

Official Document

Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation

Internal Records #GD-6754

Subject: Galactic Constitution Exhibit Gala Dinner

It is with great pleasure I confirm that the Galactic Constitution Exhibit Gala Dinner will go ahead on stardate 3006-957 at the flagship museum of the Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation: the New Metropolitan Museum on Davyn V.

The exhibit will showcase the five Galactic Constitution Codices, the historical manuscripts that form the basis of the Galactic Constitution and brought law and order to our galaxy. Guests will have the opportunity to see the three ancient and priceless Terran documents: the US Constitution, the Magna Carta, and the United Nations Charter, and the more modern Rendarian Codex and the Pact of Star'is.

During the gala, all five documents will be removed from their usual protective display cases, allowing our generous donors and VIP guests the privilege of getting up close and personal with these important and invaluable pieces of our history.

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Chapter One

She had him this time!

Captain Nissa Sander stood on the bridge of her Patrol ship, hands crossed at the small of her back, and watched the small runnership come into view.

“Lieutenant Allard, confirm her engines are powered down?” Nissa asked.

Ever efficient, the experienced Gavin Allard tapped at the console in front of him.

“Affirmative, Captain.”

“Got you this time, Phoenix,” Nissa muttered. “Ensign Gat’nar, open a comm line to the *Mercury*.”

“Open, Captain,” Bella Gat’nar replied. The young, female Modian’s tail swished behind her.

“*Mercury*, this is Captain Sander of the Patrol ship, *Resolute Freedom*. Prepare to be boarded.”

The viewscreen flared to life and the cockpit of the *Mercury* came into view. It was far smaller than the bridge of the *Freedom*, with only two seats—one for the captain and one for the co-pilot.

In the co-pilot’s chair sat a grizzled old man with a head of wild, gray hair. His eyes were two different colors: one blue and one green. He had a faint smile on his weathered face.

But it was the big man lounging in the captain’s chair who caught Nissa’s complete attention. *Justyn Phoenix*.

Deep-space explorer. Smuggler. Handsome scoundrel.

Her heart gave a traitorous kick in her chest, like it always did when she saw him. Damn thing never listened to her.

Didn’t mean she had to let its reaction show.

“Captain Smooth.” His voice was deep, with the tiniest hint of a laugh under it. “A pleasure to see you, as always.”

The ridiculous nickname grated, but Nissa summoned her self-control and let it slide.

He smiled. “You can board me any time you please.”

Nissa heard someone on her bridge snicker. Eyes narrowed, she turned and scanned her crew. Under her infamous “you don’t want to piss me off” glare, the snicker died. As one, her crew straightened in their seats and stared straight ahead. Except for her first officer, Commander Drayna Tellis. Nissa’s friend made no attempt to hide her smile.

Nissa turned back to the viewscreen and eyed the man she’d been trying for three years to arrest for smuggling. Ever since she’d been assigned to the ass end of nowhere out at the edge of the galaxy.

Life was just a big game to Phoenix. He was gorgeous, and he knew it. He had a big, tough, muscled body that even in his deceptively lazy sprawl, she knew could move like lightning. His hair had gone well beyond being in desperate need of a cut. It was a rich, thick brown with the slightest glint of gold running through it. Probably from sunning himself on some uncharted, fair-weather planet when he ran deep-space convoys with his brothers.

His face was on the rugged side of handsome with bright-silver eyes and a scar that cut through his left eyebrow and disappeared into his hairline. Every time he explained how he got it, the story changed and became wilder, more dramatic, and more incredulous.

Damn him for being everything Nissa found attractive in a man.

Well, except the criminal part.

She stiffened her spine. “Cut the crap, Phoenix.”

“Can I ask why an esteemed Patrol captain feels the need to board an honest freighter just going about its business?”

She barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Cut the good-ol’-boy routine as well. We intercepted intel that said you just picked up a shipment of Ryssian tobacco from uncharted space.” She smiled her best bitchy smile. “As you know, that tobacco is illegal.”

Phoenix leaned back in his chair. “You gonna search me?”

“Yes.”

“Then come aboard, Captain Smooth.” He opened his arms. It looked like he was gesturing at his lap. “I’m all yours.”

That snicker came again, but this time she ignored it. She wasn’t entirely sure she had full control of her temper.

“Commander Tellis, arrange teletransportation for myself and the security team to the cockpit of the *Mercury*.”

Drayna was silent for a second before she nodded. “Yes, Captain.”

Nissa appreciated that Drayna didn’t question her need to go to the *Mercury*. Her friend had given Nissa plenty of lectures on her obsession with locking up Justyn Phoenix.

Seconds later, a bright blue light enveloped Nissa, the teletransportation beam twisting and turning around her. Then she was staring at Justyn Phoenix in the flesh.

He was standing now and she hated that she had to look up at him. She was tall for a woman, and she wasn’t above using her height to her advantage on the job, but that wasn’t an option here.

He was wearing dark-brown trousers that molded over those long legs of his, a white shirt, and a navy vest, left open.

She caught the gaze of her head of security. “Commander Tryker, you and your team can start your search now.” The older man had been with Patrol a long time. He was experienced, capable, and dependable, she didn’t need to tell him not to miss anything.

“You got it, Captain.” His voice held a slight burr of his Tashian accent.

“Gus, give the commander a hand,” Phoenix said.

With a nod, the crusty old man headed off with Tryker and the security team.

Then it was just the two of them.

“I’m looking forward to slapping a set of electro-cuffs on you.”

Phoenix tilted his head and smiled. “Now, Captain, I always knew you had a little dominatrix under that starched uniform of yours.”

She felt a flood of heat race through her. She stepped forward until her polished, black boots hit his scarred, brown ones. “You are a criminal and I’ll enjoy seeing you in the brig.”

He reached out and ran a finger down the side of her neck, briefly touching the start of the scale pattern on her skin. “I bet when people see that sexy reptilian pattern, they think it might be rough. But it’s so smooth.”

She slapped his hand away. “Quit calling me that ridiculous name.”

“It suits you. That smooth, caramel-gold skin with those tantalizing patches of pattern. Your long, elegant neck and sexy, bare head. Your deep, oh-so-smoky voice.” He leaned down and she felt his warm breath against her face. “We both know your security team won’t find anything. Same as the last time you searched me. And the time before that.”

The scent of him ambushed her. Impossibly, he smelled like the snow-dusted trees on her homeworld of Thusia. Damn him for smelling so good.

“You also know I don’t hurt anyone, don’t steal from anyone. Why do you have such a burning need to lock me up, Captain?”

“It’s the law and it’s my job.”

“But out here on the edge, no one really cares much about laws and rules.” He waved a hand. “Things are more fluid.”

“The laws and rules are there to keep order. To keep people safe.” Goddess, Nissa could almost hear her father’s voice. Commodore Sander lived and breathed Patrol, even though he’d retired several years ago. “If we start bending or ignoring the rules, the edge will turn into a lawless, chaotic mess in less time than that speedy runnership of yours can cross the galactic border.” The thought of lawless chaos made her think of her brother. She felt a stab of pain and squelched it.

Justyn’s teeth were white against his tanned skin. “But Nissa, getting messy is so much fun.”

Her lips twitched. Goddess, he was the only person who could swing her from wanting to punch him to wanting to laugh in a matter of seconds. “Just stay out of the way while my team does their search.”

“Want to wager they won’t find anything?”

His confidence made her heart sink. She had the horrible feeling she’d be going away empty-handed and red-faced. Again. “No.”

“Come on. How about a case of that Gluk’sol wine you like to drink?”

She shook her head. Last time she’d been on Galaxy’s Edge—the closest and most popular space station on the edge—she’d let him buy her a drink. It was an unwritten rule on Galaxy’s Edge that you left your feuds and quarrels at the space dock.

In the space station’s bars and clubs, off-duty Patrol officers rubbed shoulders with smugglers, wealthy merchants drank with career thieves, and missionaries danced with pleasure workers. The damned smuggler had gotten her tipsy, made her laugh, and let his thigh brush against hers at the bar one too many times.

She was woman enough to admit she wondered what it would be like to have Justyn Phoenix spread out beneath her—naked and available for her hands to explore.

But she was a Patrol captain. An ambitious one who was good at her job. So she never let the fantasy go past that. She imagined what her father would have to say about Phoenix. She winced. None of it would be good.

“Captain Sander?”

Her comms specialist’s voice came through her nano-earpiece. Nissa kept her gaze locked with Phoenix’s silver one and touched her ear. “Go ahead, Ensign.”

“There’s a Pri-One transmission for you. From HQ.”

A priority one meant something big. “I’ll be there in a minute.” She heard the distinctive step of Patrol boots headed back into the cockpit. Tryker entered, his face dark. He shook his head.

Nissa sighed. “One of these days, Phoenix, I’m going to catch you with your pants down.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she cursed herself.

The laugh lines around his mouth deepened. “Oh, I hope so, Captain Smooth. I hope so.”

She gave his handsome face one last perusal, then looked at her team. “Back to the *Freedom*.” The teletrans flared and the last thing she saw were Justyn’s silver-gray eyes.

Back on the bridge, she strode toward her ops room off the bridge. “Ensign Gat’nar, put the Pri-One through to my private console.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Nissa pressed the palm plate beside the door. The ops room was actually two rooms—the larger main room with a glossy conference table, and an adjoining room that was her private office. She loved that her office had a large, round window that gave a stunning view of space. Something inside her eased. The vista of the endless black—covered in a sprinkle of stars—never failed to speak to something in her. As she rounded her desk, she caught sight of the very back of Phoenix’s runnership. Her gaze narrowed on the engine intakes. If she wasn’t mistaken, he had some not-strictly-legal modifications.

She shook her head. Justyn Phoenix wasn’t her priority right now.

Dropping into her chair, she touched the screen built into her desk. Admiral Carmel DeRuyter’s stern face filled the screen, her ash-blonde hair a sleek bell surrounding features untouched by the popular anti-aging treatments. DeRuyter had been a mentor to Nissa since her days in the Galactic Security Services Academy. Nissa respected the older woman, who’d come through the Quadrant Wars with a slew of commendations, and was tougher than most sitting on the GSS Council. Most of all, DeRuyter was willing to do anything to protect the galaxy.

“Ma’am. What can I do for you?”

“It’s good to see you, Nissa. I wish I was calling under better circumstances. We have a situation and you’re the closest ship we have.”

Nissa waited for the woman to continue, anticipation sending a flare through her blood.

“Exactly seven hours ago, the US Constitution document was stolen from the Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation.”

“What?” Nissa sat forward in her seat. “*The US Constitution? One of the five Galactic Constitution Codices?*” It was one of the most revered manuscripts in the galaxy, used as a foundation for the Galactic Constitution. And it was priceless.

“Unfortunately, yes,” the admiral said.

“Do you know who took it?”

“We have some partial intel. Galactic Intelligence managed to intercept a transmission, but they only got a short section. We don’t know who stole it or why, but we know they’ve since passed it off to a gridrunner named Hewett Kenth.”

A gridrunner. A small transporter, not unlike Phoenix, who moved all manner of things around the galaxy. Usually legal cargo, but everyone knew that gridrunners were known to go off-grid and run all kinds of contraband.

Hewett Kenth was a familiar name. He ran through the Exodus quadrant in his runnership, the *Trader’s Dart*, and kept a small base at Galaxy’s Edge. She’d arrested him three times in the past...no, wait a minute, four. “I know Kenth. He’s strictly small-time. I can’t see him getting involved with something like this.”

“Well, he must have decided to join the big leagues. He’s to rendezvous with someone at Galaxy’s Edge Space Station and hand over the artifact.” DeRuyter’s blue eyes glittered. “I want you to get it back and bring in everyone involved.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

DeRuyter smiled. “Pull this off, Captain, and I can finally arrange a transfer back to one of the central quadrants in your near future.”

Nissa straightened. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Update me regularly.” The screen went black.

Nissa stood. This was it. Her chance to make her mark, prove herself to father, and finally get a choice command far away from the lawless edge of the galaxy.

She couldn't fail.

She strode onto the bridge. "Get the interstellar drives up. We have a priceless artifact to recover."