



Official Document

Office of the Prime - Axton Saros - Planet of Centax

Centax Record #99-B54-9943D

Subject: Centax Museum Grand Reopening

Citizens of Centax,

It is with great delight that I announce the reopening of the Centax Museum in one week's time. Since the events of the coup several months ago—that saw the museum ransacked and damaged—the ruling council has worked diligently to have the museum rebuilt, its treasures recovered, and improved security measures installed.

As has already been reported, General Xander Saros, head of Centax Security, single-handedly defeated the Rahl mercenaries responsible for attacking Centax and hunted our planet's most prized artifact, the Antikythera, across the galaxy in order to recover it. We are forever in his debt. The ancient Terran relic will be the showpiece of the museum's refurbished displays.

Unfortunately, some relics are still missing, including the invaluable Codex Da Vinci—a stunning collection of pages by the ancient Terran innovator, Leonardo da Vinci. Rest assured, I am doing everything in my power to recover the Codex to ensure the successful reopening of our great museum.

Chapter One

“We need to get the Codex Da Vinci back. *Now.*”

“I know, Axton. We’re working on it.”

Axton Saros stood at the huge windows in his office, high atop his planet’s Capitol Building, his hands in the pockets of his suit pants. He didn’t need his enhanced cyborg senses to hear the frustration in his brother’s voice.

It was strange enough to actually *hear* emotion in Xander’s voice. Until a few months ago, Xander Saros—the deadliest cyborg in Centax Security—had never shown any emotion and hardly felt at all.

Axton studied his brother’s reflection in the polished synth-glass. There was no mistaking the fact they were brothers. Xander might have been a few inches taller with a heavily-muscled body thanks to his intensive CenSec training, but they both had dark hair and the same green-gold eyes. Xander was more heavily enhanced than Axton, though. The circular silver implant at his brother’s temple might be the only one visible, but there were many, many more.

“You have an entire security team of efficient, intelligent CenSecs,” Axton said. “How come they haven’t discovered what happened to the Codex yet?”

The corners of Xander’s lips tipped upward for a brief second. “Because they’re better at killing things than being treasure hunters. Myself, excluded, of course.”

By the creator, seeing Xander almost-smile was still a shock. And just yesterday, Axton had heard him laugh. Amazing to believe that one tiny woman had brought about so much change. Axton turned. “Xander, did you just make a joke?”

“Of course not.” Xander’s voice was deadpan. “We do have a lead on the Codex.”

Straight to the point. Xander wouldn’t know polite chitchat if it zapped him and beat him over his enhanced head. “Go on.”

“We’ve confirmed the Rahl took it when they raided the Centax Museum. And we know they never got it off-planet.”

The Rahl. Axton’s hands clenched. The beast-like mercenaries who’d help lead the coup on Centax. Dark memories rose but he ruthlessly shoved them away. “The Centax Museum’s grand

reopening is in one week. *One week.* I need the Codex Da Vinci back in its display by then.” It was vital to helping the planet recover and find stability again.

“Won’t everyone’s focus will be on the Antikythera?” Xander asked.

“Yes. And the new, improved vault to keep it in.” The ancient Terran artifact was revered by all Centaxians. Part of the universe’s first computer, found rusted under a Terran sea, it had been ancient when Earth was still a thriving planet undestroyed by war. Now the Antikythera was priceless.

It was also a symbol of the leader of Centax. Without it, Axton and the ruling council lost their right to rule. Which was why the Rahl had whisked it away. Xander had gone on a wild adventure, ending on a rogue planet, in order to get it back.

Xander eyes glowed a faint neon green, a sign he was accessing his cyborg systems. “I was informed that the ruling council had also updated the laws around the Antikythera.”

“Yes, thank the Creator.” Axton gripped the back of his desk chair. “Now it’s simply an artifact to be admired, not something that can used against us.” He shook his head, his shoulders sagging a little. “I should have changed that outdated law years ago.”

“Not your fault. The ruling council never thought of it either.”

Yes, but he was the Prime. If someone was to blame, it was him. “The focus will be on the Antikythera but the empty case beside it is still a blow.” He threw his arms wide. “I need the Codex found.”

Moving his arms so quickly made pain flare through his shoulder and he wasn’t fast enough to hide his wince. Xander’s gaze narrowed. Of course, it was too much to ask that his brother would miss it.

During the coup, Axton had been captured and tortured, and while the Centaxian doctors had healed all his other wounds, having his shoulder dislocated over and over again had left him with permanent damage. Regen therapy was helping, but they wanted him to consider replacing it with a mechanical one.

“How’s your shoulder?” Xander asked.

“Fine,” Axton bit out. He didn’t have the time for surgery and recuperation right now. Not with a planet to rebuild. “So, we know the Codex is still on Centax.” That was good. “Any ideas on its exact location?”

There was a movement near the doorway and the second CenSec in the room answered in a cool, composed voice. “No. But interrogation of Rahl prisoners has confirmed that it’s stashed here in Haxx and that the mercenary leader, Cran, showed a special interest in it.”

Axton felt that usual one-two punch to his gut. Something about Commander Xenia Alexander—Xander’s second-in-command and the second most deadly CenSec on the planet—set Axton’s blood humming.

She was hard to miss. Tall, toned, athletic, with a fall of vibrant red hair she always kept pulled back in a tight ponytail. The severe hairstyle accented a face that was more interesting than beautiful.

She was all spit and polish in her black CenSec uniform, only broken by a small silver insignia in the shape of a mechanical cog on her shoulder. Her deep blue eyes regarded him with cool reserve. A silver metallic implant arched over her left eye.

No, the pull toward her wasn’t just attraction. It was a connection born in a dark cell months before.

She’d been the one to rescue him from the Rahl.

He’d been weak, disoriented and covered in filth and blood. And the pain had gone beyond anything his cyborg systems could block. His memories were still a bit foggy, but he remembered her soothing murmurs, her arms around him, her hot tears on his skin.

He looked at her now and saw no sign of any emotion. Sometimes he wondered if he’d imagined those moments.

He’d read her file and knew there were many more implants under the uniform. Centax prized the enhancements and implants that made them stronger, smarter and faster. Axton himself had several, but CenSecs were so enhanced that it blocked most of their capacity to feel.

That’s why Axton, and everybody else on the planet, had been beyond shocked when Xander had gone and fallen in love with Malin Phoenix, the spunky little salvage mechanic who’d helped him save Centax from the coup.

If Xander could feel, then it was possible Xenia could too. Axton *knew* that she wasn’t the cold, blank CenSec everyone believed her to be.

She was a mystery he desperately wanted to uncover.

But as he turned back to the window, staring out across his planet's capital city, Haxx, guilt swamped him. Here he was thinking about his own wants and desires and not his planet.

At a glance, the city looked normal—tall spires spearing into the sky to tapered points. In between the spires were graceful, sprawling, white buildings with metallic domed roofs. These were the design academies that Centax was renowned for. They housed Centax's finest scientists and engineers who designed some of the galaxy's best technology—computer systems, starships, biological enhancements.

But on closer inspection, it was easy to see that some of the buildings were charred by fire or in ruin from the explosions that had rocked Haxx during the attack. An anti-grav crane hovered in the air above the dome of the Xeon Academy of Starship Design, lowering new metal sheets into place.

Axton's shoulder throbbed, a physical reminder of his failure. He'd missed the signs that Rexton Dax, a high-ranked member of the ruling council, was about to launch devastation. And then Axton had been locked up, unable to fight back, useless.

There was still a long way to go to heal the damage done by Dax and the Rahl. Axton had to win back the trust of his people. Make things right. And he needed to start with finding the Codex. He couldn't let his desire for Xenia interfere with that.

Xander's face was impassive, but he was watching Axton carefully. Xenia was staring straight ahead, the perfect CenSec.

Codex, Axton. "Any chance the Rahl will try to return and retrieve the Codex?"

Xenia didn't blink or move a muscle. "The probability is low. They are leaderless and defeated. It will take them some time to rebuild."

"Xander, I need you to assign someone to work on hunting the Codex exclusively. Someone good."

To Axton, the Codex had become more than just a valuable artifact or piece of history. It had become a symbol of rebuilding their planet. A symbol of Axton making things right again.

"Consider it done," Xander said.

Axton glanced at his timepiece. "I have a meeting with the council." He grabbed his suit jacket and as he shrugged it on, his shoulder throbbed. This time he made sure not to let the pain show. "Walk with me."

As he left the office, the two CenSecs flanked him.

“You’re a fool to ignore your injury.” Xenia’s icy voice whipped at Axton.

He jerked to a halt. Obviously he hadn’t hidden it as well as he’d thought. “Excuse me?”

“You clearly still have pain—”

He faced her. “I’m fine.”

She stepped forward, so close her body was almost brushing his. “It’s irresponsible. You’re the Prime, you should—”

“Yes, I’m the Prime, so I make the decisions. Not you.”

“Your safety and health is of primary importance. You shouldn’t risk yourself.” Her cheeks held the faintest flush and her eyes had darkened.

By the Creator, she was gorgeous. His hands flexed in an effort not to touch her.

Xander cleared this throat. “Stand down, Xenia. Axton’s treating the injury, maybe not resting it as much as his doctors would like, but he’s not threatening his life.”

Axton and Xenia both swiveled. The brush of her arm against his made his skin burn.

“If we could get back to the discussion on the hunt for the Codex,” Xander said, his voice dry.

Axton waved a hand. “Assign who you think can get the job done by the end of the week.”

“I will. I suggest a CenSec who’ll work closely with you. Every minute of the day and night, if that’s what it takes.”

Axton’s gut tightened. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear—

Xander tilted his head at his second. “Xenia, I’m assigning you as primary on the Codex retrieval.”

Xenia jerked. “Sir, I’m in the middle of training the new recruits—”

“It’s an order,” Xander added in a quiet voice that brooked zero argument.

She straightened. “Yes, sir.”

Axton was still stuck on every minute of every day and night. “No. I’m not—”

“You want the Codex back? As soon as possible?”

Axton ground his teeth together. Yes, he needed the Codex but he didn’t need the incredibly tempting distraction of Xenia around him right now.

“Fine. Commander Alexander can work in my office. Now, I have a meeting to attend.”

Xenia sat at the polished, black conference table in the Prime's office, her fingers flying across the computer screen built into the table's glossy surface. She was working so fast, her hands were a blur.

She was running searches and poring through the e-records they'd confiscated from the Rahl. And through the interrogation records of their Rahl prisoners. She swiped again at the glowing screen. So far she hadn't found any mention of where they might have stashed the Codex.

She needed to achieve her objective and find the artifact. Fast.

Because all she seemed to be able to think about was Axton Saros.

With her enhanced senses, she easily picked up his scent in the office. Something crisp and citrusy. She glanced at his sleek desk, imagined him sitting there, lounging in the black leather chair, his arrestingly handsome face staring out across the city.

No, no she *wasn't* thinking about him. She shook her head. That was a dangerous path.

Involuntarily, her thoughts turned to Xander and Malin Phoenix, and Xenia almost groaned. That was almost as bad. The two of them touching, kissing, smiling...Xenia gripped the edge of the table. He was so obviously in love with the salvage mechanic. And Malin loved him right back.

Xander was Xenia's boss but also her friend. She was so happy for him, but seeing his happiness...it just underscored everything she could never have.

Realizing the table was creaking under her increased strength, Xenia forced herself to relax. She wished she could fire up her emotional filters and block all these chaotic feelings like her fellow CenSecs. Centax Security cyborgs weren't supposed to feel jealousy. They weren't supposed to feel at all.

But it was her little secret...her filters had never worked properly. She felt. She'd learned to hide it, especially from the Security doctors. She really didn't want them cutting and poking more than they already did. Or worse, kicking her out.

Xenia had moved through the ranks to become Xander's second-in-command through sheer will and grit. And by learning to hide every drop of emotion behind a perfectly composed face.

She had to be the perfect CenSec.

It was all she had. All she would ever have.

The office door opened soundlessly and Axton Saros strode in. Her gaze collided with green-gold eyes.

She almost jolted. He was as tall as his brother but leaner, although by no means soft. He had the body of a runner or a swimmer. His face made him the darling of all the news and gossip channels in the quadrant. Square jaw, regal cheekbones, sleek silver implant at his temple and stunning eyes of concentric rings of green and gold. It was a face that inspired trust and obedience—perfect for leading a planet.

She thought his features looked sharper now, harder than before the coup. She'd never forget opening that cell door and seeing the vibrant, charismatic man chained to the floor, his bare chest streaked with blood, his shoulder dislocated and swollen, and his face beaten black. And still he stared up at her with defiance in his eyes.

He'd been back at work only a few hours later. Helping to rebuild the planet.

Everything about Axton tore through Xenia's barely functioning emotional filters like a laser cutter through steel.

She stood, her hands behind her back, staring over his shoulder.

"Sit down. You don't have to jump up every time I enter a room." He pulled off his suit jacket. "Did you find anything?"

She sat, her gaze drawn to the way his white shirt contrasted with his dark-bronze skin and how his trousers pulled tight over his—

Xenia! "Not yet."

"The clock's ticking," he said.

She stiffened. "I *will* find it."

He held up his hands. "I don't doubt your abilities, Xenia. In fact, I respect the hell out of them."

She blinked and watched him warily as he stalked closer.

"Show me what you do have."

She nodded. He stood over her shoulder as she showed him the documents on the screen. Outlined the things she'd ruled out. He made a few humming noises in his throat. But all she could think about was the fact that he smelled so good.

He reached forward to point at the screen. "I think we can discount this."

He was in her space, so close she could feel the heat of him. She kept her face blank, her hands curled together in her lap. This insanity would pass. It had to.

“Do you ever wear this down?” He fingered a strand of her hair.

She jerked her head to the side and looked back at him. “No touching.”

His gaze sharpened on her. “Why?”

“Because.”

“Not a very precise answer for a CenSec.”

“I don’t want you touching me.”

He leaned down until his face was a whisper away from hers. “Really? Why do I get the impression you’re lying to me?”

“Prime Saros.” The office computer’s modulated voice filled the room. “Your next appointment is here.”

“Thank you.” He tilted his head and focused back on Xenia. “What’s your next step in the investigation?”

“I’m going to head out and take a look at the location where the Rahl had their base here in Haxx.” And get out of your office and away from you.

“Great. Computer, reschedule my appointment.” Axton looked at Xenia. “I’m coming with you.”

“No, I don’t—”

“I’m. Coming.”

Xenia gritted her teeth. “Fine.”