

Space Highway

The Awakened

A12 ~ Cargo 1: R u Sirius?

A buzzing sound awakes me. I reach for my terminal and shut the alarm off. All right! Today I've got my first haul!

I sit up and look around the living room while I stretch my sore arms. I find Aia doing some exercises...

"Morning..." She smiles at me lying backward over an exercise ball.

"Mo-morning..." I stammer at the sight she's offering me.

Aia is topless again, her back curved over the exercise ball and showing her tits off to my delight-err, distress...

"Give me ten minutes, and I'll make some coffee," she says with a beautiful upside-down smile.

"No need, I'll do it," I reply.

"But..."

"Aia... It's just coffee..."

"Okay..." She smiles warily, as if she forces herself.

What the hell? Why can't she let me do some simple things? She doesn't let me help around the house... I need to have a chat with her. But not today, I have to be on time for my first haul.

"Want some too?" I ask her nearing the open kitchen.

"Yeah, thanks."

I sigh. Her voice seems a bit odd, as if she is uncomfortable that I want to do it by myself...

The coffee machine is straightforward to use, why should I not be able to do it?

I sigh again, put a mug under the nozzle, and select Aia's preferred setting on the machine. Twice. I don't have a separate setting, as I love her favorite, just with less sugar.

While Aia's coffee is being brewed, I sip on mine and observe her movements and stretching... Bad for my libido... Really bad...

She is truly flexible... She easily does the split and falls back doing a bridge. Fuck me... Her movements are mesmerizing, and I can't avert my eyes until she finishes all her exercises...

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"Thank you, Kira." Aia smiles as I hand her the mug.

"You're welcome, Aia." I look at my *vintage* wristwatch, "Oh~ I have to keep on, I need a shower."

"Oh~ Sure," she giggles. "I'll take one after you. You've got your first solo-haul, right?"

"Yeah~"

"Great!" she giggles again. "By the way..."

"Yeah?"

"Great coffee, thanks."

"You—you're welcome..."

What the hell?

I enter the shower while I think about her strange behavior. It's so easy to make coffee... Why should it go wrong? The freaking machine does it all...

.

"Looking good, *hm~*" Aia giggles as I step out of the bathroom. "Breakfast is ready~" she sings.

What?

“C’mon, you’ve got to have a solid breakfast for your first day at work,” she smiles.

“Ye—yeah...”

I sit at the richly prepared table. So much... How did she produce such a splendid breakfast in so little time?

“What’s your route?” asks Aia happily sitting in front of me.

“Ah, yeah...” I take my DigiBook Micro, unfold it, and select the ISTM Cargo app. I authenticate myself with my fingerprint. “Let’s see... I have to fetch a huge cargo in As Sukhnah—how is this place name pronounced?” I ask Aia. She just nods, seems I’ve pronounced it correctly, “in Syria. And have to deliver it at... the *Sirius Institute of Research for Interface and User Security* on the Cybernetic Development Transit Station in orbit of Bernard’s Star... in the Sirius constellation... For the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation...” I blink. “What the fuck? Are they *sirius*—serious?”

Aia giggles at my expression... I must look dumbfounded...

“Yeah,” she giggles. “I did that route several times, quite easy. It’s great for a newcomer. Just about two and a half parsecs away and most can be done by Jumps. And it will surely be interesting.”

“How so? If it’s a rookie-trip—”

“Not so rookie, Kira,” she giggles. “The trip is easy, but the SCS is notorious for being a disaster...”

“Really?” I’ve read something similar... where was it? In one of my Sci-Fi novels... don’t say... were they divinations or what?

“Yeah,” she nods, “all the papers are a disaster. They use horrible acronyms, and most of their stuff does work as not intended.”

“You mean as intended, don’t you?”

“Nope...” she giggles again, “quite the contrary. They are notorious for designing stuff that works just the other way around.”

“If they design something to heal, it kills?” I ask fearing an affirmative answer.

“Yup!” she laughs. “That’s why they design their stuff for bad things and turn out good.”

“No way... How come that they are still in business?”

“Dunno...” She shrugs. “Anyway, it’s a good client of the ISTM. We just do the hauls. One thing though...”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t accept any offer to test anything...”

“Huh?”

“They love to test their stuff on anyone coming by.”

“Thanks for the hint,” I sigh.

“And it will be a nice experience for you, Kira.”

“How so? If they want to use me as a test subject...”

“Mainly because you’ll meet a new species.”

“Really?”

“*Hm~*” She nods. “The Irilyx...”

“Iri—what?”

“Irilyx. They are a plant-like species. You’ll see...”

“Oh—okay...”

Finished the breakfast, I get my jacket and boots. Ready. I check that I have my terminal and my DigiBook, all set.

“Good luck, Kira...”

She gives me a peck on my left cheek.

“Yeah, thanks, Aia.”

“Call me anytime if you need help with anything...”

“Ugh~ sure... Bye...”

“Bye~ bye~” Aia sings under the threshold of her apartment.

What the fuck? Why does she play the housewife just wearing her bathrobe?

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In a brief time, I reach the CreativeTruck on my scooter and unhook my Falcon. Ready!

I blast off into the skies of Gaia. But it will be a short ride...

In less than an hour, I reach the mentioned place in Syria.

Wow! (As Sukhnah Spaceport) appears above the highlighted gigantic complex. This AR-stuff is really handy...

The controller chimes in and sends the vectors of my dock. Easy.

On the ground, I'm received by an android, I think. He is the loadmaster of my cargo. Swiftly, he prepares all the paperwork and, once the holds are coupled, he wishes me good luck.

That was fast!

Ready to blast off! This time for real!

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I'm glad I've listened to Enya's advice in getting the new system, even if it is in real-life testing phase.

Both the system and the AR are blazing fast. The real-time data and the vectors are incredibly useful and help a lot in reducing my own calculations. Even the Gate procedures are automated... I don't have to give any input unless they vary from my manifest route. I can fully concentrate on just handling the truck. Just awesome!

Even the autopilot is more *intelligent* without reaching *true* artificial intelligence. Despite this upgrade in intelligence, it lets fine-tune more details of the autopilot compared to the one of System 5.

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Time flies by while I read some of the system's intrinsic details, intriguing...

Ding! »Please, be sure to take control,« a nice automated voice reminds me that I'm about to reach the exit gate.

Let's test the voice commands...

“STS, auto-path to next Gate.”

»Auto-path to next Gate on route activated.«

“Cool!”

»Command unknown. Input valid command.«

I have to laugh.

“Execute the last command. Instructions over.”

»Repeating last command. Auto-path to next Gate on route activated. End of instructions.«

Okay... I have to remember that I have to end the instructions, or the system keeps listening.

I look up the voice command system in the guide. Oh! I can input several successive commands until I tell it there are no more instructions. Interesting. Let's try...

“STS, cancel last command.”

»Cancelling auto-path to next Gate on route.«

“Auto-path to next Gate.”

»Auto-path to next Gate on route activated.«

“Auto-check-in at next Gate.”

»Auto-check-in at next Gate on route queued.«

“Keep on route until exit of next Gate.”

»Space Gate auto-route for next Space Gate queued.«

“End of instructions.”

»Instruction queue: Auto-path to next Gate. Auto-check-in at next Gate. Space Gate auto-route for next Space Gate. Correct?«

“Yes.”

»Executing queue.«

“Thanks.”

No answer. I laugh, they could have, at least, put in a ‘you’re welcome’-routine.

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The system indeed follows my instructions and takes my Falcon to the next Gate, checks in, enters the next Gate, and sets the autopilot in Gate-mode. Cool!

Time to read more...

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Ding! »Please, be sure to take control.«

“Okay...” Time to take control.

My Falcon exits the Gate...

“Fuck me...”

The Sirius Gate Hub is huge! Just as big as the Alpha Centauri Gate Hub, if not bigger.

New vectors towards the local Gates-sector appear overlaid on the AR. Okay, let’s do this by hand...

I guide my Falcon with its long freight following the vectors towards the said sector.

«Sirius Local Gate Control to Falcon. Do you read?»

“Loud and clear. Is something not in order?”

«All in order as far as the cargo and route concerns. But we do not have you on file. Do you have a valid visa for the Sirius sector?»

“A visa? I was never told I need one...”

«It is required, I am afraid. Please follow the vectors I am sending and dock at the commute-station. It will be a fast and standard procedure, don’t worry, sir.»

“Okay...” I sigh. “I received your vectors,” I say accepting the new vectors on screen.

«I am really sorry for the nuisance. It will be fast, I assure you. And a one-time thing.»

“Okay, thank you.”

Finally, I reach the huge complex. Control chimes in and gives me the docking instructions and permissions.

I step out of my Falcon through the galley until I stumble...

A really strange creature awaits me... I can't see much of it as it wears what looks like a lab coat and it wears a mask. Its skin is reddish with some yellow and violetish strains... and it's huge! Surely more than eight feet—err... metric, metric... ugh... about two and a half meters tall.

“Welcome, sir,” the creature says as it slightly bows. “This way, please...” it points with open palm towards a door. It only has three long fingers.

Intriguing... is this, perhaps, an Irilyx?

But... didn't Aia say that they're plant-like?

Fuck! It has three legs!

“Sh—sure...” I stutter overwhelmed by the sight of this creature.

Its eyes are quite big and dark yellowish. No hair whatsoever... but some strange looking vines floating down right behind what seems a kind of tiara, but made of something similar to wood. Intriguing...

I can't guess the creature's gender. I can't find any obvious signs of it...

I follow the creature.

“It is your first time in the Sirius sector, I take it,” it says with a kind and melodic voice. No hint of gender in the voice either...

“Yes, it is.” I nod. “Is this standard?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. Please, do not worry. We need to do a health-check, and you need to answer some questions, that is all.”

“Health-check?” I ask raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, indeed. Do not worry. A gynoid of your species’ characteristics will proceed with the check. It is to ensure that you do not carry any possible pathogens in your soma.”

“I do have a health certificate...”

“Yes, I have access to it, indeed. But, nevertheless, a fresh check is needed to comply with border controls, I am afraid.”

“Okay,” I sigh. “Then why is it just for the first time?”

“Oh, good question, indeed.” It nods. “This examination is to confirm no pathogen perilous for our species resides in your soma. And, indeed, to *stymy* any possible outbreak. Under normal circumstances, you could not acquire such pathogen. And surely will not ever.”

I sigh, this manner of speech...

“Okay, I understand.”

It guides me to an infirmary where a Human-looking gynoid wearing a nurse dress awaits us.

She bows to me.

“Welcome, sir. I will be your nurse. Please, take a seat.”

“Okay.”

She walks towards me with a *modern* syringe. I’m already used to them. It doesn’t even sting...

“I will take a small blood sample, sir. Perhaps you’ll feel a faint sting.”

“It’s okay.”

Nope, not even a sting. The syringe begins to slowly fill with my blood.

The creature stares intensely at my blood.

“Is something—” I ask

“No, no...” it hastily negates, “indeed not, sir. I—” it suddenly stammers, “it is just fascinating...”

“Fascinating?”

“You mammalians are such an intriguing sub-regnum...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, indeed. It is your first stay here...” It nods. “Our species evolved from the regnum of what you call *flora*, in contrast with your animalia.”

“Oh! You mean—”

It nods again.

“Indeed. Comparing to the evolution of your species, our would be what you call plants.”

“Incredible...”

The creature seems amused, but I can only guess by its movements.

“We are called Irilyx, indeed, that is our species’ name. We cannot compare our species, impossible.” It shakes its head. “Our kind has no blood, in your sense, indeed. Nutrients in our somas are carried, indeed, by what is called *sap* in your language. However, this translation does not make justice, as it is, indeed, more complex.”

“Wow...” I blurt out in astonishment. Then it is true...

“Our species can, indeed, only compared to yours that we, like you, are intelligent living beings,” the Irilyx goes on.

“Sorry to ask,” I look up at *it*, “do you also have plants on your planets? I mean, as producer of oxygen and such...”

“Oh!” It blinks. “Interesting question, indeed. The first time someone asks this here, indeed.” I could swear it seems amused. It nods. “Indeed we have *lower* plants which may be similar to yours, but produce no oxygen.”

“Huh?”

“Our species does, indeed, inhale carbon dioxide to survive and exhale oxygen as toxin.”

“Wait...” I say perplexed, “you inhale what for me is toxic?”

“Indeed...” It nods again. “We could say, in a way, that one of your species and one of mine could survive together in an air-tight room endlessly if nutrients are provided.”

“No fuck...” I blurt out in astonishment.

Again, it looks amused, but I can swear I detect a hint of interest.

“First time such questions are made, indeed,” it says scratching its chin, or whatever it is. “Normally, truckers are only interested in going through this procedure with no questions, indeed. Or question our reproductive manner...”

I swallow empty... that’s the next thing on my mind...

It goes on while the gynoid nurse analyses my blood sample, “Our species does reproduce by pollen and stamen, but by coming in direct contact, similarly to you animalian species.”

I blink, but don’t dare to question it more.

It trails off with the explanation and looks at me.

“Why, indeed, such question and not the usual ones?” it suddenly asks me.

“Ah, it’s just that I’m interested in nowadays’ species...”

“Nowadays?” it asks intrigued. This time I’m sure of it, the posture and tone give it away.

I nod.

“Yeah, I’m an Awakened...”

“What?” The Irilyx suddenly jumps up, its *hair* points up to the ceiling. Its whole body shivers and its hands shake. “You—you are, indeed, from another era?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I was cryopreserved for over a thousand years—ah, Gaian-years.”

“No way!” It jumps up again. “That is inconceivable, indeed! This is my first time to encounter such a rare opportunity!”

“Huh?”

I'm already used to the fact that people freak out knowing I'm an Awakened, but this creature is going overboard.

"May I ask—" its voice trails off...

"Yeah?" I ask back unsure about what will come.

"How... how, indeed, you see us, as a species?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, indeed, that we are what you would call plants—"

"Oh!" I blink again. "I don't know how to answer that..." I confess. "I mean, it's the first time that I encounter a species which is not mammalian..."

"Oh, I am sorry for such a question, indeed I am."

"And, I must confess, that in the era I was born in, we didn't think of plants as a possible intelligent life-form... and I'm afraid that most treated them as simple food or even nuisance..."

It blinks.

"Oh..."

I hurry on and try to avoid conflict.

"My people, in my times, treated the planet and its resources just as that, resources to have an easy life. Not many dedicated themselves to protect nature, including flora and fauna." I sigh... shit... I shouldn't have told...

"And now?" it suddenly asks.

I sigh.

"I don't know how to answer... I'm here, in this era, for less than a month..."

"Oh! Makes sense. Are you, indeed, appalled that in other worlds plants have evolved to your level of intelligence?"

"Why should I?" I blurt out again.

It blinks, then seems to laugh.

“Not the standard response I was awaiting, indeed. Most feel pressured to a positive answer. You, however, are natural. Now I am truly intrigued, indeed, by you.”

“Huh?” I blink again unsure. Are these the questions it said will ask?

Its hand brush through its vines, or hair, or whatever it is.

“What gender would you guess I am?” it asks.

Shit...

“I,” I sigh, “I wouldn’t assume genders. But, I must confess that I’m intrigued.”

It laughs, this time obviously.

“Good answer, indeed! Most assume my gender because of my profession. Some assume I am female because I am a doctor. Others, that I am a male, on the same basis, indeed. It seems that it depends on culture or species.”

“Why should someone judge the gender based on your profession?” I ask back.

“Oh!” It laughs again. “Interesting.” It brushes again through its *hair* and scratches its chin afterward. “I am, indeed, a male, at least from a biological perspective.”

“What do you mean?” I ask baffled.

“My reproductive structure is, indeed, formed by stamen, part of my androecium. Females’ reproductive structure from our species is formed by pistils, part of the gynoecium.”

My head begins to spin. Where the hell do they learn English?

“Sir...” the gynoid nurse comes to rescue and interrupts us, “the analysis is finished.”

She hands a tablet to the Irilÿx.

“Thank you, nurse, indeed,” he says and reads through the digital document. “Perfect, indeed.” He nods and turns to me. “No extraneous pathologies are encountered in your soma, sir. Now you will have to respond to some simple questions, indeed.”

More questions? I sigh. Okay, whatever... As long as I can finish my delivery, no problem.

Some really basic questions later, the Irilyx accompanies me to the airlock to my Falcon.

“A real pleasure it has been to talk to you, sir, indeed it was,” he says and nods.

“Thanks. Now that I have this visa, do I have to do further checks?”

“No,” he shakes his head, “at least not if you do not, indeed, have any sexual contact with one of our species...”

“Huh?” Is this even possible?

He seems to have guessed my question.

“It is, indeed, possible, but not advisable. Pleasure is, indeed, attainable, but unfit for procreation. It may be possible to acquire a sexually transmitted disease which only affects our species, indeed, as no pathology would affect your soma, but may harbor it and transmit it to any soma of our species.”

“I—I understand...” Not that I’m tempted...

He bids his goodbyes, and I enter my Falcon again.

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Inside the next local jump, I sigh... What a strange guy... Oh! I didn’t even get his name... Whatever... I need a fag...

Although Kim and Kite gave me a good walkthrough through the changes from system five to six, there are still many details I don’t know... I use the free time to read the manual. Not the most entertaining thing to do... I should get some books...

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Finally... Finally, I’m reaching the Cybernetic Development Transit Station in orbit of Bernard’s Star.

I have to bring some books with me. Thanks to all this automation, I only have to be on my toes near ports and the gates. While on autopilot, things are extremely boring... Let’s hope that, at least, something interesting happens on

this Transit Station. I also need some good food. I just ate some insta-food I bought at the As Sukhnah Spaceport.

«CD Transit Station control to Falcon, do you read?»

“Loud and clear, Phoenix speaking.”

«Please send manifest.»

“Huh? The system should have sent it a second ago... Didn’t you receive it?”

«Ah! Huh? Oh! Yes! Yes! Here it is! Sorry! Oh! Alright! It is all right. Here, I’m sending you the vector. Huh? Is it this one? Ah! Yes! Yes! Have you received it?»

What the hell? Oh... Aia told me that they are a mess... shit... But the doctor at the Sirius Commute Station was really orderly...

Finally, the vector comes alive...

“Vector received. Thank you.”

«Great! I did it! I did it!» the controller chants. «Proceed to—ugh... port—ah... De—ah! Delta, delta! Six... yes, six!»

“Received, proceeding to delta-six.”

«Yay! Eh—I mean, great. Personnel will await you, huh... ah! Phoenix!»

“Thank you...” I reply with a sigh. Yup, it will be interesting, at least...

.

I’m getting irritated... I’m already waiting for a good fifteen minutes behind the closed airlock... No one in sight...

Finally, a creature similar to the doc who interviewed me on the Commute Station, but quite smaller, about my height, arrives hurriedly.

Just before reaching the airlock, it trips over and falls flat in front of the glass door. Papers float all over the place... I sigh...

Obviously hurt, it pushes itself up and gifts me a weary smile.

“Are you hurt?” I ask even knowing that the Irilyx won’t hear me through the transparent airlock.

It negates shaking its head seemingly having guessed my question.

The airlock opens humming as it touches the panel. Finally!

“Good afternoon!” It bows. “Sorry for the delay, I am! A nice travel you had, do you? Nice to have a visitor, it really is!” It begins bombarding me in rapid successions. “Ah! Yes, sorry, I am! My name is Vhzgltrx, it is! Nice to meet you, Phoenix, I am! Welcome to CDTransstation, you are!”

Hold on, hold on...

“Ah! Sorry, I am! I dropped all the cargo papers, I did!” It drops to the ground again. “Ah! The manifest, lost, it is! Uhhh~ Where is it, where indeed? Ah... Here is one page, it is!” The creature keeps talking non-stop while picking the papers up. “Oh! This is... ah! Manifest! Part of the manifest, it is!”

I kneel down and help the creature with its scattered paperwork. Do they really use paper? Aren't they plants?

“Oh! No need for help, it is! I am sorry, I am! For being such a klutz, I am!”

In seconds, I gather its papers and order them.

“Don't worry, here,” I say while I hand it the documents.

“Wooow... I am...” it stutters, then its eyes sparkle. “So fast, you are. Thankful I am, I truly am!”

It jerks up, almost letting the papers fall again. Oh.my.gosh.

“Ah! Yes! The manifest!” It jumps up again. “Let's see, let us. Ah... uups! Here! It is.”

Sighing, I take my DW out of my pocket.

“Uh~ Uuuups...”

I sigh... all the papers are scattered on the floor yet again... Patience...

“Why don't you use a DW like this?” I ask showing it my DW.

“Ah! Uh~ Don't know, I do not. My superior says this stuff is too important, she says.”

“Okay...” I sigh again. “Then why not having a desk here, then?”

“Oh! Fabulous idea, indeed it is!” It jumps up again, nearly letting the papers lose, yet again. “Uh! Yeah! Let’s do this there, we should.” It points at a door, seemingly an office.

“Good,” I simply say and nod.

Well, Aia promised me that the haul would be interesting. At least boring it won’t be, it wouldn’t. Fuck! Now I’m speaking like it.

I follow the Irilyx to the door which opens to an empty office. Right. It could have left the papers here first...

“Okay... let’s see, okay?”

Slowly, really slowly, we go through each item on the manifest... Really? There are thousands of entries in my manifest.

“All here, it is!” it giggles. “Yay! One manifest done, the first it is!”

“Huh?” I look at it questioning.

“Ah! My first day at the cargo port, it is!”

“Oh! No wonder you were nervous.”

“Huh? No, no. Nervous I am not. I knew I could do it, I did.”

“Oh... okay...”

It giggles again.

“Hungry are you, don’t you? Let’s go to the restaurant, let’s do it. Some hours they need, they do, to uncouple and couple the new cargo.”

“Hours?” I ask baffled. It should be a matter of minutes.

“Yeah,” it nods, “they are of the best, they are. The fastest of all, they are!”

No fuck! How fast are then the slowest? I ask myself.

Vhz—whatever, guides me through the vast station. More often than not, we have to gather the papers it loses from time to time...

The station is huge and... plantlike... If I didn't know better, I would say we're in a jungle. The strange thing is, that all *plants*, the not intelligent plants, are all dark-reddish.

A sudden question races through my mind.

"Ah, Vhz—ugh..."

"Vhzkltrx, it is. Easy, isn't it?"

"Sorry, not for me..." I sigh an apology. "It seems I'm unable to pronounce your name properly, sorry."

"Oh! No need to worry, it isn't. Uh... Ah! Yeah! Just call me V, will you?"

"Oh, okay, V," I sigh. "I wanted to ask..."

"Yes, what is it, it is?"

"If you breathe carbon dioxide, how comes that there is oxygen?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I breathe oxygen..."

"Oh! Good question, it is. Hmm..." V seems to ponder, "then you are breathing in our toxins... makes sense, it does. You are like a plant, you are!" V jumps up giggling.

"What?"

"Yeah, it is. Like these..." V points at the huge dark-reddish plants. "You produce life-giving carbon dioxide and process the noxious oxygen, you do."

Okay, time to freak out. *I am a plant* for a plantlike species. Great!

Just as I want to ask more, we reach, seemingly, our destination.

"Here, it is. The best restaurant for mixed species, it is."

"Mixed species?" I ask V.

V nods.

"Yeah. You surely can't eat our food, you don't. And I won't be able to eat yours, nope, I won't."

“Okay,” I sigh at the sight as V lets all the papers flutter again.

Seated in the *nice* swampy-looking restaurant, I look at the DigiMenu. At least they have something recognizable, hamburgers. The only thing I know, and I’m able to read...

V sits opposite to me and looks through the menu. Once, twice, thrice...

“Can’t make up your mind?” I ask.

“Uh~” V suddenly stutters. “No... it is not that, it isn’t. I want to try this...”

V points at a plate. I am completely unable to read it...

“Then why don’t you order it?”

“Uh~ Too expensive, it is, for me, it is.”

“Oh... is it really that expensive?” V nods. “How much?”

“Uh~ A thousand bracts...”

I take my terminal out. Let’s see. Unit converter, money, Sirius bracts to GDs. A thousand... oh fuck, that’s just forty bucks.

“Okay,” I sigh. “I invite you.”

“Really?” V jumps up high, its vine-like hair stands up and its body trembles like aspen leaf. Heh... a plantlike creature... trembling like aspen leaf... okay... no more stupid jokes, right?

“Yeah,” I confirm with a nod.

My hamburger will cost the same, so no problem.

“Thank you, thank you. So thankful I am, truly!”

“You don’t earn much, I take...”

“No, no... I do earn well, I do. It’s just...” V fidgets around, looks down, then to the side, finally at me. “I... spent it, I did, my first pay.”

“Oh?”

V nods.

“Stupid, I am. I spent it on magazines, I did.”

“Magazines?” I ask dumbfounded.

V nods again, seemingly ashamed.

“Magazines about other species, they are,” V confesses.

“About other species?”

V nods yet again.

“Like yours...” I could swear V is blushing. Its cheeks are darker red with the yellowish lines getting brighter.

We are interrupted by an android.

“Dear patrons, are you ready to order?”

“Oh, yes,” I say. “For me a hamburger menu and for V... ugh—this one...”

“Okay. And to drink?”

“Do you have coke?”

“Sure we have.”

“One for me. And for V...”

“Ah!” V jolts up. “Ziling-water, please, I’d like.”

“As you wish.” The server nods and disappears.

“So,” I ask V, “you’re interested in other species?”

“Yeah... I am.” V nods shyly.

“I can’t judge you, V. I’m the same.”

“Re—really? You are, are you?”

“I’m what’s called an Awakened—”

“What’s that, what indeed?” V interrupts me with evident interest.

“Oh... I was cryopreserved, meaning frozen for over a thousand Gaian-years.”

“Woow... You are, then, over a thousand years old, are you?”

“I am. Humans normally won’t get much older than a hundred.”

“Wooooooow...” V opens its mouth wide. “I am ten, I am...”

“Huh? Ah. Your timeframe is different, I see.”

I take my terminal out again and look up the local timeframe and input V’s age.

V looks at me with interest.

“Oh, then you would be about nineteen Gaian-years old.”

“I am older in your time, I am?”

“Yes. At least in comparison. Then you are barely an adult? Oh... sorry...”

“No need, no. Yes, I am. I just finished my schooling as an auxiliary cargo operative, I have. How old are you, if I may ask, you are?”

“Oh, I’m thirty Gaian-years old, if I don’t count the time I was cryopreserved.”

“Oh! Good age, then, truly, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

V fiddles with its fingers.

“I mean... the strongest pollen comes from maturity, doesn't it?”

“What?”

Again, V fidgets and looks around.

The server interrupts V trying to say something and puts our drinks down.

“In about fifteen minutes, your food will be ready. I am afraid that the missis’ dish takes a bit long to prepare.”

“Ah,” I blink but react, “don’t worry, we have time.”

“No problem then.” The server nods. “If you need a refill for your drinks, just call me.”

“Thanks...” I say.

V is still fiddling with her fingers.

Several awkwardly silent minutes go by... What should I say?

“V...” I say, and *she* jumps up.

“Ye—yes, what indeed?”

“No offense, but—I am not familiar with your species... what is your gender?” I finally ask.

“Oh!” V jumps up again, its body shaking nervously.

It takes another minute for V to calm down.

Shyly, V says, “I am a female, I truly am.”

“Sorry for asking such a strange thing, V.”

“Ah! No, no! No offense taken, not the slightest! But...” she plays nervously with her vine-like hair, “I—I thought you were already aware, you are... By the way you treat me, you do...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Uh... You asked me if I’m all right, you did. Then you helped me with the papers, you also did. Even invited me to lunch, you further did. I thought, you did because I’m a female, I did.”

“Oh!” What has this girl in her head? Now that I think of, how is this species’ brain wired? Oh, shit... now I remember Aia mentioning that most of their stuff works the opposite they intend...

“And you are nice to me... you are...”

I sigh, then smile.

“Sorry V, seems we both have misinterpreted each other.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t do all that because you are a female, V. I did it because I wanted to, or rather, that I would have done so whatever your gender is.”

“Oh!”

“Furthermore, I didn’t know your gender until now. I only asked because the server called you ‘missis.’ I wouldn’t have asked you otherwise...”

“Ah... sorry...” V’s head drops.

“Don’t worry, V,” I sigh. “It’s my fault too. I do such stuff simply because I do.”

“Is it so difficult to see that I’m a grown-up female, is it?” she almost sniffs. Oh, shit...

“For me it is, V. It is not you. You are the first female Irilyx I’ve ever met. I couldn’t possibly distinguish you from a male one. The first of your species I’ve met was a doctor, and he was wearing a long coat, I only found his gender out after he told so.”

“Oh!” V’s face brightens clearly.

“I’m more used to meet species more similar to mine, to be honest.”

“Do you ever notice other species’ gender, do you?”

“Well... with mammalian species it’s easy to differentiate between gender, don’t you think?” I ask back with caution.

“Ah! True, true, it is. Female mammals have udders, they have.”

I almost burst into laughter. I’m not sure if the girls would like to have their tits called udders... shit... Aia and Enya’s tits just flashed through my mind...

“Yes...” I swallow my laughter, “but that’s not how we call them.”

“How, how indeed?” she asks gleaming with interest.

I sigh.

“Well, it depends on species and cultures, of course. In a neutral context, I would say *breasts*.”

“Breasts...” V repeats like a schoolgirl.

“In a more informal context, between friends and lovers, I would use *tits* or *boobs*, depending on the intimacy.”

“Tits... Boobs...” she repeats again.

“There are more... but I wouldn’t say it here...”

“Oh! But breasts are okay to say, isn’t it?”

“Ahem!” We look up, our server arrived with two huge plates. He looks at us with a slight disapproval. “For the missis—” an absolutely unpronounceable name

of the dish emerges the server's phonatory organ... "And for the mister, an Ultra Deluxe Hamburger. Enjoy your meal."

"Thanks."

"Thank you, thankful I am."

V happily digs in, and I follow suit.

"Delishiush~ it ish~"

"It truly is..."

Who had thought that I'll eat the best hamburger ever prepared by a plantlike species in a plantlike space station...

I ask for a coffee while V asks for another unpronounceable dessert after my approval.

"Uh~ Mister Phoenix..."

"Ah, V... call me Kira, which is my true name."

"Oh!" It seems she blushes again. "Thank you, thankful I am. Uh~ about these... breasts..." Oh, fuck... "Is it true that not only milk comes out for the offspring, isn't it? It is also to attract males, isn't it?"

"Oh... well... for some males, it is one of the main attraction..."

"Oh. So bigger the better, right, isn't it?"

"No, no, V. That depends on the male, in the case of the attraction. Some like big, some like small, others like medium-sized ones."

"Oh! Surprising, it is! I've always seen huuuuge ones in some of the magazines, I did..."

"What kind of magazines?" I ask carefully. I'm quite sure what comes now...

"Uh... Some are about interspecies relationships, they are, with practical examples, they include."

Okay. She's buying porn mags. How innocent can she possibly be?

"V, I don't think such magazines give you the real picture."

“But... real pictures they feature, they do...”

“V...” I sigh. “I don’t mean it literally. I mean that those magazines do not show reality. Most attributes are exaggerated and are meant for entertainment, not for illustrating interspecies relationships.”

“Re—really? They are, are they? Are you sure, you are? How do you know, indeed how?”

“I can imagine from what you’ve told... Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that you should not take literally what you see in such magazines. Reality can be quite different.”

“It is, is it?” she asks dumbfounded.

I nod.

“If the magazines you read say that bigger breasts are the best, then they are for entertainment, that’s for sure.”

“Then?”

“I don’t know what nowadays magazines teach...” I sigh. “Most likely, if they are meant for teaching about relationships, they surely would say that physical attributes are not as important.”

“They aren’t for you mammals, aren’t they?”

“No, V, at least not for everyone.”

“Then, you are, aren’t you, one of those?”

“Yeah,” I shrug, “I don’t care about such attributes too much, as long as they are female. Of course, there are extremes I don’t particularly like...”

“Like, no breasts, don’t you?” She looks down at her own *chest* void of any *mammalian bulges*.

“No, V... what I mean is that I simply prefer a certain balance in attributes. Like not too skinny nor too fat... But even that is too generic... it depends on the person.”

“Oh... then... what do you think of me, what indeed?”

Shit...

“Not an easy question, V. I don’t know what your average look should be, I mean from your species...”

“Even so... what do you think, what indeed?”

“You’re not making it easy, V,” I sigh. “I’m quite open to other species, as far as I know, but this is a bit too much. Ah... I don’t mean to offend you, V, but our species are way too far apart so that I can make a fair judgment.”

“Oh~ Simply, you don’t want to hurt my feelings, don’t you?”

I have to smile.

“Yes, V. That’s the best to say.”

“Then...” she fiddles with her fingers again, “am I, perhaps, attractive... to you, aren’t I?”

“Oh, V... I honestly don’t know how to answer...”

“Oh... Right... sorry, I am...”

She doesn’t seem to accept my uncertain answer, but she changes topic. Phew...

V guides me through the huge station. She tells that all spaceships and stations are made up of non-intelligent plants which are able to maintain a habitable ecosystem. In awe, I listen to her extolling her species’ achievements. As for now, it seems that all their technology works as intended, not as Aia said...

After a while, we stand in front of a door which opens to V’s command. We enter. It’s obviously an apartment. Don’t say...

“This is my home, it is!” V proclaims proudly.

“Uh... V... Is it usual that a tour through the station includes a visit to your home?”

“No, silly you, it isn’t, why would it? I just want to know your opinion, I do...”

“Opinion?”

“Yes, indeed I do.”

Without further words, she lets her clothes drop.

“V... what—”

“Kira...” she interrupts me, “what do think, what indeed?”

She tries to pose sexily, surely as she has seen in the porn mags she bought, but sadly fails completely...

I am unable to judge her beauty, not because of lack of exoticism or her obvious lack of *mammalian* attributes. I can't assess her because... well... I don't know anything about her species... It seems true, that only *compatible* species feel attraction... is it? Or... I don't know...

Her skin is light reddish with yellowish and light violetish lines and marks. Her chest is obviously flat, there is no need for tits in her species. Her third *leg* sprouts from the back, where, in other species, a tail sways. Her feet also have three toes, similar to her fingers. I cannot say that the view she's offering me isn't interesting, but not so much of a turn on.

I sigh, what should I say that does not offend her?

“And? Kira? What, indeed, you think, do you?”

“V... You look—”

“Graceful? Elegant? Free? Uh... sexy? Attractive? Alluring? Inviting? I do, do I?”

“Yes...” I sigh. “But V, you don't need—”

“Yay! I do, I am!”

She jumps up, then nears me, trying to be coyly, but failing utterly again.

“Okay, time out, V, time out...”

“Huh? Not attractive, am I?”

“That's not V,” I sigh. “Let's sit down.”

“Huh?” She tilts her head.

We sit down on her bed.

“V, let me ask you first something. What do males of your species say? Do they find you attractive?”

“Yes, they do. Why this question, why indeed?”

I sigh in relief.

“Because I am unable to assess you. I mean, you are so exotic to me, that I cannot feel such attraction, at least right now.”

“Uh~ By the lack of *tits*, it is?”

“No V, I don’t think that is the problem.”

“I can simulate those, I do!”

“What?”

“Look, you do!”

She closes her eyes and begins visibly to meditate...

After a minute or so...

“Wow!” I’m baffled.

Smallish bulges begin to grow on her chest.

“See, you do?” She smiles radiantly. “Better now, isn’t it?”

“V... why do you go to such extent?”

“Because... I want, I do... To try, I do... with other species, indeed...”

Okay, yet another time to freak out...

“V... I’m honored that you want to try this with me... but—”

“Not attractive I am, don’t I?” She looks down at her newly *created* tits.

“No—no, V. It’s not you, it’s me...”

“Huh?”

Let’s defuse it gracefully...

“Look, V. You are attractive, but I cannot accept your offer, not right now. Ah~ it’s more difficult to say—”

“Oh!” She suddenly jumps up again. “Another female you have, you do?”

Let’s follow her suspicion...

“Yes.” I nod. “Although she is not yet prepared to go further. I promised her to wait.” That I have full liberty given by Aia must not be said... “And I don’t want to disappoint her...” Okay, that is partly a lie... It’s true that I don’t want to disappoint Aia, but not in this particular *problem*.

“Oh... Ah!” She jolts up yet again. “Monogamous you are, are you? I read about it, I did.”

“Yeah...” I sigh, hoping she will desist.

“But I am not, I am. We Irilyx are polygamous, we are. Why then, you cannot, indeed?”

Fuck...

“Look, V,” I sigh again. “It is more complicated...”

“It is, is it?”

“Yes. I would prefer being friends, for now.”

“Friends? Like... non-sexual friends, you mean, you do?”

I nod.

“But I assure you, it is not because you are not attractive, V. I simply cannot accept your invitation,” I try to convince her, “at least for now,” I add hoping that she accepts it. Who had thought that I will ever turn down a woman and offer her a friendship? Wait! I’ve done it twice now, twice in a row! What’s happening to me?

V seems to interpret my sudden inner outbreak of doubt.

“Kira... You want, but can’t, right, you do? You seem conflicted, you do.”

“Yeah... sorry V.”

“Don’t be, be not, Kira.”

V embraces me quite tenderly.

“I don’t understand, I don’t. But I will not pursue it, I won’t. I don’t want you to suffer, certainly not. Liking you I have become, I do.”

“V_”

“No need, Kira, for excuse, indeed not. It pains me, it does, that you won’t accede to my offer, it really does, but I cannot force you, I cannot. I like you, Kira, I do.”

I sigh relieved.

“V, I am sorry. But—”

“Shh, indeed, Kira.” She brushes one of her long soft fingers over my lips. “I accept your friendship, I do. I won’t pester you, no.”

“Thanks, V.”

“But questions I still have, I do.”

“I’ll try to answer them, V, as long as—”

“I understand, I do.” She nods and lets me free from her embrace. “Can I have your contact, Kira, can I? To ask you things about mammalians, I may?”

“Sure, V.,” I nod and take my terminal out.

She takes a similar gadget out but made of some kind of plant. We exchange our contacts. It seems that the format is universal, even if the terminals are of a different make.

“Ah~” V lets herself fall onto her bed. “That went as non-intended, it did...” she sighs deeply.

“What do you mean, V?”

“Well...” she seemingly blushes, “do you know that, usually, all we do for other species does work as non-intended, do you?”

“At least I was told...”

“It is... it really is... We do not understand animalians nor mammalians, we don’t... Anything we do works the other way around, it does. I should have approached you as a friend, I should, hoping that something more intimate would come out, I should have.”

“V—”

“I want to understand mammalians, I do, I want to understand you, Kira, I really do. But seems we are too different, it does.”

I embrace her. She shivers from my touch. Her skin is soft, almost mossy.

“Don’t worry, V. It takes time to know each other. It is true, that with such a huge difference, it will take more time, but someday you will understand why I want to keep a friendship with you.”

“Kira?”

“Yes?”

“Someday... perhaps...” she stammers, “would you, wouldn’t you?”

“I won’t make a promise I am not sure to be able to hold, but I can say that if such a moment arises, when both of us are in the mood, most likely, yeah...”

Her face blooms from happiness, almost literally.

“Thank you! Kira! Thankful I am, truly I am!”

She embraces me strongly.

“But, please, don’t try to emulate mammalian females too much. I want rather know about you and your species as you really are,” I tell her.

She looks at me in surprise, then snuggles against me.

“Yes, I will, indeed, I won’t.”

We keep this way for several minutes.

“Kira?”

“Yes, V?”

“Then, these magazines, what are they for, what indeed?”

“Oh...”

She slowly wiggles out of our embrace, sits up, and reaches a kind of DigiBook laying on the nightstand.

She opens what seems a magazine app and... hundreds of porn mags appear on the screen. Damn...

She opens one, and truly, an interspecies couple is shown having sex, a female Īiha with a Felii guy...

I suppress a burst of laughter.

“V... this is porn.”

“Porn?” she questions, then jumps up. “What? I did, didn’t I? That is what you meant by *entertainment*, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sorry, V...”

“Uhh~ I thought these are magazines portraying mammalian relationships, I did. Hoping to learn something, I did.”

“Well, V, you surely learned something, but not what you were hoping for.”

“Ugh~” She looks down but begins to giggle, then laughing...

We both laugh for a while.

“Sorry, V, but I think we should go back to port...”

“Oh! Right you are, you are. Let me change, you do?”

“Sure.”

V loses her *mammalian bulges* and puts her clothes back on.

We leaf—err... leave her apartment and wander back to port.

“Kira?”

“Yes?”

“We are friends, right, we are?”

“Yes, V, we are.”

“Please, don’t tell my superior that I’ve brought you to my home, don’t, please.”

“I won’t, don’t worry, V.”

“Thank you, thankful I am, truly. Most do not like us involving too much with mammals, no.”

“I understand, to a certain point.”

“I don’t, I won’t. I understand that we cannot procreate, I do. But cannot understand why not having and giving pleasure, I won’t.”

“V, things are more complicated.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know how it is for your species, but even in mine, at least in my times, it wasn’t accepted so easily either. Some mindsets resisted the thought of free love and open relationships. Nowadays, it is quite different. Even I have problems adjusting myself to it.”

“Even you, you said?”

“Yes, V. I was one of those open-minded, but nowadays it is way more open, at least where I live now.”

“Oooh~ Much has changed, then, right?”

“Yes, it has. But anyway, I still need time to adjust myself.”

“That’s why you don’t—do you?”

“One of the reasons, it is, V. But anyway, let’s keep this conversation private.”

“Yes, indeed. I have your contact now, I do, and can chat with you, I will.”

“Good...” I smile. Where the hell did I let me drag into?

After a lengthy cargo manifest check with V, it’s finally time to say goodbye.

“A pleasure it was, truly was, Kira, to meet you.”

“Likewise, V.”

“A pleasurable voyage back home I wish you, I do. And, please, if you stay here, visit me, do you?”

“Of course, V. I’ll text you when I will come by.”

“Thankful I am, truly.”

She gives me a hug filled with joy, I reciprocate and embrace her too while the manifest papers flutter around yet again.

“See you, V.”

“Bye, bye, you too...”

Finally... my Falcon...

Let's do this job and go home.

It is already night when I arrive at Aia's apartment.

The door opens with its characteristic humming sound, and I enter *our* home.

Aia... she's laying on the sofa, face down, and reading something...

“Oh! Hi, Kira~” she sings as she looks back.

“Hi, Aia. Reading something interesting?”

“Oh! Yeah~” she giggles while she obviously hides the paper magazine. “I'll make something in a minute. Why don't you get a good shower?”

“Oh—okay...”

Again, she's doing all the stuff... and, what was she reading that she had to hide from me? V's porn mags flash through my mind. No, can't be... or does it?

Eating the fabulous dinner with Aia, she asks me about the day.

“Well, quite boring, until I reached the destination...” I say.

“How was your first contact with the Irilyx?” she asks grinning.

I tell her roughly about V. Obviously, I try to hide V's intention, but Aia presses on until I tell her everything.

Aia giggles and laughs almost non-stop while I recount the experience.

“Wow!” she keeps giggling. “That's the best encounter with an Irilyx, that's for sure!”

“Yeah...” I sigh.

“At least, you made an Irilyx friend, that’s not an easy feat...”

We’re interrupted by a message on my terminal.

I open it...

“What is it?” asks Aia at my obvious stupefaction.

I show her what I received...

“Oh, wow! Kira! A nude pic from an Irilyx! You are some womanizer...” she laughs.

“Aia...” I sigh, but begin to laugh too. Better to laugh it off...



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SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A13 ~ Cargo 8. The Space-Highways

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TL;DR:

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