



**ANNA
HACKETT**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE PHOENIX ADVENTURES

~ Official Document ~

Galaxy's Edge Space Station
Advertisement #AD-15309455
Subject: Phoenix Deep-Space Convoy

The Phoenix Deep-Space Convoy is pleased to announce that there are still some spaces left on the latest convoy heading into uncharted space! This convoy is leaving in just a few days, and is a short convoy with the major stop being the nearby volcanic world of Naahlaw. Come and cross beyond the galaxy's edge to visit new worlds, explore new cultures, and trade new goods.

If you're looking for adventure, a new start, or a new planet to call home, then join the talented crew with years of experience:

- Convoy Master Dare Phoenix has run hundreds of successful convoys in dangerous space.
- The convoy's flagship, the *Sky Nomad*, is captained by Captain Nissa Phoenix—a former GSS Patrol captain.
- Rynan Phoenix ensures the convoy's security and health, with an experienced security team.

- Justyn Phoenix, a veteran trader, is also on hand, to facilitate trade agreements for any out-of-galaxy goods brought back into galactic space.
- Dakota Phoenix is the convoy's Antiquities Curator and Dealer and runs a ship-board museum and gallery.

You'll be in capable hands, so don't delay—book today!

Chapter One

“You little—”

His finger slipped off the multitool and it flew out of his hand, clattering to the floor, and taking some of his skin with it.

Rynan Phoenix cursed and wrapped his bleeding finger in a rag. He stared at his workbench and the weapon he’d been working on. It was one of the laser rifles from the security armory. Just a few months ago, he would have pulled it apart, upgraded it, and put it back together in just minutes.

Now...

Cursing again, he kicked the bench. Things crashed to the floor, but thankfully, this little corner of the maintenance bay on the *Sky Nomad*—the ship he owned with his brothers—was empty.

Ry pressed his hands to the back of his neck, trying to push through the fog in his head. On a rescue mission—to save his brother, Dare, and his now-wife—Ry had been hit in the head by laser fire. The scar was long gone, but it had scrambled his brain, and he’d spent several weeks in a coma. He looked out the window of *Nomad*, seeing the battered walls of the space station where they were docked. Galaxy’s Edge was a wild station on the edge of uncharted space, and

was filled with adventurers, rogues, and criminals. The place always gave Ry hives. It was a security nightmare.

Not that he was excelling at his job at the moment. He'd been in charge of security for the Phoenix Deep-Space Convoy for years, but since the accident, he felt incompetent.

Since he'd woken up from his coma, nothing had been the same. He struggled with the simplest things. He reached to do something, only to find his head blank. He remembered all his family, and his employees, but a lot of the simplest tasks eluded him.

Anger punched through him, and he swept his arm across his workbench, knocking the rest of his tools to the floor.

"Did that make you feel better?" asked an amused female voice.

Rynan spun. His second-in-command, Elana Korra, stood in the doorway, wearing her navy-blue security jumpsuit. She had her arms crossed over her chest, watching him with that dark, patient gaze of hers.

"No," he muttered.

She pushed away from the door frame and sauntered closer. "Give yourself some time, Ry. Your head is still healing."

In addition to being the most important member of his security team, Elana was also their medic. A medic patch was sewn onto the arm of her suit.

"It's been months, Elana. What if my head is never the same?" He finally voiced the fear that ran through his mind at night, when he was twisting up his sheets. He enjoyed tinkering with equipment, weapons, tools, and it made him better at his job. He liked being one step ahead of the game, he liked being in control of everyone's safety and security. He'd even invented a few devices of his own. When you were out in deep space, it paid to be self-sufficient.

His older brother, Dare, was the convoy master, and in charge of giving all the orders. Their younger brother, Justyn, was a reformed smuggler, and had a charm that made him good at trade.

For Rynan, it had always been security. Working with weapons and equipment to keep the convoy safe was what he did best.

He blew out a breath. If he couldn't do that, what use was he?

"Who's the medic here?" Elana punched his shoulder lightly.

She was far shorter than him, her head barely reaching his shoulder, but he knew she was tough to the bone, despite her size.

"You have a brain injury, Ry. It needs time to heal."

Right. He just hoped to hell she was right.

With her standing this close to him, he smelled her familiar scent. Something citrusy, with an undertone of sweet. It was prettier than he would've guessed for her. Not that she wasn't pretty, just that he tried not to notice that. Against his will, his gaze traced over her long, black hair, her pretty face, and her trim, compact body.

Sometimes people misjudged her because she was small, but she'd tossed him onto his butt in the gym a few times, so he knew she was tough and well-trained. But she was also his employee and his best friend. That meant no noticing her body, or her silky hair, or her scent.

Besides, Rynan didn't do relationships. Ever. He wasn't built for it.

She tilted her head. "Did you forget we have a meeting?"

"Meeting?" *Shit.* He tipped his wrist to check his timepiece. "The meeting with the potential new client."

She nodded. “Dare went on ahead. We’re to meet him, your cousin, and the client at Moonrakers. Niklas is introducing us to this woman who wants to venture into uncharted space.” Elana reached over and snatched up a rag off the workbench. She handed it to him.

“Right.” He took the rag and wiped his hands. The meeting had completely slipped his sieve of a mind. Moonrakers was a popular watering hole on the entertainment level of Galaxy’s Edge. In the bar’s dim booths, deals were made, grievances were set aside, and lovers’ trysts conducted. At any hour of space-station time, you could find freighter crew members side-by-side with edge adventurers and off-duty Patrol officers.

In his head, he turned over what he knew about this potential client. Some wealthy, eccentric woman, reportedly with a map to an old Earth treasure. His cousin, Niklas Phoenix—former-treasure-hunter-turned-director at the Institute of Historical Preservation—was introducing them to her.

It sounded like a wild and dangerous job to Ryman. He scowled and reached down to pat the laser pistol strapped to his thigh. Treasure hunts never ran smoothly.

Elana eyed the weapon. “Is that necessary?”

“Yes.” He didn’t mention the fact that she had a retractable baton attached to her belt.

For Ry, a weapon was always necessary. There was always someone who wanted to steal from you, beat you, or fire on you. He’d learned that as a young boy, growing up with a less-than-stellar childhood. His jaw tightened.

Well, at least after his head injury he hadn’t forgotten how to shoot. “If Nik is there, that means his woman will be, too.”

Elana smiled, her teeth straight and white against her honey-colored skin. It lit up her face. “Nera is...intimidating, but she’s on our side.”

Nera Darc was scary as fuck. When Niklas had hooked up with the infamous treasure hunter, Ry's estimation of the size of his cousin's balls had gone way up.

Ry walked beside Elana as they headed out of the *Sky Nomad*. The *Nomad* was the heart of the convoy. A retrofitted Ashrian starfreighter, it had expansive cargo bays to house their smaller ships and shuttles, as well as supplies, cargo, and provisions. There was also cabin space for the crew and any passengers they took onboard.

They moved down the ramp and across the busy docking bay filled with people and dock workers operating small magna-lifts. Then they stepped into the space station.

Galaxy's Edge was one step above space scrap. The ramshackle station wouldn't win any awards for beauty and design, but it was a popular stopping-off point for explorers, smugglers, and adventurers heading out into uncharted space. Its corridors were filled with a motley mix of people—rich and poor, loud and reserved, cautious and downright wild.

As they pushed through the crowds, Ry scanned their surroundings, always on the lookout for trouble. Elana moved ahead of him, and waited in line for the travel tubes up to Upper 13. Ry blew out a breath. He hated being this close to so many people.

Soon, it was their turn, and they wedged into a car with too many other people. A blast of compressed air shot the car upward.

They entered Upper 13 and were hit by a wall of sound. The space was lined with an array of restaurants, bars, and shops. A neon sign with two lights blown was the only thing that marked Moonrakers. When they stepped inside the bar, Ry's eyes took a second to adjust to the gloom.

The low lighting didn't quite hide the laser scorch marks on the walls, or some of the less-upstanding clientele sitting at some of the booths. A long bar on the left was packed with people

and manned by a serving syndroid, the bar's cranky Taxalian owner, Dob, and a couple of bartenders working at breakneck speed.

He continued his scan and instantly spotted Dare's dark head at a booth at the back. His brother was a hard man to miss. Tall, with black hair worn a little long, he carried an air that warned people he was a man used to giving orders and getting his own way.

Beside Dare sat Nik. It was clear that they were related, although Nik had the more scholarly face of an astro-archaeologist, even if he did have a muscular body.

Dare looked their way. "Here they are."

"Rynan, it's good to see you again." Nik stood, holding out his hand. "You too, Elana."

"Hi, Nik," Elana said.

"How are those reprobate brothers of yours?" Ry asked. "Still stealing treasure?"

The corner of Nik's mouth lifted. "Dathan and Zayn are still the most infamous treasure hunters in the quadrant." The man gestured to the silent woman standing behind his chair. "You both remember Nera."

The lean woman was dressed in light body armor in unrelieved black. She looked relaxed, but Ry didn't buy it for an instant. He knew that she was standing so she could move fast and didn't have her back to the bar.

As the woman inclined her head, he took in the short, platinum-blond hair that fell around a face that would make angels cry. But beauty aside, there was no doubting the woman was deadly.

"And this is Goldie and her friend Arus," Nik continued.

A tiny, older woman with a cloud of white hair jumped to her feet. She vibrated with energy. “It’s wonderful to meet you. Oh, and I do appreciate a well-built man.” She leaned over and pinched Ry’s bicep. “So many muscles.”

Ry stiffened, trying to ignore the woman’s bold gaze as it ran down his body. He looked helplessly at Elana. His second-in-command didn’t even bother to hide her grin.

“I’m Goldana Jaina Dangent III, but everyone calls me Goldie rather than that mouthful.”

Goldie had an attractive face that looked like she’d spent a fortune on smoothing enhancements, although she had deep lines around her mouth that said she smiled readily.

She leaned into the handsome, young man beside her. “And this is Arus Marchon. He’s my expert in old Earth treasures.” The way she touched him made it clear he was other things to her as well. He glanced at her with an adoring look.

Goldie’s man was young. Very young. He shook their hands and smiled politely.

Goldie clapped her hands together. “Now that we’re all here, let’s talk treasure.”

“Goldie is a benefactor of the Institute,” Niklas said. “A very important one.”

Elana watched the fascinating older woman lean forward. “What he means is that I’m filthy rich. I’m the heir to the Dangent shipping fortune.”

Elana sat back in her chair and took a sip of her drink. Stars, the woman had to be loaded. Dangent had starships all across the galaxy.

“I also like to collect antiquities and artifacts,” Goldie continued. Her blue eyes ignited. “And recently, I got my hands on a map.”

“To what?” Elana asked.

“Treasure, my dear.” Goldie grinned. “Old Earth treasure.”

“What is this treasure?” Dare didn’t look impressed.

“A Viking hoard.” Goldie rubbed her hands together. “The Vikings were seafarers from some of the cold, northern Earth countries. They were adventurers, traders—” she leaned forward “—pirates. They were known to raid wealthy estates and monasteries on other lands, and then often buried their treasure hoards for safekeeping.”

Nik nodded. “Viking hoards usually included silver and gold, in the shape of coins, jewelry, weapons. Highly valuable stuff.”

Wow. Elana had seen some of the Atocha treasure that Dare and his wife Dakota had discovered. The collection of gold, old-Earth artifacts had been amazing.

As everyone kept talking, asking about the treasure and the map Goldie possessed, Elana sat back and let her gaze slide to Rynan sitting beside her.

He had a slight scowl on his face, his brows drawn together as he listened. It was what she called Resting Rynan Face.

And everything inside her yearned for him.

She’d been in love with him for years. He was tough, solid, and strong. She liked his nonsense, and sometimes grumpy, attitude. Protective and loyal—they were two qualities that meant the galaxy to her, and Ry had them in spades.

And he would never see her as anything other than a friend and valued employee.

She sighed, running her fingers through the condensation on the outside of her glass. She loved her job on the convoy, but lately...she felt like her life was going nowhere. She’d watched Justyn fall in love with former patrol captain Nissa. He’d loved her from afar for several years before he’d finally made his move. And then there was Dare. She had never, ever believed that man would fall in love, and yet he’d tumbled head-over-ass in love with con artist Dakota.

Elana loved watching the two of them snipe at each other. There was so much passion between them, they practically left a trail of burn marks behind as they went.

Meanwhile, Elana had no love life. She let out a small sigh. She knew that Ry would never break his rules. The childhood he rarely spoke about had left deep scars on him.

Her childhood hadn't been bad, but it had left her wanting more. As one child among many on an old, crowded ice-mining ship, she'd mostly felt invisible. She'd left that life dreaming of paving her own path and, one day, finding someone who saw her as special. Someone who looked at her like she was the most amazing thing in the galaxy.

She wanted someone to love her.

Goldie tossed her drink back. "The map was written by the sole survivor of the crash of the old Earth starship, the *Ventura*."

"Were they a cargo ship escaping the war on Earth?" Dare asked.

Everyone knew about the terrible nuclear wars that had destroyed Earth. Elana glanced at Nik and the silent Nera. They'd heard the story of their wild expedition back to the ruined planet.

"Nope," Goldie said gleefully. "They were a pirate ship. They preyed on the cargo ships leaving Earth and scored big time with one particular ship. They stole the Viking hoard, then hightailed it into uncharted space."

Arus picked up the story. "But something went wrong and the *Ventura* crashed. There is a record of the tale by a young man named Joseph Fox. After the crash on an uncharted and dangerous water world, his shipmates took the treasure and made for a mountain range that looked like a row of ancient Earth sailing ships with masts and sails. But young Fox decided trekking away from the crashed ship and deeper into the desolate landscape was a death sentence. So, he stayed with the wreck."

“Someone must have picked him up, because he made it to charted space, with only one Viking coin to corroborate his tale.” Goldie pulled something out of her pocket.

It was a single silver coin. Elana leaned closer. The beaten metal was stamped with the image of a sword in the center and ringed by a strange language.

“Fox left a description of the water world and how they ended up there,” Goldie said.

“So you’re looking for a water world in uncharted space,” Dare said.

“Nope,” Goldie answered.

Elana traded a look with Ry. He shrugged.

Goldie set her hands on the table. “Lots of people tried to find Fox’s water world and the treasure. Many perished sending ships beyond the galaxy’s edge.”

Dare sat back, face impassive. “How about you get to the point, Goldie?”

“Patience is a virtue, Master Phoenix.” She winked. “Or so I’m told. Four weeks ago, I came across a personal letter that Fox had written to a friend of his. He recounted the crash and the clues he’d left to the treasure. He also mentioned that he’d written the clues in *code*.”

“In opposites, to be precise,” Arus said with a smile. “Everything he listed about the planets leading to the treasure is the opposite of what it is in reality.”

Elana nodded. “So the water world is actually...?”

“An ice world,” Goldie answered.

“An ice world. Great,” Rynan muttered under his breath. He raised his voice a little louder. “I’ll need to analyze the descriptions from your map, determine the opposites, and see if they match anything in our database. But there are a lot of uncharted worlds out there. We might find nothing.”

“And I have to consider the convoy passengers,” Dare added. “We have two small ships joining us. They’ve all paid for passage to Naahlaw. It’s only a few days from here, so we’ll drop them first, then start your treasure hunt.”

“I assume you’ve kept the treasure and the map under wraps,” Ry said.

Goldie cleared her throat. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

Elana stifled a wince. She knew that tone.

Goldie lifted a shoulder. “I may have mentioned it at a few central systems parties. But really, who from the central systems would make their way out here?”

“Any other security risks I should know about?” Ry asked darkly.

Arus had a pinched look on his face. “I may have made some vague references to the Viking hoard in some interviews. But only to some very small publications.”

Ry sighed. “It likely won’t be a problem.”

But Elana knew Ry hated loose ends and security risks. Everyone started talking at once again, and she tried to dredge up her usual interest in a new trip beyond the galaxy’s edge. She fiddled with her glass, filled with a new, gnawing sense of dissatisfaction.

“What’s wrong?” Ry murmured.

She glanced up and saw him frowning at her. She tried to shake off her bad mood. “Nothing.”

“The Phoenix Deep-Space Convoy is the best at what we do,” Dare said. “And this isn’t the first time we’ve found, fought for, and protected an ancient treasure.” His silver eyes settled on Goldie. “So, are you coming aboard the *Sky Nomad*, Goldie?”

The woman smiled. "I'm thinking about it. Young Phoenix here gave you a glowing recommendation, and I want this treasure found." She tilted her head. "You going to charge me an exorbitant amount?"

"Yes," Dare answered with a smile.

Goldie let out a chuckle. "I like you. And you have this dark, handsome and bossy thing going on—"

Suddenly, a scuffle broke out behind them, followed by shouts.

Elana moved on instinct, pulling her baton off her belt. She heard the distinctive sound of laser fire.

Shit. She saw Dare dive on Goldie, knocking the woman to the floor. As the others all ducked, Ry and Elana both jumped up.

Spinning, she took in the situation. Two huge men were arguing in the center of the room. She briefly rolled her eyes. Both idiots had laser pistols drawn and were going to accidentally kill somebody.

"Go right," Ry ordered, lifting his pistol.

She nodded, ducking down, and sneaking around some tables. Most of the bar patrons were hiding under their tables, but a few were still sitting there, drinking, like nothing interesting was happening around them.

Laser fire winged over her head, scorching the wall. She ducked again and heard Ry return fire.

"Put the weapons away, you idiots," Ry shouted.

The fighting men ducked, and Elana dived forward. She landed a hard kick to the first man's gut, and followed with a swing of her baton. The man went down with a groan.

She spun to face the other man and saw him lifting his pistol in her direction, his face twisted in ale-infused anger.

“Elana!” Ry leaped in front of her, slamming a punch into the man’s face.

The humanoid alien had pale-green skin, and Ry’s blow sent him stumbling backward with a sharp cry. His weapon flew out of his hand and clattered to the ground.

Ry strode forward and kicked the laser pistol out of reach. Suddenly, the alien leaped to his feet and yanked a knife from his belt.

Elana tensed, her mouth open to yell a warning to Ry.

Out of nowhere, a silver sword appeared and pressed to the green-skinned man’s throat. He went still, his eyes bulging.

Elana looked up at Nera’s lean form. The woman was holding the deadly-looking sword with practiced ease.

“I suggest you put the knife away slowly, apologize, then pay for the damages.”

Damn. The woman’s tone sent a shiver down Elana’s spine.

Clearly Nera’s voice—or her sword—had the same effect on the man as well. He nodded rapidly.

Nera stepped back, sliding her sword back into a scabbard on her back. A moment later, two uniformed station security guards hustled in. Nera turned and sauntered back to Niklas.

“I like her style,” Elana whispered to Ryan.

He grunted. “I just keep hoping she stays on our side.” His gray gaze landed on Elana. “Nice moves, Korra.”

The easy connection between them made her heart fill and ache at the same time. “Right back at you, Phoenix.” *But why can’t you want me for more than just my security skills?*

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