

Official Document

Galactic Institute of Historical Preservation

Acquisitions Planning Memo #001-78-1163

Subject: Future expeditions beyond the galaxy's edge

To the Future Expeditions Team:

Since the discovery of the Terran starship wreck of the *Nero* by Justyn and Nissa Phoenix, well beyond the galaxy's known edge, I am ordering a detailed analysis of whether the Institute should invest in expeditions in this area.

Terran colonists evidently made it out this far, so it is possible other wrecks of great historical importance could be in the area of the *Nero*'s last resting place.

Please prepare a detailed holo-presentation for next week's Acquisitions meeting with recommendations on search areas, logistics plans, and cost estimates.

Regards,

Dr. Niklas Phoenix

Director of Acquisitions

Chapter One

It was the prettiest thing she'd seen the entire trip.

Aurina Phoenix touched the controls of her small scoutship and whizzed past a small, rocky moon. Her gaze was on the large gas giant ahead. It was covered in stunning bands of blues and purples. She smiled. *Beautiful.*

But her destination was beyond the planet. She spotted the deep-space convoy, and her smile widened. It was a rag-tag line of starships of all shapes and sizes. A group heading off into uncharted space, pitting themselves against the unknown in the hope of finding a new life.

She zoomed closer and adjusted the *Ariel's* course to the largest ship at the head of the convoy.

The *Sky Nomad*. Home.

Some might argue that a starship couldn't be considered home, but for Aurina, that was definitely the case. It was certainly a world away from what passed as "home" during her childhood. Her fingers stilled on the controls. Yep, she'd come a long way from the overcrowded, dirty manufacturing world where she'd been born.

As the deep-space scout for the Phoenix Convoy, she got to see some incredible things. On every trip she discovered something new. Most people would think she had the best damn job in the galaxy. Or technically, out of the galaxy, since they were beyond the galaxy's edge.

They'd be right.

She figured life didn't get any better.

So why, despite being happy to see her brothers, did she feel like something was...missing?

Aurina wrinkled her nose and shook off the melancholy feeling. She had an interesting job she was good at, a bank account filled with e-creds, and the opportunity to frequently indulge her little obsession—collecting shiny, sparkly gemstones.

Okay, so she didn't get to wear her gorgeous jewels much out here in the middle of space. She wiggled her toes in her practical boots and glanced down at her dark-blue flight suit. It didn't matter, she loved collecting polished stones and shiny gems. Some she found herself on planets out here in the middle of nowhere, and others she bartered for ferociously. After her next bonus,

when they got back to the Galaxy's Edge space station, she was nabbing herself a Lumina sapphire she'd spotted in the station's jewelry shop on her last stop.

"*Ariel*, I've opened the hangar bay door for you." The smoky, feminine voice filled the cockpit. "Welcome back."

Aurina adjusted her controls, aiming the *Ariel* for the hangar bay on the *Sky Nomad*. She could see the door was open, and caught a shimmer of the purple huma-field that covered the entrance—keeping the atmosphere in the ship, but allowing solid objects to pass through.

"Thanks, Nissa."

Nissa was the *Sky Nomad*'s pilot and captain. She was also the wife of the youngest of Aurina's brothers, Justyn. "Did I miss anything while I was away?"

"Only Dare reprimanding one convoy idiot who decided to head off on a little joy ride to see a volcanic world up close and personal." Nissa snorted. "Your big bro can be *scary*."

Yes, he could. Dare Phoenix, Convoy Master extraordinaire, had control down to a fine art, especially when it came to obeying the convoy rules. *His* rules. Anyone who stepped out of line was swiftly reprimanded. Out here, they all depended on each other for their survival, and one wrong move could spell disaster.

"Sorry I missed it. Okay, I'm on approach now."

"Aurina, you're coming in too fast." This voice was deep, masculine, and terse.

Aurina rolled her eyes. Rynan, her middle brother, was in charge of convoy security. She liked coming in a little fast, while Ry liked everyone to follow his safety rules to the letter. He was all about minimizing risk. Even in his personal life. He never let the same woman spend more than one night in his bed, and never let emotions get in the way.

"I hear you, Ry."

"So why aren't you slowing down?"

"You're breaking up a bit there. Say again." She grinned. He really hated when she did that. She touched the controls and did a slight course correction.

She whizzed inside, activated the reverse thrusters, and slowly touched down in her usual spot. Well away from Rynan's prized security cutter, the *Pathfinder*. Stars help her if she ever scratched his pride and joy.

The bay also held several shuttles, Justyn's new runnership, the *Smooth Trader*, and a few personal ships owned by people who had taken passage aboard the *Sky Nomad* for the convoy trip.

She unstrapped her harness, and pushed out of the cockpit. She loved her little ship, she liked flying, but she also liked to stretch her legs. Occasionally, she felt a twinge of claustrophobia. Nothing drastic, just that buried urge to breathe fresh air, see the sky overhead, and have space around her. She certainly hadn't had much of it on the overpopulated Vashon V where she'd grown up. She and her mother had lived in a tiny, shitty box of an apartment. The streets had been teeming with people just like them—too busy working in the factories to enjoy life, and only making enough to scrape by.

Aurina slapped a hand against the electronic lock to open the ship door. She hurried out, breathed in a lungful of recycled air, and left her crappy memories behind. The past was the past, and she'd left it in the dust years ago.

Rynan was waiting for her, arms crossed over his broad chest. He was fit, muscular, with a rugged face, dark hair, and a scowl. "There is nothing wrong with your comms. You can't take risks when you land. You not only risk yourself, but the lives of everyone aboard—"

Aurina smiled and sashayed up to him. She smacked a kiss to his cheek. "Missed you, too."
"Aurina—"

"Ry, how many times have I landed the *Ariel* in here?"

His scowl deepened. "I don't have the precise number. Thousands."

"How many times have I come in too fast?"

He heaved out a breath. "Thousands."

She patted his muscled bicep. "See my point?"

"Yes, but I still don't like it." He grabbed her strawberry-blonde braid and tugged it.

That was Ry's way of saying *hi, love you, and you're forgiven*. He wasn't a man of many words. "Come on." She looped her arm through his and started out of the hangar. "I need to debrief you guys, then I want a shower." She sniffed herself. "I smell like I've been dancing all night in a sauna."

"You smell fine."

Men. "Ha, you would say that." Her face turned serious. "I do need to head back out shortly, though."

“You just got back.”

“I didn’t make it as far as I wanted, and I know we need a planet to land on to rest and take on supplies. I haven’t found one yet, but a couple of possibilities did show up on long-range scans. I want to get back there and take a better look.”

“Can’t keep you grounded for long, can we?”

She winked at him. “Too much to see, my brother. Why would I want to be stuck in one place?”

“Maybe because you find ship-board life a little confining. You like rocks and animals and plants. The kinds of things you don’t find on a starship.”

She frowned. Damn, the man was too perceptive sometimes. “I love being a part of the convoy.”

He patted her arm. “I never said you didn’t. Some people are made for life in deep space, for others, it’s just a short-term adventure. Besides, someday, some guy is going to finally get a good grip on you...and I don’t mean those young, pretty boys you occasionally play with at the space stations. Someone you can’t wriggle away from with a wink and that beautiful smile of yours.”

Aurina tossed her braid over her shoulder and shook her head. “That will never happen. I don’t need some man bossing me around, getting me knocked up, then swaggering off to his next conquest.”

They turned into the corridor heading to the bridge.

Ry was quiet for a moment. “You know it isn’t always like that. Look at Justyn and Nissa.”

Yes, those two were completely in love and they...fit. Justyn clearly respected Nissa’s skills as a captain and pilot. They seemed to give each other the support the other needed to flourish. It was the first time she’d seen a relationship like that. Growing up, she’d seen worn-out women like her mother, juggling work, raising children, and taking care of their homes, while the men headed off for drinks at the pub, or who just took off and never came back. Nope, Justyn and Nissa were the exception to the rule.

The uncomfortable sensation in her gut made her voice sharp. “This is all impossibly rich coming from you. You are hardly the person I’d listen to for relationship advice.”

Rynan grunted.

“Maybe some woman will sweep you off your feet and convince you that you want to keep her around for good?”

Another grunt.

Aurina knew that was Ry's "not going anywhere near that subject" response.

"Or maybe you'll see what makes you happy is right under your nose."

Ry blinked, staring down at her with his silver-gray gaze.

The man was crazy smart, but he could be obtuse when it suited him. She shook her head.

"Here we are." The double doors to the bridge slid open with a hiss, and she strode inside.

The *Sky Nomad* was a large ship, but it didn't require a huge crew. Her brothers had decked it out with some of the best tech available. As a result, the spacious bridge was manned only by a small group, and in the center of that, seated in the captain's chair, sat Nissa Phoenix—formerly Captain Nissa Sander of the Galactic Security Services Patrol. She'd spent several years patrolling the galaxy's edge, keeping law and order, and usually chasing Justyn's smuggling ass around. She'd never caught him, but eventually, after years of being in love with her, he'd caught *her*.

Now, she was captain of the *Sky Nomad*, which had freed Dare up to be an even bossier convoy master.

Nissa swiveled and smiled. She had some reptilian ancestry, which was displayed in patches of bronze, diamond-scale patterns on her forehead and cheekbones, and a bald head. Her eyes were yellow, with an elongated black pupil. "Welcome home."

Aurina lifted a hand. The rest of the bridge crew waved and called out greetings.

Justyn appeared, standing at his wife's shoulder. "How'd it go? Find any profitable worlds or new civilizations to trade with?"

"Not this trip." She watched Justyn place a hand on Nissa's shoulder, his fingers brushing the side of her neck. Such a small move, a tiny thing, but as Nissa leaned into his touch, Aurina realized it was so much more.

A hand descended on the back of her neck and squeezed. Not that same intimate touch, but comforting all the same. She tilted her head, and looked up at her oldest brother, Dare.

"Glad you're back," he said, voice deep.

Dare was your typical tall, dark, and far-too-handsome man. He left his dark hair long, framing his fallen-angel face. Add in his mercury-silver eyes, and he never lacked for female companionship.

“Glad to be back,” she said. “But not for long. I still haven’t found a habitable rest stop. Got a couple of possibilities to check out, but I needed to refuel. Me and the *Ariel*.”

He nodded. “Anything else we need to know?”

“Yes. I found a little nest of space pirates. Tech’s old, but they looked relatively well organized.”

“Nissa, call up the maps, please,” Dare said.

“On it.” Nissa tapped on the screen attached to her chair.

The air in front of them filled with a three-dimensional hologram display of their star maps. Aurina took the small, thin glove Dare handed her, and once it was on, she waved her hand through the maps, moving to the location she wanted. “Here. Near this gas giant. The pirates are hidden on the third moon.”

Dare crossed his arms over his chest, and Rynan stood beside him, in much the same pose.

Aurina stared at them for a second. Handsome devils, all three of them. They’d inherited their father’s build and looks. They were only her half-brothers, but none of them had ever bothered with the distinction. Instead, they’d welcomed her with those strong arms of theirs. After her mother’s death, she’d been an angry, rebellious twenty-something, who’d gone gunning for the siblings she’d never known.

She’d assumed they’d lived the charmed life she’d been denied after Flynt Phoenix had spent a few nights with her mother, and left her alone and pregnant.

Instead, Aurina had found out that Flynt Phoenix had been a horrible father, and had abandoned his sons as well. Worst of all, they’d ended up with a stepfather who made Flynt seem like Parent of the Year. They rarely talked about it, but she knew that compared to what Dare, Rynan, and Justyn had suffered, she might have gotten the best deal after all.

She cleared her throat. “Ah, I’ve also noted a few possible planets and moons with extensive mineral resources. No life forms, and most are uninhabitable.”

Dare’s lips twitched. “For your future mining enterprise?”

“Yes.” She made no secret of her obsession with geology and shiny rocks. She was keeping a great little record of the planets they’d passed or visited where she could one day come back and start mining. Phoenix Resources had a nice ring to it. “Okay, hang on while I tap into the *Ariel*’s comp system and download the rest of my data.”

She swiped her hands through the air, pulling up the correct commands.

“There. I’ve put in the locations of the four possible rest-stop worlds I’m going to investigate.” She pulled off the glove and handed it back to Dare. “But first, I need fuel for the *Ariel*, then food and a shower for me.”

Justyn grinned at her. “I’ll take care of your ship...if you give me one of those Maltan emeralds you hoard away in the safe in your cabin.”

She raised a brow. “Do you know how much they’re worth? More than you can afford, you scruffy smuggler.”

“I’m not a smuggler anymore, remember? I’m a legitimate trader.”

At least he didn’t wince when he said that now. “You can have a Sulphran diamond.”

“Done.” His grin was huge. “They match the color of Nissa’s eyes.”

It was then that Aurina realized her smuggler/trader brother had just scammed her. “You wanted the diamond all along!”

He winked. “A good trader never gives the game away.”

Rogue. “Okay, I’m off to my quarters.”

Aurina traveled down several decks, heading to her cabin. She was going to override the water-saving timer on the shower and take a long one. She’d earned it. The damn thing was mostly mist anyway.

She rounded a corner and nearly mowed down a tiny body. “Hey there.” She grabbed the small girl’s shoulders to steady her.

“Hi, Aurina.”

The girl, about eight years old, had a wide grin on her face. She had skin the color of deep space, eyes that glowed green like the emerald Justyn had said he wanted, and adorable hair that was all corkscrew curls. “What are you doing down here, Tamra?”

The girl’s grin morphed into an annoyed frown. “I’m playing hide-and-seek with Rock. But I can’t find him. He’s too big and he always wins.”

Aurina crouched down to the girl’s level. “It isn’t about size or age, sweetheart. You have special skills that he doesn’t. You just have to use them to find him.”

The girl’s face screwed up as she pondered that. “Like what special skills?”

“Well, you know I’m a scout, right?”

The girl nodded.

“So, I use my observation skills to be a really good scout. You have to look all around and notice the things that other people miss.”

“Okay,” the girl said slowly. She glanced down the hall. “But I don’t see anything, and I don’t see Rock.”

Aurina tapped the girl’s nose. “Don’t use your eyes. Everyone does that. Close them and concentrate.”

Tamra’s big eyes closed.

“Take a deep breath. Notice anything now?”

“It’s a bit cold in here.”

Aurina laughed. “So it is. Dare likes to keep it cool. What else?”

“I can smell you.” Her nose wrinkled. “You smell like daddy does after he’s been working at the factory.”

Sweaty, in other words. Aurina knew Tamra’s parents were from the impoverished manufacturing world of Mancha. Not so different from her homeworld. Tamra’s father was heavily enhanced to make him better at factory work—metallic arms to make him stronger and faster. Knowing their kids were destined for the same, hard menial work and a life of enhancements to keep up with other workers, they’d saved up for passage on the Phoenix Convoy. Hoping for a better life somewhere else.

“What else do you smell?” Aurina asked.

“Flowers.”

The last of Aurina’s perfume. “Anything else?”

“Loxian candy.”

She tapped the girl’s nose again, and Tamra opened her eyes. “And who likes to eat Loxian candy?”

“Rock!”

The girl spun, sniffed, and then raced over to a storage locker built into the wall. She yanked it open, and her ten-year-old brother tumbled out. “Found you!”

“Aurina helped you,” Rock said. “That’s cheating!”

“She didn’t. I *smelled* you. I have special skills.”

Aurina stood and ruffled both the kids' hair. "I think you might find it a bit harder to hide from her next time. Now, your mother is probably looking for you both. Go." She shooed them off, and they waved and giggled as they ran down the corridor.

As they disappeared from view, her smile dissolved. She'd never played like that as a child. There hadn't been time. Her mother had always been working, doing what she could to support them. They'd been really poor. Her mother had worked hard—so hard—to ensure they never went hungry and had clothes. When Aurina had been old enough, she'd had a part-time job as well. There'd been nothing for anything extra or fun. No paints, no pretty dresses, no pretty, shiny things the girls from the wealthier parts of the city had worn in their ears and around their necks. Instead, Aurina had collected rocks she found outside and polished them until they'd shined. They'd been her toys.

Now, she had real gems—invaluable rocks and jewels.

She opened the door to her cabin. Inside, the lights clicked on, and she spotted her bowl of polished rocks and her row of potted plants. They were drooping a little, because no matter what she did, they just didn't thrive in the ship's ventilation. One day she was going to have a garden, but for now, she was going to grab that long shower, then head out again in her ship.

Her life was good, and if she felt vague little niggles of dissatisfaction, she was just going to ignore them.