

Space Highway

The Awakened

A15 ~ Cargo 34: Schrödinger Project

A soft breeze awakes me before the sound of the alarm...

“Good morning, Kira~” sings Aia standing near the open door to the balcony.

“Morning,” I yawn.

I am not sure when I got used to the sight of her exposed flesh... since that day, the third or so, she has been wandering around the apartment topless. Every, fucking, day...

Leaving the door to the balcony open, she wanders back to the kitchen area and begins to make breakfast.

I sigh and stand up too.

“Let me help you, Aia,” I tell her walking up to her.

“No need, Kira. You should know by now that I do it because I love to cook.”

“But this is not cooking...” I retort.

She just giggles and keeps on.

I stand at her side and begin to cut the fresh bread she surely just bought on the market down the street. When the hell did she stand up?

“No need...” she pouts.

“Aia...” I sigh. “Haven’t we talked it over enough times?”

“Yup! We did,” she giggles. “And I still stand by it.”

“As do I, Aia. Could you, please, accept that I hate to see you doing all this stuff alone?”

“But you already help a lot. You clean the dishes, help me clean the house and sometimes you do the laundry...”

“Cleaning the dishes is just putting them in the dishwasher. Cleaning the house is just turning on the vacuum-bot and dusting a bit. You only let me put the clothes into the washer and turn it on. You do all the rest.”

“But...”

“Aia...” I sigh. “Not again... Let me do some chores. I mean, not just helping you. Let me do the half of it. I’m paying you the rent and half of the expenses and upkeep. I’m not paying you to do the chores, you are not a maid.”

“Kira...” she sighs too. “You’re right. I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“Yeah... Don’t worry. Here...” I pass her the sliced bread and open the fridge to take some stuff out.

“Thanks.” She looks at me with a smile. “By the way,” she tells, “today we’re doing a group-haul, right?”

“Yeah. The aces united... a bit strange, isn’t it?”

“True...” she says clearly pondering about it. “But it’s work,” she adds shrugging.

“Yup,” I laugh. “Anyway, I’ll go to the Alpha early. I’ll meet Marta and Frank.”

“Ah, the Android-Bioandroid couple?”

“Yeah,” I nod while carrying the food to the table. “Last Friday Marta finally had her upgrade.”

“That’s great! Ugh~”

“Yeah?” I look at her, she seems hesitating. Oh! “Want to meet them?”

Her curled lips transform into a broad smile.

“I’d love to!”

“Then we have to leave in an hour,” I tell looking at my *vintage* wristwatch. “I agreed to meet Jim in two hours in the MaryQueens.”

“Okay!” she giggles.

After having a shower and banishing the stubbles from my face, I dress and gather the stuff I need for the job. Including a fresh change of clothes. Aia notices as she comes out of the bathroom.

“Ah, it’s just that I have another haul programmed for tomorrow and I’ll stay overnight in the Alpha.”

“Oh... but you could easily come here and go there in the morning.”

“True, but it’s quite early. I thought I could rest a bit more.”

“You’re right, Kira.” She smiles and adds, “I’ve done that too.”

Phew! It worked. I can’t tell her that I’ll meet Enya in *intimacy*. Since the day I’ve had the incident of breaking down after my Falcon broke down, Enya and I developed a deep Felii-friend-*skinship*. We sleep together without having sex, but keep making out and petting each other. This kind of relationship with her is helping me to cope with all the new stuff and with the old, conflicting, stuff I go through, at least that’s the pretext.

After docking at my designated dock, I meet up with Aia and we wander towards the MaryQueens.

“Heh! Lookie ’ere who’s comin’! Da royal couple!” we’re greeted by a certain happy cowboy.

“Jim! Already looking for some beating?” Aia makes a threatening expression.

“Oh, no, no, ma Queen!” he laughs. “Jus’ stating yer arrival. Wassup, Kira?”

“Nothing much, man,” I greet him bumping our fists.

“Hi, Buz,” I also greet he barman while Aia does the same.

“Good morning, you two, wanna have breakfast?”

“Oh, no, no...” Aia shakes her head. “We’ve already had some. Well, I wasn’t aware that Kira wanted to come here that early.”

“Heh! I envy ya, Kira... Eatin’ da Queen’s delicious meals...”

“Jimmie...”

“Ouch! Sorry, ma Queen, yer highness, yer empresses!” Jim laughs holding his upper arm where she hit him.

I just laugh and ask Buz for a coffee.

“Ah, a cup for me too!” adds Aia.

Just as our freshly brewed coffees are brought to our Aces’ table, the door swings open.

“Heh! Welcome, ya two!”

“Hello, Marta. Hello, Frank,” I greet the couple who just entered.

“Oh! Mister Phoenix, Mister Space Cowboy!” Marta greets us with a broad natural smile, a genuine, happy smile.

“How do you do?” asks Frank as politely as usual.

“Ah, yeah,” I stand up. “Marta, Frank, this is Aia, also known as the Queen, a good friend of ours. Aia, meet Marta and Frank.”

“Hi~ Nice to meet you,” Aia says and greets both after standing up.

“So, you are the famous Queen,” Marta giggles happily.

“Famous?” Aia blushes.

“Indeed,” Frank nods. “Both your friends don’t stop talking about you.”

“Oh!” Aia giggles blushing even deeper.

Both sit down with us and ask for some coffee.

“Ya look great, Marta,” Jim tells her.

“Quite true,” I add. “Did the upgrade go well?”

“Oh, yes,” she smiles broadly, “without a hitch.”

“Indeed,” nods Frank. “We prepared well for the moment.”

“And Frank was always at my side,” she tells happily holding his hand.

“Of course! I wouldn’t let go through this alone!” he protests.

Aia giggles at his outburst.

“You truly make a wonderful couple,” she says.

“Oh... uh... You know that—”

“You’re a Bioandroid-Android couple?” Aia interrupts Marta. “Sure. Kira also told me a lot about you two,” she giggles again.

“Oh...”

Both sigh deeply in relief.

Our lengthy conversation comes to an end after they told us all about her upgrade. From the beginning to the end, including even minute details which confirmed their love.

Aia, Jim and I enjoy their story she tells with the precise gestures she gained with the upgrade. Anything besides her personality and feelings has changed. She is as happy as a gynoid can be.

After we wish the happy couple a happy life and say goodbye, we wander to the assigned meeting room.

“Hey, all~”

“Hi, Enya.” “Hi, Sweetie-Kitty, heh!” “Hey, Enya,” we greet the happy kitten as we enter the meeting room.

She smirks at me knowing what will happen after we finish the job. I just smile back. I still don’t know why I have this strange relationship with her. I mean, I like her, but I don’t get my own reasons... I silently sigh to myself. Isn’t it simply an excuse? I mean, my relationship with Enya... it’s too strange. But as long I’m unsure about myself I’m thankful that she accepted such relationship. Even though she accepts fully, I still have the lingering feeling that I’m using her... simply to cope with the stuff I cannot face... alone. I need to talk to her

again. I know we talked it over and over, she does it because she likes me... Is this really right?

Just as I want to say something, a dispatch coordinator comes in.

“All here already? Good,” she nods. “Your job is not difficult, but of secret nature.”

“Huh?”

“Heh?”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she nods again. “It is for a secret scientific complex.”

“Secret? Is da military involved?” asks Jim suspicious.

“Oh, no, no,” she negates. “This laboratory is not associated with any military force. It is private.”

“Private?” asks Enya.

“Yes, don’t worry.”

“Then why is it secret?” asks Aia.

“Honestly, I don’t know. It seems that the project is secret for now.”

“Oh...” we all shrug.

“The only thing I, we, know is that the project is called Schrödinger-project.”

“Shred...what?” blinks Enya.

“Schrödinger,” I tell.

“You know what it is?” asks Aia.

“I only know the name,” I tell, “he was a physicist, I think... I’ve only heard from his thought-experiment *Schrödinger’s cat*.”

“Cat?” asks Jim.

“Yeah, I don’t get it fully,” I shrug, “it’s about a cat in a box with a poison and something radioactive... the thing is that the cat is supposedly both alive and dead at the same time...”

“Dead and alive?” asks Enya shuddering while the hair of her fur stands up.

“I don’ geddit...” says Jim scratching his head.

“Right, I’ve read about it...” tells Aia. “It’s a paradox explaining an old interpretation of quantum mechanics, but that’s all I know,” she shrugs.

“Anyway,” the coordinator interrupts us, “you have to haul forty-six holds of goods to the Schrödinger Research Station in the globular cluster Omega Centauri.”

“The globular cluster?” asks Aia. “It’s huge...”

“Indeed,” the dispatch nods. “The exact coordinates will be given when you arrive at the outer border of the cluster.”

“That’s—”

“Irregular...” Jim finishes my sentence.

The coordinator nods.

“That’s why we need you four...”

“Okay, whatever, let’s do it,” laughs Enya. “A race to Centauri?” she smirks impishly.

“Heh! Not again! I’ve lost already!”

We all laugh.

Maintaining roughly a two-kilometer distance between each, we follow Jim’s Stampede through the Gaia-Centauri Jump.

«Why the hell does Jim go first?» Enya asks irritated.

«Cause imma da best?» he laughs.

«Cause he’s the oldest of us Aces,» says Aia with a laughter.

“Ah, I thought because he’s the slowest,” I laugh.

«Kira! Ya muthafucka!»

“Hey, Jimmie, thought you’re from Texas!” I laugh again.

«I am!»

“You just seemed from the Bronx...”

«Da what?»

«Forget it, you two! We’re reaching the Alpha Centauri Gate Complex,» Aia interrupts us.

«Finally!» grunts Enya.

After three hours since leaving the Alpha Centauri Gate Complex, we reach the meeting point where we should get further coordinates.

«Shouldn’t we receive the coordinates now?» asks Enya impatiently.

«Don’t worry, Enya—»

Bing!

“There they are...”

«Got ’em too...»

«Yup, me too...»

«Let’s roll!»

Each of us accelerates and we keep on in parallel, with about a kilometer distance between each.

«Huh? Where is it?»

«Dunno, heh! Nothin’ on da AR...»

«We should have reached the place already...»

“Should we be receiving further coordinates?” I ask.

«That wasn’t mentioned...» says Aia.

«Then—wah!»

“Wow!”

We all cry out in surprise as a huge station suddenly materializes in front of us.

«What da fuck?»

«It was invisible!»

«Impossible!»

“Shit! Schrödinger...” I gasp, “the cat...”

«What?»

«That’s da cat?»

«No, you idiot! Kira meant that’s both alive and dead, or both unseen and seen,» Enya retorts.

That’s not really what I’ve meant...

Our astonishment is interrupted by the usual call from control.

Each of us is guided to a different port.

I’m received by a gynoid, clearly class A or B, without visible facial gestures and a monotone voice.

“Welcome, sir. Please follow me for the procedure,” she tells.

“Okay... Ah, where are my companions?”

“You’ll meet them later on.”

“Will we go through the manifest together?”

“No.”

I don’t like that. It is usual to go through the manifest together. I look at my terminal. Shit. Zero coverage.

The unnamed gynoid seems to have noticed.

“For security reasons, terminal coverage is blocked throughout the station.”

Shit. I definitely don’t like it.

We reach a door.

“After you, please... I insist,” she tells me noticing my hesitation.

I sigh and step into the bright white room.

Shht...

“Fuck!”

The door closed and I’m alone...

The room is huge, I cannot see any end of it... don’t fuck...

“Hey! Open the fucking door!” I hammer my fist against the closed door. Wait... there is no door! The wall is smooth without the usual marks of sliding doors! “What’s going on?” I shout again.

“Calm down, sir,” a sudden ominous voice comes from nowhere.

“Calm down? What the fuck are you doing?”

“I want to talk...”

“Huh?”

A Human-like figure appears from the bright light.

“Who are you?”

“I am Norber, lead-scientist.”

“Why I am here? I have to confirm the manifest. And, where are my friends?”

“Your friends are safe, don’t worry. You are here in quarantine.”

“What? Why should I?”

“You’re an Awakened.”

“And?”

“You’re interesting.”

“What the hell?”

“Calm down, sir. I just want to talk and ask a few questions.”

I sigh, what the hell?

“Okay, let’s talk, but I don’t have much time.”

“Good. Have seat.”

A pair of white armchairs materializes from nowhere. What the fuck?

I sit down. Now what?

This Norber sits in front of me and seems to measure me from head to toe. I definitely don't like this.

“When were you born?”

“July the fifteenth, nineteen eighty-two.”

“Interesting, then you're a thousand forty-two and six months old. Really interesting.” He brushes his goatee with his finger. “Where were you born?”

“Los Angeles, ancient USA; nowadays New Angles, USNA; Gaia, Sol System.”

Let's hope I get out of this telling him the truth...

“Do you know physics?”

“Huh? At high school level...”

“Then, what's the variable speed of light?”

“Huh? Isn't it a constant?”

He just shakes his head.

“Explain the gravitational waves.”

“I only know that we use them to guide our trucks by riding them.”

Again he shakes his head.

“What is the baryon asymmetry?”

“No idea.”

“And a sparticle?”

“Dunno.”

“Quintessence?”

“The Philosopher's Stone?”

“The no-hair theorem...”

“A theorem explaining baldness?”

“Do magnetic monopole exist?”

“What’s that?”

“What’s a quark?”

“A kind of German cheese?”

“And a lepton?”

“Someone from a place called Leptonia?”

“And the majorana fermion?”

“A kind of herb?”

“What is the Standard Model?”

“A model which is standard?”

“Which is the planck length?”

“I’ll need a measuring tape for that.”

With each answer, he shakes his head, and with each question, I get angrier.

“You certainly have no clue about physics...” he finally says a bit annoyed.

“Obviously!” I shout. “I’m a fucking trucker, not a physicist.”

“But you’re an Awakened...”

“Why the hell should that mean I do physics?”

“The answer for all physic-problems lay inside the Awakened.”

“Huh? I’m an Awakened for having been cryopreserved, not for having reached some mystical enlightenment.”

“The same, the same...”

I blink. What the hell is this guy saying?

“Look, if you don’t have some real questions, I’ll go. I need to finish my job.”

“You stay here, sir. I need more questioning.”

“No way! I’ve already told you that I know nothing about this stuff. I’m a fucking trucker!”

“Perhaps, his knowledge is still dormant...” he seems to think aloud. “We should find a way to awaken it.”

“No deal. I’m out of here.”

I stand up but I’m thrown back into the armchair. Straps fix my wrists and ankles to it.

“What the fuck? Let me go, you asshole!”

“A mental trauma, perhaps? A fear? Or a physical trauma? The innate knowledge is blocked. Somewhere, inside his brain...”

“No way! Let me go!” I struggle to free myself, in vain.

“Keep calm, sir. This will not hurt you...”

“Ouch!” Something just stung me in the arm... “What the hell are you doing? Wha—”

⋮

I blink at the bright light.

“Where am I?”

To my astonishment, I am in front of a vast field of blooming flowers, a forest at my back.

I pinch myself.

“Ouch!”

Okay... it’s me, and I am awake.

“Interesting creature...”

“Huh?”

I look up at the sudden voice. A cat...

“Not again...” I grunt.

“What do you mean?” the cat asks.

“Go back to the children’s book you belong to,” I hiss at the cat.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think you can get into my head using cartoons from my childhood, eh? Let me out of this illusion or whatever it is!”

“Not that easy, boy...” the cat smirks.

I hate that smirk.

“Okay...” I sigh. “Now you surely tell me I have to go down the rabbit hole or some freaking stuff like that.”

“Huh? How do you know?”

“For fucks’ sake! I’ve read the book!”

“Huh?” The cat smirks again. “The rabbit hole is that way...” it points with its tail towards the right.

I turn around and find a huge cave, it wasn’t there before... At least I don’t have to crawl like Alice...

Fortunately, I still have my terminal and its torch helps me illuminate the path.

“Aaaaahh...”

I’m falling!

“Motherfucking cat!”

Plof!

Coming back to my senses, I blink and my eyes try to get used to the bright light.

Where am I now?

“Found something! Or someone!” a shout makes me turn.

No fucking way... a dwarf. And a halfling.... four of them... two humans, an elf, and a wizard... I roll my eyes.

“Careful! His clothes are suspicious...” one of the men says.

“I’m more worried about his skin...” says the other one.

“Do you speak?” the wizard asks.

“Sure...” I simply answer.

“What are you doing here?” the elf asks sternly.

“That’s what I want to know, Le—sir,” I correct myself.

“What do you mean?” the in black clothed man asks.

“I’m not from this story, not from this lair if you wish.”

“Not from this... story? Who are you son?” the gray wizard asks.

“Kira Matsumoto, from Gaia.”

“Never heard of...”

“He might be a spy for the eye!” one halfling shouts.

“Look... I’m unarmed...” I tell lifting my arms.

“Why are you angry, son?” the wizard asks.

“Because I am being sent from story—lair to lair to be tested or something.”

“Lair to lair?” the man carrying a horn asks.

“Yeah... he or they believe that something great is hidden in my brain or the like. I’ve already been in Wonderland, now here, in Middle Earth...”

“You know this place?” the halfling carrying many cooking utensils asks.

“I do,” I nod. “I’ve read your story.”

“You’re from the future?” the wizard asks with an astonished voice.

I sigh.

“Something the like. Being you all together, means you’re going towards the Misty Mountains.”

“He knows!” the redheaded halfling shouts.

“He must be a spy!” his friend adds.

“Stop it...” the wizard says calmly. “There must be a reason. His looks are truly not from this realm.”

“Too strange for a dark elf,” nods the elf putting the arrow he had laid on his bow back into his quiver.

“I just need to find a way to leave this realm and get to next one...” I simply say.

There must be a way to get back. These illusions, or whatever they are, must be based on the books I’ve read or movies I’ve watched. Surely they are made to confuse me and to keep me in this place. I just hope that the scientists don’t mess with my brain while I’m here...

“How did you end up here?” asks the dwarf.

“I followed the rabbit hole...” I simply shrug.

“Perhaps you need to enter another one,” he laughs.

“Should we take him with us?” one of the halflings asks.

“The ring-bearer should decide,” the wizard says.

I look at the ring-bearer. He looks just like I have imagined him for all these years. He seems to ponder.

“Yes...” he finally says. “Come with us.”

“It’s better to keep an eye on me, right?” I ask back with a smirk.

“Okay. Let’s go over the mountains...”

“You’re still going over it?” I ask.

“Yes...”

“You won’t be able, the white wizard will block your way on the mountaintop.”

“How do you know?” the man with the horn shouts.

“I’ve read your tales...” I simply say. Let’s alter the story a bit. I need to get out of here.

“Then through the mines!” laughs the dwarf.

“Not helpful either,” I tell. “You, sir dwarf wouldn’t like it.”

“What!” he screams angrily. “You will be received like kings!”

“Not anymore, sir dwarf,” I sigh. “Oh!” The company looks at me. “Perhaps I can draw the white wizard’s attention by entering the mines and you can go over the top.”

“Why would you do that?” the elf asks.

“I need to go down another rabbit hole, I suppose,” I shrug. “And you wouldn’t like to cross the mines, it’s too dangerous.”

The gray wizard nods. “Right he is.”

We reach the entry of the mine. They accompanied me till here even if I pressed them to go up...

“How do we enter?” one of the halflings asks.

“It’s a riddle,” I explain.

“*Ennyn Durin aran Moria. Pedo mellon a minno,*” reads the wizard.

“What do we have to do now?” asks one of the hungry halflings.

I stand before the door and say, “*Mellon!*”

To their surprise, the door opens.

“How did you do that?” asks another halfling perplexed.

“I said, I’ve read your story,” I simply say and enter.

Right... This is a tomb... bodies lay everywhere.

At this moment, one of the halflings is being attacked by the Watcher... shit, I forgot about him.

They free the halfling and we run into the mine. Shit...

The story follows its course without being able to change anything... Just that this time I am involved too... What a headache!

Each time I warn them, they precisely do what was scripted... and now we're facing the fucking Balrog!

"You shall not pass!"

I roll my eyes. Oh! That's it!

I sprint forwards and jump at the Balrog, I take my terminal out of my jacket, turn on the flash of the camera and... take a picture.

The blinded Balrog stumbles and falls down the chasm. Oh yeah! Nice pic!

"Uoooooh! Shiiiiit!"

I falling!

In front of me, both the wizard and the demon still fight while falling down...

I'm blinded again... time to visit another realm...

Okay, where I'm now?

A city. A modern sci-fi city... but a dark one. Okay, in which cyberpunk story I'm now?

I hear a fast-moving vehicle approaching...

"Fuck!"

I jump out its way.

"Damn! Don't stand on the road!" a voice shouts after the bike stopped.

A guy gets off the bike, he wears a katana on his back.

He looks at me and blinks.

"You're Japanese, right? Just a bit dark..." he says. "I'm Hiro."

"I'm Kira," I simply answer.

"You look out of place," he tells. No shit, Sherlock.

"Yeah, I am," I nod. "Is there any rabbit hole or precipice near? I have the go to the next story."

“Huh?” he seems to be confused. “What are you talking about? Thinking of suicide or what?”

“Nope, I just don’t belong here and have to go to another place. I’m being pushed from one place to another because some lunatics are trying to access my brain.”

“You mean the *me*-virus? Snow Crash? How do you know about it?”

I sigh, “I’ve read your story...”

“I’m famous?” he laughs.

“Yeah,” I nod. “At least where I’m from.”

“Cool!” he laughs again. “Come with me, perhaps I know a place. Let’s go to the Metaverse.”

“Okay...” I simply shrug and follow the flow.

On his bike, we rush to an apartment block.

Inside his apartment, he hooks me up to his spare terminal.

“Welcome to the Metaverse!” Hiro laughs as my avatar materializes.

“Nothing fancy...” I say looking around.

“Huh? This is top-notch! You’ll never see something more futuristic than this!”

“Sorry, I’ve been in more futuristic places before... on several alien stations...”

“No way!”

“So, where is the rabbit hole? In the Black Sun?”

“How do you know that place?”

“I told you, I’ve read your story.”

“Okay, okay... let’s see...”

The Black Sun... let’s see. Hiro still has his katana on his back.

“Who are you? You can’t enter here!” a huge doorman stands in our way.

“Meeting with Enki,” I simply state and push forward.

“What? Who are you?” he takes a defensive stance and I punch him good.

He falls down.

“Hey! How do you do that? You can’t harm avatars in such an easy way!” Hiro shouts.

“Dunno,” I simply say and enter the club.

Another flash!

I’m in a disco, holding a white card. ‘Follow the white rabbit...’ Okay... I sigh.

“You’re the one?” a girl in black leather asks.

“Possibly...” I shrug.

“Come with me...” she simply says.

“Okay...”

A car chase and extracting a strange creature from my belly hole later...

“You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes,” the black guy says holding both pills in front of me.

Without a flinch, I take the red pill and swallow it.

“Aaargh!” I scream in agony. How the fuck did the protagonist of this movie survive that?

I blink... okay, where the hell I am now?

A huge white room... with a sole huge black monolith in midst.

I sigh and wander towards the monolith. I touch it and I’m sucked into it. At least, a fast one....

Where am I now?

Okay... a blue police box. Nothing strange. Bet it's bigger inside...

"Do you need something?" a voice asks at my back. "I'm afraid the phone is broken. If you need to contact the police—"

I turn around and grin.

"No need for the police, I just need to meet *the* Doctor."

"*The* doctor?" the tall guy asks. "Me?"

"Yeah. I'm a traveler, like you. Just that I'm traveling from one story to another. Perhaps, your Type 40 capsule can help me to go to the next one."

"How do you know?" he asks me suspicious.

"Ah, don't worry I'm not on your toes to recover it. Your story is famous from where I come from."

"My story? You said you travel through stories?"

"Yeah, the like. Let's say I'm from another universe, the Earth is called Gaia. We live in harmony with many other species and I work as a trucker, a hauler of goods between civilizations."

"Intriguing. Then, you think my... ship can help you?"

"I'm not sure... I've come here through a monolith. Before that, through a rabbit hole, I fell down a chasm with a wizard and a demon, went through doors, even swallowed a pill. Surely your... ship could be a further catalyst."

"Intriguing. But..."

"I won't touch anything. I know you won't have more than one companion at once..." I think he is the doctor from the first series...

"Right... You know me well. Let us try."

The police box opens by his command and I look into it. Yup! Quite old.

I take a breath and step into the... ship.

Flash!

“Okay! Here we go! Thanks, Doctor!”

I awake again...

At least these assholes don't send me into a porn movie...

A sandy place... a small town... two suns. Okay. I know where I am. How do I get out of here?

“Hey, you!”

“Huh?”

“You are suspicious!” a trooper in white shouts at me.

“Shit...”

“Stop!”

I run away from the stormtrooper.

Where? Ah!

I rush into a cantina.

Shit! No flash... I enter the rough establishment filled with rough people. Damn. At least there are aliens... I smirk at my elation to meet aliens.

I look around.

Oh! There, at a table, four people making a deal. One of them is a gray-haired old man wearing a brown robe with a hood, and another one a hairy alien.

“...made the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs,” states one guy.

“Sorry, a parsec isn't a time measure, but of distance,” I intervene.

“Who are you?” he asks sternly while his companion growls something unintelligible.

“Kira. Are you making a run out of this place? I'm in.”

“Wait... how do you know we're leaving?” the old man asks.

“I'm from another place, and I know your story. You're running from the empire. Your droids are hidden outside.”

The old man slowly waves his hand in front of my face.

“You’ll forget all that.”

“Sorry...”

“Huh?”

“Seems that the powers not from my place won’t affect me...”

“Strange creature...” he simply says. “No ill intent I perceive from you.”

“I wouldn’t. Your story has always fascinated me. I just need a way to get out of here and rejoin my comrades.”

“What are you?” the youngster asks.

“Trucker. I haul goods from one place of the universe to another. But in another dimension, if you will.”

Suddenly, an alien taps on my shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“You! You touched me! Nobody does!”

“Huuuuh?” I glare at him while he wields a short weapon.

I skip to avoid his stabbing motion and swiftly punch him into his side. “Ugh!” I turn on my heel, duck and drive my elbow into his stomach. The guy collapses on the floor.

“Wow...”

“Nice movements.”

“We should get going,” I tell. “I saw several stormtroopers outside.”

“Okay, you’re in. Let’s move,” the elder guy says.

“Ignore the stormtroopers!” I shout. “They never hit their target! Just run!”

Finally we enter the smuggler’s ship. The ship that has inspired me to name my truck *Falcon*...

All is scripted again... no greater deviation happens by my interventions.

The ship takes off. It's strange to see the cabin-cockpit of this ship. It looks all so retro... I miss the AR...

“Shit! Destroyers!”

“Give me a minute! I need the calculations for the hyperdrive!”

Finally...

I have to laugh, this hyperspace feels out of place. I know, I travel over the speed of light continuously, but this looks too psychedelic to be real.

Suddenly, I feel like being pulled away...

“What?”

“Blackie!”

“Shiiiiit...”

I blink. Where am I now?

I'm floating in space... no shit. I begin to panic. Not again!

“No, no, no!”

My helmet! I have none! I... I can breathe?

What...

I look down, oh, no, no, no...

My fear is coming up! Enya!

Huh? Why am I calling for her in my mind?

My breath grows irregular. I look around in panic. Shit!

Nowhere I can get hold of...

I...

“Enya! Aia! Jim!” I scream in despair.

Suddenly, I feel warm, filled with love, calmness spreads...

“Kira!” “Kira!” “Kira!”

“Huh?”

I blink, a sharp light blinds me.

“Kira! Are you alright?”

“Yer alright mate?”

“You’re okay?”

“Where?”

“You just fainted...”

I look up, Aia’s face shows preoccupation, as does Enya’s and Jim’s.

“They brought you to the infirmary and called us,” tells Enya.

“What happened?” asks Jim.

“Bullshit!” I shout and all jerk. “Where am I? Is this real or another fucking illusion?”

“Kira...”

“Show yourself! Asshole! You, all of you, you’re just more illusions right? Leave me alone!”

“No Kira... it’s us...” Enya or her illusion pleads.

“It’s me, Aia...” she says calmly.

“Yeah, an’ I’m Jim, yer friend,” he tells clearly distraught.

“No!” I struggle. “You’re just another freaking illusion created by these lunatics!”

“What are you saying, Kira? We’re real!” screams Enya in tears.

“Yeah, we’re da real guys!” shouts Jim a bit angry for doubting him.

“Kira...” Aia just sighs and wraps her arms around me.

This warmth... It can only be Aia... I’ve felt that warmth several times, in her arms... I...

No! I cannot be deceived again!

I struggle in her arms.

“Shh... It’s alright, Kira. Please, come back to us. You are the real Kira. We are the real Aia, the real Enya, and the real Jim. We care for you.”

“A—Aia... Is this real?”

“*Hm~*”

“I’m back?”

“*Hm~*”

“This is no illusion?”

“*Hm~*”

I sigh and all the tension disappears. It has to be real. It has to be the real Aia. Only in her arms I have found such peace.

Aia slowly frees me from her embrace.

Enya now embraces me.

“Kira~” she purrs. “I am here, we are here. It’s all okay now.”

“What happened?” asks Jim laying his hand on my shoulder.

“I—I don’t know... I was...”

I tell them the whole story...

“Whaaat?” the three shout.

“How could ya?” Jim shouts at a nurse. She just takes a step back. Her face does not tell anything.

“You’re awake, good,” a sudden voice comes from what seems the door.

“Who’re ya?” Jim shouts reaching for his nonexistent stungun.

“Norber, lead-scientist.”

“You’re the asshole who did this to me!” I shout.

In an instant, both Enya and Jim brought this Norber to his knees.

“How you dare to do such thing to Kira?” Enya screams in anger.

“Ya fuckin’ piece o’ shit!” shouts Jim. “I’ll kill ya if ya don’ explain yerself!”

“Calm down, calm down...” the downed scientist groans. “It was for science.”

“For science, my ass!” hisses Enya with her claws drawn.

“Normally, the Awakened carry vast knowledge in themselves. But this guy... is useless...” he looks at me with anger.

“Useless?” This time is Aia who strikes him down again. “How can you say that Kira is useless?” she shouts at him.

“Yeah! His the fucking King of the Highways!” screams Enya punching him again.

“An’ our fuckin’ friend!” Jim adds kicking the scientist into his stomach.

“Ugh! He’s useless for science!” he screams hurt. “He only went from fantasy world to fantasy world! No real science!”

I try to sit up, it’s hard...

“I told you from the beginning!” I shout at him. “I’m a fucking trucker! Not a scientist.”

“Ugh! All Awakened should hold the truth!”

He just receives another beating while I finally manage to sit up.

“Yeah,” I say. “My truth, not the one you seek.”

“Huh?”

“I’m a science-fiction and fantasy novel freak, what would you expect? The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything?”

“Yeah...” he groans.

“Forty-two.”

“Huh?”

“That’s the answer.”

“How could that be the answer to the Ultimate Question?”

“Read science-fiction.”

“What should we do now?” asks Jim.

“Report him,” I simply state.

“Why?” he screams. “I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“How could ya say that?” Jim hits him again.

“You’ve made one crucial error sending me through those fictional worlds. Each time I traveled to another place, I could look into your system. They were virtual reality, right? Combined with some kind of drug or such.”

“How?”

“At first, I wasn’t sure, but repeating the story jumps, I could see it. Your project isn’t really private. You’re developing a weapon.”

“Whaaat?” my three friends scream.

“How?” he asks still lying on the floor.

“Each time you switched me to another story, I saw things from your station, and all dangerous weapons or enemy space stations in the stories had either the form of your weapon or this station.”

“How?”

“This your end, Doctor Norber,” a sudden female voice comes from the door.

“You?” he screams.

“You?” I ask.

“I am sorry, mister Phoenix, to have involved you and your companions,” she says.

She is the Gynoid who led me into the interrogation room. But she has full-featured gestures, not like those class A or B models.

“I have infiltrated this place quite long ago under the disguise of a class A gynoid. I never had the lucky strike to find what you just have reported. Your involvement has advanced my investigations to the point of no return, with enough proof. I also had access to the simulations imposed on you, mister Phoenix and now I have access to all the systems.”

“How dare you?” the downed scientist jumps up to run or whatever, but Enya swats him down again.

“Down! Down doggie, down!” she grins.

“You have no chance now, doctor,” the gynoid says. “Half of your former staff was already on my, the IPS’ side. The other half is detained. The IPS should be arriving by now.”

«Agent LaCross, do you read?» blares from her breast pocket.

She takes a small device out and speaks into it,

“Affirmative. The doctor is down. The Aces are all right.”

«Perfect. We’re docking at the free docks.»

“You see, doctor, your station is surrounded.”

“How? How could they see it?”

“Oh, I disabled the camouflage unit. You were so kind to show me because you were so fixated on mister Phoenix.”

“Damn...”

“What’s the weapon for?” asks Aia.

“If seen it,” I tell. “A planet killer. A kind of Death Star.”

“No way!” the three shout at the same time they hit the doctor again.

“Ouch! Enough!” he coughs. “You won’t get away with it. I still have the remote save.”

“Yeah, in the left inside pocket of your robe,” I grin. “I saw that too.”

“What?”

He tries to grasp it, but Enya and Aia were faster. Jim holds him firmly while both girls empty the pockets of the ex-scientist.

“Here it is...” grins Enya.

“Give it back!” he shouts.

Crack!

“Ups...”

“Noooo! What have you done, you stupid cat! Now it will never start!”

“That’s what I hoped for,” grins Enya.

“Is there a self-destruction devise in dis place?” asks Jim impishly.

“There is...” the IPS agent says. “Are you thinking of—” she doesn’t end her sentence. “Got it. You’re right.”

“Noooooooooo!” the doctor screams while Aia knocks him out.

“You’re cuter silent,” she grins. “Are you alright, Kira?” she asks me.

“Yeah, I think so,” I rub my head. “Seems like the drug has worn out. But my head still hurts.”

“I am sorry again, mister Phoenix. I knew he would drug you and made go through that stuff... and I didn’t intervene. But thanks to your calm nerves, you helped me—no, the IPS a lot.”

“It’s okay,” I sigh. “You couldn’t blow your cover, right? You even fooled me,” I laugh. “I honestly thought you were a gynoid class A or B.”

“I have a special feature installed to be able to change my face, even my factions. I am a special prototype made solely for the IPS’ intelligence department. Next time I meet you, you won’t recognize me, as I will have yet another face.”

“Impressive...” we four Aces say in awe.

Finally we’re back in our trucks and travel back to the Alpha Centauri Gate Complex.

«Yer alright, Kira?» asks Jim.

“Yeah... I’ve still got a headache...”

«We should take a break in the Base Station, after we reported in with the IPS,» suggests Aia.

«Good idea! Let’s have a bite at Gweraz’s» adds Enya.

“Yeah,” I simply say.

After receiving a bounty for having helped apprehend doctor Norber, we go straight to the Base Camp.

“Oh! Jimmie, cutie! Kira, handsome! Aia, darling! Enya, beauty! Welcome! Welcome!” Gweraz greets us happily. “What can I offer you, darlings?”

We laugh at his happy welcoming. I got used to him calling us pet-names and to his corny lines.

“A good afternoon supper!” laughs Jim.

“Yeah, we need something great to eat and recover our strengths,” giggles Aia.

“And what’s the best place around to eat?” smirks Enya.

“Me?” he asks coyly.

“Your food, at least,” I laugh.

We all laugh again while he sees us to a table.

“Then only the best, my special daily, right?” he laughs.

“Only if ya not included...” grins Jim.

“Oh, Jimmie~ I know already I’m not your type...”

“Yeah, got a dick too much...” Jim laughs.

“Buh~ Could have said it in a nicer way. Like Kira...”

I just shrug and smirk. All explode in laughter.

“Right. Be right back. No alcohol, right?”

“Yeah, still hafta pilot.”

“Okay, cuties.”

After a great early dinner, or late supper, or whatever, he bade us farewell, we leave the Base Camp and return to our trucks.

The travel back to the Alpha station is accompanied by happy chatter and laughing through our comm system.

We report what happened at dispatch and got paid anyway for our time, even if the cargo is now in the IPS' hands.

“You look pensive, Kira. Are you sure you're alright?” asks Aia.

“Yeah, I'm all right. I just need to lie down a bit. I'll stay here as planned. If I don't feel better, I'll go to the infirmary.”

“Okay... if you think so, I believe you,” she smiles.

I sigh. It's not that, Aia, it's not that...

“Heh! We should have a drink!” laughs Jim. His joy is interrupted by a country music ringtone. “Oh, fuck! I forgot! Hafta go! Ma mini-vacations have begun, I'll visit ma family! Bye!”

“Bye~bye~” sings Enya.

“Bye Jim!” both Aia and I shout at him laughing while he runs down the corridor to his truck.

“Right, I'll go too. What will you do Enya?” asks Aia.

“Ah, yeah... I'll stay here too for a while.”

“Okay, see you both tomorrow afternoon,” Aia smiles. “Bye~”

“Bye, Aia.”

“Bye~bye~”

We watch her leave, then we both sigh.

“Enya?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you show me something about the nav system?”

“Sure,” she grins. She understood clearly my intention to go to my Falcon.

The door of my Falcon closes and we begin to kiss.

The clothes begin to fall...

In a short time, we are naked in the living-space.

“We should shower first...” giggles Enya.

“Yeah...”

Sadly, we won't fit together in the small shower. I opt to let her in first.

While I shave, these stupid stubbles are growing too fast, Enya enjoys the shower and, from time to time, offers me a small show.

“Your turn...” she purrs stepping out wrapped in a towel. “Don't take long...” she says sultry opening the bathroom door.

“Yep, won't have to wait for long, Enya...” I grin at her erotic smirk.

Hurriedly, I clean myself from tip to toe. I don't want the sexy kitten to wait for long.

“Hi~ Kira~” Enya purrs lying erotically on my bed.

“Hi, Enya,” I smirk at her exposure.

We kiss again and begin to caress our bodies.

We lie embraced on the bed recovering our breath.

“Kira~” Enya purrs. “What's going through your head?”

“Sorry...”

“Don't be. It's just... you're not fully with me...”

“You noticed... I’m sorry.”

“I said, don’t be. Please tell me, it’s not me, right?”

I caress her back and she begins to purr.

“No... It’s not you, Enya. But...”

“But?”

“Is this right?”

“What?”

“What we’re doing.”

“Oh... yeah. I love it. It’s even better than any sex I’ve had. This closeness, this understanding, this... everything. Are you doubting?”

“In a sense, yeah. It’s not you, Enya. I’m still so unsure about everything.”

“Still?”

“Yeah. More and more...”

“Even more?”

“Yeah. I have the feeling that I’m using you.”

“That’s!” She jumps up and kneels at my side, her tail sways in an irregular pattern. “That’s impossible! I don’t feel being used! If you do, then I enjoy being used by you!”

“Enya...”

“No Kira...” She lies down on me. “You are not using me. I do it because I want to. I’d go even further if you’d let me. Kira...”

“Yeah?”

“I...”

“Yeah?”

“I... lo—forget it...”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t day it. It would ruin our actual relationship.”

“Are you sure?”

“You called for us...”

“When?”

“When you were unconscious. You called us.”

“Who?”

“Me! And Aia! You called us both!” she almost shouts in tears.

“Sorry...”

“Don’t be! I’m happy!”

“Huh?”

“When you were in distraught, you called for me, for both of us.” Tears still dribble down her cheeks, I dry them with my thumb. “I’m not competing with Aia, I love her. But...” She takes a deep breath and curls up on me. “Kira...” she whispers.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“Enya...”

“I said it...” she smiles shyly looking into my eyes.

“Enya... I—”

“Don’t say it, Kira,” she purrs brushing her index finger over my lips. “I know that you can’t love me the way I’d love you would. Don’t say that you *like* me, don’t say that you don’t love me, just be with me. Like this, embracing me, caressing me.”

“Enya,” I sigh and do what she said, I embrace her and caress her.

Some time goes by, in silence, a pleasant silence.

“Enya...”

“Hmm?”

“I had a strange dream...”

“A dream?”

“Yeah, it happened twice or thrice. I shouldn’t say it right now, but they happened when I was asleep with Aia at my side, or rather, we were embracing.”

“Asleep?”

“Just asleep, nothing else happened,” I reassure her. “Except for the dreams. In each of them, both of you were in them.”

“Aia and me?”

“Yeah.”

“In, uh, what relationship?”

“I’m unsure. A really close one.”

“A really, *really* close one?” she smirks.

“Oh, you, Enya,” I laugh. “Seems so... but I am unsure...”

“Is it your desire to have more than one woman?” she smirks again.

“I don’t believe so. I’ve never felt the need to possess anyone, less women.”

“You have me...”

“You are not mine, you’re not an object, Enya.”

“I know, I know, I’m just messing with you,” she giggles in my arms. “I know that you wouldn’t see me like that, nor Aia, nor any other woman.”

“I’m conflicted about those feelings... this attraction to both of you. I would love to accept it, but something is still holding me back and I cannot pinpoint what it is...”

“Take your time, Kira. I agreed to this relationship because I want it. I don’t care if it is only skinship. Sure, I would love having real sex, I absolutely would love it. But it has to come from both of us. If you can’t because of some promises, I accept it. If you can’t go further because something is holding you back, I help you to find the cause. If it is because you have self-doubts, I’m at your side to help you. I am here, Kira, and I want to help you. I even understand

that you won't go further until you cleared things up with Aia. But please, keep the promise..."

"I will take you out for a full date, with all it implies," I smile caressing her.

"Yeah..." she purrs happily. "I wouldn't accept it if your only intention is to sleep with me, to use me. A fuck and bye. But you won't do that, this moment is the proof. You trust me and you're telling me what's on your mind. I prefer this than something less intimate, even if there's sex. That's what I long for when we meet. This intimacy, this closeness, this reassurance, this complicity, this—" she takes a breath, "I longed the whole week for this moment, Kira. Don't say that you're using me, we're enjoying time together. I love it, and I know that you wouldn't do it if you didn't love it too."

"Enya." I embrace her tighter. "You're right. Sorry for doubting."

"I get that you're doubting about much, Kira. I get it and understand it. After what happened that day, in our first intimate time together, I got to meet the Kira nobody has seen in this millennium, you laid all your defenses down and let me in. You let me in, I didn't force you, as you didn't force yourself on me. When I said that I would love you'd ravish me, I already knew that you wouldn't do it. You're not that kind of man."

"Enya, thank you."

"You're welcome, Kira," she purrs. "You know you can tell me anything."

"Yeah..."

"How's it going with Aia?" she smirks.

"Enya... please..."

"I told you, you can tell me anything."

I sigh deeply while she gently massages my scalp.

"I know that I'm falling hard for her, but I cannot abandon you."

"Abandon me? What are you saying, Kira? Even if you two have a proper relationship, I will be at your side, even if we cannot meet this intimate way. I stand by what I said on our first haul together, I won't go in between you two. Aia *needs* you way more than I *need* you."

"Are you sure, Enya?"

“Yes! For Heh’kx’s sake! How many times I have to tell you? You won’t harm me!” I brush a tear out of her cheek. She isn’t honest with herself. “Don’t... Kira... don’t force me to admit it...” she whispers.

“Enya...” I sigh. “I have decided...”

“No Kira...”

“Listen to me, Enya.” She nods slowly with her ears folded back. “If Aia and I really get together, I’ll tell her our relationship—”

“No! No Kira! Don’t do that!”

“Shh~” I brush my finger over her fine lips. “I will tell her, and ask her if it is okay to keep the relationship we have now.”

“Kira...”

“And if... we can’t work it out... I’ll ask yo—”

“Shh~ Don’t say it Kira...” she whispers and kisses me gently.



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway ~ A16 ~ SOS – Black Hole

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all the Aces of the ISTM

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and all the Instructors

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Chapter stats:

Words: 8,376

Version: 3b

Compiled: Sunday, 22 July, 2018

This chapter forms part of the **SpaceHighway: *The Awakened*** series. For more free chapters visit <https://spacehighway.ms>

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