

# Space Highway

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## The Awakened

### A14 ~ All Systems Down!

“Aahh~” I exhale the smoke in a long, deep sigh.

The last three and a half weeks went by flying... Most of it at the helm of my Falcon. Truth to be said, *driving* a truck nowadays is quite boring... I know, I know, I’ve told already...

I sigh again.

All this automation... the only exciting part of *piloting* is the docking and undocking, or when I’m inside a station area.

The rest of my life, well, is more exciting thanks to my friends, the most *exciting* ones being Enya and Aia.

A long, deep sigh leaves my lungs again.

Aia... I don’t get this woman... all around her is exciting, her being, her body, her way... all of her. Our actual relationship should be labeled as “difficult to define”. Sometimes she acts as if we are a couple, at home at least, and other times quite coldly trying to define the limits of our relationship. Mostly it is something in between... nothing clear.

But she has me mesmerized!

Even when I’ve met Xivaz, Aia came to my mind more often than not, and more while sleeping with her... It has to be because both are alien women, it has to be. Isn’t it?

This feeling of uncertainty has been chasing me ever since I've slept with Xivaz. It was great, no denying it. I felt alive, but still haunted, somewhat. I don't get nowadays relationships, not a bit. How is it that I, the womanizer Phoenix, has slept with only one woman in two months?

I am falling for Aia deeply, I am sure about it, I think...

How is it possible? I mean, yeah, I've been in love, truly in love... twice... and the rest... I kept sleeping around. Lovers? Sometimes, over a dozen at once... Fuckbuddies? Even more... Girlfriends? Truly a girlfriend, one. Maria.

I sigh as drop the butt into the zero-G-ashtray and light yet another fag.

Maria... What might have happened to her since the last time I've seen her? Her father drove us apart and sold all my possessions, with the exception of my old Falcon, as retaliation for having deflowered and disgraced her... Nonsense, she wasn't a virgin when I've met her, and I truly loved her. Her father and his imposed *debt* brought me here, to this century. I am not sure if thanking him or not for this...

But I still wonder what happened to her. I just hope her father did not do her harm, even if... I was never there to help her...

Fuck...

I sigh again trying to banish this thought.

I am here now, nothing I can change. I have to look forward, not dwell on my past.

It's my twenty-ninth cargo already... and I'm on route to a binary system whose name I cannot pronounce in the constellation of Fornax. Technically, both stars are classified as HD 20781 and HD 20782, whatever that means...

I have a full cargo of building material at my back, that's slightly over three-hundred-forty-five metric kilotons... and have still half the way in front of me. One and a half parsec ahead is a space-city where I will have a brief stop-over to eat and relax.

I throw the second butt into the ashtray and begin to sing along the song blaring out from my *ancient* stereo.

"... *between the sacred silen—*"

Silence...

“Huh?”

Absolute, utter silence...

Absolute, utter darkness...

I blink... Not a dream...

All screens are dark...

*Whoop, whoop, whoop!*

An alarm...

A small screen reads ‘General failure! Sending emergency signal. Habitat undamaged. Wait for aid. Checklist: A54. Error code: G-20193.412.’ That’s it...

I press a button, one of the few physical buttons, at the right of a splashing red light.

Finally... the deafening sound stops.

“What the fuck happened?”

Just the emergency lights are on inside the cabin, the rest is offline.

Let’s consult the emergency checklist...

“Fuck!”

I cannot go through the checklist! It’s in the board computer!

There should be a *manual* checklist for this...

I search around, nothing...

Let’s check the terminal...

“Huh?” No signal... “What the fuck?”

Okay... keep calm...

I should have the manuals downloaded on my DigiBook. Let’s check.

Hurray! There they are!

Let's see...

Ah! Here! General failure... checklist A54, error code G-20193.

Uh-huh... okay... that's... "bullshit!"

I'm fucked...

'In case of a general failure G-20193 in which no visible system is functioning, be advised that the oxygen reserve might be limited. Do not speak excessively and under no circumstances consume smoking products.'

Fuck!

'An automatic emergency message is being emitted until a mechanic is on board. Please wait for the personnel to arrive.'

Seriously? No troubleshooting advice?

I keep on checking the truck's manual.

No troubleshooting advice whatsoever...

At least I've learned why my terminal has no signal, as space-trucks are shielded from any kind of radiation, no data-signal can reach its insides. The truck's communication system replicates the data-signal from the outside inside the cabin, like an ancient cell tower. Great...

What should I do?

The only thing I can do is wait...

The sight through the windscreen is strange... I only see a mass of glittering points, the stars. Where are the planets, asteroids and other stuff highlighted by the AR? Nowhere to be seen. Now I truly understand the power of the AR, without it, I'm blind...

"For the fuck's sake! I hate to wait!"

Two hours already went by and no sign of rescue, mechanics or whatever should arrive.

I am getting anxious. I need a fag, now! But I can't... The truck's air system is in passive mode, meaning, it only recycles the air by a simple passive scrubber.

Unsure about all the technical terms in the manual, I understand that the oxygen on board is limited and that I cannot smoke. Fuck!

Another hour passes painfully slowly...

«...Icon... Falcon... *du* read?»

Finally!

“I do read. Are you able to locate us?”

«*Affirmativ!* Be *dort* in twenty *Minuten.*»

“Okay, thanks.”

Huh? This guy speaks a bit strange... like a mixture of two languages.

Finally! The sound of a craft docking at my Falcon. I didn't even see it coming.

I float towards the pressurization cabin and await my rescuer.

*Click! Clonk! Bang! Creek...*

The door opens and a skinny guy, about my height, appears in front of me. He is pale white and has long dark blond hair and a styled beard. A pair of glasses hides small blue eyes. Either his eyes are small, or his glasses that strong...

Behind him, a further strange guy floats, he's also tall but tanned almost golden.

“Hi! *Ich* am Marts. *Ich bin der Rfz-Mechaniker.* *Ich* mean, *der* mechanic,” he greets me.

“Hi, I'm Kira,” I say wondering about his *accent*.

“This is Cedreipeoh, *mein Helfer.*”

“Okay...” I blink, then greet the other guy, “Hi!”

“Oh, my, hello, sir!”

No fuck... again surrounded by freaks...

“So! *Was* is broken?”

“Ugh... anything...”

“Anything? Cool!” the guy laughs.

“Huh?”

“Time to a have a *Blick...*” the guy says as he almost pushes me into the back of the habitat.

The other guy follows him to the cabin.

“Excuse us, sir...” he cordially says.

I wonder about their behavior.

“*Ja, das sieht nicht gut aus...*”

“Huh? In English, please.”

“Oh, *Sorry*. Doesn't look good.”

“I suppose...” I shrug, “I've guessed that much.”

“Let's have a look *im Bauch...*”

“Huh?”

“How do say it? Belly?” he points at the floor.

“You mean the hold beneath the cabin?”

“*Ja, genau,*” he nods.

The other guy already opens the trapdoor to the manhole. Sighing, I observe the two floating down. Now that they mention it, I've never been down there in zero-G, and Kim had not enough time to explain me everything down there.

I look down into the hold.

“Okay,” this Marts says, “let's check the *Rechner.*”

“Yessir!” the other guy answers and begins to pull switches. He turns around, “No energy flow reaching these machines, sir.” Don't say, Sherlock.

“The... ah... *Sicherungskasten...* how do you say it?”

“The fuse box, sir?”

“*Ja, genau!*”

“Sir! Half the fuses are burnt out!”

“*Was?* Really?”

“Yessir!”

“How are they burnt out?” I ask. “They are switches...”

“They are, sir...” Cedrei... fuck, I call him C-3PO, explains. “The switches snapped and burnt out, sir.”

“Okay...” I sigh. “Now what?”

“We’ll switch *die* switches!” Marts laughs at his own wordplay. I just sigh again. Just fix it...

After an hour they finally have switched out all the burnt out fuses.

“Okay, Cedreipeoh, turn the *Strom* on.”

“Yessir!”

*Flash! Clack! Clack! Clack! Pop! Fizz!*

“*Verdammt!*”

“Fuck!” I scream at the sight of sparks and smokes coming out from the fuse box and from behind the server racks.

C-3PO is faster than me and grabs the nearest fire extinguisher and puts the possible flame out.

“That’s not intended...” grins Marts.

“No fuck! You almost set my Falcon ablaze!” I shout angrily.

“Sorry, sorry. But *Schlimm* it is, if the—ah, fuses blow out this way. An important *Kurzschluss* it must be.”

“What’s that?”

“A short-circuit, sir,” translates C-3PO.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “But for fuck’s sake... what can we do now?”

“We *müssen* the source find.”

“Okay...” I sigh and float back upwards, but pop my head back down, “Is there a way to, at least, turn on the filters? I need a fag.”

“Sorry... no... *und* our *Schiff* has no filter for *Raucher*...”

Oh! Fuck! All! This!

Over an hour later, I look down again... It’s a total mess... Half of the server-racks are taken apart, the *mechanics* are halfway behind all the hardware normally managing my truck and are checking cables...

I’m hungry...

I open the fridge and sigh. Most of the food is insta-food which requires the microwave to work, no power, no insta-food. Fuck! I grab the only thing edible without warming up, a *canned* sandwich. I open the hard wrapper and take the cold sandwich out...

At least the cokes are still drinkable, albeit not as cold as they should be...

Another hour goes by, and another one, yet another hour...

Fuck! Is should be leaving the space-city Solaris III by now, after having eaten something deliciously fresh. And here I am, eating my second *sadwich*, and watering it down with lukewarm coke...

The hold looks sadder and messier by the hour... They haven’t found the problem yet...

I’m tired, angry and anxious. I want to scream...

«...on... Falcon! Do you read?» blares out of the speaker in the cabin. Seems the emergency channel’s batteries have still some power left...

I float to the cabin.

«Kira! Do you read?»

“Enya!” I exclaim relieved. Finally someone reliable!

«Kira! Are you okay?»

“Yeah, somewhat. But, my Falcon is fucked up...”

«I received your emergency call. Can I dock at your Falcon?»

“A mechanics-vessel is docked right now...”

“No worries, sir.” I turn around startled. C-3PO entered the cabin and says, “Our vessel has two docks. Your friend can dock there. I will open it.”

“Thanks.”

«Got it! I’m pinpointing your location, in ten I’ll be there!»

“Thanks, Enya.”

I *stand*—float in front of the second pressurization cabin of the mechanics-vessel and wait for Enya.

“Kira!”

She floats towards me and embraces me strongly. Overtaken by her sudden *jump*, I embrace her and we are floating around the room.

*Bonk!*

“Ouch!”

I just hit my head on the ceiling, what else could happen?

“Aww~ Sorry, Kira!” Enya pushes us back into the center of the room and gently rubs my head like I’m a kid. “What happened?”

I sigh while she frees me from her hug.

“Some electrical problem, it seems... they are on it for several hours now...”

“Fuck... Let’s have a look...”

We look down into the hold.

“How is it?” asks Enya.

“Bad... haven't found *das Problem*...” tells Marts from the mess.

“Shit...” Enya sighs. “So no ETA, right?”

“Nope.”

“Then we have to do something right now...”

“Huh?” I blink.

“What?” the mechanic asks.

“We are drifting into a restricted zone... towards a black hole.”

“No fuck!” I almost scream.

“Really?” the mechanic asks in an uninterested tone.

“Can't you tow the Falcon towards Solaris III?” asks Enya.

“Sorry, miss, we cannot,” says C-3PO, “at least not with the cargo. Too much drag...”

“What drag?” I ask angrily. “We are in open space!”

Enya stops me and shakes her head.

“He's right. We cannot tow the cargo, although *drag* is not the right word to use here. We use it to say that there are too many interferences.”

“Oh...” I sigh.

“But you could tow the Falcon alone, right?” she asks the mechanics' assistant.

“Sure, miss,” he nods.

“Okay...” Enya sighs. “Then we couple the cargo holds to my Cheetah.”

“Good plan,” says C-3PO.

“Hah!” We all startle at Marts outcry. “Found it!”

“You did? Finally!”

He pulls out from behind the mess and shows a small blackened wire.

“That's it?” I scream.

“Yup! *Dieses* cable. It's burnt.”

“I see that...”

“A, how do you say?”

“Short-circuit,” his assistant says.

“Yes! A short-circuit.”

“A simple, one-inch wire brought down my whole Falcon?” I scream angrily again.

“Don’t, Kira...” Enya holds me back. “How long till you have fixed it?” she asks the mechanic.

“*Keine Ahnung...* Some hours, perhaps...” he simply shrugs.

“Fuck!” I shout again.

“Kira... no...” Enya holds me back again and shakes her head. “We have to couple the cargo to my Cheetah. There is no time to lose. In one hour we will enter the restricted zone. No big towing vessel is nearby. We have to do this alone.”

“Enya...” I look at her baffled but nod.

“I keep fixing...” the mechanic simply says and dives back into the mess. “Ah, Cedreipeoh, help them out from our *Schiff*.”

“Yessir.”

“Okay,” Enya says confidently. “Kira, get your space-suit, we have to space-walk.”

“Whaaaat?” I scream. “Space-walk?”

“Yeah...” she nods. “There is no other way. As your Falcon has no power, we have to manually unhook the holds and push them into position so my Cheetah can couple them automatically.”

“But... I’ve never done a space-walk before...”

“You haven’t?” Enya blinks. “Oh, right... Sorry, Kira. But I cannot do it alone.”

“Right...” I sigh deeply. “Okay, I do it.”

“Great! That’s the Phoenix!” she giggles.

“But... I—”

“Don’t worry, Kira. I help you.”

“Okay,” I sigh again. “I’m in your hands.”

Enya floats nearer and purrs while she strokes her head against mine, like a kitten.

“You are...” she purrs and giggles.

“Enya...” I sigh yet again.

She just giggles and pushes herself up towards the habitat. I follow her while trying not to look up her short skirt.

“Get your suit and come to my Cheetah,” she tells as she pushes herself towards the doors of my Falcon.

“Okay...”

As I enter Enya’s Cheetah, my mute terminal suddenly begins to chime loudly, several times... I look at it.

“Oh, fuck! So many missed calls! Over twenty from... you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Enya blushes, “I received the emergency call from your Falcon while on route to Solaris III. I figured that you will be alright, as help is normally quite fast to arrive. When I arrived there, I tried to call you, to check on you, but I couldn’t get through. While I was on my stop-over, I called you many times. Then I called Aia and Jim, if they know something... I even called Yuuki... but nobody knew what’s happening to you...”

“I have fifteen lost calls from Aia, ten from Jim and five from the ISTM Central...”

“They surely tried to contact you after I called them... I asked Yuuki for permission to look for you as I’m without cargo until tomorrow, she agreed.”

“Then better call them to tell them I’m okay...”

“Yeah. Come.”

She floats into the cabin of her Cheetah and turns on the communication console.

“Let’s call Aia first, she is worried to death...” tells Enya while selecting her contact.

«Enya? Have you found Kira?» Aia immediately asks even before turning the camera on.

“Yeah...” giggles Enya.

“I’m okay, Aia. Thank you, and sorry for making you worry.”

«Kira...» she sighs while her face appears on the screen. «Thank goodness you are all right. What happened?»

“I had some electrical failure... I don’t get it at all, I only know that I was without power the whole time.”

«Fuck! No wonder we couldn’t contact you.»

“Yeah,” says Enya. “Sorry to interrupt you, but we have a lot of work ahead. We need to hook up his cargo to my Cheetah and leave this place, we’re drifting into a danger zone.”

«No way!» Aia startles, but recomposes herself immediately. «Then I won’t hold you up, but keep me posted.»

“Sure,” nods Enya. “We call you when we’re back on track.”

«Thank you, Enya. And good luck, both.»

“Thanks,” we both say.

«Ah, and Kira?»

“Yes?”

«Keep safe.»

“I—I will.”

«See you...»

“Bye.” “Bye-bye~”

Enya giggles and smirks at me.

“Keep safe, Kira~” she purrs sultry.

“Enya...” I sigh.

Smirking, she selects Jim’s contact.

«Hey! Cutie-Kitty! Found Kira yet?»

“Sure pal. She found me,” I laugh.

«Fuck me! Whatcha happenin’?»

Again, I explain what happened. And again, Enya explains what we’ll do.

«Good luck then! Fo’ both of ya! See ya!»

“Bye~bye~” giggles Enya.

And finally, we call Yuuki. Isn’t it strange that we’re calling directly the secretary of the owner?

«Hello, Enya. Any news?»

“Yeah, Kira is on board my Cheetah.”

«*Kamisama arigatou!*» Yuuki cries out in relief. I’ve never seen her show emotions till now... Hastily she recomposes herself and asks, «How are you, Kira-san?»

“Given the circumstances, not bad,” I sigh.

«Good to hear. What is your procedure now?»

“We have to couple the cargo holds to my Cheetah. We cannot tow the Falcon and cargo to a safe haven, and we’re moving towards a danger-zone.”

«Repairs will not be finished in time?»

“No,” Enya says bluntly, “and won’t be for several hours... Dunno if the mechanic can even fix it... Seems a bit unreliable to me.”

«Oh... Understood. I will look what I can do about the cargo. Please call me in when you are on your way to Solaris III.»

“We will. Bye~”

«*Matane...*»

“*Jaane...*”

Enya looks at me.

“What was that the first thing she said? I get that the last two things you said were saying bye.”

“Ah? *Kamisama arigatou?*” She nods. “It means *thank god.*”

“Oh? Is she a believer?” Enya asks innocently.

“I don’t know, it can also just be a form of saying *thank goodness.*”

“Oh! Makes sense,” she giggles. “Now, into our space-suits and into your maiden space-walk,” she tells already taking her suit from the closet just behind the copilot’s seat.

“Enya...” I sigh. “Wha—”

“Huh? What’s it?”

“You’re undressing here?”

“Duh! You can’t wear clothes other than underwear in a space-suit...”

“I know, but—ah, fuck it!”

I resign myself to let her undress, yet again, in front of me.

Fuck! Is she hot!

I shake my head, no! It’s not the moment for that! Just get into the space-suit and leave this place!

Sighing, I begin to undress while Enya seems to enjoy the show, both shows. She enjoys watching me undressing and giving me a strip-show... Enya...

She already wears her suit while I still struggle getting into mine.

“Kira...” She blinks. “It’s really your first time putting this on alone?”

“Yeah...” I sigh. “I only had one lesson on emergency procedures yet. In two days it would be my second one...”

“Shit... Sorry, Kira.”

“Why? It’s not your fault.”

Enya giggles.

“Thanks, Kira. Here, let me help you.” She helps me put on the upper part of the suit. “Here... Now, pass your arm through here. Good. Now, straighten up.”

“Thanks...”

Finally, I’m wearing the suit properly.

*Click! Fsshh!*

The suit becomes airtight after closing the last piece. Just the helmet and the gloves are left.

It really feels strange... like a diving suit, but thicker and slightly less flexible with connection for a kind of backpack for the oxygen tanks. At least it’s not one of those huge cumbersome space-suits from the twentieth century.

“Your helmet...” Enya says and slowly slides the helmet over my head. “Your hair...” she purrs and gently pushes it into the helmet, “it’s beautiful...”

“Huh?”

“I said, your hair, it’s beautiful,” she giggles.

“Tha—thanks.”

She just giggles again, and attaches the helmet to the suit.

“Don’t close the visor until we’re in the pressurization cabin. When you close it, the oxygen generator activates automatically.”

“Thanks, Enya.”

“You’re welcome,” she giggles and puts her own helmet on. Two seconds later, “Ready. Now the gloves.”

Is she fast...

She helps me with the gloves and then she puts her own on.

“Now, I’ll detach my Cheetah from this vessel and put it parallel to your Falcon.”

“Understood.”

Enya takes control of her Cheetah and talks with that strange helper guy from the mechanic vessel.

Ten minutes later, Enya secures her truck to mine.

“These are anchoring cables,” she explains, “they automatically hook to specifically designed anchor points of your Falcon. They work even without power. Under normal circumstances, they would also hook into your navigational system to keep both trucks on the same vector, but won’t work now. My Cheetah does all the calculations to keep on the same vector.”

“Wow...”

“Okay... done. Now we just need to attach the backpacks to our space-suits...”

After attaching the backpacks, we enter the pressurization cabin.

“Now, close your visor. Don’t worry, you won’t be able to open it again until we’re back in here.”

“Great...” I sigh and close the visor of the helmet.

Immediately, I notice the oxygen generator activating while a simple AR appears on the visor of the helmet.

«On the top, you’ll notice a gauge. It’s your oxygen level. Although the suit has a passive scrubber, doing hard work in space requires the active one which feeds on the oxygen tank. If it goes into the orange, tell me and we’ll get for more oxygen.»

“Okay.”

«We need part of our oxygen tanks for the boosters installed into the backpack. Meaning, we have to be careful not to make too much use of them.»

“Understood.”

«Don’t worry about talking, we should have enough oxygen for at least two hours and we’ll use some scooters for the long *walks*.»

“Scooters?”

«Yeah, like DPV's, ah—those undersea-scooters divers use...»

“Oh, got it.”

«We get them once outside.»

“Huh?”

«You'll see...»

After some minutes, a green light announces that the hull's door can be opened.

Enya pushes some buttons and the door opens.

I gasp... the empty space, at my feet...

«Kira, try to breathe normally, or you'll get hyperventilated. I know that this emptiness in front of you is scary, but you are not alone. I'm here too. I've gone through this too. Here...»

I look down as she hooks a kind of carabiner into one of the rings attached to my belt.

«With this,» she explains, «you won't drift away. Remember to always hook yourself to the fuselage you're working on.»

“Got it...” I try to sound in control.

But honestly... I'm scared to death! Enya's presence is reassuring, and it is kind of exciting. But I'm still scared of this emptiness in front of me.

Enya pushes herself out of her truck and floats down.

«Follow me slowly, Kira. Don't use too much force or you'll float away.»

“Go—got it...”

I take a step... this eery feeling of falling down vanishes. I'm floating in space. But it only vanishes in appearance... I feel like falling down!

«Kira! Stop!»

“Huh?”

She is suddenly at my side, embracing me.

«You're hyperventilating. Relax. You're not falling, you're floating. Like inside of the truck in zero-G.»

True... I'm panicking... a gauge on the AR indicates that I'm breathing abnormally, out of rhythm.

"I—I'm scared..." I blurt out.

«I know, Kira,» Enya says in a sweet voice. «It's scary. But, look at me...» She moves in front of me and I am able to see her face through our helmets' visors. She is completely calm and gifts me a beautiful smile. «I'm here too. You're not alone in this vast space. I know this is your first time out here and that it's scary, but think of it as part of—» her voice trails to silence.

"What?"

She smiles again.

«Think of it as a date!» she giggles warmly.

"A date?"

«Yeah, you're having a date with me in open space.»

"Not sure if—"

«Just do it, Kira. Think of it as something nice, with me, together.»

"I—I'll try..."

«Good!» she giggles, then slowly moves away. «Follow me, Kira. A good date needs a good ride, doesn't it?» she giggles again.

Right... oh! She's trying to calm me down, making it look like a date... okay... I sigh deeply, go with the flow.

Slowly, I keep up with her following the Cheetah's hull downwards. I can only tell that it is downwards in reference to her truck...

I always look at her, trying to avoid the emptiness behind me. It's not as easy as it looks.

I've always dreamt to float in space, to do a space-walk. Now that I'm here... I'm in panic... such a downer... why do I feel like that? I don't know... this anxiety...

«Kira...»

“Huh?”

«Try to concentrate on me and our task at hand. Don't let your thoughts follow your anxiety about this place.»

“Ra—right...”

«It's better we keep talking,» I hear her sighing, «sorry...»

“Why?”

«For putting you in this place...»

“It's not your fault, Enya.”

«I know,» she sighs again. «But I pushed you to come with me.»

“You can't do it alone, right?”

«True. But—»

“Then don't feel sorry,” I try to sound strong. “It's reality. We just have to do it.”

«You're something, Kira,» she giggles. «Even under these circumstances, you're pushing through.»

“Enya...”

«I know... Ah! Here...» She points at a door in the *belly* of her truck. «This is the hold's outer door. And next to it, there is an auxiliary door.»

“I didn't know that...” I blurt out.

«Now you know,» she giggles. «This is a separate hold for space-walk equipment. It holds the scooters, boosters, oxygen tanks and other stuff we need.»

“Okay...”

Oh... my anxiety is slowly fading. Right, let's focus on the task.

Enya pushes a kind of tile on the side of the auxiliary door and a touch panel appears. She types a code in...

«As our gloves do not have fingerprints and are radiation-shielded, we have to input a code. It's the same as your emergency code to enter your truck, if neither the fingerprint nor the chip-reader work.»

“Got it.”

The door opens and a smallish hold opens. It is filled with strange stuff.

«We need two scooters... Here, this is yours.»

Enya hands me a small torpedo-shaped gadget. It has handles and a cord with a carabiner attached to it.

Instinctively, I hook the carabiner into another ring on my belt.

«Good,» Enya giggles. «Seems you got it. Now, attach this to your leg.»

“A knife?”

«Something the like. It's for emergency use only. You use it to cut the cord to the scooter if it goes havoc.»

“Is—is this usual?”

«No, no... just in case.»

“Okay...”

I attach the knife to my right leg.

«Here...»

She hands me a strange gadget which looks like a fishing reel. The end of the *flyline* has another carabiner, and a strange looking harness is attached to the reel.

“What's that?”

«Just, a sec...» She gets another gadget for herself. «You have to step into the harness like this...» She demonstrates and I imitate her. «You fix it like this...» I do it. «And now you attach this cable to this jack.»

“Oh!”

In my visor's AR, a message appears, 'Fastening Reel Attached. Type: Nano-carbofiber alloy. Maximum length: 1km. Strength: 1000 kN.'

«It has one button on each side. On the left, is the hold button. Once pressed, the reel is locked and won't free more cord. Press it again to let it reel out. On the right, the cord is reeled in, pulling you towards the object its carabiner is attached to.»

“Got it. Cool!”

Enya giggles at my blurt-out.

«Now, attach these gadgets to your scooter...»

She only hands me a cable with a carabiner. My eyes follow the cable and reach to a huge, strange-looking gadget. Four of them...

“What are these for?”

«These are the boosters we'll use to move the cargo holds into position to couple them to me Cheetah.»

“Oh... But... the holds have their own boosters...”

«Yeah, they have,» Enya seems to nod, but I can only guess, as the space-suits with their helmets don't allow it. «But first we need to uncouple them from your Falcon, that's these babies' job.» She pats one of the gadgets.

Enya hooks other gadgets to her scooter. One of them looks like a huge red box...

«This is our emergency kit. It holds a huge oxygen tank and first aid stuff.»

“Great.”

«Now we'll have to reach your Falcon's holds. We'll keep on cabled, but have to be some meters apart. Try to focus either on your Falcon or on me. If you need to stop, please tell me. I don't want you to get lost to spatial disorientation and space-anxiety.»

“Go—got it.”

«Don't worry. Once we're there, you won't notice anything,» she looks at me and smiles.

Carefully, I turn the handle of my space-scooter and I'm pulled along with it.

Shit! My anxiety is coming back! This vast emptiness beneath...

I look at Enya. She seems quite relaxed and used to it. Somehow, looking at her relaxes me.

«You're doing great, Kira. Keep on this way.»

We reach the Falcon's back, where the outer boosters are. There is the first coupling ring we have to detach.

Enya kept the whole time talking with me about trivial stuff and about the procedures. It helped me a lot to keep as calm as possible. Even so, my heart-rate is at the upper limit, as the AR of my helmet tells.

She shows the manual emergency uncoupling of the cargo hold. Quite easy... for now.

«Okay. Now, hand over one of the boosters...»

“Okay.”

I push one of the boosters towards her, once she got hold of it, I release its carabiner from my scooter.

Enya attaches the booster to a specific place on the coupling ring.

We repeat the same procedure on three other locations of the same ring. Now I get it... these are control-boosters.

«Bingo~» Enya sings. «Now we can use the holds' boosters via remote control from this little gadget.»

She points at a yellow box she had floating behind her.

“Cool.”

«Now, let's move away... Ah... Take my hand.»

“Huh?”

«We have to move to empty space, or the blasts from the boosters would push us away.»

I take her hand and she throttles her scooter up.

Thanks, Enya... my anxiety isn't increasing. Despite we hold hands through really thick gloves, it seems like I feel her warmth. Even if it's imaginary, it helps me a lot.

Enya stops and turns us around. We're quite away from the Cheetah, the mechanic's craft, and the Falcon and its load. One-hundred-fifty meters, according to the AR of my helmet.

«Okay, now let's remote control the holds. If you need it, Kira, hold me, okay?»

“Ye—yeah...”

I wrap my arms around her waist, it kinda comforts me.

Enya giggles.

«Oh, Kira...» she purrs. «That's more like a date,» she giggles again. «It's okay. Now look...»

She pops the yellow box open, and a display, control buttons and a joystick appear.

«Can you hold it?» she simply asks.

“Su—sure...”

Reaching around her, I hold the yellow remote control and she begins to input commands.

In awe, I see the holds' boosters come alive and the whole three-hundred-forty-five metric kilotons of cargo disengages from my Falcon.

Carefully, Enya manipulates the joystick and the holds begin to align with her Cheetah.

Her truck comes alive and I'm able to see the control beams from her truck trying to sync with the ones from the first coupling ring.

«Gotcha!» Enya giggles.

She shuts the control remote down and closes the box.

“And now?” I ask her.

«We have to reach my Cheetah's boosters. There we have to unlock the back-booster, and fix it to your Falcon. Then we're able to couple the cargo to my Cheetah.»

“And the cargo? I mean... right now it's floating in open space...”

«True, but it's controlled by my Cheetah. Now there is no danger it will stray away. At least while there is no bigger interference as we have right now.»

“Got it... then we have to work fast...”

«Exactly. I'm sorry to push you, Kira, but we have to work faster.»

“It's okay, Enya. I'll get over it.”

«Great! Now, take my hand again we go back.»

“Okay...”

This time it's easier for me. I always have both our trucks and the mechanics' vessel in sight.

We reach her truck in no time and begin to work on her Cheetah's inner boosters. It's the part which is normally attached to the end of the cargo. The holds float at mere fifty meters behind us, kinda scary to have such huge mass at my back.

«Kira, I need your help.»

“Sure.”

«Now listen to me...»

“Huh?”

«I know it's scary, but I absolutely need your help, I cannot do it alone.»

“What is it?”

«I need you to reach the coupling ring, detach the boosters we attached there, and shuttle them to me.»

“What? I mean... yeah... I—I'll manage.”

«Thanks, Kira. Don't worry, you'll be attached through the reel to the Cheetah, here...» she says while taking the carabiner from my reel and hooking it into a loop at her side.

She embraces me gently.

«I know you can do it.»

“Tha—thanks, Enya.”

I get hold of the scooter and look at my destination on the coupling ring. It's just fifty meters. I can do it.

«You're doing great, Kira! You're already half-way through.»

Her words reassure me. I can do it. I focus on my destination. I won't look down, nor up, nor sidewise, just at the booster attached to the coupling ring.

*Huff, huff...* Try to keep calm.

«Almost there, Kira. You're the best! C'mon lo—Kira, you can do it!»

Finally!

I hook a second short cord at one of the nearest hoops next to the booster.

«You're great, Kira! Well done! Now, push the hold button of the reel, get a half-meter cord from the scooter and attach it to the booster and the reel's line.»

I do as told.

She goes on explaining how to detach the booster from the coupling ring.

Done!

«Now push it strongly with one hand while holding on firmly at one of the hoops.»

I understand what she means. If I push without holding onto something, I'll get pushed away too.

I gather my strength and push the booster towards Enya.

«Whoa! A bit too strong! Kira, you don't need to use such force. We've got no gravity here. But anyways, good shot,» she ends giggling. «Now, move to the next one while I attach this one. Are you able to, lo—Kira?»

“Ye—yeah. I’ll manage.”

«Cool! Great work, Kira.»

I sigh. How’s my oxygen? At half. Good. No need to worry then. But what was she trying to say? Twice she interrupted herself and said my name... Shit... I have no time to ponder about this.

I unhook my safety-cord and hook it into the furthest loop I can reach. I repeat this action until I’ve reached the second booster. Hey! It wasn’t too difficult! Either I’m getting the hang of it or I’m calming down.

«Oh! You’re already at the next one? Cool! Superb work, Kira. Do the same as before, but wait till I’m in place.»

“Okay.”

I do as before and once Enya is ready, I send her the next booster.

With each booster I send, it gets easier. The last one was like I’ve done this routinely. Even the force I’ve used to send it to Enya was perfectly measured.

«Absolutely perfect, Kira! Now you can come back. Unhook from the ring and push the right button. The reel will wind in and take you here.»

“Oh—okay.”

Now my anxiety is coming back... this emptiness between us two...

I take a deep breath and push the reel’s button...

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck fuck!”

«What? Kira! Push the hold button! Now!»

I struggle almost helplessly floating two meters from the coupling ring. I’ve forgotten to unhook the safety-cord!

In panic, I fumble on the button of the reel. Finally! But...

«Shit! I’m coming!»

Suddenly, the cargo hold seems so near... don’t say...

My breathing accelerates, sweat breaks out, my heart-rate is off the chart... it can’t be!

In panic, I look for Enya. She's still at Cheetah's back, but with a yellow box in front of her. What? What is happening?

"Eh—Enya!" I suddenly scream, unsure why.

«Hold on Kira! Please, hold on! Look at me. I'm here! Give me a second, I'm there soon! Try to breathe normally. You're hyperventilating! Look at me! I'm right there! Don't move, don't look elsewhere, just at me!»

"I'll try..." I say wavering.

«Don't try! Do it!» she shouts. «I'm coming!»

She hooks the yellow box to a hoop and pushes herself towards me.

I can't see! The visor's getting damp! My sweat! No! No, no, no!

"Enya!" I scream in despair.

«I'm here... Kira,» her sweet voice tells while I feel her arms around me.

"What—"

«It's okay, Kira. Nothing happened. All's alright. I'm here. Don't worry. Come, I'll guide you.»

"I can't see anything..."

«Shit... Okay. Take a deep breath. Can you still read your AR?»

"Yeah..." I sigh in relief.

«Good. What's the condensing factor?»

"Nine point six..." I manage to say while shaking.

«Okay. Give me a sec. I'll connect my suit to yours, and I'll be able to control its configuration.»

"Oh—okay..."

Suddenly, the moisture begins to vanish and I'm able to discern Enya's caring smile.

«It's okay, Kira. We're almost done.»

"What happened?" I manage to ask.

«You forgot to unhook the safety-cord. While reeling in, you pulled the cargo holds with you...»

“What?” I scream in panic again.

«Shh... Don't worry, Kira, it's all fixed now. Come.»

She unhooks the safety-cord and we float back to the Cheetah.

«Kira, are you calmer now?»

“Ye—yeah... I think. Thanks, Enya, and sorry...”

«Don't be, Kira. It's a difficult task, and more if it is your first space-walk. Only experts can do it. You are great that you are able to do so much on your first walk.»

“But I—”

«You did great till now. That mishap could have happened even to the most seasoned one, don't brood over it. Let's finish the work and get back to my Cheetah, okay?»

“Ye—yeah...”

I'm not so convinced... I have the feeling that I've almost fucked up really badly. And my anxiety isn't calming down.

Finally we're ready to disconnect the back-boosters from the Cheetah.

Enya goes through the procedure explaining each minute detail. She's clearly doing it to keep my mind on something else than my anxiety.

Without really noticing it, we already have reached my Falcon with the Cheetah's back-boosters and are connecting them.

“Enya...” I stutter.

«Yeah?»

“My... oxygen level... is in the orange...”

«Okay, don't worry, Kira. We're finishing here. Try to keep calm. In ten minutes we're back on board my Cheetah.»

“I'll try...” I huff.

«Kira? Oh, shit, please, don't hyperventilate again. You have enough oxygen for over half an hour.»

“Half an hour?”

This information kind of relaxes me.

After storing all the gadgets, we reach the Cheetah's door. I hastily pull myself in. Finally back!

Enya calmly pushes the physical button shutting the door and pressurization begins.

«Kira...» Enya looks at me with a gentle smile and opens the visor of my helmet. I take a deep breath. “We're back. You did a great job out there,” she says opening her visor too.

“But...”

“No buts. You did great. Come...”

The door to the Cheetah's habitat opens and we float in.

She moves to the cabin while taking her helmet off.

“Hey, mechanic-guys, do you read?”

«Yessir! I mean, yes ma'am! Is all in order?»

“It is. The cargo just finished coupling successfully and the boosters are coupled to the Falcon. You should now be able to tow it to Solaris III.”

«Will do it, ma'am.»

“Great! We'll see you there. We cannot go full power either, as the boosters are not of the same make. They sync perfectly, but the overall output is reduced by fifteen percent.”

«Understood.»

Enya turns around.

“Kira, you can get out of the suit.”

I simply slump together... if there was gravity, I would have slumped to the floor.

“Kira!” I’m shivering... “Shit! Why haven’t you told me that your anxiety is so bad?”

“So—sorry...”

“C’mon...” she says in a caring voice and leads me back to her living-area.

There, she helps me out of the space-suit.

“Ugh... You’ll need to wash it... you’ve sweated a lot... Better you get a shower...”

“Smoke...”

“Huh?”

“I... need... a... smoke...” I stammer shivering in anxiety.

“Oh, shit...” Enya disappears from my sight. Some eternal seconds later, I notice the texture and shape of a fag between my lips. “Here... Take it in, Kira. Don’t worry about the non-smoking policy. It’s voided for today.” Such a sweet voice...

I take a deep breathe while I inhale the deliciously tranquilizing smoke. This is heaven!

“I’m sorry, Kira. I didn’t notice...”

“It’s okay...” I say in a wavering voice.

“It’s not,” she tells. “We’ll talk about it later. Here, a portable space-ashtray. Just don’t let the ash float around. I have to take control and put us on vector.”

“Yeah...” I sigh relived.

“Are you feeling better, Kira?”

“Yeah, thanks...”

“Great! I’ll turn the artificial gravity on and have a shower. You should take one once I’ve finished.”

“Thanks...”

She’s already down to her underwear while I... oh, shit... I’m the same... but I’m halfway lying on the couch of her living-area.

Slowly, but steadily, my anxiety calms down and is replaced by shame. I feel shame for having panicked. I’m ashamed of my anxiety. I’m ashamed of having lost my cool... shit...

The bathroom door opens and Enya steps out with a towel wrapped around... her head! She’s stark naked face downwards!

“Eh—Enya!”

“Huh? Oh? Are you feeling better? Great!”

“I—I mean...”

“Oh!” She looks down at her naked body, begins to giggle, “Sorry, Kira...” and turns around.

She sways her tail while finishing to dry herself.

Finally, she puts some underwear on.

“You should go and have a shower too, Kira,” she tells turning back to me. “Are you able to do it alone?” she adds sultry.

“I—Of course!”

“Just teasing you,” she giggles. “Don’t take it bad.” As I stand up, she takes some steps towards me. “And please, don’t take it as an insult. I’m not playing with your pride. You did really great outside, there’s no denying it. What happened to you can happen even to seasoned space-walkers and experts. I didn’t take into account your possible anxiety. I’m sorry.”

“Oh...” I blink. “No, no...” I hastily shake my head. “It’s... surely because I haven’t smoked for over half a day...”

“No shit... Kira. You should have told me before we went out on the space-walk. I’d let you smoke a fag.”

“Fuck...” I sigh... “What’s done is done... I need a shower...”

“Do. It will do you well, Kira. Once you’ve finished, we’ll phone the pals.”

I just nod and enter the bathroom. It’s quite cozy and smelling feminine... Enya’s pheromones... shit...

Clean, fresh and back in the cabin, we call Aia and Jim to tell them we’re okay. Both are clearly relieved and ask us to keep them posted on how all will ride out.

«Hello, Enya-chan, Kira-kun,» Yuuki greets us as usual. «I’ve arranged some recovering time for you. Both your cargos will be hauled by other truckers who are staying in Solaris III.»

“Both?” asks Enya.

«Indeed,» Yuuki nods. «You both are way over your working time limits. You need a good rest. I’ve arranged a room for you in the Royal-Sol hotel.»

“Wow...” Enya blinks. “Really?”

«Of course. You both have gone through a stressful episode, you have earned it.»

“But...” Enya seems to protest. I have no clue why... I just enjoy my third fag...

«No buts, Enya-chan. You know our policy for incidents. So, it is all included for the rest of the day until tomorrow afternoon.»

“Thank you, Yuuki-san,” I say relaxed. “I need a time off...”

«You are welcome. The ISTM manager of Solaris III is informed and will take charge of fixing your Falcon and take care of the cargo.»

We reach Solaris III and are greeted by a huge Wigmez wearing an ISTM badge. She is the ISTM manager.

Coincidentally, my Falcon reaches the port while we go through the paperwork. At least, I'm able to get a rucksack filled with fresh clothes.

“No fuck!”

“Holy shit!”

“Am I'm dreaming?”

“Then we share the dream, Enya...”

We stepped into a luxury suite of the Royal-Sol hotel. Is this real?

“Then let's enjoy it!” Enya immediately jumps into the huge room. “Wow! A jacuzzi! A full bar! Two huge king-size beds! A huge video-wall! And look at that view!”

I have to smile at her reaction.

We enjoy a rich lunch and I go back to the suite while Enya went to talk with the ISTM manager. She basically sent me to recover.

So many things go through my mind right now... I lie down on the huge sofa and drift into sleep. But I can't relax... my mind is too restless...

A soft breeze and gentle strokes over my face awake me.

“Hi, Kira~” Enya sings softly brushing my hair out of my face.

“Hi, Enya.”

She's sitting at my side on the sofa.

“Care for a splash in the jacuzzi?” she asks playfully.

“Yeah...”

“I'll go change...”

“Okay...”

Still pensive, I stand up and go to the jacuzzi. I undress and let myself slide into the hot steaming water.

“Hi, hi~” she sings wrapped in a towel.

Seductively, she lets the towel fall and slides into the water at my side.

As I, seemingly, do not care for her seduction, she looks at me unsure what to say.

“Is something on your mind, Kira?” she finally asks.

“A lot...” I simply answer.

“It looks like...” she sighs. “Look, Kira, if you feel less manly because of what happened... please don’t take it as such. It’s natural to fear the void.”

“It’s not that, Enya. I give a shit about this manliness stuff.”

“Then?”

“Too much happened lately, and now this. I’m so unsure about so many things, and this incident only made things worse.”

“How so? I mean—ah... yeah, I wanted to say...” she squirms a bit and blushes. “I found it really great that you admitted your fears.”

“Enya...”

“Only strong people admit their fears and confront them. I liked it very much—no, I like that part of you, very much.”

“Thanks, Enya...” I sigh. “But right now...”

“Yes?”

“I need...” I move nearer, “a hug...”

“Kira...” she purrs while receiving me with open arms. “Anytime, Kira, anytime.”

We keep embraced for a time, she gently stroking my back, I gently stroking her’s through her wet fur.

“Enya...”

“Hmm?”

We make some space between us.

“May I ask?”

“Sure,” she nods slightly blushing.

“How far does your Felii friend-*skinship* go?”

“Huh?” her eyes open wide and she blushes deeply. “Anything we don’t consider sex. We call it deep-*skinship*.”

“You don’t consider sex?” I ask back.

She blushes even deeper, “Anything not involving penetration *down there*,” she says looking down.

Our lips meet and we kiss. Our tongues dance for a long time.

Having this petit yet strong woman in my arms and amorously kissing her, gives me comfort and assurance. It is, as if, I can be myself with her.

We slowly part, Enya is flustered, really cute.

“What’s—I mean... I like it—” she shakes her head, “I love it. But why now? After you officially turned me down?”

I sigh, “It may sound strange, even that I’m taking advantage of you...” I sigh again. “But, right now, I need someone I can rely upon.”

“Kira...”

“I am so unsure about so many things... About my feelings, my feelings towards you, towards Aia, towards anyone, but especially towards you two. I’m unsure about myself, my—” I interrupt my words with yet another sigh, “my *womanizer* image... my whole image for the matter. I’m conflicted between my past and the present. I feel so weak...”

“You’re not weak, Kira,” she embraces me again, “certainly not. But you really seem conflicted. I don’t mind being your escape if you need it. I—” she sighs, “I like you too much. I couldn’t feel being taken advantage by you. I mean, I understand, but don’t. I see that you are unsure about nowadays’ stuff and relationships. But I don’t get why you’re torturing yourself so much.”

“I don’t know, Enya,” I sigh, “the only thing I’m sure about, right now, is that I cannot break the promises I’ve made. Even if I really wanted to, I cannot embrace you as a lover.”

“Kira...” Enya sighs in relief.

“I’m sorry, Enya. I’m still so unsure. I want to await Aia’s decision, but I also want to be able to accept your feelings. Even if it is just through your Felli *skinship*.” She briefly jolts and begins to purr in my arms. “I don’t want to hurt you, Enya. But I can’t hurt Aia, it would break me apart in my irresolution.”

“Haven’t you considered what I told you?”

“What?”

“Going for other women?”

“I’ve slept with one.”

“You did?” she wiggles out of my embrace and smirks coyly. “Tell...”

I sigh, “With Xivaz, a Wigmez. Three, three and a half weeks ago.”

“Oh~” her smirk becomes impish.

“It was a great experience. But...”

“But?”

“It only deepened my confusion.”

“How so? Was it strange, did you try some exotic stuff?” she asks with an impish smile.

“No... that’s not it...” I sigh. “It wasn’t Xivaz, but me. It was great with her, but afterward, I found myself torn...”

“Torn?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “I mean... look at me... when you hear my nickname, what’s the first thing that comes to your mind, as a woman.”

“That you’re a womanizer.”

I nod, “yeah... and I’ve slept with only one woman since I’m here.”

“Really? Are you that confused?” I nod. “Kira...” She embraces me again. “If...” she purrs, “I—no...” she hesitates, “I—accept your *skinship*, by heart.”

We embrace strongly and begin to make out.

Enya and I lie on the huge bed, naked and embraced.

“Oh, Kira...” she purrs. “Even if it wasn’t *real* sex, it was wonderful.”

I chuckle at her words.

“Enya,” I keep caressing her, “it was, it was.”

“Will you do it again?”

“As long as we don’t fully break our promises...”

“Oh,” she purrs into my chest, “I’d love that.” She looks up at me, “But we won’t tell it anyone.”

“No-one.”

“A secret *skinship*, with Kira,” she purrs looking into my eyes. “Way better than a simple friendship, I love it.”

“Above all, Enya...” She keeps looking into my eyes. “A good friendship.”

“Truly,” she giggles. “An intimate one,” she adds brushing a lock out my face.

Hoping this *barely sexual* relationship with Enya helps me to order my thoughts and my feelings, I fall asleep in her arms.



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway ~ A15 ~ Cargo 34: Schrödinger Project

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