



Return to Dark Earth

Anna Hackett

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His career plan never included becoming one of the galaxy's most infamous treasure hunters. And it certainly never included his one weakness: Nera Darc.

Astro-archeologist Niklas Phoenix loved his job studying and safeguarding artifacts at the Institute of Historical Preservation...until he learned that it was all a lie. Forced out of the Institute, he joins his treasure hunter brothers, but now the Institute is trying to lure him back for the ultimate treasure hunt--a return to the planet that seeded life throughout the galaxy. But only one thing convinces him to go--his deadly, seductive rival has joined the expedition.

Dangerous and enigmatic, Nera Darc has made a life for herself where she calls the shots and bows to no one. Niklas Phoenix has become her dark obsession and on the lethal mission to Earth, they are compelled to join forces to survive. But Niklas threatens to tear down Nera's internal walls and melt the ice around her heart...but she knows caring for someone is just a weakness others can exploit.

As Nik and Nera strip away each other's secrets, a brilliant passion is unleashed, but the dangers of Earth strike from every side, and a darker enemy is closing in.

Return to Dark Earth Details

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From Reader Review Return to Dark Earth for online ebook

Marta Cox says

Well we are back in the distant future with the Phoenix brothers and this time the author has surpassed herself. For several books now we have been teased by Nera Darc, treasure hunter, daredevil and all round scary lady! There's one brother though who pushes all her buttons and that's the studious Niklas. He may no longer work at the Institute but he still loves all things rare and the most precious thing to cross his path has to be the beautiful and oh so dangerous Nera! It's just too bad that she constantly one ups him and steals the artefacts Nik and his brothers struggle so hard to find!

Nik has no intention of working for the corrupt Institute again but a fabulous opportunity to journey back to Earth alongside Nera is one he can't turn down. Earth is a barren land, a victim of the violent war that changed the landscape forever and yet the chance to bring back antiquities unites these treasure hunters. Only short visits on the surface are permitted due to the radiation levels but there's more than one kind of danger waiting out there. As Nik and Nera team up they soon discover that Earth is not as uninhabited as they thought and their expedition on the post apocalyptic planet is fraught with danger !

I loved this story. The author took me on a journey that was exciting, downright scary and full of adventure and passion. Nera slowly reveals her secrets to Nik and hers is a truly heart breaking story. Nik is at times quite sweet with his enthusiasm for the ancient world and it was easy to see how Nera fell more and more for his outright charm. Add in a landscape that's inhospitable and life forms that chilled this reader and you begin to see just why I had so much fun reading this book. If you haven't already started this series fear not as this book can easily be read a standalone but why not treat yourself and follow the journey that this couple have been on. I've enjoyed the other books but this has to be my favourite so far. Sci fi romance at it's finest! I was gifted a copy in exchange for an honest review

Lee says

Disclosure: I received an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Niklas Phoenix left the Galactic Institute of Historic Preservation on acrimonious terms and took up treasure hunting with his brothers. The Institute has found him, though, and makes him an offer he can't refuse: an expedition to Earth, with Nera Darc also going. Nik has a fascination with Darc he can't get rid of, and he distrusts the Institute enough to join up to see what they are up to. Nera has always found Nik rare and intriguing, but their rivalry and the remnants of her own issues have kept them apart. Finally working together on the expedition, they have the luxury to decide what they mean to each other. But first, they have to survive zombies, giant mutant cats, acid-spitting plants, and internal sabotage.

I loved our protagonists, separately and together. Niklas is, as Nera says, a good man. The two have been tangling since the beginning of the series, and I do recommend reading the first three Phoenix Adventures books before this one for a little more background on them. Niklas makes a great Indiana Jones, scholar and adventurer, and his respect for Nera is evident even while dirty things are happening. I was a little worried Nera's character would get watered down from what I read in earlier books, but Nera Darc continues to be the baddest treasure hunter in the galaxy, with human issues that she's somewhat dealt with, like most of us. She's not completely trapped by her past but it does give her hangups. The way she falls for Nik and opens up to him feels natural, and her protectiveness (while trusting his competence and letting him stand on his own) made me feel all warm and cozy. They make an excellent team.

The villains, however, are shallow. Their motives are believable but not complex, and I believe there are

actual villainous cackles (one of those memories that's too good to check). It's a sharp contrast to the well-developed protagonists.

The action is filmic. Chase scenes, booby traps, sword and gun fights, gladiator rings, it can make your head spin. With all that, I still somehow have a good idea as to the sequence of events. It's more coherent than the majority of action movies I'm familiar with. Everything is consistent and ties together nicely.

It's also fun to see the radioactive world Hackett has built, abounding with monsters, mutants, treasures, and environmental hazards. The horrors are vivid and scary. The ruins of my beloved New York City got me thinking, "Could we really do this to ourselves someday?" We also make stops in savage Mexico and Peru, and I was always curious to see what the team would discover next! I am very burned out on zombies, though. These are well-done and not garden-variety, but they're still zombies.

boogenhagen says

Nera is so AWESOME. I love her character. I am so happy we got to share the love, this one was even more excellent in an excellent series. And there is ZOMBIES! That is always entertaining.

Rosemarie Grainer says

Another exciting romance

The last Phoenix brother of the Treasure Hunters fame has met his match. This story is action AND character oriented, with lots of both. I think this is one of my favorites from this series. I like when the characters grow and develop. I also like how Nik can handle that Nera has beaten him so many times. We see where she is coming from.

The pace is breakneck, the tone is intense, and the storyline is action AND character oriented with vivid characters and super steamy scenes. Read them in order, if you can and enjoy!

Alex (HEABookNerd) says

Series Phoenix Adventures #5

Niklas Phoenix and Nera Darc have been circling each other for a while now and no matter how many times Nera steals a treasure from the Phoenix brothers, Niklas can't stop thinking of her. Now they must work together on an expedition to Earth where they'll find that not everything died when the planet was destroyed.

We've heard a lot about the Terran war and what happened to Earth afterwards so I was really excited for *Return to Dark Earth*. **The Institute of Historical Preservation is sending a team of treasure hunters to Earth in hopes of finding some amazing artifacts and though Nik has a bad history with the Institute, he can't pass on the opportunity to see Earth.** Nik is a scholar at heart and I loved the slightly nerdy side of him but he's also a great alpha hero! Nik has been fascinated by Nera from the beginning and now that he has a chance to spend time with her he realizes what his feelings really mean.

"I'm not friendly."

"You are to me."

"Not really, but you just seem to like my brand of unfriendliness."

I was worried how things would go with Nera since I've been conflicted since her first appearance. **On the outside, Nera comes across as brash, selfish, and possibly unethical, but on the inside there's a streak of honor and when it comes to Nik, Nera will do anything to protect him.** With a better understanding of Nera's past, we can see why she's made the choices she has and why she's pushed everyone away. But Nik has found a way through her hard shell and though trust is hard, they find a way to trust in each other. **One of my favorite parts about Nik and Nera's relationship is that Nera holds a lot of the control and Nik is perfectly comfortable with that.** He appreciates Nera's strength and he loves her for exactly who she is.

I also really liked that Jonas Solomon was in this one and I can't wait to hopefully get his book sometime in the future. He's got such swagger and bravado but you can tell it's hiding something deep and likely painful.

4 out of 5 stars

Reader Safety: Heroine was abused in the past (referenced, off page); Morally ambiguous Heroine

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**Happily Ever After Book Nerd**

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## **Vinita Hayes says**

I got an ARC of this book from the author for an honest review. Nera n Nik finally get their spotlight n what a rocky journey it becomes. Before they travel to Earth, the Phoenix's find a golden Incan Idol of the God Inti. As Dath, Zayn n Nik re-enter the jungle, they are Tased by the Institute who want Nik to help with the expedition to Earth. He refuses but Nera finds a way to persuade him to join the other treasure hunters approached by the Institute much to the chagrin of his brothers.

Earth's atmosphere is still radioactive. The oceans dark n foreboding. Any sign of life does not register, but it's there only mutated n deadly. With Nik's past association with the Institute, he has to figure out who is friend n who is foe. Along with breaking down the guards built by Nera's defenses in her struggle for survival during her childhood. Each subsequent book in the Phoenix series gets better n better. Can't wait to see what's next??

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## **mrs.s.m.oakley says**

### **A must read**

This book is a deeper book and although it's all about Nik & Darc..it's also goes deep into WHAT could happen IF we had a catastrophe war here on earth...As always Anna's plots are brilliant and with lots of action,and I can't wait for the next Phoenix's adventure.

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## Heather says

Wow! This is my favorite in this series, so far. This is Niklas and Nera's story. I had no idea how this would work between this couple. Nera Darc is one scary treasure hunter. I love her!

The Institute has hired a few of the best treasure hunters for an expedition to Earth, supposedly to gather as many artifacts as they might find. In fact Avril will risk everyone's lives in her quest to find the lost treasure of the Incas. This doesn't surprise me since I am always suspicious of perpetually perky people. Earth is a decimated world but not quite as dead as they believe.

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## Marlene says

Originally published at Reading Reality

This one definitely had its scary moments. It was totally awesome, but there were points where I was completely creeped out. All in the service of an excellent story. One that reminds me a bit of H.G. Wells' The Time Machine. It felt like I met the Morlocks, and they are us.

The Phoenix Adventures are all about the Phoenix Brothers, and occasionally their cousins, who are intergalactic treasure hunters (think Han Solo's time period combined with Indiana Jones' profession, and if you envision a young Harrison Ford it doesn't hurt – at all!)

So far, two of the Phoenix Brothers, Dathan and Zayn, have found their true loves, In At Star's End and In the Devil's Nebula but their youngest brother Niklas has been left out in the cold. He left his career as an astro-archaeologist behind when he discovered that the famous Galactic Institute of Historic Preservation is run by a bunch of cut-throat, corrupt smugglers. He decided to join his brothers and do honest treasure hunting instead. All ironies intended. The prestigious Institute is a gang of thieves, and he and his brothers, mercenary treasure hunters, are pretty much above board.

He's also too wrapped up in the mysterious treasure-hunter Nera Darc to find someone else he could love the way that his brothers do their wives. The way that Darc keeps showing up in their hunts and either stealing the prize right out from under them, or helping to save their lives (sometimes both), keeps Nik hoping for more.

Then the Institute, his former employers, recruit him for a treasure hunt of their own. When Darc joins the expedition, Nik can't resist. Not that he was resisting much in the first place. The expedition is going to be the first to go back to old Earth, our Earth, to see what artifacts might be left after centuries of nuclear winter.

The last expedition to even observe the cradle of humanity from space found only black seas, grey land and lethally high radiation. Earth has gone dark.

But as Nik's expedition discovers, not as dead as everyone thought. Just deadly enough that their expedition is going to leave more than a few bodies on its surface. The only question is whether one of those bodies will be Nik's, with Nera Darc right beside him.

Or has the corrupt Institute finally over-extended its filthy reach?

Escape Rating A-: For those of us who have been with this series from the beginning *At Star's End*, it's been a long and wild ride to get to this glorious finish.

And it was so worth it.

There have always been questions about what exactly happened with Nik and the Institute. He gave up the career he loved, but he didn't fight to right the wrongs he uncovered. That's not Nik. That's not any of the Phoenix Brothers. It was terrific to finally get the answers to exactly what went wrong. It was even better to have those wrongs finally come right.

There has also always been a question (or two or three dozen) about Nera Darc and why she finds it necessary to keep taunting the Phoenix Brothers and especially why she keeps teasing Nik. She obviously has some feelings beyond simple rivalry, but she never sticks around long enough for Nik to explore them. She's the one that keeps getting away, and he needs to figure out why or find a way to move past her. This expedition is Nik's chance to get to know Nera and discover if all that teasing can possibly lead to something more.

The revelations of Nera's background are heart-breaking. That she uses her past pain to help someone else in need is a wonderful part of the story, and shows how much she has healed. The fits and starts in her developing relationship with Nik show just how far she still needs to go.

But in the middle of the building romance, there is the expedition. While it is pretty clear from the beginning who is gunning for Nik (and who else is gunning for Nera), some of the ulterior motives were a surprise. Not that expedition leader Avril didn't come off as way too good to be true, but the depths of what she was covering up were deeper and more disgusting than I imagined.

The story of the expedition itself, both what they find and how they find it, chilled me to the bone. The portrait of the post-apocalyptic dark Earth is appropriately awful. The explanations of how things got to their final pass make all too much sense.

But what they see is frightening. The results of screwing it all up so very badly. At first, they believe that our world is dead. Then they discover that it is much, much worse. And also slightly better, but in a very twisted way.

The landscape is against them, and so is the extremely mutated wildlife. The oceans are black, and the land consists of black sand blast radii and deadly and mutated plant life, with even more mutated and deadly animal life. It's a world that has turned on itself and turns on anyone who tries to discover its secrets.

Their final attempt at wrenching out some of the planet's secrets says way more about them than it does about what they discover. The Institute attempts a rape of cultural misappropriation on an epic scale, and it finally bites them in the ass. Just because people seem primitive doesn't mean that they aren't way better at exploiting their environment than you are. It also doesn't mean that they aren't better people than you are. Technological superiority does not mean actual superiority.

The scenes of the surviving human population did remind me of the Morlocks in H.G. Wells *Time Machine*, and seemed all too plausible, where Wells did not.

And in this case, it wasn't just that the so-called natives had way more moral superiority than the Institute, it was that in this case they managed to prevail. Technological superiority turned out not to mean more civilized. Or even more human.

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## **Mei says**

Finally the story of Niklas and Nera! :)

I love this series, because it's so full of action that it's like reading a Marvel's comics!

I always knew that Nera had a thig for Niklas and he for her: it was so obvious!

I loved both of them!

She's such an uber-kick-ass heroine! But she's also very sweet in her own way towards Niklas! I appreciated that she wanted to protect him and that he accepted, even if somewhat reluctantly! ;)

He also wants to protect her too, but she doesn't make it easy!

A great roller-caster with zombies, mutant-giant-two-headed cats, burried tresures, radioactivity, etc.

Incredible situations too: where the worst happens, but they always manage to come out victorious - like in an Indy movie! LOL

Recommended for those who love easy action-packed SF romance with some hot scenes!

I'm looking forward to the next book!

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## **Kbird says**

Finally Nera and Nik's book!

I have been anticipating this love story for some time. We are not disappointed by the chemistry, it is fireworks.

I will say that the action got a little repetitive for me, but Nera proves to be a complete badass, and Nik is no slop himself.

There were some predictable 'shocks' at the end, that made it a bit too much of a happy ending.

Definitely read.

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## Ashley says

What a wild adventure for Nik and Nera. I'm glad that we finally got to see Earth and how it has adapted to the extreme radiation.

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## Dawn ♥ romance says

[zombie (hide spoiler)]

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## Kelly says

Man, I love the adventures the Phoenix family end up on. Space, distant planets, a dead earth rife with ruins and danger. Yesssssss!

Seriously, broken cities are my obsession. I just adore them. An entire broken planet complete with dangerous entities and the potential for backstabbing amongst the crew makes it EVEN BETTER. While Niklas doesn't have his brothers at his back on this adventure, he does have Nera. Well, once they strike a bargain to team up.

He doesn't really trust anybody else as far as he can throw them, but Nera...well, she's a different story. You know, because he's been fixated on her for quite some time.

Sexy rivalry, many. It works.

I'm reaching the point where I'm almost caught up with this series and that makes me a little sad. However, knowing I can go back and do a sweet reread (in order this time!) does take the sting out of it.

-Kelly @ Reading the Paranormal

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## Pet says

I'll be honest, I hated Nera, really really did not like the bitch in the other books she featured in, and I apologize to you Ms Hackett, I temporarily lost faith in your ability to write a story I would enjoy, temporarily... for like two seconds, microseconds even.

I love Nera, completely and utterly adore her, this is a woman who is not sweetness and light, she's the complete opposite of sweet. She's unapologetically a bitch and I like that about her, she's like the bitch inside us all that makes us stronger, that makes us stand up for ourselves and not always in a nice way, that makes us fight for what we deserve and need, and that demands without giving an inch of ground the right to be who we are without having to pretend just to fit in.

Nera has become my favorite female character of all time, right up there with Elena (Nalini Singh), Kate (Illona Andrews) and Modesty Blaise (Peter O'donnell). In fact if Anna Hackett ever decided to write a series with a strong female lead, Nera would do the job perfectly.

Oh and yes I love Niklas too, he's perfect for her.

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