

Space Highway

The Awakened

A07 ~ Troubled Hearts

Yet another night I didn't sleep well... Aia's flirting, her tears, and the booze didn't let me rest...

As I open my eyes, I find a mug in front of them. I try to focus on the owner of the hand holding the mug while I take it by the handle.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, Kira, good morning~" sings Aia happily.

When my eyes finally are able to focus on Aia, she turns around and goes back to the kitchen area. Not again... she's topless again... The way she walks, the movement of her hips, her waving silken hair, the blue lacy thong... I can't avert my eyes from my beautiful homie... I hope I survive this day... yet again...

I try to concentrate on the coffee in my hands. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Aia appears at a few inches in front of me.

"Kira..."

My eyes wander slowly from my mug upwards while I straighten my back. Not without a greater effort, I find myself lost in her beautiful blue irides.

"Today's your big day! You'll get your piloting license! C'mon! Brighten up!" she giggles. My stiff smile doesn't seem to convince the bluish alien... "Finish your coffee and get ready."

"Oh, yeah... But there is still time, isn't it? At least some hours..."

“Yup,” she laughs. “But I want to visit a place before. Besides, we need a good, strong, breakfast. It will be a long day...”

“Yeah?” I blink unsure.

“The exam and the tests are quite long, on top of that...” her eyes sparkle, and a huge smile appears on her lips, “we’ll have to celebrate it!”

Oh, no... no more benders... Who knows what this woman is capable of doing when drunk...

I begin to stand up, but Aia has no intentions of letting me...

“What?”

“Hmm... Kira...”

I look into her blue eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Sorry... and thanks...”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for how you treat me... Sorry, ugh~ about... what you’ve got to bear with—ugh~”

Her cheeks are flushed deep purple. Sheepishly, she looks at me, her eyes wander around, and when they meet mine, she looks down...

Aia sighs and looks sheepishly away. Slowly, she looks back at me.

“Ugh~ I’m not sure how to say it...” She seems to search for the right words. “Ah! Yeah... Even tho I’m not able... right now—Ugh~ I’m seducing you...” I shut my mouth and swallow empty. “Simply by the way I am... Ugh~ It surely is difficult for you...” She sighs deeply again.

Aia makes some space between us, an inch or two, and looks down, towards her bare breasts, while she lies her left hand on her heart...

“But!”

I jolt from her sudden way to go on...

She looks, yet again, into my eyes.

“I’m sure... when it’s possible... for me...” Again, she seems searching desperately for adequate words. “In that case... I’d like... you’d be the one—”

I interrupt her gently brushing my index finger over her fine lavender lips. She widens her eyes...

“Don’t worry,” I say. “No more words are needed...” My hand floats down finding her trembling one, and I invite her to sit down, at my side, while I try to calm down. “I too, I’m sorry and thanks for all...”

Aia wears an expression difficult to detail...

I sigh and go on, “Thanks for all you’ve done for me. Thanks for having such deep trust in me, even if... it’s almost overwhelming me...”

Aia blushes deeply again and looks away. I brush my hand gently over her burning cheek, she slowly follows my strokes and looks back into my eyes.

“And... I’m sorry...” I sigh, “that you’ve to put up with...” she shudders, “my ogling... and—”

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles gently. “This’ becoming melodramatic... Right, Kira? Seems we already know where this leads...” She smiles happily, but then sighs. “Sorry... right now...” She looks down again.

Yet again, I brush over her chin to make her look back into my eyes.

“Don’t worry. I won’t force you, and you shouldn’t force yourself either.”

“Thanks.” She smiles radiantly. “Hold up with it, and wait for me, okay?”

“Ugh~” I sigh. “Don’t let me wait for too long...”

I kiss her on her cheek and stand up. I only hear her “*Hm.*” at my back while I enter the bathroom.

I need a damn fucking cold shower! Now! I still have goosebumps...

I don’t understand... What’s happening to me? I’m unable to clear my mind... I’m moved by what she said, by what she did these last few days. For some reason, she has me captivated... This is the first time this is happening to me... I truly don’t understand... nor myself, nor her, nor what’s going on between the two of us... I’ve met and slept with so many women... And yet, I’m completely in her

hands... or... am I? No, that's not it... Something else... but what? Is it because she's an alien? No... can't be. My cryopreservation? I doubt it... Her incredible inner strength? Now I remember her tears...

I enter the shower and select my favorite setting. No... I need it ice-cold.

No, but... I'm really fascinated by Aia. I can't explain it... She's tempting me. I don't understand my own feelings...

Aaah~ That's good! The cold water is calming me... in several ways...

Aia... Will I really be able to wait for her? I shudder thinking about it... I'm not so sure... Will it be worth waiting for her?

A sudden memory flashes through my mind, my dad said something the like once, citing Bob Marley, I think... How was it? Something like, 'If she's amazing, she won't be easy. If she's easy, she won't be amazing. If she's worth it, you won't give up. If you give up, you're not worthy. Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for.' *Otōsan*¹ You're right... She's worth it, surely.

But... will I be able to wait for her? In this environment? She's continuously tempting and teasing me. If we'd lived apart, it would be way easier. After yesterday... I doubt she would let me... My idea of living in my truck is slowly crumbling down... And... will I be able to overcome my past? Then I remember why I got cryopreserved... yeah, I have to change.

The ice-cold water seems to wash away my worries... Oh, fuck... let's see how far we go till the promised beating for *going over the top*...

Now, let's focus on the upcoming exam, test, or whatever. I can't go on with my feet fixed on this planet, not anymore! I've seen space! Now that I have the opportunity, I want to go there again, with my own truck! That's my immediate goal. The rest, I'll take it as it comes.

I step out of the shower, shave my ugly stubbles away, and dress myself.

¹ お父さん – Japanese: Father.

Coming out of the bathroom, I find Aia wearing lace panties and a demi-cup bra, both in dark and light blues, of course... Plus, a matching garter belt and sheer stockings...

“A—Aia... Are you going out in this?” I stammer overwhelmed by the erotic view.

“No, no, dummy...” she giggles. “It’s just my underwear for today...” I sigh deeply in relief. “I need your help, with the upper part...”

“Oh...”

She turns around.

“Please, fasten the laces...”

“Sure...” I blink unsure what is to come.

Suddenly, I find loose laces of a bustier in the form of a classic corset...

“Fasten it tight, but not too much, please,” she says.

Sighing, I begin to tighten and fasten the black laces from the top downwards.

“Is it okay? Or too tight?” I ask.

“No, just perfect,” she giggles.

A while later, I finish tying up the overbust corset-bustier. I hold myself back to gently slap her tight ass-cheeks while I stand up.

“Done,” I say.

“Thanks.” Aia smiles heartily and says turning around, facing me, “Just a few minutes, and I’m ready.”

She goes back into her bedroom. From the living room, I watch how she puts a lace skirt in the same fashion as her bustier-corset and dark-blue boots on...

“Don’t look at me like that, Kira,” she says blushing while I admire her dress and her overall looks. My face surely shows my astonishment.

“Ah~ That’s not it...” I manage to say. “This style was fashionable in certain urban tribes...”

She looks at me, blinking in surprise.

“I think it was called, generally, Gothic Lolita... but they wore black... Your’s more likely *Sweet Lolita* or the like...” I explain. “Honestly, I’ve always liked it somewhat...” Quite true... it’s absolutely sexy... at least what Aia is wearing right now. It enhances her beautiful figure and accentuates her curves.

Aia jumps up from the bed and takes a step towards me.

“Oh~ Interesting.” She smiles coquettishly. “I’ve wanted to wear this for a long time, but it’s so difficult to put it on properly without help. Seems fate’s in our favor,” she laughs, and goes on palm on heart, “I love wearing it, and you love seeing me wearing it,” she stops at mere inches from me, still smiling coyly, “but both of us are needed to wear it. Just perfect, right?”

I almost step back overwhelmed by her assertiveness and sensual smile. I just smile and answer with a “Yeah...”

After taking her purse, matching her lolita-dress, Aia walks towards the apartment’s door. Stunned, I follow her thinking about this morning’s conversation.

Just in front of the door, she turns around and smiles brightly.

“Perhaps we should buy you something matching, so we’re able to go out and have fun together...”

“Per—perhaps... yeah...”

“Would be great to go partying in the *Lost Millennium*, a theme club. I’ve got several friends going there. I usually don’t go, because I can’t put this dress on alone.”

“Then... when we’re able to buy something for me, let’s go there...” I blurt out.

Her face brightens even more with a beautiful smile.

“Yeah, I’m eager to go with you,” she says and takes my hand, dragging me through the door.

I truly don't fit at Aia's side... She wears a beautiful lolita-dress in blueish hues with a matching purse, while I wear a simple pair of jeans, a black Slayer t-shirt, my black leather jacket, and black biker boots...

While I weight the possibility to buy something more appropriate to match her dress, something like an *Aristocrat* or *Victorian*-like suit, Aia hooks into my arm, making me move forward.

Walking on the sidewalk with her hooked into my arm, I have to sigh.

Aia looks at me with a hint of doubt, "Hm?"

"Ah, I was just thinking... My appearance isn't gentlemanly enough to accompany such a beautiful lady," I say with a smile.

Aia blushes and pouts briefly, but her coquettish smile appears again on her lips.

"Nah... Suits do not make the gentleman. I'm in excellent company."

I sigh again...

Even if she thinks so, I don't feel comfortable... I'm too plain at her side. Even more, taking into account my clouded mental state I'm in since our conversation this morning... What the fuck is happening to me?

We're already walking, arm in arm, for quite a while.

That's strange... we're completely ignored by the crowd, no one seems to mind us, nor our looks...

"By the way, Aia," I look at her, "where are we going? Didn't you mention breakfast?"

"Yeah, we've just arrived..." she says with a bright smile.

We're in front of a small building, in comparison with the huge ones surrounding it. The street-level looks aged, like a survivor from the past millennium... It really looks like one of those typical Victorian-inspired buildings from London, at least the two lower floors.

Two Humans, a woman and a man, stand at each side of the ample glass doors wearing Victorian-styled servant clothes. As we reach the short but wide stairs, they smile and open the doors for us while they bow deeply.

“Welcome, Milady, Milord.” “We hope you will find everything to your liking,” both say bowing to us.

Aia signals with a gentle hand movement her thanks for the service offered. Surely, she is smiling broadly.

Inside, we are received by a Human woman wearing a Victorian maid outfit. She bows to us.

“Welcome to the *Maids*, Madam, Sir. Table for two?”

“Yes, please,” I say automatically, still in awe.

The woman nods slowly in acknowledge.

“If you would be so kind and follow me, Madam, Sir.”

The *maid* guides us through the dining room. It’s spacious, to say the least, with only a few tables. The most striking thing is the customer’s clothing, a mixture of what Aia wears and my own *vintage* twentieth-century *inspired* clothes. All of them enjoying a breakfast served by Victorian maids.

The *classic* atmosphere inspires me and, just like the perfect gentleman, I help Aia sit down.

Once I am seated, a different maid arrives and bows deeply.

“Good morning, Milady, Milord. I am Emily, your personal maid, at your service. I hope I am able to satisfy your needs.”

“Thank you.” Aia nods. “Nice to meet you, Emily.”

The maid smiles and hands us the breakfast menus.

“Milady, Milord, would you like coffee or tea?” she asks with a bow.

Aia decides immediately, “I’d like a cup of your specialty coffee.”

“I’d have the same,” I add.

“A great decision, Milady, Milord. I will serve it promptly.”

The maid bows and disappears.

Wow! The menu has not many items... just a great variety of breakfasts... *English Breakfast, American Breakfast, Continental Breakfast*, and many more traditional western breakfasts.

“What would you recommend, Aia?” I ask her.

“Well... all of them,” she giggles. “They’re all delicious. Ah, but don’t expect the breakfasts you’re used to, I mean, from your times.”

“Wow... well... then I’ll go with the English one.”

The maid comes back with two elegant cups of coffee emanating an intense and rich aroma.

“Milady, Milord, have you reached a decision?” asks the maid cordially.

“Yes,” Aia nods, “I’d love a French, and my companion would like an English breakfast.”

“As you wish, Milady, Milord. Please, enjoy your coffee until the breakfasts are ready.”

She bows again and turns around in an elegant movement and leaves the room.

“Impressive...” I say.

“Isn’t it?” Aia seems satisfied by my amazement. “I can’t visit this place too often. You need a companion and wear something vintage, the like...” she points at us and other guests.

“You can’t come alone?”

“Yeah, minimum two.” She nods. “Meaning, you need to find someone who has vintage clothes and likes to wear them.”

“Now I regret I don’t have a Victorian-style suit to accompany your—”

“Don’t be like that, Kira,” she interrupts me. “You’re perfect, in Phoenix-style,” she giggles.

The coffee is really delicious. Aia also seems to enjoy hers. Although it doesn't come near to John's delicious selected coffee, it's fabulous. But the most incredible thing is the quietness of this place. The patrons chat quietly, without bothering others, not the slightest word reaches us.

We enjoy the coffee till our breakfasts arrive on a vintage tea cart.

"Please, forgive my tardiness," says Emily. What tardiness? It was blazing fast! "For Milady, a French Breakfast; and for Milord, an English Breakfast."

With utmost care, she puts first Aia's plates on her side, then mine on my side of the table.

"I hope everything is to your liking." She bows again.

We thank her, and she leaves, after yet another bow, the room.

I analyze each of the many plates in front of me, then my eyes wander over, to Aia's plates, until I reach Aia's beautiful smile.

"And?" she giggles. "Not what you expected, right?"

"Not exactly..." I blink. "Just as I've seen it in high-class restaurants from my times."

"Really?" She blinks thrice.

"Yeah, I've tasted some... Now, let's try this one," I grin.

"*Hm*," she smiles, humming in affirmation.

We taste our breakfasts.

"Wooooow... this *is* an English breakfast from the twentieth century..." I almost cry out.

The texture is fantastic, the flavors intense and delicious, and... it makes me remember my mother's attempt to create a more *western* cuisine...

Holding back a tear of happiness, I ask Aia, "Can I try a bit from your croissant?"

“Sure.”

She smiles and hands me a piece of one of her croissants.

“Yum, yum...” Now the tear rolls down, I can’t hold it back anymore... Aia looks at me perplexed. “It’s just as I remember it...”

“Seems like I brought you to a place which brings back good memories...” she giggles happily.

“Remembering them in your company, they are even more exquisite...” I blurt out.

Ouch, I just hope I didn't go overboard...

I look at Aia, her cheeks are on fire, just as this morning...

“Don—don’t say such—It’s embarrassing... but... I’m flattered and happy,” she declares with a sweet, sheepish smile.

We finish the breakfast in silence.

“Milady, Milord, was everything to your liking?” Emily asks with a bright smile.

Aia is faster, “Yes, it was exquisite.”

“It truly was,” I add. “I would like to talk to the manager to give my thanks.”

Both, the maid and Aia, look at me with surprise.

The maid Emily bows to me.

“If Milord wishes so... If you do not mind to wait, I will invite the manager to your table.”

“Thank you, Emily,” I say, and she turns around.

“What’s that about?” asks Aia.

“Just as I said...” I smile.

A short while after, the maid is back, accompanied by an elderly Human man wearing an English butler outfit. It fits him perfectly...

“Is everything in order, Madam, Sir?” he asks distressed.

“Oh, yes, absolutely perfect,” I say. “Don’t worry, it’s just to highlight the quality of the breakfast and our enjoyment.” The man and the maid visibly exhale in relief, and I go on, “It’s exactly as it was in the twentieth century. It’s absolutely impressive, I’ve never dreamt of being able to taste such breakfast again.”

The faces of both, butler and maid, seem petrified in their astonishment.

Aia helps me out, “It truly is.” She smiles. “My companion is an Awakened. He was born in the twentieth century and awakened in our era after a long cryopreservation.”

“Impressive...” the butler finally says. “I’ve never ought to receive such motivating words since I opened this place with my wife. We researched old recipes and their ingredients for a long time.” He heartily smiles and addresses the maid, “Emily, please ask my wife to come.”

“At once, Sir,” she bows and abandons the room.

Not long after, she comes back with an elderly Human woman dressed as a Victorian housekeeper with a white apron.

“Darling,” the butler says, “this gentleman is lauding your cuisine, and confirmed, by his own knowledge, that our breakfasts are exactly as those in the twentieth century.”

The elderly woman is flabbergasted, but smiles heartily.

We, Aia and I, explain roughly my origin and how I possibly could know how a breakfast from the twentieth-century tastes. Surprised but happy, the two owners and hosts listen to our story.

Finished the lengthy explanations, both owners are touched.

“Sir, would sign a statement?” she asks.

“Excuse me?” I blink.

He nods at her side, “A review. We would love to use it as advertisement. Of course, it wouldn’t be for free...”

Dumbfounded, I look at them, then at Aia, she just thumbs up, signaling I should do it. I just wanted to congratulate them, no freebies nor anything...

I sigh. “Okay, I’ll do it. I love this place and your food. I don’t mind helping you to make it known.”

“*Marvellous!*” She clasps her hands. “You can come whenever you want with your partner, you are our guest.”

Understanding that she just implied free food for life, I am overwhelmed...

“That’s too much...” I protest.

“Certainly, Sir. Being famous...” he says, “publicity from someone exhibited at the Museum of Gaian History is a dream come true.”

I can’t say anything... True, some details about my *famous* life has come through in our explanation, but I’ve never expected that... What’s next? The Spanish Inquisition? I grin at my absurd thought... Aia blinks me an eye, oh!

“In that case, we accept. Right, Kira?” she smiles charmingly.

I can’t refuse her charm...

.

After writing and signing my review, both owners escort us to the doors. It’s truly incredible that this place kept calm, in spite of the commotion I’ve created, yet again...

.

Aia walks happily at my left side, hooking, yet again, her arm into mine.

I sigh deeply, and Aia looks at me with a hint of doubt.

“Ah~ It’s nothing... I thought I could, at least, invite you to the breakfast... that fell apart...”

“Certainly not...” she giggles.

“Huh?”

“With this... you’ve invited me to breakfast for my whole life...” she giggles again.

“Ah~ yeah...”

“At least those mornings I want to put this dress on.” She blinks an eye and smiles coquettishly.

Aia guides us, while we chat, towards a shopping district, or rather a shopping street... It seems that most are clothing stores... of any kind...

“Wait here, I’ve got to buy some stuff,” she instructs me while she smiles.

“Huh? How so?”

“Hmm~ I want it to be a surprise. And... I doubt it would be good for your health entering this store.”

“Eh?”

“You’d get overexcited~” She smirks sensually and turns around.

She enters a lolita-store...

Fuck! Now I *am* excited... My *healthy* mind doesn't help with it, not a bit... she’s just too provocative... What the hell goes through this woman’s mind?

I need a smoke! Fuck! I don’t have any... I was always invited to one...

I look around... Ah! A tobacco-shop!

A small tobacco-shop is almost hidden between the huge clothing stores. I swiftly enter.

“Good morning~” greets an elderly Felii woman.

“Good morning,” I say. “I want some cigarettes... Ugh, what brands do you have?”

“Oh~ We have almost anything.” She smiles. “What’s your favorite flavor? Something Gaian, Sol, or from another solar system?”

“Ugh~ Gaian is enough... I like my tobacco strong, but prefer something rich.”

“Okay~ Sure.” The elderly Felii smiles happily. “Then I’ll recommend this one...” She hands me a pack. “It is light but has a deep and rich flavor.”

“Is it light?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean low on nicotine...”

“Oh, no, no. This is normal. Do you prefer a low one?”

“No, just perfect. Two then, please.”

“Sure thing.” She hands me another pack. “Anything else?”

“Oh, yeah, a lighter.”

“I have many,” she giggles. “Take a look... With flame, without?”

“Without. Something working in zero-G.”

“Oh, working in space, are we?”

“Yeah.”

“In what?”

“Trucker.”

“Oh, a space-trucker! Neat.” She smiles. “Then I recommend one of these...” She shows me a showcase filled with those electric lighters.

I look through them... oh!

“I’d like this one...” I point at the metallic blue lighter with a golden phoenix engraved on.

“Good taste,” she giggles. “Here you go,” she says reaching me my new lighter. “It’s an Electro-click Lighter.”

“Excuse me?”

“Meaning, you can simply charge the battery at any wireless charger.”

“Wireless charger?”

“Jeez...” she blinks, “son, are you from the last century, or what?”

“Well... yeah...” I nod ashamed by my lack of basic knowledge. “I’m an Awakened...”

“Oh!” She jumps up while her ears twitch. “I am sorry, son. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“It’s okay, ma’am. I’m already somewhat used to,” I sigh.

“Now, now... Don’t worry, you’ll get it in no time.” She pats my shoulder. “Look... this is a charger,” she shows me a flat silvery surface. “Anything with a battery can be charged on one of these, just lay it on the surface.”

“And it will charge?”

“Uh-huh,” she nods, “including your terminal, camera, and what-not.”

“Oh...” I blink. “That’s why Aia always leaves her lighter and terminal in the same place...”

“Your girlfriend?”

“No, no... my homie.”

“Sorry, for meddling.” She drops her ears. “But anyway, yes.” Her ears straighten again. “You can charge your lighter there. But it needs at most one charge a month.”

“A month? Cool.”

“Anything else?” She smiles.

“No, that’s it, thank you.”

I pay for the cigarettes and the lighter, are they cheap!

.

I open my new pack, light a fag, and sit down on a bench in front of the store Aia entered.

Argh~ Let’s occupy my mind with other stuff... I produce my DigiBook from my jacket’s pocket, unfold it, and open the Encyclopedia. I won’t go through the theory just before the test, it never helped, quite the contrary...

.

Half an hour and four fags later, Aia appears under the threshold of the store’s door. Finally. It seems her purchase fits in her purse. It shouldn’t be too big... The image of the tangas and thongs she wore those last days flashes through my mind... shit... *Now* I’m excited... Fuck my hyperactive mind!

“Sorry,” she sighs. “It took me longer than expected...”

“Ah, don’t worry, I’ve got me some fags and a lighter meanwhile.”

“Nice.” She smiles. “I’m done here. Let’s go to the VPA, the Vehicle and Pilots Administration. There, you’ll take the tests and exams, and we’ll use the opportunity to register your new Falcon. Kim and Kite gave me all the documents needed.”

“Wow, great...”

When did they? I wasn’t even aware of those papers. Too many things go too fast nowadays... It doesn’t matter, I just have to forget the excitement about Aia’s *surprise* and focus just on the tests.

We reach a kind of bus stop...

“Let’s see...” Aia looks at an electronic timetable. “Just perfect! The airbus twenty-one arrives in ten minutes.”

“Airbus?”

“*Hm~*” she affirms with a hum. “Buses able to overfly the city. The others are *groundbuses*, and the spacebuses... you’ve already been in one. The *groundbuses*, also called Gee-Bees, are ground gliders, just at physical ground level. To get to the VPA, we need one which reaches level five of the inner city.”

“Level five?”

“*Hm~* Normally, we move at level one, the ground level. Our neighborhood is a level one only, as we live a bit on the outskirts of NA. The center of the city has several levels. You’ll see when we get there...”

After precisely ten minutes, a huge vehicle arrives. It reminds me of those Londoner double-deckers, just way bigger, and seems to have a similar floating device like the trucks and Aia’s car.

The doors open just in front of us, and we enter. Aia hovers her hand over a kind of reader, I suppose it’s to pay the fare. I mimic her gesture and follow her to the upper floor.

She takes a seat in the front row.

“This way you’re able to have a great view over the city center.” Aia smiles. “We didn’t visit it during our tour. It wasn’t appropriate for a truistic tour of NA,” she giggles. “Anyway, mostly administrative buildings, offices and huge malls are there.”

“Oh, okay...”

The airbus keeps *driving* on the streets until, after one stop, begins to gain height.

“Look... The next stop is at level two,” Aia explains. “From here on, the city grows in height.”

“Wow...”

Truly, it looks like there are clearly marked sky-roads, similar to those I’ve seen in *our* neighborhood, but bigger, and a further *lane* is above us. But the most amazing thing is, that there are covered sidewalks on the huge buildings at our sides...

“Impressive...” I’m, yet again, flabbergasted.

“Yeah,” Aia giggles. “Here in New Angeles, we don’t have many of those zones. But other cities, like New York, are completely level nine...”

“Nine levels...”

While we climb to level three, I begin to understand how things work. Every fifty or hundred floors, depending on each case, the buildings get narrower to accommodate sidewalks, terraces, even parks... Meaning, each building is humongous, getting slimmer with each level, like hillside terracing of rice fields, just without the hillside.

“The center of NA is incremental. There are only four level six buildings in the very same center,” Aia explains. “From there on, the levels get reduced gradually till the outskirts, which are level one, the ground.”

“I understand...” I nod. “Why did they do it that way?”

“Oh~ Not sure, honestly.” She seems to ponder for a while. “Perhaps because of the environmental impact... or visual impact...” she concludes.

“Yeah... surely.”

I'm not so sure about this... but makes sense.

We reach the fifth level.

“In two stops we get off...” says Aia and begins to stand up.

“Okay...” I imitate her.

While going down, Aia explains, “The stops are brief. We have to be at the doors in time. Ah, yeah, there are three exit doors and two entries. Don't mix them up, or you won't be able to leave.”

“Understood.”

“And don't forget to hover your chip over the reader.”

“Huh?”

“It's now that the fare is collected. It's per route, the distance taken.”

“Wow...”

We step out of the bus and reach a promenade.

The promenade is covered with a transparent structure. It looks like a half a dome covering both the top and the sides...

Behind us, the double doors close, those of the airbus and those of the *promenade*.

“Airbuses stop at exactly these doors,” Aia explains, “which only open if there is an airbus at the stop.”

“How do you get in, if you're coming by car?”

“There is a huge public parking one floor below.”

“Oh~ Cool...”

What looked like simple sidewalks from the airbus, are, in reality, huge promenades. They are ample and its storefronts filled with shops, restaurants, and coffee-shops. There are small cafés on the same edges of the promenade with impressive views over the city. Gardens and small parks give natural colors to the

place, and small squares with fountains give even more life to it. If not for the height we're at, it seems like we were on a normal boulevard of any city... And it's hustling and bustling... So many people...

But Aia doesn't let me look around. She hooks, again, into my arm and forces me to follow her pace.

After five minutes of walking, a vast square opens. At the end of it, a huge building stands tall... Wait... we're already *on* a building... a building on a building... and it looks huge! How big are these structures? The one in front of us is surely two hundred floors high...

Huge letterings name the place, *Vehicle and Pilots Administration*, our destination.

Aia guides me towards it. We are still over an hour early, even so, she keeps on at a steady pace.

We enter and find several long queues. My companion doesn't falter and walks towards a window void of any queue. Its sign states that it is solely for space transport related inquiries.

"Good morning," Aia greets the public servant. "My colleague Kira Matsumoto comes to sit for the truck piloting exams."

She hands a data-card and several printed documents to the friendly Knoreliaz at the other side of the window.

"Ah, perfect," the somewhat elderly looking alien man says.

I truly can't guess his age... but seems somewhat older than the ones I've met before.

He goes on, "Mister Matsumoto, please register with your chip..."

I hover my hand over the reader placed at the left of the window. He checks my data.

"Everything is in order." He nods and smiles, then looks at Aia. "Miss, do you want to accompany Mister Matsumoto during the exams? You surely know that any external input during the exams will disqualify your colleague."

"Yes, please," she confirms with a smile.

Is this even possible?

“Very well.” The alien man nods again, then prints, stamps and signs a sheet of paper, and hands it to me. “Whenever you are ready, head to the Examination Rooms two floors up. The elevator is just in front of the front desk. Wait in the designated waiting room for the trucking exams. In about forty minutes, an examiner will receive you.”

“Thank you,” says Aia with a smile. “Ah, yeah, and please register this truck at Kira’s name.”

“Very well.” The Knoreliaz reads the digital and physical documents Aia handed him over. “Perfect, one moment.”

After several minutes, he hands the data-card and documents back.

“Your truck is now registered at your name, mister Matsumoto, but I have to remind you that you won’t be able to make use of this vehicle personally until you have passed the piloting exams.”

“Oh, sure...” I blink, this should be so obvious...

“Anything else?” he asks.

Aia shakes her head.

“No, that’s all for today.”

“Then have a nice day,” the alien says with a smile.

“Thank you,” both Aia, and I say.

“And, Mister Matsumoto... good luck,” he adds.

“Thanks...” I blink.

Heading towards the elevator, I ask Aia, “Are all civil servants so nice nowadays?”

“Yeah, why? Should it be strange that public servants are nice to the citizen?”

“No, that’s not it... But in my times, this profession was seen to be filled with unfriendly, lazy and bad-tempered people doing a poor job...” I grimace. “Ah, but of course there were many exceptions...” I add.

“*Fufu*~” Aia giggles. “Seems that in your era public servants weren’t seen in a good light. From what I’ve learned from history classes, many things changed

after the alien contact. Nowadays, public servants are hired by the state and are paid based on their performance, including their treatment of the citizen. A public servant can be sacked if he, or she, is incompetent. A good one keeps its former status, just like in your times.”

“Wow...”

We reach the examination area... Wow... So many waiting rooms... Ah, there it is...

Aia signals another way... I follow her till we reach a smoking room, great!

Once in, she lights a fag while she pushes some *virtual* buttons on a coffee vending machine.

After her first puff, she says, “The waiting rooms are non-smoking areas, and you can’t drink anything except bottled water. Take your time and drink something first.”

“Yeah, I need that,” I say while she smiles, it looks as if she had read my mind.

I also light a fag and fiddle on the machine’s touchscreen until I get the coffee I want.

“If the exams are long,” I ask Aia, “is there a break to eat something?”

“Yeah, sure.” She exhales the smoke. “There’s a break of two hours in between, enough to eat something.”

“Perfect.”

“Well...”

“Yeah?”

She shakes her head. “No, nothing...” She smiles. “Just do your best.”

“Yeah,” I say unsure. What was she going to say?

We finish our coffees and throw the butts of our second fag into the ashtray.

The waiting room is quite big, and several men await the impending exam. Only a few aliens can be seen, all from species I’ve already met, some Felii, Knoreliaz,

and Reaf. Most of them look, just as in my times, like rough truckers, like those on the Alpha station and the other cargo ports. Strangely, Aia is the only woman around.

We sit on one of the benches, and Aia takes my DigiBook out of my jacket.

“Wanna go through some of the stuff again?” she asks.

“Better not.” I shake my head. “I’ve had bad experiences with studying just before exams, I’ll go with what I know.”

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles. “I feel you. In the practical part, I’ve nothing to say,” she adds quite proudly. “It would be strange if you don’t pass it on your first try and in record time,” she laughs. She gives me too much credit, as usual.

Our conversation didn’t go unnoticed, and we hear some cackling...

“Hah, hah, hah...” “Hoh, hoh, hoh...”

Several Human men on the bench in front of us don’t stop laughing...

“Oh, boy! What’d we ’ave ’ere? A weakling wid ’is girl...”

“Yeeeah... He needs all her help...”

“Did ya ’ear ’er? Dat ’e’d pass on ’is first try...”

“An’ inna record time...”

Their cackling echoes through the waiting room.

“An’ that getup...”

“Sucha freak!”

“Dude... jus’ da geddup don’ make da trucker...”

Other future truckers look at them and their cackling with despise. I look at them annoyed, but decide to ignore them until...

“ey, dolly, leave dat loser, ’e don’ deserve yer cheers!”

Just before I’m able to stop her, she jolts up and stomps towards them.

“Yeah! That’s it! Come with us, babe. We’d show ya what a good tucker’s worth!”

“Yeah, we’ll c—*Ugh!*”

The last guy wasn't able to finish his sentence, he just ate Aia's boots and stumbled to the floor.

"What—"

Hastily, I reach her.

"Dolly? Babe? You damn fucking assholes!" she shouts angrily. "This man is more a trucker than you four together! More respect! He is *the* Phoenix! The King of the Highways!"

"Come down, Aia, my Queen," I blurt out lying my hand on her waist.

Several male voices rise and come nearer, "The Phoenix?" "Aia, the Queen?" "Wow!" "Impressive..." "Then it's true..."

That's what I wanted to avoid... and I just blurted it out, fuck me...

"That's impossible!" one of the guys shouts. "Dis guy's fooling us! 'e's a con! No way 'e's da Phoenix!"

Aia refutes, "It isn't impossible! I was there when he awoke! And he lives with me!"

Aia... you've just messed it up... badly...

"He's fooling ya! If yer really da Queen, ye should see that!"

"Yeah! No way dat dis weakling is da Phoenix!"

I'm losing my temper, now they're going on my nerves.

"If you think yourself so bright, prove it, that I'm not the Phoenix," I growl taking a step away from Aia.

"ow you dare?" he howls and runs towards me, fist in the air.

I simply evade him by less an inch, and elbow his flank sharply. He falls forwards in pain from the sudden shock paralyzing his body.

"No need for fists," I say looking down at him, "to prove I'm the Phoenix. All truckers from the ISTM, including Mitsubishi-san, the owner, can confirm it. Just ask the two Aces of Aces, the Space Cowboy and SpeedKitty..."

“Yeah,” adds Aia, “he’s the only one who’d tied with me in the simulator of the Alpha,” she confirms at my side. “I assure you, I’ll do whatever it takes that assholes like you never, ever! get the piloting license!”

“No need!”

We turn around at the sudden voice reaching us from the other side of the room.

The voice belongs to a man, a cyborg, similar to Brown, the law agent from the Alpha station I’ve met.

“I’m in charge of the security of this place,” he says in a firm voice. “I proceed with the apprehension of the four individuals causing this incident. At the same time, they are deprived of any possibility to acquire any kind of piloting licenses. Space does not need such scum.”

With those words, he walks towards them.

While he lifts the fallen one with just one hand, that one rebukes, “Mister agent! Detain dat dude too! He’s a con! And broke ma rib!”

“Request denied. He acted in self-defense. I am a witness.” The agent pushes the four out, and, just before reaching the doors, he looks back. “Good luck everyone in the exams. Especially to the Phoenix!” He blinks an eye.

What the hell was that?

Stunned, I whisper to Aia, “Who’s that? Brown’s brother?”

“No idea...” she whispers back. “If you don’t know...”

“Ugh...” As if I know everything...

Now we have to take care of the onlookers...

One of them, a Knoreliaz, steps forward, takes his cap off, and bows slightly to us.

“Good morning, Queen, Phoenix. I think I can say this for all of us. It is a true honor meeting you two here, even under these circumstances.” All nod while he goes on, “I understand, we understand, that you’d have wanted to go through the procedures in anonymity and peace. We won’t disturb you further in your

preparations. I've only wanted to show you my respects. In my case, I hope to see you again as a trucker of the ISTM."

Several more confirm their intentions to work for the ISTM, some are here to renew their license. Meaning, that most of them are, or will be, our co-workers.

"We only want to say..." he goes on.

"Good luck!" all shout vigorously.

Impressed, I laugh, "Thanks, friends. Good luck to you too."

Aia, at my side, shows one of her beautiful smiles.

"*Hm~* Good luck guys. This afternoon, after the exams, we'll hold a party at the MaryQueens. If you pass today, you're invited to celebrate."

"Under this premise, we won't fail," laughs one.

"Won't miss it," laughs another.

"Would be an honor," the huge Knoreliaz adds smiling broadly.

I sigh while Aia and I sit down again.

"That is precisely what I wanted to avoid... Aia, you were really hot-headed..." I smile and sigh again.

"Sorry... They got on my nerves... I couldn't avoid it..." She blushes slightly. "It was a sweet and chivalrous gesture..."

"Hmm?"

"Holding me and saying *Aia, my Queen...*"

"It was in the heat of the moment... I hope I did—"

"It made me happy!" she interrupts me brusquely, my jaw drops instantly. "Never in my life I've felt safer than at that very same moment. I can't describe it... Since you've entered my life, I've always felt safe at your side, but at that moment, it was overwhelming..." She blushes deeply.

"Aia..."

I have the irresistible impulse to embrace her.

She sighs deeply. "Sorry... I've said something provocative again... But I feel... like I will be able to overcome the insecurities I still have... When I'm ready, I'll let you know..."

"Yeah." I can't do anything but nod.

She just confessed that she has insecurities. I've always noticed something the like in her, but was unsure. Seems something related to men, or relationships. I should ask her someday about it. I need to know what's going on, what I have on hand...

Speaking of hands, now I notice that her hand is grasping mine firmly. I look at her, she seems an injured angel... I muster the courage to suppress all my animal instincts and to win her heart over slowly. She seems wanting to open her heart to me, but either is not able or does not dare to...

"Kira..."

"Yeah?"

"Please, keep protecting me, until I'm able to return your feelings..."

I jolt... My feelings? Am I so easy to read? Or is it what she wants?

I look at her blinking, such resolute eyes... Suddenly, I feel lightweight, a jolt of energy... happiness? It must be... but... can I? Go with the flow...

"You can count on me, Aia," I finally say. "But remember our promise..."

"Which one?" she sighs happily.

"To beat me up if I go overboard..."

"Oh~" she giggles, then laughs, "*Fufu*~ Yeah... as long as you protect me, I can forgive you," she adds smiling coquettishly.

But from what should I protect such a strong woman from? Will I be able?

I take several deep breaths to free my mind from uncertainties and to focus on my imminent exams...

We sit together, still holding hands, until several examiners enter the room.

After some minutes we hear, “Kira Matsumoto and Aia Asdiekx. This way, please...”

We stand up and follow the huge alien man calling our names.



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TL;DR:

The author does not identify himself with any character.
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