not a century. The people, if there are any left, must have advanced significantly. A lot can happen in just a few years.” She pauses. “We’re scheduled to reach this planet- referred to as “Earth”- in approximately three of Earth’s months- three years on our world. I’m trying to get used to using their system. Seeing as how our crew will be the ones to colonize this new world- that is, if we’re the only human life left- I might as well start now.” She writes a bit more onto the clipboard. “Navigator Andromeda Polaris, signing off.” You move on to the next- the folder with the title “Engineer’s Log”.

A man appearing to be around the same age as the last two crew members materializes before you. He has tanned skin and dark hair, and his neatly trimmed bangs cover most of his forehead. He wears silver goggles around his neck, a tan bomber jacket, and an armband bearing a symbol of three connected dots. He holds something that looks like a wrench in one hand. His big brown eyes seem to be sparkling with excitement- he’s much happier looking than those who’ve gone before him. You press “start” and replay the recording.

“Engineer Jax Z. Aquarius speaking. Commencing first entry.” He clears his throat. “I honestly can’t wait to start this whole thing. I mean, I know I’m supposed to be serious about it, but... I just can’t help but think *I’m making history*. Right now. People are going to look back on this and think ‘*Wow, they never would have made it without that engineer looking after the ship.*’. They’ll put our names on golden plaques. They’ll name space stations after us. They’ll write *books* about us,” he grins. “I can’t believe I’m going to make history with my best friends in the whole world.” The hologram cuts off. You chuckle to yourself, noticing how he forgot to formally “sign off”.

The next hologram- the pilot, you deduce- glows to life. He appears to be the oldest of the group- lithe and athletic and about six feet tall, at least. His dark brown hair and eyes make his fair skin look eerily pale. The expression on his face resembles that of the captain’s- stern and determined. His uniform is a slate grey with white-glowing seams. The mark on his armband is a pure white hexagon- below it is the phrase “B. GEMINI”.

"Pilot Beck Gemini," he says in a soft voice, which slightly takes you by surprise. You'd honestly expected something deeper- less nasal. "Commencing first entry." He picks up a few sheets of wrinkled paper. He coughs awkwardly and begins to read. "This journey won't be an easy one. I've been entrusted with the ship *Odyssey* and the lives of three other humans. Not only are they counting on me because I'm the pilot- the entire *planet* is counting on me to get them there safely. Because if we fail..." he goes quiet for a second. "No; we can't fail. We can't," he whispers. "*I* can't." His brown eyes glisten, but then he regains his confidence. "I promise to do the very best I can to keep my friends safe. In doing so, I'll keep the fire of hope burning for everyone back home. "Pilot Beckett Gemini. Signing off."

You browse through the rest of the .hlg files, hardly noticing the passing time. They celebrate the seventeenth and eighteenth birthdays of the first three crew members- the pilot is the oldest of them, turning nineteen about three quarters of the way to "Earth". They all seem to be very close friends. They joke around with the others, do their part aboard the ship, and care for whoever's sick or injured. The engineer ends up with a broken hand after a blunder during a spacewalk, but the rest of them help with repairs and run shuttle check-ups in his stead.

You notice how different they look from when they started the voyage, and yet how similar. They're still humans. They're still friends. Even after all they've been through, they've persevered. It reminds you of your own kind. You do your job without complaint, no matter how difficult it gets.

Then you remember, you have a job to do. You sigh. But just as you turn to go, the projector you previously set to auto-play starts whirring again. All four crew members appear in the hologram together- Eris and Beckett stand in the center.

"Okay, do you want to go first?" Eris chuckles at Beck.

"What? No; you do it," he laughs.

"Can I say it?" Jax pipes up, excitement plain on his face.

"No, it's their occasion," Andromeda cuts in.

"Andy, they aren't going to—"

"No, no, wait!" Eris shouts. "I'll do it. I'm the captain." She looks into the camera with those same bright green eyes. But something's... different about them. "Well, we've been together for about three years, and... we have decided that we'll..." she glances at Beckett.

"Oh, come on," Jax yells. "They're engaged, for goodness' sake!"

"Jax!" Eris elbows him. The entire crew laughs. "Well, I guess it's official then," the captain huffs with a smile.

"Space wedding! *Whoo!*" Jax cheers.

"And we couldn't be happier," the pilot adds, as he puts a hand on Eris' shoulder. The hologram ends, the humans stand frozen in time before you. They all look so happy. The light in the captain's eyes shines like a beacon. The stony navigator has a broad grin on her face. The engineer is more ecstatic than ever, and the pilot's face glows with what looks like a sense of belonging. Something... you really don't understand.

You don't recognize any of them. The names mean nothing; the record means nothing. X-23 means nothing. Why bother with things of the past? You turn off the projector and proceed to take the HoloPad out of the captain's desk.

You turn back and walk out of the room, turning off the cabin light. Why you thought to do that is beyond you. Maybe it was just a sense of... courtesy?

Everything the humans expressed still lingers in your mental implant. The history is there, but somehow all that feels... fainter. You look back at the lonely bed with its pristine blue sheets. Something wells within you; something you can't explain. It's like an attachment. Wirelessly connecting to... whatever the humans were talking about. But what?

You can't stop trying to process their emotions. You can't help it. Humans are strange and fascinating creatures. *That is, if there are any left. Anywhere.* You take a deep breath and pull yourself away from the cabin. You exit the ship, and you step into a layer of grey dust coating the cold, barren land around you. It's like this all over the world. The only world you've known.

You wonder how bad it really could have been for them. Maybe their star wasn't bright enough. Not that yours is very hospitable; it's a very old star. You can't complain. It's always cold, and you're untouched by climate change. You begin to make your way in the direction of the nearest trading post, unable to divert your mind from the heartfelt messages left behind by the *Odyssey's* crew. *Why?* You ask yourself. Then you realize, you've just asked yourself something. That's something only intelligent, living beings can do.

"Unit 80799873." You stand to attention. Several more units identical in appearance to you all stare in your direction. Cold, metallic, lifeless... copies. "Status report," the leader demands.

"One first gen HoloPad," you say.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Return to your function."

"Affirmative." You rejoin your "kin"- if you can even call them that. Together you venture into the wasteland. It's a very different kind of "together". You all do your part. You all do your job. But there's something missing. You glance backward at the *Odyssey*.

"Unit 80799873."

"Yes?"

"Return to your function."

"Affirmative."

"That is an order."

"Affirmative." You and your fellow scavengers move on in a silence quieter than the vacuum of outer space itself. Then it hits you.

It's that sense of belonging. That sense of... someone being there for someone else.

You want it.

You want to find it.

You're *going* to find it.

And you're taking the *Odyssey* with you.

You leave the group. The leader calls after you, but you tune it out. You listen in only on the sound of your own rebellion.

"Renegade," the leader mutters. "A renegade; a defective unit. We will report this." You enter the *Odyssey* and survey the area. The ship is in good condition, for being left alone for decades. All it needs is a bit of power, and the solar panels on the roof will do just fine.

The craft rumbles to life, and all its interior lights activate. The control panel in the cockpit whirs and requests authentication. The screen is still covered in dust, and you brush it away- and the system unlocks. *How...?*

Before you can ask why, a line of text runs across the screen.

*Welcome back, Yuri. Where to?*

You blink. It can't be.

*I'm Yuri.*

It's decided then. You view the ship's current condition and notice that Captain Skaj- rather Captain Gemini- must have left it behind- she must have traded the ship for another one because it became unfit for human survival. But thankfully, you aren't human. *That's probably the only time I've said that*, you remark to yourself, taking the liberty of researching the last departure your captain made. They were still heading toward Earth. Maybe you could make it in time to see them.

The journey you undertook wasn't easy. You never thought you had it in you, but even little androids can come out on top. Weary, battered, and in need of a good charge- you finally reach it. You've never seen this much color since you saw the projections of your crew. Later came the task of finding your captain. Navigating outer space by yourself? That was the easy part of it all.

Then finally the day came, when you stumbled onto the doorstep of a spacious building fit with hanging gardens fueled by aquaponic systems. The door opened, and though she wasn't in uniform and at least in her early thirties- you knew it was her. Those same green eyes looked down on you that day, with the same brightness you remember from the projection. But holograms don't hold a candle to the real thing.

The man you recognize as the *Odyssey's* pilot joins her as she takes you inside. Their voices shake with excitement. They take a good look at you and start trying to repair the little nicks and dents picked up from your quest. And then... someone else walks into the room.

She looks just like your captain did when she began her voyage. Her hair is a brilliant auburn, and her eyes are the same brown as the pilot's.

"What's that, mom?" She asks.

"Remember Yuri?" Eris smiles. The younger human girl's face lights up.

"No way."

"Yes, way," Beckett counters.

"We thought you were gone forever. After we left you behind on the *Odyssey* by mistake..." your captain says to you, tracing your face with her hand. "How did you..."



“I wanted to come back,” you reply. “I missed you. I know it’s not my function, captain...”

“It’s okay, Yuri. You’re here now. That’s what matters.” The humans all look at you with the same expression. You recognize it as the same one you saw in the hologram, recorded all those years ago.

That sense of belonging.

You’re finally home.

At last.

**THE END**