

Space Highway

The Awakened

A06 ~ The Queen and the Phoenix

What a headache! What happened last night? Oh, fuck! I remember... Jim and I got plastered... Ah~ What the hell did I tell Aia? I hope I didn't go overboard...

With difficulty, I stand up and go towards the bathroom, I need a good shower. I open the door...

“Kira!”

“Sorry!”

Instantly, I turn around and close the door.

Fuck, fuck, fuck... and on top of that... Aia is using the toilet...

I sit down on the sofa and hold my head. Fucking hangover... I've never had such as this one... Fuck... I think I remember some stuff... I made her angry. I can't remember what I've said... I think I *tried* to flirt with her... Shit... Surely she will boot me out now... Fuck... Argh~ Freaking headache!

“Aaah~” I sigh loudly.

“Kira...”

I feel a hand lying gently on my shoulder.

“Sorry, Aia,” I manage to say.

Her delicate hand holds my chin and gently lifts my head. She wears her light-blue bathrobe. Her purple cheeks give away her embarrassment. Even so, she smiles.

“Don’t worry, take a shower, I’ll prepare some coffee.”

“Ah~ But...”

“Nothing happened. Don’t worry, you haven’t done anything I couldn’t forgive you.”

My eyes widen... What did I do? I can’t formulate the question. I only answer with a hum and a nod. She helps me up, and I visit the shower.

“This is heaven...”

Slowly, bit by bit, I feel my mind clearing up. But my head is still muddled. Seriously, what the fuck did I say to her last night? *I couldn’t forgive you?* What does she mean? Fuck...

I turn the shower off and step out. I dry myself while I look into the huge mirror... I should shave... Time to use the *old-fashioned, hand-driven* shaving set I bought at the Retro Store.

I shave trying to keep my hand steady.

Done. Happy with the lack of stubbles in my face, I put the bathrobe on, and step out of the bathroom. The intense smell of coffee fills the living room.

“Seems you’re better now,” giggles Aia gently. “Yeah, shaved looks better on you than those stubbles. Here, your coffee...”

“Thanks, Aia, and sorry for last night. I hope I didn’t hurt you in any way...”

“Nothing bad happened,” she giggles. “I’ve told you already.” She gives me a beautiful smile. “Anyway, it’s partially my fault too... I didn’t tell you that too much alcohol in low-grav affects you faster and stronger than normal. Plus, the effects get stronger if you come down to Gaia, the gravity discrepancy.”

“Uh~ But the other times...”

“Yeah,” she nods, “you’ve drunken quite a lot, but throughout the day, over a greater period of time. Thus, don’t rack your brains over this, and get dressed when possible, we’re leaving after the breakfast.”

“Uh~ Where to?”

“Mercury. We’ve got a haul,” she smiles heartily.

“We?”

She nods and hums happily in affirmation, “*Hm~* So don’t waste time, will ya?”

Oh, fuck... Just what I needed... With my head fucked up as it is, and going with her on a delivery... I’m not sure if I’ll survive this day...

Aia’s driving on her bike does not help me the slightest in overcoming my hangover...

We reach the CreativeTruck building’s garage, the huge doors are open.

We jump off the bike while Kim greets us.

“Hi~ How’s the lovely pair?” she grins.

“Kim! Don’t say that... We aren’t—”

Kim interrupts Aia’s flustered shout with laughter, “Don’t worry, just messing with you, girlfriend,” then looks at me and blinks. “Kira... what the hell happened to you?”

I shrug. “My first space-intoxication and hangover...”

“Welcome to our era!” Kim laughs.

“Kim,” Aia intervenes, “don’t mess with him...”

“Do you prefer I mess with you? You already sound like his girl—”

“Kim!”

Kim begins to cackle at Aia’s embarrassed face and gestures. Right now, I don’t mind their *conversation*, if they just could lower their voices, just a bit... fucking head...ache...

“We’ve gotta go, got some work to do,” finally Aia breaks free from Kim’s chatter.

“Okay, okay,” Kim laughs. “Take care, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks, Kim,” I nod with a heavy head.

“Thanks, Kim. Ah, say hello to Kite,” Aia tells Kite with a broad smile.

“Yeah, thanks. I will.”

Aia steps on the *gas*, and we lift off.

During the climb into open space she says, “While we are at a low altitude, inside the gravitational pull of Gaia, we can’t exceed the sound barrier, and less if you are over a populated area. To be sure, only break the sound barrier reaching zero point three Gs.”

“I understand.” I simply nod.

It should be obvious... That’s why the Concorde hadn’t had the promised success, or so I’ve read once...

“Of course, there are some exceptions, such as around some terrestrial ports. There, it is clearly marked, and the AR gives you the details.”

“Forbidden everywhere but there, then...”

“Yeah.”

We reach the humongous rings of the GGC. Aia proceeds with the routine, and we enter the Mercury gate.

“Eh~ Don’t we have to go by the Alpha—whatever?” I ask her.

“Alpha-XT,” corrects me Aia. “And no, we don’t need to, we already got all the data.”

“Yesterday, we visited dispatch before and after...”

“Yeah, because you were hauling hazmat cargo,” she explains, “with this kind of cargo it isn’t needed.”

“Ah~ Right, Jim said something the like...” I remember vaguely. “What’s our cargo?”

“We’ve got to fetch *metsildium* in Mercury and haul it to a processing plant in Neptune. Simple stuff.”

“Ah, okay.”

“During most of our trip, we can rely on the autopilot, meaning I can explain a lot of stuff.” She smiles heartily.

“Great, I just hope you are loaded with cokes... my head is still in another galaxy...” I hold my head with my right hand.

“Sure,” Aia giggles, “and coffee too. Want one?”

“Would be great...”

“Okay, give me ten minutes, when the autopilot is on...”

“I can do it...”

“No, no... don’t worry. I’ll show you next time how the coffee machine works.”

“Oh—okay...” I blink.

I could do it, even with this headache, I should be able to... aah... whatever...

.

With the artificial gravity on, Aia goes to the kitchen area, and in a few minutes, her Thunderbird is filled with the smell of coffee.

“Kira...”

“Thanks, Aia. Aah~ I needed that...” I sigh after the first sip.

She giggles. “You seem as hit as me some mornings.”

“Really? That hard?”

“Uh~ Well, not sure... I don’t show it too much, or people simply don’t notice it... I suppose...”

“Fuck me...”

She simply giggles as she sits back into the pilot’s seat.

“By the way...”

“Yeah, Kira?” She looks at me with a beautiful smile.

“What did I tell you last night?” I sigh. “I’m sorry, but I can’t remember...”

She blushes slightly.

“Nothing important, Kira. I’ve already told you, it’s nothing I couldn’t forgive you.”

“That—that doesn’t help... Sorry...”

“That’s enough,” she laughs, still blushing. “Don’t chew on it. Let’s focus on the work.”

Fuck... I have a bad feeling about this. I *did* say something or *did* do something to her which makes her blush. She says it doesn’t bother her, but... Argh! I don’t understand this woman...

I take my DigiBook out of my jacket, unfold it and try to focus on my studies, and forget the uncertainties of what I could have said yesterday. Hmm... This coffee is really great!

Looking sideways, I see Aia looking at me with a charming smile, then moves her eyes back on the *road*.

Next chapter... fuck! More paperwork! In-depth details about maneuver and action protocols, port checklists, cargo dispatch lists, manifests... The fucking table of content goes on and on... I ask Aia about it.

“Well, yeah,” she giggles. “It shouldn’t be strange. It’s an aptitude test for spacecraft pilot’s license, not for a simple terrestrial driver’s license.”

“Ugh~ Yeah...”

“With this license, you’re able to pilot and operate any spacecraft not requiring a crew,” Aia explains. “You are the pilot, the captain, the navigator, the copilot, the—well, everything...” she laughs.

“Wow...” I blink. “Fuck... too much theory...” I sigh. “Piloting is easier than all this...”

She giggles, “Yeah, sure. Anyway,” she smiles at me, “over a ninety percent of the system is automatized. The board computers transmit your inputs instantly to the navigational components of the truck.”

“Basically,” I think aloud, “the computers do all the stuff.”

“Yeah. Of course, the system only does what’s told to do,” she explains. “In rare security-related cases, the system might override your command.”

“Ugh~ In which cases?”

“Well,” she thinks, “for example... if the pilot goes kamikaze or tries to crash-land... The system would interfere and avoid a crash.”

“Wow...” I blink impressed. “Are there any crafts with AI?”

“Artificial intelligence? Like in the movies?” I nod, she shakes her head. “No... I think there were some... experimental ones... But they had to desist on keeping on with them. The AI-Crafts became conscious and developed self-image disorders. Basically, the AIs became confused because of the humanoid reality they were programmed with, which came into conflict with their own looks... I’m not sure if I’m explaining myself,” she peeks her tongue out. “Anyway, AI-Science broke away from non-humanoid designs, to avoid further AI related existential-crises.”

“Like the Androids and Bioandroids?”

“Exactly,” she nods. “Oh!” She blinks. “You’ve already met some?”

“Yeah...” I nod and begin to tell her about our encounter with Marta and Frank.

.

“Wow... You’ve already made Android friends... Cool!” she laughs. “Ah~ Tell me about yesterday, the haul with Jim.”

“Yeah...” I nod, “I got acquainted with some new species, for me at least,...” and I tell her about our *adventure* from yesterday.

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“*Fufu*~ Not bad for your first haul,” she giggles. “I hoped you’d see and experiment interesting stuff with Jim... Did you learn a lot?”

“Yeah...”

I keep on telling her about what I’ve learned on my first space-haul with Jim. Normally, I don’t like to tell others what I do or did. But this way, I clear my mind, and I don’t focus on Aia, not on what the hell I could have told her, nor on her bodysuit with a deep cleavage and the few straps covering her tits...

“*Fufu~*” she giggles. “Seems it was a fruitful day...”

“Yeah. I don’t stop learning...”

“*Hm~*” she hums in affirmation. “You can always ask me if you’ve got any doubts. I memorized the complete manual and guide in one afternoon,” she giggles.

“No fuck! In one afternoon?” I freak out.

“Yeah~” she giggles again. “Ah~ Don’t feel bad about it, I’ve got this gift... Just by reading, I remember it all, word-by-word—”

“Really?” I interrupt her. “Just by reading, you remember it all, by heart?”

“*Fufu~*” she giggles yet again and hums, “*Hm~* Well, most of it, anyway... I mean, yeah, I remember it, but it doesn’t mean I can use them in real life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, I can memorize the whole technical and maintenance manual of a truck, but would be unable to service one... I’m not so good with tools and mechanical stuff,” she explains while I nod. Makes sense. She goes on, “Or, languages... I can read a whole course on other languages... but I’m quite bad at grammar and linguistics... so, it’s not easy for me to just learn a bunch of new languages.”

“Wow...” I gulp. “Makes sense... if not, you would be able to speak all languages of the universe...”

“Not so much,” she giggles, “there are too many of them... Anyway, what I mean is, that even if I have the theoretical background, it doesn’t mean that my body, or rather hands, can do it. I am a certified Human-doctor, but—”

“Wow! Really? A doctor?”

“Well, yeah, I’m a physician, specialized on Humans. But I can’t work as a surgeon, as I’m quite bad with precision tools, as said...” she calmly explains while I’m freaking out...

“No—What I mean... How the hell did you go from physician to space-trucker?”

“Oh?” She blinks, then giggles. “Simple, these babies are easier to handle than patients...”

“*Ugh~* I don’t mean—” I sigh, “I mean... tell me about you... You’ve simply taken me in, without wavering, but... I don’t know anything ab—”

“*Hm~* Yeah...” she interrupts me. “Well, neither I know much about you, just the myths and legends... Anyways, just a brief overlook, my foster parents adopted me after they found me in a lifecapsule on Mars. I was still a baby. They raised me just as if I was their daughter... *Uh~un~*” she shakes her head, “I *am* their daughter. They love me, as I love them. I grew up fast, not only physically, but mentally.” She smiles brightly. “I entered Mars University barely turned sixteen, sixteen Gaian-years—”

“Gaian-years?” I interrupt her.

“Oh, yeah~” She nods and smiles. “Each planet has its own years, we use the Gaian year as a reference for ages. A Mars year is about one point eight Gaian-years.”

“Oh, makes sense. Then you were eight-something years old in Mars-years?”

“Yup, eight and a half, that’s why we use Gaian-years, mainly for ages.”

“Understood...”

“Anyway, I entered university at about sixteen and finished my doctor’s degree at the age of twenty, twenty Gaian-years...” Flabbergasted, I listen to her, incredible... “While I studied, I began to work doing deliveries for the postal service and doing other similar part-time jobs. Mainly to earn some money for my parents, they weren’t wealthy, just simple farmers. I’ve always got grants for my studies, so I didn’t need the money to live... I sent it all to my parents.” She sighs with a smile on her fine lavender lips. “Anyway, there, doing deliveries, I got the liking in piloting. Finished my doctor’s degree, I learned to pilot space-trucks and entered the ISTM at the age of twenty-two,” she giggles while I’m awestruck. “During my first four years there, I became The Queen of the space-highways.”

“Amazing...” I gulp.

“Of course, it wasn’t an easy walk, but it was worth it,” she smiles. “I prefer piloting this baby instead of putting up with patients,” she giggles.

“I believe you. I’ve got my driver’s license at the age of sixteen, while I studied mechanics. I’ve got a forged ID and used it to get the license to drive big rigs, and, later on, for hazmat cargo. I was supposed not to get it till I was twenty-one. With a lot of help from lady luck and my Asian appearance, they didn’t catch me as we Asians look younger for the average American at that time,” I grin.

“Wow~” she giggles, “so, you cheated?”

“Yeah!” I laugh. “But don’t spread it. I’ve got the license in no time and began to work in a small freelance trucking association. They didn’t require experience, but, in return, they paid less. Quickly, I got better and began to work for the highest bidder, the best-paid jobs, ignoring the possible danger of the goods or the destination.”

“Wow~” She looks at me with big, beautiful eyes. “How did you get a rig? It surely was expensive.”

“Oh, yeah... I’ve got one for one buck...”

“One buck?” she screams astonished.

“Yeah,” I chuckle, “symbolic price... It was fucked up, barely usable. I used it at first to practice my mechanic-skills.”

“You fixed it?”

“Yeah. After working with that patched-up rig for about two years, I saved up enough to buy my Falcon, just for my eighteenth birthday. Well, my parents gave me a good loan, which I paid them back after just three years.”

“Impressive,” Aia blinks.

“I went on working for the highest bidder. In fact, I only took difficult or dangerous hauls, the best-paid ones.”

“You’re of no help,” she giggles.

“Yeah,” I laugh.

“When did you become the Phoenix?” she asks with a beautiful smile and a hint of curiosity.

“Hmm~ About two months after my birthday...”

“The eighteenth?”

“Yeah, with my brand-new Falcon.”

“Tell me,” she smiles beautifully, “there are so many myths and legends about you, I want to know the real one...”

I have to smile at her enthusiasm.

“Yeah, sure.” I take a breath. “It was a hot day in Arizona... I stopped by a bar where freelance truckers gathered in search of a new job.

“While drinking a draft, a security officer, or the like, hurried in. He shouted something like, ‘I need a volunteer for an extremely dangerous job! Ten thousand dollars!’

“Of course, everyone was interested, myself included. At least until he said what it was...”

“What was it?” asks Aia intrigued.

“He just pointed at the TV-set which showed the newsreel about a huge forest and a kind of oil rig on fire, and said just one word, ‘Nitroglycerine...’

“No fuck! For real?” Aia flips out.

“Yeah.” I nod. “All sat down again. I thought about it while finishing my beer. Even for me, it was something big... Ten thousand bucks was a great sum, but going in there...”

“I understand.” Aia nods. “And? Did you do it?”

“Yeah.” I grin.

Aia looks at me with big eyes, flabbergasted.

“The official said, ‘If the oil well isn’t shut down, over a hundred firefighters and workers could die...’

“All truckers looked at each other. Nobody wanted to risk its neck, but to be a hero... He then said with a long sigh, ‘The well might blow... the whole city—’ That was the trigger, I stood up and shouted, ‘I do it! Not for the money—’ I couldn’t go on, the official took me outside with relief but in haste while the whole bar was in utter silence.”

“Woow~” Aia sighs mesmerized.

“Half an hour later, a short trailer was hooked to my Falcon, full of nitro... The trailer was armored, fire and shockproof. Even if the cargo was made safe, the task was risky, to say the least. The safest route was a simple dirt track... but a section was engulfed in flames... Airtankers and helitankers would clear the path for me...”

“Wow!” Aia blinks flabbergasted.

“They had it all planned, but not a driver crazy enough to do it.”

Aia begins to giggle, “They’ve found one...”

“Yeah...” I smirk.

“Why didn't they drop the nitro from an aircraft?”

“Too risky... It had to be a precision-work to put out the burning well, and helicopters couldn’t land nearby.

“Anyway, the route was living hell... The track and the terrain was, thanks to the fire and the water from the airtankers, unstable, to say the least. Flames flared up again everywhere... Torrents of water and fire-retardants flooded down just in front of me continuously... The heat and the moisture were unbearable... ‘Don’t stop, don’t fucking stop...’ I repeated to myself and to my Falcon. If I stopped, for whatever reason, the flames would engulf me and send me sky-high with all the explosive in my back. I went as fast as I could, trying to keep the tires as cold as possible...”

“Wooooow... Of course... at that time, you used wheels and tires...”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Two things could fuck up my Falcon... the overheating of the motor and of the tires. The rest was covered by the precise airtanker-pilots. Just when I was completely engulfed in flames, I reached the clearing near the well, where I was awaited... It was in the last second, literally... Reaching the clearing, the tires were on flames, and I almost lost control over the truck. Miraculously, I was able to stop in the midst the clearing...”

“Wow...” Aia blinks flabbergasted and can’t close her mouth. Obvious... it was a freaking miracle that I could walk away from that...

“I was received like a hero... With the nitro, they were able to close the well. The forest fire was under control in several hours. There, my nickname was born, I

came out of the flames with the wheels on fire... The Phoenix, who revives from its own ashes..."

Aia keeps on looking at me with big eyes and flabbergasted. She swallows empty.

"Fucking awesome! Better than any legend I've heard!" she shouts excited.

I have to laugh. "Even tho they took me for a hero and called me the Phoenix, I didn't enjoy the newly gained glory. I did it for the firefighters and the workers there, for the people. Once the adrenaline-rush was over, I almost lost consciousness... A paramedic, who was there, treated me. I suffered from burns, my left arm was severely burnt, and I was on the verge of complete dehydration. But it didn't matter, I just did the most dangerous task, to drive through the very same hell with a cargo of nitro. I've never felt such an adrenaline-rush again."

"I imagine... But you really did a fantastic job there. You saved a lot of people. Ah~ Did you get paid?"

"Yeah, of course, they even insisted," I laugh. "The first time for me!" I laugh again. "They even paid a bonus to fix my Falcon. I had to repaint it, change the whole motor, and of course, fix part of the undercarriage and the wheels. It was a miracle it wasn't damaged more... Of course, I checked and serviced it by myself."

"Nothing better than checking yourself if you have the know-how."

"Of course. I took it to the workshop of a friend, and we fixed it together."

"Nothing better than a trusty mechanic," giggles Aia. "That's why I leave my Thunderbird only in Kim and Kite's hands."

"Yeah, it's obvious that they are outstanding."

"Yeah, they are."

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After I fished my story, Aia goes back into the living space and gets some soft-drink and sandwiches. Damn, are they good! She smiles sheepishly and blushes at my praises.

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We exit the gate, and I'm blinded by the sun.

Aia explains while the windshield tints itself golden, “The system needs a fraction of a second to adjust the windshield’s tint. Basically, it’s like a pair of automatic sunglasses,” she giggles.

“Wow! How does it work?”

“Well, the system detects the difference of the light entering the cabin, and adjusts the chemical reaction inside one of the layers of the windshield.”

“Wow... Is it possible to activate it manually?”

“Nope. You can, however, dim it. It’s a safety feature. Anyways, it’s always on, you couldn’t see anything if looking at or away from a star. It never lets you dim or clear it over a threshold.”

“Cool...”

.

A dark, round object covers the sun, and the windshield readjusts itself again.

“Mercury. Gates on a single planet are always on the opposite side as the star, due to security measures. And more if the planet has no survivable atmosphere,” she explains.

“It wasn’t terraformed?”

“No, for two reasons. It’s almost impossible. Due to the Sun’s proximity, no life could be sustained. And the second, because of the planet’s chemical composition. Terraforming would have changed it completely, and the planet would not be mineable. It is, basically, a gigantic mine.”

“Fuck me...”

.

In no time, we reach the cargo-port of Mercury.

As I try to stand up, I float up and hit my head on the cabin’s roof..

“Ouch!”

Giggling, Aia explains, “Careful, Mercury’s gravity is less than the half of Gaia’s. Always look at this indicator after landing,” she points at a gauge in the middle of the dashboard, it shows (0.38G). Fuck! At least I didn’t hit my head too hard.

Aia asks me while wandering out of the airlock, “Did Jim show you how the coupling works?”

“Oh, yeah. He explained the practical protocols and what I had to do inside the cabin, that’s about it.”

“Oh~ *Hm*~ That’s the interesting part to learn. Just have a look then, how it works, its process.” She points at her truck through the huge windows. “First, the container propulsion block is uncoupled from the main body of the truck.”

I blink as I watch how a central part of the back of her truck separates from it.

She goes on, “Basically, it is half of the thrusters and the powerplants. That’s the limit of modularity of a truck. This module is coupled to the back of the last cargo-hold. It is independent and communicates with the truck through four different wireless systems. It’s always the same data, but a redundant system, for safety.”

“Wow...”

“Look, the first container-hold is being coupled to the Thunderbird. Between every three holds, a stabilizer-module is added, we call this module a *booster-ring*,” she giggles and peeks her tongue out. “Each hold carries its own fuel and has its own thrusters, these are used to move the holds into place at port. They can, however, be used for certain maneuvers.”

“Wow, cool. What maneuvers?”

“You use them while docking at a port, or you can use it during an emergency. Like full-stop in space or tight turns. The booster-rings carry powerful thrusters, and work in sync with the truck’s thrusters and powerplants.”

“Unbelievable...”

“In case of an emergency turn, you can do one of a hundred and eighty degrees in less than a second, in open space and without hazards, of course.”

“Less than a second?” I scream flipping out.

“Yeah, imagine a pen... the truck and the holds spin on its center...” She draws the movement with one finger over her open palm.

“Ah~ No friction, nor resistance...”

“Yup, exactly,” she laughs, “but it guzzles most of the fuel of the hold’s tanks. It is only used in emergency cases.”

“Understood.” I nod trying to digest that I will be able to make a one-eighty in less than a second.

I keep an eye on the coupling procedure while Aia does the paperwork. I’ve already seen it with Jim, now I want to see the coupling.

Six container holds are connected to the truck. They are humongous... over seven hundred feet long and over eighty feet tall, without the booster-ring which is added in between the third and the fourth hold. It truly looks like a ring which protrudes over the holds and has, just as Aia told, its own thrusters. The detached module from the truck is connected to the end of the last hold.

“Look...” I jump up startled at Aia’s sudden voice from my back, “they are syncing...”

I see several light-beams connecting each module and the truck.

Aia explains at my side, “These are three different types of lasers checking the connections, couplings, and data-sync. C’mon, let’s go.”

The routine is obvious, we leave the port and enter the gate, destination Neptune.

I use the time to go back to the theory *book*. I’ve got to finish it today. I really want to take the test tomorrow. Now that I have seen space, I want to come here by myself.

The trip through the jump is calm, nothing new... From time to time, I ask Aia details about the theory I don’t get on the second try. She explains calmly and patiently the most difficult parts. She could be a perfect teacher, I understand it easily with her explanations.

After some hours, just when my stomach reminds me that it's time for lunch, we exit the gate.

"Look, Neptune..." Aia points at the highlighted planet. "There, in sector four, there is the processing plant."

"A spacecraft?"

"*Hm~* More like a space station, like the Alpha. If you look carefully, you'll see a lot of gas-miners around Neptune. The plant uses these gases to process our cargo into several kinds of compound metals, including those used in our trucks."

"Wow... so, basically, a foundry..."

"More or less, yeah," she giggles.

Aia chats with control and docks the Thunderbird at the cargo port of the plant.

"Now, the process is the same, just the opposite. Do you want to watch or—"

Growl... my stomach interrupts her words, and she bursts into laughter.

"It's clear, then," she giggles. "I wanted to ask if you want to go and grab a bite."

"Seems obvious, no?" I ask holding back a sheepish laughter.

"Yeah," she giggles, "let's eat something." Turning to the cargo-manager, she asks, "Can we go and grab a bite while they uncouple?"

The Human man looks at his tablet. "If you wait five minutes, we're done, and you can eat without preoccupation."

"Oh, okay," Aia smiles happily, "I'm sure Kira's stomach can hold on for so long," she giggles.

I observe how they finish the digital *paperwork* and how the truck's module connects back into its place.

We enter the bar-restaurant of the cargo port. We are the focus of all patrons and the staff. It's the same feeling as on the Base Station, but different, it's more hostile...

We sit at the bar, no table is free, and order a combo each. Aia asks for a beer...

"Are you able to drink?" I ask her.

"*Hm*~ Two isn't a problem at all, provided that we don't haul any hazmat cargo. We're going home empty," she laughs.

Neat, I order a good draft too.

Finished eating, we get another jug and chat about the route and the jumps. There aren't many jumps in the Solar System. The most important ones are Mercury, Gaia, Mars, Jupiter, and Neptune. They are the industrial planets or the most settled ones.

Suddenly, a hefty human-guy interrupts Aia's explanation, "Hey babe, what's such a cute ass doing in this fuckin' hole?"

Aia, disgusted and annoyed by his comment and interruption, replies coldly, "Having a nice beer and being interrupted from a nice conversation with my colleague by a fucking asshole..."

"What?" he shouts spitting.

"Fuck up and leave us alone, don't wanna talk to you."

"How you dare, bitch?"

Aia stands up from the barstool.

"How dare *you*? Are all you miners so impolite to interrupt two truckers chatting?"

"Trucker? Don't fuckin' dream! You're no trucker, but a whor-Ugh!"

The guy couldn't finish his insults. Thanks to the low gravity, he ended flying across half the diner... Aia went ballistic using her boots... point of impact: his balls...

I simply laugh at the outcome and offer her the jug she left on the counter.

“Nice aim,” I laugh, “cheers.”

Giggling, she takes the jug. “Thanks, cheers.”

Meanwhile, several similar looking human-guys aide their fallen comrade.

“How you dare?” howls one.

“This chick busted his balls,” shrieks another.

“That whore!” brawls another.

Annoyed by their comments, I turn around.

“Why do you insult a girl who defended herself from a sexual aggressor?”

“And who are you?” he shouts.

“I don’t introduce myself to pigs...” I say coolly standing up.

My insult results in a furious answer... the group of miners runs towards us, Aia and myself.

I tense my muscles awaiting a heavy brawl...

My right fist intercepts the first, and I make him step back, the second receives my steel-reinforced boot with his stomach...

Glancing over at Aia, I see her move raging, and elegantly, and sexily... between several guys she strikes down by fists and kicks.

Impressed by her movements, I lose focus and receive a fist in my face, and I lose my footing...

“Kira!”

Several guys try to tumble me completely, but I am able to recover myself thanks to the low gravity, and I jump over them, making them eat my boots. They are separating us...

“Aia!”

In that instant, I see ugly guys flying away from where Aia is... Standing on the shoulder of one guy, which is falling from my weight and after having received a blow from my boots in his face, I see that someone is helping her. I grin, no need to hold back, and I focus on the ones around me...

Several eat dust, and I receive several blows until a group of uniformed guys enter hastily and begin to stop the fight. The law has arrived...

Two jump on me and press me against the floor, I don't resist, I know it would be worse if I do.

"No! That one is innocent!" a deeper feminine voice shouts. It's not Aia's...

The pressure on my back eases, and I'm helped up.

My eyes seek for Aia... I find her with two hefty women at her sides. They are heftier than Buz...

I near them.

"Are you okay, Aia?" I ask her.

"Yeah, covered in food and beer, but alright. Thanks to these two," she points at the two grinning women.

"You're welcome, girl. We know how girls are treated in this sty," says the heftier one.

"Yup... These assholes see new curves 'n' a cute ass, and they go wild..." adds the redhead.

Aia inspects me, "Kira, are you alright? Your face is all black'n'blue..."

"I'm all right, thanks. I've gone through worse..." I grin.

"*Fufu*~ Being a legend, even if most are invented, I'm sure about it," she giggles.

"Legend?" both women ask intrigued.

Still drenched, Aia grins and laughs, "Yup! Kira is the Phoenix!"

"The Phoenix?" echoes in the bar.

"Yup," laughs Aia, "the real one!"

I sigh, and without thinking, I say, "Queen... don't—"

"The Queen?" both shout.

Ups... shit... I just blurted it out...

"Are you really the Queen and the Phoenix?" the brunette asks.

I sigh again and nod, “Yeah, it’s true... I am the Phoenix, and my colleague here, is the Queen. I awoke not even a week ago...”

“Impressive...”

“Fuck me...”

A crowd is surrounding us forgetting the whole fight and the half-destroyed bar...

“Ah, we are Marisa...” the hefty redhead introduces herself.

“and Avasava. We work here, in the plant,” adds the muscular brunette.

“Yeah, Ava is in charge of the foundry.”

“And Mari is the hydraulics chief.”

Aia smiles heartily. “Thanks, girls. Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, thanks. You have been a great help,” I add.

Both women laugh at my comment.

“We couldn't possibly stare and ignore a girl being harassed,” says Marisa.

“Yeah, and the workout was great!” laughs Avasava.

After our laughter dies down, we hand Aia all napkins we find, and one of the staff brings a wet cloth. She begins to clean herself and rubs the food out of her tight-fitting bodysuit.

“Yuck! Disgusting...”

“Aia, your beautiful hair...” I say without thinking...

“*Hm~* Thanks.” She smiles slightly blushing while I help her to dry and clean her colorful long hair.

Meanwhile, the agents questioned all patrons and the staff, and took the group of miners away.

The owner apologizes and invites us to a beer, and insists that our tab is on the house. We insist on paying, but he won't let us, he says it is his fault for not calling in the police earlier... Well... if he insists...

We finish the beers in the company of Marisa and Avasava.

Aia looks at me. “Better we go... I need a shower... I feel disgusting...”

Both women accompany us to the airlock, and we say goodbye after swapping our contacts.

“Kira, take off..”

“Huh?” I look at her baffled.

“I can’t sit down in these drenched clothes, I’d dirty the seat. I’ll instruct you.”

Wow!

I strap myself into the pilot-seat of the Thunderbird. Aia begins to guide me through each step to take. It’s my first time to undock in a real-life situation. My heart is pounding, but thanks to Aia’s precise instructions, I have no problems. I undock successfully, and we enter the jump towards the Ea–Gaia.

Inside the jump, Aia tells me how I have to switch the autopilot into jump-mode. Easy.

“Now the system keeps in this lane and keeps the security distance by itself. Yuk! I’ll take a shower. Ah! Activate the artificial gravity—” I find it before she is even able to finish the sentence and turn it on. She smiles, “Thanks, Kira. Be right back...”

“Yeah, no problem, I’m on lookout.”

With a simple smile, she turns around and goes back into the living space.

It’s the first time I sit at the controls during an official haul since I awoke. I seize the moment and go through the functions of each instrument, setting, and the menu of the computer, mentioning them aloud, comparing each of them with the theory I’m reading.

“*Fufu~*” a happy giggle interrupts my self-study reciting protocols and functions.

A delicate hand rests on my right shoulder and holds on it gently. I turn my head... instead of meeting Aia's happy face, I meet one of her nipples! I almost brush over it!

"*Fufu*~ I'm up here~" she giggles.

I jolt, and with a major effort, I meet her eyes.

"I see you're getting the hang of the most important stuff," she smiles.

"Ugh~"

"I mean the controls, not my tits," she laughs while she sits on the copilot seat.

Fuck... what should I say now?

"Oh, my..." she exclaims and jolts up again.

"What?"

"Let me have a look at your bruises..."

Spinning the seat towards her —how did she do that?— she looks at my face...

"Uuuh~ This one doesn't look good at all... Does it hurt?"

"A bit... I didn't notice this one before..."

Just above my forehead, it stings, even hurts, more than in any other place.

"Just a moment..."

Aia turns around and goes back into the living space. She's only wearing really short... ugh... shorts.

"Back... Be still. In no time, I'll treat it."

She begins to treat my injuries. I don't feel anything she's doing, just the dull sting of the bruise. Another thing caught my attention and raises my blood pressure... her bare tits dance just in front of my eyes while she keeps treating my wound...

"Ready..."

Her tits disappear from my sight, and I find her beautiful eyes while I notice her weight on my knees... she simply sat on them...

“Let’s have a look at your other bruises...”

Still sitting on my knees, she keeps on examining my other bruises on my face.

“*Hm*~ They’re not serious. With this treatment, the bruises will disappear by tomorrow,” she smiles.

“Uh~ Yeah...”

Has medical science advance so much? But I can’t keep on admiring the medical improvements... Aia looks at me intensely. I know it’s because of the injuries... but the way she does it... ugh...

“Ready,” she giggles leaning back. “I’ve finished with your face. C’mon, take your jacket and t-shirt off...”

“Ugh~ Here?”

“Oh,” she giggles. “True, the windshield isn’t tinted... let’s go back...”

“Ugh, yeah...”

Does this mean that we could have been seen? Fuck... is it even possible? With those speeds? Better don’t think about it...

She stands up and guides me, taking my hand –does she even know the term *personal space*?– and sits me on her bed. Sighing, I take my jacket and t-shirt off.

“Let’s first see your back... Wow! You’ve got a huge bruise here, doesn’t it hurt?”

“A bit...” I say as I don’t really feel it.

“Wow... seems you’ve got a high threshold of pain tolerance... Anyone would be whining from this...”

“That bad it is?”

“No, no... but huge... it should affect a lot of superficial nerves.”

“Strange... Sure, I’ve lost some sensitivity on my left arm...”

“From when you’ve got burnt?”

“Yeah, not much... but noticed it.”

“Wow... Ah!”

“Did you find something else?”

“No, no... it just went through my mind... Did you lose more sensitivity?”

“Huh? Not so much at the touch, I think.”

“Hmmm~”

I look back, at her. “Aia, you’re frightening me...”

“Ah~ Sorry, sorry... I was just thinking... Perhaps, your cryopreservation influenced your threshold of tolerance, raising it... But you didn’t lose your sense of touch... hmmm~”

I sigh deeply while Aia keeps on treating my back and right side.

“Done. Lie down. Let’s see your chest... Wow...”

I’ve got a huge bruise around my lower stomach area, I suppose she means that.

My body jolts by the gentle brush of her delicate fingers along my muscle-lines... By no means, I’m a body-builder. Yeah, my muscles are somewhat defined... But that’s genetic, and I keep myself fit...

“*Fufu*~” she giggles. “It’s the first time I see your chest close up,” she says while she gently caresses along the lines...

“A–Aia...”

“Oh~ Sorry...”

She blushes and hastily moves her attention to my injury. Her cheeks seem to burn... No doubt she has noticed my boner forming in my pants...

She keeps on treating my injuries in silence. But, every so often, she glances over me... and hastily turns her eyes back to the bruises. Slowly her purple cheeks turn bluish again...

“Done...”

“Thanks...”

“Let’s get back to the cabin,” she giggles.

“Yeah, ah... Shouldn’t you put something on if the windshield isn’t tinted?”

“Oh, yeah...”

Sighing, I put my t-shirt on and go back to the cabin. She'll drive me crazy!

.

To my relief, Aia comes back with a short sleeve bodysuit on and the rest of the journey goes on calmly.

A short while after I finished with the theory book, we reach the exit gate.

.

"*Fuu~* I need a beer. Are you up to it?" asks Aia stepping out of her Thunderbird.

"Sure."

"Okay, let's go home, leave the bike there, and go on foot. Then we don't have to be concerned with the quantity," she laughs.

Going on yet another bender...

.

We leave the garage of Aia's apartment's building. She wanders towards the opposite direction of the Metal Heaven...

After a half an hour chat, we reach a pub called *The Rolling Stone*. Expecting a rock-themed pub, we enter and are received by another kind of well-known song...

"This voice... Bob Dylan?"

"Yeah," Aia nods, "it's a pub devoted to Dylan and other folk and blues singers."

"Wow..."

We find a free couch and sit down.

Aia asks for a rum... I thought we'd get some beers and some snacks...

I didn't get wrong with the snacks, the two Cuba Libres come with a huge plate of fries...

"Cheers, Kira! For the reborn Phoenix!" Aia laughs.

"Cheers, Aia! Long live the Queen!" I laugh.

She giggles, and blushing takes her first sip.

We're already two hours chatting and drinking. The first plate of fries was substituted with another one, half empty by now. I feel the alcohol's early effects while Aia keeps on drinking like a fish... Her behavior is already somewhat irregular...

"*Fufu~*" she giggles quite drunk.

She moves nearer, our bodies brush against each other...

"What?" I look at her.

"*Fufu~* I just remembered the fight... You're great! You were so protective..." she giggles.

"Oh~ My father always told me, 'No matter how strong a woman is, protect her. Humanity depends on them...' and—"

"Wow..." she interrupts me. "I'd love to have met them... your parents..."

"Aia..."

"Uh~ Sorry... But... you've been great!"

Uff, she's already drunk, she's even repeating herself.

"I'm getting drunk~ with a legend~" Aia giggles.

"Aia..." I sigh.

"*Fufu~* Surely~ you've never met girls as beautiful~ as me~ in your times?"

"Aia," I sigh. "You're drunk..."

"*Ugh~* I know that~ already. C'mon~ answer..."

"Ugh... No. You're the most beautiful of all," I tell her.

"Yay! I'm the most beautiful~ the Phoenix met!"

"Aia... please, sto—"

She interrupts me sitting on my knees and wrapping her free arm around my neck...

“*Fufu*~ This is great~ *Ugh*~ Kira... Am I really~ the most beautiful?” She looks directly into my eyes.

I brush my free hand through her long bluish hair.

“Yes, Aia, you’re the most beautiful and impressive woman I’ve ever met.”

“*Fufu*~ You’re exaggerating~ You only want to~ make me feel good~”

“No, Aia. I’m serious...”

«*I want you...*» Dylan sings just at the right moment...

She looks at me as if she’s in shock... tears begin to roll down her cheeks...

“Kira...”

She begins to cry and leans on my shoulder. Just in time, I took her long drink away, before it fell over us.

I put the drinks away and hold the fragile girl... How did she change so fast?

“Aia... You are beautiful...”

She seems to have a self-esteem problem... She doesn’t stop crying... I don’t know what to do... I limit myself to brush through her hair and her back. I repeat over and over again that she is beautiful and an impressive woman.

She fell asleep...

I carry her back to her apartment. Yet again, I lay her down on her bed and take off what could disturb her sleep.

I sit on the bed and look at her. A teardrop rolls down her cheek. I dry it with a finger and brush through her hair.

“Aia... what happened to you? What life did you have? You’re so strong—” I halt my words... I shouldn’t go on...

I stand up sighing, leave her bedroom, and prepare my sofa-bed and lie down.

What the hell happened to her? She is so strong, but, at the same time, so fragile...



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A07 ~ Troubled Hearts

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TL;DR:

The author does not identify himself with any character.
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