

Space Highway

The Awakened

A11 ~ Falcon

Finally! Today's *the* day! My Falcon is officially ready. Kim, Kite, their team and I gave it the finishing touches on Sunday, yesterday...

The past week went by flying, literally... I accompanied Aia, Enya and Jim on several hauls and spent my free time in the CreativeTruck helping the girls to finish my truck.

I ended buying a simple scooter to get there and back. Even if the public transport is great, I still prefer keeping my own pace. Of course I'd love to get one similar to Aia's, but my economy wouldn't allow it. I've got just a cent left... Finally, today, my contract will go live and I'll be able to pay Aia the rent...

I'm really excited about this day, but you are surely interested in what happened during these last eight days, don't you?

Let's track back some days...

On Sunday the sixteenth, Aia showed me around the neighborhood.

I was surprised to find out that *we* live not far away from Long Beach, nowadays just the name of the beach itself...

Half of the old coast has gone. A long promenade snakes along the new seaside and stretches from the disappeared Terminal Island to what was once Newport Beach.

Aia's apartment would lay in the old city of Long Beach, but is nowadays incorporated into the city of New Angeles, as most other peripheral cities around the old Los Angeles.

The whole seaside and part of the streets leading to the beach-promenade are pedestrian-only. The whole city seems better adapted for pedestrian and the public transport is excellent.

Seems I won't miss the old cities of California... Here I have it all... Sea, surf, and a lot of girls—*cough*—I mean, yeah... it's all here what I need...

On Monday the seventeenth, I persuaded Aia to take me to the CreativeTruck, or, at least, show me the way. She insisted on taking me there. Obviously, I took the vintage-stuff from my old Falcon with me.

In no time, I entered into a deep conversation about mechanics with Kim.

Aia seemed a bit out of place as Kite chimed in and almost forgot about her own work. The poor bluish woman was freed after Kite offered to give me a ride back to Aia's apartment, as it seemed like we would be talking for a long time...

Both Kim and Kite began to show and explain how nowadays' tools work. I was immediately immersed and asked to help out, at least on my new Falcon. It didn't take long to convince them, it seems they like my interest in modern mechanics.

Throughout the week, I went to the CreativeTruck when time allowed it and got my own hands dirty on my new baby. From an eight-wheeler to a miniature spaceship! Who has thought...

I've learned a lot thanks to Kim and Kite and slowly a friendship began to flourish.

On Tuesday, I accompanied Jim again, in another haul to Wintermute in Alpha Centauri, for the TF-Corp. Meaning, I've met Nik and Gweraz again. Sadly, the

Gynoid-Bioandroid couple Marta and Frank were not on duty during the delivery.

On the other hand, I've finally met the four local Aces of the ISTM, great guys...

Oh, yeah... by the way, that night, I didn't get drunk with Jim as we were stopped for a routine health-check from the ISTM.

There, my suspicion was confirmed...

As I wasn't on file yet, they made a full test on me. Quite boring... but as the nurse asked me about my ethnic backgrounds, she confirmed, after a genetic-check, that I have an African background. Does that mean that I'm Japanese-African-American? Anyway, here comes the Jap-Nigger, yo!

Okay, no more bad jokes... Now it explains... I'm way too *dark*, my body mass way too heavy for any Filipino or Japanese...

Back to the recap...

On Wednesday, I went with the crazy Enya on a two-day roundtrip. Bad idea... I've almost succumbed to her temptations... She is way too promiscuous and sexy to avoid her flirting. We slept in the same hotel room, she of course naked...

I had to keep myself steady and not break promises I've made. We barely could avert a disaster that night. Not really a disaster for us two, but the others, which we don't want to hurt. She doesn't want to hurt Aia, and I don't want to break my promise with Jim nor hurt the blueish alien.

We drank a bit too much on our layover and almost ended having sex... We entered tumbling the room, stumbled over our own feet and fell onto one of the beds... She just giggled excited and, clouded by the mist of alcohol, we began to make out...

Fortunately, we came to sense just in time... Only the promise and our compromise with our friends stopped it. If we didn't have *that*, we would have gone all the way. What, I ask myself, would have happened afterward?

We agreed that it was a mishap not to share, at least for now...

Just after the *almost* mishap with Enya, Aia insisted in accompanying her on another haul on the next day. I tried to decline with the excuse of working on my Falcon. She didn't let me, she needed a copilot, so she said.

The job was a short haul from Mars to Venus, but my *adventure* with Enya still lingered inside of me and I had to concentrate to the fullest on the tasks at hand.

It was true that she needed a copilot, well, not exactly a necessity, but it helped her... Mainly in navigation. Well, it also helped me to get the hang of it.

I finally could talk with a Īiha without interruption, Aia let me with a gentle smile on her lips.

During the haul I asked Aia about the strange weather in New Angles, it's too hot to be winter... She explained that due to global warming and the posterior *fix* made by the Īiha, the seasons shifted a bit. What was autumn, became essentially winter, it's the coldest season. September to November are the coldest months in which it snows, at least here in California. December to February would be like the old spring with short heat-waves, like we had the first days after I've awakened. Another thing to bring me out of balance...

That night, of course, we got drunk again... And, yet again, I carried her home. Gathering all my willpower, I let her sleep in peace and defused the growing impulse with the vivid images from two nights before in the shower...

Now... that's what happened the last few days... some provocations, I almost fucked with Enya, I was working on my Falcon, chatting with Jim, and getting drunk... several times...

I sigh... What a week...

I look up at one of the exhibited space-trucks on the huge open space in front of the CreativeTruck. The whole place is swarming with people from any possible species, but most are Humans.

This is just like any other big event. Did they really organize all this just for my Falcon?

Between trucks, many small stalls offer a huge variety of goods, from exotic foods to gadgets and toys.

I keep wandering the place in awe, a festival for truck-lovers...

Many truckers explain, most likely inflate, their truck's abilities and their own skills...

Amused, I listen to one extolling his *beautiful, oh so powerful*, truck.

"Here you are! Kira!"

I jolt as I'm suddenly taken by my arm.

"Aia..." I exhale.

"C'mon! It's time! I've been looking for you..."

"Really? What for?"

"*Moh~* Kira... I was calling you over the terminal..."

I look at my terminal...

"Oh, shit..." sixteen lost calls... "I'm sorry, Aia. I didn't hear it..."

"It's okay, now c'mon."

She drags me along.

"But... what for?" I ask unsure what's happening.

"The unveiling of your Falcon, you dummy," she smiles heartily.

"Unveiling?"

"Yeah! It's the main event, after all."

"Oh... fuck..." I sigh.

We reach the huge stage on which a humongous blanket covers something as big as a space-truck... don't say...

One huge and another smaller sofa and several armchairs are at one side, a podium on the other. And in the middle, several people are standing. Among them, Enya, Jim, Kim, Kite, Mitsubishi-san and Yuuki...

"Heh! Finally..." grins Jim, "Da star's 'ere..."

“Hi, Kira~” sings Enya happily with a slight blush. Oh, fuck!

“Welcome, Kira-kun,” nods Mitsubishi-san, “timely, a true Ace.”

“Welcome, how do you do, Matsumoto-san?” says Yuuki while slightly bowing to me.

“Hi, Phoenix,” greet Kim and Kite at once with a grin.

“Ah, hello, everyone. Sorry, I’ve got myself lost in the masses. What’s this all about?” I ask looking up at the covered Falcon.

“Don’t worry,” says Aia ushering me to the sofa.

Enya and Jim follow us and take a seat on it while Aia pushes me down and also sits down. I sit just between both girls... damn...

Kim and Kite take the smaller sofa, and Mitsubishi-san and Yuuki take each an armchair. Several other people I don’t know take the rest of the seats.

Mitsubishi-san stands up again and walks to the podium.

“Thank you for coming, dear guests.

“Today is a special day of unveiling...”

I whisper to Aia, “Is this usual?”

She giggles, “Only for Aces...”

“Shh...” hushes Enya, she pokes my leg and grins. Fuck...

“...today is truly a special occasion,” continues Mitsubishi-san. I’ve missed half of his talk... “Not only do we unveil a brand-new space-truck, but welcome the fourth Ace of Aces of the ISTM!”

The crowd cheers. I’m baffled... What the hell?

“Rumors are running that the ISTM has finally found the Ace it lacked, and today we make it official. Yes, indeed, we have found our fourth Ace of Aces.” He gesticulates over at us. “Our fourth Ace of Aces, Kira Matsumoto!”

“Go!” Aya and Enya push me up.

I look back at them, Aia smiles broadly while Enya smirks, did she really just grope my ass?

Mitsubishi-san signals me to come over to the podium, oh shit...

I sigh and wander towards him while I'm showered with cheers.

"The authentic Phoenix!" shouts Mitsubishi-san into the mic, "The Phoenix is our fourth Ace!"

Fuck me... Am I part of a publishing stunt? The crowd cheers even louder.

He turns to me.

"Kira-kun, please confirm the contract," he smiles heartily.

A cameraman points at us two trying to get a close shot.

I sigh and place my finger on the reader of the DigiContract.

A loud »Contract validated« rings from the gadget and the crowd cheers again. What the fuck?

"Hereby, I welcome you, Phoenix, to the ISTM," says the old Mitsubishi in a solemn voice.

"Thank you for the opportunity, Mitsubishi-san." I bow to him. "I will work hard to exceed your expectations." I don't know why suddenly my Japanese heritage flourished, surely because of my new boss' one...

The huge crowd keeps on cheering and chanting...

"Long live the Phoenix!" "Phoenix! Phoenix!"

I recognize some faces in the crowd, fellow truckers I've met at the MaryQueens and during the exams, including the four local Aces.

"Now..." Mitsubishi-san raises his voice again and the cheering crowd goes silent. "The Phoenix will unveil his very own space-truck, the Falcon!"

More cheers...

Sighing, I follow Mitsubishi-san towards my covered Falcon.

I look at my friends sitting on the sofas. Aia smiles radiantly holding her hands together, Jim grins widely, as do both Kim and Kite. Enya... she smiles broadly and almost unnoticeably licks her upper lip. Shit, Enya! Don't tempt me more!

“...and now...” fuck, I wasn’t paying attention, “the Phoenix will unveil his Falcon!”

“Huh? Ah!” I take the end of an adorned rope Mitsubishi-san hands me. “Without further ado, I present you the Falcon!” I blurt out to the delight of the crowd, my boss and my friends while pulling the rope.

The humongous blanket falls down and my new Falcon emerges in its full splendor.

More cheering... My new friends stand cheering and clapping...

Several camera-operators swarm around me, Mitsubishi-san and my Falcon. A huge screen shows all the details to the crowd. I want to go home...

I’ve never liked this kind attention, not at all. I just want to take my Falcon and fly away... a simple party at Sue and Buz’s place would be enough.

We all sit on the sofas while several cameras point at us. It seems it’s time for some interviews...

A Īiha woman nears me and says, “I am Althreth Nerthin, the official spokeswoman for the ISTM’s press department. Would you, Phoenix, answer some questions?”

“Oh, of course.”

They indicate me to sit on one of the armchairs put in midst of the huge stage.

The longish interview comes to an end and the crowd cheers again. Sighing, I sit back between Aia and Enya.

“That was great,” giggles Aia.

“Yeah, truly,” charms Enya.

More interviews go by, first Mitsubishi-san, then Aia, Jim, and Enya.

While Aia is being interviewed, I have to stop Enya.

“Enya...” I whisper to her.

“Hmm?” she smirks back.

“Please, not here...”

“Oh, prefer something more intimate?” she whispers back.

“Whatcha whisperin’ ’bout?” asks Jim suddenly.

Shit!

“Oh, nothing~” purrs Enya, her ears flip, “Just about Aia...” she says after I poked her.

“Oh, yeah! Great interview!” he laughs.

Jim... are you so dense? She is flirting with me the whole time. Don't you see it? Does nobody see it?

I sigh deeply.

Finally, it's over.

“Race! Race! Race!” the crowd chants.

“What's about—” I try to ask.

“A race!” Enya interrupts me. “They want a race between us Aces,” she grins and laughs while her ears twitch and her tail sways.

“Yeah,” also laughs Aia.

“I'm already out, heh,” Jim shrugs.

“Why?” I ask.

“Heh... Ma Stampede's too slow for a race...”

“Poor Jimmie...” smirks Enya.

“Whatcha say?” counters Jim making a fist.

“That you're the best in dangerous cargo, Jimmie,” sings Enya with a smirk.

“Oh, yeah... Heh!” he remarks proudly.

I roll my eyes while Aia giggles.

“How does this work?” I ask, “I mean the race...”

“Oh! Yeah,” Aia giggles, “starting point is the Alpha. Then we rush around Gaia on a specific vector. The first to return to the Alpha wins.” She turns around and says something to Jim.

“But if Enya has the fastest truck—” I think aloud.

“Doesn’t mean that I always win,” Enya grins, “at least theoretically.”

“Theoretically?”

“Yeah, once, but only once, I tied with someone,” she smirks.

“Really?”

“And you know with whom...”

“Aia?”

“Yup! Aia!”

“Huh? What’s it?” Aia turns around and blinks.

“Ah, Aia,” Enya giggles, “just saying that you’ve tied with me once.”

“Oh, yeah, pure luck...” she plays it down.

“No luck! Such thing does not exist!” laughs Enya. “You did it great! In each race you’re less than a second behind me, that’s no luck, that’s technique!”

“C’mon... Heh! Show it live!” Jim intervenes.

“Yeah...” both girls giggle.

My Falcon... I sit into my pilot’s seat, finally, an *official* flight. I’ve only taken some test flights with Kim and Kite, now it’s time to see what this baby can do.

I start the powerplants. All green. Perfect. Doors closed, check. Habitat pressurized, check. Artificial Gravity off, check. Board-comp, check. Autopilot off, check. Autoassist on, check. Nav-comp and Navigation module on, check. AR on, check. Seatbelt fastened, check. Power distribution all green, check. Communications on, check.

«Hi, hi~» Enya giggles through the speaker. «Turn the cam on, please.»

“Oh, hi... right...”

I turn the cam on and Enya’s grinning face appears on the nether part of the AR.

«Hello, you two,» giggles Aia.

I activate the cam for her too.

«Great! Now we can chat with each other,» giggles Enya.

«Yeah,» giggles Aia. «Ah, Kira, turn the distributed com-link on so the truck’s cameras are streamed to the ISTM.»

“Oh, right...”

I go through the menus on the screen. Right... I sigh, the crowd want to see it too...

«Yuuki here, do you read, Aia-chan, Enya-chan, Kira-san?»

“Loud and clear, Yuuki-san,” I answer.

«Yup, here too,» giggles Enya.

«I’m in the loop too,» laughs Aia.

«Great, I won’t stream your inside cameras nor your voices until the winner is declared,» Yuuki tells. «Just the outer cameras and the ones from observatory crafts and stations.»

«Thank you, Yuuki,» giggles Aia.

«Thank you~» sings Enya.

“Great.”

«Ready?» asks Yuuki.

“Whenever you want,” I nod despite knowing she won’t see it.

«Yeah! Let’s rock!» shouts Aia lifting her fist.

«And roll!» adds Enya with a smirk.

«Okay, here are the race-vectors and the starting point. The race begins when the three of you are there,» explains Yuuki.

“Understood...”

«Blast off!» shouts Enya giggling while she already, well, blasts off...

«Enya! Don't cheat!» shouts Aia, visibly frustrated and also disappearing swiftly into the skies.

Cheat... yeah...

«I won't! The starting point is the Alpha,» giggles Enya.

«C'mon, Kira! What are you waiting for?»

“Coming,” I sigh.

I lift off and follow them.

Nice... Nice feeling... My Falcon... I sigh relaxed.

«Aia, look...» giggles Enya.

I blink.

Both girls look almost dreamy at me.

“What?”

«You looked like you were in nirvana,» giggles Aia.

«Yeah, just as whe—» Enya bites her lower lip.

«What?» asks Aia.

«Ah, nothing, nothing...»

«Huh?»

Enya fidgets searching for an excuse, I know what she means, damn Enya.

«Well... we had to share a room...» Enya? What are you saying? «It just happened...» Enya! «That he had such a face in his sleep.» Uff! Nicely defused, Enya. «Surely thinking of a nice girl,» she grins.

“Enya...”

«*Fufu~*» Aia giggles. «True, sometimes he makes such faces in his sleep.»

“Aia?” I blink.

«*Fufu*~ When I'm awake before you, I saw it many times...»

«So lovely~» sings Enya and giggles.

“Girls...” I sigh, “wasn't this meant to be a race?”

«Yeah, but not yet...» grins Enya licking her lips.

Great...

«Ready! Five, four, three, two, one, go!»

We three blast off from the starting point.

«Yahoo!» shouts Enya.

«Let's do it!» shouts Aia.

“Banzai!” I shout.

The AR gives me their positions and the vectors of the race. We are quite near on each other, taking into account the speeds we are reaching. This race should be over in less than ten minutes...

«Damn, Enya! Have you tuned your rig again?» shouts Aia.

«Yup! Freshly oiled!» giggles the half-Felii. «After Kira oiled me,» she giggles.

«What?» Aia blinks.

«An opening!» Enya giggles.

«Damn you, Enya! Saying such things!»

I sigh again, that Enya... Luckily, Aia is taking it as a diversion rather than a confession.

A quarter of our race is already over... I have to do something... Enya leads with Aia tailing her. I'm quite behind. It's not my Falcon, it's me... am I too prudent?

«What's up, Phoenix? Can't keep up with a kitten?» giggles Enya.

“You haven't seen anything yet...” I grin.

«But I have seen it all...» she smirks erotically, that horny kitten.

“I doubt it...” I grin again.

«That’s it!» giggles Aia.

«Wha!» exclaims Enya. «That’s foul play! Don’t use my diversion as a diversion!»

«Digging your own grave, Enya cutie?» giggles Aia.

«Fuck! How did you come so near?»

«It’s~ a~ se~cret~» sings Aia giggling.

Both are parallel to each other. How? Oh! I see... I smirk...

«Oh~oh~» giggles Enya. «Seems like Kira has an idea... Go and catch us!»

Aia just giggles but is clearly concentrating.

Enya’s slingshots... That’s the key...

«Huh?» «What?» both exclaim. «Kira!» «Are you crazy?»

The AR splashes red lights all over the screen. Yeah! That manual override did it!

«Kira! You’re entering the atmosphere!»

«You’re too shallow! You’ll be expelled!»

“Just half a degree off...” I grin and push the powerplants to their limit.

«No fucking way...» «Kira...» both say in awe.

My Falcon is juddering from the pressure of Gaia’s atmosphere while I take a *shortcut* through it.

“Still inside the threshold of the vector,” I say grinning.

«Fuck! Kira! How do you do that?» screams Aia.

«Damn!» exclaims Enya.

«What?»

“Slingshot... variation SK-8,” I grin.

«No way! Kira! That’s for an expert!» shouts Aia.

«That's my...» Enya bites her lips.

“Thanks for teaching it, Enya,” I laugh.

«Fuck you, Kira!» shouts Enya, «I should never have blown you!»

«What?» Aia shouts.

“But you've shown me,” I grin keeping my calculated vector.

«Fuck you, Kira!» Enya shouts again.

“Yeah, baby!” I shout, “Show what you can do!”

We three are parallel, while my Falcon is glowing from the friction. The gel is spread accordingly to the TPG's system. Just perfect. I can't stop grinning, I'm getting it back at Enya. That's for tempting me...

«Kira...» Aia says astonished.

«Kira...» Enya bites her lips, then giggles, «Damn you...»

«We have no winner!» suddenly blasts from the speaker, Yuuki's voice. «You just crossed the finishing line at the same time!»

«What?» «No way!» «The three of us?» the girls shout astonished.

«No doubt. You have reached the goal at exactly the same time!» Yuuki tells excited.

“Great game, girls,” I laugh.

«Oh, you...» giggles Aia.

«You're great,» giggles Enya licking her lips again. «Now I want to play more games with you...» Shit, Enya...

«The race is over, Aces. I am sending you the vectors back to the CreativeTruck.» Yuuki says and the vectors appear on my nav-comp. I accept them and they appear on the AR. Neat.

«Kira...»

“Yeah, Aia?”

«How did you manage to do this slingshot variation? I mean, just a few are able to... Even I consider it a risky maneuver...»

“Oh... I’m not sure...”

I see both girls blinking through the video stream.

«What do you mean, Kira?» asks Enya.

I sigh, “I was so into it... I simply felt I can do it...”

«You felt?» asks Aia astonished.

Enya also looks baffled.

“Yeah... it happens... when I have the feeling I can do it, I’m able to.”

«Simply like that?» asks Enya. «But... You’ve never done it before...»

“Yeah,” I nod, then shrug, “it’s a gut-feeling... I see the line to take...”

«But...» Enya remarks, «that’s only good if you know your rig to the rivet... I mean, yours is brand-new...»

“I worked on it myself... I’ve already got the feeling... we’ll be good partners,” I laugh.

«This Kira...» laughs Aia.

«Now I have to create a new, even better slingshot variant...» giggles Enya.

As I step out of my Falcon, Aia, Enya and Jim already await me.

Both girls embrace me suddenly while Jim slaps my back harshly...

“Just great!” giggles Aia.

“You’re cool...” purrs Enya.

“Fuckin’ awesome! Heh!” laughs Jim.

Both girls press against me, this would be nice if we weren’t in a public place and I didn’t have this lingering feeling of having cheated on our friends with Enya...

“Truly spectacular... Indeed...” an old rougher voice takes us out of our embrace.

We look at Mitsubishi-san who smiles brightly.

“Truly impressive! My judgment has never failed me, you are the true Aces of Aces!” He laughs. “Jim-kun, I admire your honesty for not participating. I am absolutely sure you would have tied with your Aces team too if you had a truck with their specifications.”

“No need!” Jim hastily negates. “Imma a dangerous cargo haula, notta speedsta!” What happened to Jim? Is his speech rougher than in other times? Is he nervous or something?

The old Mitsubishi simply laughs.

“No, no, Jim-kun. I know your strengths. You are fast with the proper equipment. But your choice of dangerous cargo as your specialization is even the more impressive.”

“Ya... ya 'umblin' ma...”

We laugh.

“Now...” Mitsubishi-san says, “I must say that this was the most exciting race I have witnessed in my life.” He clears his throat. “Even if short, you three had me completely fired up.”

“Cool race!” laughs Kim.

“Yeah!” adds Kite. “How was it, Phoenix? Your rig?”

“Ah... absolutely great! I enjoyed it,” I laugh. “Great work girls. I absolutely love my new Falcon.”

Both mechanics and tuners brighten up even more.

“But,” says Kite earnestly, “don't do such stunts too much... or your rig needs more servicing.”

“Yeah,” adds Kim, “don't force it too much.”

“I won't. Thanks, girls,” I laugh. “By the way...”

“Yeah?”

“Ugh... I've got no money left for the garage space...”

“Oh!” Both laugh.

“Your first month is free,” says Kim and Kite nods at her side.

“That’s standard and included in any new rig from us,” comments Kite.

“Wow! Thanks, girls.”

“Of course, you’ll get one of the Aces-only VIP spaces,” grins Kim.

“Really?”

“Of course, Phoenix!” laughs Kite. “You’re one of our best customers.”

“But... I’ve just—”

Kim interrupts me, “We’re sure you won’t let your rig in other hands...” she grins.

I laugh, “Quite right...”

We all laugh.

“Okay,” I keep on laughing. “Then it’s set. From next month on, you’ll have another high-performance truck at your care.”

“Thanks, Phoenix.” “For your trust,” both say brightly.

A boring two hours follow our frenetic race... Mitsubishi-san gives a long speech about the ISTM, its value, its commitment, its philosophy, its goals, and a lot more...

At least, I’ve learned some stuff about the ISTM.

The ISTM was founded in the year 2744 GCE. That last acronym means *Gaian Common Era*, as Aia explained, and is used to refer to the relic AD or Anno Domini. The company is one of the few transport association having received the SuperNova seal of quality, whatever that means. That the ISTM is one of the most punctual transporters universe-wide. Also that the association only hires the best truckers, with the greatest experience... How the hell did he choose me then? I’ve got no experience whatsoever in space-trucking the time he hired me...

He went further on explaining the advantages, for both the truckers as for the customers hiring us, the ISTM gives.

Then he went on citing absurdly high numbers of Central ISTM... Its hired truckers, the trucks registered under its name, the direct employees it has employed, its stations and other assets...

After that, he went on citing even higher numbers about the whole of the ISTM... from the diversity of species hired, to the number of exclusive contracts...

I sigh... such a huge information-dump...

It would have been quite illustrative if I didn't have to stop Enya constantly from her covert flirting, including wrapping her tail around my hips... I have to talk with her. I don't mind her flirting with me, but she's going over the top. We've talked it over, so I thought... that it was an *accident* what we did. I have to reinforce my stance that I am loyal to my promises. I can't break them while valid. I mean, yeah, we said that after a while we would take into consideration something *real* between us, but that's after I've cleared things up with Aia. And, well, I can't talk with her about my other promise... the one with Jim. Even though no time limit was set for this promise, it's too soon. But the one with Enya about Aia... we almost broke it and she's already breaking it furtively...

Finally over... Enya takes Aia and me up to the Alpha in her Cheetah. Time for the real party!

“Welcome, welcome!”

Buz almost runs us over. His huge arms wrap around me and he squeezes me...

“Buhhzz... can'thh breathh...”

Laughing he let me free from his embrace.

“I knew it! From the first sight, that you're special!” he laughs. “Come in all!” he shouts, “Sue and I prepared a feast for you all!”

Truly... the whole counter of the bar is filled with canapés and titbits. A huge keg also stands on the same counter.

And the party begins...

Music, delicious food and gallons of beer... cute girls from several species... what else do I need?

I sigh... what I need is room... I'm surrounded by truckers, all wanting to chat with me and toast to my new Falcon.

“Ouch!”

“What is it?” “Somethin’ wrong, Phoenix?” several ask at my sudden outcry.

I look back, Enya... I sigh, she just pinched and groped my ass, and grins at me with mischief.

“Excuse us for a second,” I tell the others and take Enya by her arm.

I drag the half-Felii towards the bathrooms.

Blinking she looks at me, unsure what this is all about.

In the small space before the bathrooms, I turn around.

“Enya, please stop it,” I tell her. “This isn’t funny anymore.”

“Huh? Don’t like it?” she blinks.

I sigh, “It’s not that I don’t like it. But Enya, if you keep on, I can’t hold back.”

“Oh!” she smirks.

“Remember our promise, Enya. Right now I can’t. I don’t want to hurt Aia.”

“Oh...” she looks down.

“I don’t care if it’s the Felii-flirting, but this isn’t subtle. I do like you Enya. I don’t mind your playful flirting, nor your friend-skinship. But you’re taking it beyond it...”

“Kira...” she drops her head and her ears fold down.

“Look, Enya. I really like you, but what happened last week was a mistake. We both know it. I thought we talked over it and made it clear, but I have the feeling that you are not taking it seriously...”

“Fuck... Kira...” she sighs she looks up at me, her eyeliner is smeared, forming black tears. “I’m sorry...”

“Sorry, Enya,” I say while wiping her tears away. “Please, don’t take it personal. I don’t know what goes through your mind, I don’t understand your thinking... it is as if I have given you permission to aggressively flirt with me

and opening myself to you. If I gave you that impression, I apologize. If it is so, then I don't get nowadays flirting and relationships. I don't want to hurt you, you are dear to me. But I can't hurt Aia either—”

“I—I understand, Kira,” she sniffs. “You're right... What happened was a mistake... an accident... Even after we talked it out...” she sniffs again, “I had the impression that... something more could happen... I want to... but yeah...” she sighs deeply, “I'm sorry, Kira... I went overboard...”

“Look, Enya, I wouldn't mind if we didn't make that promise for Aia's sake.” She looks up at me with wide eyes. “It's not that I wouldn't like it, it's just that I can't break a promise I've made.”

“Oh... You mean...”

I nod, “If we didn't make that promise for Aia's sake,” and my promise to Jim, “I would be banging you right now, right there, in the bathroom.”

“You—you've would?” she stammers.

“Yeah,” I nod again, “Enya, you're a beautiful, feisty woman. How could I not want you if it wasn't for something important? I hate to admit it, I can't because of those promises...”

“Then...” she carefully asks, “the only thing stopping you is our promise?” I nod. “You take promises to the heart, do you?” I nod and she sighs, “I get it... I won't... Molest you anymore...”

“Enya,” I bend down and hug her tightly, she jolts and her ears flick, “I don't mind you flirting, but tune down a bit. You're not getting my attention, you are turning me on.”

“I—I do?”

“Yeah, you do. I want to keep our relationship at a friend-level, for now. I don't mind if it is your Felii friend-skinship. But please, don't seduce me, or I won't be able to hold my promise,” I sigh again, “and let's not hurt Aia...”

“Ye—yeah...” she sighs, “you're right. Aia...” she sighs again, “I don't want to hurt her either. Yeah... I've told you, didn't I? That we should be friends...”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck...” she sighs, “I wanted to forget that... that I said that... Kira?” She looks into my eyes.

“Yeah?”

“But the rest... would be the same? And what we said that day too?”

“As long as you don’t try to seduce me...” I smile at her.

“Thanks, Kira,” she sighs. “I’ve gone overboard. I’m sorry. Don’t tell Aia what happened between us.”

“You’ve already told her,” I smile weakly.

“Huh?”

“During the race... although Aia took it as diversions, you basically confessed to her what happened between us.”

“Right...” she bites her lower lip.

“Don’t brood over it, Enya. Now, let’s go back to the party. You know you can always count on me in needs, except for *that* need,” I smirk and blink an eye, “at least for now.”

“Oh, you, Kira,” she giggles. “Right.”

She kisses me on the cheek and wiggles out of my embrace. She turns around and swiftly disappears into the bathroom.

Sighing, I return back to the chaotic party. I need a draft!

“Heh! What was ’bout?” suddenly Jim asks me, “With Enya?”

Oh fuck...

“Don’t worry, man. I won’t take her away,” is simply say.

“But ya were quite close...”

I sigh, “I rejected her.” Not a lie. Nor the whole truth.

“Heh! Ya did?” the cowboy shouts.

“Yeah, I nod. She advanced on me...” Neither a lie.

“Why?” he asks baffled.

“Jim...” I sigh again, “a promise is a promise.”

“Really? Kira... don’t fuck...”

“No...” we didn’t... by a hair...

He suddenly wraps his arm around my neck and draws me nearer.

“Kira, yer da best,” he laughs, “ma friendship is fo’ eternity!”

“You’re welcome...” I simply say and bump his fist.

He lets me free and we guzzle down our beers.

Jim is too dense... I sigh for myself. It should be obvious. Enya was flirting aggressively with me. Fucking promises! Fuck! I need another beer!

“Kira...”

I turn around, Aia...

“Yeah, Aia?”

“Uh~ What’s going on between Enya and you?” Fuck! “Do you have... something—”

“No, Aia. It was just something we had to talk about.”

“She seemed crying...” she says preoccupied.

“Ah... I was consoling her... She was rejected...” Not a lie. Quite true... But not the whole story.

“Oh... I understand... Why didn’t she tell me?”

“She got some interest in a guy... while on route with me...” Neither a lie...

“Oh...”

“I knew about it, so she turned to me...” Not a lie either.

“I understand. Sorry for imaging things...”

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” she shakes her head.

She disappears... What the fuck?

I see Aia and Enya chatting... fuck...

I near them.

“Hi, Kira~” smiles Enya, “thank you. I feel better now.”

“Ah, you’re welcome, Enya,” I say.

“Kira is so sweet,” she tells Aia, “if you ever have love problems, you can count on him.”

“Kira...” Aia sighs with a beautiful smile.

“It’s clear that he has a lot of experience,” Enya giggles.

“Enya...” I sigh, “Don—”

“Thanks again, Kira.” She grabs my shoulder and pulls me down to her height, then kisses me on the cheek. “You are really a good friend.”

“Sorry, Kira. Sorry, Enya,” Aia suddenly apologizes.

“Why?” we both ask.

“Seeing you there... I thought... you two...”

“No harm done,” giggles Enya. “It’s okay.”

“Yeah,” I nod. I don’t want this to go further. “Now you just need a good beer,” I laugh it off.

“Yeah... that’s a great idea!” Enya laughs too.

“I pay,” says Aia, “as an apology.”

“No need!” Enya protests.

“But I do!” Aia counters.

We end laughing.

We all are quite drunk by now...

Just us Aces of Aces are still in Sue and Buz's bar. The rest already bade us goodbye and went, unsteady, to their respective homes.

"Bout~ time to go~ heh!" Jim says heavily drunk.

"Where~ do you live?" I ask him equally drunk.

"ere~" he laughs pointing unsteadily upwards.

"In the~ station?"

"Yup! Heh!"

"There~ are~ apartments~ here~" explains Aia wobbly.

"Oh!"

"I~ sleep~ in my Cheetah~" says Enya swaying her head.

"Oh! Wanna sleep~ with ma? Gotta~ nice place," asks Jim smirking.

"No chance~" giggles Enya. He snaps his fingers. "Not even~ drunk, friend~" she giggles again.

"How~ do we~ get home?" I ask Aia.

"We~ won't~"

"Huh?"

"We stay~ at the hotel~"

"Oh!"

"There's one~ for truckers~" she explains still wobbling her head.

"Okay~" Surely the best option.

We stand up... each of us trying to help each other... almost unsuccessfully.

We bid a good night to Sue and Buz and wobble towards the elevators. There, we say our byes to Jim who goes up and to Enya who goes down. We stay on this level.

Holding each other somewhat steady, we reach the hotel.

“Good night, do you have a room?” asks the receptionist.

“No~” negates Aia, “a room for~ each~”

“Okay...” the gynoid nods and types on her computer. “I’m sorry... I’m afraid that we only have one room left, with two beds.”

“That’s okay~” I say, I just want to lie down.

Aia nods, “Yeah~ okay~”

“Okay,” the girl nods, “please sign here...” she hands the reader to me. Aia takes it and signs. “Room 404,” she says blinking at Aia’s gesture.

“Thanks~” we both say.

“Ah~ Finally...”

Aia let herself fall on one of the beds, but pulls me with her.

“Aia~”

“Sorry~”

“Huh?”

“I said some~ strange things~”

“What?”

“At the~ party~ I was—” she bites her lip. We lie sidewise on the bed facing each other. She is blushing. “The guy~ rejecting Enya~ was you, right?”

Oh, shit...

“Ye—yeah...” No need for lies, not with her.

“Fuck~” she sighs. “Why?”

“I—”

“Isn’t she~ cute? Don’t like~ her?”

Damn... Enya was right... Now that she suspects, well, knows, she's trying to get us together.

"That's not~ it~" I sigh.

"Then?"

"I—"

"She's cute~ nice~ strong~"

"She is~"

"Then?"

"I can't, not right~ now..."

"Why?"

"It's all too~ much, too~ new..."

"But..."

"And I made promises~ I can't~ break..."

"Promises?"

I nod.

"You mean~ me?"

I blink, does she know?

"Because I~ confessed?"

I sigh, "One reason, yeah~ But not~ the only~"

"Then~ I'll—"

"No, Aia."

"Huh?"

"Don't step~ away."

"You..."

"I—I don't know~ what to~ feel, right now..." I sigh. "Too much~ uncertainty..."

“Re—really?”

“Yeah... I made promises...”

“Promises?”

“To you, to Enya, to Jim...”

“Oh~”

“I don’t~ want to hurt~ any of you...”

“Kira~”

“Sorry if~ I gave wrong~ impressions or~ said something~ wrong~”

“No, no~ Kira,” she sighs, “I—I just~ don’t want to be~ in your way~”

“My way? Aia~ beauty~ You’re never~ in my way~”

She blushes deeply.

“I—”

“The reasons why~ I rejected Enya~” I clumsily brush her bluish silken hair out of her burning face, “are... my decision... I mean~ I like her~ as a friend...” I do like her as a friend, no lie. “Her advances were~ too sudden~ too fast~ I’m not used to~ it.”

“Kira...” She brushes my hair out of my face. “Do you love~ her?”

“I—no... I like her... it’s too sudden...”

“Then~ why not—”

“No, Aia~” I interrupt her. “It’s not about~ loving her or not~ It’s just the way~ Right now... I simply can’t...”

“Oh~ Sorry, Kira...” Some tears roll down her cheeks. I brush my thumb over them. “I still... feel... for you...” she stammers.

“Aia...”

“Kira...”

Slowly our faces near each other... Our lips gently brush...

She jolts back.

“So—sorry... I can’t...” she stammers, “So—sorry, Kira...”

“It’s okay, Aia~ Take your time~”

“You too~” she smiles bashfully, “I said it~ You can~ do other girls~”

“Aia...” I sigh, “if~ I do it... outside of the ISTM...”

“Huh?”

“Just please, don’t try~ to get~ Enya and me together~”

“Wa—why?”

“What happens between~ us should be our decisions~”

“I—I understand... Sorry... I—Kira?”

“Yes?”

“I have to~ confess...”

“Confess?”

“Yeah...” she nods, “When I saw you~ hugging... I suddenly...” she blushes even deeper, “I felt~ jealous, I think... I’ve never been—”

I brush my middle finger over her fine lavender lips.

“Shh~ It’s okay, Aia~ We’ll see what~ the future brings~ I’m here for~ just two weeks now...”

She softly giggles, “Yeah... true...”

“Sleep over it, Aia~”

“*Hm*~ Thanks, Kira~”

“No problem...”

I try to stand up, but she holds me down.

“Kira?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you~ give me a hug?”

“Sure.”

I hug her tightly.

“Kira?”

“Yeah?”

“Sleep this way?”

“Huh?”

“Please... let us~ sleep this way...”

“Okay...”

Hugging the bluish alien girl, I drift into sleep...

⊙

“...ning, Kira...”

I slowly blink. Something bluish moves in front of me... I open my eyes, a beautiful smile and violet-tinted cheeks greet me.

“Morning, Aia...”

“Uh~ Kira?”

“Yeah?”

“I need to go to the bathroom...”

“Huh?”

Oh, fuck! I’m still hugging her... How the fuck did we undress? We only wear our underwear!

“Oh! Sorry, Aia!”

She giggles, “*Fufu*~ No worries.”

She stands up after I freed her from my embrace. What the hell?

What did we do? What did we say?

Slowly, the whole night comes back to me... fuck me... I just want to crawl under a rock... Huh... No rocks on a space station, heh... No, seriously... Yesterday went straight down the gully. Fuck!

Sitting on the bed and holding my head, I hear the shower while I try to put all my memories of yesterday in order.

The shower stopped... a few minutes after, Aia steps out wrapped in a huge towel.

“Ah~ That did it!”

I look up at her.

“Are you all right, Aia?” I ask her.

“Yeah,” she blushes, looks away, then back at me again, “you look awful, Kira.” She sits down at my side. “Don’t overthink the stuff we said each other yesternight, Kira. We were drunk. But it was good...”

“What do you mean?”

“It was good that we talked, even if we were unsteady...” she sighs but smiles, “I won’t inquire what’s going on between you and Enya, nor will I try to get you together, I promise. You’re right, it doesn’t concern me. But you don’t have to reject her because of me.”

“Aia...” I sigh with a heavy head, “I think I said it’s not only because of you. There are more factors, I made promises I can’t break. Plus, things go so fast nowadays, so straightforward... I can’t cope with all this. I rejected Enya because I care for her.”

“Oh? You mean, you like her? But then, why did you reject her?”

I sigh, “I don’t know how’s nowadays, Aia. I don’t know how your relationships work. I have rarely been in love in my life... in fact... only twice I was truly in love...”

“No way... Kira... But—”

“Yeah... the rumors...” I sigh. “I am, was at least, a womanizer. Yeah, that’s true. But most were temporal sexual relationships. Not couples or deeper relationships except with two women.”

“Kira...”

She embraces me gently.

“It might sound strange, but I care too much about Enya and you to have a simple one-nighter. I mean, sure, I’ve met you two weeks ago... but... Ahh~” I sigh deeply. “I don’t know what to think anymore... It’s so strange for me... My old me would have jumped on Enya immediately... I would make direct approaches on you, Aia... But... somehow... I can’t do it...”

“Wow... Kira...” She hugs me strongly. “Sorry...” she whispers, “I didn’t know that you feel that uncertain.”

“It feels as if I’m thrown out of my being...” I sigh.

“Then don’t force things, Kira,” she whispers caring. “The last two weeks were hectic. You need your time too.”

“Yeah...”

“Kira...”

“Yeah?”

“I...”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry...”

“Why?”

“I would...”

“You would?”

“Go further... if I could.”

I look at her, her face is deep purple, her lips curl a bit up, but I notice a huge uncertainty in her eyes.

“Aia... Don’t force yourself into something you don’t want. I said it before, I think, that I don’t want to hurt you in any way. I am a bit lost, and act not my usual way. It throws me out of balance. I like you, it’s true, but I don’t know how to react to your ways, nor to Enya’s.”

“Kira...” she sighs relieved. “You’ve rejected her because you don’t know how to treat her? And me?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “I don’t know how to treat both of you. I mean, in my usual ways. I don’t know if it’s because of my cryopreservation, this new environment... or...”

“Or?”

“Simply... you two...”

“What do you mean?”

“Your way of being yourself. I don’t know, I can’t say it properly. I only know that I need my time. I would love to correspond to you. But right now, I wouldn’t know how to react, nor if I could accept your advances.”

“Wow... Kira...”

“I don’t mean to disregard your confession, nor Enya’s. I like you, both of you. But right now, I’m so uncertain about what is happening to me. I think I said something the like during my tests, and now it’s showing... I wasn’t sure then, but now... I don’t know,” I sigh, “this—I don’t know myself anymore...”

She embraces me a bit stronger.

“Kira...” she sighs in relive. “I don’t get all of it. But you are clearly tormented by it. I’ll be here to listen to you when in need. Now, I think you should take a good shower and relax a bit.”

“Yeah, thanks, Aia.”

“You’re welcome,” she giggles and let me free from her embrace.

I hit the shower. Ahh~ that’s it~

What was all that I blurted out right now? I suddenly relaxed in Aia’s arms and a sudden stream of self-doubt and anxiousnesses came to surface...

What happened? No, rather, is all I told her the truth? It simply felt like it. And that strange dream I’ve had this night... About Aia and Enya... It was as if I knew them for the longest time in there... and...

I shake my head and begin to lather my scalp and long hair.

True, I'm uncertain in many ways, but why with the girls? I've always been the fast moving one, the aggressive, almost rash acting, flirter. I'm mesmerized by Aia, enchanted by Enya, and I'm getting crazy... Not really the latter, but I'm almost freaking out by my own behavior.

I sigh as I wash the shampoo off. Finally clean...

“You're looking better, Kira,” smiles Aia wearing her blue dress she wore yesterday all day.

“Yeah... I needed that shower...”

“Perhaps, you need a bit time for yourself, Kira. Why don't you take your Falcon and simply pilot it around the Sol System for a time?”

“Good idea, Aia,” I nod.

We take the spacebus to New Angeles and there an airbus to *our* neighborhood.

Once reaching *our* home and having changed my clothes, I go to the garage and take my scooter. In no time I'm at the CreativeTruck.

Kim shows me how to unhook my Falcon from the servicing piping, and I blast into the skies.

That's it... my Falcon and me alone. In space. I sigh deeply. I put a CD into my vintage stereo, «No fear...» That's it... «...no pain...» I sigh deeply. «...like the king of the sky...»

For several hours I *drive* aimlessly around the Sol System, without a route to take...

So many things go through my mind...

My reactions towards the girls, my own behavior towards them... this isn't normal...

I feel pressure... but not the one of being considered *the best of the best*, nor for being an Ace of Aces, nor for being an Awakened, and surely not for being the Phoenix. Or am I?

Is this pressure coming from the outside, or from my insides? I can't make a clear picture of it...

Right now... it's just my Falcon and me... this is relaxing...

The view of stars, planets, the whole galaxy... So peaceful...

I program the autopilot to Jupiter, and simply stare out of the windscreen. Even if the view is enhanced by the AR system, it relaxes me.

I sigh deeply... I shouldn't be pondering about myself too much. I should go with the flow as always... but is it the right thing to do? Aia... I sigh again. What's going through this enchanting alien's mind? The contrast of her emotional behavior while drunk and her clear mind when sober...

And that dream?

The stars are beautiful...



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway ~ A12 ~ Cargo 1 & 2: R u Sirius?

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Epecially to

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