

Space Highway

The Awakened

A08 ~ The License

Aia and I follow the huge golden reptilian-like alien examiner who just called our names out.

Even though I'm really intrigued by his species, I'm getting tense...

Aia takes my hand and gently squeezes it.

"Don't worry, Kira, I'm sure everything's going okay," she whispers encouraging me.

"Yeah, thanks, Aia."

The examiner guides us into an office.

"Please, take a seat."

We sit down while I'm wondering why we're in this place, instead of a huge room taking a multiple-choice test.

"Well..." he smiles, "Mister Matsumoto, this is your first space piloting exam..."

"Yes, it is." I nod.

"Perfect. Don't get nervous. It won't be too difficult if you have studied. According to the data, you have got a driver's license over a thousand years ago..." He looks at me questioning.

"Yeah... I was cryopreserved since then."

“Oh, makes sense. Interesting.” He brushes through his short tentacle-like hair. “You are my first case of an Awakened...” he calmly goes on. “Then I’ll explain the procedure. As you surely know, traffic regulations have been largely overhauled since your era.”

“Certainly.”

“Perfect. In your case, we’ll do the theoretical test here, orally. Do you agree?”

“Yes, no problem at all.”

“Perfect. Please be aware that I will center most of my attention on the differences with your past knowledge of the matter. Are you ready?”

“Yes, just a question.”

“Yes?”

“I thought that the exam would be a multiple-choice test, as it figures in the theory book. Is it different for an Awakened? Not that I’m uncomfortable with it, it’s just out of curiosity.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it won’t affect your assessment.” He nods. “You are right. It has to do with your awakening. You don’t sit for a first-timer exam, but for a special renewal. According to the current law, Awakened are offered this renewal procedure in which we consider mostly the key differences which might come into conflict with your past knowledge.”

“Oh! Then it’s just a renewal?”

“An intermediate one, between a standard renewal and a new, first-timer license. That’s why it is on an individual basis and oral. If you are ready, we can begin.”

“I’m ready,” I nod still a bit nervous, but this chat helped me to relax a bit. Aia’s hand holding mine helped even more...

“Perfect.” He nods again. “Ma’am Asdiekx, you are surely aware that any involvement, be it orally or via body language, will disqualify your companion.”

“I understand,” she says and lets my hand free. “I’ll sit a bit back. I’m just for moral support here,” she giggles and moves her chair back to the wall, behind me.

“Excellent...”

The examiner asks calmly and patiently the questions and possible situations I could encounter. His calmness is infectious... it calms me down and I'm able to answer him with all the calmness of the world. From behind, I feel even more peace and confidence, Aia is covering my back.

After over an hour of a calm conversation in the form of questions and answers, the examiner seems pleased.

"Perfect, we are done." He smiles and brushes again through his thick tentacle-like hair which falls behind his pointy ears. "In two minutes, the system will confirm the official results. But I can already say that you have done it almost flawlessly."

I sigh deeply in relief. A hand from behind gently lies down on my left shoulder.

I look up, Aia stood up and gifts me a charming smile.

"Congratulations," the alien man says. "Mister Matsumoto, you have officially passed the theory exam."

"Congrats, Kira!" I jolt, Aia hugs me from behind and happily adds at my side, looking into my eyes, "You've already passed one-third."

"One-third?" I ask.

"Indeed, Mister Matsumoto," nods the examiner, "the second part will be done in a simulator. And, if you pass it, the last part will be done with real trucks."

"Great!" I laugh.

The examiner stands up.

"If you would like to follow me..."

I also stand up and follow him, Aia just behind me. He guides us through several corridors until we reach a huge room with a humongous machine. A simulator, similar to the one on the Alpha station.

“You will have to wait a bit,” says the golden alien, “right now a contender is being tested. If you’d like, there is a coffee and refreshment vending machine.” He points at one side of the room.

“Thanks.” I nod and ask the bluish alien, “Aia, want something?”

“*Hm~* A coffee would be great,” she confirms smiling.

“Okay.”

I get two coffees from the machine.

Aia sat down and asks the examiner, “Does Kira have to do the same kind of exercises or will they be different?”

“They are different, of course, but similar,” he says.

“Oh, I meant because he’s an Awakened...”

“Ah... They are the same type as for anyone. It doesn’t change anything,” he says nearing us while I hand Aia her coffee and sit down at her side.

“Thanks, Kira,” she happily says.

“You’re welcome, Aia.”

“The first exercises are quite basic,” the examiner explains, “from there on, they will be more exhaustive and more difficult. We adjust them based on the contestant’s abilities. Slalom, on land, in space, over water... and in different situations, like emergency braking, for example. We will have some extreme cases, like avoiding near-misses. We take into consideration the contestant’s actions, his calmness facing extreme dilemmas, the maneuver precision, and the correct handling of the truck while adhering to the strict piloting codes.”

“Oh,” I sigh relieved, “that’s reassuring.”

“Reassuring?” asks the examiner. “Mister Matsumoto, normally, people get nervous during my explanation...”

“Kira doesn’t,” giggles Aia, “he already did some trucking simulations. On the Alpha-XT.”

“Oh?” The alien man blinks. “Did he try Doctor Whang’s extreme simulations out?”

“Yup!” she giggles. “And passed most of them.”

He widens his eyes.

“Most of them?”

“Yeah, he challenged Kira to best his extreme simulations still under development,” Aia laughs brightly.

“Wow... Then, I doubt you would have greater difficulties.” He looks at me with a hint of amazement. “But, even so, keep in mind that our exercises are meant to test your qualifications by following the regulations. You can’t go over them, even if you feel it would be the best option.”

“Thanks for the hint,” I say. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

After twenty minutes, the *contestant* finishes his exercises. He did quite well. He scored, according to a huge screen, an average of seventy-nine points out of a hundred. The poor guy looks exhausted, they kept him over an hour inside...

Aia points at the screen.

“You need, at least, an average of sixty points to get to the third part,” she explains. “If you don’t reach them, you can repeat the simulation up to two times more if you fail the first one, but each time the minimum passing score goes up by fifteen points.”

“Quite right,” nods the examiner. “Mister Matsumoto, whenever you are ready...”

“Thanks, let’s do this...” I grin.

I look at Aia, she gives me a charming smile.

“Good luck, Kira, break a leg.”

“Thanks, Aia.”

After a brief introduction, I sit into the simulator’s pilot seat. The alien examiner carefully observes how I adjust the seat and the controls to my size.

He nods satisfied and sits into the copilot’s seat.

“Are you ready, Mister Matsumoto?”

“Yeah, whenever you want.”

“Perfect.” He takes the mic, “Simulation A1034.”

«Okay, loading!» replies the technician and fires up the named simulation.

First, I have to do several simulations with a *smaller* truck, about the half the size of a standard space-truck, on land and over water. Until now, the examiner seems to approve my actions. After those, similar simulations follow in a full-size space-truck with cargo.

“Quite perfect,” says the examiner after I’ve done some heavy loaded cargo simulations. “At this pace, we will be able to skip several simulations ahead. Let’s go to space. Simulation G3298.”

«Okay, firing up!»

More simulations... This time in space. Coupling and uncoupling, docking and undocking... emergency and evasion maneuvers... Entry and exit of spaceports and space gates... Configuration and override of the autopilot... Manual maneuvers... Uff...

Sweaty and exhausted, I step out of the simulator.

An overly excited Aia awaits me at the end of the stairs and jumps into my arms once I’ve reached the last step.

“You’re fuckin’ great!” she shouts overjoyed. “You’re the best! Simply amazing!”

Startled by her reaction, I simply hug her back in silence...

After several minutes, she finally lets me go and she turns me around. I blink at the scores...

“Congratulations, Mister Matsumoto,” the reptilian alien man says. “You have passed the simulations with an average of ninety-one points. You have just broken the records for a first-timer.”

“No way...” I blink.

“Yeah!” giggles Aia and hugs me again. “You’ve beaten mine by one point!”

“Re—really?” I stutter in awe.

“*Hm~*” she hums over my shoulder, then takes a step back. “I knew you’re a genius.”

“Ugh~ No—I’m—”

“Perfect!” she interrupts me. “You’ve been simply perfect. You’ll ace the real-life test, I’m sure!”

“Truly,” says the examiner, “with this score, your real-life test will be shortened drastically. Have a good break, your next test will be in three hours, in the Alpha-XT.”

“The Alpha?” I ask.

“Indeed,” he nods, “we will do some docking and undocking exercises and make a real delivery. You avoid doing a two-days long route.”

“Really?”

“Indeed,” he nods again, “we will use a truck lent by the ISTM. That way we are able to test you and observe your actions in a real-life situation.”

Aia’s still overjoyed, “Yeah! Let’s go to the Alpha as soon as possible and eat something at the MaryQueens.”

“Oh, yeah...”

The examiner hands me a data-card.

“Here. Your copy of the results. You have to show them when you report in for your next part. We’ll meet again on the Alpha-XT. You may take the spacebus leaving in about half an hour.”

“Tha—thanks...” I stutter overwhelmed.

Aia and I leave the VPA.

She guides me, hooking yet again into my arm, towards a kind of bus stop, but way bigger than the other one where we arrived here.

“This is the spacebus stop. Basically, a spacebus is a shuttle, like the one we used to visit the museum...” she explains.

“Oh~ Is it for general public use?”

“Yeah,” she nods, “there aren’t many. But as the VPA’s real-life exams and tests are taken at the Alpha-XT, there is a non-stop express line between any VPA delegation and the Alpha. It’s even free for the examinees,” she giggles.

“Wow...”

“And, of course, it’s free for any employee of the ISTM,” she grins.

We sit at a cafe near the spacebus stop and get some coffees.

I light a fag on.

“Are you nervous?” asks Aia.

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s your eighth or ninth fag today, since we left the *Maids*.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen you smoke that much...”

“Oh... Actually, I’ve always smoked a lot, since sixteen...”

“Oh~” she blinks, “I smoke since I started working as a trucker...”

“Me too,” I laugh.

“Ah~ true,” she giggles.

“Well, honestly, I’m not the slightest nervous. It had been a long time since I’m so relaxed before an exam. Well, yeah, I’m a bit tense, that’s for sure...”

That's only partially true... I am nervous, but not because of the exams, but because of Aia and her behavior... Fortunately, my nervousness can't be seen from the outside...

"Are you sure?" she asks me.

"Huh?"

"I see you nervous..."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you don't tremble or the like, but your eyes move erratically from time to time..."

"For real?"

"*Hm~*" she nods.

"Oh, maybe it's the excitement..." I bluff.

"If you say so," she shrugs clearly not convinced.

I take a good sip of the simple coffee when something catches my attention... I look over at a table where one male Reaf sits with two women, one Human, the other one a Reaf.

"Hm?" Aia is intrigued by my surprise.

"Oh~ No—nothing..."

She looks over at the other table.

"Oh~ Aren't they cute?" she smiles charmingly.

"Ye—yeah," I stutter. "But—"

"What?" She looks at me surprised. "Are you against interspecies relations?" she asks almost in shock.

"Inter—No, no!" I hastily wave my hands in negation, almost tipping my coffee over. "It's—"

She sighs visibly in relief.

"Ah~ They're flirting..." she giggles.

I nod slowly.

“They are *poly*...” she smiles.

“Poly?”

“*Hm~* A family. Look,” she discreetly points at them, “they wear matching wedding rings...”

“Oh~” I blink surprised, “meaning that they are married... together?”

“Sure,” she smiles.

“The three?”

“Yes,” she giggles. “That’s called a polymarriage.”

“How—how does that work?”

“Hmm~” she seems to think for a moment, “right... in your era, only monogamous marriage was the norm...”

“Are they polygamous?”

“Yup,” she giggles, “that’s where the name comes from.”

“Then...”

She seems having guessed my question, “Nowadays’ polygamy is legal and does not work exactly as in your times.”

“How so?” I ask intrigued.

“First, it means that, at least, three of the partners are in love with each other...”

“Three?”

“Uh-huh,” she nods. “In their case, the three love each other, look... they flirt with each other, even the girls under them.”

“W—wow...”

“The girls are not married to him, like what you’d see in your times. Both girls are also married to each other too, they are clearly polysexual, even omnisexual.”

“Polysexual? Omnisexual?” I ask blinking.

She nods with a beautiful smile, “Yeah, meaning they don’t care if their partner is male, female, genderless or even hermaphrodite.”

“Hermaphrodite? Do they exist?”

“Sure!” she giggles at my astonishment. “There are several species which are hermaphrodites only.”

“Wow...”

“Anyway, they are *polys*, that’s the word we use nowadays to call them, as we cannot use *couple* for more than two,” she explains.

“Wow... Is this the norm nowadays?”

“Oh, no, no...” she negates, “at least not between Human-Gaians, most of them are still monogamous. But many other species are polygamous by default, or are, at least, used to it. For Reaf, it is quite usual having more than one partner in a marriage.”

“Incredible...”

“Anyway... you’ve got to get used to it.” She sighs relieved. “At least you are not against interspecies relationships...”

“How could I?”

“Huh?”

“I’m a quarter Filipino, or black... whatever,” I say, “why should I be against it? I’m technically a Human mestizo...”

“Oh~ Kira~” she sighs happily.

A sudden sound interrupts our conversation and a sterile voice announces that the spacebus is arriving.

We stand up, Aia hooks into my arm and we go to the *bus stop*.

Seated in the spacebus, which reminds me more of a spacious train than an airplane, I look through the window and watch the undocking procedure.

“Ugh~ Kira?” Aia suddenly asks.

“Yeah?”

I turn my head towards her.

“If you aren’t nervous because of the exam...” she asks cautiously, “is it because of me?”

Fuck! Busted! She noticed... Am I so easy to read?

“Ah~” I don’t know what to say...

“If it is because I’m coming along... I—”

“No,” I interrupt her abruptly, “that’s not it... it reassures me having you at my side. Ah~”

She blushes deeply.

“The—then?”

“Ugh~ I’m tense... because of this morning...” She blushes even deeper, and looks at me sheepishly. “Because of what’s going on between us, ugh~”

“Ah~ Uh~ *Hm~*”

“I—I’ve never been in this situation... I’m nervous because... I am unsure how to act at your side...”

“W—wow... Then... uh~”

“Even though I know now what’s on... I am unsure how to interact with you...”

“Uh~ *Hm~*”

“I know I want to wait for you, even tho it never happened to me. You have me mesmerized, Aia...”

She blushes even more... her face is burning in a beautiful violetish hue.

I sigh, “But...” she trembles, “honestly, I am unsure if I’m able to hold myself back... Even if I vowed to change myself, I don’t know how much I’m able to change. You should be aware of my womanizer past, even if it is just through the legends.”

“*Hm~*” she nods shyly.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Aia,” I say in all my honesty.

“Kira... uh~ Thanks for being frank with me. I think I understand what you’re trying to say.” She nods with a shy smile. “Then... let’s be... uh~ friends till I’m ready... when I have overcome my—ugh~” she looks wavering around.

“Don’t worry, Aia,” I lay my hand on her shoulder, “you don’t have to tell what you can’t or don’t want to, tell me when you’re ready to tell it.”

She takes my hand from her shoulder and holds it tightly.

“*Hm~* Sorry, Kira...”

“Don’t be, Aia. And don’t feel pressured because of what I’ve said,” I squeeze her back, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Thanks, Kira, by heart.”

A long awkward silence reigns between us... But I don’t know what to say... It angers me not being able to know how to act around her. And... my own sudden insecurity at her side... no... it’s also assurance... it’s my own insecurity I’ve never been aware of..

But things couldn’t get worse... her beauty, and her behavior... her mere presence tempts me continuously... I’ll need all my willpower to keep myself from hurting her and burning myself...

»Dear guests, in twelve minutes we will begin the docking procedure at the Alpha-XT. Please remain seated until the doors are open. We hope you had a pleasant voyage and will travel with us again.«

Aia sighs and smiles sheepishly.

“Kira... whatever happens, we’re friends. If you find someone... I won’t throw myself in between. But...” I gently squeeze her hand. “I just hope, that, when I’m sure about myself... and I’m ready, you will listen and acc—”

“I’ll listen, Aia,” I interrupt her, “whatever happens. I’ll be there for you when you need me, and will listen to what you have to say. I won’t make a promise I can’t hold, but I want to await your decision...”

“Kira...” Aia sighs relieved and kisses me on the cheek while the spacebus docks at the Alpha station. “Thanks, Kira...”

“Welcome! Oh! The Queen and the Phoenix, what brings you here today?” asks Buz joyfully. “Judging by your beautiful dress, I doubt it’s work-related,” he laughs.

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles, she is her usual self again. “Oh, Buz... Thanks. Yeah, we’re here for Kira’s practical test.”

“Oh! Congrats!” Buz almost jumps over the counter and slaps my back, harshly. “That means you’ve passed the rest. How many points?”

Before I can answer, Aia jumps in, “He’d beat me by one point on my first exam,” she says proudly.

“Wow!” Buz gleams. “Ninety-one points? Fuck! Congrats, Kira. No doubt you’ll make a great Ace of Aces!”

I sigh, “Thanks... but it wasn’t easy... They’ve kept me for an hour in that simulator, and I had to gather all my past knowledge, the things I’ve learned from Aia and Jim, plus the whole theory I crammed through...”

“Heh... even so, you’ve got this freakish score...”

I have to laugh, “Yeah, true...”

“*Hm!*” nods Aia. “I’ve been watching Kira’s simulations, he mastered them easily,” she giggles.

“Aia...” I sigh.

“It’s true, Kira,” she says proudly. “You’ve even got a full score on water.”

“Ah~ That’s just because I’ve got some experience in sailing thanks to my dad. He loved the sea, and each weekend, if the weather allowed it, we went out sailing in a small boat.”

“Wow... that’s why you’ve handled the truck in that way...” she says impressed.

“Uh, yeah...”

“You should have seen it, Buz,” she says to the bartender, “it looked like he’d surf the waves with a truck and cargo and all. He even looked like he enjoyed himself...”

“No shit...” he laughs.

“Oh, yeah,” I confess shrugging. “I almost screamed in excitement...”

“*Fufu*~ Oh, Kira,” giggles Aia.

“Hah! A true Ace!” laughs Buz. “By the way, I suppose you come to eat something, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah!” laughs Aia. “Two daily specials and some cokes, please.”

“Right away,” grins Buz. “Sue! Darling, two specials.”

“Coming!” Sue looks out from her kitchen. “Oh! Aia, and Kira... How do you do? I’ll make the best I have,” she laughs.

“Thanks, Sue,” giggles Aia.

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I’m thankful that the MaryQueens is as calm as it is right now. We’re able to enjoy Sue’s delicious specials without disturbance. At least until the coffee...

“Heh! Look who’s here! Oh~ Sucha cutie, Aia Queen! Is a party in sight? Heheh...”

“Oh! How’re you, Jim?” I greet the happy Space Cowboy.

“Oh~ Kira, wassup? Heh~”

“Having a bite between tests...”

“Heh! Great!” We bump our fists. “Now, honestly, what’s yer getup for, cutie Queen?”

She answers with a huge smile, “It’s for Kira’s after exam party.”

“Heh! Such confidence!”

“Is there any doubt?” she smirks.

“Heh! No way!” he laughs, then looks at both of us with an impish smile, and scratches his chin, “Heheheh~” he laughs slowly.

“What?” I ask.

“Jim~” Aia says miffed. “Don’t think anything strange...”

“Heh! Shame...”

“Jim!”

“Whoops... Nothin’, nothin’ ma Queen, yer highness,” he laughs and evades her punch.

Just as Aia jumps up to counter Jim properly, my terminal rings...

“Oh~ Time to go! Aia! We’ve got half an hour left...”

She halts her punch in mid-air.

“Oh, yeah. Buz, the check...”

“Coming,” Buz laughs.

Turning to Jim, she says with a grin, “Saved by the bell, Jim...”

“Yup! Heh!” he grins back. “Ma lucky day...”

“Good luck, Kira. Break a leg,” says Buz while I pay.

“Heh!” laughs Jim. “Make ma proud havin’ teach’d ya! Heheh~”

I laugh, “Sure buds, I will.”

Jim, Buz and I bump our fists.

Aia smiles at our ritual and lays her hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s go?”

“Yeah, let’s go...”

We reach one of the many areas I’ve not yet seen of this huge space station. Aia guides me to the VPA offices, as already usual, hooking into my arm. It seems as if she has already forgotten our conversation and keeps on as if nothing happened...

We find the waiting room and enter. Several others also await their turn. There are many more than in the VPA of New Angeles this morning. I figure that they passed their tests in other places or delegations...

Oh! There is one familiar face! And he recognizes us too... it's the Knoreliaz who spoke with us just before the tests.

"Hello, congratulations on passing," he greets us happily.

"Oh~ Likewise," I laugh, "ah~"

"Oh, right... I haven't introduced myself properly... I am Cingreg, although all call me Rock, 'cause I'm hard as one," he laughs. "I'm specializing in military transports."

"Military?" asks Aia.

"Quite so, I'm an active member of the IPS, and will keep on working for them from within the ISTM."

"Oh? The InterPlanetary Security forces?" I ask.

"Exactly." He nods proudly. "I'm part of the humanitarian wing. I will make humanitarian transports, among others."

"Welcome on board, then," smiles Aia, "it's always good having a seasoned soldier among us truckers."

The huge Knoreliaz blushes and bows slightly to us.

"It is an honor to work with you, Queen, Phoenix."

"Oh~ Please call me Aia."

"And me Kira."

"Such an honor," he says happily, "pleased to meet you, Queen Aia, Kira."

"Kira Matsumoto!"

I turn around following the sound of my name and find the same examiner from before.

He greets us, then says, "It is your turn, are you ready?"

"Oh, sure, whenever you want..."

I adjust the seat and the controls as I did in the simulator. The examiner takes the copilot's seat, and Aia the jumpsuit behind him. I look back at her, she gives me a beautiful smile and nods.

“Whenever you are ready, Mister Matsumoto. The itinerary will be the following, we will leave the station, you will follow vector Zulu-six and go around Gaia on route G-E-326. We come back to the station and proceed to hook up a full cargo. Said cargo will be delivered to the Congo, you will receive all details with the cargo. From there, we will come back to the Alpha-XT with another cargo. Your punctuality, observance of the rules in force, and your actions in every moment will be graded,” he explains.

“Perfect, understood,” I nod.

I call in to port control and ask for an exit vector. The guy on the other side gives me the coordinates and vectors I need, and gives green light to undock and exit the cargo port.

I follow the instructions given while I do the exercise. Actually, this is an easy delivery used to test the applicants, or *contenders*, as they call us. The examiner only gives occasional instructions and I have to figure the rest or is given by port control.

It's exciting, hauling a cargo for the first time, alone at the controls...

Entering the atmosphere a doubt crosses my mind...

“Excuse me, I have a question, it isn't stated in the theory book...” I say to the examiner.

“Yes?” He shows a calm smile.

“I understand the details on how to act and instruct the systems for atmospherical entries, but I don't know the technical details,” I explain. “How is it possible that the friction doesn't overheat, even destroys, the truck and the cargo?”

“Oh... let's see...” he looks at his tablet, then looks at me. “Truly... You are right, it isn't properly explained in the manual. Good question, indeed. We should have

included it... Pay attention to this gauge...” He points at one of the few physical instruments on the dashboard with three bars. “The left bar denotes the exterior temperature. The middle one, the TPG. And the right one, the temperature of the craft’s hull. If any of them enters the red zone, the entry is aborted automatically.

“The Thermal Protection Gel, is part of the TPG-system,” he goes on, “When the heat-sensors detect an outside temperature over a given parameter, the TPG is automatically deployed over the whole hull, covering it completely. This happens to both, the truck and the cargo-holds. The TPG reduces the friction to the bare minimum possible. The quantities of the gel and the places where it is needed are adjusted automatically by the system.”

“Oh, I understand. Then, the first gauge indicates the temperature of the friction, the second one the quantities of gel deployed, and the third one the hull’s temperature, am I right?” I recap.

“Indeed, you have understood it well, Mister Matsumoto. Odd that it has been left out from the manual,” the alien examiner says pensively.

“It only states the procedure in case of the hull’s overheating during entry...”

“Hmmm... Let’s see... You are right. Truly a negligence... I have to take notice of this matter. Your question is not unfounded. Thank you for noticing.”

I deliver the cargo correctly at a scientific complex in the Congo, and, while the cargo is uncoupled and a new one is added, we take a refreshment at the port’s bar.

“Fu—So hot!” laments Aia, clearly swallowing a curse.

“I’m very sorry, miss. The air conditioning just broke down about half an hour ago... the technicians are on it right now...” the bartender excuses quite worried.

“Ah~ Sorry, I wasn’t judging you or anything, it can happen,” Aia hastily excuses herself.

“Aren’t you hot in this dress, Aia?” I ask her.

She blushes.

“Yeah, a bit... But don’t worry, I’ve gone through worse...”

“Right...”

While I sip on my coke, Aia begins to giggle...

“*Fufu*~ You truly can’t complain about the heat,” she laughs, “you’ve already crossed the very same hell...”

I burst into laughter.

“True... This cannot be compared with that...”

“That? What do you mean?” asks the alien examiner intrigued and tilting his head.

“Oh~ Sorry,” Aia stands at my side, lays her hand on my shoulder and proudly proclaims, “Kira is the Phoenix!”

“Wo—woow...” It’s the first time the examiner loses his calmness and jolts up from his barstool. “*The* Phoenix? The real one?”

“Yup! The real one,” giggles Aia.

The examiner does what his profession implies, he examines me... from tip to toes... Slowly but steadily, his calmness comes back and he sits back onto the barstool.

“Then I shouldn’t be surprised...” He smiles. “Your skills at the controls are impressive for any contender, even more for an Awakened. Now I understand.” His hand moves to his chin. “Of course...” he laughs. “You truly were able to hide it skillfully. I should have pictured it. I heard rumors... I was truly astonished when you said you have passed many of Doctor Whang’s simulations,” he laughs again.

Oh, no... I really don’t want that my past *fame* might influence my results...

“I am sorry for hiding it,” I say. “I did it because I don’t want a special treatment just because of my nickname.”

“Oh~” the golden alien blinks. “Thank you for being honest. Truth is, that it would not have had any influence in your grading, but I surely would have treated you with more respect.”

“Thanks,” I say, “but I don’t deserve more respect you’ve already treated me with.” He widens his eyes. “Anyway, most legends about me are overstated, even

invented. I am only interested in the respect given based on my acts, on facts, not based on strange stories.”

Aia holds my hand firmly and nods happily at my side.

“Oh~” the examiner blinks again, “I understand. You are right. Of course. Even so, it is a true honor for me, being able to examine you,” he laughs.

I sigh relieved.

“Oh~” I say looking at the alien man.

“Yes?” the examiner looks at me, awaiting my question.

“Now that this is over... I mean about my name and all that... may I ask a question?”

“Of course,” he nods.

“I mean, it’s personal...”

“Oh?” he looks at me questioning. “Of course,” he finally says.

“No offense... but what species are you from?”

“Oh!”

He begins to laugh heartily.

Aia giggles at my side.

“No offense taken, Mister Phoenix,” he laughs. “I am a Wigmez.”

“Wigmez...” I repeat. “I am sorry, but you are the first Wigmez I have met since I awoke...”

“Then I’m doubly honored,” he laughs. “Before you ask, we are a mammalian species, and not related to dragons or lizards.”

“Cool!”

“It is true that we have some vague similarities with your Gaian lizards and fantasy dragons,” he smiles. “Our skin is covered with soft scales instead of hair, have slightly pointy ears, and we have, normally, a short tail, that’s about our differences. We are taller, our average is about two meters tall. And... I think that is all...”

“Wow! Thank you,” I bow to him, then I look at the clock. “Oh! It’s time to go! They surely will be finishing by now...”

“Right,” the examiner smiles and ticks a box on his virtual examination sheet on his tablet.

We pay and go back to the cargo port.

Aia whispers to me, “What he didn’t mention, is that the female Wigmez have two rows of tits...” she giggles.

“Wha—” I hold my shout in, and whisper back, “Two rows?”

“Yup!” she giggles, “four tits...”

“No way...”

We reach the port and, truly, they are finishing up. I go through the digital paperwork and we blast off again.

We reach the Alpha-XT and I execute the docking and uncoupling procedure. Even if the examiner kept on treating me correctly, without any special treatment, I hope my *fame* didn’t influence the results. I really hate those legends... Who had thought that they would live on till today... And they are even crazier nowadays... oh, fuck...

The three of us leave the truck and the examiner says, “Perfect. Get some rest now. In about two hours, the results of the short tests will be published, when everyone has finished.”

“Oh! Okay...”

I’d prefer he could tell me right now...

At my, apparently, visible disappointment, the examiner laughs.

“Of course I can tell that you have done it exceptionally well. The rest is simple formality.”

“Oh~” I exhale relieved.

“Yup! You did it perfect!”

Aia hugs me ecstatically...

“Aiaah~ Caahh~t breahh~”

She lets me free.

“Ups~ Sorry~” she giggles.

.

We return to the MaryQueens. Sue, Buz, and Jim await us intrigued...

“How was it?” “How’d it go?” “Are ya’ll right?” they ask me all at once.

Aia laughs, “Sue, Buz, better be prepared for a party in two hours...

The three brighten.

“Heh! Congrats, pal!” “You’re the best!” “Congratulations, Kira.”

“Thanks, guys.” Buz hands me a draft. “Oh~ Thanks, Buz,” I laugh. “Just what I needed!”

“Thanks,” giggles Aia receiving her beer.

“Heheh~ Cheers!” shouts Jim with his own jug in hand.

The five of us toast and take a large gulp...

“Aah~ I needed that,” I exclaim, “I was almost dehydrated...”

Aia giggles, “*Fufu*~ I believe you, Kira. You’ve been awesome, just perfect...”

.

Two hours pass flying by and we walk towards one of the huge press rooms of the station.

“Oh~ Enya! Come! Come with us!” Aia shouts at the half-Felii from afar, she notices us and jogs towards us. “The results of the tests are being published in no time.”

“Already?” asks Enya blinking, then grins happily. “Then you did the short one, Kira. Congrats~” she sings.

“Thanks, Enya,” I laugh.

“Heh~ C’mon, let’s go!” Jim pushes us forwards.

.

Aia, Enya, Jim and I find some free seats in the huge press room which begins to fill. There are a lot of people, surely more than a half are friends and family members of the examinees.

Silence falls over the room as a group of examiners enters and step onto the stage. One of them carries a tablet and, I suppose, a mic.

“Good evening. I will proceed to call each contender in order of the received final score. Today we enjoy, yet again, the absence of failing grades in this short test session.”

A long applause echoes in the huge room.

“Aia,” I ask her, “is it usual that all pass?”

“*Hm~*” she nods, “in the short one, it is. In the long one, the failure rate is about eighty percent...”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you need a good simulator score to do the short one...”

“Oh, yeah...”

“*Shhh~*” hushes us Enya, “she’s going on...”

“For the first-timers, I’ll explain the procedure briefly. When named, please come up to my college’s desk,” she points at one guy sitting at a desk. “He will hand you the certificate and update your ID-chip with the license-data. In case of a renewal, the data will be updated. Let us begin, then...”

The first to be called up is a young looking Wigmez with a score of fifty-nine points. One by one, the *contenders* go up to the stage.

I’m getting nervous... They still haven’t called me up yet...

Aia notices, takes my hand, and holds mine gently.

“Kira Matsumoto. Ninety-seven points. Congratulations, you have got the highest score...”

Smack!

“Ugh!”

Jim just smacked my shoulder.

“Congrats, bastar’. Heheh~”

“Congrats~ Kira~” sings Enya.

“Go, Kira,” smiles Aia radiantly.

I stand up and go down to the stage. The cheers keep on until I receive my *certificate* and my chip is loaded with my license.

“Long live da Phoenix!” I clearly discern Jim’s voice...

“Ooooh~” the whole room begins to bristle...

“*The Phoenix?*” “The Phoenix!” “*¡El Fénix!*” “It’s the Phoenix!” “He exists!”

Shouts, whistles and cheers deafen my ears...

“We hafta celebrate!” “Of course!” “*¡Ahora mismo!*” “Right now!” “*Ob’ta-nà!*” “*Masashiku!*” seems that the whole room agrees in seconds...

.

A huge group follows us to the MaryQueens...

“Mitsubishi-san?” I blink.

“*Omedetōgozaimasu*³, Phoenix-kun,” he says solemn, “Welcome to the ISTM.”

“Thank you, for your support, Mitsubishi-san,” I bow to my *new* boss.

He laughs, “Buz-kun, a round for all, it is on me.”

All faces brighten immediately.

“Long live the boss!” “*Banjou!*” “Long live Mitsubishi!” “*¡Viva!*” more shouts and laughter fill Sue and Buz’s bar...

.

¹ Spanish: “right now!” “at this moment!”

² 正しく - Japanese: surely, no doubt, evidently.

³ おめでとうございます - Japanese: Congratulations.

⁴ 万丈 - Japanese: hurrah!, long life, congratulations!

When each of us has a jug in hand, Jim has to make his obligatory appearance,

“Cheers for da Phoenix, da King o’ da Highways!”

“Cheers!” “*¡Salud!*” “*Kanpai!*”⁵

We all guzzle down our free beer...

“Speech, speech, speech~” one begins to shout and others sing in...

I sigh... Aia just smiles and softly elbows me.

“Thanks, friends!” I speak up. “Honestly, I’m not very good at this kind of stuff... Thanks to all of you who helped and supported me... Huge thanks to Mitsubishi-san for this great opportunity. I can’t forget to mention the great Space Cowboy for his lectures,” I laugh.

“Heheh~ Ol’ bastar’...” he laughs.

“And especially grateful I am to the Queen, if we hadn’t met, I’d never be here, partying with you!” Aia blushes and draws a sweet bashful smile. “She was the one who brought me here and the first to teach me how to pilot a space-truck.”

“Oh~ Kira~” Aia charms.

“Heheh~ Thanks, pal,” laughs Jim.

“In fact,” I go on, “I couldn’t have done it without my two great friends, the Queen and the Space Cowboy, who were able to teach me patiently, and updated me to space travel. Cheers for the Queen!” I lift my jug into the air.

“Yahoo!” “*Joōheikamansai!*”⁶ “For the Queen!” “*¡Viva la Reina!*”⁷

“Cheers for the Space Cowboy!” I shout.

“Cheers!” “*¡Salud!*”

“And big cheers for Mitsubishi-san!”

“Long live the boss!” “For the ISTM!” “*¡Viva!*” “*Banzai!*”

All cheer... and drink...

⁵ 乾杯 - Japanese: cheers!

⁶ 女王陛下万歳 - Japanese: “Long live the Queen!”

⁷ Spanish: “Long live the Queen!”

“*Fufu*~ Thanks, Kira,” charms Aia.

“Heh! Impressive, pal,” laughs Jim.

“Truly, thank you for including me,” laughs the old man.

“I couldn’t forget any of you,” I laugh loudly.

Enya just smiles, but seems a bit absent...

“Ah, Enya?” I ask her.

“Yeah? What’s it, Phoenix?” she blinks.

“Oh,” I laugh. “Please, call me Kira.”

“Thanks, Kira,” she giggles, but still seems a bit down.

“Ah, yeah,” I say. “Do you have a haul scheduled for the next days?”

“Uh~ Yeah, of course...”

“Could I come along? I want to learn more, and Kim and Kite still need some days till my Falcon is ready,” I tell her.

The Felii opens her mouth, without saying anything, like she’s frozen or something...

Aia pinches her.

“Ouch!” Enya jumps up, bristles and blinks for a second. “O—Of course! Sorry... Yeah, sure. I didn’t expect it...”

“Huh? Why?” I ask her.

“Ugh~” she sighs. “Well... as you’ve already got your license... I thought, I wouldn’t have the honor to take you on a haul... Uh~ Being one of the Aces... Uh~”

I blink, then laugh.

“I’m dying to see the fastest trucker in action on her fastest rig.”

She blushes deeply, so deep it can be seen through her soft fur.

“Heheh~ Enya, beauty kitty, don’ let him wait for long...” laughs Jim.

Aia nods and elbows her softly again...

“Oh~ Sure! Of course!” she shouts, then adds, “Tomorrow at noon I’ve got a haul...”

“Perfect,” I laugh. “When and where?”

“Ah~ The Gaian Space Port. At one o’clock, universal time,” she blurts out.

“Just perfect, I’ll be there,” I nod.

“Heh... Ya’ve stunned da kitty,” laughs Jim.

“How so?” I ask him. “What’s with her strange behavior?”

We both look at Enya chatting happily with Aia, nothing compared to when she was talking to me. And when Aia introduced us, she was in high spirits...

“Hmmm...” Jim scratches his scalp beneath his cowboy hat. “Enya’s from a long standin’ trucker family... It’s said dat her roots date back to yer times...”

“No fuck?” I blink.

“Heh, but not even she’s sure ’bout it...” he shrugs, “her family tree’s quite chaotic... Only rumors an’ legends remain... Perhaps, ya’ve even met her ancestors...”

“Oh~ That’s why she’d become nervous?” I ask him.

“Hmm... Maybe, maybe not... Dere could be more... She’s somewhat enigmatic...” he smirks. “Dat’s why I lo—like her, heheh~”

“True,” I laugh, “she’s truly a cutie.”

“Heh! Don’ eva dare, Kira!” he almost shouts. “Imma already long chasing after her...” he whispers.

“Don’t worry, Jim,” I laugh. “I won’t steal her away from under your nose...”

“This’ a promise?”

“Sure...”

We bump our fists.

“At least for some time,” I add with a grin.

“Bastar’!” he laughs.

“Heh!” I imitate him, “If ya don’ go fo’ ’er, I’ll take ’er...” and laugh.

“Fuckin’ bastar’!” he laughs. “Yeah...” he adds. “Point taken...”

We bump our fists again to seal our promise.

“Heh, seriously...” he sighs suddenly. “Imma also puzzled by her behavior... always happy, active, even hyperactive... Full o’ action! But ya left ’er stunned... Heh...” he laughs. “Surely to do with yer persona, heheh~”

“Huh?” I blink. “What do you mean, Jim?”

“Yer considered... Heh!” he exclaims. “We all consider ya da best o’ all truckers, da legendary Phoenix. Out o’ reach for any o’ us. A demigod!”

“Jim...”

“Heheh~ Yeah, I know, Kira,” he nods. “Even tho I only know ya since jus’ a week, I know how ya feel ’bout it, an’ how ya really are. But not da others... dey don’ know shit ’bout ya...”

“You’re right...”

“I think Enya still treats ya as da King, not as a co-worker...”

“Could be... But when you’ve introduced us...”

“Heh, most likely, she didn’t believe it yet,” he grins. “Now’s clear, dat yer da Phoenix. She’d be overwhelmed... Now, factor in dat ya already did some hauls with Aia an’ maself, she’d surely felt displaced...”

“Fuck, pal, you know her well... For how long have you been chasing after her?”

“Heh! Since she’d became da third Ace... Ups...” he covers his mouth.

I laugh, “Don’t worry, pal, I won’t blow the whistle.”

“Heheh~ Thanks, pal.”

We guzzle the rest of our beers down.

“What were you talking about, boys?” asks Aia smirking.

“Nothin’, nothin’,” Jim waves it off with exaggerated gestures.

“*Fufu~*” she giggles. “Nothing? Are you sure?”

“Heh...”

“Guys-talk...” I shrug. “I’ll tell you later...” I grin.

“Don’ eva dare, Kira!” Jim jumps up.

“Hmm~” Aia giggles. “I think I know which way the wind blows...” she smirks.

“Should I invite Enya over?”

Jim overreacts again waving it off in negation.

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles. “You’ve just confirmed my suspicion...” she laughs. “Okay, I won’t say anything, for now... Cheers, boys!” she blinks an eye.

.

“Enya~ C’mon! Let’s~ get~ drunk~ with Kira!” Aia giggles.

“Aia... you’re already drunk...” Enya giggles.

“Yup! But! Not~ enough!” she giggles unsteadily. “Kira is~ great! He always~ takes me~ hom—”

“Aia...” I interrupt her, “don’t say such stuff here...” I look around.

Most truckers are already *overly happy*... and some completely drunk...

She looks at me, widens her eyes, blinks several times, and begins to laugh.

“*Fufu~* Oh~ Kira~” she hugs me by my neck and pulls me against her. “Don’t wanna~ let them know~ you’re living~ with me?” she whispers into my ear.

I look into her beautiful deep blue eyes.

“Yeah, for now... ugh~”

“I~ understand’~ *Fufu~* Not~ this way~” she blushes deeply.

I try to stand up, but she doesn't let go, and stands up with me.

“Ooohh~ Wanna~ dance with me?” she giggles.

I feel many eyes on us... I smile and simply nod and take her by the hip...

We dance several songs among the horde of half-drunk and drunken truckers which move more erratically than dance to the music...

Many observe us. It would have been a bad move not accepting to dance with her, I still have to maintain a certain image, it seems. Ugh~ I am not so sure... Some look at us, me, with envy...

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles, “Ugh~ Sorry~ Imma bit dizzy~”

I help her sit down again at *our* Aces’ table, and she immediately guzzles down half the pint I left there...

“*Fufu~*” she laughs. “So good~ Oh~ C’mon Enya! Dance~ with the Phoenix!” she pushes the feline girl towards me.

Enya stumbles from Aia’s sudden push. Luckily, I manage to take hold of her.

“Ugh~ But...” Enya stammers.

“*Fufu~* Go! Kira’s~ a good dancer!” Aia laughs loudly.

Enya looks at me blushing.

“Uh~”

“May I ask you for a dance, Miss SpeedKitty?” I play along, and bow.

Enya only blushes and nods.

While starting to dance a rock song with Enya, I look at Jim and simply shrug, he just laughs loudly, clearly brushing off his thoughts... Jim... that’s not the way to chase after her... I silently sigh to myself.

Oh! The music changes to a genre I’ve listened to as a kid, Japanese *Eurobeat*... Enya, which simply swayed along and followed my lead shyly, begins to move lively and matches my movements perfectly...

“Oh?” I ask her, “Do like Eurobeat?”

“Yup!” she giggles happily. “My favorite!”

And we dance crazily through the bar till a slow song comes on...

“Aaah~ That felt great! I feel alive!” laughs Enya. “You’re right, Aia. Kira is a great dancer.”

“*Fufu*~” Aia giggles more than tipsy, “told you~”

“Cool! I’ve never dreamt of finding someone else loving Eurobeat!” exclaims Enya happily.

“Well~” says Aia, “Enya, cutie~ Kira is~ Japanese, after all~”

“Really?” she blinks at me. “That’s why you know this style?”

“Yeah, of course.” I nod. “Even though I was raised in Los Angeles, I followed many customs my parents kept, and I’ve never missed any cultural news from Japan... well, mainly music and alternative styles...”

“Wow, cool!” Enya beams. “Oh! Cheers!” she giggles as we four guzzle yet another pint down.

Aia smirks mischievously, and pushes Enya onto Jim.

“Now~’s your~turn~”

I laugh, “Yeah, your turn to dance.”

Both begin to dance, he’s blushing and clumsy, she unsure how to follow him...

Aia and I observe the pair dance awkwardly in the midst the chaotic dancing mass...

“*Fufu*~” Aia giggles, “that’s~ what you’re~ talking about~ right?”

I laugh, “Yeah...”

Using public transportation, I reach *our* home carrying Aia on my back, yet again... she is completely drunk and unable to keep herself on her own feet. Honestly, I’m in no better place... and almost completely battered...

Finally home...

As already usual, I lay her down and remove partially her clothes till she’s in her underwear. I almost fell over her several times... I’m just too finking drunk...

Finally, a bed... The room spins as I lie down... Fuck me, what a day... At least I have my license now...

Aia... I really don't get her... I... Am I truly falling for her? The attraction is strong... But... I don't know myself anymore... The last time I fell in love, was what brought me here, to this place, this time... I don't want to hurt her, less after all she did for me, and without asking anything in return... My head spins... Aia... I hope I'm able to keep our promise... I want to change, but will I be able to? At her side? Her temptations... are strong...

I...

Zzzz~



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A09 ~ SpeedKitty Enya

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- Al

and all the Instructors

- Ana del Hierro
- Siegi Simon Sr.

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TL;DR:

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