

Space Highway

The Awakened

A16 ~ SOS: Black Hole!

Yet another day at the helm of my trusty Falcon...

Despite the long dead hours between the stopovers and the destinations, I've gotten to love my job more than ever before. Thanks to the automation, I have reread all my books and I've bought, and read, several scores of others. I've even bought several online courses to get up-to-date. From simple mechanics to advanced courses on space-truck troubleshooting. I was at loss once and I don't want it to happen again.

Under Enya's influence, I've even bought a Feli language course for dummies... and I'm still unable to pronounce a single word...

Today I'm on route to the planet Neva, in the Neinal solar system. Seems the planet is famous for its wines and fizz wines similar to champagne, at least I'm reading that.

With the Encyclopedia Galactica open, I'm reading through my destination's features. Interesting... Let's see if I've got time to buy some wines...

A sudden repeating beeping, three short, three long and three short tones interrupt my readings. An SOS!

I've programmed the warning system to reproduce the familiar morse-code.

I push the dedicated red-flashing button and map pinpointing the origin of the SOS is overlaid over the windscreen.

«Mayday, mayday, mayday... Maelstrom, Maelstrom!»

Shit! Someone is in great danger! The same message is repeated in several languages.

Maelstrom... This is the universal code for *black hole* in Gaian English.

A ship is being sucked into a black hole!

Hastily, I check the troubled ship.

Fuck! It's a cruise ship!

Capacity: 11.000! Crew: 9.600! That's over 20.000 people in danger!

I check the location again. Just one and a half parsecs from here.

“STS! Truckers’ emergency channel! Radius six parsecs!”

»Opening truckers’ emergency channel. Six-parsec radius. Online, you may speak.«

“To all truckers receiving this, Phoenix speaking. Cruiser vessel in Maelstrom, I repeat, cruiser vessel in Maelstrom. Will attempt rescue. Need more!”

Immediately, the loudspeaker comes alive.

«Heard! On my way!» «On ma way!» «Calling for more!» «Coming too!» «I’m near!»

Good to know, I sigh in relief knowing I won’t be alone.

I activate the emergency procedure which will leave the cargo stationary in this place.

Once free from the cargo, I accelerate at max speed with half of the thrusters towards the red zone.

«Hey, Phoenix! What can we do?» asks someone through the comm.

“I’m not sure. There are too many people on board.”

«I’m trying to contact them, seems impossible!» another shouts into his mic.

«Yeah, me too... no answer...» confirms another.

«Fuck!»

“I’m going nearer. Let’s hope we get communication before it’s too late...”

«Yeah...»

«Keep the attraction forces in sight...» reminds me another one.

“I will.”

«Coming with you!»

“Aia?”

«Hello~ everyone~» she greets all on the emergency channel. «Let’s do this!»

The truckers on the channel are ecstatic to receive The Queen. And many suddenly want to adventure into the red zone with us. I roll my eyes, beauty draws more than five yokes of oxen, or the like...

I open a private channel to Aia’s Thunderbird.

“Hi, Aia, are you sure?”

«Hi, Kira~» she giggles. «Of course I am,» she adds convinced. «We need to help with whatever we can.»

“Great to have you here,” I sigh a bit relieved yet a bit preoccupied.

«Yeah... you too,» she simply adds. «No answer?»

“No...”

«Shit...»

“There!”

«I see it too!» Aia confirms over the emergency channel.

«Me too!» «Yeah! There she is!» «Fuck! The Maelstrom is strong!» «Careful! Don’t get sucked into it too!»

»Communication established. You may speak now,« my comm system tells me.

The Titan... damn fucking great name! Really fitting.

“To Cruiser The Titan, Phoenix speaking. We—”

I’m interrupted.

«Finally! We're sending out emergency signals for over two hours now! Thank all! We cannot get free! We've got a powerplant malfunction! The engineers are on it!»

«What can we do?» one asks.

Hastily, I formulate a plan, hope this works...

“All, throw your cables and hold it!”

«We won't be able to tow it out! It's too massive!» another one shouts.

«We don't need to!» shouts Aia. «Just hold it! Make it fall slower!»

“Exactly!”

«On it!» «I'm in too!» All truckers on the channel confirm too.

We near the impaired cruiser and throw our holding and towing cables.

«Shit! It's strong!»

“How are the repairs doing?” I ask the communication officer on the cruiser.

«They are still on it,» he tells in distress. «We were on our usual route but the captain wanted to show off the black hole to the passengers and we got too near and then the powerplants failed!»

«That's bullshit!» shouts Aia. «How can someone be that reckless?»

“Where is the captain?” I ask.

«We don't know! The whole bridge is in disarray!»

“Fuck!”

«Is there a mechanic with you?» he asks nervously.

«Kira, you're a mechanic!» Aia suddenly exclaims.

“What? No... I'm just—”

«Wonderful! We need help urgently! We have several docks available.»

“But I'm—”

«Please! We don't know what else to do!»

«Kira...» Aia says looking at me through our private live-stream with an earnest face.

“I know, I know...” I sigh. “At least, let’s check...”

Fuck... I’m fucked...

«I’m coming with you, Kira,» tells Aia, «I’ll assist you.»

“Thanks...” I sigh again, this time in relief.

«More guys are coming!» a trucker shouts into the emergency channel. «In ten they’re here!»

«Great! The Phoenix and I will board the ship and help to fix their powerplants,» Aia explains.

«Okay! Great!» «We’ll keep the ship from falling into the Maelstrom!»

“Thanks, guys.”

Not without difficulty, the attraction forces of the black hole is really strong, I dock at the cruiser.

Armed with my vintage and my modern-day toolboxes, I wait for the doors to be opened.

Just after the pressure has stabilized, the door opens and I’m greeted by a distressed Knoreliaz.

“Thanks Teh’rei, I’m Ka’nī, the EO, the Environmental Officer,” she says nervously. “The Second Officer is receiving your companion. The Chief Engineer is down in the engine room,” she adds out of breath.

“It’s okay. Let’s meet with Aia, my companion, and have a look...” I simply say, unsure if I would be of any help.

“Yes...” she takes a breath. “Thank you so much. The Staff Captain is trying to keep everything under control. But he is still a trainee.”

“How is it possible that a trainee has become a Staff Captain?” I ask her while walking at a firm pace.

“He’s not a trainee in that sense,” she tells again out of breath. “He’s a trainee in that position, but he never had to take over in an emergency case of this magnitude.”

“Ah... I understand...”

“Kira!” I turn around and find Aia. She jumps into my arms. “Are you okay?”

“Ye—yeah...” I stutter overwhelmed by her greeting. “You?”

“Given the danger...” she seems to think, “quite well...” she adds giggling.

How can she be so calm? For me it’s nerve-racking. We’re about to be devoured by a black hole.

She lets me free.

“Right, let’s go.”

“Yeah...”

“This is the engine room...” Ka’ni says opening the door hovering her palm over a chip reader.

The door opens and a chaotic place opens up in front of us.

People running around, shouting and screaming in several languages.

“It isn’t working!” “Try the flux-capacitor!” “It’s running!” “Fuck!” “What is it? What does not work?” are some of the shouts I can make out.

One who seems to command the distraught engineers halts her shouts and turns to us.

“Are you the rescue-engineers?” she asks with hope.

“They are,” Ka’ni says.

What?

“Thank you, thank you. I’m Vitziec, Chief Engineer,” says the shuddering Reaf. “We are trying to isolate the issue, but seems to avoid us. We already have

checked the in- and outlets, the electric and energy flux, and all the constants, but the powerplant won't start again."

"So, the powerplants simply stopped working?" I ask.

"Yes..."

"As if turned off?"

"Yes..." the distraught Chief Engineer says in a sigh.

"What is the procedure to turn this particular powerplant off and on?" I ask.

"Oh... I'll show you..." Vitziec guides me to a console. "Here..."

She explains briefly the procedures.

"Meaning, it isn't as easy as turning a switch to turn it off..." Aia says thinking aloud.

"No," Vitziec tells. "That's the first thing I've ruled out."

"Good," I nod hiding my own nervousness. "Please, show me through the engines, and tell me what you have done so far." I try to infuse some calmness into her.

"Sure..." she nods.

For around fifteen minutes, the Chief Engineer walks us through the measures they have taken.

We stand in front of the huge machinery I am seen for the first time. Fuck... this isn't your average diesel engine...

"Okay," I sigh. "I'll be frank with you. It's the first time I see this kind of powerplants. I worked on space trucks and ancient diesel engines."

"Then..." Vitziec lets her head drop.

"I'll do whatever I can to assist you. At least, I have basic knowledge of the inside workings of these machines and bring fresh ideas."

“True,” Aia adds. “We surely can look at it from another perspective. I’m not well-versed with machines, but I have a clear picture of this baby in my mind. I know the manual by heart.”

The Chief Engineer and the Environmental Officer’s faces illuminate.

“Kira?”

“Yes, Aia?”

“I’ll head to the nearest console. Visually check what I ask for, will you?”

“Sure.”

Over the next twenty minutes, Aia instructs me to look at conventional gauges and relay their readings.

I crawl under parts of the huge machine, climb over pipes and thick cabling bundles, even bend around parts of the humongous apparatus to reach the small gauges... They could have put them well visible, but no, they had to be put in the least accessible spots.

“Twenty-two thousand three-hundred...”

“What? The console reads zero... That’s the problem! If this gauge reads zero, the powerplant stops. But I cannot see a warning message...”

“Shit... Where does the reading come from?” I ask Aia.

“Coming...” She sprints to my side. “The sensor is... about down there...” She points way beneath the huge pipe in front of us.

“Hmm... I’ll check.”

“Okay.”

I climb down, luckily I’m fit and not too bulky, or I wouldn’t fit in there.

Just as I crawl under the huge structure, the vessel begins to vibrate.

“Shit! What’s going on?”

Some shout, some scream...

“We’re reaching the point of no return in thirty!” Ka’ni shouts.

Fuck!

“Around seventy trucks are already pulling on the ship. We need the main powerplant working now!” shouts Vitziec.

Seems all are distressed and unable to concentrate. I’m at my limit too. I just want to run away...

“Kira...” Aia is at my side, lying on her back and looking at me. “We can do it.” She takes my hand firmly, I sense her hidden nervousness, her delicate hand shakes slightly.

“Yeah...” I muster myself.

We keep crawling beneath the huge pipings. This definitely doesn’t look remotely like a Diesel engine... this huge pipe is one of the main fuel pipes.

“It should be around here...” she says.

“Great... huh? What’s that?”

“What?”

“That...” I point at a hanging cable.

“The sensor’s wire.”

“It’s cut...”

“No way...”

“No wear and tear... cut...” I repeat dumbfounded.

“Sabotage...” Aia simply says.

“Where is the rest of the cable?”

“Down there...”

I look down. A deep abyss opens up just ahead.

“Fuck...”

“The cabling shaft...” sighs Aia.

“Vitziec!” I shout. “Shut off the artificial gravity for this place!”

“On it!” she shouts back.

»Attention, all people in the engine room! The artificial gravity will be deactivated in one minute! Tie down and fasten everything!«

“Aia. I need the splicer from the new toolbox, and the white small box and the screwdriver-set from my old one.”

“On it! Be careful,” she says giving me a peck on my cheek.

An alarm sounds and I feel weightless. Great.

I push myself from the underbelly of the huge pipe and down the shaft.

Just a simple reddish light illuminates this place...

I can barely make out the bundles of cables...

“I’m back, Kira...” Aia shouts down the shaft.

“Okay! I’m still looking for a loose wire... Ouch!”

“Are you alright?” she shouts down.

“Yeah! Found it!”

Fucking cable. It just graced my arm and made a long cut...

I push myself up the shaft again.

“Good grief,” Aia exhales. “Oh no! You’re bleeding!”

“Shit... That’s not important now. Give me the splicer.”

“Here...”

“Thanks.”

I try to splice the cables together...

“Fuck!”

Around ten centimeters are missing...

“What now? I’ll ask for wires!” says Aia while hurriedly turning around.

“Hand me the white box. There should be some in there.”

“Oh!” She turns back to me. “Yeah! Here! Careful!”

“Shiiiiit!”

All the screws, wires, zip ties, terminal blocks, crocodile clips, plugs and jacks, and fuses fly around...

“Forget it!” I shout as Aia tries to catch all the stuff floating around. “I just need a wire, the terminal blocks and the cutter.”

“What’s a terminal block?”

“That!” I point at the twelve-way terminal blocks floating behind her. “The white strip!”

“Ah! Got it!”

I take the wire and the pliers in mid-air and snip an eight inches long piece from the wire.

The vibrations get stronger...

“Use the cutter, or the pliers, or whatever and cut two individual terminal blocks from the strip and get me a screwdriver. A flat one, number one.”

“On it!”

Without thinking it through, I bite down on the insulation and pull on the wire. No time to peel the insulation off the standard way.

“Here, the first one.” Aia hands me a terminal block and the screwdriver.

She already loosened the screws on the block. Perfect.

As steadily as I can with all the vibrations, I fix the cable to the piece of wire. Done.

“Here...”

“Thanks.”

I fix the other end of the cable to the wire and the connection is made...

“Reset section C6!” Aia shouts back at Vitziec.

“Reset section C6!” she relays.

“Try to start the engine!” Aia shouts.

Vitziec relays again and...

Suddenly the dead machine revives!

“Captain! All systems on-line!” we hear Vitziec shout.

«Full thrust!»

“Full thrust!”

Aia and I look at each other in relief as the powerplants seem to produce thrust.

Suddenly... all floating pieces and tools fall down.

“Huh?”

“Kira? Kiiiiiraaaa....”

“Uaaaaaaaaahh...”

“Why is the gravity on?” someone screams.

I’m falling...

Shit, shit, shit... I was floating over the shaft...

“Kiiiraaa!”

Aia tries to grab my hand, but misses by a mere inch...

“Turn it on! Now!” someone bellows.

Shiit...

Do! It! Now! I see the ground!

Ploff!

Just in fucking time...

“Kira!”

“I’m fi—!” I hastily shut my mouth.

There’s no fucking oxygen down here!

I’m being drawn to one place... No! Sucked out! There’s a leak!

I close my eyes for a second. This is it... but these people... Aia...

“Leak!” I shout as loud as I can while hypoxia is taking over my body.

Have I truly come to this?

Is this it?

What about Aia, and Enya?

No! I cannot!

I cannot move...

I'm stuck to the wall...

I cannot breathe...

I wanna live.

I wa...

I...

⋮

“...a!”

I hear someone...

“...ra!”

An angel?

“...ira!”

I'm able to lift one eyelid. Something bluish...

“Kira!”

An angel. A bluish angel...

“Thank goodness! Kira!”

Warmth... such warmth...

I feel embraced in warmth.

I cannot move and wear a kind of transparent mask.

“Are—” I'm unable to speak...

“We're slowly pulling away from the black hole, we did it, Kira.”

Thank goodness...

Still holding me, Aia tells, “You are in the ward. We got you out just in time and the engineers are fixing the leak. We still need an hour or two until we’re out of the attraction force of the black hole.”

“Gre—” I still can’t utter a full word...

“Take it easy, Kira. You were without oxygen for almost five minutes before I reached you. I feared the worst...” she sighs, “but you’re recovering remarkably well.”

“Indeed,” a sudden unknown voice comes from my left. “We have injected some special drugs to avoid further brain damage.” Further? “Luckily, no brain damage was found during the cerebral scan. Either you are very lucky or your body very strong, perhaps a combination of both.”

Now I’m able to see the speaker, a Knoreliaz wearing a doctor’s coat.

He goes on, “You have to keep in intensive care for at least an hour, then we will see.” Only an hour? Has medicine advanced that much? “For now, try to keep calm and breathe normally.”

I simply close and open my eyes again as an affirmation.

He seems to understand and nods.

“Perfect, now try to relax. Albeit not being fully out of danger, we are able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

That was not the best proverb to refer to a black hole...

“Don’t worry about anything now, Kira,” tells Aia holding my hand. “Right now we’re leaving the black hole behind, the mechanics are keeping up the machinery, security guards are stationed in the engine room, and more are searching the ship for the ex-captain.”

I just blink.

“Seems that the powerplants were sabotaged...” she sighs. “But I cannot think of any other as the captain... the ex-captain.”

“We also think so...” Ka’ni suddenly says. She’s out of my sight, but I recognize her voice. “But this ship is huge, if someone wants to hide, there are

numerous places, more if you have a master-key as he has. It will take time...” she sighs.

«How’s our savior?» a voice blares from a device.

“He’s recovering, sir,” Ka’ni tells.

«Good to know,» the voice sighs in relief. «We just have received a message from the IPS, a flotilla is approaching. Estimate time to arrival is thirty minutes.»

All sigh in relief at the news. About bloody time...

«Truckers relayed the emergency message, without them it would never have reached them...»

“How is that possible?” asks Aia. “Emergency transmissions are designed to be broadcasted even under these circumstances.”

«We don’t know, honestly...»

“Sa—bo—tage...” I try to speak.

“Maybe it was also sabotaged,” interprets Aia.

«That... cannot be ruled out... Anyway, we’re out of imminent danger, thanks to you two. Once we are out of the danger-zone, I will come by personally to thank you on behalf of the crew and the passengers.»

“You’re welcome,” Aia simply says while strengthening her grip on my hand.

Time trickles slowly away while I try to keep calm. I’m restless. I don’t know why... Because I was on the verge of dying? It wasn’t the first time... I’ve woken up in a hospital more than once. Or...

I suddenly begin to shiver and my body jerks...

“Kira? Kira! Keep calm!” Aia jumps up and embraces me.

I see a void... Shit! Not these memories...

“A—Aia! Help!”

“What’s happening?”

“I’m—I’m falling!” I scream.

“No, no, Kira... You’re lying in a bed...” she tells distraught. “I’m here...” she adds gently and embraces me.

My head spins... I feel falling... the void... that moment...

“No!” I scream again.

“Shh...” Aia tries to calm me. “What’s happening Kira? Tell me, I’m here.” She brushes through my hair.

“Void...” I stammer.

“Void? Ah! The void has gone, Kira,” she says gently.

I feel a sudden pressure on my whole side, arms around me and deep calmness.

My eyelids open slowly, Aia lies at my side on the bed and embraces me.

“It’s okay, I’m here...” she whispers while embracing me and brushing a lock out of my face.

“I...”

“I know, Kira. Don’t worry, I’m here.”

“Know?”

“Yeah, Enya told me about what happened that day...”

“She—she did?” unsure why, I begin to panic.

“Yeah... You had spatial disorientation and nervous crisis because of the void of space on your first space-walk,” she sighs. “Enya told me that she cared for you.” No... She did tell... “That you needed some company.” No way... “So she simply embraces you, like this,” she hugs me tighter and smiles.

Uff... I sigh in relief.

Aia seems to interpret that my relaxing is thanks to her embrace and just hugs me and gently brushes through my hair. I’m more relaxed knowing that my secret relationship with Enya hasn’t leaked.

I don’t know for how long we already were lying like this, I only know that it relaxes me.

“Can you sit up, sir?”

“I’ll try...”

Aia helps me up so that the doctor is able to check if my sense of balance is back.

“How do you feel, sir?”

“A bit dizzy, but quite well...”

“That is because of the drugs and you were lying for quite a while. But also a good sign, that means you haven’t lost your balance.”

“Lost?”

“Indeed,” he nods. “In some cases, hypoxia may affect your sense of balance. You are extremely lucky, we cannot find any possible damage, nor in your brain, nor your in the rest of your nervous system. We have checked any possible effects of hypoxia in your body, but have not found a single adversity. At this pace of recuperation, you will be able to stand in less than an hour.”

“Wow... Has medicine advanced that much?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Kira is an Awakened,” explains Aia.

“Oh!” “No way!” “Really?” the few people inside the ward flip out.

“Yeah,” I nod. “I’ve awakened on January the seventh of this year.”

“He is from the twenty-first century,” adds Aia.

“Impressive!” “Cool!” “Wow!” Not again...

When the commotion finally died out, the doctor seems to think.

“Then I cannot rule out your cryopreservation, sir,” he suddenly says after a lengthy silence.

“What do you mean?” I ask intrigued.

“Perhaps, your body still has some leftovers of the drugs you were infused with. That could explain your survival with no damage after having gone through

hypoxia. But,” he shrugs, “this is just a hypothesis. Whatever it is, you will be completely recovered after a good night’s sleep.”

“Does that affect him further?” asks Aia.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” the doctor shakes his head. “This goes beyond my medical knowledge. I am a normal physician for general medicine, not an expert in that matter.”

Good grief, then why do you mention it?

I lie down again and let Aia handle medical matters with the doctor. I’m tired...

I’m gently shaken awake.

“Kira... wake up...”

“Hmm? Aia?”

“*Hm~* The IPS has boarded the ship and is towing us out of the danger area.”

At the very moment, the door opens and two soldiers from the IPS enter.

“Good day,” one says. “We’re here to protect this area, please don’t mind us.”

“Huh?” Aia looks at me with unsure what’s happening, then back at the soldiers. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“No, ma’am. We have the orders to keep this place secured, words about sabotage have reached the higher-ups,” explains the other. “As you have disrupted the plans of the saboteur, you might be in danger.”

“Oh! Well... then thank you,” she smiles.

I would rather be alone...

“Here, Kira,” she hands me a drink. “You need to rehydrate yourself. Although you’re on IV, it’s better to have a drink,” she smiles.

“Thanks, Aia.”

I take the closed cup and begin to drink through the straw.

Again the door opens and both soldiers stand straight.

“Ma’am!”

“Good day,” the huge Wigmez says. “I am Xeviez, lieutenant of this force.

“Good day,” both Aia and I say.

“How are you, sir?” the lieutenant asks me.

“Quite well,” I reply.

“Are you able to speak?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Can you confirm that what you found in the engine room was sabotage? I will record what you might say.”

“Yes,” I nod and begin to relate what happened while Aia confirms each part.

The Wigmez takes note on a tablet and nods constantly.

“Sabotage...” she sighs. “Yes, this is clearly sabotage. Our engineers will have a look at your fix after we have reached the safe zone. They will confirm and document your suspicions. But until then, we cannot let anyone leave the ship. Every passenger and crew member has to be screened and background checked. I am afraid I cannot let you two leave either. I’m already in contact with the ISTM to recover your cargo and bring back the extension modules of your trucks. The cargo will be delivered by other truckers not involved in the rescue mission.”

“Wow...” Aia and I look at each other.

“I am sorry, ma’am, sir, but that is our protocol in such circumstances. If it had been a simple accident with no-one on the loose, you could leave the moment we leave the danger-zone.”

“It’s okay,” I simply say, “it’s your job. Thank you for informing us.”

“*Hm~*” nods Aia. “Kira’s right. No worries. As long as the ISTM is informed, we have no problems abiding your instructions.”

“That’s a relief,” nods the lieutenant. “The rest of the truckers will be interrogated and can carry on with their job if they have not overreached their time limits. If so, we work it out with their respective companies and tow them to the nearest port.”

“Good to hear...”

“We also have to account for all trucks who have entered the danger-zone. Seems some are missing...”

“No way!” we scream.

The Wigmez nods heavily.

“Some of my subalterns already reported some losses...”

“Shit...” “Fuck...” Aia and I look down.

“Once we are sure, we will hold a memorial for them. They have, you all have, risked your lives for all these people here on board. For now, please abide our instructions.”

“We will... But where will we stay for the time being? Here in the ward?” asks Aia.

“Oh, no, no,” the lieutenant shakes her head. “There is a free suite which the crew is preparing for you.”

“Great...” I sigh. I just want to be alone for a time.

“This is your room for the time being,” the second in command of the ship says. “I hope it is to your liking,” he adds while opening the door.

“Does it have two beds?” asks Aia.

“No... One empress-sized. You are not a couple?”

“No...” we both say shaking our heads.

“Oh! Forgive us! We will change the bed for—”

“No need...” says Aia. “This also works.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “We’re... friends, home-mates.” I just want to have a shower and a fag.

“Oh!” he sighs in relief. “Then I hope you enjoy it, even given the circumstances.”

“Thanks, is smoking allowed?” asks Aia.

“Sure,” he says as we enter.

The two soldiers from the IPS escorted us and will stay at the door for our protection.

“Wow...” we both are speechless. This suite is huge!

A living-room with a huge window to see the open space, a big bedroom with one huge empress-size bed, a huge bathroom with a tub and a shower for four... this is a honeymoon-suite for polys.

“If you need anything, you can use this console and we bring it as fast as possible. Any extras are for free, you have saved us all, this is the least we can do for you.”

“No—”

“Thank you,” Aia interrupts me. “No need, but thank you very much. We really need a shower and relax a bit.”

“As you wish. Whenever you are hungry, you can order from the console,” he says and closes the door.

“I need a shower...” I sigh and already go towards the bathroom.

“Yeah, me too,” giggles Aia. “You go first.”

“Thanks.”

“Ah... that did hit the spot...”

I step out of the shower and wrap myself in the huge bathrobe.

As I cross the door of the bathroom, Aia already stands near.

“*Hm~* Looking good, now it’s my turn,” she giggles and swiftly enters the bathroom.

She must have heard the shower turn off, I shrug and sink into the cozy sofa.

Why do I feel so tired?

A soft, gentle, warm breeze takes me out of my nap.

“Good morning,” whispers Aia lifting her head from my shoulder. She smells of shampoo and wears a bathrobe like me.

“Morning?” I blink.

“You’ve just slept through the day...” she giggles. “Just kidding, it has been for a quarter of an hour or so.”

“Ah... very funny...”

“Don’t be grumpy,” she giggles. “I sat at your side for a while now, your shoulder is comfortable.”

“Aia...”

“Yeah...” she giggles. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh? Quite well, but sleepily...”

“That’s because I gave you a relaxant. You were too nervous the whole time...”

“I... yeah, sorry...”

“Don’t worry, Kira. This episode must have awakened your crisis, your fear from the void of open space.” My heart jumps, right... “I’ve talked with Enya about it.” Not again. “She told me what happened, she’s sweet, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“You still feel that way?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, about me, about Enya.”

“Aia... I don’t know...”

“Sorry, it’s not the right time, right?” I nod and she sighs. “You go through such strange stuff, you’re an Awakened, you’re here for not even three months and have gone through so much. You had your first space-walk with no training, and now you acted as a mechanic, I mean an engineer...”

“Yeah...”

“And... you still feel uncertain?”

“Yeah... it doesn’t change much... this uncertainty has even grown.”

“Grown?”

“Yeah... Not only our relationships, I mean the one I have with you and the one with Enya, but everything... the only certain thing right now is my work.”

“Kira...” Aia pulls me into a hug. “You know, you can speak with me to lighten your heart.”

“Aia, thanks... But there are things I don’t want to burden you with. You already do so much for me, I cannot impose more stuff o—”

Aia brushes her delicate finger over my lips.

“You’re not imposing anything, Kira. I understand that there are things you don’t want to discuss with me, but let me help you.”

“It’s—It’s not easy, Aia. Right now, I don’t even get myself...”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m changing, but I don’t know if it’s for good or bad. I’m even unsure what’s changing... I’m uncertain about all... I cannot word it exactly, and that’s frustrating.”

“Then let’s just chat... there is no need to follow a plan...”

“Yeah, you’re right...”

We begin to talk about anything, even stupid things, there, sitting on the cozy sofa, drinking beer and smoking fags...

After two hours of talking nonsense and guzzling down draft after draft, we’re already a bit loaded... Luckily, we ordered some dishes, if not, we would be wasted by now.

Aia doesn’t mind her already open bathrobe and has her tits on display...

I sigh...

“What is it?”

“Your tits...”

“Yeah? What about ’em?”

“Nothing...”

“*Moh~* Now you have to tell me,” she pouts. “Is something wrong with ’em?” She looks down and cups them.

“Nothing wrong, but...”

“But?”

“How can you show them to me so openly?”

“Ah! Is that your concern?” she giggles.

“Not concern...” I sigh. “Enya and you show yourself too easily...”

“Enya too?” she smirks. Oh-oh... “What did you do with Enya? Hmm?”

“Aia...”

“C’mon... tell...” she giggles while making an erotic face. Shit...

“Okay,” I sigh. “We have a Felii-friend-skinship.”

“Oh! You have? Cool!” I blink. “I have one too with her. She’s so cute~” she giggles.

Okay brain, snap it out! No need for explicit images... Shit!

“Huh? What is it, Kira?”

“Oh... Nothing, nothing...”

“Ah! You’re imaging us together?” she giggles. “Nothing much to see. Just some body-contact now and then. We two have it too.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah...” she blinks, “why such face? We have slept many times together, barely clothed... these babies have pressed against you many times...” she cups her tits again. “So no worries, it’s great that you have such relationship with her, even if you rejected her. This means that you get along great.”

“Ye—yeah...” Okay, she refers to the *normal skinship*, no sexual contact.

“Ah! You want to touch my tits too?” she smirks impishly.

“What? You’re drunk...”

“Yes! Barely! C’mon, don’t want to?”

Calm down...

“Aia... I’d love to...”

“Then do it~” she giggles.

“No...”

“Why?”

“Because I will not be able to stop, Aia. You know it. And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Fuck... right...” she sighs and removes her hands from her tits. “You’re right... I’m not ready for... *that*... yet.”

“Then, please, don't tempt me...”

“But you can do it with Enya?” she suddenly says leering at me. Fuck!

“Sorry...” I sigh. How can I get out of this? I don’t want to lie, but I cannot tell the whole truth either...

“It’s okay, Kira,” she giggles. “I’m just teasing you. I get it. You don’t do such stuff...”

I just sigh, hoping she won’t take it as an excuse.

“Let’s lie down... my head is spinning...” she suddenly changes topic. Great.

We both lie on the huge bed, over a meter apart...

Aia rolls over to my side.

“Kira~”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s snuggle? I need it...”

“Sure... I also need it, after this day...”

“*Hm~*”

She presses her back onto my chest and curls up. I lay my hand on her firm belly and try to avoid her chest, I know I would not be able to stop at that moment...

“Hmm~ Nice~”

We lie together in that way for a while...

“Kira?”

“Yeah?”

“You do this with Enya too?”

“Yeah.”

“This warmth, so nice... Bet she feels the same as me right now.”

“How?”

“Protected...”

“Protected?”

“*Hm*~ I feel safe, I cannot describe it. But I feel safe.”

“But you’re strong, Aia...”

“That doesn’t mean I cannot seek some protection...” she whispers.

“True... But I’m not the bes—”

“You are, for me, right now. Surely for Enya too. Now I feel down for having been jealous...”

“Jealous?”

“*Hm*~ About Enya and you... well... I don’t know if I really was jealous... I felt like apart... Left outside...”

“Left outside?”

“Between you two...” she sighs. “If it was jealousy...” she seems to think.

“Yeah,” she giggles, “of both of you...”

“Both?”

“*Hm~* Like... you were together and I... not with both of you... Does that make sense?”

Suddenly, my repeating dreams come to my mind...

“Yeah, makes sense...” I say sleepily.

“Yeah~” she yawns. “I’m falling asleep... Good night...”

“Good night...”



I wake up surrounded by warmth... and pressure on my chest...

Aia... She’s sleeping on top of me... Her chest pressing against mine... and I’m embracing her tightly.

Such an awakening... I wish we had our relationship ironed out... I would make love to her this instant.

“Aia...” I whisper while tensing my arms around her. What have you gone through? If I am uncertain about myself, what are you? You, the sole representative of your species...

Am I really in love with you or simply infatuated with your beauty? No... I’ve never been that superficial. But you have me spellbound. I cannot tell why... I’m just under your spell...

She moves a bit and whispers, “...ve you, k...” I sigh.

“Hmm?”

“Morning, Aia...”

“Morning, Kira~” she yawns. “Oh~” she looks at me coyly. “I... oh-uh~” she suddenly says. “I’ve gotta go to the bathroom...”

She jumps up and hastily sprints out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. What the hell?

What's happening with Aia? She's flirting way more than usual... And this unusual smell?

Shortly after we stood up, we were called to be questioned about what happened.

Xeviez, the lieutenant, asks us to relate again what happened to several other officials.

After a short interview, we are told that we won't be stranded here for long. We are reaching a port and that all on board have been screened, but the captain is still elusive. Once they have found him, we are free to go. Of course, they congratulate us and give their thanks for our help.

Two hours later, they have found the captain, he was hiding in some servicing tunnels of the ship. Upon questioning him, he finally confessed that he was attempting suicide... with the whole ship, crew and passengers! He will be behind bars for life.

Before opening the doors to the port, all passengers and crew members gather in the huge main saloon of the ship.

Aia and I are showered with thanks and a standing ovation. And I'm pushed for a short speech...

"Thank you... thank you all. There is no need for this, we just did our job. As truckers, we oblige the laws of the space-highways, if someone is in danger, we help however we can. Today you have seen how tight-knit we truckers are, even if we work for other companies." I signal Aia to get the list of lost truckers. She just nods and takes her DigiBook. "Now, please, accompany us honoring our friends, co-workers and mates who have lost their lives in this rescue..."

Those who wear hats take them off and the huge hall falls completely silent.

"Benderth Sendert, trucker, also known as Singer, father of two, working for the Galactics..." Aia says solemnly. A minute of silence follows.

"Clara Miller, trucker, also known as Momi, mother of four, working for the ISTM..." A further minute of silence...

Aia goes on listing our fallen comrades. After each name, a minute of silence follows. We have lost fourteen good truckers. My heart weights by the feeling of loss. But, we all, together, were able to save twenty-two thousand people.

When Aia finishes, we give our fallen colleagues a standing ovation, wherever they are now.

Later, on the station, Aia and I are pushed to hold a press conference with the IPS. We have to tell our story again... at the end, we honor our fallen comrades again in the huge hall.

Aia still behaves strangely... she acts way sexier than usual and doesn't stop flirting with me. What happened? Did our conversation of last night influence her somehow? Or our sleeping together? That can't be, it's too strange and sudden... and that smell? It's gentle but erotic...

Finally we are free. I want to talk to her alone, but seems impossible. ISTM dispatch has assigned us new cargo to be hauled ASAP. Shit!

“Sorry, Kira... I'd like to talk a bit more, but I have to rush. I've got an express delivery.”

“Oh—okay... Bye then...”

“Bye~bye~”

She flits away while I check the dispatch app. Huh? Aia has her delivery in four hours, just like me... what the hell?

What should I do? She must have a reason. It's not like we can't talk at home.

Let's have a coffee and fag before my haul...



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway ~ A17 ~ Cargo 51: Roswell

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Epecially to

all the Aces of the ISTM

- Al

and all the Instructors

- Ana del Hierro
- Siegi Simon Sr.

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TL;DR:

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